

Mountain, of a deep rich purple, crowned with a bright orange, shading off into delicate green. Far off to the southwest rose the Massanutten like a purple wave, with Strasburg under the crest, and to the east the Blue Ridge shut in the prospect—a prostrate giant, touched on its summits by the fading light, and slowly merging its bald outline in the gloom. A moment came at last when you could not tell where the mountain ended and the sky began. Was it a cloud, or a range of heights? The question remained unanswered. There was no moon, but the whole universe seemed to be pervaded by stars. The dusky twilight charmed and soothed, and looking toward the Blue Ridge, where the little twinkling lights of night seemed to spring up from the very horizon, I said to my friend Burney,

"I really seem to have wandered away into star-land."

"I see you are looking at the mountain," he replied, with a smile. "But you are mistaken if you suppose that those lights are stars: they are the fires of the sumac-gatherers."

"The sumac-gatherers?"

"Yes; the work of collecting sumac is in full progress. Those brilliant stars of your fancy are fires in front of tents d'abri—small shelter affairs."

I looked again, and more attentively. Even then it was difficult to believe that the twinkling lights were not stars. They covered the side of the mountain far and near. The wooded declivity rising almost directly from the banks of the Shenandoah was brilliant with them, soft glow-worms glimmering in the autumn night.

"Tell me who the sumac-gatherers are?" I said.

"Have you never heard of them before?" said my friend, with a smile. "Well, that proves, my dear Willing, that you are a stranger to 'Old Virginny'—since the war at least. Sumac-gathering has become an industry, with army head-quarters, so to say, at Richmond, but corps head-quarters at Winchester and elsewhere. The Virginia mountain sumac is said to be the best in the world after the Sicilian, and here you see how it is procured."

I began to be much interested by this time, and said: "I always make it a point to confess my ignorance where I am ignorant. What is sumac, and what is it good for?"

"It is a small shrub," my friend replied, "with lanceolated leaves, which turn of a bright crimson at this time of the year, and are used for tanning fair leather and dyeing. With the various mordants the sumac makes a variety of very rich and beautiful dyes of great excellence, which are chiefly used in calico-printing. Virginia seems to be the favored region for this valuable shrub. It thrives here without cultivation, covering the whole mountain with its blaze of scarlet. It is, besides, in shape a very beautiful plant. Do you see that ailantus-tree there with its Oriental leaves? The sumac closely resembles it."

"And they are gathering it—I mean the people in the tents d'abri yonder?"

"Yes. They have now been engaged for some days. They make it a sort of frolic. They are poor 'mountain people,' as we call them, and the sumac crop is a very important source of revenue to them. The leaves and twigs on which they grow bring a cent a pound at Winchester, where there is a large sumac factory, and many a poor family depends for its brown sugar and Rio coffee throughout the winter on this industry. They pitch their tents, wives, children, and all, with provisions and cooking utensils, and by daylight and all day long everybody is engaged pulling the leaves and making up bundles. At night they talk and laugh and sing around the fires in front of the little tents—you see them yonder—and then lie down on their 'pine-tag' beds, and go to sleep under the stars."

Having given me this explanation, my hospitable host changed the subject to politics and the question of the Virginia State debt, but this topic failed to interest me. It has been said that everybody has a "wild side" in him—something which makes him revolt from convention and commonplace, and thrill with vague pleasure at the unconventional, nomadic, and new. Here was something of this sort. These people, taking their wives and children and pitching their tents on the mountain-side, interested me. Looking toward the glimmering glow-worm lights, I could fancy the groups around the fires, and hear their songs in imagination, and live their wild careless life with them. No doubt this attraction rose from contrast. I had come from a Northern city, where I resided, to spend a few weeks in the valley, and the scenes around me were