

THE STRAW

together—is throwing to the lions. They say she has mints of money, and Maria has booked her to set Bill Lauder on his legs.”

Lord Robert whistled.

“Lauder, of all men!” he remarked. “If that’s it there’ll be the devil to pay when Sophia Bland comes back with a divorce in her pocket. She won’t let him go without a struggle.”

The other man laughed.

“Maria believes in the distribution of wealth,” he said. “Thinks herself kind-hearted. There’ll be a pretty fight.”

“Here’s Burkinshaw,” said Lord Robert, pricking up, as, with a face of hypocritical sympathy, he bore down upon the victim, whose arrival was made known by a circulating grin.

Gay kept aloof. He durst not make one of the audience collecting to enjoy Burkinshaw’s furious recital. It wasn’t guilt, it was a kind of shyness with which nobody, least of all himself, would have charged the devil-may-care, impecunious Gay, who was one of Maria’s failures, having flatly refused to buy prosperity at the hands of a woman, and who had lately come back the same cheerful pauper (after spending two or three unprofitable years in