

THE MONKEY'S PAW (1902)

from *The lady of the barge* (1906, 6th ed.)

London and New York
Harper & Brothers, Publishers

by **W.W. Jacobs**

I.

Outside, the night was cold and wet, but in the small sitting room of Laburnam Villa, the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were playing chess; the father's idea of playing chess involved radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary danger that it even caused the white-haired old lady knitting calmly by the fire to comment.

"Listen to the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen that he had made a fatal mistake after it was too late, was good-naturedly trying to prevent his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the son, grimly looking over the chess board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

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

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," wailed Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's full of water. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses on the road are rented, 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 between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin gray beard.

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

The old man rose with welcoming haste, and opening the door, was heard commiserating with the new arrival. The new arrival also commiserated with himself, so that 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 rosy face.

"Sergeant Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant major shook hands, and taking the offered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whisky and glasses and placed a small copper kettle on the fire.

After the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of strange scenes and brave deeds of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

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

"He don'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 round 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. "Leastways, 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 off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absentmindedly 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 offered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, 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 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."

His manner was so impressive that his listeners were aware that their light laughter had shook him up somewhat.

"Well, why don't you have three, sir?" said Herbert White cleverly.

The soldier looked at him in the way that middle age people often look at rude youth. "I have," he said quietly, and his spotty 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?" asked 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 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. "Fancy, I suppose," he said slowly.

"If you could have another three wishes," said the old man, looking at him eagerly, "would you have them?"

"I don't know," said the other. "I don't know."

He took the paw, and dangling it between his front finger and thumb, suddenly threw it on the fire. White, with a slight cry, bent down and snatched it off.

"Better let it burn," said the soldier seriously.

"If you don't want it, Morris," said the old man, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend stubbornly. "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 looked at his new possession closely. "How do you do it?" he asked.

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

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

Her husband drew the lucky charm 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 practical."

Mr. White dropped it back into his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the lucky charm was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in fascination to a second chapter of the soldier's adventures in India.

"If the tale about the monkey paw is as true as 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 shouldn't make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White, looking at her husband closely.

"A little," said he, coloring 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. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be bullied by mother."

He ran around the table, chased by Mrs. White armed with a chair cover.

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 shamefacedly at his own gullibility, 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 played a few impressive chords.

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

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

"It moved, he cried, with a look 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 it up and placed it on the table, "and I bet I never shall."

"It must have been your fancy, father," said his wife, looking at him nervously.

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. A silence unusual and gloomy settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to go to bed 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 told them good-night, "and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains."

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so ape-like that he looked at it in amazement. It got so bright that, with a little nervous laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grabbed the monkey's paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

II.

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 simple goodness about the room, which it did not have the night before, and the dirty, dried-up little paw was laying on the side table with neglect, as if no one held great belief in its abilities.

"I guess 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 the playful Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might think that it is 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, greedy man, and we shall have to throw you out."

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him walk down the road, and returning to the breakfast table, was laughing at her husband's gullibility. But this did not prevent her from hurrying to the door at the postman's knock, or prevent her from saying rude things about drunk retired sergeant majors when she found that the mail had brought a tailor's bill.

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

"I dare say," 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 gently.

"I say it did," said her husband. "There was no thought about it; I had just----What's the matter?"

His wife did not answer. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, looking at unsurely at the house, seemed to be trying to make up his mind to go in. Thinking about the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed and wore a glossy new silk hat. Three times the man stopped at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand on it, and then suddenly made his decision and threw it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly untied the strings of her apron and put it under the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed nervous, into the room. He looked at her cautiously, and listened as the old lady apologized for how the room looked, and how her husband's coat looked, a coat that he usually only wore in the garden. She then waited as patiently as she could, for him to say why he was there, but he was at first strangely silent.

"I--was asked to come by," he said finally, and bent over and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. "I come from Maw and Meggins."

The old lady jumped. "Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?"

Her husband interrupted. "There, there, mother," he said quickly. "Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir" and he looked at the other man hopefully.

"I'm sorry----" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother.

"Badly hurt," the visitor 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 evil meaning of his words became clear and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the man's turned away face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, placed her trembling old hand on his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor finally, in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, with shock and confusion, "yes."

He sat staring out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he used to do when they had dated 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 company wished me to tell you how sorry they are for your great loss," he said, without looking around. "I hope that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath soft; on the husband's face a look that his friend the sergeant might have had during his first fight in the war.

"I am supposed to say that Maw and Meggins deny all responsibility," continued the other. "They say they don't owe you anything, but because of your son's help to the company, they wish to give you a certain amount of money."

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

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Not hearing his wife's scream, the old man smiled weakly, put out his hands like a blind man, and fainted.

III.

IN the huge new cemetery, two miles away, the old couple buried their son, and came back to a house dark and silent house. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and continued to wait for something else to happen--something else that would lessen the pain in their hearts.

But the days passed, and they became resigned--the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, unfeeling. Sometimes they hardly said a word to each other, because now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long and tired.

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 gently. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," said the old woman, and cried harder.

The sound of her crying faded from his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed restlessly, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife woke him with a start.

"*The paw!*" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

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

She came stumbling 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," he said, amazed. "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 quickly. "We've only had one."

"Was not that enough?" he demanded fiercely.

"No," she cried, happily; "we 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 off his shaking legs. "Good God, you are mad!" he cried horrified.

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

"We had the first wish granted," said the old woman, excitedly; "why not the second."

"A coincidence," stammered the old man.

"Go and get it and wish," cried the old woman, shaking with excitement.

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

"Bring him back," cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. "Do you think I am afraid of the child I have brought up?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the living room, and then to the shelf. The lucky charm was still there, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring back his badly hurt son before he could escape from the room took control of him, and 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 around the table, and felt along the wall until he found himself in the small hallway with the nasty thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and hopeful, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look on 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 lucky charm fell to the floor, and he looked at it with fear. Then he sat shaking in a chair as the old woman walked to the window and raised the blinds.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, looking every once in a while at the old woman peeking through the window. The candle, which had burned low, was throwing shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it went out. The old man, with a large sense of relief at the failure of the lucky charm, went back to bed, and a minute or two later the old woman lay down silently and sadly beside him.

Neither spoke, but both lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse hurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was terrible, and after lying for some time working up his courage, the husband took the box of matches, and lighting one, went downstairs for a candle.

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

The matches fell from his hand. He stood motionless, holding his breath 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, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man, his voice shaking--"a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock could be heard through the house.

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

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

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

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling. "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.

"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 jerk broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed and called after her, begging, as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bolt of the bottom lock pulled slowly and stiffly open. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The top bolt," she cried loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees feeling wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. More knocks sounded through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife pulled it down in the hall to the door. He heard the creaking of the top bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and wildly said 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 rushed up the staircase, and a long loud scream of disappointment and sadness from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.