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Of Keats and Kensington

By The Secret Agent

It's certainly hard to argue that the super-prime market will waver. But there's less certainty out of those 'quartiers'

Ah, "*la vérité, va savoir.*" This was uttered by a French client. We were in South Kensington, home to most of London's wealthier Gallic inhabitants – for all sorts of reasons, not least the profligacy of cafés and the Lycée school. We discussed house prices and the reality of where the market is going. These clients hover below the super-prime level in the up-to £2m range where the assurances that things will continue to soar at an Icarian pace are debatable.

It's certainly hard to argue that the super-prime market – property above £5m in Belgravia, Knightsbridge, Chelsea and Kensington – will waver. But venture out of those *quartiers* beneath multiples of millions and there's less certainty. The economic outlook is precarious and we're told that we are in the midst of seven years of lean. European nations are buckling, and upheaval in the Middle East is causing jitters. It's difficult to assimilate these verisimilitudes in a market that continues to rise and rise.

GG (my business partner) is selling a charming flat in Knightsbridge. It's well decorated with a lovely terrace but essentially it's a two-bedroom pied à terre. We're asking more than £2m and the interest has been phenomenal, which I can't believe is due solely to the fact that people want to see GG. She is indisputably attractive, but as much as she's in demand, the flat is too.

By contrast, a friend called me this morning asking my advice. They are selling their family house on Clapham Common, in south London. It's a lovely house with garden and has been on the market for six weeks, initially at £2m then reduced to £1.8m. They've had one sole viewing in six weeks. I can't understand this, as it sits about two miles from the coveted corner of Knightsbridge. I suppose it hails back to the adage of "location, location, location". It also proves my theory that the central London market is dictated by neither a British nor European demographic but an international one. London's desirability as a city continues to grow.

I have been pondering the city and its merits recently, debating exactly why our particular capital is so sought after. I went to a charity dinner at the Royal Courts of Justice with this

on my mind. It was replete with a scattering of celebs – but the star of the show was the setting. The gothic Victorian grandeur of the building spoke of a time when Britain ruled the world and was confident of its unequivocal standing and its assumed moral superiority. That's clearly no longer the case but it fascinated me that the architecture reflected the time and social feeling so strongly. The vogue now is for glass, open spaces and transparency – what does that tell us?

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Stephen Fry, the British comedian and polymath, gave a speech over pudding. I'm not an aficionado of such events but he spoke with such compassion, wit, substance and intelligence that it was impossible not to be moved. The charity was unquestionably a very good one. The point he made – far more eloquently than I can paraphrase – was that we in the room were blessed in life with friends and that this charity, of which he is honorary president, supports the friendless. It was incredibly affecting and he went on to ask that we recognise our good fortune by supporting those most in need – for isn't that what a civilised society does? I bet that at least half of those there did as he requested and added a zero to the figure they had in mind to pledge.

As I cycled home that star-filled evening – the skies having cleared after torrential rain earlier – I passed by Trafalgar Square, the Mall and Buckingham Palace, then skirted St James's Park, sped under Wellington's Arch and entered Hyde Park. I witnessed the furtive glances of those in quest of a late-night tryst in the rose gardens; a fox passed my path with such languor that I thought it about to strike up conversation; a couple walked across the open fields hand in hand; a silhouetted figure sat reading by the Serpentine – Keats, I imagined. I passed the Albert Hall and the last strands of folks leaving a concert as a ripple of laughter stretched across Kensington Gore.

That Stephen Fry is a national treasure, that the parks are open, that there is beauty to be found in the architecture and landscape, that life is full of possibilities, that we are free and respect each other – those are just some of the reasons I love this city of London.

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