

# *An extract from The Country Escape*

## *Prologue*

'Is this thing working?...I think it is. The red light's on. Blast...get *off* the recorder, Daphne. Lie over there. No, not on the *Telegraph* – I haven't finished the crossword. That's better. Good girl. Where was I? Ah, yes, Katherine. Hello, Katherine. This is Constance Mytton-Gough.

'I was intending to compose a letter to you "to be opened in the event of my death" – such a wonderful, self-indulgent sentence to write because it affirms one is still alive – but as you know my wretched fingers are too arthritic to hold a pen for long nowadays and I don't trust that girl from the solicitor's to take this down verbatim – she's always adding whereforeins and whenceforths. I've borrowed this recording apparatus from dear Miriam, whom I trust to be utterly discreet in passing my message on to you. You must listen very carefully – I've always wanted to say that too, what fun! Where was I? No, Daphne, leave the cushion alone. Ah, yes, my death. We won't dwell on it, but when one reaches one's ninety-fifth year it is rather closer than it is in one's ninety-fourth, and I need to get my ducks in a line before I go. Where was I? I have a list somewhere.

'Ah, yes. As you know, the animals will all need looking after when I'm gone – yes, that's you,

Daphne, and you two, my darlings, along with your disreputable lurcher chums wherever they are – plus the horses, of course, and all the other stock here, which is why I have made provisions. It's all legal and signed and, of course, you and I have spoken about it often, Katherine, but this letter... recording, whatever it is, will help verify my wishes should anybody contest the will, and I rather fear they might. The solicitors are clearly convinced I've lost my marbles. You are totally over-qualified to take on this role, but you were also over-qualified to come here and look after me, and we both know why you did that. Ignore the doubters who say a nurse from the suburbs cannot be a Herefordshire small-holder. You are young and strong and quick to learn. You love animals and are frightfully practical. Gosh, this is exhausting. I must take a breather.'

'...must be this one, eh, Daphne? There we go. Red light.

'Katherine, I do have several additional wishes that I want to— Hello? Oh, you're here. How awkward. Is it the yardarm already, Katherine? What joy! Set it down over there, will you?...What? This thing? It's a Dictaphone. Now, take these dogs out for a run, there's a good girl.

'Good. You've gone. That rather interrupted the flow, but while I remember please do something about your appearance. It's easier for you to hear this when I'm dead. One hates to criticize so take this as a back-handed compliment. You're a very pretty girl, but you give out a rather wanton message, not to mention a frightful colour clash with all that ridiculous cherry red hair and whatever it is you use to make your skin orange. Scrub up, have a bob and knuckle down to country life. Male suitors will distract you, especially at first. They'll all be circling once I'm gone and you've got Lake Farm, but I've thought of a way of protecting you on that front. Marry and you lose the lot. Tough but fair, I feel.

'Where's that blasted piece of paper? Ah, here! This must be to do with it...

*'Unlike the rest of my estate, which will pass to my heirs...Lake Farm to be held in trust after my death... blah...managed by the Constance Mytton-Gough Memorial Animal Sanctuary charity...for the purpose of caring for the family pets and other domestic animals that survive me so they may live out their lives in peace amid familiar surroundings...blah... looked after by my former nurse Miss Katherine Mason, who has the right to live in the property known as Lake Farm until such time— This isn't my Letter of*

Wishes. This is the change in the will. You know about that. The Wishes are just as important. Ah, yes. Here they are.

'First, and forgive an old bat a frightful romantic indulgence here, you must promise me that you will only marry for love. You may think me quite unreasonable insisting upon it, but it's such a simple thing and I regret not doing it. The clause about losing the farm in the event of your marriage is rather counter- intuitive – but it's a forfeit you must be prepared to pay, and is only there for your own protection.

'My second wish is rather more eccentric and requires a great deal of dedication on your part, but

I think it will be the making of you. Blast. Have I asked you whether you ride, Katherine? Think

I'll enjoy my snifter now.'

'...think I'd remember how to turn on the wretched thing by –ah, light!

'The Bolt. Katherine, you must ride The Bolt! It's in the Letter of Wishes. I know you said you want to do it before I die, which is terribly sweet of you, but it's jolly hard and quite dangerous and you have to learn to ride first. I want you to do it for a greater reason than my entertainment, or for the Eardisford Purse, which naturally is a part of the reward. I want you to do it because it will set you free. You will understand what I'm talking about when it happens.'