

ing nearer, the falconer soon discovered in it the object of his watch, and hastened to apprise the count. He found him in a spacious hall, seated in a massy carved chair, and watching the motions of his page, who, resting on a cushion at his feet, was amusing himself with the gambols of a small greyhound that frisked around them.

The count was a man about fifty years of age, of a spare make and rather hank visage, whose expression denoted at once much timidity and nervousness, and much self-esteem. On his hand was perched a superb falcon, which seemed greatly to enjoy the caresses occasionally bestowed upon it—now bending under them with a low, quiet murmur—and now ruffling its feathers, familiarly pecking and nibbling at the hand that fomented it. As the falconer entered the apartment, the bird recognised the step of him whose care had reared it, and, shaking its wings with a joyful scream, seemed to invite his approach.

"Is the bark arrived from Bellano?" enquired Count Oltrado of the new comer, to whom his attention was thus directed.

"It was close at hand, my lord, when I left the ravelin," was the reply, "and by this time Michael and his son Arrigozzo must be on shore."

The count gave the hawk into the hands of the page, with orders to bestow it in the falconry, and in a few minutes he and the falconer, Ambrose, were joined by the boatmen from Bellano; the father, a stout, healthy old man; the son, a fine youth of five-and-twenty.

"Welcome, Michael," said the count to the elder of the two. "What tidings bearest thou—good or evil?"

"That is as it may turn out, noble sir," answered Michael; "but undoubtedly it is your lordship's wish to hear the events of the day?"

The master made a signal of assent, and the boatman went on:

"We were all assembled, my lord count, in front of the archbishop's palace, when the hour strikes, the bell rings, and out on the terrace comes an ill-favoured scoundrel, with half a score of scribes and pharisees about him—pulls me out a sheepskin or two—speaks me a long oration full of hard words, and ends by declaring that we Limontines—bless the mark!—had always been bond servants of the monastery. Aye, and maintained too, that in token of our servitude—as he phrased it—our heads were kept shaved, and that only lately was our hair allowed to grow. Heard ever any one a more rascally lie!"

"But," interrupted the count, "what proof of this did he bring forward? He did not surely bring witnesses to what I know never to have been the case?"

"Witnesses!" resumed the old man, "I warrant ye he did—scores of them—fellows who for the peeling of a fig would swear to the greatest lie the devil ever invented."

"Well, what followed?"

"Why, when the crafty old fox had finished, forth steps our own advocate, Lorenzo Garbagate, and tells them plump and plain that more—the vassals of the abbot, and not a whit more—that we never had been his bond servants, and never would be; and then, to prove his sayings, he brings forward his witnesses—all old men from the neighbourhood here. And then the judge——"

"Decides in your favour, I trust?"

"Not he; but he rises and says: 'Here are witnesses ready to swear one thing—there are others ready to swear the very opposite: I can yield credence to neither; let the cause be tried by the judgment of God.'"

"By the judgment of God!" echoed the count.

"Even so, master mine! And then the crowd fell to shouting and clapping of their hands, as if he had given a most righteous judgment. 'Let it be the ordeal of the red-hot iron!' cries one. 'Of seething oil!' roars another; but the abbot's advocate had settled beforehand on the ordeal by battle, and the ordeal by battle he sure it was."

"It must be then *cum justibus et scutis*, with club and shield!" exclaimed the Count di Balzo, with a sapient air; "for as the matter concerns peasants, the arms of cavaliers cannot be allowed them."

"Right, my lord; with club and shield it is."

"And who is the champion of Limonta in this cause?"

"Our champion, noble sir! methinks he will be somewhat difficult to find. Had you but seen the swarthy giant the monks have in readiness——"

"You have refused the challenge, then, like arrant cowards as ye are?"

"Nay, nay, I said not that. Here is Arrigozzo would have stood forward on the spot, had I allowed him."

"Aye, and others too," added his son. "Limonta has bold spirits enow, but they are all trammelled, like myself, with those who are more afraid for them than they are for themselves."

"And well for them they have," rejoined Michael. "I will take good heed you slip not the leash for the four days that intervene before the day of trial."

"But," exclaimed the falconer Ambrose, who had been an interested listener to this conversation, "may we not, too, hire a champion; I myself will give a hundred scudi, ere Limonta should be so hard bested."