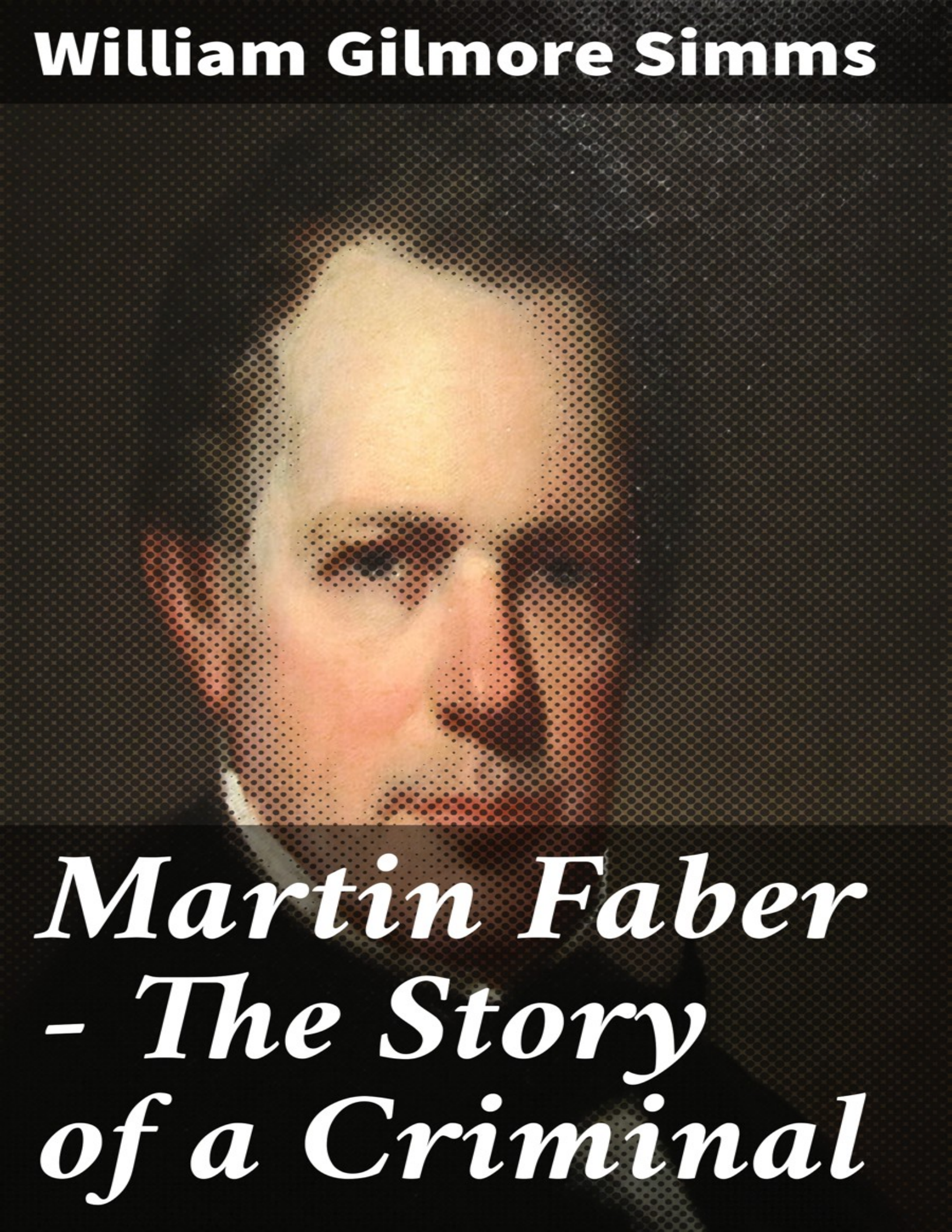
William Gilmore Simms



Martin Faber - The Story of a Criminal

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CHAPTER I.

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This is a fearful precipice, but I dare look upon it. What, indeed, may I not dare--what have I not dared! I look before me, and the prospect, to most men full of terrors, has few or none for me. Without adopting too greatly the spirit of cant which makes it a familiar phrase in the mouths of the many, death to me will prove a release from many strifes and terrors. I do not fear death. I look behind me, and though I may regret my crimes, they give me no compunctious apprehensions. They were among the occurrences known to, and a necessary sequence in the progress of time and the world's circumstance. They might have been committed by another as well as by myself. They must have been committed! I was but an instrument in the hands of a power with which I could not contend.

Yet, what a prospect, does this backward glance afford! How full of colors and characters--How variously dark and bright. I am dazzled and confounded at the various phases of my own life. I wonder at the prodigious strides which my own feet have taken--and as I live and must die, I am bold to declare,--in half the number of instances, without my own consciousness. Should I be considered the criminal, in deeds so committed? Had not my arm been impelled--had not my mood been prompted by powers and an agency apart from my own, I had not struck the blow. The demon was not of me, though presiding over, and prevailing within, me. Let those who may think, when the blood is boiling in their

temples, analyze its throbs and the source of its impulses. I cannot. I am a fatalist. Enough for me that it was written!

My name is Martin Faber. I am of good family--of German extraction--the only son. I was born in M--village, and my parents were recognized as among the first in respectability and fortune of the place. The village was small--numbering some sixty families; and with a naturally strong and shrewd, and a somewhat improved mind, my father, Nicholas Faber, became the first man in it. The village of M--was one of those that always keep stationary. The prospect was slight, therefore, of our family declining in influence. My father, on the contrary, grew every day stronger in the estimation of the people. He was their oracle--their counsellor--his word was law, and there were no rival pretensions set up in opposition to his supremacy. Would this had been less the case! Had Nicholas Faber been more his own, than the creature of others, Martin, his son, had not now obliterated all the good impressions of his family, and been called upon, not only to recount his disgrace and crime, but to pay its penalties. Had he bestowed more of his time in the regulation of his household, and less upon public affairs, the numberless vicious propensities, strikingly marked in me from childhood up, had, most probably been sufficiently restrained. But why speak of this? As I have already said--it was written!

The only child, I was necessarily a favorite. The pet of mama, the prodigy of papa, I was schooled to dogmatize and do as I pleased from my earlier infancy. I grew apace, but in compliance with maternal tenderness, which dreaded the too soon exposure of her child's nerves, health and

sensibilities, I was withheld from school for sometime after other children are usually put in charge of a tutor. When sent, the case was not very greatly amended. I learned nothing, or what I learned was entirely obliterated by the nature of my education and treatment at home. I cared little to learn, and my tutor dared not coerce me. His name was Michael Andrews. He was a poor, miserable hireling, who having a large and depending family, dared not offend by the chastisement of the favorite son of a person of so much consequence as my father. Whatever I said or did, therefore, went by without notice, and with the most perfect impunity. I was a truant, and exulted in my irregularities, without the fear or prospect of punishment. I was brutal and boorish--savage and licentious. To inferiors I was wantonly cruel. In my connexion with superiors, I was cunning and hypocritical. If, wanting in physical strength, I dared not break ground and go to blows with my opponent, I, nevertheless, yielded not, except in appearance. I waited for my time, and seldom permitted the opportunity to escape, in which I could revenge myself with tenfold interest, for provocation or injustice. Nor did I discriminate between those to whom this conduct was exhibited. To all alike, I carried the same countenance. To the servant, the schoolmaster, the citizen, and even to my parents, I was rude and insolent. My defiance was ready for them all, and when, as sometimes, even at the most early stages of childhood, I passed beyond those bounds of toleration, assigned to my conduct, tacitly, as it were, by my father and mother, my only rebuke was in some such miserably unmeaning language as this--'Now, my dear--now Martin--

how can you be so bad'--or, 'I will be vexed with you, Martin, if you go on so.'

What was such a rebuke to an overgrown boy, to whom continued and most unvarying deference, on all hands, had given the most extravagant idea of his own importance. I bade defiance to threats--I laughed at and scorned reproaches. I ridiculed the soothings and the entreaties of my mother; and her gifts and toys and favors, furnished in order to tempt me to the habits which she had not the courage to compel, were only received as things of course, which it was her duty to give me. My father, whose natural good sense, sometimes made him turn an eye of misgiving upon my practices, wanted the stern sense of duty which would probably have brought about a different habit; and when, as was occasionally the case, his words were harsh and his look austere, I went, muttering curses, from his presence, and howling back my defiance for his threats. I was thus brought up without a sense of propriety--without a feeling of fear. I had no respect for authority--no regard for morals. I was a brute from education, and whether nature did or not, contribute to the moral constitution of the creature which I now appear, certain, I am, that the course of tutorship which I received from all around me, would have made me so. You will argue from this against my notion of the destinies, since I admit, impliedly, that a different course of education, would have brought about different results. I think not. The case is still the same. I was fated to be so tutored.

CHAPTER II.

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There was at the school to which I went, a boy about twelve, the same age with myself. His name was William Harding--he was the only child of a widow lady, living a retired life--of blameless character, and a disposition the most amiable and shrinking. This disposition was inherited by her son, in the most extravagant degree. He had been the child of affliction. His father had been murdered in a night affray in a neighbouring city, and his body had been brought home to the house and presence of his lady, when she was far advanced in pregnancy. The sudden and terrible character of the shock brought on the pains of labour. Her life was saved with difficulty, and, seemingly by miraculous interposition, the life of her infant was also preserved. But he was the creature of the deepest sensibility. His nervous organization was peculiarly susceptible. He was affected by circumstances the most trifling and casual--trembled and shrunk from every unwonted breeze--withered beneath reproach, and pined under neglect. So marked a character, presenting too, as it did, a contrast, so strikingly with my own, attracted my attention, at an early period of our school association. His dependence, his weakness, his terrors--all made him an object of a consideration which no other character would have provoked. I loved him--strange to say--and with a feeling of singular power. I fought his battles--I never permitted him to be imposed upon:--and he--could he do less?--he assisted me in my lessons, he worked my sums, he helped my understanding in its deficiencies, he reproved

my improprieties--and I--I bore with and submitted patiently on most occasions to his reproofs. William Harding was a genius, and one of the first order; but his nervous susceptibilities left him perfectly hopeless and helpless. Collision with the world of man would have destroyed him; and, as it was, the excess of the imaginative quality which seemed to keep even pace with his sensibilities, left him continually struggling--and as continually to the injury and overthrow of the latter--with the calm suggestions of his judgment. He was a creature to be loved and pitied; and without entertaining, at this period, a single sentiment savoring of either of these, for any other existing being, I both loved and pitied him.

One day, to the surprize of all, William Harding appeared in his class, perfectly ignorant of his lesson. The master did not punish him with stripes, but, as the school was about to be dismissed, commanding the trembling boy before him, he hung about his neck a badge made of card, on which was conspicuously printed, the word 'idler.'--With this badge he was required to return home, re-appearing at school with it the ensuing afternoon.

A more bitter disgrace could not, by any ingenuity, have been put upon the proud and delicate spirit of this ambitious boy. I never saw dismay more perfectly depicted upon any countenance. His spirit did not permit him to implore. But his eye--it spoke volumes of appeal--it was full of entreaty. The old man saw it not. The school was dismissed, and, in a paroxysm of grief which seemed to prostrate every faculty, my companion threw himself upon the long grass in the neighbourhood of the school-house, and refused to be