

Seeing the World

By Fitz-James O'Brien

The hall reverberated with plaudits. The *improvisatore* surpassed himself. Scarcely was a subject given to him by the spectators than grand ideas, profound sentiments, clad in majestic verse, rolled from his lips, as if evoked by some magic. The artist did not reflect for an instant. In the twinkling of an eye his newly-born thoughts ran through all the phases of growth, and appeared clothed in the most exact expression. Ingenuity of form, splendor of imagery, harmony of rhythm, all were exhibited at the same moment. But this was a trifle. People gave him two or three subjects at the same time. The *improvisatore* dictated a poem on one, wrote a second, and improvised a third; and each production was, in its way, perfect. The first excited enthusiasm; the second called the tears into the eyes of the listeners; and the third was so humorous that none could restrain their laughter. In the midst of this the *improvisatore* did not seem to be in the least preoccupied with his subject. He talked and laughed with his neighbors. All the elements of poetical composition seemed to be at his disposal, as the pieces on a chess-board, which he used when he needed them, with the most superb indifference.

At last the attention and admiration of the spectators were exhausted. They were more wearied than the *improvisatore*. He was calm and cold. One could not trace on his countenance the slightest of fatigue; his features, in place of expressing the lofty joy of the poet content with his labor, displayed only the vulgar satisfaction of the conjuror who astonishes a stupid crowd. He listened to the laughter, and watched the tears tremble on the cheeks, with a sort of disdain; he alone neither laughed nor wept; he alone had no belief in his utterances. In the moments of divinest inspiration he had the air of a faithless priest, whom long habit has familiarized with the mysteries of the temple. The last of the audience had scarcely issued from the apartment when the *improvisatore* flung himself upon the pile of money received at the door, and commenced counting it with the avidity of Harpagon. The sum was large. He had never received so large a one in a single evening, and he was enchanted.

His joy was very pardonable. From his infancy upward poverty, cold and hard, had crushed him in its stony arms. He had not been born amidst songs, but amidst the dolorous sighs of his mother. When his intellect began to awaken, he beheld no rose-gardens in life; his young imagination encountered every where the icy smile of indigence. Nature was a little more generous to him than Fate. She gave him the creative faculty, but she condemned him to seek with the sweat of his brow the expression of his poetical conceptions. The editors and publishers paid him for his poetry prices that would have enabled him to live in comfort, if he was not obliged to spend an eternity of time on the composition of the smallest verse. It sometimes occurred, but very rarely, that in a moment of inspiration his intellect—always veiled in clouds—shone out with clearness; but if, on such occasions, this nebulous star showed itself clear and brilliant, it was only for an instant, and the poor poet had to make superhuman efforts to profit by the fleeting light.

Here again the labor recommenced: the expression fled before the words; the words would not come, or, if they did, were the wrong ones; the metre was rebellious; hideous prepositions came at the end of each line, interminable verbs became entangled in a web of substantives, and the rhymes—the accursed rhymes—always appeared in the shape of some barbarous and discordant words. Every verse cost the unhappy poet broken pens, finger-nails bitten to the quick, and locks

of hair torn from his head in moments of agony. All his efforts were impotent. A thousand times he vowed to abandon poesy, and adopt some honest profession. But without having all the gifts, he had all the faults of a poet—the innate passion for independence, the incorrigible aversion to manual labor, the habit of awaiting inspiration, the radical want of punctuality. Add to this, the irritability which always accompanies poetic natures, an instinctive tendency to luxury, and an aristocratic craving for distinction. He could neither translate nor work by the page or column; and while his brother authors made considerable sums by compositions that were frequently insignificant, he saw himself universally neglected by editors and publishers. The little that he did receive for works that often cost him years of labor, went to pay usurious interest on money borrowed of the Jews, and poor Cipriano—as the poet was named—found his necessitous condition as hard and cheerless as ever.

In the town in which Cipriano resided lived also a physician named Segelius. Thirty years previously he had earned the reputation of being a skillful and learned practitioner; but he was poor, and had so small a practice, that he resolved to abandon medicine and take to commerce. After remaining a long time in India he returned to his native country with ingots of gold, and an immense quantity of precious stones. He built a magnificent mansion surrounded by a vast park, and hired numberless servants. His old acquaintances remarked with astonishment that neither the years he had spent, nor the long voyages he had made in tropical countries, had produced the slightest change in him. On the contrary, he appeared more young, more elastic, more sprightly than before. Not less surprising was the fact that the plants of every country in the world grew and prospered in his park, without any care being bestowed on them. Beyond this Segelius had nothing extraordinary about him. He was a man of good figure and excellent manners, with black mustaches. His clothes were simple, but elegant. He received the best society, but himself scarcely ever went beyond his huge park. He lent money to young men without interest; had a capital cook, the best wines, and liked to remain a long time at table. He went to bed early, and rose late. In fact, he led a superbly aristocratic existence.

Segelius had not entirely abandoned his practice as a physician, yet followed it but seldom, and then with a sort of repugnance, as if he did not wish to be troubled with it. But when he did practice he performed miracles. However grave the disease or the wound, and although the invalid was yielding up his last sigh, Segelius took no pains whatever, and would not even go to see him. After putting two or three questions to the relatives, more as a matter of form than any thing else, he took a small bottle from a box, and ordered them to give it to the patient, who, without fail, was as well as ever next morning. Segelius took no pay for these services. His disinterestedness, added to his marvelous good-nature, would have drawn patients to him from every corner of the earth, if he had not imposed on the invalids the most singular and fantastic conditions. For instance, to throw a certain sum of money into the sea; to perform some very disagreeable task; to burn one's house, etc. Rumor increased the singularity of these actions, and prevented even the most despairing invalids from coming to him. It was remarked that since a certain time no one had come to consult him; and it was further noticed, that if any of his patients did not comply with the conditions of his prescriptions, they infallibly died. The same happened, people said, to those who went to law with him, spoke evil of him, or displeased him.

It was natural after this that Segelius should have a great number of enemies. The physicians and apothecaries were, of course, his bitterest foes, and denied his right to make use of secret remedies; the most natural deaths were attributed to his poisons. They did not stop even there. They hinted suspiciously at the origin of his great fortune, and accused him of all species of crime. These public clamors obliged the police to visit his house, and institute a rigorous search.

His servants were taken aside and interrogated. Segelius favored the inquisition, left the field free to his inquisitors, whom he scarcely honored with a glance, and retired smiling disdainfully at their attempts.

Their search was, indeed, vain. Nothing was discovered in the house but vases of gold, pipes ornamented with diamonds, delightfully luxurious beds and lounges, exquisite tables, and secret boudoirs fitted up with perfumed furniture, and concealing harmonious instruments. In shod, the doctor's house inclosed all the comforts and luxuries of life, but nothing more; nothing that could awaken the suspicions of justice. His correspondence revealed naught beyond his many relations with the bankers and chief merchants in every quarter of the globe. Some Arabian manuscripts, and packets of papers covered with writing in cipher excited at first some suspicion, but on examination they proved to be nothing more than commercial letters, as the doctor had before stated. Finally, this inquiry justified the doctor on every point, and recoiled upon the heads of his enemies, every one of whom met shortly after with some misfortune.

It was to this man, strange and mysterious, that Cipriano, in a paroxysm of despair, came one day to solicit aid.

"Doctor," said he, casting himself on his knees, "relieve the most unfortunate man in the world. Nature has given me the passion for poesy, but refused me the boon of words and the faculty of expressing my thoughts. I think deeply, but when I wish to speak words fail me. If I wish to write, it is still worse. My sufferings are more horrible, I swear to you, than any you have ever alleviated. O God, can it be that it is you who have cast a spell over me, and condemned me to this eternal pain?"

"Son of Adam," said the doctor—this was his phrase in his gayer moments—"Son of Adam, behold the privilege of thy race! Thou canst obtain nothing but by the sweat of thy brow! It is destiny. Nevertheless," he added, after a moment's pause, "I can give thee a remedy for thy fate; but on one condition."

"I will consent to all that you wish, doctor, rather than die a thousand deaths every day."

"What they say of me, then, in the town does not frighten you?"

"No, doctor, because I can be in no worse plight than that in which you see me."

The doctor smiled.

"I will be frank with you," continued Cipriano. "It is not alone the love of poesy, nor the love of glory that has brought me to you. I nurse another sentiment more tender than either. Could I be but assured of facility of composition, I would be able to earn a living, and Charlotte would be mine. You understand me, doctor."

"That's what I like," cried Segelius; "I love nothing better than frankness. Evil lights alone on those who play a double game. You are, I see, a man free and open, and you merit a reward. I consent willingly to grant your prayer, and give you the faculty of producing without labor; but my first condition is, that the gift shall always remain with you."

"You mock me, Doctor Segelius."

"Not at all. I am also a frank man, and conceal nothing from those who have confidence in me. Listen, and take good heed of what I say. The faculty I give you will become a part of yourself; will grow, live, and die with you. You consent?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"Very good. My second condition is, that you will see every thing, know every thing, and comprehend every thing. Do you accept?"

"You certainly jest, doctor. I know not how to thank you. In place of one faculty, you give me four. Why should I not accept?"

“But understand me well. *You will see, you will know, and you will comprehend every thing.*”

“You are the most generous of men, Doctor Segelius.”

“You accept then?”

“Certainly. Do you want a written engagement?”

“It is not needed. Your word suffices. A promise can not be torn like a piece of paper. Know that in this world nothing is lost, nothing perishes.”

At these words Segelius placed his hand on the head of the poet, and another on his heart, and pronounced the following words in a solemn voice:

“Receive from the mysterious spheres the gift of knowing all things, of reading every thing in the world, of speaking and writing nobly, in a gay or serious vein, in verse or prose, for heat or for cold, in sleeping and waking, on wood and on sand, in joy as in pain, and in every language of the earth.”

Segelius then put a manuscript in the poet’s hand and dismissed him. When Cipriano was gone, the doctor burst into a fit of laughter, and cried,

“Pepe! my cloak of frieze!”

And, as in *Freyschutz*, all the panels of the library replied by a diabolical echo, “Ahou! Ahou!”

Cipriano imagined these words to be an order given by Segelius to his *valet de chambre*, and was astonished that so elegant a man as the doctor would wear so common a garment. He peeped through the keyhole of the door and beheld a singular occurrence.

All the books in the library were in motion. From one of the manuscripts the figure 8 came out, from another the letter *aleph*, from a third the Greek delta, and so through all. At last the room was filled with animated figures and letters, that bowed and straightened themselves, and again closed themselves convulsively; dancing, leaping on their deformed feet, and falling on the floor. The commas, the periods, the marks of accentuation, glided through the midst of the band, like the infusoria seen through a solar microscope; and an old Chaldean volume beat time to the infernal dance with such vigor that the window-panes trembled with fear. Cipriano fled.

When he was somewhat more calm, he opened the manuscript which Segelius had given him. It was a huge roll covered with unknown characters. But scarcely had Cipriano cast his eyes, illumined with superior light, upon the paper than he understood the mysterious writing. There all the forces of nature were enumerated—the systematic life of the crystal, the fantastic will of the poet, the magnetic oscillations of the globe, the passions of the infusoria, the nervous laws of the language, the capricious wanderings of rivers. Every thing appeared to him arranged in mathematical progression—things of the mind as those of the heart. Cipriano beheld creation naked, and the lofty mystery of the conception and birth of thoughts seemed to him commonplace and easy. There existed for him a miraculous bridge, cast across the abyss that separates thought from expression—he spoke in verse.

We have seen at the commencement of this narrative the prodigious success which Cipriano enjoyed in his *rôle* of *improvisatore*. The first time that he tested this astonishing faculty he returned home with a full purse and a gay heart, but a little fatigued. Having taken a glass of water to appease his thirst, he suddenly started while he was carrying it to his lips. He looked at it. The tumbler did not contain water, but was full of something horrible and revolting. Two gases in a perpetual struggle were filled with myriads of microscopic insects that swam in them. Cipriano emptied his glass and filled another. There was the same odious mixture. He ran to the stream from which the water had been brought. Afar off he beheld its waves pure and silvery, rolling calmly; but when he drew near, there was the same frightful fluid, full of busy animalcules. The unhappy *improvisatore* shivered, and his blood seemed to freeze. In his despair

he flung himself on the grass, and sought to forget his sufferings in sleep. Scarcely had he lain down when he heard grinding noises, blows, hisses, as if thousands of hammers were striking on an anvil, as if iron hoofs trampled upon a stone pavement, as if steel files were tearing some hard and polished surface. He rose and looked around him. The moon lit the garden. The shadow of the railings fell in dark bands across the foliage of the shrubs. All was calm and silent. He lay down again, and the noise recommenced. He could not sleep, and passed the night without closing his eyes. In the morning Cipriano ran to Charlotte's house, to confide to her his joy and grief, and to find repose by her side. Charlotte, who had heard of his success, awaited him with impatience. She was elegantly dressed, with bows of red ribbon in her beautiful fair hair, and from time to time she admired herself in her mirror, with innocent coquetry. Cipriano entered, ran toward Charlotte, holding out his hand smilingly, but suddenly he stopped and gazed at her with eyes of terror.

He beheld—what? Through the garments and the flesh he saw the triangular artery called the heart beating in the young girl's bosom. He saw the blood coursing up to the roots of the hair, and forming the delicate blush upon the cheeks that he had loved so much. Wretched man! In those eyes so beautiful and full of love he found nothing more than a species of *camera obscura*, made of a reticulated membrane and a drop of liquid. In that graceful walk, he saw only the play of ingenious mechanism. Alas! Charlotte was no longer an angel upon earth for him, and the object of his purest hopes. She was nothing more in his eyes than an anatomical preparation. Cipriano fled with terror.

Not far from this was a portrait of the Madonna to which Cipriano had often had recourse in his hours of suffering and despair, and whose radiant face had always ravished and soothed him. He fell on his knees before the holy picture and prayed. Scarcely had he lifted his eyes in adoration than all disappeared. There was no longer a picture before the penetrating eyes of the *improvisatore*, but a piece of canvas and a blotch of colors; the work of the artist seemed nothing more than a chemical amalgam.

Who can tell how Cipriano suffered? Sight, taste, smell, hearing—all the senses had acquired in him a frightful acuteness. An insect, a grain of dust, that did not exist to the rest of mankind, was to him a cause of anguish and suffering. The flapping of the wing of a butterfly almost deafened him. *He saw every thing—comprehended every thing.* But between him and mankind there was an abyss always. Nothing in the world of nature harmonized with him.

When he wished to seek forgetfulness in the perusal of some great poetical work, or in burying himself in historical studies, or in employing his intellect in the subtleties of some system of philosophy, all was in vain. His tongue babbled the words, but his mind saw other things.

Beneath the varnish of poetical expression he discovered all the artifices of the poet. In the consoling truths, in the eternal progress that history deduces from events, he saw nothing but an arbitrary arrangement of facts. The invention of a system of philosophy was nothing in his eyes but the desire of saying something new. For him there was no more music; the majestic harmonies of Haydn and Mozart struck him as only physical phenomena, as peculiar vibrations of the molecules of air. When he was among his relatives and intimate friends he read the evil thoughts in their hearts, and the criminal designs that each nourished against the other.

Cipriano went mad. He left his country, and sought to fly from himself, traveling through distant lands, but always, as of old, *seeing every thing—knowing every thing.*

He still retained the fatal gift of poesy. If the cruel faculty of seeing and knowing all slumbered for an instant, the passion for verse replaced it, and the stanzas rolled from his lips like water from a fountain. With what bitter regret he recalled that time of sweet suffering, when inspiration

came to him seldom, or objects appeared to him under a doubtful form, waveringly and in slow succession. To-day he sees all—all simultaneously in a melancholy nudity. Then, from another world, a buzzing swarm of poetic inspirations descends incessantly on his head.

For many years Cipriano wandered from country to country, and necessity obliged him often to have recourse to the fatal gift of Segelius. This procured him all the luxuries of life—all the material enjoyments. But each one of those joys contained a poison the sting of which was more acute after each success. At last he resolved to use this accursed faculty no more; to stifle it, to crush it, even if it were at the price of starvation and death. But it was too late. In this savage struggle against himself Cipriano gave way. His reason trembled. The delicate links that united the mysterious elements of thought and sentiment were broken. Sentiment remained to him no longer, nor ideas; only vertigos of sensibility, fragments of thoughts, that he clad still in confused words that he himself did not understand. Misery and hunger had crushed his frame. He wandered for a long time, living on public charity, and not knowing himself whither he went.

I saw him once, when, in my capacity of American engineer on a Russian railroad, I traveled through the Steppes. He was living in the house of a Russian gentleman of small means, where he played the part of the old court fool. He wore a caftan of thick cloth, belted round the waist with a band of red leather. He babbled verses incessantly, in an incomprehensible language composed of all the idioms of the earth. He related his story to me himself, and complained bitterly of his poverty; but above all, his sorest affliction was that of not being comprehended, and being beaten every time that he, in one of his poetic inspirations, not having any paper, wrote his verses on the walls and tables. That, however, which pained him more than all was the fact that the family and servants laughed at the only happy memory which the fatal gifts of Segelius had not destroyed—his first verses to Charlotte.