

A HOUSE IN DEVONSHIRE STREET

Kathleen McCormack

When I first came to the United Kingdom, after having sung for five months in a Summer Season show at the Floral Hall, a theatre by the beach in Southport, I came back to find I was losing the basement flat I had in Harley Street.

Apparently my flat was part of the resident nurse's flat, which she shouldn't have let to me and as within hours of arriving back I then received a telephone call to say that my mother had died, I was more than a bit dazed. So when a friend, who was head of the Spiritualist Association rang me and I told her of my mother's death and that I would soon have nowhere to live, I didn't really take in her words when she said, 'Oh, I really think you will be living in a flat around the corner from where you are'. As the rents in that locality were gigantic, I thought she'd got it wrong, but a few days later, Linda, the nurse said, 'Kathleen, would you consider being caretaker and cleaner for a house in Devonshire Street?' Which of course was around the corner! I had wonderful references, from a university professor, the father of friends of mine, from the head of Collins publishing company and from my second cousin who was the Honourable Helen Chudleigh, but I think it was my reference to my cat whom I told them wasn't a good mouser but who preferred to swim in the bath – for I found out later that the manager loved cats too!

I was given six pounds a week to keep me and my cat, supplemented by readings which I was allowed to advertise with the telephone number only – not the address, and regular singing engagements at the Stars and Garters in Leicester Square. What other Mrs Mop had all her residents coming to listen to her sing in eight languages? The nicest thing about that whole year's saga was that one of the residents, Jan, took me to dinner long after I had left that job and told me how much they had all missed me, for I had made the house into a home for everyone. Until then I had not realised that although the residents had all lived there for years, they had really never talked to one another. On Christmas Day I had made them all troop upstairs to have a drink with the Marching Major, an alcoholic and recent widower, missing his wife, who marched up and down above my head every night playing the kettledrum! I had arranged a little party in the foyer, to which they all came but the most moving thing she told me which made me glad I'd spent a year there was how her husband had died, tragically young, from leukaemia a year after I had left and how kind all the others had been to her during his illness and afterwards, how they rallied

around and helped her in every possible way. What made me nearly cry was that there she was, thanking *Me* for that!



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