



The Importance of Being Ernestine

AN ELLIE HASKELL MYSTERY

Dorothy Cannell

VIKING

The Importance
of Being
Ernestine



VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,
Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany,
Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in 2002 by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

Copyright © Cannell & Company, 2002

All rights reserved

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA AVAILABLE

ISBN 0-670-03060-0

Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Nancy Resnick

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Also by Dorothy Cannell

NOVELS

The Thin Woman

Down the Garden Path

The Widows Club

Mum's the Word

Femmes Fatal

How to Murder Your Mother-in-Law

How to Murder the Man of Your Dreams

God Save the Queen

The Spring Cleaning Murders

The Trouble with Harriet

Bridesmaids Revisited

SHORT STORIES

The January Sale Stow-Away

The Family Jewels

To Julian Ashley Moore and Trevor McNeil Cannell.

Time to take your bows. Here is your book.

With love from Granna

One

Mata Hari and the other devious divas of history had nothing on me! The plotting with all its secret assignments and whispered telephone conversations was enormously satisfying. Yesterday's heist had been somewhat nerve-racking given that Kathleen Ambleforth, the vicar's wife, had failed to send the van at the appointed time to remove the loot. But now the stage was set.

All day I was exuberantly busy. In the morning I instructed the furniture men where to place the leather sofa that would have done Lord Peter Wimsey proud, made sure the tapestry armchair was angled just right and that the Georgian-style cabinet intended to hide the new computer was positioned squarely under the window. Seeing three burly men close to tears always brings out the best in me. In the space of fifteen minutes I produced three pots of tea, watched an entire fruit-cake be demolished and did not snap when one of them took a chunk out of the wall. Immediately following their departure I hung the Scottish landscape paintings and the gilt-framed mirror, positioned the lamps and potted plants and tied back the topaz velvet curtains with tasseled cords.

My cousin Freddy who lives in the cottage at the bottom of the drive kindly watched two-year-old Rose for me during the afternoon, enabling me to revel in arranging the brass candlesticks and antique finials on the mantelpiece and the Royal

Worcester figurines in the display cabinet that had arrived the previous day. I had just finished positioning the area rug when it was time to collect the twins—son Tam and daughter Abbey—from school.

They would be five in a few weeks, at the beginning of December, and were always bounding with energy when they got home. Having them underfoot made lining up the books in the newly installed walnut bookcases a lengthy process, but I got through it with my sunny mood intact. The only one out of sorts was Tobias the cat who accidentally got shut in the cupboard under the stairs. But fortunately he worked off most of his irritation having a showdown with the Hoover and a couple of mops. All three children ate their supper of toad-in-a-hole and rice pudding without fuss.

I got them bathed and down for the night with a minimum of pillow fighting and jumping on the beds. Hurrying them through their prayers and only reading them one chapter of *Charlotte's Web* left me feeling a little guilty, but the minutes were ticking away. It was time to step into the shower. I resisted the temptation to skip washing my hair because it is long and always takes an age to blow-dry. But I wanted to look my best when the curtain rose on the entrance of the man who played the leading role in my life.

The corduroy dress I put on was forest green, one of my favorite shades. A glance in the mirror showed my eyes sparkling with anticipation and my chignon pinned neatly in place except for the tendrils I had allowed to escape. Usually I didn't fuss unduly about my appearance. I would never be a beauty like my cousin Vanessa, the well-known model. My coloring was too subdued, my features unremarkable. Fresh-faced and wholesome was one way I'd heard myself described. Still, I thought this time I had risen to the occasion.

It had been storming on and off during the day, and rain now beat against the windowpanes as I hurried back down to

the study to turn on the gas logs, another new addition. The grandfather clock struck the half-hour: 7:30. He should be here any moment now. I was setting two glasses on the silver tray containing the brandy decanter when I heard the front door open and his footsteps in the hall. My hero! My husband had returned from a week's trip promoting his latest cookery book.

Ben was peeling off his damp coat. Never had he looked more handsome with rain glistening in his dark hair and his blue green eyes alight with the pleasure of being back where he belonged. I stumbled over his suitcase in getting to him and for several moments I was lost to the thrill of being again in his arms and returning his passionate kiss. It's amazing how even a short absence can revitalize a marriage of six years. I was swept back to those first heady days when he had stormed into my life and I had thought him the most insufferably arrogant, infuriating . . . marvelous man alive. But this wasn't just a reunion. It was the moment for which I had been rehearsing all day. Over and over again I had recited my lines and his too, knowing exactly what he would say when I walked him on stage.

"Come with me," I tugged on his arm. "Have I got something to show you, darling! We're going into the study. Promise to close your eyes when we get to the door and not open them until I've walked you into the middle of the room."

"Not a surprise party?" He recoiled, looking aghast. "There isn't a bunch of people in there. I want it to be just you and me and the children."

Hadn't I known that's what he would say?

"The children are in bed. And there's nobody else here except Tobias, and he's too much of a gentleman to intrude." I laughed in cheerful delight. I just couldn't wait to see my beloved's expression when I had shuffled him into position. Across the flagstones we went, past the twin suits of armor against the staircase wall and through the study door. No doubt about it, my labors had paid off. The room was a vision to be-

hold. Those gas logs gave an apricot glow to the newly hung wallpaper and gleamed upon the polished surfaces. The brandy in the decanter seemed to have caught on fire. How could Ben fail to be as delighted as I was? "You can open your eyes now." I moved back to the doorway, eager not to impede an inch of the view.

"My God, Ellie!" It was the exclamation I had anticipated.

"Surprised?"

"You've changed everything!"

"Out with the old. In with the new," I caroled back at him.

"You shouldn't have!"

The very words I had rehearsed for him! But he was supposed to have included an endearment, such as sweetheart or darling. And I hadn't pictured his eyebrows coming down in an iron bar across his nose. Or that his mouth would have firmed into an equally hard line. For several moments he did not move except to fold his arms. Then he began to pace with thundering steps.

"Where's my typewriter?"

"The old manual?" A quiver entered my voice.

"And my filing cabinet?"

"That beaten up, rusty piece of tin?"

"Ellie," menace throbbed through every syllable, "what have you done with my stuff? I can't work in this fussed-up environment. I want my own things. My lumpy armchair, the old jet gas fire. Why the wallpaper? Why the china cabinet and the silver and crystal?" He was now clutching his head and looking as anguished as if I'd given away his mother to the Salvation Army. "How do you expect me to write? With a quill pen?"

"There's a computer in that cabinet?" I pointed a shaking finger. "And all your files are in the drawers."

"I don't want a damn computer!"

"I thought you would be pleased!"

"Then you thought wrong? What really went on here," he

flung out an arm toppling over a vase, "is that you've been itching to get your hands on this room, the one place in this house that I've called my own, because you thought it wasn't up to your standards as a professional interior designer."

"Ben, I went to a lot of effort"—I did not add that I had also spent an unconscionable amount of money—"to do this for you."

"No, Ellie," he had never before spoken to me so coldly, "you did it for you." Before I could summon up an answer the telephone rang. Feeling relieved at having a reason to leave the room and its suddenly icy atmosphere, I went out into the hall to answer it. When I returned Ben was back to standing with his arms folded.

"That was Mrs. Malloy," I said bleakly, "phoning from the detective agency." He continued standing, staring, silent. "She's been cleaning there in the evenings for the past few weeks. She asked if I could bring her a lipstick she left behind when she was here last. And as it seems to me you're not too keen on my company at the moment, perhaps taking it to her now would be a good idea."

"Should I hire her employer to locate my missing items, or am I likely to find them if I rummage in the attic?" He raised what would have been described in a romance novel as a dark, sardonic eyebrow.

"There's no need to be hateful." I blinked away tears and escaped from the room and out of the house with my raincoat half on and my head in a desperate whirl. Would there ever be a good time to tell him the extent of what he deemed my wicked betrayal? Could my once faithful daily helper Mrs. Malloy offer words of wisdom? After all she had been married herself—more times than she could remember, as she was fond of reminding me. Or would she stick to telling me that I'd made a complete hash of things? It didn't matter. Nothing much mattered. There was no point in telling myself that there were real

tragedies going on in the world at that very moment: life savings being lost, nice old people being ill-treated by their relatives, murders being plotted. All I could think about was Ben's wretched ingratitude.

As I drove out onto Cliff Road the curtain came down in a heavy gauze of rain, behind which my unhappy thoughts were left wandering on stage like lost souls in search of a script.

Two

It was no fit night for man nor beast, let alone a female in distress, to be out and about in Mucklesby. Rain lashed against the windows as I parked the car. The wind howled at the top of its lungs when I stepped out onto the curb. The moon peeked furtively out from behind a muffler of clouds. Tucking my already drenched hair under my raincoat collar, I stood under a streetlight to study the address on the scrap of paper I had pulled from my pocket. Thirteen Falcon Way. According to the instructions given to me by Mrs. Malloy this should be the street. And a nasty, seedy place it was with its boarded-up shop windows, graffiti-covered walls and a rusted chain-link fence surrounding a vacant parking lot. A couple of straggly haired youths sidled past me followed by a woman who smelled the worse for drink.

On spotting the lighted doorway of a café, I nipped inside. It was crowded with half-a-dozen tables covered with dark green oil cloths upon which sat bottles of tomato sauce and pink plastic salt and pepper shakers. Only one chair at one table was occupied, by a man having a bad hair day. He should have kept on the hat that was set down at his elbow. On glancing my way he buried his face in the dog-eared menu. It didn't surprise me. I had already decided that Mugglesby wasn't the sort of place to welcome strangers—an unfair assessment, as was proved when a door behind the counter opened.

Out came a woman with at least three chins and a beehive hairdo. Her pink overall matched the salt and pepper shakers. When I said I had come in seeking directions she smiled as though I were a long lost friend.

"I'll take this over to the gent and be right back with you, love," she said. And on returning a few seconds later, having received not so much as a grunt from the man behind the menu, she went on brightly: "It's a good thing he's still here, or I'd have closed up a couple of hours ago. In wintertime I don't stay open as a rule past 6:30. Might as well roll up the pavements after dark in this part of town. And just as well. Cuts down on the muggings. But I'm not one to hurry my customers.

"That's kind."

She gave me a concerned look. My puffy eyelids had to give the game away that I had been crying. "Always the silver lining isn't there? Nasty raw evening to be wandering around lost. Now, tell me, where is it you're looking for, love?" She stood nodding as I gave her the address. "You're as near as to be almost there. This is Falcon Road. Turn left out the door and go to the corner. That's Falcon Way. The building you want used to be the ironmonger's. The bottom half's shut up. But you can get in through the side door to go upstairs to that private detective's place. That's where you're headed I take it?"

"Yes."

"In some sort of trouble are you, love?"

"Nothing like that," I said quickly. "I have to take something to a woman who works for him."

"Well, that's good." Clearly she wasn't sure whether to believe me. "A quiet sort of gent is Mr. Jugg. Comes in here once in a while for his lunch. Always has the cod and chips. Does mostly divorce work, as I understand it. Getting the dirt on husbands that are seeing someone on the side. Wives too I suppose. Marriage isn't what it used to be. And I blame the telly. There's not enough worth watching these days to keep people

at home in the armchair. My own hubby started going out with the boys, so he said, Wednesday nights when they took off the snooker." Her chins wobbled disconsolately. "How about I get you a cup of tea before you turn back out into the rain?"

I thanked her, but said I was already late. No doubt she supposed that I had an appointment with Mr. Jugg that would set him on the trail of an errant spouse and a buxom blonde. As I went out the door, I noticed that the man at the table was still holding up the menu and had not touched his baked beans. Focusing on such trivia kept my unhappiness at bay for a few moments. Once back in the street I concentrated on regretting that in my haste to leave the house I hadn't had the sense to bring an umbrella. The pavement was as black and shiny as a freshly applied coat of tar. Rain-shrouded streetlights added a yellowish cast to the puddles that turned the road into a pond. Reaching the corner I turned into what in a more salubrious area might have been called a mews.

Here in Mucklesby, Falcon Way was merely an alley. Dustbins stood rusting next to the crumbling steps. Scarred doors and rotted windowsills added to the grimness of the warehouse-style buildings. And the brick-paved road was so narrow it barely allowed room to park a bicycle let alone a car. A scrawny cat crept up along side me, mewing plaintively in hopes that I had a couple of kippers in my pocket. I felt wicked ignoring it. My own Tobias would be comfortably ensconced in his favorite chair in the warm kitchen. But this one could also belong to someone, I told myself. On spotting number thirteen, I went down a few feet of cracked pathway toward the side door the woman in the café had mentioned. It opened with a melancholy creak onto a dingy flight of steps. A lightbulb dangled from the stairwell. I climbed to a narrow landing where a glass door faced me. This one swung inward without audible protest.

I was now in an office that looked remarkably like the sort I had seen in old movies featuring hard-drinking, hard-boiled

private detectives. There were a couple of battered-looking filing cabinets against one wall, a coat stand in the corner sprouting a trilby hat and a desk bare of all essentials except a bottle of bourbon and an overflowing ashtray. Save for a couple of chairs, the room was otherwise empty. An inner door opened.

Coming toward me was a woman whose face and figure were as familiar to me as my own. She had, after all, been an important part of my life since the first days of my marriage. Since our last meeting, however, her appearance had undergone a dramatic change. Where once she had worn black taffeta frocks better suited to a nightclub than turning out the guest bedroom, she now sported a miniskirt and tight angora sweater. Her hair, which had always been dyed black, was now platinum blond. Only her makeup was the same. But the familiar neon-coated eyelids, false eyelashes, brick-colored rouge and magenta lipstick did little to lessen my shock.

"So what do you think, Mrs. H.?" She twirled about on her four-inch heels.

I was thinking that I couldn't say what I was thinking. Mrs. Malloy was a robustly built woman, and I suspected that she had to be wearing an iron ribbed corset under that skirt.

"Very nice," I managed.

"That don't sound overly enthusiastic." Planting her hands on her hips, she jutted out her imposing bosom. "But all's forgiven. I could tell you wasn't yourself when I phoned. For a moment I didn't think it was you speaking."

"Who else would it have been?" I responded bleakly.

"A burglar come to pinch all the silver. Would have been doing me a favor seeing as how I hate polishing the stuff."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mrs. Malloy! You've hardly been at Merlin's Court to polish anything since you started working here in the evenings. And I really can't see what there is here," I said, surveying the small room, "to keep you so busy."

"Trying to better meself, that's what I'm doing!" She parked herself in the desk chair, reached into a drawer for a battered packet of Lucky Strikes and lit up with a flourish. I was never more appalled. Mrs. M. was partial to a glass of gin, but I had never known her to smoke. "For your information, Mrs. H.," she continued with a determined look on her face, "I'm hoping that if I make meself a presence around here, Mr. Jugg will appoint me his Girl Friday. I've been teaching meself to type. Up to four words a minute, I am."

"Congratulations." I wandered over to the filing cabinets and back.

"You're put out, and I don't wonder!" She blew a couple of smoke rings. "I've been your right hand and no mistake. But much as I've enjoyed slaving away for you these past years, there hasn't been much in the way of mental stimulation, if you get my meaning. Which isn't to say," she stubbed out the cigarette in the hideous ashtray and adopted a more conciliatory tone, "that I'm handing in me notice. Once I get the hang of things around here, I'm sure I'll be able to fit you back in of a now and then."

"That's awfully kind." Not having been offered a chair, I stood unbuttoning and rebuttoning my raincoat.

"You could try and sound like you're broken hearted not to have me at your beck and call."

"One has to accept what life dishes out."

"I must say you don't sound at all yourself." Mrs. Malloy's voice shifted from peevishness to professionalism. "And you look something awful."

"Naturally," I snapped. "Your directions weren't first-rate, and I nearly drowned finding this place." To impress the point I lifted my hair, which had come undone from its chignon, out from under my raincoat collar and wrung it out briskly.

She waved a dismissive hand. "That's all by the by. Your

nose is red, your eyes is puffy, which means you've been crying. Also you've got one black shoe on and one brown. Clearly the situation is desperate."

"Please," I spluttered, "do stop talking as though you're already Mr. Jugg's Girl Friday."

My former ally furrowed her brow, closed her eyes, then snapped them open. "Speaking strictly professionally, the problem has to be Mr. H.! Gone and upset you, has he?"

"As a matter of fact . . ." I swallowed a sob along with a mouthful of secondhand smoke.

"Got himself a dolly on the side, I suppose." Mrs. Malloy oozed sympathy. "Well, I can't say as I'm surprised. Husbands are men when all's said and done. And yours is a good-looking bloke with that dark hair and those be-damned-to-you blue eyes."

"They're more green than blue." I sank down on the chair across from the desk. A feeling of lassitude enveloped me. Within seconds I would be hopelessly trapped in the persona of distraught client.

"Want to have him and the nasty little home-wrecker put under surveillance?" She reached for a lethally sharpened pencil. "That sort of thing is a big part of our business here at Jugg's Detective Agency. That and missing persons."

"There is no other woman," I said, endeavoring to square my shoulders. "Ben and I have had a minor tiff, that's all. I'm sure he didn't mean to be beastly and horribly ungrateful. And I don't doubt that by the time our golden wedding anniversary rolls around we will both have completely forgotten about it."

Mrs. Malloy's eyes narrowed. "Ticked off was he, that you went behind his back and did over his study?"

"He wasn't pleased."

"Well, I did try to warn you he wouldn't be thrilled." She tossed me a gun that had been on the desk next to the ashtray. For a blurred moment I thought she was offering me a way out