
THE RING
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Four
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Dustpan

Black Moor · November 1997

Bell brought the ring in on a saucer. There was a hairline crack in the saucer I knew from the kitchen. I was going to ask him where he'd got it, which would have been a very different question five minutes earlier.

"I washed it," he said.

I picked up the ring by its rim. A little gold eye, open about as far as the eye of a person who has heard somebody at the door and is waiting to see if they'll knock.

"Where did you find it?"

"In the droppings under the old wall."

"Arthur the cat's?"

He let me think about that. Arthur was a cat who could get a mouse through the kitchen door without opening it much further than the mouse. I knew what Bell had meant before he spoke again.

"Kitty," he said.

I could see he'd had time to get over saying the name. ONE had told him about Kitty, his black leopard, when he gave him the job. Bell said he'd been told which part of the grounds to leave alone. He'd found the ring this side of it.

"Did you see her?"

"No."

"How thoroughly did you wash it?"

"With the brush Mrs Prowse uses for the potatoes. I bought her another."

The ring had no initials where I'd have expected them. There was a pale oblong on the gold round the eye and a nick at the edge of the setting. I put it back on the saucer. Later I would wish I'd thought to ask Bell where he'd seen ONE last. At the time I asked whether Mrs Prowse knew about the brush.

I'd been looking at the eye. It took me another moment to think about the inside of the band and what might have been on it before Bell washed it. He'd done a thorough job. I could see that much.

"If you find anything else there, leave it where it is and come and get me," I said.

“Anything like what?”

“I don’t know. If I were looking for proof of where this came from, I’d want what was on it before you took the brush to it.”

“I thought you’d want it clean.”

“I did, till I saw it.”

He asked if it might help to show me the place. We went out by the side door. The wall was lower on the far side, where the ground fell away. Bell pointed from the path. I could just see the place from there. If I’d gone out to get the washing in, I’d have walked within a foot of it and looked straight past.

“Did you see any prints?” I asked.

“I saw mine when I went back for the pan.”

We stood a little longer. I wished I could remember what I’d done with the side door key. It was in my hand. Bell asked if I wanted him to close the door on his way back and I said I would do it myself.

The bell sounded just before four. Through the glass I saw Bell standing behind a small man in a

light coat. The man's feet were wet above the laces.

"He says he has an appointment," Bell said.

"You're early for whoever you're meant to see," I told the man. "I haven't an appointment till tomorrow."

"Did he tell you who Nicholas was working for?"

I had asked that question in this room. ONE had been sitting where he could see the window. I could remember where both his hands had been. I couldn't remember whether the window had been open. The man watched me look at it. I got the impression he'd expected me to look somewhere else.

I asked the man his name.

"Have you got Nick's ring?"

Bell moved his head just enough for me to see that he'd heard it too.

The Statement

The man said he'd wait. I went through to the house to telephone Kerr, leaving Bell by the door. Before she could come, the man had gone out again. Bell followed him as far as the bend. The next time I saw the light coat, it was spread on the wall where a constable had laid it.

Kerr came in when they'd taken him away. She told me plainly he had died. Later the inquest established that he'd taken his own life. That evening all I knew was that I'd had time to ask him his name and he'd had time to hear me ask it.

"What did you think he meant by 'he'?" Kerr said.

"I thought he meant ONE."

"Because he mentioned Nicholas?"

"Because I'd asked ONE that very question."

She waited while I told her when. Then she wrote my words down and passed the page to me. Through the door I could hear Mrs Prowse running water into the kettle. I wanted to go out

and tell her I didn't think any of us wanted tea. I signed instead.

Kerr took the saucer with the ring still on it. She put the ring in an envelope and gave Bell the saucer back.

"What did he tell you at the gate?" she asked him.

"That his appointment was for four. I was to ask her whether she'd received a parcel. He hadn't said which parcel when she came to the door."

I asked Kerr if she would look for a parcel slip among his things. She said she would look. It was the first promise anybody made that day that I thought they could keep.

The Bend

Kerr asked me to walk as far as the bend with her in daylight. I'd thought I would have to ask her first, so I was ready with all the reasons I wanted to go. When she offered I found I could only say yes.

The edge of the road was soft. Somebody had put a piece of plywood over the worst part so it could be crossed without going ankle deep. A constable I knew lifted it to let us pass and put it back again. I knew him from the search for Nicholas. This time he said good morning straight off. It took me until I was past him to remember his name.

“Bell said he was walking quite slowly until he got here,” Kerr said.

“He had wet feet when I saw him.”

“Both?”

“I think so. I looked down because I was going to ask him to wipe them.”

No amount of remembering the wet feet would put the man back on my step. I went on looking

at the verge for a while. Then I asked Kerr if she thought he'd walked up from the village.

“If he did, he came by the lower path. Nobody we spoke to saw him on the road.”

“Would that account for the wet feet?”

“Would you take the lower path in shoes?”

“Only if I didn’t want to be seen from the road.”

She took me to where the path came through the hedge. Bell had mentioned it when he came to work here. It joined the drive inside the gate. There was a notice on the fence, stiffened with new varnish. Private road. There was no name on it and nothing to tell a person where the path went. I stepped through the gap and found I could see my own door. I was very glad there was nobody standing at it.

Back at the house I told Bell what Kerr had shown me. He said he'd known about the gap and kept an eye on it when he was out. He wanted to know if I was asking him to fence it.

“Can you do it without asking ONE?”

“I can tell him it needs doing.”

“Tell him who asked.”

He fetched his coat. I sat on the step till he came past with his hat on and the little notebook he used for the jobs he wanted to remember. I asked what he'd written. He opened it and showed me. Side path, request of Miss Watson. Then he turned to a clean page so he could take his own note of what ONE said.

What Penny Heard

Penny came in the next morning without saying what time she'd left home. She took off her coat and put it over the back of a chair. I fetched two cups. It was easier to tell her about the ring while I was doing that.

"I thought he'd let go of you," I said.

"He did. Kitty had him by the wrist. That was when I got you up."

"Did you see what happened to him?"

Penny shook her head. "I could hear him screaming, way off on the moor. It was chilling, knowing what may have been happening to him. Even knowing what he was going to do to us."

"Did you think of going back?"

"I thought of it," she said. "I kept hold of you."

I looked out at the yew. There was a dark place underneath it where I thought I could see something until I looked a second time.

"We made love that afternoon," I said.

Penny set her cup down.

“At the picnic,” I said. “When we’d finished he wrapped the bread up in your cloth. I keep trying to remember when he started saying goodbye.”

“Did he say goodbye?”

“No. He asked me to remind him about the mustard jar.”

Penny left her hand on the table. It was there if I wanted it.

“I know whose baby it is,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. She left her hand where it was.

The Unpaid Fare

June said she had never seen the man in the light coat. Then she said a man had come in on Thursday to buy two first-class stamps. He had a coat light enough that she noticed where he set it against the bread, and he paid with a handful of little change.

“Did he ask the way to the house?”

“He asked whether we had a collection after four. I told him there was one from the main road. I expected him to ask where it was. He already knew.”

“Did he have letters with him?”

“He had one. He wanted two stamps.”

June went into the back room while a boy counted out the price of a bag of crisps. He counted it twice and took back a penny. She came out again with a pad she kept under the till. She said she'd written down the last four digits of a number for the man when he tried to get a taxi. He hadn't used it and she'd put the pad away without tearing the top sheet off.

I asked where he wanted to go. June said she hadn't heard him ask anybody. He had made a call from the box and come back with the pad. It was the first time I'd heard about a telephone call. Kerr asked the owner of the cab firm. Nobody answering to Marsh had rung him that afternoon.

There was an envelope on the wire rack by the till. A customer had left it for the bread man. June's name was at the top, and below she had written which van he would be in if he missed the first one. I stood looking at it for a while. It occurred to me that I'd assumed the stranger was expecting to take the parcel with him. He might have been told to send something off. The extra stamp was a small thing, but it had been worth his last change.

The next day Kerr rang from her office. A bus driver remembered a man with a light coat who'd borrowed a pencil to write something down. He got off at the main road and left the pencil on the seat. The driver had noticed because passengers usually took them with them.

"Do we know what he wrote?" I asked.

"No."

“Was it an address?”

“The driver says it was something on a small envelope.”

“Can you see if it went?”

“I can ask,” she said. “That's all I have at present.”

I wanted the missing envelope to explain why he came and how he knew what I'd asked ONE. It was a great deal to ask of an envelope. Kerr did ask about it. Nobody turned up with a letter that answered to what we had. When I put the telephone down, I drew a little box in my notes for the envelope, then left the box empty.

The Jeweller

What Kerr found was a pawn ticket for a watch. The shop sold and repaired jewellery as well. Kerr asked me to come with her because the shopkeeper wanted to know what I'd seen on the ring that made me think it had been altered.

Mr Fenn put on a lens to look at Kerr's photograph.

"That little flat edge there," I said. "The gold's a different colour."

"I took a coat of arms off it," he said. "It took most of a morning."

He found the counterfoil for the work in a wooden box. The name on it was H. Marsh. He'd paid for the work and collected the ring himself. Mr Fenn remembered him because he insisted on taking the gold filings, then forgot the envelope with them and came back for it in the rain.

"Did he say what the eye meant?" I asked.

"He said he wanted to be able to recognise it across a table."

"Did he wear it when he left?"

“He tried it on. It was too big for him.”

The pawn ticket had the same name. Fenn knew Marsh came from a boarding house in town and remembered a woman who’d brought the watch in to be repaired before he pawned it. Kerr found her there. She was his sister. She identified him and asked for the watch because it had been their father’s.

Kerr telephoned to tell me. She said the sister knew Marsh had worked for a courier firm and that his job had ended in July. She couldn’t say why he’d come to Black Moor. I asked Kerr what to do if somebody called for the ring.

“Take their name,” she said.

I asked Kerr if she thought Marsh had come for a ring he already knew I had.

“He asked if you’d received a parcel,” she said. “Did you ever tell him you had?”

“No. Did he have anything with him that might have been meant for me?”

“A watch ticket, a room key and enough money to get the bus back to town. His sister says he’d

left the watch at the shop every winter since their father died. He always went back for it."

I could picture her making the trip herself. I asked if the shop would let her have it, and Kerr said she'd arranged it before she rang me.

I put the telephone down. I had found out whose voice it was. I wished I could still ask him what he'd meant by the parcel.

I went back to the jeweller after closing. The door was still unlocked and Mr Fenn was wrapping something in a piece of tissue paper. He said I could come in if I kept my feet on the mat. I told him I'd been thinking about the ring being too large for the man who picked it up.

"Did he ask you to make it smaller?" I said.

"He asked what it would cost if he wanted a different size. I told him. He put it back in the paper."

"Did he tell you whose size he wanted?"

"If he'd known the size, I'd have been able to give him a price."

He set the parcel down. I looked at his hands. The ends of two of his fingers were dark. I'd

been asking him to remember somebody who came to his shop long before a stranger died on our road. I asked whether he had the receipt there so I could see when it had happened. He pulled the box out again and turned the receipt over. Marsh had picked it up at the beginning of July.

That had been before the last picnic. I was sure I'd have remembered an eye on Nick's hand. Then I remembered I'd been wrong about which window in the agency had been open, and I saw I was going to have to live with being sure of a number of things I couldn't establish.

His Own Name

I met Marsh's sister outside the watch shop a week after Kerr rang. I'd asked Kerr to pass on my number. His sister said she had two errands to do in town and could manage a third if I came early. She told me her name was Judith.

She had the watch in a small box by the time I arrived. Mr Fenn had wrapped it, although it was hers already. She let me see it as far as the first fold in the paper. The strap was frayed where the buckle went through. On her brother's wrist it must have worn a place a little farther in. I could see the unused holes all in a line.

"What did you want to ask me?" she said.

"Whether he talked to you about somebody called Nicholas."

She said no. She was quite sure about that. I asked whether he had mentioned Black Moor.

"He asked me if I'd ever been there. I said I used to take an aunt to the sewing shop in the village. He wanted to know if you could walk from the bus stop to the big house without going by the road."

“Did you tell him?”

“I said I supposed you could if there was a gate at the end of the path. I didn't know. That must have been weeks ago.” She folded the paper back over the watch. “You keep thinking a question is something you can answer and be done with.”

I asked if she remembered which week. She said the week the telephone went wrong. She had written the date on the bill. She gave it to Kerr later. Marsh had asked about the path before Bell found the ring.

I’d been thinking of a man hearing that something was found and coming to claim it. He had been asking how to reach the house much earlier. I could take one supposition out of the file and put it down somewhere else.

“His firm collected metalwork,” Judith said. “Things people put into safes and never looked at. He used to say the envelopes were worth more than the van. After the firm closed he did the odd delivery on his own.”

“Did he tell you where he took things?”

“One place. We went there together to see about a job he hadn't been paid for. The building was empty. He was quite put out because he had to pay for us both to get back.”

She wrote down the address. It was a row of little units behind the station. I went with Kerr. There was a shop that sold lamp fittings and a man counting boxes in a doorway. The office number Judith gave us had been taken off the wall. The man knew it all the same, because he'd had mail from there put through his door. He’d handed it over to the postman at the end of each week. He could tell Kerr when the last one came, because there had been a leak in the roof and he had had to take it outside to dry.

He couldn't tell us who'd opened the office or used it. He said the only person he'd seen there with a key was Marsh.

I thought of the way Marsh had said Nick’s name. I’d taken it as a claim to know him better than I did. It might have been a name he’d read on an envelope.

Outside the station Judith had arranged to meet us. I told her what the man said. She asked what I

thought her brother had wanted from me. It was the first time anybody had put it like that.

“I think he expected me to have something he could take away,” I said. “I don’t know who he meant to give it to.”

She asked if I'd tell her when I did know. I said I would. I had to let her go home with that much. She put the watch in her handbag before she crossed the road, and held the clasp shut with one hand.

On the way home from the station, Kerr stopped the car at the bend. I thought she had seen something and put my hand out against the dashboard. She said she was only stopping to ask me a question without having to watch the road.

“What do you expect ONE to tell you when you show him the photograph?”

“Whether he knows the mark. What it means to him.”

“What will you do if he wants to keep it?”

“Give him another print if you’re happy for me to. You can keep the ring.”

She thought about that. When she drove on, we went straight past the gap in the hedge. The fence Bell had asked for was going up. There were three new posts and a line between them so he could see whether they were straight. It made the track easier to see than it had been before.

At the house I asked Mrs Prowse if she'd noticed a letter brought up on Thursday. She showed me everything we'd had that day. A bill for coal, a circular about insulating the loft, and a letter for Penny in a hand I recognised. I remembered Marsh asking whether I'd received a parcel. I still couldn't say whether he was trying to deliver something or take it away.

I went upstairs with Penny's letter to put it where she could find it. At the door I stopped and looked at the words on the front. I could have taken it to the kitchen and rung her to ask if she wanted it opened. She hadn't asked me to do that. I set it on the table in her room and left the door as I'd found it.

Two Envelopes

ONE looked at the photograph of the eye at my desk. He took his glasses off, cleaned them and looked again.

“I’ve seen that mark before,” he said. “On a letter meant for somebody else.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. There was no name on the envelope. I’d been asked to pass it on and I did.”

“To whom?”

“To a man who said he’d take it the rest of the way.”

I waited for him to hear himself. He turned the photograph right side up and slid it back to me.

“Did anybody know you were coming to see me the day I asked about Nicholas?”

“The clerk who handed me the file.”

“Who did you tell after you left?”

“I told Bell you’d signed.”

“Did you tell him what I asked?”

“No.”

I could write those answers down. They would have the same value tomorrow as they did today, which depended entirely on whether I believed him.

“I’m grateful for what Kitty did,” I said.

He looked at me then. “So am I.”

“I’d like to know where she is.”

“I can tell you where she was this morning.”

“Could you tell me where she’ll be tonight?”

He folded his glasses. I had my answer by the time he put them away.

After he left, I wrote the rent cheque and put it in one envelope. My invoice went in the other. Both were going to the same office. I could send them in one envelope and save a stamp, which is the sort of thing I’d ordinarily do.

I paid for two stamps.

