

The Monkey's Paw
W. W. Jacobs
dramatized by **Mara Rockliff**

Characters:

Mr. White

Mrs. White

Herbert, their son, about nineteen years old.

Sergeant Major Morris, a tall, heavy man with a ruddy complexion who served with the British Army in India for 21 years.

Stranger

Setting: The White family's home, in a newly developed English suburb, around 1920.

Scene 1

A dark and stormy winter night.

The sound of heavy rain can be heard and an occasional thunderclap. The Whites' living room is cozy and bright. MR. WHITE and HERBERT play chess, while MRS. WHITE knits by the fire. HERBERT is winning.

Herbert. Not looking too good for you, is it, Dad?

Mr. White. Could you please be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate. *(He pauses another moment, then makes a move.)* Listen to that wind howling out there.

Herbert *(keeping his attention on the chessboard)*. I hear it.

Mr. White. He won't show up in a storm like this, I bet.

Herbert. Maybe, maybe not. *(He moves.)* Check . . .

[MR. WHITE *reaches for a chess piece.*]

Herbert *(triumphant)*. . . . Mate!

[MR. WHITE *pulls his hand back.*]

Mr. White *(angrily)*. That's what I can't stand about living out in the middle of nowhere like this! Every time it rains, the road gets flooded and no one can get out here. And what do those politicians in town do about it? Nothing! I suppose our three votes just don't count.

Mrs. White *(soothingly)*. Never mind, dear. Maybe you'll win the next game.

[MR. WHITE *looks up sharply and sees MRS. WHITE and HERBERT smiling at him in amusement. His annoyance fades, and he smiles guiltily. A gate bangs, and heavy footsteps are heard approaching the door.*]

Herbert. Sounds like he made it after all!

[MR. WHITE *goes to the door and greets* SERGEANT MAJOR MORRIS, *who comes in and begins wiping his feet, shaking out his umbrella, etc.*]

Mr. White (*introducing them*). Sergeant Major Morris, my wife, and this is our son, Herbert.

[*They shake hands, and the three older people sit down while HERBERT goes to fix tea.*]

Mr. White. Glad you made it. We didn't know if you'd come out in this storm.

Morris. Storm? This little shower? (*Chuckles*) You wouldn't think much of this if you'd ever been holed up in Bombay during the monsoon season. Now there are some storms, let me tell you.

Mrs. White. Did you live in India a long time, Sergeant Major?

Mr. White. Twenty-one years he's been gone. When he joined up with the army, he wasn't a day older than Herbert there—and neither was I, for that matter. We started out in the warehouse together.

Morris. Well, time flies, time flies.

Herbert (*bringing the tea*). I'd like to go to India. See the old temples, maybe catch one of those holy men performing miracles.

Morris (*shaking his head and sighing*). You're better off here.

Herbert. But you must have all kinds of great stories to tell—the places you saw, the people you met. . . .

Mr. White. Does he ever! What was that story you started telling me the other day, Morris? About a monkey's paw or something?

Morris (*quickly*). Nothing, really. Nothing worth hearing.

Mrs. White. A monkey's paw?

Morris. Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, I guess.

Herbert. Magic!

[*The WHITES look at MORRIS with interest.*]

Morris (*fumbling in his pocket*). It looks like just an ordinary little paw all dried up.

[*He pulls a mummified monkey's paw out of his pocket and holds it out. MRS. WHITE draws back in horror, but HERBERT takes the paw and looks at it curiously.*]

Mr. White. So what's so special about it? (*He takes the paw from HERBERT and examines it, then puts it down on the table.*)

Morris (*solemnly*). It had a spell put on it by an old holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that anyone who tried to interfere with fate would be sorry. He put a magic spell on the paw so that three people could each have three wishes from it.

[MR. WHITE *laughs uneasily.*]

Herbert. Well, why don't you wish on it, then?

Morris (*sadly*). I have.

Mrs. White. And did you really have your three wishes granted?

Morris. I did.

Mrs. White. And has anyone else wished on it?

Morris (*seriously*). The first owner had three wishes, yes. I don't know what the first two were for, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw.

Mr. White (*after a pause*). If you've had your three wishes, that thing's no good to you now, then, Morris. What do you keep it for?

Morris (*shaking his head and shrugging*). No good reason, I guess. I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It's caused enough trouble already. Besides, no one will buy it. Some people think it's just a fairy tale, and the ones who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward.

Herbert. If you could have another three wishes, would you use them?

Morris. I don't know. (*Pauses*) I don't know.

(*He takes the paw, dangles it between his finger and thumb, then suddenly throws it into the fire.*)

Mr. White. Hey! (*He jumps up and grabs the paw out of the fire before it starts to burn.*)

Morris (*solemnly*). Better let it burn.

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

Morris (*stubbornly*). I won't. I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. If you're smart, you'll throw it back in the fire.

Mr. White (*shaking his head and looking closely at the paw*). How do you do it?

Morris. Hold it in your right hand and wish out loud. But I'm warning you, you won't like the consequences.

Mrs. White. Sounds like the Arabian Nights. Why don't you wish for a few extra pairs of hands for me?

[*She gets up to set the table for supper. MR. WHITE starts to raise his arm, and MORRIS, alarmed, jumps forward to stop him. The three WHITES laugh.*]

Morris. If you must wish, for heaven's sake, wish for something sensible. But I don't want to be here to see it.

[*The four sit down and eat supper. The monkey's paw forgotten for the moment, the WHITES listen eagerly to more of MORRIS'S adventures. After supper, MORRIS rises. MR. WHITE accompanies him to the door and they say their goodbyes. MR. WHITE returns to the fireside and sits down.*]

Herbert. Well, Morris is quite a storyteller. For a minute there he almost had me believing that one about the monkey's paw.

Mrs. White. Did you give that disgusting thing back to him?

Mr. White. I tried to, but he wouldn't take it. And he told me again to get rid of it.

Herbert (*in mock horror*). Get rid of it! And give up our chance to be rich and famous and happy? Wish to be an emperor, Dad, to start off with—then Mum can't boss you around.

Mrs. White. Thanks a lot!

Mr. White (*taking the paw from his pocket and looking at it doubtfully*). I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact. (*Looking fondly at his wife and son*) It seems to me I've got all I want already.

Herbert. You'd like to pay off the mortgage, though, wouldn't you? Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then. That'll do it.

Mr. White. This is ridiculous. (*Smiling shamefacedly*) No harm trying, though, I suppose. (*He holds up the paw as HERBERT taps a drumroll on the table with his hands.*)

Mr. White (*loudly*). I wish for two hundred pounds.

[*HERBERT finishes with a dramatic flourish. MR. WHITE cries out, shuddering, and drops the paw. His wife and son run toward him.*]

Mr. White. It moved! When I wished, it twisted in my hand, like a snake!

Herbert. Well, I don't see the money, and I bet I never will. (*He picks up the paw and puts it on the table.*)

Mrs. White (*to MR. WHITE, anxiously*). You must have imagined it.

Mr. White (*shaking his head*). I felt it move. Never mind, though. I'm all right.

[*They sit down by the fire. A depressing silence settles over them. The howling of the wind grows louder. A door bangs, startling them all. HERBERT laughs.*]

Mrs. White. I don't know why we listened to that nonsense. How could wishes be granted in real life? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, anyway?

Herbert. It could drop on his head from the sky!

Mr. White. Morris said the things happened so naturally that you might think it was coincidence.

Mrs. White. Well, I've had enough of magic and fate and monkey's paws for one night. It's time for bed.

Herbert. Well, good night, then. (*Teasing*) You'll probably find the money tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed, Dad—and some horrible creature squatting up on top of the dresser, watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains.

Scene 2

The next afternoon.

The sun shines into the living room. MR. and MRS. WHITE are drinking tea and sorting through the day's mail. The paw lies on a shelf, ignored.

Mrs. White. Plenty of bills so far, but no check for two hundred pounds. I suppose Herbert will have more of his funny remarks for you when he gets home from the factory.

Mr. White. I'm sure he will. But the thing moved in my hand—I'd swear to that.

Mrs. White (*soothingly*). You thought it did.

Mr. White. It did! There was no thought about it. I had just—What is it?

[MRS. WHITE *is looking past him, out the window.*]

Mrs. White. There's somebody outside. A man in a business suit. I've never seen him before. . . . He's acting very strange—as if he can't decide whether to open the gate or not. Here he comes up the path now.

[*There is a knock at the door and MRS. WHITE goes to let the STRANGER in. Inside, the STRANGER stands silently for a moment, looking uncomfortable.*]

Stranger. I—I was asked to come see you. I come from Maw and Meggins.

Mrs. White (*alarmed*). Is anything wrong? Has something happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?

Mr. White. Now, now. Calm down. No point jumping to conclusions. (*Looking hopefully at the STRANGER*) I'm sure our visitor hasn't brought us any bad news.

Stranger. I'm sorry . . .

Mrs. White (*frantic*). Is he hurt?

Stranger (*nods*). Badly hurt. But he is not in any pain.

Mrs. White. Oh, thank goodness! Thank goodness for that! Thank—

[*She breaks off, suddenly understanding, and stares at the STRANGER in growing horror. The STRANGER looks at the floor. MRS. WHITE turns to her husband and takes his hand. There is a long pause.*]

Stranger (*in a low voice*). He was caught in the machinery.

Mr. White (*dazed*). Caught in the machinery. Yes. (*He squeezes his wife's hand and stares blankly out the window, then turns to the STRANGER.*)

Mr. White. He was our only child, you know. It is hard.

Stranger (*clearing his throat*). The company wants me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss. I hope you understand that I'm just doing my job. (*Pauses*) I'm supposed to tell you that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility. They admit no liability, but in consideration of your son's work, they would like to give you a certain sum as compensation.

Mr. White (*barely able to speak*). A certain sum . . . How much?

Stranger. Two hundred pounds.

[MRS. WHITE *screams*. MR. WHITE *holds out his hands and falls to the floor in a faint.*]

Scene 3

Nighttime, a week and a half later.

[MRS. WHITE *stands in the doorway, weeping as she looks out into the darkness. MR. WHITE comes downstairs. He goes to her and closes the door, then puts his arms around her.*]

Mr. White (*gently*). Come back to bed. It's cold out there tonight.

Mrs. White. It is colder for my son. (*She sobs. Suddenly she straightens and turns, clutching her*

husband's arms.)

Mrs. White (*wildly*). The paw! The monkey's paw!

Mr. White. What? Where?

Mrs. White. I want it. You didn't get rid of it, did you?

Mr. White. It's upstairs, I think. Why?

Mrs. White (*crying and laughing hysterically*). I only just thought of it. Why didn't I think of it before? Why didn't you think of it?

Mr. White. Think of what?

Mrs. White. The other two wishes. We've only had one.

Mr. White (*fiercely*). Wasn't that enough?

Mrs. White. No! We'll have one more. Go get it down and wish our boy alive again.

Mr. White (*stepping back in horror*). You're insane!

Mrs. White. I want my son back. I want to see my son

Mr. White. You don't know what you're saying.

Mrs. White. We had the first wish granted! Why not the second?

Mr. White. It was a coincidence.

Mrs. White. Go and get it and wish!

Mr. White (*facing her and taking her by the arms*). He's been dead ten days, and besides . . . I didn't want to tell you this, but I could only recognize him by his clothes. He was mangled in the machinery. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how would it be now?

Mrs. White. Bring him back! Do you think I would fear my own son?

[MR. WHITE *goes slowly upstairs, followed by his wife. He takes the paw and stares at it.*]

Mrs. White. Wish!

Mr. White (*weakly*). It is foolish and wicked.

Mrs. White. Wish!

Mr. White (*holding up the paw*). I wish my son alive again.

[*He drops the paw and sinks trembling into a chair. MRS. WHITE runs to the window and stands looking out. The clock ticks. A stair creaks. MRS. WHITE comes and sits by her husband. Finally, a quiet knock is heard. MRS. WHITE jumps up.*]

Mrs. White. What's that?

Mr. White (*shakily*). A mouse. It's just a mouse in the wall.

[*Another knock, louder this time.*]

Mrs. White. It's Herbert! It's our son! (*She starts toward the stairs, but MR. WHITE grabs her by the arm.*)

Mr. White. What are you going to do?

Mrs. White. It's Herbert! What are you holding me for? Let go so I can open the door.

Mr. White (*hoarsely*). Don't let it in.

Mrs. White. How can you be afraid of your own son? Let me go.

[The knocking is louder and louder. She breaks free and runs down to the door.]

Mrs. White. I'm here, Herbert, I'm right here!

[As she struggles with the lock, MR. WHITE falls to his knees. He picks up the monkey's paw from the floor and holds it up in his right hand. His lips move, but we can't hear him over the thunderous knocking. He drops the paw. At once the knocking stops, and the door springs open. There is a pause, and then a long, loud wail from MRS. WHITE. Beyond her, the road is empty.]