

THE MONKEY'S PAW BY W.W. JACOBS

"Be careful what you wish for, you may receive it."—Anonymous

PART ONE

Outside, the night was cold and wet, but in the small living room the curtains were closed and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were playing chess; the father, whose ideas about the game involved some very unusual moves, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary danger that it even brought comment from the white-haired old lady knitting quietly by the fire.

"Listen to the wind," said Mr. White who, having seen a mistake that could cost him the game after it was too late, was trying to stop his son from seeing it.

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

"I should hardly think that he'll come tonight," said his father, with his hand held in the air over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," cried Mr. White with sudden and unexpected violence; "Of all the awful out of the way places to live in, this is the worst. Can't walk on the footpath without getting stuck in the mud, and the road's a river. I don't know what the people are thinking about. I suppose they think it doesn't matter because only two houses in the road have people in them."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife calmly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

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

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

The old man rose quickly and opening the door, was heard telling the new arrival how sorry he was for his recent loss. The new arrival talked about his sadness, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room followed by a tall, heavy built, strong-looking man, whose skin had the healthy reddish colour associated with outdoor life and whose eyes showed that he could be a dangerous enemy.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him to his wife and his son, Herbert.

The Sergeant-Major shook hands and, taking the offered seat by the fire, watched with satisfaction as Mr. White got out whiskey and glasses.

After the third glass his eyes got brighter and he began to talk. The little family circle listened with growing interest to this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of wild scenes and brave acts; of wars and strange peoples.

“Twenty-one years of it,” said Mr. White, looking at his wife and son. “When he went away he was a thin young man. Now look at him.”

“He doesn’t look to have taken much harm.” 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 the street entertainers,” said the old man.

“What was that that you started telling me the other day about a monkey’s paw or something, Morris?”

“Nothing,” said the soldier quickly. “At least, nothing worth hearing.”

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

“Well, it’s just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps,” said the Sergeant-Major, without first stopping to think.

His three listeners leaned forward excitedly. Deep in thought, the visitor put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. Mr. White filled it for him again.

“To look at it,” said the Sergeant-Major, feeling about 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 for them. Mrs. White drew back with a look of disgust, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

“And what is there special about it?” asked 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 tried to change it would be sorry. He put a spell on it so that three different men could each have three wishes from it.”

The way he told the story showed that he truly believed it and his listeners became aware that their light laughter was out of place and had hurt him a little.

“Well, why don’t you have three, sir?” said Herbert, cleverly.

The soldier looked at him the way that the middle aged usually look at disrespectful youth. “I have,” he said quietly, and his 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?” continued 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 voice was so serious that the group fell quiet.

“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. “Fancy I suppose,” he said slowly. “I did have some idea of selling it, but I don’t think I will. It has caused me enough trouble already. Besides, people won’t buy. They think it’s just a story, some of them; and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward.”

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

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

He took the paw, and holding it between his front finger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. Mr. White, with a slight cry, quickly bent down and took it off.

“Better let it burn,” said the soldier sadly, but in a way that let them know he believed it to be true.

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

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

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

“Hold it up in your right hand and state your wish out loud so that you can be heard,” said the Sergeant-Major. “But I warn you of what might happen.”

“Sounds like the ‘Arabian Nights’,” said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the dinner.

“Don’t you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me.”

Her husband drew the talisman from his pocket, and all three laughed loudly as the Sergeant-Major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

“If you must wish,” he demanded, “Wish for something sensible.”

Mr. White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of dinner the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat fascinated as they listened to more of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey's paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us," said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time to catch the last train, "we shan't make much out of it."

"Did you give anything for it, father?" asked Mrs. White, watching her husband closely.

"A little," said he, colouring slightly, "He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away."

"Not likely!" said Herbert, with pretended horror. "Why, we're going to be rich, and famous, and happy." Smiling, he said, "Wish to be a king, father, to begin with; then mother can't complain all the time."

He ran quickly around the table, chased by the laughing Mrs. White armed with a piece of cloth.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it doubtfully. "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 only paid off the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you!" said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. "Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that'll just do it."

His father, smiling and with an embarrassed look for his foolishness in believing the soldier's story, held up the talisman. Herbert, with a serious face, spoiled only by a quick smile to his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few grand chords.

"I wish for two hundred pounds," said the old man clearly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted his words, broken by a frightened cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he cried, with a look of horror at the object as it lay on the floor. "As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the money," said his son, as he picked it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your imagination, father," said his wife, regarding him worriedly.

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 jumped nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs.

An unusual and depressing silence settled on all three, which lasted until the old couple got up to go to bed.

“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 goodnight, “and something horrible sitting on top of your wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten money.”

Herbert, who normally had a playful nature and didn’t like to take things too seriously, sat alone in the darkness looking into the dying fire. He saw faces in it; the last so horrible and so monkey-like that he stared at it in amazement. It became so clear that, with a nervous laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing some water to throw over it. His hand found the monkey’s paw, and with a little shake of his body he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

PART TWO

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table he laughed at his fears. The room felt as it always had and there was an air of health and happiness which was not there the previous night. The dirty, dried-up little paw was thrown on the cabinet with a carelessness which indicated no great belief in what good it could do.

“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, father?”

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

“Morris said the things happened so naturally,” said his father, “that you might if you so wished not see the relationship.”

“Well don’t break into the money before I come back,” said Herbert as he rose from the table to go to work. “I’m afraid it’ll turn you into a mean, greedy old man, and we shall have to tell everyone that we don’t know you.”

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him go down the road, and returning to the breakfast table, she felt very happy at the expense of her husband’s readiness to believe such stories. All of which did not prevent her from hurrying to the door at the postman’s knock nor, when she found that the post brought only a bill, talking about how Sergeant-Majors can develop bad drinking habits after they leave the army.

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

“I know,” said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; “but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I’ll swear to.”

“You thought it did,” said the old lady, trying to calm him.

“I say it did,” replied the other. “There was no thought about it; I had just – What’s the matter?”

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, looking 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 shiny newness. Three times he stopped briefly at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden firmness of mind pushed it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, hurriedly untied the strings of her apron, and put it under the cushion of her chair.

STOP HERE

She brought the stranger, who seemed a little uncomfortable, into the room. He looked at her in a way that said there was something about his purpose that he wanted to keep secret, and seemed to be thinking of something else as the old lady said she was sorry for the appearance of the room and her husband's coat, which he usually wore in the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit for him to state his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I – was asked to call," he said at last, and bent down and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I come from 'Maw and Meggins.'"

The old lady jumped suddenly, as in alarm. "Is anything the matter?" she asked breathlessly. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband spoke before he could answer. "There there mother," he said hurriedly. "Sit down, and don't jump to a conclusion. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure sir," and eyed the other, expecting that it was bad news but hoping he was wrong.

"I'm sorry –" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother wildly.

The visitor lowered and raised his head once in agreement. "Badly hurt," he said quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh thank God!" said the old woman, pressing her hands together tightly. "Thank God for that! Thank –"

She broke off as the tragic meaning of the part about him not being in pain came to her. The man had turned his head slightly so as not to look directly at her, but she saw the awful truth in his face. She caught her breath, and turning to her husband, who did not yet understand the man's meaning, laid her shaking hand on 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, too shocked to think clearly, "yes."

He sat staring out the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he used to do when he was trying to win her love in the time before they were married, nearly forty years before.

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

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The firm wishes me to pass on their great sadness about your loss," he said, without looking round. "I ask that you to please understand that I am only their servant and simply doing what they told me to do."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath unheard; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the Sergeant-Major might have carried into his first battle.

"I was to say that Maw and Meggins accept no responsibility," continued the other. "But, although they don't believe that they have a legal requirement to make a payment to you for your loss, in view of your son's services they wish to present you with a certain sum."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, stared with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Without hearing his wife's scream, the old man smiled weakly, put out his hands like a blind man, and fell, a senseless mass, to the floor.

PART THREE

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles away, the old people buried their dead, and came back to the house which was now full of shadows and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of waiting for something else to happen – something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and they realized that they had to accept the situation – the hopeless acceptance of the old. Sometimes they hardly said a word to each other, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to tiredness.

It was about a week after that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and he could hear the sound of his wife crying quietly at the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

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

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, who began crying again.

The sounds of crying died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He slept lightly at first, and then was fully asleep until a sudden wild cry from his wife woke him with a start.

"THE PAW!" she cried wildly. "THE MONKEY'S PAW!"

He started up in alarm. "Where? Where is it? What's the matter?"

She almost fell as she came hurried across the room toward him. "I want it," she said quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

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

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

"I only just thought of it," she said. "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 quickly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded angrily.

"No," she cried excitedly; "We'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again."

The man sat up in bed and threw the blankets from his shaking legs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried, struck with horror.

"Get it," she said, breathing quickly; "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," his voice shaking.

"You don't know what you are saying."

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman, desperately; "why not the second?"

"A c-c-coincidence," said the old man.

"Go get it and wish," cried his wife, shaking with excitement.

The old man turned and looked at her, and his voice shook. "He has been dead ten days, and besides he – I would not tell you before, but – I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?"

"Bring him back," cried the old woman, and pulled him towards the door. "Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the living room, and then to the fireplace. The talisman was in its place on the shelf, and then a horrible fear came over him that the unspoken wish might bring the broken body of his son before him before he could escape from the room. He caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His forehead cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table and along the walls until he found himself at the bottom of the stairs with the evil thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears 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 said weakly.

"WISH!" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he looked at it fearfully. Then he sank into a chair and the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and opened the curtains.

He sat until he could no longer bear the cold, looking up from time to time at the figure of his wife staring through the window. The candle, which had almost burned to the bottom, was throwing moving shadows around the room. When the candle finally went out, the old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, went slowly back to his bed, and a minute afterward the old woman came silently and lay without movement beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. They heard nothing else other than the normal night sounds. The darkness was depressing, and after lying for some time building up his courage, the husband took the box of matches, and lighting one, went downstairs for another candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he stopped to light another; and at the same moment a knock sounded on the front door. It was so quiet that it could only be heard downstairs, as if the one knocking wanted to keep their coming a secret.

The matches fell from his hand. He stood motionless, not even breathing, until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and ran quickly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"WHAT'S THAT?" cried the old woman, sitting up quickly.

"A rat," said the old man shakily – "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 was there before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly. "What are you going to do?" he asked in a low, scared voice.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling automatically. "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, shaking with fear.

"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 top of the stairs, and called after her as she hurried down. He heard the chain pulled back and the bottom lock open. Then the old woman's voice, desperate and breathing heavily.

“The top lock,” she cried loudly. “Come down. I can’t reach it.”

But her husband was on his hands and knees feeling around wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If only he could find it before the thing outside got in. The knocks came very quickly now echoing through the house, and he heard the noise of his wife moving a chair and putting it down against the door. He heard the movement of the lock as she began to open it, and at the same moment he found the monkey’s paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking stopped suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair pulled back, and the door opened. A cold wind blew up the staircase, and a long loud cry of disappointment and pain from his wife gave him the courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate. The streetlight opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

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