

SILENT DOMINION

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BY

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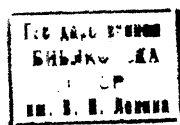
AUTHOR OF 'MARKED WITH A CIPHER'

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BOOK I: 'CONFITEOR'

CHAPTER THE FIRST

MY grandfather began life with a fortune: fair in the eyes of most folk, and colossal to my youthful imaginings; and when he lay in his coffin, his creditors arrested his corpse for debt—while his only son began life, hampered and choked by the parental difficulties, and with the prospect of a government clerkship, with a stipend of one hundred pounds a year, wherewith to purchase his daily bread.

My father was, at the time of my grandfather's demise, twenty-three years of age, and, after accepting the government appointment, he succumbed to the eroticism of his time of life, and further complicated his affairs by taking to wife the sister of a clerkly colleague, whose beseeching blue eyes and sunny curls had seared and twined about his heart, to say nothing of the effect of her high school ability to play 'Reveries' on the pianoforte, and for singing the ballads of Claribel in a sweet, plaintive thin voice.

Alas for the hopes of yesterday! My poor mother's good looks rapidly faded under the sunless clouds of poverty, and her little accomplishments fell into the rear of disuse and were lost and forgotten in the endless skirmishes with circumstance which made up her life's campaign. An uncomfortable awakening to the realities of life was the immediate result of the union, while its remote outcome was the annual appearance for ten consecutive years of a small atom of humanity to be fed and clothed—creeping into the narrow circle of my father's limited income and straining its elasticity to so alarming an extent, that it was all the poor man could do to keep the ends within measurable distance of each other.

Of these troublesome incursionists into his cloudy domestic atmosphere my brother Tom was the eldest, I was the second, and seven brothers followed, the care of whom, as they left their mother's individual attention, devolved mainly upon me.

My education, from reasons which must appear obvious, was irregular and meagre. At the age of thirteen I was sent to a ladies' high school, and for a short time underwent the daily ordeal of trying to acquire a smattering of 'isms, 'ologies, French verbs, Herz's exercises, and an aptness for hairdressing, together with the large amount of snobbery and the tendency towards incipient flirtation incidental to the hybrid social position of the daughters of the opulent tradesmen, and the miss in her teens, who