

The Invisible Hand

She entered on tiptoes—
and found the old man
dead



By
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A pointing finger reaches through the gates of death!

YOKUM Acres stood on a bluff overlooking the Housatonic, about twenty-five miles from Hartford. It was a lovely, rambling old place full of four-poster beds, Italian antiques, Chinese cabinets and rich Persian rugs.

In winter, high snows drifted in over the estate, blocking its private roads, and all but marooning the people who lived at the Manor House, with only a large food locker and their own neuroses to keep them company.

Perhaps the most neurotic of them all, this chill January day, was old Maurice Mitchell, who owned the estate, the beds, the Chinese cabinets, the plushy rugs and

even the refrigerated beef.

Mitchell was playing a game. He had been playing this same game, without letup, for the last five years—ever since his third wife, an erstwhile night club cutie, had walked off with seven trunks of clothes, two mink coats and a cash settlement of a million dollars.

It was an interesting game, in a way. At least, it kept old Mitchell happy, even though it drove most of his retainers half out of their minds, through the years.

Mitchell reached out his long, thin hand and pulled the service cord. He yanked it once, twice, three times and Nurse Maybelle Thomas came into the bedroom, nervously, with worried

anticipation.

“Yes, sir?” She surveyed the half-eaten tray of food. “Wasn’t your breakfast satisfactory?”

They studied each other. Miss Thomas was in her forties, slim, blond and wiry. She had watery gray eyes, string hair and white, drawn skin over her sharp, narrow face.

If you stuck her with a pin, a little honest blood might ooze out. And then again, it might be ice water.

Mitchell was equally charming. He was short, stocky, and had a white, bald head that gleamed even when he powdered it—which was seldom. His sharp, knowing dark eyes peered cynically through yellow tortoise-shell glasses, which had the effect of giving old age a rather disconcerting New Look.

“You didn’t eat your oatmeal,” Miss Thomas resumed tentatively.

“Of course I didn’t, my dear. I never swallow this hogwash—you know that better than I. Tell me, Miss Thomas—do you burn the water when you brew tea?”

Miss Thomas flushed. “Perhaps you’d like scrambled eggs?” she said. But her teeth bit into her lip.

OLD MITCHELL waved a long, waggish finger. “Temper, my dear! Temper! We mustn’t bite our lips, now must we? I’m sorry if I offended you. Really I am. You just can’t imagine how much I think of the people whose wages I pay.”

I’ve been imagining it for five long years, Miss Thomas thought hatefully. I imagine, and you put your maniacal meanness to daily practise. Some day I’ll put my imagination to work. Then we’ll see who gets carried out of here feet first.

“Oh. I’m sure you’re thinking about us all the time,” she replied sweetly. Mitchell’s mouth hardened, but for once

he held his tongue.

Tokarz came in shortly after noon. He wore Army surplus fatigue clothes, and an Air Corps mechanic’s leather jacket. Tokarz had been tinkering with Mitchell’s seven-passenger limousine, adjusting the points, cleaning the spark plugs. He had been at it all morning, and he was hungry.

At lunch, in a kitchen alcove, he pointed an admonitory fork at Maybelle Thomas.

“Say—this hamburg roast is swell! Dig in, honey.”

Miss Thomas blushed. She liked this big, good-natured Polish boy with the broad round face who’d taken the chauffeur’s job four months ago. She liked him so much, in fact, that she was afraid to think what she would do to make him happy.

“I-I guess I haven’t any appetite today, Mike.”

Tokarz frowned. “The old buzzard been makin’ cracks again?”

Miss Thomas nodded. “Sometimes I think I could kill him!”

“Why don’t you?”

“Oh, don’t say such a thing!” Maybelle Thomas pleaded. “Don’t even *think* it!”

Tokarz took her hand in his, under the table. “Look, kid. He’s not my problem. He’s not your problem, either. I take him for a ride every other day—in more ways than one. Why don’t you do the same?”

“I don’t get what you mean, Mike.”

“It’s simple.” Tokarz lit a cigarette. “I run up big gasoline and repair bills in the village. Old Mitchell pays by check—thinks he’s smart, the old crock. So the gas station and the garage give me a healthy kickback every month, and who’s the wiser?”

Miss Thomas gasped. “Why, that’s dishonest! You shouldn’t be telling me these things.”

“Well,” Tokarz kidded, “you just said

you wanted to murder the old miser. Now we've both got secrets to keep!"

After lunch, old Mitchell snoozed for an hour. Then he called for Nurse Thomas and had himself dressed. This was Wednesday, and he always went for a drive with young Tokarz on Wednesday afternoons.

Miss Thomas got him into his wheel chair, which she pushed to the small private elevator. The elevator descended to the basement floor, where Tokarz was waiting.

And so they got the old man into his limousine and out for his "health ride," as Mitchell cynically called it.

His health, in fact, was the bane of his employees' existence. Mitchell regarded his personal state as a weapon to shock and annoy his retainers. At various times in the last few years, he had suffered long and loudly from varicose veins, pleurisy, arthritis, digestive disorders and a moderate heart ailment.

At least, he thought it was moderate.

Hence, having nothing better to do, he was able to maintain the fiction of "poor health." Unfortunately—or so it seemed to his frustrated employees—his various ills and chills always occurred separately, never in combination sufficient to do him in.

This was a particularly unhappy circumstance, so it was whispered about, because all of the estate people were mentioned in old Mitchell's will.

Minnie Zotter, his faithful cook, was down for twenty-five thousand dollars alone.

"Whitey" Peterson, the venerable old gardener, was listed for ten thousand in cash. Because he had been on the estate only four months, young Tokarz was not in the will; but a codicil would be added after his first year's service, Mitchell had let it be known.

AND MAYBELLE THOMAS was to get five thousand dollars, in addition to all the therapeutic equipment in Mitchell's personal infirmary.

"You can marry a middle-aged doctor when I am dead," the old miser had told her, his voice a purring sneer. "Just think how much you'll have to offer him!"

And Nurse Thomas had gone running off to her room, to drench her pillow with tears of rage and hate.

Meanwhile, old Mitchell continued to live out his mean, unloved lifespan.

Miss Thomas lay now on her bed, drowsy from lunch, yet with a certain mental alertness that drove complete rest away. Old Mitchell had had another heart attack just two weeks before. The doctor had come in with an attendant and some heavy equipment, to make a cardiograph test.

The nurse and the physician had studied the results carefully, though Miss Thomas was hardly an expert.

"He's growing older, of course," Dr. Carlton had said. "His heart shows it too. We probably won't all have gray hair before he's gone."

He won't linger until I have gray hair, Nurse Thomas thought bitterly. My hair may be a stringy blond, but it isn't gray yet. It never will be gray, either, during the old coot's lifetime, she told herself.

I'll have my five thousand dollar bequest yet. And I'll have Mike Tokarz too.

Nobody lives forever!

Old Mitchell was back from his drive at three-thirty. Nurse Thomas met him in the driveway, helped him out of the limousine into his wheel chair and thence into the elevator.

This is your last ride in God's free air, she thought. This is the last time I have to push your old body around on wheelchair tires. This is the last time I help you back

into bed, and pull the covers over your thin, bony legs.

This is the end.

At four-thirty, Maybelle Thomas went into the infirmary, adjoining the bedroom, and heated Mitchell's afternoon glass of milk. She brought it into him a few minutes later, on a tray with graham crackers.

Mitchell bit into a cracker. "It's stale, my dear," he said. "Have you been carrying it around in your handbag all week?"

"I haven't been out of the house in five days, sir," Miss Thomas told him evenly. "I've had no occasion to use my handbag."

Old Mitchell sipped his milk with a slight frown. "In other words, you are telling me to go jump in the lake."

Miss Thomas was entirely composed. "The suggestion is your own, sir—not mine," she said coldly.

She went about the room then, drawing the shades slightly, closing the door that led into the hallway. She shut the door into the infirmary too. When she returned to the bed, she saw old Mitchell start suddenly, and then clutch his heart.

"Miss Thomas!" he moaned, pathetic with pain. "M-my heart—it's another attack! Phone Dr. Carlton at once!"

Nurse Thomas coolly left the tray on the bed, as Mitchell watched her with growing alarm in his feverish eyes. But his face was white as the sheet that covered him, and his mouth was taut and drawn.

"Miss Thomas! Get the doctor at once!"

Maybelle Thomas drew up a chair and sat down. Her sharp gray eyes bored into the sick millionaire's.

"Death becomes you, Mr. Mitchell," she said, accenting each word. "Dying, you act almost human. I trust you enjoyed your milk, Mr. Mitchell. It is the last liquid you will ever taste.

"There was an overdose of digitalis in that milk, Mr. Mitchell. It is acting upon your heart, even now. Already you are almost too weak to talk. I shall make certain you do not give an alarm. And I'm sure you can't get out of bed and walk to the hallway.

"If you tried—believe me, sir, I would cheerfully smother you with your own pillow."

Presently, with one last hate-filled glance, Nurse Thomas rose and went into the infirmary. She closed the door quietly behind her. She would never see old Maurice Mitchell alive again.

She knew it, and he knew it too. Her last mental picture of her victim was of a sick, gasping old man, obviously too weak to reach up and yank the heavy service cord. An old man with a tray on his bed. The glass of milk, two-thirds empty, he had put previously on the night table beside his bed.

And on the nightstand stood a reading lamp. It was unlit—lifeless as the old man who owned it would soon be.

MISS THOMAS went straight to her room. There was a slight film of perspiration on her forehead now. She went into the closet, found a key, opened her suitcase, and dug into it for a pint of good whisky she kept for emotional emergencies.

She held the open bottle to her lips, took a good stiff drink, and recapped the bottle. After a moment or two, she began to feel all of one piece again. She went to her dresser, too a peppermint drop and let it dissolve slowly in her mouth, to kill the whisky breath.

Within a half hour, she reentered old Mitchell's bedroom from the hallway, switching on the ceiling light as she always did. She tiptoed over to the bed.

The old man was as dead as ever he

would be.

Her heart leaping with sudden fear and instant elation, Nurse Thomas ran to the hallway, ran downstairs, ran into the kitchen and almost threw herself at young Mike Tokarz.

“H-he’s dead!” she shouted. “I think Mr. Mitchell is dead! A heart attack! He’s lying there so still and white!”

Tokarz whistled softly. He went to the phone and called Dr. Carlton, while Miss Thomas and Minnie Zotter, the faithful Mitchell cook, hurried upstairs to the dead man’s side.

Nurse Thomas did what she could quickly and efficiently, to bring back life to a corpse of her own making. She was still busily at it, when trim, dark-haired Dr. Carlton came in, not bothering to shuck his coat, and strode immediately to the bed.

He lifted an eyelid, peered for a moment. Annoyed at the subdued lighting in the room, he switched on the bedside table lamp and looked again.

“Dead, of course,” he declared softly. “How did it happen?”

Maybelle Thomas lied expertly, and the physician nodded. And then something caught his eye. He stared at it a long minute, and then he looked long and hard at Nurse Thomas.

Miss Thomas’ face drained of its color. Her wide, fascinated eyes followed the direction of Dr. Carlton’s sardonic stare.

There it was, weakly, shakily scrawled on the paper lampshade:

Miss Thomas Poisoned Me

The woman gasped. “He’s lying! You know he’s lying!”

Dr. Carlton’s eyes never left her face. “Perhaps. An autopsy will tell the story, no doubt. You know, Miss Thomas, that old Mr. Mitchell was a famous chemical engineer before he retired. But perhaps you don’t know that a man can use milk as an invisible ink.

“That’s what Mr. Mitchell did. He dipped his finger in the glass of milk, there on the nightstand, and scrawled his accusation on the lampshade. When I turned on the lamp—as he knew someone would—the bulb warmed up and heated the paper shade. That made those fatal words come out.”

Nurse Thomas gaped at the brown, streaked letters.

“I’m sorry, in a way,” Dr. Carlton said, in tones that held a certain regret. “I didn’t want to tell you, or anyone else—professional reticence and all that, you know.

“But remember that heart examination two weeks ago? The fact is, Mr. Mitchell had only three months more to live. It’s too bad you couldn’t wait that long, Miss Thomas.

“I’m sure it would have been worth your while.”