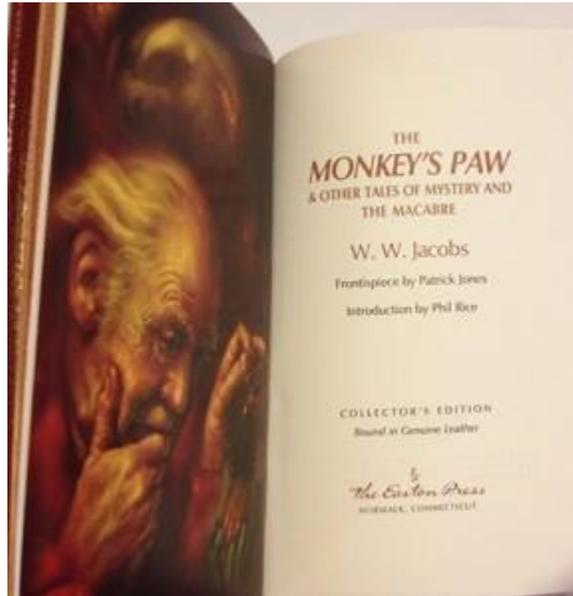


**Introduction to  
*The Monkey's Paw* by W. W. Jacobs  
(Easton Press, 2006)**

By Phil Rice



The idea that a simple object, an object displaying no visible powers, can be held in the hand and grant the bearer three wishes is such an enticing concept that countless stories and legends have been handed down for generations—and it does seem like the answer to life's problems. As children we certainly have no problem entertaining such notions, our minds easily racing from wish to wish. Wouldn't it be great to have all the candy in the world stored in our backyard, or hundreds of the most popular toys? As adults we might think of toys of a different sort, extravagant mansions or perhaps fancy automobiles—but then again, wouldn't a huge sum of money provide such things and rid us of our worldly problems in the process? Yes, wishes would almost certainly strike a financial chord, which is apparent whenever conversations turn to stumbling across a buried treasure or winning the big lottery. But do we stop and consider the heavy burden such an eventuality might bring? Perhaps the more practical sort might have such reservations, but showing restraint in the presence of such power would be difficult indeed.

The appeal of having a magical charm to cut through life's travails touches something within our human nature. Certainly the working class families of England, such as those familiar to author W. W. Jacobs, would be seduced by the possibility that all economic woe could be erased by a simple wish. A magic lamp to rub or magic beans to plant or catching a talking fish—such tales are woven deep into the society, from children's fairy tales to great works of literature. And the drawing power has not lessened over the years. Popular culture in 1960's America was drawn to television shows such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, shows in which average folks with problems and difficult jobs were afforded the opportunity to have a

genie (or a lovable witch) provide shortcuts—but in each vehicle the primary mortal held reservations about flaunting the magical powers and preferred to succeed or fail on his own through the use of his cognitive senses. Somewhere alongside the inherent desire to have a talisman resides an awareness of leaving fate to the powers that transcend human capabilities. But still there is that seductive idea that maybe we can exceed our limitations. W. W. Jacobs understood that compulsion to circumvent the natural order of events, and he also understood the fear that goes along with tampering with fate.

## II

William Wymark Jacobs was born in Wapping, London, England on September 8, 1863, the eldest son of Sophia Wymark Jacobs and William Gage Jacobs. His father was the wharfinger, or manager, of the South Devon wharf. His boyhood was tinged with tragedy as his mother died while he was still a tot; his father remarried a woman who apparently proved to be an excessively strict stepmother. Young William and his many siblings grew up among the rough and tumble rabble associated with tramp steamers and their crews. The environment for the Jacobs family was bleak and the earnings were meager, although there were brief and much-anticipated respites from the dockside life when the family visited relatives in rural East Anglia. He would always maintain a great affection for the English countryside, but the wharf, with its bustling scene and rough inhabitants, would become the backdrop for a grand portion of the stories that would eventually allow the adult W. W. Jacobs to live in substantially finer trappings.

Jacobs was a shy lad, and very early he took to the world of words and books. After attending a private school, he studied at Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution in London, which evolved into Birkbeck College and is now a part of the University of London. He became a clerk in the civil service in 1879 and worked in the Savings Bank Department of the General Post Office from 1883 until 1899. He was successful if not particularly dedicated to his career as a clerk, and in 1885 he began publishing literary sketches in *Blackfriars*, a GPO journal. His talent attracted considerable attention, and he began sending his stories out to other literary journals—and subsequently collecting painful rejection slips. He finally found a responsive editor in Jerome K. Jerome of the *Idler*, a popular London-based magazine. This success stoked his ambition to pursue a more permanent literary trade, the immediate result of which was the 1896 publication of *Many Cargoes*, his first official collection of short stories.

Stylistically Jacobs rarely strayed from the realm of humor, and thematically he drew liberally from his dockside upbringing. According to the celebrated *Punch* magazine, his stories were about “men who go down to the sea in ships of moderate tonnage.” He continued in the same vein with *The Skipper’s Wooing*, a novelette published in 1897, and *Sea Urchins*, a collection of stories published in 1898. His stories began appearing in *The Strand* that same year, thus beginning a lucrative publishing relationship that would last for decades. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Jacobs’ success as a professional scribe led him to resign his post with the civil service in and embark on a full-time literary career. He also entered into matrimony with Agnes Eleanor Owen, a turn-of-the-century suffragette with whom he would eventually have three daughters and two sons.

The novelettes *At Sunwich Port* (1902) and *Dialstone Lane* (1904) cemented his reputation as one of the leading British authors of the new century. As prolific as he was popular, Jacobs followed those efforts with a string of successful publications, including *Captain’s All* (1905), *Night Watches* (1914), *The Castaways* (1916), and *Sea Whispers* (1926). He published eighteen books in all during his lifetime, thirteen collections and five novels. His output declined

sharply after the First World War, and he settled into his role of esteemed elder among England's literary lights. Even in semi-retirement he remained recognized as a leading humorist, generally ranked at the top alongside such writers as P. G. Wodehouse and George Birmingham. His influence and elevated status among his fellow writers were certainly recognized, as attested to by these comments attributed to Henry James: "Mr. Jacobs, I envy you. You are popular! Your admirable work is appreciated by a wide circle of readers; it has achieved popularity. Mine never goes into a second edition." While the works of Henry James did eventually warrant reprinting, the compliment is no less significant.

The final decade of Jacobs' life was spent at his home in St. John's Wood and on his small farm near Epping Forest. He was generally recognized as a melancholy figure during these years, a man more in touch with the darker edges of his horror stories than the tales of humor which had been the foundation of his popularity—though, as his stories often prove, the lines of distinction between the genres can be remarkably thin. Jacobs died in a north London nursing home on September 1, 1943. Ian Hay, fellow humorist and author of the classic *The First Hundred Thousand*, eulogized Jacobs as being "much more than a writer of amusing or creepy tales; he was one of the greatest masters of story construction, especially short story construction, in our language." *The Times Literary Supplement* put forth that Jacobs' storytelling possessed "a fertility in inventing new examples of the wiliness of plain men and women in trying to get what they want, and their behaviour in success and failure . . ." Jacobs' extraordinary talents, according to the same obituary, "are most obvious in the tales of terror . . . But the same literary virtues are to be found in the slightest and most disreputable tale of a tipsey Thames bargehand."

### III

Staying true to his artistic beginnings, the grand majority of Jacobs' writings are humorous stories set on wharves or other seaside habitats, and throughout his career he was certainly known as a humorist by trade, but a collection of short stories published in 1902 proved to be his greatest source of literary immortality. *The Lady of the Barge* exhibited a darker side of the author; he had crossed into the macabre, and he demonstrated a definitive talent for the genre.

Of the chilling tales that have become indelibly associated with W. W. Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw" remains the most influential, and, in addition to also being his most popular, it was the first of the tales from *The Lady of the Barge* to grab the attention of dramatists. Louis Napoleon Parker, who in 1905 invented the Edwardian town pageant, persuaded Jacobs that "The Monkey's Paw" demonstrated great dramatic promise, and together they adapted the story for the stage. The play was first performed on October 6, 1903, and was such a rousing success that several ladies allegedly required medical attention following fainting spells. Since that first production, the story has been reworked into dozens of adaptations for film and television, and the essential plot elements turn up in hundreds of other dramatic performances not credited to the original author.

"The Monkey's Paw" is a brilliant piece of literature. Jacobs is doing more than just trying to scare the audience; he is using a solid prose style to construct a masterfully written short story. The character development is minimal yet exactly sufficient. The relationship between the Whites—a husband, a wife, and their adult son—is quickly established in the opening paragraph and first lines of dialogue. The son is obviously the vital member of the household, the father simple but kind, and the mother, "the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire," is disapproving but loving. They are clearly of working-class stock, yet they are humble and essentially accepting of their lot in life.

Into this relative contentment comes the cantankerous Sergeant-Major Morris and his monkey's paw, "an ordinary paw, dried to a mummy." The mother is repulsed, the son intellectually curious, and the father impishly excited. The author has successfully brought the characters to the forefront as each considers the possibilities of the paw. The elder Mr. White, while not quick to place complete faith in the object, nonetheless believes that there can be no harm in giving it a try. Rather than expending the wish on something overwhelmingly greedy, he shows restraint by keeping it to a small sum of money, just as his son prudently suggested. As this first wish is stammered, the reader is caught up in the same frenetic energy that encompasses the Whites, and the reader is also feeling the subtle chill which is beginning to set in the delicate marrow.

The horror within these gothic stories of W. W. Jacobs lies in what the author chooses not to describe, the imaginative seed he slips into our sub-consciousness. In "The Monkey's Paw," without revealing the horrific sight that must surely be waiting outside, the author implants a terrifying image that creeps into our restless nights, disturbing our sleep patterns for years—even into middle age and beyond—as we remain entranced by the sound of tapping on the other side of the locked door.