

The Monkey's Paw

by W. W. Jacobs

If someone told you that you could have three wishes come true, you'd want that, wouldn't you? In this famous old story, you'll see how Mr. White is indeed granted three wishes. For many people—maybe you, too—getting three wishes would be a dream come true. Find out how Mr. White's dream turns into a nightmare



Outside, the night was cold and wet, but in the Whites' living room, a fire burned brightly.

Father and son were playing chess. "Listen to the wind," said Mr. White. He'd made a bad move, and he was hoping his son Herbert wouldn't notice.

"I hear it," said Herbert, taking advantage of his father's mistake. "Check."

"I don't think that my old friend will make it here tonight," said Mr. White, making another move.

"Checkmate," replied his son, as he won the game.

"That's the worst part of living so far out," said Mr. White. "The road is always washed out."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife. "Perhaps you'll win the next game."

Just then, the gate banged loudly, and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

"Your friend made it after all," said Herbert.

The old man got up and opened the door. Then he led his friend into the living room.

"This is Major Morris," he said. "He was in the army. He's been everywhere and seen everything."

Morris shook hands and sat down by the fire. As he warmed up, his eyes got brighter. He began to talk. Everyone listened as he told stories about strange scenes, bloody wars, and horrible plagues.

"He's been gone 21 years," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away, he was a young man working with me in the warehouse. I'd like to travel, too, you know."

"You're better off where you are," said Morris, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass.

"I'd like to see old temples and mysterious objects," said the old man. "What were you telling me the other day? Something about a monkey's paw?"

"Oh, that was nothing. It's just something that they think is magic over in a faraway country," said Morris.

The White family leaned forward. Morris absentmindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. Mr. White filled it for him.

"I think I've got the stupid thing here," said Morris, pulling something out of his pocket. "It looks just like an ordinary paw, all dried up."

Mrs. White drew back, but her son

took it and looked at it curiously.

"What's special about it?" asked Mr. White. He took it from his son and set it down on the table.

"An old man put a spell on it," said Morris. "He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered would regret it. The spell grants three separate people three wishes."

"So are you going to give it a try?" asked Herbert.

"I have," Morris said quietly, and his face whitened.

"Did your wishes come true?" asked Mrs. White.

"They did," said Morris, and his glass tapped against his teeth.

"Has anybody else tried it?" asked Mrs. White.

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

His voice sounded so sad that the others grew quiet.

"If you've had your three wishes, then it's no good to you now," said Mr. White at last. "Why do you still have it?"

Morris shook his head. "I thought once that I would sell it, but I probably won't. It has caused enough trouble, and besides, people won't buy it. Some think it's a fairy tale. Others want to try it first and pay me later."

"If you could have another three wishes," asked Mr. White, "would you want them?"

Morris didn't answer. He just took the paw and threw it into the fire. Mr. White, with a little cry, bent and snatched it out of the flames.

"Better let it burn," said Morris.

"If you don't want it," said Mr. White, "why not give it to me?"

"No. I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Throw it back, please."

The old man shook his head and stared at the paw. "How do you do it?"

"Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud," said Morris, "but I'm telling you not to do it."

"It does sound like a fairy tale," said Mrs. White, as she got up and began to put the dinner on the table. "Why don't you wish for four pairs of hands for me?"

Mr. White held up the monkey's paw as Morris, looking alarmed, caught him by the arm. "If you must wish," he said, "wish for something sensible."

Mr. White dropped the paw into his pocket and led his friend to the table. As everyone ate, they all forgot about the paw. Then, after dinner, they sat listening as Morris told more stories about his adventures.

Finally, they closed the door behind their guest. "If the story about the monkey's paw isn't any more truthful than his other tall tales," said Mr. White, "there's not much to it."

"Did you give him anything for it?" asked his wife.

"Not much. He didn't want it, but I made him take it. He begged me again to throw the thing away."

"Wish to be king, Father," said Herbert. "Then nobody can boss you around."

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it doubtfully. "I don't know what to wish for," he said. "I've really got all I want."

"If you paid off the mortgage on the house, you would be completely happy," said Herbert. "Wish for 2,000 dollars to do that."

Mr. White held up the paw. His son

sat down at the piano, and laughing, struck a few impressed chords.

"I wish for 2,000 dollars" said the old man. Then he let out a strange little cry and dropped the paw to the floor.

His wife and son ran toward him.

"It moved," he said. "As I wished, it twisted in my hands like a snake."

"Well, I don't see the 2,000 dollars," said his son, picking up the paw and putting it on the table. "And I bet I never do."

"That's impossible. You must have imagined it," said his wife, looking at him anxiously.

He shook his head. "No, I felt it move. I'm all right, but it gave me a shock just the same." Then he felt cold . . . and a little afraid.

The next morning, the sun streamed over the breakfast table, and Mr. White laughed at his fears. The room looked cheery, and the shriveled old paw lay on the counter, looking completely ordinary.

"I suppose all old soldiers are the same," said Mrs. White. "How could we have listened to that nonsense? How could three wishes be granted? If they could, how could getting the mortgage money hurt you?"

"The money might drop on his head from the sky," said Herbert.

"Morris said that everything happens so naturally," said his father, "that you might think it was all just a big coincidence."

"Well, don't spend all the money before I come back," said Herbert, rising from the table. "I'm afraid it'll turn you into a greedy old man."

"Herbert will make more funny remarks when he comes home from work," Mrs. White said after her son had been gone awhile.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Mr.

White, "but the thing really did move in my hand. I'd swear to that."

"At least, you *thought* it moved."

"It did," he said. Then he looked up at his wife, who staring out the window.

"What's the matter?"

She didn't answer. She was watching a man, who seemed to be trying to decide whether to knock on their door. She noticed that he was well dressed and wearing an expensive suit. Three times he walked past their gate, then turned and walked back. The fourth time, he opened the gate and walked up the path. Mrs. White got up and opened the door.

She brought the man into the house and waited for him to say something. At first, he was silent. "I was asked to come here," he said at last, stopping to pick lint off his pants. "I'm from Maw and Meggins."

Mrs. White was startled. "Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Has anything happened to Herbert at work?"

Her husband interrupted. "There, there," he said. "Don't jump to conclusions. You're not bringing us bad news, are you?" he asked the man.

"I'm sorry..."

"Is he hurt?" demanded Mrs. White.

The man nodded. "Badly hurt," he said quietly, "but he is not in any pain."

"Oh, thank heavens!" said the old woman. "Thank heavens for that! Thank —"

She broke off suddenly as she realized what the man really meant. Herbert was dead. She caught her breath, and turning to her husband, put her trembling hand on his. There was a long silence.

"I'm afraid that he was caught in the machinery this morning," said the man finally.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White.

He sat, staring blankly out the

window, and pressed his wife's hand between his own.

"He was the only son we had," he said, turning to the visitor. "It is hard."

The man coughed and walked slowly to the window. "The firm wanted me to give you their sincere sympathy," he said, not looking around. "Please understand that I am only an employee, and I'm only obeying orders."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. White replied. Their faces were white, their eyes staring.

"They told me to say that Maw and Meggins is not responsible for what happened. Still, they want to present you with a certain sum of money."

Mr. White gazed with horror at the visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

Mr. White didn't even hear his wife's scream. He smiled faintly, put out his hands like a blind man, and fell to the floor.

The Whites buried their son in a huge new cemetery two miles away. They came back to a house filled with shadows and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly believe it. They kept waiting for something else to happen, something to make their lives easier to bear.

About a week after the funeral, Mr. White woke up in the middle of the night. He stretched out his hand and found himself alone in the darkness. He heard his wife weeping by the window. "Come back," he said tenderly. "You will be cold."

"It is colder for my son," she said and kept crying.

He went back to sleep until a sudden wild cry from his wife woke him with a start. "The monkey's paw!" she cried wildly. "The monkey's paw!"

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

She stumbled across the room toward him. "I want it," she said. "You haven't destroyed it, have you?"

"It's in the living room. Why?"

She bent over and kissed his cheek. "Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?"

"Think of what?"

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

"Wasn't that enough?"

"No," she said. "We'll have one more. Go down and get the monkey's paw, and wish our son alive again."

The man sat up in bed and threw off the covers. "You're crazy!"

"We had the first wish granted," said Mrs. White. "Why not the second?"

"A coincidence," he stammered.

"Go and get it!"

Mr. White's voice shook. "I don't think you want him back. He has been dead 10 days. When he was killed, he was so mangled that I could only recognize him by his clothing."

"Bring him back," she demanded. "Do you think I'm afraid of my own child?"

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the living room. He found the monkey's paw on the mantel. Then he felt his way along the wall until he found himself in the hall.

Even his wife's face seemed different as he entered the room. He was almost afraid of her. "Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wrong," he protested.

"Wish!" she repeated.

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

The monkey's paw jerked in his hand and fell to the floor. He sank into a chair as his wife walked to the window and opened the blinds.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold. He glanced now and then at his wife peering through the window. The candle threw shadows on the ceiling and walls until, finally, it flickered out. Nothing happened. Their son did not come back. Mr. White crawled back to bed with a sense of relief. A minute or two later, his wife lay down silently beside him.

Neither spoke, but both lay listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and squeaky mouse scurried through the wall. The darkness bothered the old man. Finally, he took the box of matches and, striking one, he went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs, the match went out. He stopped to strike another. At that moment, he heard a knock on the front door.

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

"What's that?" cried Mrs. White.

"A rat," said Mr. White, shaking. "A rat passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed, listening. The knocking started again.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed.

"It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband got there before her. He caught her by the arm in the hallway and held her tightly.

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

"It's my boy. It's Herbert!" she cried. "I forgot the cemetery was two miles away. That's what took so long! Why are you holding me back? Let go. I have to open the door."

"Don't let it in," cried Mr. White, trembling.

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

There was another knock and another. Mrs. White pulled free and ran from the room. Her husband had reached the landing when he heard her voice, strained and panting.

"The door bolt! Come help me. It's too high for me to reach."

But her husband was on his hands and knees. He was reaching wildly for the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. He heard a chair scrape as his wife put it down in front of the door. He heard the creaking of the door bolt as she pushed it back. At the same moment, he found the monkey's paw. He frantically made his third and last wish.

The knocking stopped suddenly, although its echoes were still in the house. He heard the door open, and a cold wind rushed up the stairs. His wife's long, loud wail of misery gave him the courage to run to her side. He looked out the door and past the gate. The street lamp shone on a quiet and deserted road.

READER'S TIP

- * To build suspense, pause briefly before the last paragraph of this story.