

# HAIR MAGIC

A short story by A.A. Abbott

*Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people is completely coincidental and unintentional.*

"Liam, you're a magician." Stella gazed approvingly at her hair in the mirror. Her chestnut locks hung in glossy curls around her shoulders.

Liam blushed. "Cheryl Cole can't hold a candle to you, Stella. Or whatever she calls herself these days. I lose track of all those husbands she has."

"Mrs Fernandez-Versini. If you read Hello and OK, you'd know."

"I only keep those magazines for the clients. No time to read them."

Or inclination, Stella thought. Liam looked like he spent all his spare time at the gym. Macho muscles rippled through his forearms, quite at odds with the gentleness he displayed with his hairdressers' scissors.

"I can't even see my grey hairs," Stella said, gratified.

"There aren't many," Liam said. "Anyway, the shampoo I use hides grey hairs – sometimes. I make it at home to my special formula, you know. I use it myself." He ran his hand through his artfully waved hair. "Bobby adores it too."

Of course. Bobby. How, Stella wondered, had she spent an hour in Liam's chair without hearing about Bobby until now? The hairdresser loved to talk about his partner. "How is Bobby?" she asked.

"Showing his age, I'm afraid," Liam sighed. "I'm hoping our seaside holiday next week will buck him up. Bobby loves the beach."

"Me too," Stella admitted. "Don and I are away in the Caribbean next week ourselves – maybe we'll see you there?"

"Not Bobby and me. He doesn't like flying. We're off in our old VW camper van, Daisyboo."

Stella chuckled to herself. She wondered which of them had named the van.

Another client was waiting impatiently, glancing alternately at Liam and her watch. Gino, the owner, had noticed, and was looking daggers at Liam.

Liam squeezed Stella's arm. "Well, I'm glad your hair's amazing for your holiday. You'll be so beautiful in your bikini, all the other guys will be jealous of your husband."

Stella simpered, and tipped him handsomely. He always had an impecunious air about him. She suspected he simply spent too long on each client to make a good living. It didn't sound like Bobby ever did any work; he appeared to be at home all the time. He could have a computer-based job, she supposed. She didn't think a nerd was Liam's type, though.

Stella thought long and hard about Liam on her way home, as she negotiated the city streets in her pink Mercedes convertible. Heads always turned to look at the car. Was it her imagination, or did their eyes linger for longer? With her curls gleaming, set in place with a cloud of hairspray, perhaps the high street shoppers really thought she was a celebrity. Her hairdresser was a genius, just as Don was a business genius, and Liam deserved financial rewards just like Don. What could she do to help? At last, she realised the answer was obvious. Liam should share his incredible shampoo with the world outside the salon, selling it in drugstores and supermarkets everywhere. All she had to do was persuade Don to invest.

"I know what we can call the range," she told Don over dinner that night, her excitement mounting. "Hair Magic!"

Their dinner guests laughed. Maree, the wife of Don's banker, said, "Well, I'd buy that shampoo. Stella, your hair is stunning."

"My wife's always been a stunner," Don said dutifully.

Despite his bored tone, Stella clocked the pound signs in his eyes. She slipped him Liam's business card. "You know what else you should do?" she said. "Get Liam on TV to advertise his products. The ladies will love him. Think James Dean, with more muscles."

"You should be worried, Don," Maree said, nudging him.

Stella shook her head. "Liam's gay, so no concerns there."

"Pity," Maree winked.

The next morning, Rich Edwards rushed into the office at 7am for his weekly meeting with his boss. He knew Don Devenish had been entertaining bankers last night, but previous experience suggested the old man would be on time and sharp as ever. True to form, Don was waiting for him.

"Coffee?" Don barked. When Rich murmured his assent, Don phoned his PA to request drinks for both of them.

The girl who brought their coffees was a stranger to Rich; a curvy blonde who looked to be straight out of college.

"Thanks, Chloe," Don said, a rare smile softening his features.

"She's new," Rich observed, after the blonde left. He could not help noticing how Don's eyes had focused on her figure.

"Indeed," Don said. "The last one from the temp agency was much too old. I need to surround myself with young people to stay on top of my game. No room for greybeards here."

Rich squirmed. He was almost thirty, the age when all his siblings had begun to go grey. Just one or two strands to start with, catching the light on their raven-black locks, but even one would be too many for

Don. He shivered. He enjoyed his job: the cut and thrust of doing deals, the huge salary and the flashy car. He didn't want to lose it.

"Cold?" Don asked. "You should exercise more, build your energy levels." He reached into his pocket, producing a business card. "Here's a project for you. I want to invest in this guy's hair care range. We'll call it Hair Magic, OK? My idea. This Liam's a loser, a hairdresser who rents a chair in a suburban salon. But my wife says there's something special about his shampoo, and to tell you the truth, she does look better since she started seeing him." He licked his lips. "Not as tasty as Chloe, though."

Don's intentions towards Chloe seemed clear enough to Rich. His approach to Liam Wooding was less easy to divine. Loser or not, the man was friendly with Don's wife. Rich knew that a woman's relationship with her hairdresser was relaxed and intimate. Usually, he would aim to rip off his counterpart in negotiations, and Don would reward him for it. This time, he might need a different attitude. "What kind of deal do you want?" he asked cautiously.

"A great one for me," Don replied without hesitation. "I want a majority stake in the Hair Magic business. Put him on the payroll if you like, give him a good package and sweet talk him into thinking he's important. But I want control of everything: the secret recipes, the marketing, and the huge returns we're going to make. As long as I own more shares than he does, I can fire him the minute we start making money."

"Understood." Rich relaxed, glad it was business as usual. Being a cutthroat bastard was well within his comfort zone. To his delight, Liam Wooding was extremely gullible. He clearly liked Stella, and the mention of her name made it even easier than Rich had imagined to do a deal on favourable terms. Impressed by Rich's sleek BMW, Liam gave away his shampoo formula in exchange for a company car and huge salary. He would own no shares in the Hair Magic business at all, and could be sacked without compensation any time Don wanted. There would be only one winner in this venture.

"You've done well," Don said, signing a £10,000 bonus cheque for Rich.

Rich accepted it gratefully, running his fingers through his lustrous mane. Since he started using Liam's shampoo, his hair seemed somehow even blacker and thicker. The guy really was a magician. Shame for him he was such a loser too. Don had been so right about that.

When Stella next saw Liam, she was amazed at the difference. "Great designer gear, Liam," she said. A regular shopper at Harvey Nicks, she knew designer when she saw it.

"Thank you," Liam said. "I've got to look good for TV. I'm fronting all the Hair Magic ad campaigns. Don insisted."

"Do you need a model?" she asked, tongue in cheek.

"Don and Rich have found me one – a girl called Chloe. Pretty in a vacuous sort of way." He laughed. "I've given up hairstyling – except for you, my dear. I'm too busy for anyone else. I came in specially today. Do you like my new motor?" He pointed to a red sports car parked outside the salon.

"Love it!" Stella said. "I bet Bobby does too."

"Oh no, Bobby doesn't care for material trappings. He's happiest when we just spend time together."

How wonderful to be so loving, Stella thought. Liam and Bobby could teach her and Don a thing or two about relationships. Don was increasingly distant from her these days. She presumed it was the pressure of launching Hair Magic as well as dealing with all his other ventures.

She left with a spring in her step and an even more flattering hairstyle. Turning on her car radio, she immediately heard an advertisement for Hair Magic. It was bound to be a great success.

Stella's predictions were correct. Hair Magic shampoo sold by the tonne, and Liam was instantly the darling of talk shows and smart parties across the nation. Although she rarely saw Don any more now he worked such long hours, he seemed very cheerful and had splashed

out on a Lamborghini and a flashy new wardrobe – “a ram dressed as a lamb,” Stella joked to Maree.

It was a rather subdued Stella who booked her next appointment with Liam, however.

“Yes, he is working here still,” Gino said when she phoned. “Rather a lot, actually. But he doesn’t want to see you any more.”

Puzzled, Stella phoned again, pinched her nose to disguise her voice, and booked in as Jenny Johnson. “No, I haven’t been here before,” she told Gino, “but I hear that Hair Magic is rather good.”

“Well, Liam’s fallen out with that company,” Gino said. “That’s why he’s cutting hair again, so his loss is your gain, Mrs J.”

She approached the salon with trepidation, parking her car around the corner, although there was room outside Gino’s. The red sportcar was no longer there.

Liam looked shocked to see her. “I didn’t expect you’d be back.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’ve got Hair Magic.”

“Not any more, I’m afraid.” He whistled. “Your husband dispensed with my services. I consulted a lawyer then, and I discovered I had nothing. I’d signed away all my rights to Hair Magic products.”

Stella was mortified. While Don was renowned for driving a hard bargain, she’d believed he would treat her friend fairly, at least. “I’ll talk to Don,” she said. “I expect one of his minions made a mistake. Don’s always saying Rich lacks experience.” Don also complained that Rich wasn’t tough enough, she recalled. Doubts began to nibble at her certainty.

Liam was silent. He stared out of the window.

“Go on,” Stella urged. “Please let me help.”

“You can’t,” Liam said. “Don personally escorted me from his office, with a black bin bag. Classic.” He sighed. “Face facts, my dear. He just

isn't a nice man. Still, you know that, and you stand by him, don't you? Turning a blind eye to his affairs with that little Chloe, and all the others."

"What do you mean?"

"I found them on the couch together after one of the ad shoots," Liam said. "I admit she's a flirty type, but you don't need to react to that, do you? I made it clear I wasn't interested."

"I can't believe Don would do that." Stella was outraged.

Liam shrugged. "You mean you didn't know? Don's a smooth operator, then. Rich told me it wasn't the first time, and it won't be the last."

Tears and fury were battling within her. Her anger won. "I'm going to hit him where it hurts," Stella fumed. "I'll divorce Don and take him for every penny I can get." Money meant everything to Don, and she would make him rue the day he crossed her.

"I'm glad you will, Stella," Liam said, "as sadly, I can't."

Stella decided she could help Liam, too. She vowed to wrest control of Hair Magic from her errant husband, and install Liam at the helm. Meanwhile, she still felt desperately sorry for her hairdresser. "I suppose Bobby's being supportive," she said soothingly. "He doesn't care for material things, after all."

"Bobby died last week," Liam said.

"Oh no." Stella felt like crying. On impulse, she hugged him. "What happened?"

"A heart attack," Liam said, extricating himself easily from her embrace. "Nothing anyone could do."

"How dreadful for you," Stella said.

"I miss him terribly," Liam replied, his eyes moist. "I decided the only way to cope was to find a replacement right away, and I'm pleased to report that I have."

That was even more unexpected. Liam had never appeared to be a man of fickle affections. As Stella struggled to respond, Liam added, "I went to the dogs' home last week and they had a beautiful little spaniel. Becky. Her hair came up lovely with my shampoo. She'll never be the same as Bobby, but she is a cute, cuddly little darling." He smiled, flicking the tears away. "Now, let's give you a killer hairstyle. If you're going to dump your husband and go dating, you need to look your best. I'll let you into a secret, too."

"Not another nasty surprise, I hope?" Stella said with apprehension.

"No, a nice one. My secret formula works alongside your karma. And you, Stella my dear, have good karma. Your hair is going to be spectacular."

Stella drove back down the high street in the pink convertible. Men and women alike gawped in admiration of the car and its driver. Rich, too, thought Stella Devenish was utterly gorgeous. His boss was an absolute idiot to prefer Chloe. Of course, Mrs Devenish had no idea, had she? Rich certainly wasn't going to tell her. Don could have his cake and eat it.

Rich caught sight of his reflection in a shop window. A strand of hair was sparkling brighter than it should. He must use some more Hair Magic shampoo. Everyone was raving at the way it hid that grim grey. He rushed home to take a shower, squirting a huge slug of shampoo from the shiny silver bottle. Towelling his tresses, he stopped dead in front of the mirror. Faded grey hairs hung across his forehead; not just one or two, but far too many to count. An old man stared into his eyes from the silvered glass.

