

long as you know what you're doing,' she said. 'Anyway, don't say you haven't been warned!' Her tone was only quarter-serious.

'Old Gypsy Loame!' I said. 'I'll cross your hand with silver when we get back to the Crook!'

But I did not, for when we reached the house Twice had the promise of the cottages at Crookmill from Sir Andrew, and Sir Andrew had Twice firmly enmeshed in plans for their rehabilitation; and during lunch Monica and I felt like a quantity of flotsam or jetsam or something equally unamusing and unwanted.

Now, I was brought up to the idea that when 'the men' were talking, 'the women' sat quietly and did not interfere, but Monica came from a different tradition, and when Sir Andrew said: '... and this end would be the kitchen—' she said: 'Oh, no it wouldn't!'

'What do you mean, no?' he barked.

'Just what anyone else would mean. NO. In the negative. And to develop a little further, I think it is time you boys came out of the realm of theory. Why don't we all go and *see* this place?'

After a few looks of wild surmise on the faces of Sir Andrew and Twice and some discussion, this was decided to be a reasonable idea, so we drove about four miles in the sharp autumn sunshine, and I saw, for the first time, my new home.

Of course, I had seen Crookmill before. I had seen it as a row of low, grey-stone, broken-down cottages at the end of a short rough road by the course of a stream, showing nothing to the main road but a blank, defiant gable wall, but there are many ways of seeing things and one of the most extraordinary of these ways is suddenly to see something as your own, something that

hitherto had no personal significance. When we had bumped up the steep rough road beside the little burn that gurgled over its rocky course, we left the car where the road ended in an irregular patch of grass and crossed a rotting little wooden bridge to go through the gateless gap in the wall that enclosed the cottage gardens. These were rank with nettles, docks and run-out gooseberry bushes; the roughly boarded windows of the building looked like a row of blind eyes. Nothing, had it been the possession of someone else, could have had less appeal, but suddenly, taking it for my own, I had both love and pride for it.

‘Monica!’ I said. ‘We’ve got four front doors! I bet that even at Beechwood you haven’t got four *front* doors!’

Suddenly we all—even Sir Andrew—burst out laughing, a joyous peal in which the hill burn seemed to join as it chuckled on its way and it became a moment of pure happiness in every sense—sound and sight, the smell of frostbitten bracken, the feel of Twice’s tweed sleeve, the taste of joy on the tongue amid the laughter of friends.

‘Have you thought,’ Twice asked when we had fallen to silence, ‘of coming out of one front door into a snowdrift and in through another to get to the bathroom?’

‘*Il faut arranger tout ça!*’ said Monica, who tends to revert to her French convent youth in moments of enthusiasm. ‘Let’s break our way in and have a look!’

‘There are ways in round the back,’ said Twice. ‘I’ve been here before. Come on.’

The row of cottages consisted of eight rooms in all, with four front doors, four small front halls, four back doors and four little lean-to sculleries at intervals along the back wall.

‘All fearfully *parti-carré!*’ said Monica. ‘And I suppose that

once there were four dear little inconveniences at the bottoms of these four back gardens? Tell me, what in the world are all these great wooden boxes built into every room?’

‘Beds,’ said Sir Andrew.

‘Beds? You mean for horses?’

‘Don’t be a fool, woman! Have you never heard of a box bed?’

‘No,’ said Monica.

‘God above us!’ Sir Andrew stepped between a pair of the wooden walls that went from floor to ceiling at right angles to the stone walls of the room. ‘This had a platform about four feet from the floor, the mattress lay on that—feathers, as a rule—and when you went to bed you climbed in and shut the big doors that were in front here—very secure and warm.’

‘And then somebody cleared out the asphyxiated corpses in the morning?’ Monica inquired.

‘Asphyxiated rubbish!’ said Sir Andrew. ‘Over two hundred and fifty cubic feet in here! People in these days went for comfort, not fads!’ He turned to Twice. ‘Well, my boy, I must say I wouldn’t have thought of trying to convert it, but once these scullery places are joined together into a continuous passage you are well on the way. It’s a fine old building—I’d like to see it in use again.’

‘Well, you might have answered the man’s letters!’ said Monica.

‘I thought he was a rambling club or a hostelling youth or something. I don’t hold with them. If he had told me he was thinking of getting married—well, what do you think, my boy?’

‘I want it, sir. Eh, Flash?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said.