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Opening extract from

Cyrano

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A Night at the Theatre



Who with any sliver of soul in him can resist the sounds, sights, and savour of it? That whisper of silk gowns; that hubbub as an audience streams indoors; bores recollecting past plays; fans relishing the play to come; the greetings and insults loosed off like catapults; the flirting, the wagers, the bad jokes, the poets arguing in rhyming couplets . . .

See that dizzying cliff-face of boxes decked out in white and gold; the tiered chandeliers being hauled into the roof ablaze with candles; the fleecy bob of wigs and sumptuous swirl of cloaks; the gallants strutting, fingers on

sword-hilts; the footlights winking on . . .

Feel the jab of saucy elbows, the brush of rouged cheeks as the scandalmongers exchange whispers; the snip-snap of pickpockets dipping like herons into pockets and purses. Countless mouths are already a-glitter with sugar from Monsieur Ragueneau's cream horns. Blushes, drunkenness, and rage soak a hundred hatbands with sweat . . . All Paris is crowding into the Théâtre des Muses tonight. Everyone is here—well, with maybe one notable exception . . .

And smell the mouth-watering savour of pasties, éclairs, cloudy claret, and dark tobacco! The tang of oranges, the smarting stench of the limelight, the mixture of sweat and perfume, the aroma of cinnamon and sin. A veritable riot of smells, in fact, vying for the attention of a hundred no—

. . . no, no. No.

Let us not stray on to dangerous ground. There's trouble enough in the world without raising the subject of noses.

The curtain goes up. Silence falls. The evening star is rising in the shape of the magnificent Montfleury! He is as big as a baron of beef and absolutely without talent, but he is very, *very* famous, and isn't that what matters with actors? The audience gives a roar of delight.



The mighty Montfleury had not spoken above three lines when a voice even louder than his own came booming out of the auditorium:

'What? Has this *thing* appeared again tonight?' The audience parted like the Red Sea, and there he stood: Cyrano had come after all. 'Montfleury, I thought I forbade you ever to set foot on stage again! You are the greatest ham since the Gadarene Swine. Be so good as to cart your streaky bacon off the stage and be gone!'

Uproar. Half the audience began to moan and groan, not wanting to be robbed of the play they had come to see. The rest were just as happy to

watch Cyrano rant against Bad Acting. Montfleury might be grossly huge and Cyrano as lean as a greyhound, but as celebrities went, Cyrano de Bergerac was by far the larger—larger than Life, in fact.

Montfleury flung his arms about and tried to begin again, but it was hopeless.

'Call yourself an actor? The trees of Birnam Wood were less wooden in *Macbeth*! Will you leave the stage of your own accord or must I cut you up into logs and *burn you*?'

The actor's lines gurgled back down his throat like water down a drain. He could see the white panache on Cyrano's hat looming through the smoke of the footlights, and his two fat little legs told him to run.

The audience took sides:

'Get on with the play!'

'You tell him, Cyrano!'

'Stand your ground, Montfleury!'

'Teach him a lesson, Cyrano!'

But the other actors were protesting on their own behalf. 'Who's going to pay us if we pack up and go home?' they wanted to know. They had no objection to Montfleury-the-Ham getting hamstrung, but they could not afford to lose an evening's pay.

With a flourish worthy of royalty, Cyrano tossed back his cloak, reached across his body . . .

'He's going for his sword!'

. . . and drew out a bulging purse. He tossed it on to the stage where it burst gloriously open, spilling golden coins across the boards and fetching an acrobatic display from the actors as they dived to gather it up. Applause and peals of laughter burst from the gallery: the play might be lost, but the gesture was too impossibly grand to resist. What a divine fool that Cyrano was! What a colossus of style!

Quel panache!

On the sill of a nearby opera-box, however, the fingers of a black-gloved hand drummed irritably.

'The Gascon is making a nuisance of himself,' said the Comte de Guiche, through a yawn of exquisite boredom. 'Do something about him.' One of his retinue slipped out of the opera-box and downstairs to the auditorium.

Cyrano had started to list, in verse, all the reasons for drowning Bad Actors in big buckets. But he had no sooner started than he was interrupted by a jeering, sneering heckler.

'What's this, then? Is *Sir-run-nose* poking his *nose* in again where it don't belong?'

The crowd gave a gasp. So! The evening's excitements were not over, after all! A foppish young viscount lounged against the edge of the stage, flicking pieces of orange peel around the floor with the tip of his elegant sword, and smirking. 'And such an UGLY nose, too,' he tittered.

A spot of colour touched Cyrano's cheek and he glanced up fleetingly at the gallery. Five hundred pairs of eyes swung to see what he would do next.

After a long silence, even the fop cocked a puzzled eyebrow. 'Well? What are you waiting for? Aren't you going to cross swords with me? I insulted your big fat nose.'

'You *did*? When?'

The fop was wrong-footed. 'I—'

'You call *that* an insult?' Cyrano declaimed. '*Tch-tch-tch*. I have trodden in worse insults than that on the pavement. My God, man! If you're going to insult me, at least do it with a little *style*! A little *panache*! Good Lord! There are as many schools of insult as there are tribes of Israel, and is *that* the best you can come up with? I see I must teach you the Art of the Insult!' At last the sword came out—a noise like a snake uncoiling. The onlookers shivered with delicious horror and drew back as far as possible, boys thrust behind their mothers, wives peeping over their husbands' shoulders. Once more Cyrano's grey-brown eyes flickered towards the upper gallery of the theatre and he raised the hilt of his sword to his lips in salute to

someone seated there. He did not remove his hat: perhaps he knew that, from up there, its brim concealed his huge beak of a nose.

Then his blade flashed. Fast as the spoke of a carriage wheel it moved. Its reach was as long as a moonbeam. In his hand, it was summer lightning. His voice was calm and very slightly taunting. Such a silence had fallen that his words were audible from the front stalls to the upper gallery.

'ONE! There is the Insult Theatrical. Let me give you an example: *O brave New World that has such noses in it!*

'TWO! There is the Insult Geographical: *Just walking round you is like rounding Cape Horn!*

'THREE! The Insult Inquisitive: *Does it not cause you to tilt over, monsieur, or do you wear counterweights in your boots?'*

The crowd roared with laughter, while the fop roared with frustration, his lunges and parries hitting nothing but the empty air as Cyrano stepped deftly round him.

'FOUR! There is the Insult Punning: *Where does Cyrano come to an end? Nobody nose!*

'FIVE! The Insult Explanatory: *Don't tell me! You grew it that big to keep your feet from getting sunburned!*

'SIX! The Insult Medical: *When you have a cold, monsieur, Belgium floods!*

'SEVEN! The Insult Biblical: *It wasn't Ararat where Noah ran aground, you know?'*

By this time, the gallant had forgotten about sarcastic remarks or showing off or even fencing. He had simply begun to run, lifting his heels higher than his kneecaps as Cyrano carved him clear of the floor.

'You might have attempted EIGHT! The Insult Exaggerational: *Have a care! When you sneeze, whole fleets sink in the Spanish Main!*

'Or NINE! the Insult Unsporting: *You must be the only man who can win a race by a nose before the starter has even fired his gun!*

'Or TEN! The Insult Sentimental: *Aaah! How*

kind of you, monsieur, to provide a perch for so many ickle squiwwels and birdies!

'And now—to make an end—The Insult Well-Intentioned: *If you ever lose your scabbard, at least you will always have somewhere to sheath your . . .*' One small flick of his wrist, and Cyrano whipped the foil from his opponent's hand and sent it skidding among the floor rushes. '. . . sword. But no! You aspired to none of these! The words you offered me were about as witty as a dead rat, as clever as a used handkerchief, as original as Thursday!' He leaned forward, as if to dislodge a fly from a cake, and the viscount cowered down, eyes shut, trying to shield the whole of his body with two thin arms. 'So, by your leave, I think I shall not put myself to the trouble of actually *fighting* you, monsieur.' He added coldly: 'The real shame rests with whoever sent you.'

Then Cyrano plunged his sword back into its sheath, leaving the fop gibbering and half-naked amid the rags of his shredded clothing. As the