

HILDA.

CHAPTER I.

MISS HOWE pushed the portière aside with a curved hand and gracefully separated fingers; it was a staccato movement, and her body followed it after an instant's poise of hesitation, head thrust a little forward, eyes inquiring, and a tentative smile, although she knew precisely who was there. You would have been aware at once that she was an actress. She entered the room with a little stride, and then crossed it quickly, the train of her morning gown—it cried out of luxury with the cheapest voice—taking folds of great audacity, as she bent her face in its loose mass of hair over Laura Filbert, sitting on the edge of a bamboo sofa, and said—

“You poor thing! Oh, you *poor* thing!”

She took Laura's hand as she spoke, and tried to keep it; but the hand was neutral, and she let it go. “It is a hand,” she said to herself, in one of those quick reflections that so often visited her ready-made, “that turns the merely inquiring mind away. Nothing but passion could hold it.”

Miss Filbert made the conventional effort to rise, but it came to nothing, or to a mere embarrassed accent of their greeting. Then her voice showed this