

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OVERSEERS.

Austin Gore—Sketch of his character—Overseers as a class—Their peculiar characteristics—The marked individuality of Austin Gore—His sense of duty—Murder of poor Denby—Sensation—How Gore made his peace with Col. Lloyd—Other horrible murders—No laws for the protection of slaves possible of being enforced.

THE comparatively moderate rule of Mr. Hopkins as overseer on Col. Lloyd's plantation was succeeded by that of another whose name was Austin Gore. I hardly know how to bring this man fitly before the reader, for under him there was more suffering from violence and bloodshed than had, according to the older slaves, ever been experienced before at this place. He was an overseer, and possessed the peculiar characteristics of his class, yet to call him merely an overseer would not give one a fair conception of the man. I speak of overseers as a class, for they were such. They were as distinct from the slave-holding gentry of the south as are the fish-women of Paris, and the coal-heavers of London, distinct from other grades of society. They constituted a separate fraternity at the south. They were arranged and classified by that great law of attraction which determines the sphere and affinities of men; which ordains that men whose malign and brutal propensities preponderate over their moral and intellectual endowments shall naturally fall into those employments which promise the largest gratification to those predominating instincts or propensities. The office of overseer took this raw material of vulgarity and brutality, and stamped it as a distinct class in southern life. But in this class, as in all other classes, there were sometimes persons of marked individuality, yet with a general resemblance to the

mass. Mr. Gore was one of those to whom a general characterization would do no manner of justice. He was an overseer, but he was something more. With the malign and tyrannical qualities of an overseer he combined something of the lawful master. He had the artfulness and mean ambition of his class, without its disgusting swagger and noisy bravado. There was an easy air of independence about him; a calm self-possession; at the same time a sternness of glance which well might daunt less timid hearts than those of poor slaves, accustomed from childhood to cower before a driver's lash. He was one of those overseers who could torture the slightest word or look into impudence, and he had the nerve not only to resent, but to punish promptly and severely. There could be no answering back. Guilty or not guilty, to be accused was to be sure of a flogging. His very presence was fearful, and I shunned him as I would have shunned a rattlesnake. His piercing black eyes and sharp, shrill voice ever awakened sensations of dread. Other overseers, how brutal soever they might be, would sometimes seek to gain favor with the slaves, by indulging in a little pleasantry; but Gore never said a funny thing, or perpetrated a joke. He was always cold, distant, and unapproachable—the *overseer* on Col. Edward Lloyd's plantation—and needed no higher pleasure than the performance of the duties of his office. When he used the lash, it was from a sense of duty, without fear of consequences. There was a stern will, an iron-like reality about him, which would easily have made him chief of a band of pirates, had his environments been favorable to such a sphere. Among many other deeds of shocking cruelty committed by him was the murder of a young colored man named Bill Denby. He was a powerful fellow, full of animal spirits, and one of the most valuable of Col. Lloyd's slaves. In some way—I know not what—he offended this Mr. Austin Gore, and in accordance with the usual custom the latter undertook to flog him. He had given him but few stripes when Denby broke away from him, plunged into the creek,



GORE SHOOTING DENBY.

and standing there with the water up to his neck refused to come out; whereupon, for this refusal, Gore *shot him dead!* It was said that Gore gave Denby three calls to come out, telling him if he did not obey the last call he should shoot him. When the last call was given Denby still stood his ground, and Gore, without further parley, or without making any further effort to induce obedience, raised his gun deliberately to his face, took deadly aim at his standing victim, and with one click of the gun the mangled body sank out of sight, and only his warm red blood marked the place where he had stood.

This fiendish murder produced, as it could not help doing, a tremendous sensation. The slaves were panic-stricken, and howled with alarm. The atrocity roused my old master, and he spoke out in reprobation of it. Both he and Col. Lloyd arraigned Gore for his cruelty; but he, calm and collected, as though nothing unusual had happened, declared that Denby had become unmanageable; that he set a dangerous example to the other slaves, and that unless some such prompt measure was resorted to there would be an end to all rule and order on the plantation. That convenient covert for all manner of villainy and outrage, that cowardly alarm-cry, that the slaves would "take the place," was pleaded, just as it had been in thousands of similar cases. Gore's defense was evidently considered satisfactory, for he was continued in his office, without being subjected to a judicial investigation. The murder was committed in the presence of slaves only, and they, being slaves, could neither institute a suit nor testify against the murderer. Mr. Gore lived in St. Michaels, Talbot Co., Maryland, and I have no reason to doubt, from what I know to have been the moral sentiment of the place, that he was as highly esteemed and as much respected as though his guilty soul had not been stained with innocent blood.

* I speak advisedly when I say that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot Co., Maryland, was not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community. Mr. Thomas

Lanman, ship carpenter of St. Michaels, killed two slaves, one of whom he butchered with a hatchet, by knocking his brains out. He used to boast of having committed the awful and bloody deed. I have heard him do so laughingly, declaring himself a benefactor of his country, and that "when others would do as much as he had done, they would be rid of the d——d niggers."

Another notorious fact which I may state was the murder of a young girl between fifteen and sixteen years of age, by her mistress, Mrs. Giles Hicks, who lived but a short distance from Col. Lloyd's. This wicked woman, in the paroxysm of her wrath, not content at killing her victim, literally mangled her face, and broke her breast-bone. Wild and infuriated as she was, she took the precaution to cause the burial of the girl; but, the facts of the case getting abroad, the remains were disinterred, and a coroner's jury assembled, who, after due deliberation, decided that "the girl had come to her death from severe beating." The offense for which this girl was thus hurried out of the world was this, she had been set that night, and several preceding nights, to mind Mrs. Hicks' baby, and having fallen into a sound sleep the crying of the baby did not wake her, as it did its mother. The tardiness of the girl excited Mrs. Hicks, who, after calling her several times, seized a piece of fire-wood from the fire-place, and pounded in her skull and breast-bone till death ensued. I will not say that this murder most foul produced no sensation. It *did* produce a sensation. A warrant was issued for the arrest of Mrs. Hicks, but incredible to tell, for some reason or other, that warrant was never served, and she not only escaped condign punishment, but the pain and mortification as well of being arraigned before a court of justice.

While I am detailing the bloody deeds that took place during my stay on Col. Lloyd's plantation, I will briefly narrate another dark transaction, which occurred about the time of the murder of Denby.

On the side of the river Wye, opposite from Col. Lloyd's,

there lived a Mr. Beal Bondley, a wealthy slaveholder. In the direction of his land, and near the shore, there was an excellent oyster fishing-ground, and to this some of Lloyd's slaves occasionally resorted in their little canoes at night, with a view to make up the deficiency of their scanty allowance of food by the oysters that they could easily get there. Mr. Bondley took it into his head to regard this as a trespass, and while an old man slave was engaged in catching a few of the many millions of oysters that lined the bottom of the creek, to satisfy his hunger, the rascally Bondley, lying in ambush, without the slightest warning, discharged the contents of his musket into the back of the poor old man. As good fortune would have it, the shot did not prove fatal, and Mr. Bondley came over the next day to see Col. Lloyd about it. What happened between them I know not, but there was little said about it and nothing publicly done. One of the commonest sayings to which my ears early became accustomed, was that it was "worth but a half a cent to kill a nigger, and half a cent to bury one." While I heard of numerous murders committed by slaveholders on the eastern shore of Maryland, I never knew a solitary instance where a slaveholder was either hung or imprisoned for having murdered a slave. The usual pretext for such crimes was that the slave had offered resistance. Should a slave, when assaulted, but raise his hand in self-defense, the white assaulting party was fully justified by southern law, and southern public opinion in shooting the slave down, and for this there was no redress.