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THE OLD-AGE PENSIONER AND THE CONFIDENCE TRICKSTER

Miss Clara Streit, a retired lady from Zurich spending her remaining days in a Kensington old people's home, is one of the many elderly Swiss in this country without the possibility of returning to Switzerland. Miss Streit's remaining relatives are in Switzerland. They cannot make the journey to England and are not in a position to afford her a ticket to Switzerland. So she just lets the days elapse in the dreary environment of an old people's home. Her life is occasionally enlivened by a visit from the Swiss Benevolent Society, the Swiss Church and one or two friendly visitors.

She has crossed through more difficulties in her life than most. Her most painful misadventure happened some seven years ago and still brings the tears to her eyes when she relates it. For one fleeting day, Miss Streit's misfortune made the headlines of all the British national dailies.

Having worked as a cook in wealthy households for forty years, Miss Streit was ordered by her doctor to stop working. The years she had spent in the standing position on hard kitchen tiles had worn her bones and helped arthritis to creep in. She had to abandon the job she loved so much and had to retire in an old people's home. No other solution lay open to a person benefitting from a £5 pension and very modest life savings.

The switch from an independent and active life to the boredom and loneliness of the promiscuity of a council-run old people's home was hard to bear. Those were the most solitary days in Miss Streit's life.

One day in the spring of 1963, feeling as lonely as ever despite the shining sun and the blossoming trees, she was seated on a park bench in front of South Kensington station when a well groomed and polite man sat next to her and engaged in conversation. He was well-at-ease, relaxed and under-

standing. He listened to her problems with genial interest. He laughed amiably and cheered her up when she told him that she had been a good cook in her day and that she had been forced to retire because she was partly crippled.

Miss Streit returned with a newfound happiness to the gloom of her dwelling. She had found a friend.

A few days later, the man rang at her home and asked to see her. She welcomed him with joy and they sat to have a chat in the hall. The man had an idea: he had found a possible answer to Miss Streit's unsatisfactory idleness and absence of income. A butler friend of his in a good home in Grosvenor Square was in a position to secure her an easy, part-time occupation as a kitchen assistant. Miss Streit was all ears—this was too wonderful to be true! The man assured her that he would do everything to make this possibility materialise. He obtained Miss Streit's consent to get into contact with the butler and see how his plan could be carried out. In leaving her, he asked her for a £5 note to be given as a gesture of acknowledgement to his friend the butler. Miss Streit searched without hesitation into her purse and just managed to draw the desired sum. She gave him the money willingly. He was so kind. A real godsend!

When he returned a short while later, Miss Streit eagerly asked him about any promising developments. He told her blankly that the butler, a practising Catholic, had gone to Rome with his family to pay his last homage to Pope John, who had just died. He would not be back for an indefinite period.

Miss Streit was naturally disappointed, but understood the situation. Going to the Pope's funeral was after all a perfectly legitimate reason for absence! They talked of other things, and the man told him the story of his

life. His name was Marshal and he was a budding film producer. But beginnings were difficult and it was hard to break through! He hadn't enjoyed a decent meal for days—could she perhaps spare him a pound or two?

Miss Streit hesitated a moment. But she fumbled in her handbag for her purse. There were only a few coins left but she gave him what she could. He left hurriedly without looking either side. The old ladies whiling their day in the common room peered at him curiously.

When he came back for the third time, Miss Streit's enthusiasm had begun to wane. She literally craved for any chance of getting away from her old people's home but her first wave of disappointment had left a mark. Mr. Marshal didn't bring any positive news from the butler, he was still absent in Rome. "Never mind that" he said, "I've got something else for you!" And he explained to her what it was. He assured her that he had discovered a marvellous little bed-sit at a giveaway rent endowed with a kitchenette and a small living room ideal for having friendly tea parties!

His words had an overbearing fascination. What could an old lady who had lived by herself actively all her life pray for with more fervour than an independent small flat of her own? At the back of her mind however—deep inside—she knew that Mr. Marshal was swaying before her a delusive dream. But what an attractive dream! He warned her that the flat would involve some initial expenses—but nothing beyond her means. He knew that she must have some life savings tucked away somewhere and he was going to get at them. But Miss Streit shrugged off this fascinating temptation. She had toiled too much for too long to play loosely with her small nugget. She explained this to Mr. Marshal. The prospect of a small flat of her

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own was wonderful indeed but she could just not afford to eat into her life savings. Mr. Marshal insisted that this was the opportunity of her life and impressed upon her that she would regret having missed this unique chance. But Miss Streit remained firm. She would not touch her money and thanked Mr. Marshal for his obligingness.

He decided not to push his luck any further and left with the secure knowledge that his old victim had money and that she was worth cultivating.

He tried again on the following days. He presented himself at Miss Streit's home and told her that his offer was still open. The small flat that he had in store for her was truly wonderful and the deal had to be made now or never. Miss Streit repeated what she had said at earlier meetings: she could not be driven into a deal, which however attractive, would put her precious life savings in danger. Mr. Marshal changed tactics and opened a new chapter of the story of his life. He told her that he had to see a Mr. Bernstein in Manchester. This interview with a television man was most important for his film producer's career. But he was too hard-up to afford the journey to Lancashire. Could Miss Streit give him a hand? He would, thanks to the money made after the interview, be able to pay her back and more. He seemed genuine and Miss Streit finally disarmed. As she didn't have the required £10 with her, they walked off together to the Post Office where she kept her savings.

The man returned from his alleged Manchestered journey and rang again at the door of his benevolent old friend. The flat was still for sale, he told her. It only needed a small down-payment, say, £20, £10 if she could not afford it! But Miss Streit had definitely begun to wear of him. She told him once more that she could not part with the little money she had, could he please seek another client.

He left to come back a day or two later. He repeated his offer, illuminating its marvellous advantages under every possible light. This day Miss Streit happened to be more depressed than usual. The urge to get away from her home and enjoy the independence

and dignified existence of old was again imperiously strong and the dream which Mr. Marshal was depicting was so alluring that she gave in. She would concede him an initial payment of £20. And off again they walked to the Post Office.

Miss Streit had yielded and thus begun a two-month nightmare. She was trapped by her initial gift-payment by the ruse of Mr. Marshal, who always knew how to make her understand that the money had to be given in gradually. If she stopped paying she was forsaking everything! She was gnawed with doubt and dreaded the times when he would ring at the home and ask to see her in the common room to press her for money in front of all her silent and vacant inmates: "Please leave me alone!" she would cry out time and again, "I cannot give you any more money". But he managed to quieten her with ruthless suavity and persuaded her that the wonderful flat of which she dreamt every day was round the corner—so that their argument invariably ended at the Post Office.

Miss Streit's position was particularly intolerable because she was aware of being robbed and yet dared not tell either the police nor the home matron about it for fear of losing all her money completely. By giving Mr. Marshal all he demanded, she thought, there were more chances of finding it again than in denouncing her torturer to the law. He was for all intent and purposes a crook—a fairly likeable one at that—but there was just that little twinkling hope that all his stories about the flat might be true! She thus became the slave of her yearning and surrendered endlessly to the swaggering persuasion of her extortioner. One day as they both went to the Post Office it was *he* who actually ordered the counter-clerk how much money she should draw. He pocketed in that minute the devastating sum of £130 while Miss Streit stood miserably behind him. He left her to walk home alone, wondering whether what had just happened was true.

His visits continued relentlessly until Miss Streit's postal account ran dry. He had scrounged £714, the fruits of years of parsimony, in just under three months! He stopped turning up

at the home and his promised flat was still as hazy as a castle in Spain. This time Miss Streit resolved in desperate anguish to notify the police. She was held up at Earl's Court police station for detailed questioning for two consecutive days. Mr. Marshal's deeds were already well known to them.

Miss Streit was however to have the last word. In a derisory gesture of encouragement, Mr. Marshal sent her a slip in which he promised to pay her all her money back very shortly. Miss Streit produced this slip at the police station. It had been mailed from Finsbury Park and this was to give a most important lead to the enquirers, who managed to lay their hands on Mr. Marshal a few days later.

The affair soon appeared in the national press. "Crippled pensioner ruined by crook" cried out all the headlines. Miss Streit received a visit from *The Times* and the *Guardian*. But what may have shocked or amused the masses for an hour was to poison the rest of a poor pensioner's life. To this day Miss Streit has not recovered from her blow. She wept for weeks and almost envisaged putting an end to it all when she learnt that all the money she possessed, and with it her last chance of enjoying independence from charity, had been irredeemably lost. When Marshall was arrested he had no more than 7s. in his pockets, the £3,400 which he had robbed from his unfortunate victims in 18 months had all been squandered at the races.

The trial at the Old Bailey disclosed that he had all in all robbed 31 victims—of which Miss Streit was to be the last. There was a singular constancy in his methods, which always struck elderly or impotent persons. A lame grocer, a butler, a hairdresser, two or three invalids counted among his victims. His booty was large but a piddling amount compared to the total of suffering which he had caused. He got a seven year sentence and must have been freed two or three years ago by now. Seven years later, Miss Streit still quivers each time she looks back at the most painful misadventure of her life.

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