

A LOVE-KNOT



MR. NATHANIEL CLARK and Mrs. Bowman had just finished their third game of draughts. It had been a difficult game for Mr. Clark, the lady's mind having been so occupied with other matters that he had had great difficulty in losing. Indeed, it was only by pushing an occasional piece of his own off the board that he had succeeded.

"A penny for your thoughts, Amelia," he said, at last.

Mrs. Bowman smiled faintly. "They were far away," she confessed.

Mr. Clark assumed an expression of great solemnity; allusions of this kind to the late Mr. Bowman were only too frequent. He was fortunate when they did not grow into reminiscences of a career too blameless for successful imitation.

"I suppose," said the widow, slowly—"I suppose I ought to tell you: I've had a letter."

Mr. Clark's face relaxed.

"It took me back to the old scenes," continued Mrs. Bowman, dreamily. "I have never kept anything back from you, Nathaniel. I told you all about the first man I ever thought anything of—Charlie Tucker?"

Mr. Clark cleared his throat. "You did,"

he said, a trifle hoarsely. "More than once."

"I've just had a letter from him," said Mrs. Bowman, simpering. "Fancy, after all these years! Poor fellow, he has only just heard of my husband's death, and, by the way he writes——"

She broke off and drummed nervously on the table.

"He hasn't heard about me, you mean," said Mr. Clark, after waiting to give her time to finish.

"How should he?" said the widow.

"If he heard one thing, he might have heard the other," retorted Mr. Clark. "Better write and tell him. Tell him that in six weeks' time you'll be Mrs. Clark. Then, perhaps, he won't write again."

Mrs. Bowman sighed. "I thought, after all these years, that he must be dead," she said, slowly, "or else married. But he says in his letter that he has kept single for my sake."

"Well, he'll be able to go on doing it," said Mr. Clark; "it'll come easy to him after so much practice."

"He—he says in his letter that he is coming to see me," said the widow, in a low voice, "to—to—this evening."

"Coming to see you?" repeated Mr. Clark, sharply. "What for?"

"To talk over old times, he says," was the reply. "I expect he has altered a great deal; he was a fine-looking fellow—and so dashing. After I gave him up he didn't care what he did. The last I heard of him he had gone abroad."

Mr. Clark muttered something under his breath, and, in a mechanical fashion, began to build little castles with the draughts. He was just about to add to an already swaying structure when a thundering rat-tat-tat at the door dispersed the draughts to the four corners of the room. The servant opened the door, and the next moment ushered in Mrs. Bowman's visitor.

A tall, good-looking man in a frock-coat, with a huge spray of mignonette in his button-hole, met the critical gaze of Mr. Clark. He paused at the door and, striking an attitude, pronounced in tones of great amazement the Christian name of the lady of the house.

"Mr. Tucker!" said the widow, blushing.

"The same girl," said the visitor, looking round wildly, "the same as the day she left me. Not a bit changed; not a hair different."

He took her extended hand and, bending over it, kissed it respectfully.

"It's—it's very strange to see you again, Mr. Tucker," said Mrs. Bowman, withdrawing her hand in some confusion.

"Mr. Tucker!" said that gentleman, reproachfully; "it used to be Charlie."

Mrs. Bowman blushed again, and, with a side glance at the frowning Mr. Clark, called her visitor's attention to him and introduced them. The gentlemen shook hands stiffly.

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine," said Mr. Tucker, with a patronizing air. "How are you, sir?"

Mr. Clark replied that he was well, and, after some hesitation, said that he hoped he was the same. Mr. Tucker took a chair and, leaning back, stroked his huge moustache and devoured the widow

with his eyes. "Fancy seeing you again!" said the latter, in some embarrassment. "How did you find me out?"

"It's a long story," replied the visitor, "but I always had the idea that we should meet again. Your photograph has been with me all over the world. In the backwoods of Canada, in the bush of Australia, it has been my one comfort and guiding star. If ever I was tempted to do wrong, I used to take your photograph out and look at it."

"I s'pose you took it out pretty often?" said Mr. Clark, restlessly. "To look at, I mean," he added, hastily, as Mrs. Bowman gave him an indignant glance.

"Every day," said the visitor, solemnly. "Once when I injured myself out hunting, and was five days without food or drink, it was the only thing that kept me alive."

Mr. Clark's question as to the size of the photograph was lost in Mrs. Bowman's exclamations of pity.

"I once lived on two ounces of gruel and a cup of milk a day for ten days," he said, trying to catch the widow's eye. "After the ten days——"

"When the Indians found me I was delirious," continued Mr. Tucker, in a hushed voice, "and when I came to my senses I found that they were calling me 'Amelia.'"

Mr. Clark attempted to relieve the situation by a jocose inquiry as to whether he was wearing a moustache at the time, but Mrs. Bowman frowned him down. He began to



"HE TOOK HER EXTENDED HAND AND, BENDING OVER IT, KISSED IT RESPECTFULLY."

whistle under his breath, and Mrs. Bowman promptly said, "*H'sh!*"

"But how did you discover me?" she inquired, turning again to the visitor.

"Wandering over the world," continued Mr. Tucker, "here to-day and there to-morrow, and unable to settle down anywhere, I returned to Northtown about two years ago. Three days since, in a tramcar, I heard your name mentioned. I pricked up my ears and listened; when I heard that you were free I could hardly contain myself. I got into conversation with the lady and obtained your address, and after travelling fourteen hours here I am."

"How very extraordinary!" said the widow. "I wonder who it could have been? Did she mention her name?"

Mr. Tucker shook his head. Inquiries as to the lady's appearance, age, and dress were alike fruitless. "There was a mist before my eyes," he explained. "I couldn't realize it. I couldn't believe in my good fortune."

"I can't think——" began Mrs. Bowman.

"What does it matter?" inquired Mr. Tucker, softly. "Here we are together again, with life all before us and the misunderstandings of long ago all forgotten."

Mr. Clark cleared his throat preparatory to speech, but a peremptory glance from Mrs. Bowman restrained him.

"I thought you were dead," she said, turning to the smiling Mr. Tucker. "I never dreamed of seeing you again."

"Nobody would," chimed in Mr. Clark. "When do you go back?"

"Back?" said the visitor. "Where?"

"Australia," replied Mr. Clark, with a glance of defiance at the widow. "You must have missed a great deal all this time."

Mr. Tucker regarded him with a haughty stare. Then he bent towards Mrs. Bowman.

"Do you wish me to go back?" he asked, impressively.

"We don't wish either one way or the other," said Mr. Clark, before the widow could speak. "It don't matter to us."

"We?" said Mr. Tucker, knitting his brows and gazing anxiously at Mrs. Bowman. "*We?*"

"We are going to be married in six weeks' time," said Mr. Clark.

Mr. Tucker looked from one to the other in silent misery; then, shielding his eyes with his hand, he averted his head. Mrs. Bowman, with her hands folded in her lap, regarded him with anxious solicitude.

"I thought perhaps you ought to know," said Mr. Clark.

Mr. Tucker sat bolt upright and gazed at him fixedly. "I wish you joy," he said, in a hollow voice.

"Thankee," said Mr. Clark; "we expect to be pretty happy." He smiled at Mrs. Bowman, but she made no response. Her looks wandered from one to the other—from the good-looking, interesting companion of her youth to the short, prosaic little man who was exulting only too plainly in his discomfiture.

Mr. Tucker rose with a sigh. "Good-bye," he said, extending his hand.

"You are not going—yet?" said the widow.

Mr. Tucker's low-breathed "I must" was just audible. The widow renewed her expostulations.

"Perhaps he has got a train to catch," said the thoughtful Mr. Clark.

"No, sir," said Mr. Tucker. "As a matter of fact, I had taken a room at the George Hotel for a week, but I suppose I had better get back home again."

"No; why should you?" said Mrs. Bowman, with a rebellious glance at Mr. Clark. "Stay, and come in and see me sometimes and talk over old times. And Mr. Clark will be glad to see you, I'm sure. Won't you Nath—Mr. Clark?"

"I shall be—delighted," said Mr. Clark, staring hard at the mantelpiece. "Delighted."

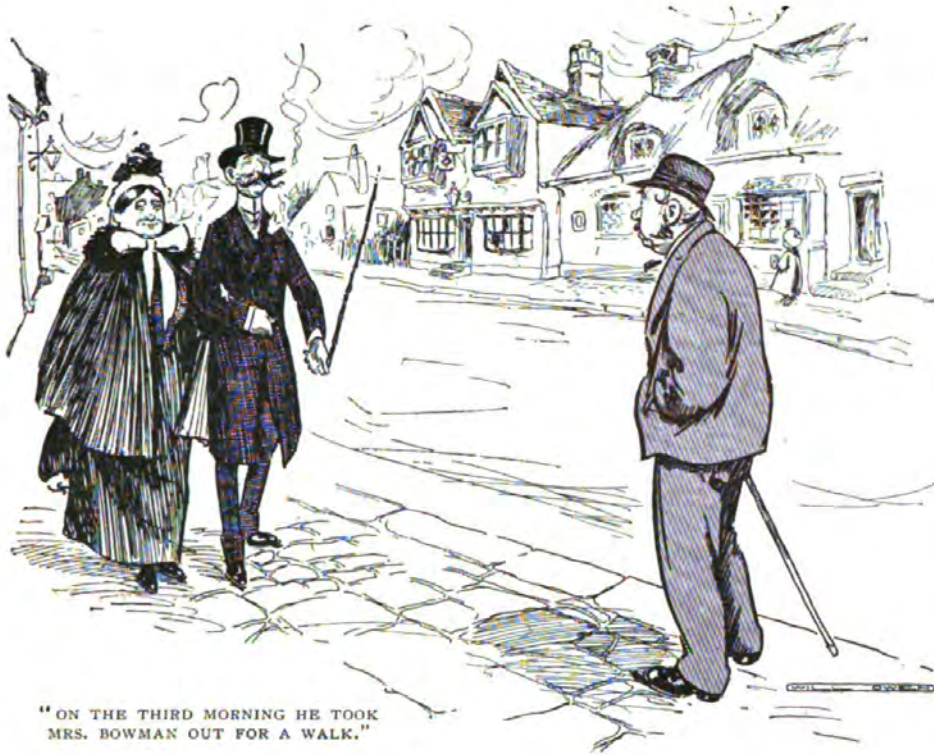
Mr. Tucker thanked them both, and after groping for some time for the hand of Mr. Clark, who was still intent upon the mantelpiece, pressed it warmly and withdrew. Mrs. Bowman saw him to the door, and a low-voiced colloquy, in which Mr. Clark caught the word "afternoon," ensued. By the time the widow returned to the room he was busy building with the draughts again.

Mr. Tucker came the next day at three o'clock, and the day after at two. On the third morning he took Mrs. Bowman out for a walk, airily explaining to Mr. Clark, who met them on the way, that they had come out to call for him. The day after, when Mr. Clark met them returning from a walk, he was assured that his silence of the day before was understood to indicate a distaste for exercise.

"And, you see, I like a long walk," said Mrs. Bowman, "and you are not what I should call a good walker."

"You never used to complain," said Mr. Clark; "in fact, it was generally you that used to suggest turning back."

"She wants to be amused as well," remarked Mr. Tucker; "then she doesn't feel the fatigue."



"ON THE THIRD MORNING HE TOOK MRS. BOWMAN OUT FOR A WALK."

Mr. Clark glared at him, and then, shortly declining Mrs. Bowman's invitation to accompany them home, on the ground that he required exercise, proceeded on his way. He carried himself so stiffly, and his manner was so fierce, that a well-meaning neighbour who had crossed the road to join him, and offer a little sympathy if occasion offered, talked of the weather for five minutes and inconsequently faded away at a corner.

Trimington as a whole watched the affair with amusement, although Mr. Clark's friends adopted an inflection of voice in speaking to him which reminded him strongly of funerals. Mr. Tucker's week was up, but the landlord of the George was responsible for the statement that he had postponed his departure indefinitely.

Matters being in this state, Mr. Clark went round to the widow's one evening with the air of a man who has made up his mind to decisive action. He entered the room with a bounce and, hardly deigning to notice the greeting of Mr. Tucker, planted himself in a chair and surveyed him grimly. "I thought I should find you here," he remarked.

"Well, I always am here, ain't I?" retorted Mr. Tucker, removing his cigar and regarding him with mild surprise.

"Mr. Tucker is my friend," interposed Mrs. Bowman. "I am the only friend he has got in Trimington. It's natural he should be here."

Mr. Clark quailed at her glance.

"People are beginning to talk," he muttered, feebly.

"Talk?" said the widow, with an air of mystification belied by her colour. "What about?"

Mr. Clark quailed again. "About—about our wedding," he stammered.

Mr. Tucker and the widow exchanged glances. Then the former took his cigar from his mouth and, with a hopeless

gesture, threw it into the grate.

"Plenty of time to talk about that," said Mrs. Bowman, after a pause.

"Time is going," remarked Mr. Clark. "I was thinking, if it was agreeable to you, of putting up the banns to-morrow."

"There—there's no hurry," was the reply.

"Marry in haste, repent at leisure," quoted Mr. Tucker, gravely.

"Don't you want me to put 'em up?" demanded Mr. Clark, turning to Mrs. Bowman.

"There's no hurry," said Mrs. Bowman again. "I—I want time to think."

Mr. Clark rose and stood over her, and after a vain attempt to meet his gaze she looked down at the carpet.

"I understand," he said, loftily. "I am not blind."

"It isn't my fault," murmured the widow, drawing patterns with her toe on the carpet. "One can't help their feelings."

Mr. Clark gave a short, hard laugh. "What about my feelings?" he said, severely. "What about the life you have spoiled? I couldn't have believed it of you."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry," murmured Mrs. Bowman, "and anything that I can do I will. I never expected to see Charles again. And it was so sudden; it took me unawares. I hope we shall still be friends."

"Friends!" exclaimed Mr. Clark, with extraordinary vigour. "With *him*?"

He folded his arms and regarded the pair with a bitter smile ; Mrs. Bowman, quite unable to meet his eyes, still gazed intently at the floor.

"You have made me the laughing-stock of Trimington," pursued Mr. Clark. "You have wounded me in my tenderest feelings ; you have destroyed my faith in women. I shall never be the same man again. I hope that you will never find out what a terrible mistake you've made."

Mrs. Bowman made a noise half-way between a sniff and a sob ; Mr. Tucker's sniff was unmistakable.

"I will return your presents to-morrow," said Mr. Clark, rising. "Good bye, for ever !"

He paused at the door, but Mrs. Bowman did not look up. A second later the front door closed and she heard him walk rapidly away.

For some time after his departure she preserved a silence which Mr. Tucker endeavoured in vain to break. He took a chair by her side, and at the third attempt managed to gain possession of her hand.

"I deserved all he said," she cried, at last. "Poor fellow, I hope he will do nothing desperate."

"No, no," said Mr. Tucker, soothingly.

"His eyes were quite wild," continued the widow. "If anything happens to him I shall never forgive myself. I have spoilt his life."

Mr. Tucker pressed her hand and spoke of the well-known refining influence a hopeless passion for a good woman had on a man. He cited his own case as an example.

"Disappointment spoilt my life so far as worldly success goes," he said, softly, "but no doubt the discipline was good for me."

Mrs. Bowman smiled faintly, and began to be a little comforted. Conversation shifted from the future of Mr. Clark to the past of Mr. Tucker ; the widow's curiosity as to the extent of the latter's worldly success remaining unanswered by reason of Mr. Tucker's sudden remembrance of a bear-fight.

Their future was discussed after supper, and the advisability of leaving Trimington considered at some length. The towns and villages of England were at their disposal ; Mr. Tucker's business, it appeared, being independent of place. He drew a picture of life in a bungalow with modern improvements at some seaside town, and, the cloth having been removed, took out his pocket-book and, extracting an old envelope, drew plans on the back.

It was a delightful pastime and made Mrs. Bowman feel that she was twenty and beginning life again. She toyed with the pocket-book and complimented Mr. Tucker on his skill as a draughtsman. A letter or two fell out and she replaced them. Then a small newspaper cutting, which had fluttered out with them, met her eye.

"A little veranda with roses climbing up it," murmured Mr. Tucker, still drawing, "and a couple of——"

His pencil was arrested by an odd, gasping noise from the widow. He looked up and saw her sitting stiffly in her chair. Her face seemed to have swollen and to be coloured in patches ; her eyes were round and amazed.

"Aren't you well?" he inquired, rising in disorder.

Mrs. Bowman opened her lips, but no sound came from them. Then she gave a long, shivering sigh.

"Heat of the room too much for you?" inquired the other, anxiously.

Mrs. Bowman took another long, shivering breath. Still incapable of speech, she took the slip of paper in her trembling fingers and an involuntary exclamation of dismay broke from Mr. Tucker. She dabbed fiercely at her burning eyes with her handkerchief and read it again.

"TUCKER.—*If this should meet the eye of Charles Tucker, who knew Amelia Wyborn twenty-five years ago, he will hear of something greatly to his advantage by communicating with N.C., Royal Hotel, Northtown.*"

Mrs. Bowman found speech at last. "N. C.—Nathaniel Clark," she said, in broken tones. "So that is where he went. Oh, what a fool I've been ! Oh, what a simple fool !"

Mr. Tucker gave a deprecatory cough. "I—I had forgotten it was there," he said, nervously.

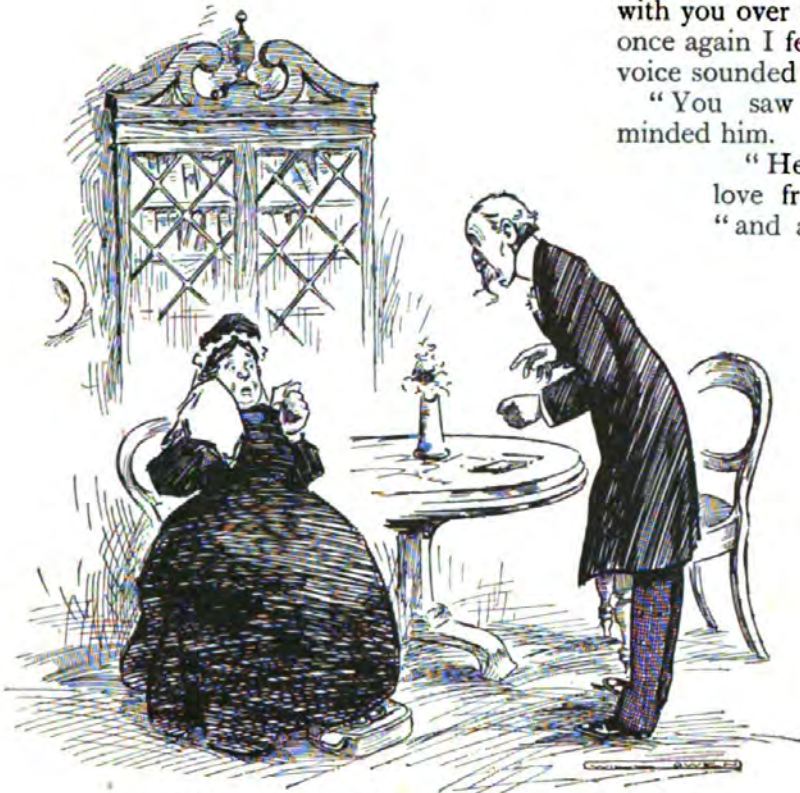
"Yes," breathed the widow, "I can quite believe that."

"I was going to show you later on," declared the other, regarding her carefully. "I was, really. I couldn't bear the idea of keeping a secret from you long."

Mrs. Bowman smiled—a terrible smile. "The audacity of the man," she broke out, "to stand there and lecture me on my behaviour. To talk about his spoilt life, and all the time——"

She got up and walked about the room, angrily brushing aside the proffered attentions of Mr. Tucker.

"Laughing-stock of Trimington, is he?" she stormed. "He shall be more than that



"I HAD FORGOTTEN IT WAS THERE," HE SAID, NERVOUSLY.

before I have done with him. The wickedness of the man; the artfulness!"

"That's what I thought," said Mr. Tucker, shaking his head. "I said to him——"

"You're as bad," said the widow, turning on him fiercely. "All the time you two men were talking at each other you were laughing in your sleeves at me. And I sat there like a child taking it all in. I've no doubt you met every night and arranged what you were to do next day."

Mr. Tucker's lips twitched. "I would do more than that to win you, Amelia," he said, humbly.

"You'll have to," was the grim reply. "Now I want to hear all about this from the beginning. And don't keep anything from me, or it'll be the worse for you."

She sat down again and motioned him to proceed.

"When I saw the advertisement in the *Northtown Chronicle*," began Mr. Tucker, in a husky voice, "I danced with——"

"Never mind about that," interrupted the widow, dryly.

"I went to the hotel and saw Mr. Clark," resumed Mr. Tucker, somewhat crestfallen. "When I heard that you were a widow, all the old times came back to me again. The years fell from me like a mantle. Once again I saw myself walking

with you over the footpath to Cooper's farm; once again I felt your hand in mine. Your voice sounded in my ears——"

"You saw Mr. Clark," the widow reminded him.

"He had heard all about our early love from you," said Mr. Tucker, "and as a last desperate chance for freedom he had come down to try and hunt me up, and induce me to take you off his hands."

Mrs. Bowman uttered a smothered exclamation.

"He tempted me for two days," said Mr. Tucker, gravely. "The temptation was too great and I fell. Besides that, I wanted to rescue you from the clutches of such a man."

"Why didn't he tell me himself?" inquired the widow.

"Just what I asked him," said the other, "but he said that you were much

too fond of him to give him up. He is not worthy of you, Amelia; he is fickle. He has got his eye on another lady."

"WHAT?" said the widow, with sudden loudness.

Mr. Tucker nodded mournfully. "Miss Hackbutt," he said, slowly. "I saw her the other day, and what he can see in her I can't think."

"Miss Hackbutt?" repeated the widow, in a smothered voice. "Miss——" She got up and began to pace the room again.

"He must be blind," said Mr. Tucker, positively.

Mrs. Bowman stopped suddenly and stood regarding him. There was a light in her eye which made him feel anything but comfortable. He was glad when she transferred her gaze to the clock. She looked at it so long that he murmured something about going.

"Good-bye," she said.

Mr. Tucker began to repeat his excuses, but she interrupted him. "Not now," she said, decidedly. "I'm tired. Good night."

Mr. Tucker pressed her hand. "Good night," he said, tenderly. "I am afraid the excitement has been too much for you. May I come round at the usual time to-morrow?"

"Yes," said the widow.

She took the advertisement from the table

and, folding it carefully, placed it in her purse.

Mr. Tucker withdrew as she looked up.

He walked back to the George deep in thought, and over a couple of pipes in bed thought over the events of the evening. He fell asleep at last and dreamed that he and Miss Hackbutt were being united in the bonds of holy matrimony by the Rev. Nathaniel Clark.

The vague misgivings of the previous night disappeared in the morning sunshine. He shaved carefully and spent some time in the selection of a tie. Over an excellent breakfast he arranged further explanations and excuses for the appeasement of Mrs. Bowman.

He was still engaged on the task when he started to call on her. Half-way to the house he arrived at the conclusion that he was looking too cheerful. His face took on an expression of deep seriousness, only to give way the next moment to one of the blankest amazement. In front of him, and approaching with faltering steps, was Mr. Clark, and leaning trustfully on his arm the comfortable figure of Mrs. Bowman. Her brow was unruffled and her lips were smiling.

"Beautiful morning," she said, pleasantly, as they met.

"Lovely!" murmured the wondering Mr. Tucker, trying, but in vain, to catch the eye of Mr. Clark.

"I have been paying an early visit," said the widow, still smiling. "I surprised you, didn't I, Nathaniel?"

"You did," said Mr. Clark, in an unearthly voice.

"We got talking about last night," continued the widow, "and Nathaniel started pleading with me to give him another chance. I suppose that I am soft-hearted,

but he was so miserable—— You were never so miserable in your life before, were you, Nathaniel?"

"Never," said Mr. Clark, in the same strange voice.

"He was so wretched that at last I gave way," said Mrs. Bowman, with a simper. "Poor fellow, it was such a shock to him that he hasn't got back his cheerfulness yet."

Mr. Tucker said, "Indeed!"

"He'll be all right soon," said Mrs. Bowman, in confidential tones. "We are on the way to put our banns up, and once that is done he will feel safe. You are not really afraid of losing me again, are you, Nathaniel?"

Mr. Clark shook his head, and, meeting the eye of Mr. Tucker in the process, favoured him with a glance of such utter venom that the latter was almost startled.

"Good-bye, Mr. Tucker," said the widow, holding out her hand. "Nathaniel did think of inviting you to come to *my* wedding, but



"MR. TUCKER STOOD WATCHING THEM FOR SOME TIME."

perhaps it is best not. However, if I alter my mind, I will get him to advertise for you again. Good-bye."

She placed her arm in Mr. Clark's again, and led him slowly away. Mr. Tucker stood watching them for some time, and then, with a glance in the direction of the George, where he had left a very small portmanteau, he did a hasty sum in comparative values and made his way to the railway-station.