

CHAPTER I.

On the shore of the Lake of Como, in Upper Italy; half-way between Bellagio and Lecco, lies, embosomed in groves of chestnuts, the small district of Limonta. From the eighth century till the abolition of the feudal tenure in Lombardy, it formed an appanage to the Monastery of St. Ambrose of Milan, the abbot of which, amongst his other titles, bore that of Count of Limonta.

Between this monastic territory and the district of Bellagio, rose, in 1329, a castle, even then reckoned ancient, which was in ruins about a century afterwards, and of which at the present day not the slightest trace remains. This castle, at the period above-mentioned, was in the possession of Count Oltrado del Balzo, whose ancestors, it would appear, had been formerly Lords Paramount of Bellagio, which was at this time, however, a free *commune*. Count Oltrado, although possessed of many estates in various districts of Lombardy, passed the greater part of the year at the Lake of Como, in the company of his wife and daughter, who, like himself, seemed enchanted with its splendid scenery and delicious climate.

Rich, illustrious, and powerful, both by birth and alliance, the family of Balzo had always been the natural patrons of the peasantry dwelling in their neighbourhood, who had learned, by long tradition from father to son, to regard their name with reverence and affection. Successor to so fair an heritage, Count Oltrado had been unable to retain it, and had fallen much in the estimation of the ancient clients of his house: not that he abused his power by oppression or injustice—on the contrary, he was of a kind and courteous disposition; but, living as he did in stirring and difficult times, the energy necessary to carry into execution his good intentions was not to be found in his timid and vacillating, though withal rather overweening, nature.

About this time, the Emperor Louis of Germany, surnamed the brave, had made a descent upon Italy—and having, of his own authority, deposed Pope John XXII., then residing at Avignon, by whom he had been excommunicated, caused to be elected in his stead Pietro di Corvaria, of the order of the Minors, who assumed the name of Nicholas V. Milan,—which had now for many years laboured under a papal interdict, issued through hatred of its rulers, the Visconti, who were powerful and zealous supporters of the Ghibelline party,—soon declared itself in favour of the anti-pope; and, the state being restored by him to its former privileges, the churches were re-opened in the cities and principal towns; while the few clergy remaining there resumed the exercise of their ecclesiastical functions, as in ordinary times.

In the country, on the other hand, particularly on the borders of the Lake of Como, the people maintained the cause of Pope John, and refused to open their churches to the priests despatched thither from Milan. Many among the towns-people also, looked upon the interdict as still in force, whilst in the country parishes Pope Nicholas was not without his supporters, and the quarrels which in consequence every where arose, were not always confined to words. Aicardo, archbishop of Milan, Astolfo, abbot of St. Ambrose, and others of the clergy who adhered to the French pope, were forced to fly into the other states of Italy, where they led a wandering and mendicant life, while their places were filled by others of the Ghibelline party.

Giovanni Visconti, a relative of the princes of that name, who had been installed abbot of St. Ambrose, sent to Limonta, as his procurator, a man of very indifferent character, who revenged the fidelity which the vassals maintained towards the abbot Astolfo, by acts of the basest cruelty and oppression. The poor Limontines solicited in vain the protection or interference of the timid Count of Balzo; and the procurator, Pelagrus, growing bolder by impunity, at length produced certain parchments, which he pretended to have discovered, and which purported to be a conveyance of the territory of Limonta, by Lothario Augustus of Lombardy, to the monks of St. Ambrose, in full lordship and possession. He then summoned the Limontines to appear at the Ecclesiastical Court of Bellano, to try the validity of this document, which, if allowed, would reduce them from the vassals to the bondsmen of the monastery. Cressone Crivello, a partisan of the Visconti, had seized the lands of the church at Bellano, on the expulsion of the former occupants, and as he had replaced the officers of the court, by creatures of his own, it was easy to divine which side the decision would favour. In this emergency, his neighbours had once more recourse to Count Oltrado; but neither their urgent appeals, nor the earnest entreaties of his Countess Ermelinda, and their daughter Beatrice, could rouse within him sufficient courage to undertake their defence, although his feelings were strongly engaged in their favour.

On the evening of the day when judgment was to be pronounced at Bellano, the falconer of the count was stationed on the battlement of the castle that commanded the widest view in that direction. Fair and far-spread as was the scene beneath, his eye wandered not over it, but was kept intent upon that point of the lake where a boat coming from Bellano would first make its appearance. For some time he looked in vain; but at last a small bark came in sight, and draw-