

THE STRAW

and died away towards the stables. . . . And then all at once Judy sprang up, with a sense of Fate close upon her.

"You heard what they said, didn't you? It's in your hands. Be a little kind to him, Judy," said Maria; and then was not.

And still the girl did not run away.

Lauder came into the house alone, a splendid figure in splashed scarlet, bearing himself with a defiant swagger and all the signs of having ridden hard; perhaps dangerously, perhaps trying—how had they put it?—to end it across a fence. The fire, more potent than the fading light without, glistened in his eyes as in the glass eyeballs of the tigers lurking in the dim recesses of the hall, the familiar trophies terrible to strangers. He looked too big, too magnificent as a man, to rock on the brink of ruin.

The girl's heart was beating with an excitement that was half frightened, half fascination. It had flattered her to watch his recklessness in the field, to hear, while she caught her breath and admired, Maria's cunning whisper. For Maria had been indefatigable, fanning an inclination to worship daring, dazzling her fish before landing her with the fatal net of compassion.