Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner

C.J. Koch

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Abstract
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Maybe It’s Because I’m a Londoner

The cold became intense. In the main street, at the corner of the court, some labourers were repairing the gas pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged men and boys were gathered: warming their hands and winking their eyes before the blaze in rapture. The water-plug being left in solitude, its overflows sullenly congealed, and turned to misanthropic ice. The brightness of the shops, where holly sprigs and berries crackled in the lamp heat of the windows, made pale faces ruddy as they passed. Poulterers’ and grocers’ trades became a splendid joke...

Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

‘So much for the Lascar manager. Now for the sinister cripple who lives upon the second floor of the opium den, and who was certainly the last human being whose eyes rested upon Neville St. Clair.’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

I saw the Chinaman with the branded forehead, and remembering what Fomalhaut had told me, I decided that this man could be no other than the chief of the Gang.

Frank H. Shaw, The Brand of Mystery (Chums, 1920)

London, in my earliest days, came to me always as a set of images by night. It was a night more thrillingly cold and vast than any in Tasmania, congested with huge, grimy buildings of ineffable importance, and with grimly hurrying people whose concerns were those of a metropolitan Valhalla. It was half fearsome, its alleys the haunt of blackjack-wielding thugs and of various grotesques: hunchbacks, criminal cripples and deformed beggars. The sirens of ships sounded alarmingly from the Pool of London. And yet it had pockets of warmth and enviable snugness, glowing through the fog: gas lamps flaring beside old doorways of worm-eaten wood; candles in attic windows above inn yards, staining the thick northern air with yellow. In rooms where great fires blazed in open fireplaces that were larger and more efficient than ours, men in dinner suits gave low-voiced directions for the running of the world. Mister Pickwick had warmed his coat-tails before such fires; Christopher Robin was made
cosy by them, safe in his nursery; and boys much more worldly-wise than my brother and I toasted sausages and muffins over the coals. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, hurrying through pea-soupers to their rooms in Baker Street, could always be confident that a blazing fire awaited them.

This unique British snugness in things — an aspect of the imperial ability to tame a naughty world — was readily and vicariously shared in the freezing Hobart winters of my childhood. And other, more disturbing flames flickered in our imaginations in those days: the bonfires lit by the Blitz. The fires of London, snug or apocalyptic, glowed at the distant centre of our universe, since London was the City: the capital of the world. There was no other city that mattered; Melbourne and Sydney were mere towns, and New York was rumoured to be a brash monstrosity. London was both the city of cities, and the all-wise, half-forbidding Friend.

All this began earlier than I can remember. My Grandfather Hurburgh, in those infant years before I could read, used to take the old Strand Magazine, where Sherlock Holmes had still been making his appearance not so many years before. On its cover was a picture of the famous street, and this is my most ancient and central memory of London. I somehow saw my Tasmanian grandfather — who had never been farther than Sydney, but whose own grandfather had come from Greenwich — as a Londoner; once, I believed, he had walked the Strand itself, in his gleaming black shoes, as all heroes of the city must do. Its deep and splendid channel, crowded with shining cars and god-like city people, was the thoroughfare of destiny we all must some day tread, to pass beneath its porticoes and pinnacles of filigreed stone. And very early too — so early that it has become like a memory of my own past — I followed Ebenezer Scrooge to that ‘gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of buildings up a yard’ where Marley’s ghost awaited him.

Like many another child of the Empire in the ‘thirties, I had been named after Christopher Robin; When We Were Very Young had been read to me when I was three. My brother and I had Dickens read to us when we were seven and nine years old, and Oliver Twist and Pip and Little Nell and Mr Bumble were famous figures we might some day meet: our parents and relatives spoke of them as though they were real, and I can still see my mother pursing her lips over Uriah Heep. Give us a child until the age of seven. It wasn’t the Jesuits who had us until that age, it was Christopher Robin, Buckingham Palace, Little Pig Robinson, Mr Toad, Sherlock Holmes, and a school called Clemes College. Our teachers
made us keep scrapbooks on the doings of ‘the little princesses’, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. What chance did we have?

Clemes College was a decaying private school where our father and his brother had gone, housed in a musing nineteenth-century building with French windows leading from the kindergarten room onto an antique sandstone terrace, surrounded by English gardens in which stone urns gathered English moss. It was run by old, vague, white-moustached Mr Clemes, who was English, and by a staff of English maiden ladies who smiled a lot but who displayed sadistic tendencies, setting about us with rulers, and watching with gleaming eyes as big boys tortured smaller ones in the playground. These ladies read us Alice in Wonderland and The Jungle Book and, pointing to a globe of the world in the corner of the classroom, showed us how red was the dominant colour on the map, a pattern ending at the bottom with the little red shield of Tasmania. We were left in no doubt of what we were and where we were; being Australians was secondary, and at the top of the map, in the south of that dragon-shaped island we had never seen, the great web of London waited for us to come to it.

My earliest expeditions through London were made in the pages of Chums: an ancient British boys’ paper which finally expired in the early years of my childhood, before the Second World War. I had inherited the Chums Annual for 1920 from my cheerful Uncle Gordon, who had owned it when he was my age, and who would be off next year to New Guinea in the AIF, to fight the Japanese. ‘Some of those stories’ll give you the ding-bats,’ he warned me, and I thrilled in anticipation of being terrified. I was not to be disappointed: a pirate story called ‘The Night Rovers’ was to petrify me as no literary work has done since:

*It sounded quite loud, for one of the small panes was broken, and I counted thirteen taps. Then they ceased, and a most horrible chuckle ended with a low whistle.*

*‘Thirteen!’ breathed a voice that made me shiver. ‘That was your number, Cutías, when we drew lots. And mine was seven. Thirty years ago on the Spanish Main...’*

Boys must have read more in the 1920s, I decided, as I gloated over the sheer size and weight of this big red book — understanding for the first time the full, pregnant meaning of the word ‘volume’. It was actually a bound collection of weekly papers, giving off a delicate scent of age: the antiquity that was twenty-one years ago. Each yellowing newsprint page contained three columns of tiny type, with old-fashioned headings; black and white illustrations occurred, but they did little to interrupt the marvellous, almost limitless fields of print. This book, I saw immedia-
ately, would take years to exhaust, and I was right; when my uncle came back safe from the war, whistling around the house in his jungle greens, there were still stories in *Chums* I hadn’t read.

At nine and ten years old, one of life’s chief ecstasies was to sit up in bed on a winter’s night with *Chums* propped on my knees, a cup of cocoa in my hand, the westerly wind rushing in the big pine tree next door, rain drumming on the iron roof of the sunroom my brother and I shared as a bedroom. Of course, as we now know, such papers were tainted with the quaint and objectionable prejudices and myths of their era. Hearty xenophobias, as well as a mystical devotion to the British Empire, were confidently expected of their boy readers; but I knew little then about the ramifications of such things. My friends and I took it for granted that Chinese were sinister, and called ‘Chinamen’; that the only good savages in ‘the heart of Africa’ were those who devotedly served clean-living young English *Bwanas*; that Dutchmen (the Boer War having left its mark), were treacherous. I tended to skip the self-improvement and athletic articles (‘Boxing for Boys’), and to concentrate on the serials, many of them written by men with military titles (Captain Oswald Dallas; Major Charles Gilson). There were pirate stories, heart-of-Africa stories, Canadian-backwoods stories; but dominating everything, and fascinating me most, were stories whose background was the city of London.

In the year that *Chums* came into my hands, London was enduring the Blitz, and we thought of the city now with a protective concern. As I sat up in bed reading *The Night Rovers*, bombs were hitting Westminster Abbey, the houses of Parliament, and the Wren churches we sang about in *Oranges and Lemons* in the Clemes College playground. Images of all this came to us through photographs and the cinema, the dome of St Paul’s glowing inviolate at the centre of destruction, ringed by defiant searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. We never doubted in Tasmania that London would win; never doubted that the Spitfires would triumph over the Messerschmitts and the Junkers 88s. We listened with a lump in our throats to the unperturbed, paternal voice of the BBC announcer speaking from the heart of fire and terror, on the late-night broadcast carried by the ABC. *This is London calling.* It was a voice made to waver only by the fluctuations of short wave, and by the global distance that separated us from our capital. The droning of the German bombers filled our heads as though they were only miles off; by 1942 our own windows were covered with blackout blinds, and air-raid practice at night made the war come even closer. Sirens brayed and searchlights swept across the sunroom windows as we waited for an invasion by imperial Japan. Our
fate now depended on America, and on a straggling line of Australians in slouch hats (Uncle Gordon among them), on the Kokoda Trail; but it also depended on the war in Europe. Tasmanians flew in the Stirlings and Halifaxes that bombed the Ruhr.

Those who have not been subjects of a global empire, who have not been made aware from infancy of what were then called ‘ties of blood’, will never understand these far-off things. No English man or woman will ever be able to experience what a colonial Australian or New Zealander of British or part-British descent felt about England. We were subjects of no mortal country; hidden in our unconscious was a kingdom of Faery: a Britain that could never exist outside the pages of Hardy, Kenneth Grahame, Dickens and Beatrix Potter; and yet it was a country we confidently set out to discover. We sailed, as soon as we reached our twenties, for isles of the Hesperides we never doubted were real. What no native of the ‘mother country’ could ever understand — what no-one but overseas children of the Empire could ever experience, in fact — was the unique emotion summoned up by the first sight of a country known at one remove from birth, and waited for as an adolescent waits for love. We really did stare at the white cliffs of Dover with beating hearts; we really did survey London (familiar yet unfamiliar, in a dreamlike, paradoxical mix), with a surge of intoxication. This quickly wore off, as the cold realities of bedsitters and jobs descended on us; but nothing could rob us of those first hours and weeks.

These are archaic emotions, now. No doubt citizens of the imperial Roman possessions once experienced them, on coming into Rome for the first time. Possibly they will never be felt again. But those who dismiss them as a sentimental absurdity have no conception of their intensity, and fail to understand the central convictions and fantasies that history can brew up, shaking whole generations with their poignancy; making them willing to die for such fancies. Afterwards, as a joke, they are made to be merely quaint.

For me, the London of fancy became the London of fact at the age of twenty-two; and my entry was made via the Strand. Robert Brain and I, penniless after hitch-hiking about Europe, had landed in England at Harwich, having come across by ferry from the Hook of Holland. We caught the train to London, and entered the tube system, to emerge into the city’s open air at Charing Cross Station.

Here was the Strand, then, on a fine summer’s morning, carrying its human streams towards the Aldwych, St Clement Danes and the Inns of
Court and Chancery where Dickens’s Lord High Chancellor had sat at the heart of the fog, and no doubt sat still. Here were men actually wearing black morning-coats, pin-striped trousers and bowler hats, wielding furled umbrellas, whom we examined with joy, until one of them glared at us. Here was a real copy of *The Times* bought from an actual, cloth-capped Cockney at the entrance of the station, who called Robert ‘Guv’nor’. A man passed us now clad in a suit of green silk, wearing a green top hat and talking to himself. He was an unusual sight to young Tasmanians in 1955, but no-one else in the crowd even glanced at him: here was the famous British tolerance of eccentricity. We entered Forte’s café across the road, where we drank without complaint a grey liquid called coffee which was certainly not coffee; then, in a daze of delight, we wandered on under the promised porticoes and pinnacles of filigreed stone. There was Villiers Street, running down to the Embankment, where we might well have to sleep out, we knew, if we didn’t find jobs immediately. And here, reassuringly, was Tasmania House, where we went in to the desk and found our mail awaiting us. This was our club, and London was already our home.

But if it was home, it was a stern and tight-fisted one. For the first time, we understood our good fortune simply in being born Australian. Post-war Australia was carefree and prosperous; post-war Britain was grim and poor; these facts were soon borne in on us, as we contemplated weekly wages which at home would barely have satisfied us as pocket money, and nearly half of which would be needed to rent a single bedsitting-room. London was still marked by the Blitz: war-damaged buildings were being repaired, and flowers grew on the gaping bomb-sites. An air of austerity persisted, and people had the manner of cheerfulness in adversity: that style we had become familiar with in wartime British films. Faced with these realities, we soon separated. Robert landed a job in one of the counties, teaching in a summer school; and I found myself alone in London.

At that time, the new Welfare State didn’t pay unemployment benefits which made survival possible; nor did one think of applying for them. I must quickly find work or starve; I had five pounds borrowed from Robert to stave off that eventuality, and my search began. Tramping the streets, gazing up at lighted windows in Charing Cross Road, Piccadilly and the Bayswater Road, peering through the doorways of buildings whose intimidating neo-Greek facades forbade entry to any shabby young colonial, I began to understand what the American writer Thomas Wolfe had discovered here before me: that there were two races in England, the Big People and the Little People.
These were the days before large-scale immigration from India and the West Indies, and the island's two indigenous races were very clearly recognisable; I was seeing, although I didn't know it, the last of the frozen old England which the post-imperial era was dissolving. The Big People, who ate in restaurants in Mayfair and Soho where the prices terrified me, were conveyed past in Jaguars and Rovers and Rolls Royces, and lived in another London than the one I was discovering. My London was the London of the tiny bedsitter in Bayswater or Earl's Court or Notting Hill Gate, with its gas-ring for cooking, gas-box to pay coins into, aged washbasin and shared, freezing bathroom down the passage. 'Your bath will be on Tuesdays and Thursdays,' my first landlady informed me. 'Mr Drummond has his on Mondays and Wednesdays', and Miss Appleby has hers the other days.' My London was the London of the cheap caf., with sausages, eggs and chips for two-and-sixpence, and tea for fourpence. It was a London whose streets were the grey of old overcoats, its buildings of that liver-coloured brick whose hue seems the essence of despair; the districts of Little Dorrit:

*Wilderness of corner houses, with barbarous old porticoes and appurtenances, horrors that came into existence under some wrong-headed person in some wrong-headed time... Ricketty dwellings ... like the last results of the great mansions breeding in — and — in...*

This London, into which I was descending like so many other young Australians, was the London of the Little People: Cockneys and working-class Londoners who received us with the friendliness of fellow-spirits. Cockneys in particular assumed that an Australian was a sort of lost tribal brother, and one felt that this was so. The Little People existed with few creature comforts, keeping their clothes neat and maintaining an unaccountable jauntiness. They didn't own the houses they lived in; they had no cars; they could afford no holidays, except for a few days at Brighton; their only pleasures were a few pints of bitter in the evenings and a seat in the cinema or the music hall once a week. And this life was soon to be mine.

The interview for my first job held a promise of glamour. It was conducted by a pretty young employment officer at Lyons' Corner House, where I had applied to wash dishes. She spoke in the accents of the Big People. 'Hev you ever appeared before the public?'

No, I said cautiously, I hadn't.

'Do you maind appearing before the public?'

No, I didn't mind; and I was issued with the grey, vaguely Cossack jacket which was the required uniform of a Lyons' waiter, and sent out
on the floor to what was called a ‘station’. This was a block of tables which it was my duty to keep cleared of dirty crockery, and where my other task was to pour tea and coffee for the customers. The kitchen, reached through swinging doors, was a tiled ante-chamber to Hell; here I fought through a line of other snarling waiters to keep my coffee and tea pots filled at the huge, hissing urns. But outside, on the red-carpeted floor, all was grandeur.

Lyons’ Corner House at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, long vanished, was really just a big self-service restaurant. But it provided elegance; it was a place where the Little People could pretend to be Big People, helped by the fact that after they had queued for their meals, their tea and coffee were poured for them by waitresses, or by uniformed men such as myself. A big Hammond organ was played by a man in a dinner jacket in the afternoons, and the whole scene was patrolled by a species of floor-walker: men in frock coats and striped trousers who were our immediate superiors, and who kept us up to the mark. They too, I realised from their accents, were technically Little People, but they were physically large and martial-looking and had an air of haughty menace that was very intimidating, lining us up each morning for a military inspection.

‘Koch, your uniform’s filthy. Get a fresh one.’
‘Sir.’

I earned five pounds a week, and my bedsitter in Notting Hill Gate cost three; it was not really enough to survive, but on Friday, which was pay-day, Lyons’ allowed us a free meal. I had worked out that by Thursday I could usually afford either to eat or to smoke; being addicted to cigarettes then, I chose to smoke. Lying in bed on a Thursday night, my stomach rumbling, dragging deeply on a Woodbine (the cheap fag of the Little People), I would think about the free meal in the kitchen next day, which included nauseating cream cakes. Like many of the Little People, I allowed myself a half-pint of bitter in the pub in the evening, a picture show a week, and ten cigarettes a day; these pleasures being digested with miserly care. I should have been miserable, but I wasn’t; a vast elation would seize me at unexpected moments. My love affair with the real London had begun.

I had begun to comprehend that this city of cities, despite its grim facades and its penny-pinching and its beggars, was strangely gentle. The gold light of October fell on sooty, golden stone, and on a hundred gently-frowning little church spires, and I began to understand too what every newcomer here learned: that it was really a set of villages, and that one of its great virtues was a fond, village cheerfulness. Cockney bus con-
ductors impersonated comedians on the double-deckers that took me along Oxford Street in the mornings; motherly women in shops called me 'dear', and I saw that people smiled at each other far more than they did in any Australian city. One Sunday morning in that autumn, I was woken in my bed in Ladbroke Square by the sound of a tune, floating through the window from the street below: *Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner.*

I get that funny feeling inside of me
Just walking up and down.
*Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner*
That I love London town.

I knew who was playing it: a group of street musicians I'd often seen trudging along the kerb in the Bayswater Road: a one-armed, straw-haired trumpeter; an old accordionist with a black Homburg hat; a thin violinist in a long muffler. I had heard this ballad in an earlier life, it seemed to me, and I knew, in my Sunday bed, that in some way I already belonged to the London of my ancestors, and would do so forever.

I had now begun to make friends. My first friends were two show-business men down on their luck: Derek, a Canadian tap-dancer working with me in Lyons, and his friend Buddy, a New Zealand accordionist. They shared a shabby double room in Camden Town, home of Bob Cratchit, where Buddy would cook us elaborate Sunday roasts. Later I would make English friends, but for now, we three outcasts from the old Dominions wandered about London in our time off, sharing our loneliness. Derek and Buddy, I came to realise, had no friends other than me.

'They'll never let you into their homes,' Buddy told me, discussing the English. 'Never. Just realise that from the start.' A bald, stout old man of around sixty, always in a brown felt hat, he had a high, chanting voice and a dolefully dogmatic air, and was very bitter against the world. He was now working on a counter in an Oxford Street department store; it had been some years, I gathered, since he had played his accordion around the music halls, and I suspected that he would never be hired again. He put his troubles down to corrupt theatrical agents who refused to book him.

'Those bloody agents,' he would say. 'They take bribes. They work their favourites into the halls, and leave better performers to starve. If I could shoot them all, I would; every one of the greasy bastards. The barrel of my rifle would be running hot, and still I'd be blazing away.' His mouth worked, as he stared into vistas of carnage.
‘Now Buddy,’ Derek would say soothingly. ‘You’re just workin’ yourself up.’ He was a thin, pale, sweet-natured man in his thirties, with thin blond hair, who always referred to himself as ‘a hoofer’. He too hadn’t been hired for some time, and I wondered if he would ever hoof again.

Buddy and Derek introduced me to the music halls: one of the cheap pleasures that London then offered the Little People. For ninepence, we could go upstairs at Collins’ Music Hall or the old Finsbury Park Empire and watch jugglers, comedians, dancers, and vocalists like Dicky Valentine. Buddy and Derek would whisper professional comments in the dark, staring down at the lemon-lit stage from which they were exiled.

‘His voice is going. Straining it, you can tell.’
‘Without a mike, she’d be nothing. No power at all.’
‘Poor old bastard, his back’s giving him trouble. See that?’
‘Now there’s a lovely hoofer.’
‘Fifty, if he’s a day. Bribed the agent, I’ll bet.’
‘Now Buddy, don’t be bitter. You’ll only give yourself a heart condition.’

‘Agents. My barrel would be running hot.’
‘Buddy, please. We’re trying to hear the vocalist.’

I now found a job at a pound a week more, in the Hearts of Oak Insurance Company at Euston; and the last edges of the world of Dickens closed even more firmly about me.

At the Hearts of Oak, I found myself in a large room surrounded by glass offices, sitting at a long wooden table together with some eight or ten other men. Our job was addressing and sealing envelopes; we did nothing else. This was carried out with steel-nibbed pens, dipped into a set of common ink-wells. I eventually asked one of the supervisors why typewriters weren’t used, and he reacted with distaste. ‘The Hearts of Oak would never treat its customers like that. They expect the personal touch.’ What went into these envelopes, I discovered, were reminders that premiums were due.

We were supervised by a group of men who appeared, like their counterparts in Lyons’ Corner House, to be floor-walkers. They wore the same black morning coats and striped trousers, they were large and intimidating, walked with their hands behind their backs, and spoke in the accents of the Big People. They patrolled past our table at regular intervals, bringing us to order.

‘Mr Brown, that’s enough talking. Resume your work.’
‘Mr Koch, have you no more envelopes? Then why are you speaking to Mr Dempsey?’
What other functions these men had, and the true nature of their work, still remain a mystery to me. They disappeared for long periods, but were always hovering in the background, like suave crows.

On my first day, I made an error I was not to make again. Having collected a set of envelopes and a list of names to be copied from a man who sat at a desk on a sort of podium, I took them away, finished them in an hour, and brought them back to him.

'What's this?' he said.
'I've finished.'

He stared at me in weary disbelief. 'Try to understand, Koch. That was your morning's work.'

I understood. Going back to the table, I realised that I would have time here to loaf and invite my soul; even perhaps to tinker with a chapter of the first novel on which I was working at night. We were a happy band of men at that table, all quietly aware of the gift of leisure the Hearts of Oak was giving us — provided, like good children, we were not too noisy, and pretended to write when the supervisors came past. We did crosswords and the football pools; told each other the stories of our lives; discussed films we’d seen; told dirty jokes; debated politics and philosophy; and smoked our Woodbines — always bent over our envelopes, our pens describing writing motions. My chief friends were Bill Brown, an ex-tail-gunner who had flown many raids over Germany, and who now found civilian life boring, and Mr Dempsey, a little old Irish gentleman who had lost all his money.

Handsome, diminutive and gnomish, Mr Dempsey had a sweeping mane of white hair, a trim white moustache, brilliant blue eyes, and a patrician bearing that was probably quite unconscious. He dressed nearly always in a tweed suit of excellent quality which I suspected was the last of a stylish wardrobe. He was, he told me, nearly seventy, well past retiring age, but the Hearts of Oak had taken him on three years ago as a favour, when he lost the last of his assets. He preferred to work rather than draw the pension, on which he and his wife would have found it difficult to survive. Always perky, despite his descent in the world, he was full of extraordinary schemes for escaping the Hearts of Oak and making money. He formed a sort of grandfatherly fondness for me, and seemed to believe that he and I would carry out one of these schemes together. Perhaps it was just a game; but if it was, he never let on. His optimism was supernatural.

'I've had a wonderful notion, my dear,' he said one morning. 'We'll sell bicycles to the Americans. Bill here agrees it would work.'

This scheme, the details of which I've forgotten, occupied us for over a
week, with detailed plans and figures on Hearts of Oak stationery. When he got particularly excited, Dempsey would spring to his feet and quote from the poem which he said had provided the firm's name, declaiming it at the top of his voice. «Hearts of oak, the Captain cried!»

A black-coated figure would loom up. 'Mr Dempsey, what is the trouble?'

'Sorry, sir — just loyally quoting the firm's motto.'

When Dempsey discovered me to be an aspiring writer, furtively at work on a novel on the backs of premium forms, he became even more enthusiastic. 'You must write down your impressions of England now, my dear, while they're fresh. Young people like yourself from the Dominions see us with new eyes. You ought to get it down before it fades. Get it down.' His insistence had a personal note; and over the weeks and months, I came to feel that he looked to me to fulfil some lost dream of his own.

His story was at first unbelievable to me. He came from a wealthy Anglo-Irish family, and over a lifetime — perhaps through wild schemes — had run through his entire inheritance. But he had no regrets, he said; he'd enjoyed his adventures, and now and then he gave me glimpses of life on the Riviera in the 'thirties, where he had met his French wife. 'The casinos were my downfall,' he said quietly, dipping into the inkwell. 'I lost a lot there. Well, well, easy come easy go, my dear, and we must be grateful to the Hearts of Oak for giving us our sustenance.' He rose to his feet and raised his steel-nibbed pen on high. «Hearts of oak, the Captain cried!»

'Mr Dempsey. These outbursts really must stop.'

'Aye aye, sir. Just reciting the firm's motto. We are all grateful to the firm.'

He had written his autobiography, he told me, which had been published some years ago by Hutchinson. He had been friends with Alexander Korda, and had put some money into a film of Korda's, shot on the Black Sea. Secretly, I decided that these were the fantasies of a poor little old man who was merely a clerk; I even began to wonder if he had ever had any money. But one day he brought me a copy of the book he had written, published by Hutchinson, sure enough: and there, among others, was a photograph of a youthful Dempsey with Alexander Korda, on location on the Black Sea.

'Yes, it's all true,' Bill Brown said to me disgustedly. 'The mad little bastard ran through all his money. And now he's ended up here. Serve him right; if I'd had that money I'd have bloody well hung on to it.'

But Mr Dempsey's cheerfulness began now to seem to me heroic. He
loved poetry, and when I asked him whether he was ever downcast about his fate, he quoted Housman to me.

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
Think rather, — call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.

'That's what I tell myself when unhappiness or discontent come upon me,' he said, 'and you should learn to do the same. Tell your soul to be still, and it will be. All bad things pass, my dear, just like all good things. They pass.'

Eventually Mr Dempsey invited me to visit him at home in the evening: to take tea and cakes and to meet his wife, at their flat in the Gray's Inn Road. 'I've spoken about you often to my wife,' he said. 'She greatly looks forward to meeting you. She doesn't get about much; she's not awfully strong. I have to make sure she takes care of herself; she's all I have, my dear, we never had children — and we're as much in love as we were when we first married. So you see, I'm very fortunate.'

The Dempseys lived just around the corner from Doughty Street, where Dickens's house was. I discovered a tall, grey, four-storeyed terrace of intimidating gloom: a house from *Little Dorrit*. The Dempsey flat was reached by climbing three flights of steep, narrow stairs through semi-darkness, and proved to be simply a double room with a tiny kitchen and no bathroom. There were two frayed old armchairs of Genoa velvet; a cheap dining room table; a small, crowded bookshelf; a sagging double bed in a corner half disguised by cushions. The central light was weak and we sat in a brownish gloom, eating our cream cakes and buns and drinking our tea. I guessed that they'd spent more on the cakes than they could afford.

But the Dempseys were vivacious and happy, and plainly pleased to entertain me. Yvette Dempsey was much the same age as her husband, probably in her late sixties: frail and bird-like, with a thin face of faded French prettiness, her pale eyes just discernible behind tinted glasses. Her English was not good; it seemed they spoke French a good deal between themselves.

'He speaks very much about you,' she said. 'He says you will become a real author. That is a brave thing to be. My husband has also written a book, did you know?'

They sat side by side, holding hands in their unperturbed poverty, and I saw that what Mr Dempsey had said was true: they were very much in love with each other. Glancing at a small side table set against the wall,
my eye was caught by a drawing in a frame, and when I peered at it, I became embarrassed: it was a sketch of Mr Dempsey I had done myself, on the back of a piece of Hearts of Oak stationery, whiling away time at the table. Mrs Dempsey smiled. ‘It is such a good likeness,’ she said. ‘I had it framed.’ But the crookedness and smeared paste told me that they had framed it themselves.

I visited the Dempseys perhaps twice more. Soon afterwards, I resigned from the Hearts of Oak, having found a more exalted and well-paid clerical job in the London office of BHP, the major Australian iron and steel corporation. The old gentleman in the glass office to whom I tendered my resignation surveyed me reproachfully. ‘So it’s a higher salary,’ he said. ‘BHP? Never heard of it. You may get more money from these fly-by-night organisations, but in the Hearts of Oak you’d have been secure for life.’

Mr Dempsey seemed very much affected when I left, and told me many times to keep in touch with him; to call on him and his wife again, in the Gray’s Inn Road. ‘You’ll succeed,’ he said. ‘Never doubt it, my dear. And if you get discouraged, remember: «Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season.» You will call on us? Don’t forget. We’ll be waiting. You’re like a son to us.’

I promised him that I’d come, and I intended to; but I never did. Derek and Buddy drifted out of my life too, because now I’d found a girl, and had escaped from that London which is the capital of loneliness, where the aged and the lost wander in calm despair. Young, poor and happy, my English girl-friend and I held hands along the Embankment and over the Waterloo Bridge; we watched Richard Burton play Iago at the Old Vic; we listened to Hancock’s Half Hour on the radio in my bedsitter at night, as the iron, majestic cold of the northern winter closed in, and the pea soupers that Holmes and Watson knew began. We tied handkerchiefs around our noses against the smog; breathing in, we left a yellow stain. But I was not appalled by this winter; it was winter in the city of cities, the grim and gentle old friend I had waited for. I thrilled to its sheer, icy edge, and looked up at the Pole Star, and discovered what I believed no-one had noticed before: that the moon here was upside down. Or rather, I told Patricia, the moon in Australia was upside down; and I now understood why the man in the moon’s face, in English nursery books, was shown in pictures to have a mouth like an O. In Australia, the mouth was one of the eyes...

But recollection of London happiness is tainted with the knowledge of how I failed Mr Dempsey. There are omissions that can never be made good, and cheerful little Dempsey and his pretty French wife wait for me.
still, after thirty-odd years, holding hands in the brown gloom of that tall old terrace in the Gray's Inn Road: that house out of *Little Dorrit* that could not crush their spirits. In a hollow of the heart where the Marshalsea Prison stands, in a London that doesn't exist, old Dempsey waits, and his shade will not release me. Some day, he and I will sell bicycles to the Americans.

This is the first in the series *The Colonial Visits 'Home'*. ‘Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner’ will appear in a collection of essays by Christopher Koch. The collection, *Crossing the Gap*, will be published in Spring 1987 by Chatto & Windus.

Like many other ‘colonials’ visiting ‘home’, Chris Koch taught at one period for the London County Council. The photo on this page and the following one record this experience.

Highbury Quadrant Junior School (L.C.C. school), London; class of ’56: Grade IV. Left: Mr G. Palmer, headmaster. Right: Christopher Koch, class teacher.