

THE STRAW

"I want to ask you something," said Lauder hoarsely.

"Yes . . ." she murmured faintly, turning away her head because she could not bear the desperate look she must meet . . . it made her shiver. And she was young; there had not been any man yet to ask her what she knew this man would.

Lauder came nearer still.

This thing was so important that his heavy pride was broken, its urgency washed away in the tide of necessity his air of overriding obstacles, of crashing mightily into Fate. He paled under his tan and stammered. Maria had not lied; the girl had his life in her hands.

There was no love in his eyes, no passion, and he did not know how to simulate either; hard-driven, betraying only his desperate need of her. He was catching at a straw.

It touched her. Pity had always moved Judy first of all emotions; she who had wanted for nothing, who had found kindness where she looked for it, perhaps not quite knowing how little she claimed, and who had danced up to womanhood without having to learn in bitterness to battle for herself. And she had no vanity to accuse him. Just be-