

THE MAGIC MONEY TREE

by A.A. Abbott

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John Bly worked every New Year's Eve. He didn't regret it. While other folk partied, he could earn a week's money in a few hours.

"It's always the same place, same time," he told his son, Kian. "It's never failed me."

This year, though, he was breaking with tradition. Before, John had worked alone. Now Kian had left school, John was teaching him the family business.

John sighed with nostalgia as he and Kian walked down Church Road. On this last night of the year, the street was

peaceful. Tall fir trees, some bearing cheery fairy lights, fringed the edges of large gardens. A scent of pine hung in the air.

"There," John said, pointing at a mock Tudor mansion, "Number 12. That was my job in 2015."

"Where are we going tonight?" Kian asked.

"Next door."

Number 14 was a cube-shaped sixties bungalow overlooking a sweeping lawn. A Jaguar XJS sat on a gravel drive. The stones crunched under Kian's feet.

"Be quiet. Walk on the grass." Although a burly man, John's gait was graceful. There was no sound as he peered into the darkness behind a sheet of plate glass windows.

His hooded reflection grinned back. Cautiously, John approached the front door. He rang the bell, hearing a squeaky rendition of Frosty the Snowman. There was no reply. He hadn't really expected one, having seen the inhabitants leave in a taxi two hours before.

"All right, let's go in." John gestured to the empty cartons and bags stacked neatly in a green box at the foot of the drive. "Look at their recycling. iPhones, MacBooks, jewels from Tiffany's – they've had classy Christmas presents. And it's all waiting for us."

"What about the alarm?" Kian said.

"Do you see a box on the wall?" John asked him. "There isn't one. Come on, round the back."

The garden extended along the sides of the property, allowing access to a flimsy rear door.

John's gloved hands retrieved a torch from his pocket. "Not even deadbolted," he said contemptuously, breaking the door's single-glazed pane with a loose stone. Satisfied the sound hadn't attracted attention, he reached inside. "Key's in the lock. This is so easy, boy. A magic money tree."

They entered the kitchen. "This is nicer than ours, isn't it, Dad?" Kian said, surveying a large room gleaming with chrome and marble. His eyes lit on a row of champagne bottles. "Are we taking the booze?"

John was blasé about the houses of the rich, but he remembered the excitement of youth. "We're not here for that, but you may as well bring some bottles back for your mates. You can take them in that car if we find the keys."

"Here, Dad." A Jaguar key fob sparkled invitingly in a trinket dish on the worktop. "Could I drive it now? Just round the block?"

Why not, John thought. His son had had a couple of lessons. He smiled indulgently. "Okay, a quick spin. Bring it back in two minutes. I'll have collected the goodies by then. And be careful. Your Uncle Clive won't want to see a scratch on it when he breaks it up for parts." He set off to search the bungalow while Kian took the fob.

John had just filled a carrier bag with gold necklaces when he heard the doorbell ring. Cursing under his breath, he tiptoed back to the kitchen.

A beam of torchlight dazzled his eyes.

"Put that down," a man growled.

“Who says?” John was sure it wasn’t the police. He half-recognised the voice.

A punch in the stomach caught him unawares. John swung a fist in return, putting all his bulk behind it.

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Ben, the CCTV operator, turned to Dave Davey. “Better get a squad car down there, Sarge. You’ll be looking at a murder enquiry if you don’t.”

Dave whistled. “This sting’s working better than expected.”

After a decade of break-ins on Church Road every New Year’s Eve, he’d finally secured resources to tackle the problem. He radioed for a car to pick up John Bly and Tony Smith, two prolific offenders, from number 14. Another team was sent to release Kian Bly from the Jaguar, which by now would have ground to a halt with the teenager locked inside.

At last, Dave Davey felt the magic of the festive season.