

The Monkey's Paw*William W. Jacobs*

Outside, the night was cold and wet but a fire burned brightly in the small living room of Laburnum Villa, where Mr White and his son Herbert were playing chess. Mrs White, a white-haired old lady, sat knitting by the fire, occasionally commenting on the game.

5 'Listen to the wind,' said Mr white. He had made a serious mistake and wanted to distract his son's attention so that he wouldn't see it.

'I'm listening,' said his son, concentrating on the chessboard.

10 'I shouldn't think he'll come tonight,' said the father, his hand over the board.

'Checkmate,' replied the son.

15 'That's the trouble with living here,' Mr White shouted with unexpected violence. 'Of all the wet, isolated places this is the worst. The path is a bog and the road's a river, but I suppose people don't care because only two houses in the road are occupied.'

'Don't worry, dear,' said his wife. 'Perhaps you'll win the next one.'

Mr White looked up suddenly and saw mother and son look at each other quickly. He hid a guilty smile in his thin grey beard.

20 'There he is,' said Herbert, hearing the gate shut loudly and heavy footsteps coming to the door.

The old man stood up hurriedly and went to open the door. He came back with a tall, well-built man who had small, bright eyes and a red face.

25 'Sergeant Major Morris,' said Mr White, introducing him.

The officer shook hands, sat by the fire, and watched contentedly as Mr White got out some whisky and glasses. After three drinks the soldier's eyes became brighter and he began to talk. The family listened with great interest to this visitor from distant lands while he

30 spoke of his courageous adventures and his experiences of wars, plagues and strange nations.

'Twenty-one years ago, when he went away, he was just a boy in the warehouse,' said Mr White to his wife and son. 'Now look at him.'

35 'It doesn't seem to have hurt him,' Mrs White agreed politely.

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

40 'You're better here where you are,' said the Sergeant Major, shaking his head. He put down his empty glass, sighed, and shook his head again.

'I'd like to see those old temples, and fakirs and jugglers,' continued Mr White. 'What was that about a monkey's paw or something you started telling me about the other day, Morris?'

45 'Nothing,' said the other quickly. 'Nothing worth hearing anyway'.

'Monkey's paw?' said Mrs White curiously.

'Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic,' said the soldier casually.

50 But the three listeners were looking at him eagerly. Mr White filled his glass for him.

'It's just an ordinary little paw to look at,' said Sergeant Major Morris, taking it from his pocket.

Mrs White moved back with a disgusted look, but her son examined it curiously.

55 'And what's so special about it?' Mr White asked. He took it from his son, examined it, and put it on the table.

60 'An old fakir put a spell on it. He was a very holy man and he wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that to interfere with fate only caused deep sadness. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it.'

His manner was so impressive that the others realized their careless laughter was not appropriate.

'Well, why don't you have three wishes?' said Mr White.

The soldier looked at him as if he were a foolish boy. 'I have,' he said quietly, and his red face whitened.

'And did your three wishes really come true?' asked Mrs White.

'Yes.'

'And has nobody else wished?' the old lady went on.

'The first man had his three wishes, yes. I don't know what the first two wishes were but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw.'

He spoke so seriously that everybody became quiet.

'If you've had your three wishes, the paw is no good to you now,' said Mr White at last. 'Why do you keep it?'

The soldier shook his head and said slowly, 'Oh, just for interest, I suppose. I had some idea of selling it but I don't think I will. It has caused enough trouble already. Anyway, people won't buy it. Some think it's all a fairy story, I and those who believe it want to try it before paying me.'

'If you could have another three wishes,' said old Mr white, looking interestedly at him, 'would you have them?'

'I don't know, I don't know.'

Then he took the paw and suddenly threw it on the fire. With an astonished cry Mr White bent down and pulled it out quickly.

'Better let it burn,' said the soldier.

'If you don't want it, give it to me, Morris.'

'No. I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't then say that it is my fault. Be sensible – throw it on the fire again!'

But, examining his new possession closely, Mr White shook his head. 'How do you do it?' he asked Morris.

'Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud,' was the reply. But I warn you of the consequences.'

'It sounds like the *Arabian Nights*,' Mrs White said as she began to prepare the dinner. 'Why don't you wish for four pairs of hands for me?'

Laughing, her husband took the talisman from his pocket to make the wish but with a look of alarm the Sergeant Major caught his arm.

'If you must wish,' he said aggressively, 'wish for something reasonable.'

So Mr White put it back in his pocket and they all sat down to dinner. The talisman was partly forgotten for the rest of the evening as the soldier continued telling them about his exciting adventures in India. When he had gone, Mr White said that the story of the monkey's paw was probably untrue, like all the other stories Morris had told them.

'Did you give him anything for it?' Mrs White asked him.

'Oh, just a bit of money. He didn't want it but I made him take it. And he tried to persuade me again to throw the thing away.'

'Of course we will!' said Herbert ironically. 'God, we're going to be rich and famous and happy! Wish that you were an emperor, father, to begin with. Then mother won't order you around.'

Mrs White pretended to be angry at this and chased him round the table, while Mr White looked at the paw 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 could finish paying for the house you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?' Herbert said. 'Wish for two hundred pounds, then. That'll just do it.'

His father, in an embarrassed way, held up the talisman as Herbert, with a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and played a few solemn notes.

'I wish for two hundred pounds,' said the old man distinctly.

As Herbert played a loud, dramatic chord the old man suddenly
125 cried out in a trembling voice. His wife and son ran towards him.

'It moved,' he cried, glancing with disgust at the object on the floor. 'As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake.'

'Well, I don't see the money,' said Herbert, picking it up. 'And I
am sure I never will.'

130 'It must have been your imagination,' said Mrs White, looking anxiously at her husband.

He shook his head. 'It doesn't matter – nobody's hurt. But it gave me a shock.'

They sat down by the fire. While the men smoked their pipes the
135 wind outside blew harder than ever and the old man became nervous at the sound of a door banging noisily upstairs as it closed. An unusual and depressing silence fell on the family. Then the old couple stood up to go upstairs to bed.

140 'You'll probably find the money in a big bag in the middle of your bed,' Herbert joked as he said goodnight to them.

He sat alone in the darkness, looking absently into the fire and seeing faces in it. One face was so horrible and monkey-like he stared at it in amazement. When he realized he was still holding the monkey's paw he quickly put it down and with a little shiver wiped
145 his hand on his coat. Then he went up to bed.

The next morning at breakfast Herbert laughed at his fears of the night before. The winter sun shone in the room, which looked very ordinary now, and the dirty, dried-up little paw was still lying where he had thrown it carelessly.

150 'I suppose all old soldiers are the same,' Mrs White commented. 'Why did we listen to such nonsense? How could wishes be granted these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt us?'

'Well, it could drop on father's head from the sky,' Herbert joked.

155 'Morris said the wishes happen naturally,' said his father, 'so you think they're just coincidences.'

'Don't spend any of the money before I come back,' Herbert said, going to the door.

His mother watched him walk down the road to work. Of course
160 she didn't believe that the talisman could grant wishes, yet later that day she ran quickly to the door when the postman knocked and she was disappointed that it was only a bill.

'I expect Herbert will joke about it even more when he comes home,' she said at dinner.

165 'I expect he will,' said Mr White. 'But the thing moved in my hand – I swear it.'

'You thought it moved.'

'It moved, I tell you. I didn't think – what's the matter?'

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious
170 movements of a man outside in the street, who seemed to be trying to decide whether to open the gate and enter. She noticed that the stranger was well-dressed and wore a new silk hat. Three times he paused at the gate and walked away. The fourth time he stopped and put his hand on the gate, then suddenly opened it and walked
175 up the path. Mrs White opened the front door and brought the stranger into the room. He seemed worried and uneasy, and looked at her from the corner of his eye.

'I – was asked to call,' he began hesitantly. 'I am from Maw and Meggins.'

180 The old lady looked surprised. 'Is anything wrong?' she asked breathlessly. 'Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it?'

'Now don't worry,' said her husband. 'I'm sure he hasn't brought bad news. Have you, sir?' he concluded, looking hopefully at the visitor.

185 'I'm sorry –'

'Is he hurt?' demanded the mother wildly.

The visitor looked down. 'Badly hurt,' he said quietly. 'But he's not in any pain.'

'Oh, thank God, thank God for that!'

190 But the sinister meaning of the visitor's assurance suddenly became clear to the old lady and she looked at him. His face was turned away, confirming her worst fears. She caught her breath and put her trembling hand on her husband's. There was a long silence.

195 'He became trapped in the machinery,' said the visitor in a low voice.

'Trapped in the machinery?' repeated Mr White in a daze. He sat staring through the window, and taking his wife's hand, he pressed it as he used to when they were young lovers nearly forty years before. 'He was our only son,' he said to the visitor. 'It is hard.'

200 The other coughed and walked slowly to the window. 'The firm wish me to express their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss,' he murmured, without looking at the old people.

There was no reply. Mrs White's face was pale, her eyes staring. The expression on Mr White's face was dark and serious.

205 'I have to tell you that Maw and Meggins do not hold themselves responsible for what has happened,' the visitor continued. 'But in consideration of your son's services they wish to give you a certain amount of money as compensation.'

210 Dropping his wife's hand, Mr White stood up and stared at the man with a look of horror.

'How much?' he said.

'Two hundred pounds.'

The old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a blind man, and fell to the floor, unconscious.

215 Having buried their son in a huge new cemetery two miles away, the old couple came back to a house full of shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they hardly realized it; they

expected something else to happen, something that would lift the intolerable weight from their old hearts.

220 But the days passed and their expectation changed to resignation. They hardly talked – they had nothing to talk about now – and their days were long and empty.

225 It was about a week later that the old man woke up suddenly in the night and heard the sound of quiet crying coming from the window. He sat up and listened.

'Come back to bed,' he said tenderly. 'You'll get cold.'

'It is colder for my son,' said his wife, who continued weeping.

The sound of it gradually faded as the old man fell asleep again, until a sudden wild cry from his wife woke him up with a start.

230 'The paw!' she cried wildly. 'The monkey's paw!'

'Where? Where is it? What's the matter?' the old man said, alarmed.

She came towards him. 'I want it. You haven't destroyed it?'

'It's in the living room,' he replied, amazed. 'Why?'

235 Mrs white laughed and cried at the same time, and kissed his cheek.

'I've 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?'

240 'The other two wishes. We've only had one.'

'Wasn't that enough?' he demanded fiercely.

'No, we'll have one more. Go down and get it quickly and wish our boy alive again.'

245 The old man sat up in bed and threw the bedclothes from his trembling body.

'Good God, you are mad!' he cried.

'Get it,' his wife said, breathlessly. 'Get it quickly and wish Oh, my boy, my boy!'

Mr White lit the candle with a match. 'Get back to bed. You
250 don't know what you're saying.'

But the old woman said feverishly, 'Our first wish was granted.
Why not the second?'

'A coincidence,' the old man stammered.

'Go and get it and wish.' Mrs White was trembling with
255 excitement.

The old man looked at her and his voice shook. 'He has been
dead ten days, and also – I could only recognize him by his clothes.
He was too horrible for you to see then. What do you think he looks
like now?'

260 But his wife pulled him towards the door. 'Bring him back. Do
you think I'm frightened of my own son?'

He went downstairs in the darkness, and felt his way to the living
room, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was there.
Suddenly he was possessed by a horrible fear that his unspoken
265 wish might bring his mutilated son back before he could escape
from the room. In a cold sweat he groped his way round the table
and along the wall until he was in the small passage. The dirty,
twisted, dried-up, thing was in his hand.

270 Even his wife's face seemed different as he entered the bedroom.
It was white and expectant, and her expression seemed unnatural.
He was afraid of her.

'Wish!' she cried in a strong voice.

'It is foolish and wicked,' he stammered, hesitating.

'Wish!' repeated his wife.

275 He raised his hand. 'I wish my son alive again.'

The paw fell to the floor. He looked at it in fear. Then he fell
trembling into a chair. With burning eyes his wife walked to the
window and raised the blind.

280 Mr White sat until he was chilled to the bone, glancing
occasionally at his wife who was peering through the window. The

candle-flame, which had burned low, threw pulsating shadows on
the ceiling and walls, until it slowly went out. The old man, feeling
an inexpressible relief that the wish had not worked, crept back to
bed. A few minutes later his wife also came to bed, silent and
285 depressed.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the
clock. A stair creaked; a squeaky mouse ran noisily through the
wall. The darkness was oppressive. After building up his courage
for some time, Mr White lit a match and, taking the matchbox with
290 him, went downstairs for a candle.

At the bottom of the stairs the match went out. He paused to
strike another one, and at the same moment there was a knock at
the door, a knock so quiet it was almost inaudible.

295 The matches fell from his hand. He stood like a statue, his breath
suspended. The knock came again. He turned and fled back to the
bedroom, closing the door behind him. A third knock sounded
through the house.

'What's that!' shouted the old woman, sitting up suddenly.

300 'A rat.' Mr White's voice shook. 'A rat. It passed me on the
stairs.'

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

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

She ran to the bedroom door, but her husband was faster than
her. He caught her by the arm and held her tightly.

305 'What are you going to do?' he whispered.

Mrs White struggled to free herself. 'It's my boy, it's Herbert! 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.

310 'You're afraid of your own son. Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert,
I'm coming!'

There was another knock, and another. With a sudden violent movement the old woman broke free and ran from the room. Mr White followed her to the top of the stairs and appealed to her to
315 stop as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back; the Stiff bolt at the bottom of the door was slowly pulled open. Then Mrs White's voice came, strained and breathless:

'The bolt at the top! I can't reach it. Come down!'

But Mr White was on his hands and knees, groping wildly on the
320 floor, trying to find the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in! Now a continuous knocking echoed through the house. He heard the sound of a chair scraping across the passage floor as his wife pulled it against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it was slowly opened, and at the same moment he found
325 the monkey's paw and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking stopped suddenly, though it still echoed in the house. He heard the chair scraping back from the door; he heard the door open. A cold wind rushed up the stairs and a long, loud wail of disappointment and misery broke from his wife. It gave him the
330 courage to run to her side, then to the gate outside. The street lamp opposite the house shone flickeringly on a quiet and deserted road.