

Our 5-Minute Story

THE LAST TIME.

BY EDWIN PUGH.

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THE man mounted the stairs with a light foot and burst into the sorry little attic on the top storey, laughing from sheer joy of heart. His wife was hushing the baby to sleep, and at the sound of his tempestuous entry she held up a warning hand.

"Never mind about the kid," said the man. "Let him wake up if he likes. I feel too jolly to be quiet."

The woman's face took on an expression of great gladness.

"Why, Bob," she cried, "you don't never mean to say—?"

"Yus, I do," said he. "I've got the job!"

And he executed a very long, slow, solemn dance. The baby sat up and crowed joyously.

"I'm to start on Monday," said Bob. "That'll give us time to get the sticks together before prattin'. And once out of London—away from the smoke, wi' trees around us instead o' houses—with a chat of our own and the money coming in reg'lar and on the straight—I'll be a different man."

"You'll be yourself again," said his wife.

"That countryfied old self I can only just remember. So I shall. And I want to be that old self again. I'm tired o' Rob Ryot the suideman, screwsman, peter-claimer, what you like so long as it ain't honest. I want to be Bob Ryot the bloomin' yokel, with a knowledge o' gardenin' in general an' graffin' in particular. And I'll be him. Put on your squeeze dress and we'll make a night of it. The kid won't hurt if we leave him with the landlady. Hey, old lady? What say?"

"Pr'raps we hadn't better go out," faltered Mrs. Ryot, between longing and prudence.

"Rats!" said he.

And that decided it.

They were on the point of starting when the door opened and a man entered the room. He was small, of mean appearance, and crafty demeanor. He had dispensed with the formality of knocking; the formality of a greeting he also omitted.

"Evenin', Jimmy," said Bob.

"I've come on business," said Jimmy, sitting down. "If Mrs. Ryot wouldn't mind going out on the landin' for a bit we might get on to it quick."

"It doesn't matter about her."

"Oh, don't it though!" cried Jimmy. "I think it do. You know what it is when the 'tees get nosing around a woman. Out comes the whole b'iling. And the woman never knowin' as she's let on. 'Sech a nice man called to-day.' That's them when you come home. 'Sech a nice man—knew your brother Jack in Australia.' 'Garn!' says you 'Jack wasn't never in Australia at all. It was Cape Colony as Jack used to adorn.' 'Oh, but he said he knew him quite well,' she says, not half believing you. 'Then he's a qualified liar,' says you; and you tell him that again when he meets you at the Sessions; but it ain't no good, and you get fullied, sure as Adam. 'Sech a nice man he was—so gen'im'nly.' Ugh!"

"Can't your business wait, Jimmy? Me and the missus is going out."

"Not to night you ain't. Business can't never wait. Take off that go-to-meeting clobber, Mrs. Ryot. Your husband's looked to me."

Mrs. Ryot looked at him, and there was a shadow of

alarm upon her face. "What do you want wi' Bob?" she asked.

"There you go! There you go!" snarled Jimmy. "That's a woman all over! She must be askin' questions. Why? Where? How?—When? Who? What? That's them. It ain't to be surprised at as all men are liars, seein' the questions women ask. But I ain't agoin' to let on. Bob can if he likes."

Bob scratched his head.

"Is it a—burglary you want Bob for?" asked Mrs. Ryot.

Jimmy half rose with a savage growl. "Shut it!" he cried.

"Don't go tellin' the world."

"So that is your business?"

"Yuss!"

Mrs. Ryot laughed. "Then it can wait," said she.

"What d'ye mean?" asked Jimmy, looking from her to her husband. "'Ere, Bob, open your mouth an' say sutthink. It gives me the fair knock, palaverin' with a woman."

"You see, Jimmy," said Bob, "I've got a job."

"A whatter?" asked Jimmy, incredulously.

"A job. As gardener down Eltham way. Big house. Lot o' servants. Lodge all to myself. Everythink known about me by the boss. Nothink known about me by anyone else. All shipshape and comfortable, and thirty quid a year reg'lar."

"'Ere, I say, you'll go and get drunk or sutthink with all that money," sneered Jimmy. Bob laughed. "All the same, that's no reason why you shouldn't help me with this bust to-night."

"Don't go, Bob," cried his wife, in quick dread.

"Tain't likely," said Bob.

Jimmy gave no sign of any emotion. He sat looking at Mrs. Ryot in silence, his thin-lipped mouth drawn out in a wry smile. At last he spoke.

"Well, you're a nice sort o' pal, I don't think," he said.

"Very sorry," said Bob; "but I've done with all that sort o' thing."

"Ah!" reflected Jimmy. "Well, it's never too late to begin again, is it? You'll begin again to-night!"

"Not me."

"Yuss—you. Look 'ere. Didn't I help you last time, when you couldn't find a mate for love or toffee? And didn't you promise as you'd do the same for me nex' time I arst? Hey? And ain't I holdin' out my hat now?"

"Did I promise?" asked Bob, weakly.

"Was you ever born? Yes and yes. You did promise. And even if you hadn't promised you'd be bound as an honorable man to come to-night wi' me."

"I wish you'd let me off it, Jimmy."

"But, Bob," cried Mrs. Ryot, "surely you're never thinkin' of goin'?"

"Well, you see, my dear, a promise is a promise, and—"

"Don't—don't go!"

"It's the softest little thing I've spotted for years," said Jimmy. "It'll be just like shelling peas. A fairish-sized house up Muswell Hill way. Owned by a military man, retired. Eccentric old card, livin' all by himself. It was made to be burgled. Must ha' been run up by a screwsman turned builder for old association's sake!"

"Can't you do it by yourself?"

"No. I ain't strong enough. And I ain't got enough sand in me. I get the terrors workin' single-handed. And it ain't so safe neither. Then I want your spreader. There's bars on all the windows."

"Jimmy," cried Mrs. Ryot, "don't ask Bob to go."

"Fair's fair," said Jimmy. "You never arst him not to ask me to go that other bust, did you?"

"It'll be the last time, old gal," said Bob.

"Then you are going!"

"I must."

"You shan't go."

"Don't be a goat."

"You shan't go. I'll give you away. I'll follow you. I'll"