THE MONKEY'S PAW by W.W. Jacobs

I.

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of

Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly.

Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas

about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into

such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment

from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal

mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing

his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he

stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father,

with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled 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 a torrent. I don't know what people are

thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are

let, 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 intercept a knowing

glance 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 to loudly

and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was

heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also

condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and

coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a

tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

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

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by

the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and

tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At 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 wild scenes and doughty 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, offhandedly.

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 proffered it. Mrs. White

drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined 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."

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that

their light laughter jarred somewhat.

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

cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to

regard 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?" persisted 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. "Fancy, I suppose," he said, slowly.

"I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It

has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won't buy.

They think it's a fairy tale; 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, eyeing

him keenly, "would you have them?"

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

He took the paw, and dangling it between his forefinger and thumb,

suddenly threw it upon the fire. 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 other, "give it to me."

"I won't," said his friend, doggedly. "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 supper. "Don't you think you might wish for four

pairs of hands for me?"

Her husband drew the talisman from 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 it back in his pocket, and placing chairs,

motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the

talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat

listening in an enthralled fashion to a second installment 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 for him to catch the last train,

"we sha'nt make much out of it."

"Did you give him anything for it, father?" inquired Mrs. White,

regarding her husband closely.

"A trifle," said he, colouring slightly. "He didn't want it, but I

made him take it. And he pressed 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 maligned Mrs. White

armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed 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 only cleared 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 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 toward 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 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 fancy, father," 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 bade 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 simian that he

gazed at it in amazement.' It got so vivid that, with a little

uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little

water to throw over it. His hand grasped 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 he laughed at his fears. There was an air

of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the

previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched

on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great

belief in its virtues.

"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 the frivolous Herbert.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said' his father,

"that you might if you so wished attribute it to 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 following him to the door, watched him

down the road; and returning to the breakfast table, was very

happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did

not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock,

nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired

sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post

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 soothingly.

"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, 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 that useful

article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room.

He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion

as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her

husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the

garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for

him to broach 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 interposed. "There, there, mother," 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 wistfully.

"I'm sorry—" began the visitor.

"Is he hurt?" demanded the mother, wildly.

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 perverted 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 had been wont 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 other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The

firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your

great loss," he said, without looking round. "I beg 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 inaudible; on the husband's face was a

look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his

first action.

"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 sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed

with a look of horror at his visitor. 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.

III.

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people

buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in 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 was to

lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the

hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy.

Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing

to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

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 the sound of subdued weeping came from 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, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and

his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until

a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke 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 came stumbling across the room toward him. "I want it," she

said, quietly. "You've not destroyed it?"

"It's in the parlour, on the bracket," he replied, marvelling.

"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 bedclothes 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 his wife, quivering with

excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. "He has

been dead ten days, and besides he—I would not tell you else, 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 dragged him toward the

door. "Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and

then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a

horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son

before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and

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 round 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 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 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 fearfully. 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 expired. The

old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the

talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the

old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the

clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily

through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for

some time screwing up his courage, he 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

stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. 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.

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"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 resounded 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 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

wrench 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 put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the

creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and 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 street lamp

flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

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