

CHAPTER II

THE COURT OF THE ORPHAN

AN hour before dusk found the company that had dined in the valley making their way up the dry bed of a stream, through a gorge which cleft a line of precipitous hills. On either hand the bank rose steeply, giving no footing for man or beast. The road was a difficult one; for here a tall, fern-crowned rock left but a narrow passage between itself and the shaggy hillside, and there smooth and slippery ledges, mounting one above the other, spanned the way. In places, too, the drought had left pools of dark, still water, difficult to avoid, and not infrequently the entire party must come to a halt while the axemen cleared from the path a fallen birch or hemlock. Every man was afoot, none caring to risk a fall upon the rocks or into the black, cold water of the pools. The hoofs of the horses and the spurs of the men clanked against the stones; now and then one of the heavily laden pack-horses stumbled and was sworn at, and once a warning rattle, issuing from a rank growth of fern on the hillside, caused a momentary commotion. There was no more laughter, or whistling, or calling from the van to the rear guard. The way was arduous, and every man must watch his footsteps; moreover, the last rays of the sun were gilding the hilltops above them, and the level that should form their camping-place must be reached before the falling of the night.