

## THE STRAW

terrible firmness inspired alarm in anybody it struck her she ought to settle in life.

Burkinshaw himself had been heard to thank heaven that he was married to her ; his only security against being polished off in his turn. And there was a profane tale that Maria had once been caught shaking her head disconsolately over some suitable importation, explaining that had things been otherwise the lady would have done excellently for Dicky.

Experience had taught the onlookers to keep to their own province. They felt kindly towards the subject of Maria's generalship, but with no more idea of interrupting her march than that of an immutable Providence. If this girl were the straw destined to save Bill Lauder ; if Lauder should clutch at her like a drowning man ; and if Maria had made this salvage her business, it was not theirs.

"So Tokenhouse picked you up the other day and took you home in his chariot," said a man who had put a seat for her in the hottest corner, and was keeping the fire off her cheek with a sporting paper (to which his eye wandered in conversation). "How do you like him ?"

"I like him very much," said Judy ; "but isn't he rather odd ?"