

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATE READER.

"I look down to his feet, but that's a fable."

THERE were low brooding clouds and a feeling of thunder in the air as Gerard Hillersdon's cab rattled along the King's Road, past all the squalor and shabby gentility of the side-scenes of Chelsea, towards quiet rural Parson's Green. Only a few years ago Parson's Green had still some pretensions to rusticity, and where now the speculating builders' streets and terraces stretch right and left in hollow squares and close battalions, there were fine old Georgian and pre-Georgian mansions, and stately sweeps of lawn and shrubbery, and elms of old world growth, shutting out the hum and hubbub of the great city.

To one of those old respectable mansions, that one which was second only to Peterborough House in the extent and dignity of its surroundings, Gerard Hillersdon was driving under the heavy sky of a July afternoon, the lowering close of a sunless and oppressive day. Never, not even in mid-winter, had the smoke-curtain hung lower over London than it hung to-day, and if the idea of fog seemed impossible in July there at least prevailed that mysterious