

THE STRAW

more than likely to end it, one way or another, across a fence."

"Sh!" said Maria.

They started guiltily at the emphasis of her interposition, and were dumb, but the fancy crossed at least one man's mind that she might have hissed at them sooner—if she had really wanted to shut them up. As it was her whisper lent to what they had said importance.

"W' 'ady, white lady," said Burkinshaw facetiously, staring upwards, "come down to your tea."

"You have got it wrong," said Maria. "In the rhyme she was a green lady, and she turned into a serpent and ate up the servant as well as the bread and butter."

"Then," said Burkinshaw stoutly, "nobody will insinuate that that version is more suitable than mine."

Judy came down to them, more like a pale princess than any serpent. The heiress had no terrors for these men, married veterans who saw in her only a young thing in Maria's clutches, to be pitied and encouraged, but with no thought of rescue. All of them had a wholesome respect for Maria, who had a man's knowledge of outdoor things, but whose