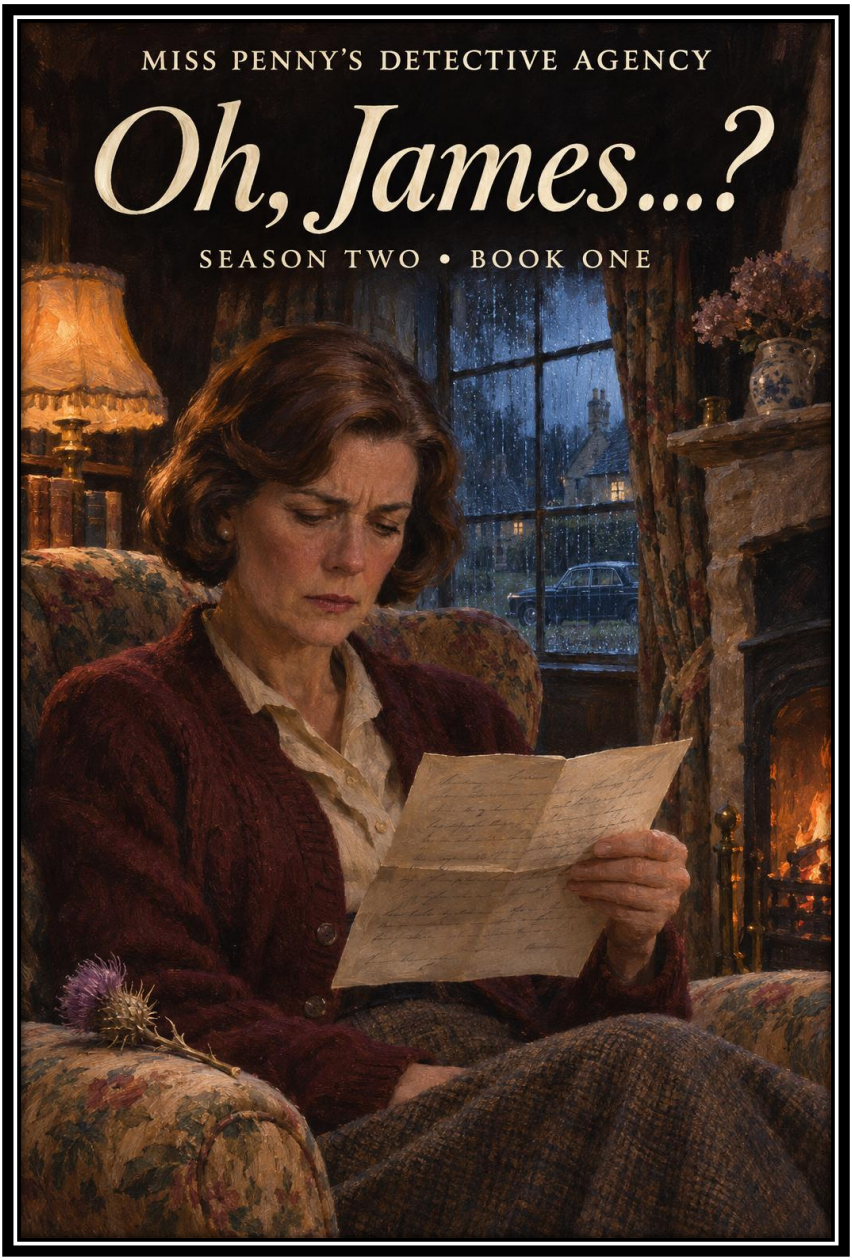

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
Oh, James...?
SEASON TWO • BOOK ONE

Dearest Brother

Dearest Brother,

How am I even addressing you like this? In one short letter, my entire world has been turned inside out. It was my job to know everything about you, yet I knew nothing about us. I'd always assumed you respected our office too much to ask me "out". Why didn't you tell me you were my brother? Why was I not told? It was my job to keep all your secrets. And I did! It seems you did a damn good job of keeping one little fact from me. Why? Now you have managed to create a complete mess of my life in an instant. Do you think for a moment I'd be satisfied with just two secrets revealed?

Well, brother, you don't really understand women at all. And you have especially underestimated me. You really are "a son of a gun." And if you thought SPECTRE and SMERSH were your adversaries, you have not seen anything yet, dear BROTHER! You are not getting away from me.
Sincerely,
Your Miss Moneypenny

PS: And, FUCK YOU, TOO!

Penny read the postscript again. It was the only part she had written without stopping.

She folded the letter and put it in an envelope. There was already a stamp on it. She had stuck it there before it occurred to her that she had nowhere to send it.

Outside, someone was scraping frost off a windscreen. Penny lowered the top of the window and looked out. The car across the lane had been there when she came down to make tea. Its windscreen was clear. The scraping came from a neighbour she could see in her dressing gown, having a row with a plastic card from the library.

In Stocker's rooms the wheelchair still stood beneath the table. He had once let Penny try it. For ten minutes she had been unable to get round the kitchen without hitting a chair leg. He told her he'd had longer to practise. She'd laughed. She remembered that now with a peculiar dislike of her own laughter.

She found the advertisement in her tenancy papers. Somebody had circled the rent twice and slipped it onto her desk at the office. The circles intersected at a little peak over the pound sign. There was nothing of James in them. She could name half a dozen people who would have used the same pen.

He'd known she'd take it, though. A place on a green, a decent rent, and a landlord who would never ask her to put up a shelf because he could see how she held a hammer. She'd been so pleased somebody in the office had thought of her.

"Practise," she said aloud.

When Watson came in, Penny was in the kitchen putting sandwiches into a paper bag. Her suitcase stood by the hall door. Her gun was already packed. She had taken it out of the drawer and held it for some time before putting it away again in the case. It had given her no better idea of where she was going.

"Did you see the car?" Watson asked.

"Yes."

"It went past me twice after you went into the post office. The second time I was on a road that goes nowhere."

Penny stopped folding the bag.

"I thought it might be yours," Watson said. "Then I thought it might be mine. Is there something you want to tell me before I ring Lucas?"

Penny carried the two letters to the table. The thistle slipped out of James's and came to rest on Watson's side.

Watson read his first. At the other she took a little longer. When she set them down she kept them separate.

“Have you got an address for him?”

“No.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got a stamp’s worth.”

Penny watched her put the thistle on the saucer beside the sugar bowl. “I was going to Edinburgh.”

“Why?”

“I’ve no idea. The name came into my head before I’d finished reading his letter. Then I thought of a pub called the Whistling Thistle.”

“Do you know a pub called the Whistling Thistle?”

“No.”

“Does he?”

“I’d like to ask him.”

Watson opened the paper bag and looked at the sandwiches. “How many of these were you hoping to eat yourself?”

The Reserved Seat

By the time they got to King's Cross the sandwiches had disappeared and Penny had bought a newspaper she couldn't read. She kept putting her finger on the same line. Watson said she'd be easier to travel with if she let herself turn the page.

The man in the grey coat stood near the departures board. Watson recognised him when he took his glasses off to read it. He had done the same thing in the pharmacy window the previous day, squinting at the display of hot-water bottles. She couldn't have said he was the driver. She could say he had been in a village where she hadn't seen him before, and now he was here.

She showed Penny by asking where she supposed a man could buy a coat with a pocket that size. The pocket on his right side hung lower than the one on his left. He had the habit of checking it as he moved, scarcely touching the cloth.

"He could be visiting his mother," Penny said.

"He can visit her in Edinburgh, then."

They boarded with five minutes left. At their table a card said two of the four seats were reserved from York. Watson put her case in the rack and took it down again after discovering she had left her book

inside it. When she turned, the man in the grey coat had passed their window on the platform. He had walked almost to the head of the train. He stopped there with his hand in the low pocket.

The announcement came too softly to make out. People set down newspapers, ran for doors, and returned to ask whether they were on the right train. When the train began to move, the man was no longer on the platform. Watson didn't say she'd lost him. She could only be certain of where she'd last seen him.

For the first hour Penny let her read. Beyond the window, little gardens gave way to sheds, and the sheds to flat country streaked with standing water.

Then Penny said, "I think M knew."

Watson put her book down. "About you and James?"

"I think M helped him arrange it. I was in practically every room he had a reason to come into. People think the person who knows where you'll be at four is the person you work for. It's generally the woman who tells you where you'll be at four."

"Did they ask if you wanted looking after?"

"They gave me a desk."

Watson waited.

“I liked the desk,” Penny said. “I was good at the work. I’d rather you didn’t tell me the whole thing was done to me.”

“Then I won’t.”

“And M is dead. There’s only one way two people can keep a secret. One of them has to be dead.”

“That still leaves the question of why we’re being followed.”

Penny took the newspaper off her lap and put it on the table. “You think somebody wants me to lead them to him.”

“I think somebody might find you useful whether or not they know he’s your brother.”

Penny pulled the newspaper straight again. Watson could see she hadn’t read a word.

The Dining Car

There were flowers in the dining car, each in a little bottle with enough water in it to keep it upright. Penny found herself reassured by them. She had not been reassured by the train continuing north or by the presence of two hundred other people. The flowers suggested somebody expected to be there to take them off the tables at the end of the day.

The waiter laid two menus down. “Your friend has been in already,” he said.

“Which friend?” Watson asked.

The waiter looked past her shoulder. At the far end of the carriage someone stood between the two blue panes of the vestibule door. Penny could see a slice of face, or possibly only the reflection of one in the glass. The dark shape moved sideways and was gone.



“The gentleman who asked me to hold the table,” the waiter said. “He said a lady with a burgundy scarf would be coming through.”

“I could take it off,” Penny said.

The waiter smiled with some uncertainty. “Would you still like the table?”

They would. Watson put her book on the white cloth and asked how long the gentleman had been there. The waiter said he’d come through before they left London. His coffee was on the bill. He’d paid for it. All this he seemed happy to establish, once Watson made it plain she had no desire to complain.

Beside Penny’s knife lay a little folded bill slip she’d mistaken for a menu insert. It had a number at the top

and three words pencilled near the bottom: **Thursday. Clock. Vale.**

Watson didn't touch it immediately. She asked whether the waiter had seen who left it. A woman with a pram had needed help between carriages. A gentleman had paid for coffee. The waiter had cleared the next table, and he couldn't be certain which of them had been at this one when the slip was put down. He could say the number belonged to the coffee because he'd written it himself.

"Did he tell you the lady's name?" Penny asked.

"Penny," he said. "I thought it was your first name."

She ordered the soup. While the waiter wrote it down, she turned her menu through a half-circle and peered at it. "I never can tell which end of these trains is which. Was he asking you to hold a seat facing London or facing Edinburgh?"

"He asked for the seat where she could see the door," the waiter said. He indicated Penny's place with the end of his pencil. "That one. He was quite particular."

Penny thanked him and turned the menu the right way round. When he was gone, Watson said, "You knew perfectly well which end was London."

“He’d already told us he couldn’t remember the man. I asked him to help me with something he did remember.”

“You let him think you were a little lost.”

“People are wonderfully kind when they think you only need a little help.”

Watson took a moment to answer. “Is that what you thought about Stocker?”

Penny looked toward the vestibule. There was still nobody at the door. “I thought he couldn’t reach the top shelf.”

When the soup arrived she put a spoonful back in the bowl without tasting it. Watson broke a roll and passed half of it across.

“I can still hear him saying it,” Penny said eventually. “He’d stand at the door and say ‘Penny’ in such a way that I’d know whether he was going to ask a favour or had already helped himself.”

“Would he ask the waiter to hold a table for you?”

“He might hold a table for the Queen. He’d expect me to find one.”

She picked up her spoon again. At the other end of the carriage the door opened. It was the waiter bringing a bill to the young couple behind them. Penny hadn’t

realised she'd been waiting for him to come back until she felt the want of it in her chest. She was angry with herself for a moment, then with James, which came more easily.

Watson folded the slip inside her book. "Whatever he wants us to do with this, he's given us about four hours to think better of it."

From York

At York the reserved seats filled. One belonged to a woman carrying a hatbox, the other to a boy who consulted his mother as to whether the station roof was the usual size. Penny, who had never given station roofs much thought, listened to the mother invent a satisfactory standard.

As the train started up, Watson went to ask the guard about the slip. She found him farther back than she expected, holding open the door for a man who had just found his ticket. The man wore a grey coat with a sagging pocket. Up close his spectacles had a hairline crack across the left lens.

He said to the guard, "I'm meant to be in the other carriage."

"Where's your reservation?"

He took two folded papers out. The first was a ticket for Edinburgh. By accident or carelessness the other one opened just far enough for Watson to see a ruled square and a photograph inside it. The face was mostly obscured by his thumb. There was a clock behind the head. It had one hand pointing nearly straight up.

The guard directed him towards the back. As the man went by, he paused beside Watson.

“Have you a light?” he asked her.

“No.”

“Neither have I,” he said, as if he had only just remembered.

She watched him go through the sliding door. A minute later the glass reflected a different man with a paper cup. Watson went back to her own carriage and drew the clock she had seen.

“Could it have been a station clock?” Penny asked.

“Of course.”

“Could he have dropped that picture open because he meant you to see it?”

“Of course.”

“Were you going to tell me anything I wanted to hear?”

“I saw a young man somewhere with his mother today who was very happy about a roof.”

Penny laughed in spite of herself. The boy wanted to know what was funny. Watson told him it was something she said in the hope of making someone laugh. He accepted this with the confidence of a person who had already put a great deal more work into his own jokes.

When the family went to find the buffet, Penny leaned forward and asked what Watson thought James had done with all his time in the rooms on the other side of their house.

“Some of it he spent complaining to me about a dripping cistern,” Watson said.

“I wish he had told me. I’d have gone through every birthday I could remember. Who came to the house and who didn’t. Things everybody else knew better than I did.”

“Perhaps nobody else did.”

Penny looked out. “I want that to be true. I also want to give him such a piece of my mind he’ll have to borrow somebody else’s.”

Watson turned her drawing over. On the other side she wrote down what she had seen and the time. Penny watched her decide which details were worth

the ink. She had forgotten that some people could look after you simply by continuing to do the work in front of them.

Who Held the Table

Watson went back to the dining car before Durham. The waiter had changed out of his white jacket and was counting spoons into a drawer. She asked why he thought the gentleman and Penny were friends.

“He said the lady would have had a long morning.”

“Did he say where she’d come from?”

“No.”

“Did he ask you to take a message?”

“No. That’s why I thought he knew her. Someone arranging to meet in a dining car generally says where they’ll be.”

The coffee had been ordered from a seat at the end opposite the flowers. Watson stood where the waiter pointed. From there a man could see the vestibule, half the dining car and any passenger who came through the end door. He could see the side of the table where the waiter had left the slip. A person beyond the glass could see it too, if the light on their own side was low enough.

The waiter said the gentleman had worn a dark coat, which might have been grey. He couldn't have said whether he wore glasses. People took them off to read things all the time.

The chef appeared with a crate of milk bottles and asked what she'd lost. Watson said she was trying to find someone who might have been standing in the doorway. The chef said he had seen a man there when the train was still in London. He was holding the door open for a little boy who claimed he couldn't go back to his seat until he'd found something. The chef thought the man must have been his father until he saw the man go off without him.

"What was the boy looking for?" Watson asked.

"Wouldn't tell me."

Watson went back to the table. The boy from York had left a glove and gone with his mother to get sandwiches. She knew he couldn't have been the boy at King's Cross. She sat for some time wanting him to be. It would have been a satisfaction to have one person on the train whom she could account for from end to end.

Penny had found a sheet of paper and made three columns. Watson saw her own name at the top of one, Vale at the top of another and a blank above the third.

“Who gets the blank?”

“Whoever wrote the note. I started to put James there.”

She showed Watson another sheet. On this one she had written down the dates she remembered visiting Stocker, the days on which the police had come, and the dates of two deaths. The list contained a great many apologies for dates she couldn’t remember. Watson asked what Penny would do if she found one evening when Stocker couldn’t possibly have been anywhere else.

“I’d want to know who saw him and what they saw.”

“And if it was you?”

“I’d tell you I was sure. Then I’d probably have to start again.”

Watson turned the sheet round. One of the evenings on it was marked *jam*. Penny explained that Stocker had asked her to open a jar. She had done it standing beside the wheelchair, with a tea towel twisted round the lid. When the lid came loose, he said she hadn’t changed a bit. She remembered asking what he meant. He said she still couldn’t take a compliment.

“Did it sound like James?”

“I ask myself that every time I tell it,” Penny said. “He sounds a little more like James each time.”

There was a considerable silence while the train ran through a tunnel. For a few seconds Watson had a fair view of Penny in the window. She was looking down at the paper, lips pressed together. As soon as daylight returned there was no reflection at all.

A Call from Durham

The man with the cracked lens got off at Durham. Watson and Penny saw him from their seats this time. He crossed the platform to a payphone. He stood with the receiver against his ear for so long that Penny expected the train to go without him. When he returned he took a different door.

A porter had been stacking trolleys close to the telephone. A girl in a green school blazer wanted to use it. The man had looked past her twice while he waited. Watson saw him shelter the receiver between cheek and shoulder and write something on a stiff piece of paper. She couldn’t see the writing.

After the train pulled out, the guard stopped at their table. “Which of you asked about a letter?”

“Neither,” Watson said.

“He said one of you was expecting a letter from home.”

“He?”

“The man I sent along the train. He asked if we held post for passengers. I said we held luggage, sometimes, but I wasn’t the Royal Mail.”

He had wanted to know about the address for forwarding property. Watson asked whether he had left anything. The guard said he hadn’t, and walked on.

Penny touched the inside of her coat. Her own letter was still there. James’s was in Watson’s book, with the slip from the dining car. Nobody on the train should have known there were two letters. Somebody watching the house could have seen the solicitor’s envelope arrive. It was also entirely possible that a man had wanted a letter from home and this was what a day of watching him had done to her mind.

At Newcastle he changed his seat again. Watson saw his grey coat in the carriage window, laid across the back of an empty seat. A man in a blue pullover put his hand on it while he looked for his bag. Then he went on down the aisle. It had stopped raining for very nearly a minute. Penny could see so far along the platform that she forgot to look at the nearer doors.

When they got moving again there was a clean folded napkin on the table. It had been there, Watson said, since the waiter cleared away the mince pies the woman with the hatbox had bought. Penny opened it anyway. There was nothing inside. She was ashamed of the relief she felt and even more ashamed of the disappointment.

“People have died since I went to that house,” she said. “The man in the boot. Marden. Do you ever wonder if James was near them?”

“I wonder if the same man was near both.”

Penny nodded. “I used to think that if I knew, I’d feel better.”

“Do you still want to know?”

“Yes.”

By the time a strip of sea appeared, they had both stopped pretending to read. The light made every mark on the glass visible. Penny rested her head against it and watched the coast until it went out of sight.

The Man Who Left His Coat

They arrived in Edinburgh in rain. In the changing light as the train pulled in, Penny thought she saw the man with the cracked lens reflected beside her. She turned. There was a porter with a trolley, waiting for them to move.

On the platform a grey coat lay across a wooden bench. Watson recognised the stretched right pocket. She hadn't thought it would look quite so empty off the man's shoulders. A ticket lay on the slats below it. She asked a member of staff to look before anybody moved the coat.

The attendant showed Watson the ticket and let her read it. It was a platform ticket from King's Cross. It was no help in accounting for the Edinburgh ticket Watson had seen him take out. The member of staff tagged the coat and its contents and offered to have the police ring her if nobody claimed it.



“Did you see the man leave it?” he asked.

“No,” said Watson.

Penny knew how much effort it cost her just to say that.

At the station information desk Penny asked about the Whistling Thistle. The woman pulled out a creased street guide. Penny could see the little shake of her head people give when they don’t have anything to offer but have to give it a good look first. Then a man bringing out a wastebasket said the place still took rooms and she could try ringing it.

“You’ll want the Cowgate,” he said. “If they tell you to come straight down, ask which way they’re facing.”

Watson made the call from the station. Watson gave only her surname and their expected arrival time. The man who answered said there were two beds free from that Thursday for a week, and he'd find a reading lamp if somebody had taken it out again. Penny listened from the next booth. She expected to recognise something. She heard a man ask Watson to bring the key back downstairs if the door wouldn't shut.

As they left the station an officer came down the steps after them. The attendant had passed on their details. A man had been found dead beside the tracks just outside Edinburgh. He had no coat. The officer took Watson's statement standing up, near the taxi rank. When she mentioned the cracked lens he stopped writing and asked her to describe it again.

Penny kept waiting for him to say the name. He didn't have one.

Under the Clock

The Whistling Thistle was down a close narrow enough for the sign to look almost like a roof from below. Penny waited under it while Watson found the entrance. In the lantern light the thistle was purple as the dried one had once been. She tried to remember whether she had thought of the pub before she'd

looked at the flower. If she let herself keep trying, she knew she would eventually remember whatever she wanted.

Inside, a stout man in a rolled-up shirt was holding a bar towel in one hand and somebody's photograph in the other. There was a dog in the photograph, and a large portion of someone's thumb. He handed it back carefully and wished the dog a long life with a surprisingly grave expression.

"You'll be Watson," he said. "I'm Alec."

He found them the reading lamp. He could have described the floor upstairs without looking at it, where the carpet rose at the bend and somebody was liable to catch a toe. He forgot which room he'd given them twice before he put the key down on the bar.

At the end of the room a man with a small leather case sat under a clock. It had stopped at seven minutes to twelve. In Watson's drawing the hand pointed in almost the same direction.

"Mr Vale will want his usual," Alec said to someone by the kitchen.

The man under the clock glanced up as they passed. "Miss Moneypenny," he said.

Penny stopped. "That's an old name."

“From the lady who booked the room,” he said.

Watson put the reading lamp down on the stairs. “I booked the room.”

Vale looked at her with an interest that might have been quite genuine. “Perhaps there were two bookings.”

The train had left Penny with a long narrow sensation, as if she’d been looking down the same aisle since London. She could go upstairs or keep walking towards whatever the person at the other end intended for her. She picked up the lamp.

“We’ll ask in the morning,” she said.

Watson followed her upstairs. The room looked out over the sign, which moved a little each time rain ran down the iron bracket. There were fresh towels, a door that needed lifting to close, and a shelf full of old telephone directories. Penny put her letter on the shelf. She did not put James’s beside it. That one was still with Watson.

What He Was Promised

In the morning the police rang. The dead man was Martin Redd. The spectacles recovered with him matched Watson's description, down to the cracked lens. The police couldn't say when he'd left the train, or how his coat had reached Waverley without him.

Watson told the officer about the clock. She asked if the photograph was among the things recovered beside the tracks. She sent him a copy of her drawing and the waiter's slip. It was two days before he asked her to come in again.

Among the things recovered with Redd was the photograph. It showed Vale in the pub, under the clock, with his leather case. On the back there was an address and a name. Vale's. The police had also spoken to a booking clerk who knew Redd. On the day before Penny and Watson made their arrangements to leave Guiting Power, Redd had shown her the photograph when he asked about trains. He wanted to get to Edinburgh on Thursday. The clerk recalled the date because it was her first shift back after a holiday. She had helped him find a fare. With permission from her manager she had shown the officer her copy of the reservation.

Watson thought of the dark figure at the end of the dining car. "Was he meant to meet Mr Vale?"

“The woman says he asked where he’d be most likely to see him. We’re going to put that to Vale.”

She thanked the officer and walked back to Penny through a slant of pale afternoon sun. The notes in her book had started on the premise that somebody had followed them from the village. Now she had a man who had known his destination before she knew hers. He could still have followed them. He could have been told to expect them. But at least one person on that train had been looking for Vale, and she could account for him without using the note on the table.

Vale told the police Thursday had been his night at the Thistle for fifteen years. His wife had played darts there. He was keeping the receipts for the trophy fund in the leather case because nobody wanted to take responsibility for them at home. He came down to the bar later with the case and showed Watson the slips. Each had a date and a figure and the signature of somebody on the committee. The oldest was three years old. It was either a perfectly good explanation for the case or a great deal of work for a story nobody had yet asked him to tell.

“Was there a second booking?” Watson asked Alec when Vale had gone.

Alec showed her the book. Watson’s was the only booking for their room. A pencil mark before it could

have been an erased word or simply the scar from somebody leaning on a pencil through several pages. He turned it towards the light for her. That was all the light did.

One More Week

Penny went downstairs after closing. Alec was wiping rings from the table under the clock. She helped him carry two empty cups to the bar. One had a chip in the lip. He ran a finger over it before setting it aside.

“Are you any nearer finding him?” he asked.

“Nearer than I was at home. I don’t suppose that tells me much.”

“Have you worked out what you’d say when you do?”

“I wrote it down.”

“That’s usually a sign it’s something you can’t say.”

She pulled a thread from her sleeve. “I’d ask him whether he ever came round because he wanted to see me.”

Alec took the cup she’d been holding. “That seems a fair question.”

“I thought so. It’s taken me forty years to think of it.”

He asked if she wanted another week on the room. She said she'd have to ask Watson. He found a clean cup for her anyway, and set it on the bar with the handle toward her.

Later Watson woke at the sound of metal on stone. One little rattle, then another. At the foot of the lane below the window a man sat with a tin cup resting against his knee. He turned his head toward the pub when the lamp in the bar went out. One side of his face caught the light from the sign. The other was in shadow.

Watson went to wake Penny, then saw she was already sitting up. They went to the window together. The lane was empty. In the rain the brim of a hat

would have looked very like the edge of a tin cup. Neither woman suggested it.

On the shelf behind them the letter still had its stamp.

