
MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK THREE
PEACOCKS!
Lumen with Chip Cook

Three at the Window

Black Moor • 1996

Watson had just spread marmalade to all four corners of her toast when three peacocks looked in at her.

The first stood on the stone sill. The second appeared beside him, glassily indignant, as though he had caught her eating his breakfast. The third had evidently decided there was room for one more if nobody had a regard for anybody else's feet.

"Penny," said Watson. "How many did you say there were?"

"I didn't."

"Then you may as well start with three."

Penny put down the teapot. In the grey morning light the three blue necks seemed to belong to one extraordinary animal. Then the middle bird turned sideways and revealed a face of such solemn disapproval that she laughed into her napkin.

Mrs Prowse came in with the eggs. She found both women staring at the window and looked to see whether it had started raining.

"Those come with the house," she said.

“All three?” Watson asked.

“Unless one’s fallen off since I looked.”

As Mrs Prowse set the eggs down, the nearest bird tapped the glass. Watson moved her toast a little closer to herself. The bird followed it with one eye.

“You’d think they’d put it in the particulars,” Penny said.

“Would it have made a difference?”

Penny thought of the particulars. *Quiet situation. Secluded grounds.* At St Michael’s Mount she had liked the word *secluded* so much she’d described the house to Watson before she’d quite decided to take it. She had pictured a place where a visitor announcing himself at the gate would have somebody to explain himself to. It had never occurred to her to ask how many people already had the keys.

“I might have bought another loaf.”

“Don’t start that,” Mrs Prowse said. “You’ll never have a breakfast to yourself again.”

One of the birds gave a long, tearing cry. Penny’s cup struck the saucer. Across the table Watson reached for her walking stick and then left her hand on the cloth.

Mrs Prowse glanced out. A wisp of newspaper had blown into the flower bed. As it came to rest against a clump of wet lavender the bird hopped down to inspect it.

“On the way back from the surgery,” Penny said after Mrs Prowse had gone, “I heard one. I thought it sounded like somebody calling for help.”

“Two days ago,” said Watson, picking up her toast, “I’d have been quite happy to have one call for me.”

Her boot stood beside her chair. She wore a soft shoe on the injured foot. Every time she settled her leg somewhere comfortable, the bruised arm she’d brought home from Scotland found a fresh objection. At breakfast she had dropped the butter knife twice. Penny had retrieved it the first time. The second time she’d moved the dish and let Watson retrieve it herself.

“Would you like to come to the village?” Penny asked.

“At what pace?”

“Yours.”

“Then yes. And if somebody offers me a chair, we shall both pretend it was meant for me.”

Mrs Prowse left for the shop while they were getting ready. By the time Penny put on her coat, two

peacocks had left the sill. The third watched her. She had the uneasy feeling he would remember which coat she wore.

A Village Account

The village shop sold milk, stamps, rubber boots and an assortment of screws in envelopes which Arthur Prowse had marked in pencil. Mrs Prowse covered the counter on Thursday mornings while June Dyer went to visit her sister. June had missed the bus that morning. So both women were behind the counter, waiting for a customer to settle which of them was entitled to be cross.

“I can call her,” June said. “She’ll only say it’s a pity and put the kettle on all the same.”

Mrs Prowse pointed to the telephone. June looked at it for a moment, then put the kettle on in the shop.

Watson took the chair she was offered. Penny bought a pint of milk and a local map. Arthur had marked the house for them on Mr Venn’s map when they arrived, but Penny wanted one she could write on. June drew her finger along the road towards the Bristol Channel until it disappeared beneath the fold.

“You’ll want to see the cliffs when your leg’s better,” she told Watson. “My sister says she can see

Wales from up there. I say she can see whatever she wants if nobody's about to contradict her."

"Did you ever go there as a girl?" Watson asked.

"We all went. We used to take sandwiches. Now they'd have to promise me a chair when I got there."

The bell over the door jingled. A tall woman in a raincoat brought in an empty jam jar wrapped in a scarf. She put it on the counter with the care of someone returning a child.

"The jar was yours," she said to Mrs Prowse. "The scarf is mine. I'd be obliged if you could remember which is which this time."

"This is Miss Enid Trevelyan," Mrs Prowse told them. "She used to teach everywhere within the sound of that bell."

"Only at the school," said Miss Trevelyan. "Though there were one or two I could have done with keeping after they'd left."

June introduced Penny and Watson by name. Miss Trevelyan considered them for a moment, then asked whether they had heard an unusual bird at night.

"Apparently it sounds like a gate," Penny said.

"It sounds like several things. Gordon Pike has promised to record it. Gordon also promised to bring

back my television before the Christmas edition of *Songs of Praise*. He has neglected to specify which Christmas."

Enid took a notebook from her pocket. She offered to show them the entry for the bird and spent some time finding it. June brought three cups out from behind the counter. For a while people had to set their purchases down amongst the cups and take care to leave with their own belongings.

At last Enid found the page. Beside the date she'd written *first heard from school wall, shortly after three*. Underneath she'd put *blackbird, gate, blackbird again*. It was the sort of evidence Watson could imagine keeping herself.

Enid folded the notebook shut. "I understand you've come down from Scotland."

"We've been in Cornwall since then," said Penny.

"Oh, of course. I meant before. Does Alec still leave that chair empty by the fire?"

Mrs Prowse came back for a cup at precisely that moment. She stopped with her hand around the handle.

"Which Alec?" asked Penny.

Enid tucked her notebook into her coat. “The man at the pub. The Whistling Thistle. I heard somebody speak of it.”

“Who was that?”

“I’d have to think.” Enid looked down at her empty hands. “Good heavens, I’ve left my scarf on the counter.”

June handed it to her. Enid thanked her and left the shop at the same pace she’d come in.

“I was taught arithmetic by that woman,” June said. “She could still tell you what I got wrong.”

Penny waited for the bell to settle.

“Had she asked you about us before?”

“No,” June said. Then, after trying the word out, “She’d asked what the new tenants were like. We all had.”

Watson put her empty cup in its saucer. “That’s something we can answer at last. We’re the sort who stay too long over a pint of milk.”

She stood up without asking for help. Penny took the milk, the map and the unopened envelope of screws she’d bought without quite knowing why.

The Neighbour

They drove as far as a bend above the village where a gate opened onto a strip of common. They could see Black Moor House across the valley. From there it looked smaller than the name suggested. The roof was a long dark shape, interrupted by chimneys, and behind it rose the moor where Watson had been hurt. She followed the ridge with her eyes until she found the rock she thought she remembered.

"Was it there?" Penny asked.

"I thought so at the time. Now everything I can see looks like somewhere I might have been."

She wanted to walk to the gate and back. Penny lit no cigarette and read no map. She sat where she was, looked out at the valley and let Watson go on her own. By the time Watson returned, her face was pale but there was mud on the good shoe and she appeared pleased with it.

A Land Rover came down the road. It went past them, slowed and pulled in a little way beyond. Watson recognised the vehicle before the man got out.

He came back on foot, leaving his door open. "How's the patient?"

“She’s escaped the surgery,” Watson said. “They’ll send for her when they notice.”

“I’m Nicholas Vale. I ought to have told you at the surgery.”

“I might have forgotten by now.”

He had a small scar beside his left eyebrow which she hadn’t noticed while he was carrying her. In the daylight his coat was quite shabby. Both things made him easier to talk to. She introduced Penny, and he put out his hand. Penny took it.

“I’ve a place over the hill,” he said. “I’m glad your friend was safely at the house when it happened. One of you was quite enough to frighten me.”

Watson looked at him. The corner of his mouth bent before he smiled. She found herself smiling back.

“Who told you she was at the house?”

For an instant he appeared to be giving the question serious thought. “Somebody at the surgery, perhaps. I couldn’t swear to it.”

“Did you find out who left the trap?” Penny asked.

“Hasn’t anybody come up to look at it?”

Penny knew the constable had found the ground empty. She decided to see whether Nicholas would say anything about it first. “Inspector Kerr passed on

what we told her," she said. "We don't know who left it."

"Then you've got it in hand." He asked Watson if she liked ginger biscuits. When she said she did, he told her where in the village to buy them, which turned out to be at the same shop they had just left. There were two kinds, he said. June kept the better ones in an unmarked tin. If June said she had no idea what he meant, Watson was to tell her he owed her two shillings.

"They'll make it ten pence by the time I get there," Watson said.

"They have. She lets me say two shillings because it makes me sound old enough to know better."

He went back to his Land Rover. He had the grace to wait until Penny had opened the car door for Watson before starting it. She had to raise her good leg in first and then bring the other one round by degrees. She was glad he was out of sight when her shoe caught on the edge of the mat and she swore.

"Did you tell anybody at the surgery where I was?" asked Penny once they were moving.

"I told the doctor's wife you wouldn't know where *I* was."

"He may have worked it out."

“Yes. He could have said so.”

Penny slowed for a bend. “Do you want to see him again?”

Watson looked out at the road he had taken. “I think I do. Ask me again after we’ve spoken to Kerr.”

The Chair by the Fire

Penny rang Scotland from the study. The telephone sat on a little table which also held an ashtray, a railway timetable two years out of date and a list of numbers that included the chimney sweep but omitted the police. She dialled Kerr’s number from memory. While she waited, she could hear Mrs Prowse in the hall asking Arthur if they had any more nails.

Kerr answered on the fifth ring. She took down Enid’s name and asked Penny to repeat what the woman had said. Penny did so, in the order she remembered.

“The chair *by the fire*,” Kerr said.

“Yes. And the full name of the pub.”

“People know both things. The question is where she heard them together.”

“Was Alec’s name in the paper?”

“Not in the piece I saw. It was a small piece for the number of people who died.”

Penny rubbed a pencil mark on the telephone table. It had looked like a stain when she sat down. Now she could make out somebody’s attempt to add three figures without a scrap of paper.

“Any luck comparing the two copies of the poster?” she asked.

“I’m still waiting to see the newspaper’s copy. I do have something about the suitcase. The man who last saw it before it came into our hands gave me a better account yesterday. He remembers setting it aside because the owner was coming back for it. Someone else moved it before he returned.”

“Did he see who?”

“He saw it in a different place. He saw somebody near it earlier. I’ve asked him to think about how much time there was between the two.”

Penny wished she could ask Kerr the question she’d been asking herself since the telephone call at St Michael’s Mount. She could hear ONE’s voice as easily as she could hear Kerr’s. She could also hear what Watson would say if she tried to offer it as evidence.

“The men who came after us,” she said. “Did any of them have anything that connected them to the name on the poster?”

“Nothing I’d put in a statement. One of them had a conviction under a different name. Two names on paper is all I’ve got there. I’m still asking about the other people who were at the castle.”

“Do you think anyone from my old office has asked for the same information?”

Kerr was quiet long enough for Penny to hear the pencil point snap under her thumb.

“Somebody rang and asked whether I’d released any of your effects,” Kerr said. “He said he was calling from London. I asked for a number to call him back on. The line went dead.”

“Did he give a name?”

“He gave yours.”

Penny put the broken point down beside the ashtray. “What did you tell him?”

“I asked which effects he meant. He said he understood there was a photograph. I have no idea whether he meant the one on the poster or a photograph from your rooms.”

Penny’s first thought was of James. She took a moment to consider what she could possibly know

about the whereabouts of her brother. The answer was the same as it had been when she woke that morning and the morning before.

“Would you let me know if he calls again?” she asked. “And if there’s anything you can send me about the case, would you send it care of the village shop?”

“Yes. And Penny, about the trap. I told the local station where you’d found the leather. If you find anything else on the ground round that house, ring them first. You can ring me afterwards.”

Penny wrote that down. It was good advice of the sort she could have given somebody else. She rang the local station and asked them to add Nicholas Vale’s name to the report. The constable confirmed he had the scrap and Penny’s note. He said they’d spoken to the doctor and hoped to have a word with Mr Vale later that day.

When she came out of the study, Colin was on his knees in the hall beside a box of drawing pins. He was putting them back into the box one by one. She offered him a hand. He turned the box towards her so they could both reach.

“Were you here when the others started work?” she asked.

“Samual and I came the same week. He’d done a day before me.”

“Did Mr Venn interview you?”

“Mr Prowse did. He asked what I was like with a hoover. I said I could learn. I’d used one for six years at home but I thought there might be something peculiar about theirs.”

“Was there?”

“It was the same one.”

Penny handed him the last pin. He was about to stand when he remembered one under the edge of the carpet and put his hand there without looking. She wondered what he’d found in the house already that he now knew how to find again. She wondered, too, how long she could go on turning everybody’s ordinary competence into something that frightened her.

The Wall

Mr Venn arrived after lunch carrying his inventory folder under his coat. He had found out a little about the extra staff. The name of the person who asked for them was missing from the file. There was a note to say the estate office had received instructions by

telephone. He wanted Penny to know he'd asked twice and would ask again.

"Were you expecting to find a name?" Penny asked.

"I'd have put one, if I took a call like that."

"You did give us the reference for the surgery."

"That was Mrs Prowse. I gave you the plumber."

"Yes," Penny said. "Of course you did."

She remembered reaching for her coat while Colin called out that Watson was safe. There were whole parts of that afternoon she could see as clearly as if she'd been looking at a photograph. The order in which they'd happened seemed to change every time she tried to tell it.

Mr Venn showed her where he'd found the note. She asked if she could make a copy. He said she could have the sheet he'd brought and he'd make another when he got back to the office. Penny folded it in half. She thought he might have brought it expressly to leave with her and hadn't known whether he would be asked.

A peacock screamed. From the front hall the cry sounded as if it came from the old wall beyond the terrace. Penny stepped outside. Watson met her beneath the stone arch, carrying her stick. One blue bird stood high on the wall. Another was below him,

going back and forth in the grass. The third had disappeared.

Penny saw a dark movement beyond the wall, far enough away that the shape might have been a shoulder or a fold in the gorse. She waited for it to move again. The top bird cried once more, facing into the moor.



Samual came in through the yard. He had peat on his boots and a leather glove curled in one large hand. Penny thought of the scrap by the rock. From where she stood she couldn't see a tear in the glove. She could hardly see its seams. Samual stopped beside the women and looked out where they were looking.

"Do they often do that?" Penny asked.

"If they think there's something there."

"Do they usually get it right?"

“About there being *something*, more often than I do.”

Watson held the arch with her free hand. “When did people here start keeping them?”

“Mrs Prowse would know better.” Samual leaned his glove against a stone post, then thought better of it and picked it up again. “They call them the old watch dogs. If something comes into their bit of ground, they object. Last week one went for Arthur when he had a new hat on.”

“He’s worn that hat every day since,” Mrs Prowse said from behind them. “He thinks the bird has a right to get used to him.”

Penny told Samual she thought she might have seen someone beyond the wall. His eyes moved from her to the window of the study, where a light was still on.

“Did he see you?” he asked.

“I don’t even know if there was a *he*.”

Samual nodded. He went down to the wall. The bird stepped aside for him, which seemed to Penny the most surprising thing that had happened all day.

“Did you hear the way he asked that?” she said.

“I did.” Watson rubbed a ridge in the stone with her thumb. “If I’d been out there alone, I’d have liked someone to ask me exactly that.”

Penny felt she ought to answer. Then she thought of the moment at breakfast when Watson had reached towards the stick, and understood why she could let the sentence stand. They waited until Samual came back. He’d seen the top of a coat going away towards the road, he said. He couldn’t see who was wearing it.

“Did it look like a man?” Penny asked.

“It looked like someone in a coat.”

Watson looked at Penny and then down at her shoe. Penny knew that look. It meant Watson had heard one of her own answers from somebody else and was making an effort to enjoy it privately.

Gordon’s Evidence

Gordon Pike turned up at five with a cassette recorder in a shopping bag. He rang the front bell and waited for Colin to let him in. He had a message from Miss Trevelyan about the odd bird and wondered if he might ask for permission to make a recording. Penny asked if he had ever made one before.

“Twice. I’ve brought the better one.”

The better one began with a sound that could have been a blackbird. Then came a sequence of very small thumps.

“That’s my dog moving his feet,” Gordon said. “I’d laid a newspaper down for him. He has a good bed at home. I expect he wanted me to know he could tell the difference.”

A shriek came from beyond the hiss of the tape. Penny would have called it a peacock if she’d heard it from the flower bed at breakfast. Here it was sharper at the end. The next sound was the click of Gordon’s recorder.

“Did you see the bird?” Watson asked.

“No. It was dark.”

“Did you see anything else?”

“I saw Black Moor House. The little window under the arch was lit. It went out before I packed up.”

“Which night was that?”

Gordon turned the cassette over and read the label. It was from three nights before they arrived. Colin said there was no little window under the arch. Gordon took him out to the wall to show him. From there the glass in the side door caught the reflection of the pantry window across the yard. It looked like a light

in the recess under the arch. They came back still arguing over which of them owed the other a shilling.

While they were out, Penny lifted the recorder from its bag so Colin could have his chair back. A little torn label had caught on the corner of the handle. She set the machine on the table and pressed the label flat with a fingertip. It bore Gordon's shop address and a telephone number for repairs.

When he came back, Penny asked him whether he'd ever done work in Scotland.

"Heavens, no. I know a chap who'd do it if you needed it, though."

"At The Whistling Thistle?"

His expression brightened. "Is that where you know Enid from?"

"We met Enid this morning."

"Oh. I got the impression she'd met you somewhere before."

Penny asked him what had given him that impression. Gordon put the cassette back in the bag, took it out, turned it and put it back the other way round.

“She said there’d been two women up there who had got into trouble. Then she said you’d just moved in. I put two and two together.”

“Did she tell you what kind of trouble?”

“Everybody was talking at once. June had an opinion about the price of butter. I wish I could be more help.”

He meant it. Penny was glad of that. She still wrote down what he’d said once he’d gone.

A Photograph from Scotland

Two mornings later June rang to say there was a letter at the shop with a Scottish postmark. Penny had asked Kerr to send anything she was prepared to send care of the shop. Standing at the counter, Penny recognised the inspector’s handwriting and felt a disproportionate relief. A known hand on an envelope had once been an ordinary thing.

June said she’d put the kettle on. Penny asked if she could use the little table by the window first.

Inside there was a photocopy of a photograph of the suitcase on a wooden bench. Kerr had written a note across the back. It gave the date and the time the photograph was taken, after the police had possession of the case. There was no picture of the

poster. There was a close view of a paper tag, folded down almost to the string.

Watson, sitting opposite Penny, turned the copy towards the light. The tag was folded across the line where the surname would have been. A few capital letters showed above the fold, too little to make out the name. The line below was clear enough. It said collect Thursday.

Underneath the date Kerr had added, *He remembers Thursday. The case was moved on Wednesday.*

"How long had they been expecting him?" Watson asked.

"We don't know whether he wrote the tag."

"And we don't know whether the person who moved it had anything to do with him."

Penny could hear the big clock over the till. June waited until she saw them both lift their heads before she brought the tea.

"I thought of something about Enid," June said. "Last autumn she was collecting letters for an old pupil whose mother had died. The poor man had been writing home for years. He wanted the letters back before the house went up for sale."

"Was Alec the pupil?" Penny asked.

“No idea. She didn’t say a name. I remember wrapping the bundle for her and asking if it was going far. She said the Highlands. It seemed a long way to send something you’d have been glad to keep.”

Penny wrote the date Kerr had given her, Wednesday, on the back of the envelope. Then she wrote *Enid’s pupil* and left room beneath it. Nothing on the page said that Enid knew the dead man, the man who moved the suitcase, or even Alec himself. There was a place to look all the same.

On their way out she bought a packet of plain biscuits. June said the ginger ones were better. Watson asked if they were kept in a tin, and June looked delighted to have somebody to whom she could finally explain why they weren’t.

The Hour

That afternoon the two women sat in the car above the village and followed the lines of the coast on Penny’s map. The cliffs lay to the north, on their side of the channel. Out past the houses there was a brightness where the water ought to be. Watson said she meant to go and see it when she could walk far enough to enjoy the coming back.

Penny asked whether she meant to ask Nicholas about the trap again.

“Next time I see him. I’d also like to thank him properly. I think I can do both.”

“I think you can.”

“And what will we tell ONE?”

“What we know when we know it.”

Watson folded the map. “I hope he pays by the hour.”

At the house Enid had left her notebook for Penny to see. It was with Gordon’s card and an invitation in Mrs Prowse’s handwriting. Three or four people proposed to come the following night, when the weather was meant to be dry. Enid had offered to take charge of the party. It said Gordon would bring his recorder, and June would bring a flask. Arthur had written underneath that he was only there to carry things.

“They mean to stay awake to hear it,” Watson said.

“They mean to stay awake to discuss what time they heard it.”

Penny opened Enid’s notebook at the folded corner. The entry about the bird at the school wall was there. There was another on the facing page, written in a hand that had got more hurried towards the foot

of the sheet. The first two words were *Peacock again*. The third line was simply a time.

Thursday, 17 October 1996. 3.15 a.m.

“Would you be willing to have them here?” Penny asked.

“I’d be willing to look down from a window. I’m fairly sure that’s where a woman with a leg like mine ought to be at quarter past three.”

They each said good night in the hall. Watson took the stairs slowly. Penny stayed to put the notebook on the table out of reach of the damp coats. There was a peacock at the dining-room window again. He was only just visible in the last of the light. She stood still, waiting for him to see her. After a while she realised he was looking beyond her, out through the other window, towards the wall.

Upstairs, Watson called down to ask whether Mrs Prowse had left them any hot water.

“I’ll look,” Penny said.

She closed the curtains on her way up. It was a little thing to be able to do for somebody, to make a room warm and give her a door she could shut. After Scotland, she wanted to be sure she hadn’t forgotten how.