

THE STRAW

horse." So Gay turned away and was at once accosted.

"You villain, what do you mean by deserting us?"

"Oh, come," said Gay. "I've been over three weeks in Ireland."

"You were out yesterday with the Quorn."

"I can't be so uncivil as to turn my back on them," said Gay, "when they are at my door."

Lord Robert, posted on a windy hillock that raked all approaches, nodded at him, preternaturally correct, stiff as a poker, the last person one would suspect of original sin.

"Seen anything of Burkinshaw?" he asked. "I'm on the look out for him. There's an astonishing rumour going round Melton, and" lower—"I've let out a hint to one or two fellows. Oh, here's Maria! Done again, it's the parson."

A respectable rider in a dark coat and breeches came into the narrow bit of lane turning town to the field; a figure not at all remarkable till she came closer and you saw that her hair, brushed flat, was tied with a black silk ribbon. It was Mrs. Burkinshaw, whom for no reason, since her name was Elizabeth, the hunting world called Maria.

"She's riding that kicker Somers palmed off