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## **Excursions along the banks of the Rhine**

**Hugo, Victor**

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Letter V.

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## LETTER V.

*Givet, August 1.*

GIVET is a clean, hospitable, pretty little town, situated on the banks of the Meuse, which divides it into Great and Little Givet, and at the foot of a lofty precipice of rock, of which the geometrical lines of the fortress of Charlemont somewhat disfigure the brow.

The inn, called the Mont d'Or, is pretty good; though, being the only one, it can compel its customers to swallow whatever it pleases. The steeple of Little Givet is covered with slate; but that of the Great Givet is of a more complicated order of architecture. The architect must certainly be indebted for his plan to the square-crowned cap of some priest or lawyer, with a reversed salad-bowl placed upon it; to which is added a sugar-basin; and, over all, a bottle, in the neck of which is stuck the image of a sun, overtopped by the figure of chanticleer, pertly perched on one leg, upon the highest vertical ray. Supposing him to have devoted one day a-piece to each of these bright inventions, he may fairly have rested on the seventh, satisfied with his work. It must have been a Fle-

ming. For two centuries the architects of that nation were infatuated by outlines of crockery and kitchen utensils, piled up in Titanic proportions. Even in the construction of the steeples they have taken ample care to adorn their cities with these colossal conglomerations of pipkins.

The view of Givet is delightful, when standing, as I did, about evening, upon the bridge looking towards the south. Night, which is the best veil for the follies of mankind, began to conceal the absurd composition of the steeple, and smoke in spiral clouds floated from every roof. To my left, I heard the gentle tremor of some fine elms, above which, in the clear evening light, rose a huge tower dominating over the lesser Givet. On my right stood another with a conical roof, half brick, half stone; the whole reflected in the metallic mirror of the Meuse, which was seen traversing this darkened landscape.

Farther on I distinguished, at the foot of the fearful rock of Charlemont, the strange-looking, lengthy edifice I had remarked on arriving. Above the town, the towers, and the steeples, the eye discovered a range of lofty rocks, prolonged till they disappeared in the horizon, enclosing the view as in a circle. Towards the extreme boundary of a sky of delicate green, the crescent moon was gradually sinking towards the earth, so clear, defined, and pure, that it seemed as if the Almighty were displaying the moiety of his ring of gold.

In the course of the day I had decided to visit the old tower which once dominated the lesser Givet. The path ascending to it is rugged enough, providing work for the hands as well as for the feet. It is necessary to scale the rock, which is hard and sharp. Having with difficulty reached the tower, I found it barricaded and padlocked. I called, knocked, but nobody answered. My efforts, however, were not unrewarded, for on walking round the decaying wall I remarked, amongst fragments which daily fall into the ravine, a stone of some size, upon which there was still a vestige of an inscription. On a closer inspection, I found it to run as follows :—

LOQVE....SA. OMBRE  
 PARAS....MODI. S L.  
 ACAV. P....SOTROS

The letters, deeply cut, seemed executed with a nail, and above them was likewise a signature, still perfect—*Jose Gutierrez*, 1643. I have always had a passion for inscriptions. I confess that the one in question puzzled me. What did it mean? In what tongue was it written? Making allowances for orthography, you might have thought it French, and purporting something absurd. *Loque sale—Ombre parasol—Modis (maudis) la cave—Sot Rosse.*

But taking into account the effaced characters, these words were out of the question; besides, the signature of *Jose Gutierrez* protested against

it. Comparing the signature, therefore, with the words *para* and *otros*, which are Spanish, I conclude that the inscription must be in the Castilian, and I have accordingly adjusted it as follows:—

LO QUE EMPESA EL HOMBRE  
PARA SIMISMO, DIOS LE  
ACAVA PARA LOS OTROS.

*i.e.*, "That which man begins for himself, God completes for others;" which strikes me as being a very fine sentence, both Catholic and Castilian.

But who was Gutierrez? The stone was evidently taken from the interior of the tower. The battle of Rocroy took place in 1643: was Jose Gutierrez one of the prisoners made on the field? Was it in his dungeon he found leisure to inscribe this melancholy summary of his existence? A probable surmise, for it is evident that the letters are the work of a nail; and so long a phrase, inscribed in hard granite, could scarcely result but from the patience peculiar to prisoners. And who mutilated it thus?—time and chance? or some idler of the human race? I am inclined to favour the last hypothesis. Some barber, become a soldier through the compulsion of the conscription, had suffered the penalty of a breach of discipline, and indulged his wit by turning the grave lamentation of the Hidalgo into idle ridicule; a face into a grimace. Now, alas! both bar-

ber and noble, the groan and the laugh, the tragedy and the parody, are alike dust and ashes, trodden by the passer-by into the same ravine, and the same oblivion.

The following day, at five in the morning, I found myself comfortably seated on the imperial of Van Gend's Diligence; and having quitted France by the road leading to Namur, ascended the first eminence of the only chain of hills that exists in Belgium. For the Meuse, flowing in an inverse sense to the decline of the plain of the Ardennes, has succeeded in forming a valley in that immense plain called Flanders; where man has constructed fortresses, in place of the mountains devised by nature as a more permanent defence. After an ascent of half an hour, the horses being out of breath, and the Belgian conductor athirst, they agreed with one accord to pause and refresh themselves; and halted before a small inn, at a village clothing the two sides of a wide ravine, which has made its rugged way through the mountain. This ravine, which is at once the bed of a torrent and the main street of the village, is naturally paved with indigenous granite.

At the moment we were passing, a waggon dragged by six horses was clambering along this steep and dangerous ravine. It was luckily empty; for had it been otherwise, it would have required at least twenty horses or mules. Such a waggon seems quite unfit for such a purpose,

and only serves to furnish improbable sketches to the young Dutch artists one meets on the road, with a staff in hand and a knapsack on their back.

How is one to occupy oneself on the roof of a diligence, unless by looking out at everything that comes in one's way? I was admirably placed for the purpose; having beneath me a great extent of the valley of the Meuse, and to the south the two Givets, prettily connected by a bridge; to the west, the old ruined tower of Agimont, apparently forming part of the hill on which it stands, and casting a huge pyramidal shadow: to the north, the dark defile into which rushes the Meuse, throwing up a luminous blue vapour. In the attic of the inn, about two strides from my seat, and on the same level, sits a pretty peasant girl, dressing herself, with the window wide open, which allows the rays of the morning sun, as well as the indiscreet eyes of the travellers, to penetrate into the chamber. Above this cottage, in the distance, as if to crown the frontiers of France, is extended the immense line of the formidable batteries of Charlemont.

While I was absorbed in these contemplations, the peasant girl suddenly raised her eyes, smiled, and made me a gracious bow. But instead of closing her window as I expected, she was obliging enough to resume her toilet.