

THE

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PERIODICAL FIRES OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

On my first arrival in this province, in midsummer, I was struck with horror, in viewing from the deck of the ship, the first evening we cast anchor, large masses of fire extending over the beautiful semicircle of hills to the south of Adelaide. How, I exclaimed, can a country subject to such casualties be the residence of civilised man? How can property be preserved or protected, where it is subject to such visitations? On taking possession of my land I found almost all the grass burnt down, and this renewed and increased the feelings of danger and insecurity I had formerly experienced. Now, on further acquaintance, I view the matter very differently, and I shall shortly state my reasons.

These fires, which generally occur in January or February, burn off not only all the dry grass and weeds which the cattle will not eat, but also the leaves and fallen branches of trees; and not unfrequently, entire trees of large growth are brought down, and partly consumed. In February last I witnessed an event of this description. The fire passed over the land in the morning; and in the evening, in every direction in the forest, hundreds of fires were visible, supported by the ignited trees. Some continued in full activity next morning, and with assistance were kept up for several days, removing with little trouble, many cumberers of the ground. Whatever alarm or danger may be produced on such occasions, one beneficial result is certain, the annual top dressing of the soil with fertilizing ashes.

I have never heard it even guessed at, how long it takes to perfect a gum tree, but without doubt many of those we daily see, are of an immense age. Indeed nine-tenths of the whole may be pronounced aged, and these are almost all more or less decayed at the stem, just

above the root, and are sure to be attacked by the fires at the vulnerable places. Nothing is more familiar than the singular appearances of trees, sometimes hollowed out, sometimes with a passage burnt through the centre, and sometimes standing as if on props. Notwithstanding, they continue to flourish as if nothing had happened, so long as any portion of the bark is preserved in connexion with the root; but year after year fresh ravages are made, till at last the tree falls, leaving a heap of blackened ruins to be diminished annually by the same means, if a shorter period is not put to its existence by the labors of the settler.

Many a fair tree, however, would pass unscathed by fire, but for the experienced and interested eye of the settler. He finds some heavy trees which he wants to take down, and carefully examines their lower stems, and finds some blackened spots where the fires have taken effect, although, perhaps, only to the extent of burning through the bark and sapwood; but as sure as he sees these tokens, he knows he can burn down such trees by applying fire to those places. Nothing can be more tedious than the attempt to burn down a fresh gum tree by applying fire to the living bark, but when applied to such spots, where they can be detected, the progress is rapid, and this method of killing a tree is attended with the further advantage of, to a considerable extent, burning out the roots.

Seedling and sapling trees are frequently found killed by the fires, in considerable numbers, and they are further destroyed by the cattle and sheep; and as the aged trees are gradually disappearing, it may be safely inferred that at no very distant period the forest will entirely wear out.

It would naturally be supposed that great distress must be produced by the sudden destruction of herbage in a country supporting so many sheep and cattle; but in fact the fires are never universal. There are always some spots saved, on which the flocks and herds can subsist until the grass springs afresh, and, in my experience, with the exception of the noted season of 1838-9, the fires have been followed within a few days by plentiful showers, which quickly restored the grass to greater beauty than before. Few things are more abhorrent to the eye than a country recently burnt over; but nothing can be more delightful than to see nature suddenly change her garb of sackcloth and ashes, for a robe of the most superb verdure.

I am aware opinions have been expressed that the fires injure the grass, but this is contrary to my experience. Every year our grass has been partly burnt, and every year it has become more closely planted. This, I have no doubt, is chiefly owing to its being trod upon, and eat down by sheep and cattle. It is an established physical

law, that all plants are more or less exhausted by perfecting their seeds, and that the soil on which they grow is also exhausted by the same process. Before the country was settled, all grasses ran to seed—now only a small proportion. Hence both the plants and soil being less exhausted, the roots of the former spread and became more continuous. The fire passes too suddenly and slightly over the grass to make any injurious impression on the roots, and this I think is proved by the sudden burst of verdure produced by succeeding rains.

It cannot be denied that these incidents are attended with considerable danger to property. It fortunately happens that a trifling want of continuity of the grass, such as a road or even a footpath will stop the progress of the fire. From this cause there is little danger to houses; but enclosed fields should be carefully protected, by burning a belt of grass around them in every direction where they are liable to exposure, so soon as the grass is ripe enough to burn; and this should be done in calm weather to avoid accidents from the wind. When the attack occurs through the day, and with a low wind, a few men with boughs of trees may extinguish a considerable line of fire; but this should never be trusted to, because the enemy may come like a thief in the night, accompanied with a high or squally wind, which defeats all human efforts.

The origin of these fires is generally imputed to the natives, and as the country bears evident marks of having been subject to them long before our time, I imagine the imputation is well founded, particularly as it is ascertained to have been one of their modes of hunting their prey. An opinion has been broached that the fires produce the hot winds which prevail about the same season; but I think there are equally good grounds for contending that the hot winds occasion the fires. Our hot winds seem to be much the same in their character and effects with the sirocco which blows from the coast of Africa on the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, and in all probability will be found to arise from similar causes.

Attempts have been made by scientific men in England to prove that Australia cannot be a fertile country, in respect that her trees are not deciduous; but I have not yet seen the subject investigated in a satisfactory way. No doubt our trees are always green, but the leaves, notwithstanding, fall annually, the new superseding the old. Whether the soil is more benefited by the rotting or burning of the leaves, I will not venture to decide; but I feel quite assured that the latter process is much more conducive to the health of the inhabitants, than the former. The intermittent fever of the back woods of America, so destructive to the health of all, but particularly to new settlers, is here, fortunately, unknown. If the fall and decay of the leaf is the criterion of

fertility, how is it that extensive tracts in America are utterly barren, and that large portions of our adopted country consist of as fine land as any in America? That the soil of Australia has been hitherto benefited by conflagrations, I have no doubt. As the country becomes more thickly settled, it will probably be found conducive to the general interest, to limit or regulate the operation of so dangerous an accessary, and to rely chiefly, as in the old country, on the benefit to be derived from our flocks and herds.

It may be necessary to explain, that in speaking of the country generally, my experience has chiefly been restricted to one of the higher districts.

SYLVANUS.

THE ORPHAN.

A lonely thing, a lonely thing,
 I'm doom'd to be on earth;
 No more a lonely thing I'll be,
 When comes death's second birth;
 Fruition full of happiness,
 My spirit shall pervade;
 No look unkind, no cold neglect,
 Shall then my peace invade.

For then with angels I shall dwell,
 And kindred dear on earth;
 I'll know a heavenly father's love,
 When comes that second birth.
 A sainted mother too will there
 Me to her bosom fold;
 That breast more warm, more pure than 'twas
 E're death's touch turn'd it cold.

Rekindled by a heavenly flame,
 She'll greet her child of earth;
 How shall the ransom'd orphan joy,
 When comes that second birth.
 No more a helpless, hopeless thing,
 The orphan child shall be;
 But love and bliss in endless round,
 My ravished eyes shall see.

No more I'll sigh a lonely thing,
 Nor pine for ties on earth;
 High, holy raptures wait for me
 When comes the second birth.
 Reign in my breast sweet hope serene;
 Earth's cares no more control;
 God in thy mercy call me home;
 And Christ redeem my soul.

Adelaide, June, 1842.

ARGALIA.

CHAPTER FOURTH.

DIVACONTA had marked every movement of his enemy, and he knew his love for Azora from its commencement. He rejoiced, when he saw in this passion, another bond to chain Argalia to his dreams. But Argalia, he found, had abandoned his mistress; and Divaconta learnt that the maid pined in solitude. Curiosity induced him to fathom the motive: for of inconstancy he did not for a moment suspect his rival.

One morning, disguised as a hunter, he traversed the forest to the sea-shore, followed by a splendid train, and under a very slight pretext, entered the garden of Irad. He found the patriarch superintending his labourers, and was hospitably received. Slaves, richly dressed, brought forward a table of costly wood into the shade of tall cedars, while others hastened with carpets and cushions, and a repast was served up. The object of Divaconta's visit was yet wanting, for Azora was not visible. In the course of the repast, Divaconta took occasion to enquire for her: Irad then commanded that his daughter should be sought. Divaconta had expected to see a dazzling beauty: he was astonished to behold only a fragile form, on whose pale face was a deep-seated expression of grief, and who approached with very feeble steps. Azora raised her eyes to the stranger, and found him strikingly handsome: splendor of dress increased the charms of his majestic shape: but from his dark eyes there sparkled a restless fire, and there was something in his countenance which altogether displeased Azora. She seated herself by her father's side, and took only such a part in the conversation as her presence required. Divaconta was at first disposed to make light of Argalia's choice; but he observed her very narrowly during the repast, and at every glance, some new charm disclosed itself quite unexpectedly: he discovered that her features were beautiful; that the expression of grief rendered her still more attractive; that her full dark eye appeared more lovely from the paleness of her face; and that its earnest glance was altogether irresistible. He was impressed too, with the exceeding graces of her figure and movement, and even the sound of her voice, however faintly heard, enraptured him. He departed reluctantly, but soon repeated his visits, and Azora observed with pain, and Irad with concealed joy, that the rich and magnificent stranger found pleasure in the society of Azora. He explained to both his wishes and his hopes. From Irad he received encouragement; from Azora a refusal, in a tone so gentle and delicate, but so decided, that it needed no repetition. A suitor thus powerful, however, was not easily to be repulsed; for Divaconta felt firmly persuaded, that whatever might pass in the heart of Azora, he needed but to shew himself in his true form, to set at defiance every rival, and to distance immeasurably, all thoughts of another.

One morning the slaves of Irad rushed terrified into his presence, to announce that a countless train of men and animals of strange form and uncouth figure, were moving across the plain. Irad, accompanied

by his household, hastened to meet the approaching cavalcade.

Foremost on wallrusses and hippopotami rode the spirits of the ocean. The deities of the springs and rivers with their urns followed, habited in vests of pale blue, and bearing in shells of gold and chrystal, costly pearls, and all else of rare, which the depths of ocean and the beds of rivers produce. Following these, and borne on salamanders, lizards, and other mis-shapen inhabitants of the rocks and caverns, came the genii of the earth, who, in subterraneous shafts, and the secret bowels of the mountain, melt the metals, separate the ores, and guide the rich veins of gold and silver through the dark stone; and who prepare the boiling masses which shew themselves to mankind in earthquakes and volcanoes, terrifying the alarmed world by their secret operations—strange shapes, formed by nature in fantastic mood; horrible and not seldom malicious.

In richly worked baskets, and chests highly wrought with glittering stones, or precious woods, they brought the produce of their mines—gold, silver, and that condensed sunbeam, the flaming diamond, with all his party-coloured brothers.

Then came on white elephants spirits of higher order, majestic forms, each more beautiful than the last: the dazzled eye in every succeeding one thinking to behold their monarch. But all this pomp faded before the presence of Divaconta. He was borne forward in a chariot, drawn by four enormous mammoths: his glittering crown, his golden sceptre, and his dark drapery sparkling with jewels, but much more his majestic form, far above human height, dreadful, yet beautiful, announced the chief; and both father and daughter recognised with very different sensations, in the king of the spirits, the features of their new friend. Irad bowed to the earth, with respect and humility; while Azora sunk lifeless into the arms of her attendants.

The chariot halted: twelve inferior genii threw themselves forward as footstools for their lord, but he sprung from the car, and floating over his attendants, with the expanded pinions of an archangel, raised and strove to re-assure the patriarch. He then stepped forward to Azora: the instant her eyes unclosed on the prince of the genii she swooned with a scream of terror, and was borne away insensible to further agony.

Disappointed and gloomy, Divaconta regained his chariot, but not without muttered threatenings of impending mischief should his wishes remain ungratified. The cavalcade then disappeared in the depths of the forest.

Azora recovered with difficulty, anxiously hoping that the recent scene had been but a heavy dream. Irad folded her to his breast, and confirmed to her but too certainly that she had seen the prince of the elements. She fell at her father's feet, and implored him not to sacrifice her: Irad, in anger, set before her the honor and felicity of such an alliance—she remained unmoved: he represented to her the threats of the genius, and the dangers that awaited him, his family, nay, his whole race, should Azora refuse to fulfil the wishes of Divaconta. She shuddered as her father then confided to her determination the the welfare of himself and numerous dependants. Cosvanda's image

floated before her, and her heart was almost broken. At length, in a stifled tone she said, "My happiness shall never be founded on the ruin of thee, my father, and of my family—I consent to be the bride of Divaconta." Irad, with the feeling common to age, delightedly embraced his daughter.

Exhausted and trembling, supported by one of her slaves, Azora wandered at the close of this eventful day towards the lake where Cosvanda had first beheld her. It was a lovely evening—exquisite, as that in which they had first met. The same golden glow, the same mild repose pervaded the scene. Azora reclined on the soft grass of a bank. It was from the thicket adjoining that the godlike form had appeared to her; here had his glance first met her own, his silver voice first breathed his love. She sunk down among the flowers which bloomed round—tears flowed over their blossoms, and mingled there with the dews of evening. She poured out her sincere and pious aspirations to the creator of all things; for thus had Cosvanda taught her to adore; and she prayed that he would take her life, since she could not live and be faithless or disobedient. She remained thus for some time, and believed with joy, that the languor and exhaustion she felt were the precursors of death. Suddenly, a voice which penetrated to her inmost soul, reached her ear—she sprang up, and Cosvanda stood before her. She flew to his embrace: all her misery was in a moment forgotten. But she re-awakened to its consciousness, and tearing herself from his arms, exclaimed "Fly! beloved, fly! we must be separated for ever; and thou art lost if the terrible one shall find thee here." "Azora!" replied the youth, with a voice of the calmest tenderness, while his beaming glance rested on her pale countenance, "Fear nothing! dry thy tears, we shall not be separated." She looked at him with a melancholy incredulity, and said, "Thou knowest not what has happened to thy poor Azora; thou knowest not the terrible Divaconta." "I know all, Azora, and I also know that thou art mine, virtuous mortal! loveliest of earth's daughters!—we shall yet be united: learn that thy betrothed is not the obscure hunter of the Altai, nor a poor and lowly stranger."

During this discourse, the form of Cosvanda expanded, and assumed its supernatural dignity, while the smile of heavenly peace was visible in every feature of his countenance: golden pinions, streaming in all the colours of the rainbow, unfolded themselves on his godlike shoulders; a coronet of flames sparkled over his dark locks; a glow, as of breaking day, shone on his cheek, and a supernatural light surrounded his whole person as with a halo.

"Who art thou? divinity, who art thou?" exclaimed the terrified Azora, sinking dazzled and confounded at the feet of the god.

When she recovered, she reclined, as she believed, in the arms of Cosvanda, who had tenderly endeavoured to wake her to existence. His form was still that of the resplendent genius, but of milder beauty and more earthly manhood; such as the eyes of the weaker mortal could endure. Azora regarded him with astonishment, and remembering suddenly his supernatural appearance, entwined herself from his arms, and kneeling with mute transport, folded her hands in the

act of adoration. "My Azora, my beloved one," said the genius, bending tenderly over the suppliant, and raising her respectfully—"Let me receive thee to my bosom—I am Argalia, monarch of the realms of air and the regions of fire: I love thee—fondly love thee, Azora, and will perform that pledge which was given by the poor Cosvanda." "But, Divaconta?"—cried Azora, anxiously. "Fear not my adored; I am of at least equal power; he cannot, dare not, tear thee from me," and at these words the countenance of Argalia lighted up fearfully; and Azora hid her face timidly in his bosom. "Collect thyself; dearest," said he, as he supported her declining head, "in my arms nothing can assail—I have never loved until now. The most attractive of the female genii, the most enchanting of earth's daughters, have never excited my affections; but thy quiet modesty, above all, thy virtues, carried me irresistibly away. That thou lovedst me I saw in the first moment, but I required to know also if this love would be lasting. Thou hast obeyed the voice of duty, conveyed through my dictates to thy heart: for this didst thou resolve to relinquish thy passion. I have never left thee; it was beyond my power," added he, as he pressed her fervently to his breast. "In dreams have I often dried thy tears, and listened to thy prayers, which proved not so vain as thou hast thought. I hovered round thee; I stood before the eyes of thy spirit, when slumber held thy senses prisoners. Then came my rival: at thy father's bidding didst thou offer up thy last sacrifice in implicit duty, and thy happiness was annihilated for the felicity of another. I have seen thee, too, at the close of day, in those well-known spots, which bear the remembrance of our early bliss; and followed thee unseen, and also unseen heard thy petitions and thy agony. Azora! how blissful was the conviction of thy worth! Thou art mine: not as a mortal might be, for a few fleeting years, but for eternity: and no power, I joy to think, can part us."

CHAPTER FIFTH.

WHEN Azora returned to her father, she related to him the appearance of Argalia, and now, safe in the consciousness of his protection, entreated him to dismiss the formidable Divaconta. Irad heard with astonishment her report; and, if the thought that his daughter was beloved by two of the most exalted beings of the created world, filled him with pride; he dwelt with terror on the consequences of this double attachment, and the misery which might ensue to his house; perhaps also to numbers of the human race, and he looked with intense anxiety to the fearful consequences. Argalia visited his betrothed once more: her felicity was boundless; while Divaconta, enraged at his rival's happiness, whom he was so strenuously seeking to ruin, still hoped to make him an easy conquest. Too proud to brook the refusal which he soon received, he left the dwelling of Irad, plotting the deepest enterprises of revenge.

The strife began, at first, by secret attacks and treacherous provocations, in which Divaconta sought only to irritate his adversary, and deprive him of that self-command, which had conferred on him hitherto so marked a superiority. His plan did not succeed. Argalia

opposed his schemes with the calmest foresight, and Divaconta found, that there were no means of thus obtaining his end. His passion for Azora meantime was heightened by resistance, and he was resolved to gain his wishes by any measures, however unjustifiable. He approached Azora again, but not in his former shape : sometimes in one, sometimes in another enchanting form, in every varied guise, under every attractive circumstance, and in every romantic situation, he strove to engage her attention to himself, and to infuse into her soul those feelings which should weaken and undermine her love for Argalia. But these efforts were also utterly vain. For Azora, there existed in the world but one being to whom all her feelings belonged, and wily and seductive as were the enchantments of Divaconta, they failed to shake the constancy of Azora. His rage knew no bounds : what he could not gain by cunning, he determined at length to snatch by violence; and while Azora, accompanied only by a few of her slaves, wandered in the palm-grove near her father's dwelling, the earth suddenly opening at their feet, two genii of the subterranean empire rose from the gulf, and in sight of her women carried her through the yawning chasm, which instantly closed over them. They saw the violence without being able to prevent it, and hastened to the dwelling of Irad, spreading terror and dismay.

Argalia's equanimity was now destroyed. Azora's loss deprived him of his self-possession. Stung with anguish and fury, he summoned all the powers at his command to annihilate his enemy, and to rescue his betrothed. The strength of air and fire, the two elements subjected to him were called forth to engage with his powerful adversary, in a long and doubtful contest.

Azora was conveyed to Divaconta's subterranean palace. The walls were of beaten gold ; transparent veils of imperishable asbestos floated from the cornices to the floors, which, inlaid with Mosaic of onyx, jasper, porphyry, and other precious stones, represented enamelled meadows, and the blooming empire of the spring. In vast urns of alabaster, burnt the purest naphtha, shedding a pearly light, more exquisite than that which the sun's softest beams ever spread on the upper world. Voluptuous music floated round ; and delicious odours, which soothed the entranced nerves with sweet languour, rose from silver vases, worked in devices, and chased with amatory scenes, filling the air in this habitation of enjoyment and fascination. Of this, Azora was now unconscious, for, from the first moment a swoon had robbed her of her senses. She revived at length, on the purple tapestries of the palace of Divaconta, surrounded by ministering spirits in female shape. She gazed wildly round her, and her glance lighted on the genius, who, in his splendour and beauty, powerful enough to enchant every unfettered heart, knelt fondly at her feet. With a cry of terror she sprung up, and made a movement to fly. Divaconta's anger rose. He was already on the point of punishing, and with a tread of his foot to shake the earth, that the crushing walls of his palace might bury the contumacious fair one beneath their ruins ; but she looked at him with her full eye swimming in tears, while her hands were outstretched in supplication, and the white drapery fell back from her

arms; she sank on her knee before him, and begged with bitter tears to be restored to her father. Divaconta hesitated; hate, love, revenge, and pity, struggled in his breast: at length he raised her in his arms, and clasped the slender form. "No," said he, in a voice that shook the palace to its foundations, and made Azora tremble, "No, I release thee not. Thou shalt be mine, if it be only to confound my rival." She did not reply; in vain did Divaconta try every art that might induce her to speak; she did not open her lips again, and the genius left her in high disdain.

When she found herself alone, she drew her veil close round her bosom, concealed her person, and shutting her senses to all around her, remained seated in the deepest grief. No endeavours of the ministering genii, nor of music with its sweetest powers, could move her to break the silence she had vowed to preserve. She took no refreshment, neither did sleep close her eyes.

Divaconta had little faith in her constancy, or the strength of her resolution. But neither prayers nor threats touched her soul. From hour to hour, however, she grew weaker, and felt with a sensation allied to joy, that death would soon release and thus unite her in a better world to the being she loved. While so absorbed, and half-expiring, a violent peal of thunder suddenly shook the palace: the vases of naphtha were extinguished, and a frightful darkness filled the apartment, which was instantly afterwards illumined by a single flash of intense lightning: the rocky walls trembled: the pavement shook: flames broke forth from every side: the palace was rent asunder; and amid the storm, appeared the towering form of Argalia. He grasped the swooning maid, and raising her in his arms, soared with her above the wreck and ruin of his rival's habitation, to the higher regions, where the heavier nature of his enemy had not power to follow.

Azora's senses were paralysed: she scarcely moved or breathed. With the anxious care of tender love Argalia held her in his arms, and was now first conscious that his dreaded assumption of divinity must be likely rather to destroy than to strengthen her mortal nature. He shrouded the dazzling splendor of his beams and the terrors that still streamed from him; his heavenly breath touched her lips; she opened her eyes, uttered a loud cry, and threw her arms anxiously round his neck, as longing for protection. "Collect thyself, dearest Azora," said he, in a tone so soft, that it soothed her agitated spirit like a healing balm—"We are safe; thou hast nothing to dread." She looked up, and saw herself and her lover in a chariot, to which were yoked four splendid white unicorns with glittering wings, soaring in swift flight through the regions of the air. She now first became able to enjoy her freedom. She related to Argalia her sufferings and her resolution to die. His look thanked her for her constancy, and he described to her his own grief at her loss, and his combat with Divaconta, in which each had recourse to all the subordinate powers at his command. He related the contest of the elements, and that at last he had vanquished, and had victoriously opened a passage to her presence.

Azora shuddered at the picture "And where are my father and my brother?" "Already in that safe retreat whither, my beloved, I am