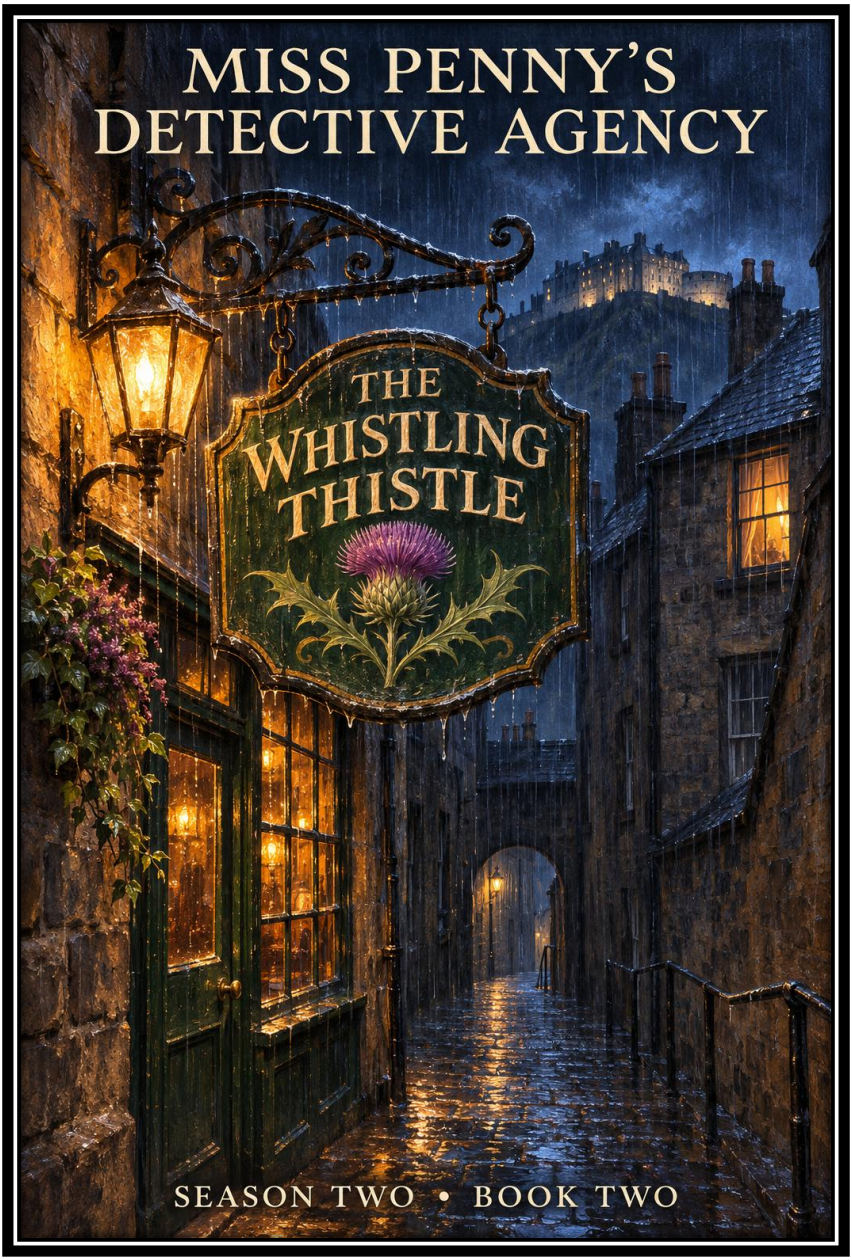

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
THE
WHISTLING
THISTLE
SEASON TWO • BOOK TWO

# Two Beds

At eight in the morning upstairs at the Whistling Thistle, there was a knock so low on the door that Watson thought it might be the building settling.

“Do you need anything changed?” a woman asked.

Watson opened the door. The woman on the landing had two fresh pillowcases folded over her arm. Behind her stood a tall wicker basket, in the way of everyone except the person who had put it there.

“Both beds all right?”

“Very comfortable,” Watson said.

“I made them up before dinner on the Thursday you came. I hate making up beds when somebody’s already downstairs waiting for them.”

Watson looked at the basket. An isolated sock had been hung over the side, as if there might yet be someone to claim it.

“I booked from Waverley. It was raining by then.”

“It generally is when somebody rings from Waverley,” the woman said. “I’m Jean.”

When Watson turned back, Penny was sitting up with the coverlet over her shoulders. They had stood at the window together after midnight. Before Penny joined

her, Watson thought she'd seen a man down in the close with a tin cup. Neither woman had seen him go.

"Who asked her to make up two beds?" Penny said.

"I was hoping you'd come down and ask that in your dressing gown. I think you'd get a straighter answer."

Penny got dressed. She put James's thistle in a book, between two pages she hadn't read, and shut it. Her reply to him still sat stamped and unaddressed on the shelf.

Alec was alone behind the bar. He was a broad man who looked particularly happy doing jobs that required him to stand still. At present he was holding a tea strainer up to the window to see whether he'd washed it properly.

He got the ledger out when they asked. Watson's name was halfway down the page, in Alec's sloping hand. Above it there was a faint pencil line. In daylight she could see that the line ended in a small figure two.

"Is that yours?" Watson asked.

Alec put on his glasses. "The name's mine. I can't claim the two."

"Jean made the beds before we rang."

“She makes them when I ask her. Sometimes she makes them when I don’t ask her. It’s one of the things that keeps the place open.”

Jean had followed them down with the basket. “I was asked. There was a slip on the kitchen hook. Two beds, Thursday, room four. I used the back of it for the milk order.”

“Whose writing?” Penny asked.

“Square letters. Nobody’s handwriting if you ask me. Letters for other people to read.”

Alec brought out the kitchen spike. It held two deliveries of lemons, an account for the window cleaner, and a note saying *please leave this here*, which somebody had taken down and filed. There was no milk order.

Watson went back to the ledger. Vale had said he’d heard Penny’s old office name from the woman who booked the room. Watson had given only her own surname on the telephone. If he’d invented a woman, he’d had the bad luck to invent her just where someone else had left a space.

## The Thursday Table

Vale came back at eleven. He said he wanted a word before his afternoon bus. The clock above his

Thursday table was still stopped at seven minutes to twelve. He took the chair from which he couldn't see it.

Watson put her notebook in her bag. "Who was the woman?"

"I never said I'd met her."

"You said she'd booked the room."

"I was told she'd booked it."

"By whom?"

He looked towards the bar. Alec was explaining to Jean that there was a difference between a leaking tap and a tap that had just been turned off. Jean was inviting him to come and see the difference on the floor.

"A woman rang for me here on Wednesday," Vale said. "Alec was serving. I took the call in the passage. She asked whether I remembered Miss Moneypenny."

"Did you?"

"No. She said I would when I saw you."

Penny tried to think of somebody who would say that about her. She could think of several men. It took her much longer to find a woman and that, she thought, was an indictment of her imagination.

“What did she want from you?” Watson asked.

“Nothing. She said I might be asked about the room and that it had been dealt with. I told her she had the wrong man.”

“Then why did you call Penny by that name?”

Vale looked at Penny. “I wanted to see if you’d stop.”

He took a receipt from his case. On the back was the date, Wednesday, and the name he had written down as he stood at the telephone. Miss Moneypenny. The loops had run into each other. Anybody might have written it after the event. Watson asked why he’d kept it.

“It’s a receipt for thirty pounds. My wife used to keep the books for the darts team. If one goes missing, people remember who used to do it properly.”

Penny let him have it back. His attachment to the receipt was the first thing about him she believed without effort. She wondered whether that made it the first thing she ought to doubt.

At the bar Alec put a pot down between her and Watson. “He’s been sitting at that table every Thursday since before I came here. The clock was going when he started.”

“Can you remember Wednesday’s caller?” Watson asked.

“Only that she wanted Vale. People ring the pub for him because he never answers at home.”

“Was she expecting to speak to you?”

“If she was, she recovered wonderfully.”

Watson drank her tea. She had no reason to think Alec was lying. She wrote the hour of the call down as *about six*, the best he could give her. Vale’s was *quarter past*. The news on the wireless might have told her which man was closer. She thought she’d ask when it mattered.

# A Sheet of Blue Paper

Jean fetched the milkman's address from the kitchen noticeboard. It belonged to a dairy which had become a carpet showroom. She fetched her coat and said she would take them to the man who actually delivered the milk.

On the way up the close she told them that she had nearly thrown the slip away. There had been no guest's name on it. Just a room number and the instruction about the beds. She saw orders for rooms all the time. Usually they had a date. This one had said Thursday, which had been good enough when she found it on Thursday morning.

"Where is the hook?" Penny asked.

"Next to the switch by the back door. I hang my handbag beneath it when it isn't raining."

"Who comes in that way?"

"People with hands full of things."

Jean stopped at the top of the steps, getting her breath back. Below her, through the arch, a stooped figure turned away from the entrance to the pub. Watson caught a little sound of metal against stone. She took a step down. The man had a soft cap and the flap of his coat was held in against the wind. Then somebody

came out of a shop carrying a rolled carpet and the women had to stand aside.

When Watson could see again there was nobody at the foot of the steps.

The milkman was called Hamish and lived above a shop that still sold picture frames. He went down to his van for a plastic bag of notes customers had left him. He had every intention of throwing it away once somebody else had taken charge of it. Jean sat on the bottom stair and went through it with him.

She found the slip by the milk order in blue biro. On its other side the square letters were faint but legible. The paper itself was pale blue. It had been folded in half and then folded back. The figure four had a little island of white inside it where the strokes hadn't met.

"That's all it ever said," Jean told them.

Watson had hoped for a name she could take back to Vale. Instead she had an instruction and one witness who could say when she had read it. She asked Hamish when he'd collected it.

"Thursday afternoon. Before the rain. It was out with the empties."

He brought down his book. There were two additions made on that Thursday. One was for half a pint. The other was for cream. Both were in Jean's order.

On the walk back, Penny asked Watson if she wanted to know how someone had put a slip on a hook.

“I want to know how somebody knew we’d want the room,” Watson said. “The hook sounds easy enough.”

## What Redd Had

The detective looking after Redd’s case was called Catriona Kerr. She had a way of resting her pen parallel to the edge of her desk that made Watson straighten her own notebook.

“His coat was on the bench at Waverley,” Kerr said. “He was found outside Edinburgh by the line. If you saw him between Newcastle and Edinburgh, I’d like you to tell me what he was doing, even if it was just standing there.”

Watson described the coat in the window at Newcastle, laid over an empty seat. She described the man who touched it while looking for a bag. She said she could not place Redd himself after Durham. Penny said she’d thought she saw him reflected at Edinburgh, and when she turned there had been a man with a trolley.

“Do you think it might have been the porter you saw?” Kerr asked.

“I think it’s the porter I know I saw.”

Kerr made a mark on the paper. She asked if they remembered the time the call had been made from the Thistle. Watson corrected her. They had made the call *to* the pub, from the station, on Thursday. There had been a call *from* a woman to Vale at the pub on Wednesday.

Kerr asked why that distinction mattered. Watson laid down the blue slip.

“Somebody was expecting two guests before we knew where we were going to sleep.”

Kerr read it and asked if the date could be another Thursday. Watson said Jean had known to make the beds because it was on the hook that morning. The dairy could place the milk order on the back. As to how long someone might have kept the slip before putting it there, she couldn’t say.

When they got up to leave Kerr asked whether either of them recognised handwriting in square capitals. Penny said everybody at her old office could make a serviceable job of it. She remembered being asked to write the same four words on a dozen pieces of paper for a man who wanted to see whether he could tell which clerk had written which. He got three of them right. Two were his own.

“Will you tell me which office?” Kerr asked.

Penny thought of how easy it would be to say it didn't matter any more. She gave Kerr the name and left James out of her answer. In the street Watson asked if she minded.

"I mind that I've spent a lifetime deciding how much of an answer a question deserves. I think somebody may be doing it to me."

# A Second Door

Jean wanted the wooden bedstand brought up from the cellar because the small lamp had to balance on a directory. Watson went down with her to see whether there was anything to carry. At the foot of the steps there was a stone arch behind a row of empty crates. Through it Watson could see the bottom of another stair.

“Where does that go?”

“Back into the close. There used to be a shop next door. Their people came down that way for their stock.”

Jean set the bedstand on its feet. It was too low. Watson lifted a much uglier one which turned out to be exactly right.

Penny came down to see whether she could help. A tap came from the stone stair. A man was standing on it. He wore a patch over one eye and carried a tin cup with a handle that had been bent almost flat. Seen close to, he looked tired. Watson had expected to feel more certain of him now that she could see his face. His cap looked like a hundred caps she had passed on the way to work.

Jean said, “It’s dry enough up there now.”

“I was looking for a button.”

“What colour?”

“Wouldn’t have come down here if I knew.”

He went back up the stairs. Watson heard him stop for a moment and then heard the cup against the wall. She asked Jean his name.

“Sam, if you ask quick enough. He’s a bit particular about who gets it.”

Watson put the bedstand down. The steps were empty again. Above them the door at the upper end stood a few inches open. From where Penny was, anyone walking across the opening would appear to be going through a wall.



On the street again, the women tried the ordinary routes from the head of the close to the pub. Penny

took the public route past the shops. With Jean's permission, Watson tried the back stair. By the time Penny rounded the corner, Watson was standing outside the pub. Penny would have sworn she'd had the whole close in view. She went back and tried it herself. When she came out ahead of Watson she called up to ask what she had won.

"You've established that I can't see you from the corner," Watson said. "I had to spend my pocket money on that information."

A man sitting in the shelter of an arch had watched them pass twice. He put down his paper when Watson stopped to ask the time. It was a quarter to four, he said. The man with the cup had been there earlier. A woman with a square basket had been there at the same time. He didn't know if they'd been together.

It might have been Jean. It might have been anybody who carried things through the back door. Watson was beginning to think that the most interesting thing about a second door was how quickly people assumed they knew which side everyone had come from.

## Close Enough to Hear

Alec had started taking his supper at the end of the bar after half past six. That evening Penny asked if it

would disturb him to have company. He pushed the salt towards her and asked her to move it the instant he reached for it.

She had intended to tell him about Vale. Instead she found herself telling him about the desk at her old office. There had been a drawer James never managed to shut. He would bump his knee on it and blame the person who'd made the desk. One day she moved the rubbish bin in front of it, intending to teach him a lesson by getting him to close the drawer. He picked up the bin, carried it across the room and put it back exactly where it had been every other day of her working life.

"Was he always difficult?" Alec asked.

"Almost never when I needed him to be."

She could think of the evening someone had rung her at the office to tell her a woman she'd known had died. James fetched her coat and saw her to a taxi. He spoke to the driver as if he had some reason to be in the rain. He didn't offer to go home with her. She had been grateful to him for that too.

"What would he do if he knew you were here?" Alec asked.

"I'm never sure which of us is supposed to be asking that."

He finished his supper, and kept his hands on either side of the plate as though warming them. “I could tell you what I’d do. I’d ask if you wanted another cup.”

He brought one when she said yes. Her brother would have put the handle toward her right hand. Alec put it toward her left, where she could lift it without putting down the pen she was turning between her fingers. She wished she could stop making him sit an examination he hadn’t volunteered to take.

## The Undelivered Parcel

A parcel came for room four. The driver had carried it up from the Cowgate in a stack of three. He put the other two on the floor and asked Watson to sign for the middle one.

She turned the cardboard far enough to read the label. It said *Miss M. Penny*. The address was right. There was a small black stroke through the first letter of her surname, as though it might have been made through two pieces of paper at once.

“Can you tell me when it was sent?” she asked.

The driver turned it over. “It was to be delivered here last Thursday. There wasn’t anyone to sign. I was off Friday and nobody told me it was back in the van.”

“What time Thursday?”

He handed her his sheet. She found the tick beside the address. It had been crossed out at ten past two. They'd been on the train. At ten past two they hadn't yet rung the Thistle, let alone asked for a room.

Watson asked him whether he remembered making the delivery. He said he remembered having to carry it down a close with no number on the door. A woman came to the door, and turned it down because there was nobody in room four. She had asked him to read her the name. He didn't remember what she looked like or whether somebody fetched her.

Jean arrived to take the empty glasses off the table by the door. When the driver saw her he said, "That's the one," quite unprompted. Jean didn't look pleased to be remembered.

"What did you do after he went away?" Watson asked.

"I checked we hadn't got the name in the book. We hadn't."

"Did you tell Alec?"

"He was out. And there was nothing to tell him by then. Most of what gets brought to the address is for somebody who's lived here in the last twenty years." Jean looked at the box. "I told him not to send it back in case she turned up."

“You might have said something when we asked about the room,” Penny said.

“I might if either of you had told me your name was Penny.”

It was a fair answer. Penny wished it had done anything at all to improve her temper. She signed her name as M. Penny and took the box upstairs. Watson asked if she wanted to be left alone with it.

“No. If there’s a jack-in-the-box in here I’d like two people to see it go off.”

There was a pair of tights, a cheap hairbrush and a small tin of tea. Under the tin lay an envelope addressed to the manager of the Thistle. Penny sat at the window while Watson fetched Alec to open it. It held a note asking that the articles be left in the room for the lady when she arrived. There was no signature. The tea was a sort Penny had drunk at work until somebody stopped selling it in the canteen. She remembered speaking of the loss once in a room containing at least fourteen people.

Watson took the note to the window. The back was very slightly blue, and there was that same little space in the figure four, which came after the word *room*. She laid it aside. Later she showed it to Kerr.

Penny wanted to know what use anyone could make of putting a brush in her room.

“To see if you’d use it,” Watson said.

“Why would they care?”

“Because if you used it, they’d know you thought it had come from somebody who knew you.”

Penny looked at the little black letters on the label. “I could have got a brush anywhere.”

“Yes. And then it would have been yours.”

Penny put the brush back in its paper. There was nothing she had wanted so badly that morning as to hear James tell her where he’d been. She looked at the tea again and found it considerably easier to imagine him drawing a line through the P than writing out her name.

# The Woman with the Basket

Watson took the blue slip to the bar while Jean was counting towels. When she laid it alongside the towel book, Jean stopped counting.

“The paper,” she said. “Look at the edge.”

One side of the slip was toothed. Jean had a pad with the same edge, but its sheets were cream. The blue paper belonged to the woman who collected alterations from the pub, Mrs Hume. Her order slips were cream on top, blue underneath. Customers got one sheet. Mrs Hume kept the other.

They found her the next morning at a sewing shop behind Graham’s Inn. Outside, two delivery boys were trying to get a crate through the door without turning it. The cook’s son came out to tell them that if they waited any longer he’d be obliged to make soup round them. Watson stopped long enough to ask him if he’d seen Sam.

“He asked me for a saucer of water,” the lad said. “Put it down outside and sat and waited. I never saw what for.”

Mrs Hume’s shop was long and narrow, with a high shelf full of clothes she hadn’t been paid to finish. She looked at the slip and asked if they’d had the room.

“Yes,” Watson said.

“Then I hope those beds were warm.”

Penny took off her gloves. “Did you book them?”

Mrs Hume turned the iron off at the wall. “I put the slip on the hook. I didn’t put a name in the book. I don’t know either of your names.”

“Who asked you to do it?”

“A man in a grey coat. He gave me a pound for my trouble. I bought needles.”

Watson asked her when. Mrs Hume fetched her appointment pad. A pin had left a small hole through the Wednesday page and several pages beneath it. She had written down the extra pound because she kept a separate account for cash. She had no way of knowing if the time was right, except that she heard the school’s last bell while he was in the shop.

“Did he wear glasses?” Penny asked.

“I don’t know. If you tell me about the glasses I may think I saw them.”

Watson asked which pocket he’d got the pound from. Mrs Hume demonstrated how he had reached across himself, dipping his left hand into the right side. He had caught his cuff on the edge. She remembered that because it was the sort of thing she would normally offer to mend.

“It could have been anybody,” Penny said when they left.

“Mrs Hume thinks so too. That’s why I’m taking her account to Kerr.”

Penny turned back at the inn door. “A man in a grey coat makes sure our beds are made. A voice on the telephone teaches Vale my name. A man turns up dead by the tracks. I can see a story that joins them all.”

“So can I,” Watson said. “What’s the part that actually happened?”

“We got a room.”

## The Man in the Photograph

Kerr spoke to Mrs Hume without telling her which man the women suspected. Mrs Hume picked Redd out in a set of photographs because she remembered a gap at the corner of his mouth when he smiled. She still could not remember glasses. The police had a dated account of her payment, the order pad, and Hamish’s account of when he’d picked up the slip. In the space of a week the anonymous instruction on the hook had become a thing a particular man had asked someone to do.

Kerr asked the women to come in and hear it from her.

“He paid Mrs Hume to see about the beds on Wednesday, here in Edinburgh,” she said. “The booking clerk recalled him arranging the Thursday journey north. We have a separate account of him travelling south after he saw Mrs Hume.”

“On Wednesday morning I saw him by the pharmacy in Guiting Power,” Watson said.

“You saw somebody you took for him,” Kerr said. “If it was him, he spent a good part of Wednesday on trains as well. I can place him with Mrs Hume late that afternoon. I’m still working on the hours before that.”

“Did he say the beds were for us?” Penny asked.

“No. Mrs Hume says he said they were for two women coming from London. If you want him to have known who you were, you’ve still got to show how.”

Watson looked at the account in front of her. Their trip had seemed to begin when Penny told her about the car. If Redd had already arranged the beds, his part of the story had begun earlier and farther away.

“Could they have been for two other women?” she asked.

“They could. The room wasn’t paid for. They were instructions for what to make available. Someone was going to decide who used it later.”

Penny thought of what Alec had said over the phone. Two beds for a week, and a lamp if somebody had taken it out again. He sounded as if he told half the callers in Edinburgh the same thing. It would have been much easier to make sense of him if she knew that he did.

On their way out Kerr returned a copy of the drawing Watson had made on the train. She’d put a date in the margin. In the corner was the stopped clock, with the long hand nearly upright.

“Vale said Redd wasn’t anybody he knew,” Kerr said. “I asked him whether he’d ever seen the photograph. He said he couldn’t see why anyone would want it.”

Watson took the drawing. The distinction would have sounded like her own if she had heard it in another room.

## What Mrs Hume Kept

Mrs Hume turned the new note over twice when they went back with Kerr. “I wrapped that,” she said. “I put my mark on everything that goes out because if I

don’t I spend the next fortnight being told I forgot to send it.”

She showed them how she scored through one letter on a label after she put the address in her book. She had kept a copy of the delivery slip. Redd had brought her the items in a paper bag and given her the name to write. She had wrapped the box as asked and handed it over for delivery. He’d been anxious about the two beds and had asked her to put the room number on the note inside the box. He seemed quite careless about whether it got there in time for tea.

“Why didn’t you tell us about it?” Penny asked.

“You asked who put the slip on the hook. Nobody asked me about a box.”

Watson watched Mrs Hume find the receipt and put it in Kerr’s hand. Ever since she’d first looked at the ledger, she’d wanted there to be some way of tying the anonymous room order to Penny herself. Now she had a signed delivery sheet and a woman who remembered copying Penny’s name. She wished she could be as pleased about it as she’d expected.

Penny asked Mrs Hume, “Did he seem to know me?”

“He read your name off a bit of paper. I asked him where the full stop went and he looked down to see.”

Outside, Watson said Redd might have been doing somebody a kindness. Penny watched the seamstress turn her sign back to OPEN.

“Of course he might,” she said. “That’s what I’d like to know.”

## A Room for Another Week

Vale came in that Thursday before it rained. Watson asked him whether he had ever taken another table. He said he’d have to ask his wife, which for a moment sounded like something he might actually be able to do.

Watson set down the photocopy Kerr had agreed she could show him. Vale told her a young woman on the darts team had once taken a photograph with a timer so she could be in it herself. He remembered standing up for that one. This one he hadn’t known was being taken. He recognised his wife’s scarf on the back of the empty chair beside him.

“Are you quite certain it’s hers?” Watson asked.

“I bought it,” he said. “I had to go to three shops to get the right blue, and she told me when I got home that she’d have taken any of them.”

He studied the empty chair rather than himself. Then he asked if he could have the copy when she was

finished with it. She said she'd ask Kerr. He nodded and returned to his table.

Penny had gone upstairs to get the stamp off her letter. She couldn't bear to leave it sitting on the shelf as though all it needed was an address. When she had the edge raised with a fingernail she pressed it back again.

Watson came in and took off her shoes. "Can we afford another week?"

"Yes."

"Would you like another week?"

Penny looked at her. She hadn't expected those to be such different questions.

"Yes," she said again.

Downstairs Alec asked whether they'd like the room on the other side because it tended to be quieter. Penny said they had earned a certain acquaintance with the noise. He put them down for the same room and asked for nothing in advance.

After closing she came down for her book. Alec was at Vale's table with the clock in front of him. He had taken it off the wall to dust behind it.

"Did you get it going?" she asked.

“No. I found a note behind it asking somebody not to wind it.”

“Who wrote that?”

“If you stay long enough,” he said, “you’ll find that half the writing in this place belongs to somebody we’ve stopped expecting.”

Penny took her book upstairs. A little way above the turn, where the carpet rose, there was a round mark like moisture from the foot of a cup. She knelt to look at it. The carpet was dry.

Then she heard somebody on the other stair.

“It’s late to be looking for a button,” she said.

A man gave a little laugh. She could not tell which side of the wall it was on.

“Ask the Hangman,” he said. “He knows what people lose.”

When Watson opened their door Penny was still on the step, looking down at the mark. She asked what Penny had heard. Penny said she’d tell her while it was fresh. Watson got her notebook. Through the

door of the room they had paid for themselves, neither woman could see the other stair.

