

The Monkey's Paw

Short story by an English writer, W.W. Jacobs (adapted to simplified English)

The year was 1876. A fire burned brightly in the front room of Laburnum Villa. Outside, the weather was cold and wet. It was nighttime and Mr. and Mrs. White had drawn the curtains to try and keep out the draught.

"Just listen to that wind," said Mr. White to his son opposite. Father and son were enjoying a game of chess.

"I'm listening," said his son, Herbert, as he moved his piece on the chessboard.

"That's the worst of living out here," said his father, "It's too out of the way. The road can become a stream in weather like this. I don't suppose he'll come on a night like this!"

Mr. White was talking about an old friend from the army. He was due to pay them a call. The Whites had not seen him for a long time and were very eager to have a chat about his adventures abroad.

"Never mind," said Mr. White, "I don't blame him for not coming on a night like this. He'd be half-drowned in this terrible weather!"

Suddenly, they heard a loud knock at the door. Mrs. White almost jumped out of her skin. "Well I never," she said, "Perhaps he's coming after all!" She padded off down the hall to answer the door.

Mr. White quickly started to tidy away the chess pieces and rose to his feet to welcome their visitor. As he did so, he could hear his wife chatting to the new arrival in the hallway.

In strode Sergeant-Major Morris. He was very tall. He had taken off his raincoat, but his face was still red and shiny from the heavy rain. He held out his hand and Herbert and his son shook it to welcome their visitor.

Mrs. White entered behind him and showed the sergeant-major to a warm seat by the open fire. Herbert poured him a glass of whisky.

By his third glass, their visitor was quite thawed out and chatting merrily. He hadn't seen the Whites for many years. Twenty-one years ago, he had left to join the army and had spent most of the time away in India so there was plenty to catch up on.

He told them of far away wars, plagues, wild beasts and strange encounters.

"I don't know," said Mrs. White, "You were a wee slip of a lad when you left England and now look at you... and all these wonderful tales. What a life you've had!"

The sergeant-major smiled and took one more sip of his whisky. He told them a few more stories about temples and magicians and suddenly fell silent. There was a strange glint in his eye which Mr. White noticed immediately.

“Out with it, Morris,” he said. “You can’t fool me. What are you hiding from us? What’s upset you?”

“The monkey’s paw! ” was the simple reply.

“The monkey’s what?” asked Mrs. White curiously.

The sergeant-major pulled himself together, cleared his throat and continued, “Well, it’s a bit of what you might call black magic.” His voice was actually trembling.

His listeners were now very intrigued. They leaned forward in their seats and begged him to continue his tale.

“To look at,” said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pockets, “it’s just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy.”

He took something from his pocket and dangled it before them. Mrs. White let out a gasp and leant back in her seat.

“And what’s so special about it?” asked Herbert, taking hold of the paw and looking at it closely. His father, too was intrigued. He examined the paw then placed it down on the coffee table beside them.

“It came from a holy man. He wanted to teach people a lesson. He put a magic spell on the monkey’s paw. He said it would grant three wishes but these wishes would come back to haunt the owners. He wanted to show you cannot meddle with your own fate... not without paying highly!”

Mrs. White was by now wriggling uncomfortably in her chair. Her son and husband were not as easily scared.

“Come off it, man!” exclaimed Mr. White. “Stop being so melodramatic”. You can’t expect us to believe that!”

“I have had three wishes so I know what I’m talking about,” replied the Sergeant-Major and his face whitened with terror.

“And did they come true?” asked Mrs. White.

“They certainly did!” He took another gulp of his whisky and the glass rattled against his teeth. His voice was so unearthly that a hush fell on the group.

“What do you still keep it for?” asked Herbert.

“To keep it out of harm’s way,” I suppose, replied the soldier, and with that he threw it on the open fire.

Mr. White stooped forward quickly and pulled it from the flames just in time. “Better let it burn,” snarled the soldier, “You don’t know what you’re messing with here. Leave it well alone!”

Mr. White was not easily put off. “How do you do it?” he enquired of his friend.

“You simply hold it tight and wish aloud,” said the soldier, “but I warn you of the consequences.”

Mr. White put the paw away in his pocket to calm down his visitor and they all sat down at table to enjoy a hot supper. Soon, the strange paw was forgotten and all four were laughing and joking as before. They had a lot of other news to catch up on.

It wasn't until much later, near bedtime, when the visitor had long gone that they remembered about the monkey's paw. Mr. White took it out of his coat pocket and examined it again.

“Wish to be an emperor, father,” said Herbert, “then you won't have mother ordering you about all the time.”

“Don't be cheeky!” said Mrs. White and pretended to chase her son round the room. She then paused, became more serious once again and said to her husband “We could clear the mortgage.”

They still owed some money to the bank for their house and Mr. White had often said he would like to get rid of the debt.

“Wish for two hundred pounds,” continued Mrs. White, “and we can clear the loan.”

Without thinking, her husband held up the talisman and wished out loud: “I wish for two hundred pounds!” he said quite clearly. Then he screamed and threw the paw to the ground.

His son Herbert sprang to his father's side. “What's wrong?” asked the young man in alarm.

Mr. White was staring wildly. “It moved!” he yelled, “The monkey's paw twitched in my hands when I wished for the money just then.”

Herbert exchanged glances with his mother. It was obvious that both thought Mr. White had drunk a little too much whisky for one evening.

“Never mind. No harm done,” said Herbert, “I expect you'll find the money upstairs on your bed, tied up in a bag.” He smiled and stepped towards the door saying goodnight to his parents. His mother was swift to follow. It had been a busy night.

Mr. White wiped the beads of sweat from his neck and then he too set off for bed. The wind outside the house howled worse than ever as he climbed the stairs.

The next day, when the sun was shining, Mr. White smiled at his fears. How silly he had been the night before. How his imagination had got the better of him.

“I suppose these old soldiers are all the same,” said his wife, “The idea of listening to such nonsense. He had us quite worked up! He ought to be on the stage. What an act!”

Her husband smiled and poured himself another cup of tea. “How could winning two hundred pounds hurt us?”

“It might drop on his head from the sky,” joked Herbert, his son. “Don't go spending it before I get back from work!” With that, he put on his jacket and strode out of the room.

His mother laughed as she followed him to the front door to wave him off. Back in the living room, Mr White suddenly refused to join in the fun. He remembered Sergeant- Major's Morris' warning from the night before. "The events just happen quite naturally," was what the soldier had said. "It sometimes takes you a while to work out the connection with your wish."

At tea time, her husband was again looking rather serious. "I tell you the thing moved in my hand. I swear it," was all he would say.

"You thought it did," said the old lady soothingly. Suddenly she became quiet as she noticed a stranger through the window. He was hovering around outside the garden. Three times the man went to open their gate before walking down the path.

Mrs. White sprang to her feet to see exactly what the man was up to. Perhaps he had come to drop off the wished for two hundred pounds, she thought. Mrs. White opened the front door just as the stranger was reaching for the door knocker.

"May I come in?" he asked nervously. Mrs. White ushered him into the living room and apologised for the mess. She danced round the stranger and tried to tidy a few cushions and clear away the tea plates from the table.

"I was asked to call," said the stranger. "I come from Maw and Meggins."

Mrs. White jumped with surprise. "Has anything happened to Herbert?" she asked, "What is it? What is it?"

Mr White was now on his feet. He too was agitated.

"I'm sorry..." the visitor hesitated, lost for words.

"Is he hurt?" begged Mrs. White.

"He is in no pain now," replied the stranger.

"Thank God for that! I was beginning to...." Mrs. White broke off suddenly as she realized what the man had actually said.

"He died early this afternoon," continued the young man. "He was caught in the machinery at work. It was all over in an instant."

Mr. and Mrs. White sank into their chairs in disbelief. There was an awkward silence as the truth sank in. "He was our only child," was all Mrs. White could mumble.

Their visitor coughed and put his hand into his pocket. "The firm wished me to convey their sincerest sympathy for you in your great loss," he said, without looking them in the face, "I am only their servant and obeying their orders" he said, pulling out a brown envelope. "I was to disclaim all responsibility for the accident," he continued. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services, they wish me to present you both with some compensation."

He raised the envelope and offered it to Mr. White.

“How much is it?” replied the older man.

“Two hundred pounds,” was the answer.

Mrs. White shrieked at the news and Mr. White fainted and dropped on to the living room carpet.

Herbert was buried a week later and as to be expected Mr. and Mrs. White took it very badly. They hardly ever spoke and had not eaten a thing for days. The living room was in semi-darkness when Mrs. White suddenly erupted, “The paw! The monkey’s paw!”

“What?” cried her husband, starting in alarm.

“Where is it?” she moaned, “You haven’t destroyed it, have you?”

“It’s in the parlor, on the hook,” was his reply.

Mrs. White smiled strangely, bent over and kissed her husband on the forehead. “I’ve only just thought of the answer,” she cried.

Her husband stared up at her as she strode out of the room, grinning. She was back almost immediately, clutching the dreaded paw against her chest. “Why didn’t I think of it before? Why didn’t you think of it?” she asked.

“Think of what?” he questioned.

“The two other wishes,” she replied rapidly. “We’ve only had one.”

“Wasn’t that enough?” he demanded fiercely.

“No,” she replied triumphantly; “we’ll have one more. Here. Grab it. Wish him alive again!”

With that, she thrust the monkey’s paw into her husband’s right hand.

His eyes lit up and his mouth twisted. “Are you mad?” was all the old man could say. He could hardly believe his ears. He was sure his wife’s wits were turning.

“We had the first wish granted, why not the second?”

“A horrible coincidence,” he stammered.

Mrs. White spat out her reply: “Make a wish!”

His brow was cold with sweat as he gave in to his wife’s terrible plea. “I wish my son alive again,” he said, holding the paw firmly in his hand. Only after he uttered the fateful words did Mr. White stop to consider that Herbert had been crushed in machinery. What condition would he be in? Neither he nor his wife had seen the corpse. The undertaker had advised against it. He’d said it would have been too upsetting for the elderly pair.

The candles burning around the room seemed to read his mind. Their flames started to flick wildly and they cast weird shadows round the room. Neither spoke, but Mr. and Mrs. White

feared the worst.

“What’s that?” said Mrs. White, as she heard a noise from outside the front door. Mr. White dropped the monkey’s paw and grabbed his wife firmly by the wrists. “For God’s sake don’t let it in!” he screamed.

“It’s Herbert! It’s my Herbert!” was all his wife could say. From outside, they could hear terrible moans, groans and whimpers. Whoever or whatever was out there was in terrible trouble, that was for sure.

“It’s my boy!” Continued Mrs. White...I’m coming, I’m coming.” She pulled herself free of her husband’s grasp and ran to the front door.

By now hideous noises could be heard from outside. The slobberings and yelps sent shivers through Mr. White’s veins. He dropped to his knees and groped around in the dark for the monkey’s paw as his wife struggled with the bolts on the door. Outside, the ghastly visitor was thrashing around and knocking wildly on the woodwork.

Mr. White was now frantic in his search. If only he could find it before that thing outside got in they would be safe.

At last, his hand grasped the brittle fur of the desired object and he breathed his last wish aloud.

The knocking ceased suddenly. The yells subsided and the house was quiet once more. He heard his wife throw back the upper bolt and felt the rush of cold air as she flung back the door.

A loud wail of disappointment told him he had acted in time. It gave him courage to rise to his feet and run to her side and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.