

THE MONKEY'S PAW

by

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Adapted from the short story by W.W. Jacobs

"THE MONKEY'S PAW"

FADE IN:

EXT. ALLEY - DAY - FLASHBACK

TITLE: The Boxer Uprising. China, 1900.

Royal Marine Corporal ALISTAIR WHITE (30) runs headlong down an alley. He bellows in fear and frustration, desperately trying to load a revolver. Pursuing him are three BOXERS: Chinese rebel martial artists with red belts, and red cloth tied around their heads.

Alistair turns a corner, and reacts in panic -

- standing there is a Chinese soldier with a machine gun. Alistair ducks out of the way as the man, HUAN ZI (20s), sprays the alley with bullets. Two of the Boxers are slain as they are about to fall on Alistair and Huan Zi.

The third Boxer clutches something worn round his neck. A withered, nasty thing: a preserved monkey's paw. And says something fast and indecipherable...as he does, the machine gun jams. Alistair quickly finishes loading his revolver.

The Boxer advances with a cleaver, clangs it into the wall by Alistair's head. There's no room or time to aim, so Alistair clubs his attacker with the revolver, connecting with his head, and sending the gun spinning to the floor.

The Englishman fails to see the knife that his attacker has in his other hand. The Boxer stabs at Alistair, a nasty wound spreading across his face. Huan Zi picks up the revolver, and shoots the Boxer with it.

Alistair goes over to the body. Looks at the paw. He shudders: it's an ugly thing.

HUAN ZI

A stupid superstition. Three people will each have three wishes granted. But always it ends badly.

Alistair finds a cloth to tend to his wound. As he does, Huan Zi goes to the corpse, and - unseen by Alistair - takes the monkey paw.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - NIGHT

TITLE: Yorkshire, 1921.

A long and winding road. There's no sign of any people, but a piano and voice are audible. The song is from Gilbert & Sullivan's 'The Mikado'.

WOMAN'S VOICE

And so we straight let out on bail
A convict from the county jail,
Whose head was next
On some pretext
Condemned to be mown off,
And made *him* Headsman, for we said,

Smoke from a chimney becomes apparent, and the music becomes louder. A modest house comes into view. All of this is seen by someone unseen, walking along the lane.

WOMAN'S VOICE (CONT'D)

"Who's next to be decapitated
Cannot cut off another's head
Until he's cut his own off."

INT. HOUSE/LIVING ROOM

The interior of the house is lit by an open fire and gaslight. In one quiet corner, reading his newspaper, sits a man whose beard fails to mask the scar that identifies him as Alistair (now 50).

His wife CHRISTINA (40s) is singing. Their son HERBERT (19) accompanies her on piano. There's a ham on the table, with bread, cheese and pickles, and bottled beer.

CHRISTINA (CONT'D)

And we are right, I think you'll say,
To argue in this kind of way;
And I am right,
And you are right,
And all is right-too-looral-lay!

The jollity of the last line is interrupted by a harsh knocking at the door. The music trails off. Alistair looks from his newspaper to his son.

ALISTAIR

Well?

Herbert goes to the front door. Standing outside is Huan Zi. Herbert is startled, never having seen a non-European before. Herbert's parents cannot see their visitor.

CHRISTINA

Manners, Herbert. Invite our visitor in. I shall make a warm drink: it's beastly out there. Now, who is it?

Herbert and Huan Zi come into the room. Herbert looks like he's done something wrong, but isn't sure what. Alistair gets up from the piano. He turns round, sees the visitor. Neither says anything for a long moment.

ALISTAIR

Huan Zi. What are you doing here? You've scarcely aged.

HUAN ZI

Corporal White.

ALISTAIR

Alistair. Those days are behind us.

The two men shake hands. Huan Zi removes his coat, revealing the monkey's paw on a cord around his neck. It attracts and repels Christina.

CHRISTINA

Do you take cocoa, Huan Zi?

LATER

All are at the table. Huan Zi drinks cocoa, and eats a plate of ham and pickles with gusto. Herbert can't take his eyes off the visitor.

CHRISTINA

The ham is cured on the farm you must have passed on your way from the station.

ALISTAIR

Huan Zi wants to eat, Christina. Spare him details of his supper's pedigree for now.

HUAN ZI

It is good. Very good.

HERBERT

You and father fought together?

Huan Zi looks to Alistair for guidance.

ALISTAIR

Herbert is glamoured by battle.

CHRISTINA

Some of his friends lied about their ages, to fight in the Great War.

HERBERT

They died for their country.

ALISTAIR

And we sometimes fight about our refusal to let him die with them.

CHRISTINA

Herbert has this week commenced a job, which is the cause of our little celebration. Rather fortuitous in the event of your -

'Fortuitous' is a new word to Huan Zi. This embarrasses Christina. Huan Zi intervenes to spare her further self-deprecation.

HUAN ZI

Where is it you work, Herbert?

HERBERT

I have been taken on at the pumping station.

CHRISTINA

It provides water for the city -

ALISTAIR

Huan Zi is familiar with the concept, I'm sure.

(to Huan Zi)

You talked of becoming an engineer.

HUAN ZI

And became a teacher. I was a
tutor to the Empress's children.

CHRISTINA

An Empress!

HUAN ZI

I have been fortunate.

As he says this, Huan Zi unconsciously fondles the paw, and looks straight at Alistair. There's the sound of firecrackers...

EXT. STREET - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

...as they stutter and spray in the street. Huan Zi and Alistair are roaring drunk, dressed casually. Alistair is attempting to teach a regimental song to Huan Zi. There's a dressing on Alistair's face, covering what will become his scar. A firecracker is tossed between them, and the two men stop singing, alert to whoever has set them off...

LIVING ROOM

...and a lump of coal explodes in the fire, spits fragments into the room. Herbert gathers them with tongs.

The mood is quieter, and they're sitting on a sofa and in armchairs now. Christina pours Alistair and Huan Zi port from a decanter. She checks with Alistair, who nods in agreement that Herbert should have some.

CHRISTINA

Around your neck, Huan Zi...

HUAN ZI

The monkey's paw?

Huan Zi removes it, passes it to Christina. She takes it by the cord, refusing to touch it directly.

HUAN ZI (CONT'D)

A talisman. To bring luck.
Crafted by a sorceror to teach men
about fate, so the story goes.

ALISTAIR

You said it was nonsense. Mumbo-
jumbo.

HUAN ZI

And who was it that ordered me use it?

Alistair looks away.

CHRISTINA

You never told me of this.

ALISTAIR

In peril, the mind sees what it wants to see. Huan Zi and I were in a sticky situation, and escaped from it.

HERBERT

Saved from certain death by the magic of the Orient, father? This is the stuff of penny dreadfuls. You must tell.

ALISTAIR

It is late.

HERBERT

Tomorrow is Saturday -

ALISTAIR

And you are working. Best go to bed, or your employers will want to know why you're turning up red-eyed and sore-headed.

HERBERT

But father -

ALISTAIR

Bed.

Herbert heads upstairs without saying good night. His mother smiles at him. He scowls back. The fire crackles. Alistair stares into it. Christina toys with the talisman, stroking the paw itself.

CHRISTINA

He's a good lad. You couldn't wish for one better. Are you married, Huan Zi? You have children?

Huan Zi smiles but does not reply. Alistair stares into the fire. Huan Zi puts his hand on his heart.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The sound on this scene comes from Christina and Huan Zi talking over what happens on screen:

Continue from the last flashback...Huan Zi and Alistair on edge, a firecracker fizzling out. From one side two BOXERS appear. Two more firecrackers are tossed at them.

HUAN ZI (V/O)

And you, what would you wish for?

CHRISTINA (V/O)

I am a contented woman, Huan Zi.

As Alistair and Huan Zi dodge firecrackers, two more BOXERS appear.

HUAN ZI (V/O)

But still, there must be something...

CHRISTINA (V/O)

There is always something.

The Boxers flourish blades. Alistair produces a pistol; Huan Zi is unarmed, and locates a length of wood to wield.

HUAN ZI (V/O)

Very well.

CHRISTINA (V/O)

I fancy paying for this house, so we may spend our money on more frivolous things.

The Boxers advance on Huan Zi and Alistair. The two exchange a glance: they might not make it out of this.

HUAN ZI (V/O)

And that is all?

CHRISTINA (V/O)

It is enough. Two hundred pounds should do it.

HUAN ZI (V/O)

Well then. Two hundred pounds.

LIVING ROOM

Christina passes the paw back to Huan Zi.

CHRISTINA

Forgive my foolishness, Huan Zi.
It is late. I have imbibed too
much of port.

HUAN ZI

But knowing that wish would change
your life..

Alistair stares into the fire.

CHRISTINA

I know no such thing. I think you
should stir my husband. Please
excuse me. I should make your
bed.

Huan Zi looks over at Alistair. The flicker of the flames
he watches seem to make the shape of a monkey's face..

HUAN ZI

Well Alistair, what are we to do?
Your wife would like to make a
wish. What do you say?

FLASHBACK

Huan Zi and Alistair are overwhelmed by their attackers.
One of the Boxers launches himself at Huan Zi, and Alistair
drops him dead with a bullet. But there are three more..

Two fall on Alistair. The other leaves Huan Zi for now,
wanting him to see what they do to the Englishman. As
blades are about to fall on Alistair he looks at Huan Zi..

Cut between the flashback, and Alistair saying the line
aloud in the living room:

ALISTAIR/ALISTAIR (V/O)

The paw. Use the paw.

LIVING ROOM

Huan Zi holds the paw in front of his old colleague.
Alistair grasps it. The sound in the room is of the chaos
in the flashback scene. Then cut back to:

FLASHBACK

Alistair bellows at Huan Zi.

ALISTAIR

The paw!

Huan Zi is reluctant, aware of the curse.

ALISTAIR (CONT'D)

What else are we to do?

Alistair forces his hand around Huan Zi's as Huan Zi grasps the paw, shuts his eyes and speaks aloud:

HUAN ZI

(in Cantonese)

Spare us from death. Please spare us.

Seemingly out of nowhere, THREE ENGLISH SOLDIERS turn up. They wade into Alistair's attackers and subdue them. The third Boxer is shot in the back as he flees. Huan Zi and Alistair look at one another. Alistair collapses laughing, and Huan Zi breaks down in tears. The soldiers look on.

LIVING ROOM

Alistair loosens his grasp of the paw, but still holds it.

CHRISTINA

But didn't you say the paw was cursed?

Alistair pours himself more to drink.

HUAN ZI

It is yours now, the paw. And everything that comes with it.

CHRISTINA

(to Alistair)

You said that it's just a superstition.

ALISTAIR

Then this will be the end of it:

Alistair places the paw on its cord around his neck. He clutches it again, and looks up as he implores loudly:

ALISTAIR (CONT'D)

Bring this family two hundred pounds.

Silence. Nothing happens in the aftermath of Alistair making the wish. Christina looks around expectantly.

CHRISTINA

Oh.

ALISTAIR

Our visitor needs sleep. We can talk more tomorrow.

(to Huan Zi)

You can tell us what you want here, for a start.

Alistair, drunk and angry, leaves the room. Huan Zi stares into the fire. Christina looks at him, alarmed, and then follows her husband.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Herbert washes. His attention is taken by a noise outside. He looks out of the window, and sees Huan Zi in the garden, doing tai chi.

GARDEN

A whiskery POSTMAN warily approaches the house on a bike, deeply suspicious of what he sees. Huan Zi ends his exercises. The Postman has a parcel.

HUAN ZI

If you like, I could take charge of any package.

The Postman flinches, and steels himself. Christina emerges from the house.

POSTMAN

I am authorised by His Majesty to give the parcel to Mrs White, and no one else.

CHRISTINA

Jack Duckham, His Majesty said no such thing.

The Postman gives Christina her parcel.

LIVING ROOM - LATER

Christina opens her package: sheet music for 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. The table is laid for breakfast. Herbert and Alistair eat scrambled eggs. Huan Zi pours himself tea: Herbert open-mouthed that he drinks it without milk.

CHRISTINA

I was rather hoping for a banker's
draft, or a fat wad of cash.

Alistair glares at his wife, but says nothing. Herbert looks at his parents, and Huan Zi. To break the tension, Huan Zi indicates the open package.

HUAN ZI

Your document...what is that?

CHRISTINA

Sheet music.

Herbert sees what the song is, and kisses Christina.

HERBERT

Mother!

CHRISTINA

(to Huan Zi)

It was popular in the war. A
favourite of Herbert's. We have
disputed the words, but now we
will know for sure.

Herbert shows it to Huan Zi.

HUAN ZI

Your father taught me a song,
once.

Christina and Herbert are stunned by this.

ALISTAIR

(to Herbert)

Don't you have to be getting to
work? You can speak to Huan Zi
this evening.

HUAN ZI

I fear that I will be gone by the
time you are finished, Herbert.

Christina and Alistair look at one another in surprise.
Herbert looks disappointed.

CHRISTINA

So soon?

HUAN ZI

My...obligations are discharged.
But I would like to take the air,
Herbert, if you care for a
companion on your walk.

LATER

Christina takes breakfast items away. Alistair sits in his
armchair, not reading the book he holds. Christina seems
to make a lot of noise as she goes from one room to the
other. Alistair traces the path of his scar.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - DAY

A lovely fresh day. Herbert and Huan Zi walk briskly.

HERBERT

You're not wearing your talisman.

HUAN ZI

It belongs to your father, now.
It is rightly his.

HERBERT

Do you believe in its magic?

HUAN ZI

I do not need to believe.

HERBERT

The soldiers who saved you from
the rebels: they must have been on
their way already.

HUAN ZI

Next day, all of them were killed.

HERBERT

It was war. People die.

Huan Zi laughs. Herbert is embarrassed.

HUAN ZI

In ordering me to use the paw's magic to save us, your father condemned those men to death. And with them condemned me, its owner.

HERBERT

You don't believe that..?

HUAN ZI

My second wish was for prosperity. I trained as a teacher, and was singled out to be a tutor at the Palace. For five years, all was well. Then I was arrested. Falsely accused, and imprisoned for five more years. Only one would believe me: a woman from my village.

HERBERT

That's nothing to do with the paw, or my father...

HUAN ZI

When I left prison, we married. All this time I kept the monkey's paw. For years I hated, but now I knew I wanted only peace in my life. With children, my rage softened. But inside I still knew fear. So, I made my last wish: to have my wife and children always close to my heart.

Huan Zi bares his chest. On it, a tattoo. Herbert looks. The design features a woman and two children. As Herbert examines it, the figures move, reaching towards him. Herbert steps back from Huan Zi, then runs away.

INT. HOUSE/BATHROOM

Alistair stares at his face in the mirror, the paw hanging from his neck. Christina brings in a bowl of steaming water. He barely looks at her. Stripped to the waist, he prepares to shave his beard off.

COUNTRY LANE

Herbert runs headlong towards the big building where he works: a Victorian pumping station. At the entrance, he's met by a plump SUPERVISOR, filling his pipe.

SUPERVISOR

You don't have to be that hasty to get here on time. Show the rest of us up, you will.

He sees the state that Herbert is in.

SUPERVISOR (CONT'D)

Are you alright lad?

Herbert vomits. The Supervisor moves out of the way just in time to save his feet being splashed.

BATHROOM

Alone now, Alistair examines his newly shaved face. He has cut himself a couple of times: blood drips down onto the paw. His scar is clear and stark.

INT. PUMPING STATION

The machines are working away. Huge flywheels, gouts of steam, noise, and heat from the coal fires that power it all. Herbert brings a barrow of coal through from outside.

The Supervisor urges Herbert to bring the barrow over, and between them they stoke the furnace, establishing a good working rhythm.

SUPERVISOR

You'll be fine now, yes? I've never known someone take such powerful offence at another man's shoes.

HERBERT

It's not your shoes, Sid. It's the sight of your fizzog.

The Supervisor laughs.

LATER

The Supervisor shows Herbert the powerful flywheels, spinning away. A noise takes the Supervisor's attention and he turns to the external door to check what. Standing there is a MONOCLED MAN.

The Supervisor smiles at the newcomer...whose monocle pops out in shock. The Supervisor turns to see what has prompted this - the spectacle is unseen, but Herbert has clearly become caught in one of the flywheels.

The Supervisor reacts quickly, and the Monocled Man helps, turning the machinery off. It's too late. The Supervisor holds Herbert's limp body.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE - NIGHT

The lane is empty, then the Supervisor comes into view. He makes his way to the White residence, removing his hat before he knocks on the door.

HOUSE

Christina answers, her hands and face dusted with flour.

CHRISTINA

You must excuse me. I was expecting our boy, Herbert.

SUPERVISOR

Sydney Paxton, madam. I'm supervisor over at the pumping station. If I may come in...

The two of them go into the house, shutting the door.

LIVING ROOM - LATER

Sydney sits with Christina at the table. She is weeping uncontrollably: the tears smear the flour on her face. Alistair stands, his back to the fire. It crackles. He turns to look into it: the flames seem to make the shape of a monkey's face.

LATER

The fire is dying. Alistair is at the table with Christina and Sydney: Christina has wiped her face, but her upset is still apparent. All have glasses of whisky. Sydney tries not to look at the monkey's paw around Alistair's neck.

SUPERVISOR

There is also the matter of compensation. Probably not something you wish to have the details of at this moment.

The Supervisor waits for a response. Alistair realises that he needs to speak, though he is in no mood for it.

ALISTAIR

You are here, and have the information...

SUPERVISOR

Our insurance arrangements are made with a long-established London company. I think you'll find that they are...generous. Though in no sense compensating for your loss. In your son's case, I estimate that the figure should total two hundred pounds.

Alistair looks at Christina, and laughs a sick and hollow laugh. She has a panic attack, inhaling and exhaling uncontrollably.

Alistair goes over to the embers of the fire. He takes off the monkey's paw, but can't bring himself to cast it in. Sydney is as horrified by the way that the two of them react as he is by the fact of Herbert's death.

A slow bell tolls.

EXT. CHURCH GRAVEYARD - DAY

The bell continues to toll. Herbert is being buried. There's a small gathering, with the VICAR, Alistair and Christina, Sydney, and a handful of FRIENDS and RELATIVES. Wind and rain are strong: it's a foul day. The mourners share umbrellas, but Alistair and Christina are exposed.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

Rain lashes the house. Christina stares out of an upstairs window.

LATER - NIGHT

Christina stands in the same position at the window of Herbert's bedroom. The rain has eased. With a white shawl on, she is visible, but has not lit a light.

LIVING ROOM

Alistair reads a book. He seems almost calm at first, but his muscles are tense as he turns the page.

LIVING ROOM - NEXT DAY

Christina looks at the piano. She puts the lid down. Alistair approaches her, tentatively.

ALISTAIR

I'll prepare us some lunch, from the pantry. There's pie left. Some hare. Pickled walnuts and apples.

CHRISTINA

Why?

ALISTAIR

We must eat, keep our strength up.

CHRISTINA

What for?

She leaves the room. Alistair, now heavily stubbled, watches the door that she closes behind her. He unconsciously reaches for the monkey's paw.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Alistair pulls the curtains in the living room while Christina stares out of a bedroom window.

INT. HOUSE/HERBERT'S BEDROOM

A knock at the door. Christina doesn't notice. Then it opens, and Alistair comes in.

The room is sparse: it was Herbert's, but he didn't have much. A handful of magazines, a football, a wooden boat, and clothes.

Christina comes over to Alistair. He resists, trying to keep his composure, but she holds him. They hug, and cry.

MASTER BEDROOM

Alistair and Christina make love in their own bedroom. It's violent and tender at the same time: not stereotypical pre-1960s 'think of England' style sex. The monkey's paw is on a table at Alistair's side of the bed.

LATER

Lying in bed together.

CHRISTINA

We could bring him back. Don't tell me you haven't thought of it.

ALISTAIR

The paw is just...folklore, boojum.

CHRISTINA

So why do you keep it still?
Where did our money appear from,
our two hundred pounds?

ALISTAIR

From the insurance paid on
Herbert's death.

Christina reaches for the paw. Alistair takes the paw before she can hold it.

CHRISTINA

If it's just superstition, wishing
won't do a thing. Do you want
Herbert back? Do you want to see
our son again?

ALISTAIR

You know I do.

CHRISTINA

And the one thing that could help,
you refuse to do because of your
stupid pride?

Alistair looks away.

CHRISTINA (CONT'D)

Even if it's just to humour a
grieving woman, do it.

Alistair takes the paw, and goes over to the window. He looks out in the direction of the graveyard. Christina holds him close.

ALISTAIR

In the name of all that is holy,
bring our son back to us.

Seemingly from nowhere, rain begins to lash violently against the window.

Christina detaches from Alistair, puts a dressing gown on.

ALISTAIR (CONT'D)

Chrissie?

CHRISTINA

There is so much to do.

Alistair looks after her in dawning horror, realising both the state his wife is in, and the enormity of what he has done by making the wish. She leaves the room.

EXT. HOUSE

The house is besieged by rain. There's one small flickering light in the master bedroom, another from the living room, where a piano is being played. Christina falters on the introduction of the tune, 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'.

LIVING ROOM

The fire in the living room is just embers. Christina sings the song as strong as she can.

CHRISTINA

Keep the home-fires burning,
While your hearts are yearning,
Though your lads are far away
They dream of home;

MASTER BEDROOM

Alistair dresses, a look of dawning horror on his face. The song carries from downstairs.

CHRISTINA (O/S)

There's a silver lining
Through the dark cloud shining,

Turn the dark cloud inside out,
Till the boys come home.

EXT. GRAVEYARD

The last notes of the song are drowned out by howling wind and rain. There's the suggestion of a human shape, and perhaps footsteps, through the dark.

LIVING ROOM

Christina is setting the table with an erratically arranged buffet of everything she can find in the pantry. Alistair comes into the room from upstairs, fully dressed.

CHRISTINA

Herbert will be with us
imminently. He will be eager to
see us, and hungry.

Alistair cannot bring himself to reply. Christina stands still for a moment, then has a thought.

CHRISTINA (CONT'D)

The champagne! We were saving it
for Boxing Day...

ALISTAIR

Christina, no.

Christina turns her back on Alistair, heads to the kitchen.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE

Along the lane, until the Whites' house comes into view. All as seen by someone unseen. The weather is atrocious.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Christina brings champagne glasses through to put on the table. Alistair bars her way. There's a tussle, and the glasses smash on the floor.

ALISTAIR

We cannot do this thing.

Christina's manic energy collapses. Alistair holds her close. The wind and rain are ferocious at the windows, and the draft disturbs the sheet music on the piano.

CHRISTINA

Our son, Alistair. The son we
made with our love.

ALISTAIR

This is not something for you and
I to decide.

CHRISTINA

Then what?

Alistair holds the monkey's paw. At which point, there's a
thump at the door. Alistair and Christina look as it
trembles in its frame.

CHRISTINA (CONT'D)

He is our son.

A more mighty thump.

ALISTAIR

Our son no longer.

A pounding at the door, and what might be a howl of rage,
or fierce elemental wind. The door shudders.

CHRISTINA

This was never meant to be.

Both Christina and Alistair clutch the paw, united, the
door edging open with the force behind it...

ALISTAIR

Return our son to his place of
rest.

The door is flung open with the power of the storm,
catching Alistair and Christina in its rage.

Alistair takes the monkey's paw, and tries to throw it
outside. As he does, the paw seems to move, raking him
with its claws before he manages to dispose of it.

The two of them collapse to the floor, holding each other
while the wind and rain continue to lash them.

EXT. HOUSE - NEXT MORNING

Calm. Bright. The aftermath. And the postman makes his
way to the door. Before he can knock, it's opened by
Alistair. He's had some sleep, but is still in a bad way.
And has the makings of a new livid scar across his face.

The postman is startled by this, and the ferocity of Alistair's eyes. Alistair seizes the envelope, and shuts the door. From within, the sound of the piano.

LIVING ROOM

Christina is fumbling for notes on the piano as she attempts to regain control of herself. The improvised notes are poignant, fragmented.

Alistair opens the envelope. A banker's draft, for £200. He looks at Christina with undisguised hatred. She continues to play the piano, her hurt and guilt audible.

THE END