

The Monkey's Paw

by W.W. Jacobs

Outside, the night was cold and wet, but in the small living room of Laburnum Villa, the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were playing chess. The father, who liked to take radical chances when he played, put his king into such unnecessary danger that it even produced a comment from the white-haired old lady knitting quietly by the fire.

"Listen to that wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was trying to prevent his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the son looking seriously at the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I doubt he'll come tonight," said the father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst thing about living so far out," complained Mr. White with sudden agitation. "Of all the awful, slushy, out of the way places to live in, this is the worst. The pathway's a swamp, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are rented out, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife soothingly. "Perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to see a knowing glance pass between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White as the gate banged loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man quickly stood up, and opening the door, greeted their new arrival. The guest apologized for being late. But Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room followed by a tall, burly man, with beady eyes and a reddish face.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing himself. The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking a seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and tumblers and put some more wood on the fire.

At the third glass, the sergeant-major's eyes got brighter, and he began to talk. The little family circle listened with interest to their visitor, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of distant lands, strange scenes and brave deeds, of wars and plagues and extraordinary peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was just a boy working in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He doesn't look like he was harmed any," said Mrs. White, politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look around a bit, you know."

“Better where you are,” said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

“I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers,” said the old man. “What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey’s paw or something, Morris?”

“Nothing,” said the soldier, hastily. “At least, nothing worth talking about.”

“Monkey’s paw?” said Mrs. White, curiously.

“Well, it’s just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps,” said the sergeant-major, off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him. “To look at,” said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, “it’s just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy.”

He took something out of his pocket and held it out. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, looked at it curiously. “And what is there special about it?” inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

“It had a spell put on it by an old fakir,” said the sergeant-major, “a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people’s lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it.”

The sergeant-major’s manner was so impressive that the family members were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

“Well, why don’t you have three wishes, sir?” said Herbert White, cleverly. The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age often regards presumptuous youth. “I have,” he said, quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

“And did you really have the three wishes granted?” asked Mrs. White.

“I did,” said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

“And has anybody else wished?” inquired the old lady.

“The first man had his three wishes, yes,” was the reply. “I don’t know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That’s how I got the paw.” His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

“If you’ve had your three wishes, it’s no good to you now, then, Morris,” said the old man at last. “What do you keep it for?”

The soldier shook his head. “Just for amusement, I suppose,” he said, slowly. “I did have some idea of selling it, but I don’t think I will. It has caused enough trouble already. Besides, people won’t buy it. Most of them think it’s a fairy-tale, and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterwards.”

“If you could have another three wishes,” said the old man, watching him closely, “would you have them?”

“I don’t know,” said the other. “I don’t know.”

Sergeant-Major Morris took the paw, and dangling it between his front finger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. Mr. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

“Better let it burn,” said the soldier, solemnly.

“If you don’t want it, Morris,” said the old man, “give it to me.”

“I won’t,” said his friend, with determination. “I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don’t blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again, like a sensible man.”

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. “How do you do it?” he inquired.

“Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud,” said the sergeant-major, “but I warn you of the consequences.”

“Sounds like the Arabian Nights,” said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the table for supper. “Don’t you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?”

Her husband drew the talisman from his pocket, and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

“If you must wish,” he said, gruffly, “wish for something sensible.” Mr. White dropped the paw back into his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table.

As they ate supper, the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterwards the three sat listening in an enthralled way to a second installment of the soldier’s adventures in India.

“If the tale about the monkey paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us,” said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, “we won’t get much out of it.”

“Did you give him anything for it, dear?” inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

“Just a little bit,” said he, blushing slightly. “He didn’t want it, but I made him take it. And he pressured me again to throw it away.”

“Likely,” said Herbert, with pretended horror. “Why, we’re going to be rich, and famous, and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can’t be henpecked.”

He darted round the table, pursued by the offended Mrs. White armed with an dinner napkin.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and looked at it dubiously. “I don’t know what to wish for, and that’s a fact,” he said, slowly. “It seems to me I’ve got all I want.”

“If you could only pay off the mortgage for the house, you’d be quite happy, wouldn’t you?” said Herbert, with his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then. That’ll just do it.”

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

“I wish for two hundred pounds,” said the old man, distinctly. A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran towards him. “It moved,” he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. “As I wished, it twisted in my hands like a snake.”

“Well, I don’t see the money,” said his son as he picked up the paw and placed it on the table, “and I bet I never will.”

“It must have been your imagination, dear,” said his wife, regarding him anxiously. He shook his head.

“Never mind, though. There’s no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same.”

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night. “I expect you’ll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed,” said Herbert, as he wished them good-night, “and something horrible squatting up on top of the dresser watching you as you enjoy your ill-gotten fortune.”

IN THE BRIGHTNESS of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table, Herbert laughed at his fears. There was an air of ordinary wholesomeness about the room which had been missing the night before, and the dirty, shriveled little paw was sitting on the shelf with a carelessness which showed that no one really believed in its power.

“I suppose all old soldiers are the same,” said Mrs. White. “The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, dear?”

“Might drop on his head from the sky,” joked Herbert.

“Morris said the things happened so naturally,” said his father, “that it might almost seem like a coincidence.”

“Well, don’t break into the money before I come back,” said Herbert, as he rose from the table. “I’m afraid it’ll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you.”

His mother laughed, and followed him to the door. She watched him walk down the road to the factory, and returned happily to the breakfast. She laughed at her husband for being so quick to believe in the paw’s magic. But that did not prevent her from scurrying to the door when the mailman knocked, nor prevent her from accusing the sergeant-major of having a bit too much to drink, when she found out that the only mail was a bill from the dry cleaners.

“Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home,” she said, as they sat at dinner.

“I’m sure you’re right,” said Mr. White, pouring himself something to drink, “but I know that the thing moved in my hand; that I’ll swear to.”

“You thought it did,” said the old lady soothingly.

“I say it did,” replied the other. “There’s no doubt in my mind; I had just—What’s the matter?”

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution, flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put it beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed furtively at Mrs. White, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband’s coat, which he usually only wore while working in the garden. She then waited as patiently as she could for him to state his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

“I—was asked to call,” he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. “I come from Maw and Meggins.”

The old lady started. “Is anything the matter?” she asked breathlessly. “Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?” Her husband stepped in.

“There, there, dear,” he said hastily. “Sit down, and don’t jump to conclusions. You’ve not brought bad news, I’m sure, sir,” and he eyed the other hopefully.

“I’m sorry—“ began the visitor.

“Is he hurt?” demanded the mother.

The visitor bowed in assent. “Badly hurt,” he said quietly, “but he is not in any pain.”

“Oh, thank God!” said the old woman, clasping her hands. “Thank God for that! Thank ...”

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other’s averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

“He was caught in the machinery,” said the visitor at length, in a low voice.

“Caught in the machinery,” repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, “yes.” He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife’s hand between his own, pressed it as he used to do in their old courting days nearly forty years before.

“He was the only one left to us,” he said, turning gently to the visitor. “It is hard.”

The visitor coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The company wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking around. "I hope you'll understand I am only their employee and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible. On the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first battle. "I was to say that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services they wish to present you with a certain amount of money as compensation." Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his guest. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

IN THE HUGE NEW cemetery, some two miles away, the two old people buried their dead son and came back to a house full of shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation, as though of something else to happen—something else which might lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear. But the days passed, and expectation was replaced with resignation. Sometimes they hardly said a word to each other, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long and weary.

It was about a week after that that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of quiet weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

"Come back," he said tenderly to his wife. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and cried again. The sound of her sobs faded. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

"The monkey's paw!" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!" He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?" he questioned. She came stumbling across the room toward him.

"I want it," she said quietly. "You haven't destroyed it, have you?"

"It's in the living room, on the shelf," he replied, in amazement. "Why?"

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

"I only just thought of it," she said hysterically. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?"

"Think of what?" he questioned.

"The other two wishes," she replied rapidly. "We've only had one."

“Was not that enough?” he demanded fiercely.

“No,” she cried triumphantly, “we’ll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again.”

The man sat up in bed and flung the covers from his quaking limbs. “Good God, you are mad!” he cried, aghast.

“Get it,” she panted, “get it quickly, and wish—Oh, my boy, my boy!” Her husband struck a match and lit the candle.

“Get back to bed,” he said unsteadily. “You don’t know what you are saying.”

“We had the first wish granted,” said the old woman feverishly, “why not the second?”

“A coincidence,” stammered the old man.

“Go and get it and wish,” cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the living room, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place. A horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him before he could escape from the room seized him. He caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way around the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife’s face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

“Wish!” she cried, in a strong voice.

“It is foolish and wicked,” he faltered.

“Wish!” repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. “I wish my son alive again.” The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it shuddering. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind. He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle end, which had burned below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it went out. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed. A minute or two afterward the old woman silently climbed into bed beside him.

Neither spoke, but both lay quietly listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was heavy, and after lying for some time trying to get up his courage, the husband took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another, and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and cautious that it could hardly be heard, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from the old man's hand. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house. "What's that?" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man, in shaking tones, "a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock echoed through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband got there before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman, with a sudden pull, broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it." But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife pulled it against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back. At the same moment, he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish. The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long, loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The streetlamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.