

## THE STRAW

shuttlecock. I've no real relations ; nobody to scold me. That is why I do silly things." Faltering, almost beseeching, as if troubled by a vision of ridicule, she finished : " You won't tell ? "

" It's our secret," said Gay.

She didn't know—how could she ?—that Maria had been putting her up to the lowest bidder ; that Maria, in her moonstruck philanthropy, was offering her to her needy friends. And so she had nobody on her side, no relations to scold her and keep her safe ? A great longing to shield her seized him, himself impossible, miserably poor. She looked so young, so full of a dangerous confidence that had never known treachery or unkindness.

" You shouldn't do things like that," he said, following his confused and angry thoughts. " We're not worth pity. We're not worth helping. None of us. We're brutes. Some day you'll hurt yourself."

The girl was startled by his irrelevant fierceness, but instinct helped her to answer lightly.

" Do you mean," she said, " that if you had been a real burglar you would have murdered me ? "

" Of course I mean that," he said, dropping into mock seriousness. " A reasonable creature