

A YEAR OF POEMS

**‘WHENEVER I WALK IN A LONDON STREET,
I’M EVER SO CAREFUL TO WATCH MY FEET ... ‘**

-

- LEARNING TO WALK AGAIN

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**‘Whenever I walk in a London street,
I’m ever so careful to watch my feet,
And I keep in the squares,
And the masses of bears
Who wait at the corner all ready to eat
The sillies who tread on the lines of the street,
Go back to their lairs,
And I say to them: “Bears!
Just look how I’m walking in all the squares!”’
A.A. Milnes *Lines & Squares* (1924).
Illus. by E.A. Shepard for volume of poems by
A.A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young* (1924)**

LEARNING TO WALK AGAIN

I should start by clarifying! Yes, I am still walking! I am not bed-ridden; nor am I confined to a wheel-chair. Nonetheless, I am watching my feet very carefully, which put me in mind of this poem by A.A. Milne¹ (above) which I loved in childhood.

At the end of last year, I had a bad fall, which left me slightly concussed. A subsequent hospital check-up revealed no broken bones or permanent harm done. Yet I found that I was reluctant to go on long walks again (which I had always loved) and that my confidence on even short walks was much shaken.

After some months of torpor, I reconnected with a brilliant osteopath who had helped me many years earlier. He immediately did wonders. At one point, whilst he was manipulating my spine, I cried out - not in pain but in surprise. I felt something loosen significantly. It was at the junction of my spine and pelvis. And when I next did a medium-length walk, I was positively amazed. I was able to swing my hips and to walk properly. It was how I used to walk in my youth!

So great was my surprise and pleasure that, upon my return home, I left a joyous message of thanks and congratulations on the osteopath's answerphone. But the story did not prove to be so simple. Some days, when I go on my habitual morning walk, everything clicks into place. Head up, I stride ahead confidently.

Alas, however, on other days, the muscles in my thighs and haunches ache wretchedly. I have to concentrate on every step. Outwardly, I look as though I am walking tolerably well (though

sometimes I am rather too bent over). But, inwardly, I am in considerable discomfort and reminding myself with every step how to move, how to hold my head up, and how to swing my hips.

What's more, I never know each day whether walking is going to be easy or difficult. I think that the root cause is that my muscles had got out of the habit of regular exercise and need basic retraining. So I tell myself that I am, in effect, learning to walk again. And just as it takes babies several months of toddling to get completely accustomed to independent motion, so I expect that it will also take me a few months to get back into the regular routine.

One result of this retraining is that now I often gaze at other people walking around. A small number do also seem to be having difficulties. I sympathise! Yet the great majority are just striding around nonchalantly, as though walking is as natural as breathing. I look at them admiringly, with a tinge of envy. But, with a few months of retraining, I will be walking around like them!

Meanwhile, I gaze intently at the ground before me. It's too easy to trip on a tree root or a broken paving-stone. And as I watch where I put my feet, I am playing once more the childhood game that so amused me and my siblings. We called it 'Bears and Squares' and we tried not only to walk within the squares of the paving-stones but also not to tread on any line or crack at all.

Playing this game as an adult makes me super-aware of the state of Wandsworth's paving. Some roads have been recently repaved - and they are a joy for pedestrians. Other pavements are so full of cracks

that it's not possible to walk without putting a foot on at least some of them.

By the way, why do some paving-stones end up so cracked?² Do cars, vans and lorries drive onto pavements (accidentally or otherwise) and cause damage? Yet some paving-stones are protected from marauding traffic by railings or by lamp-posts ... and are still cracked.

It's a mystery. But in the meantime, I'm still watching my feet when walking the London streets. I'm still jumping over cracks to baffle the bears. And, happily, I'm learning to walk properly again!

ENDNOTES:

¹ Alan Alexander Milne (1882-1956), *When We Were Very Young* (1924); and for context, see J.C. Wheeler, *A.A. Milne* (2004).

² The capacity of paving-stones to bear weights depends also upon how stable is the base upon which the stones are laid. For full analysis, see F.M. Hueston, *The Complete Exterior Stone Trouble-Shooting Manual: A Professional Guide*.