

ELEVENTH NIGHT, a prequel

A ten-minute Play
By Rob Armstrong Martin

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Eleventh Night

Characters:

Lady Olivia Trismontaignac: 25, a noblewoman, recently inherited her dead brother's large, indebted estate

Mellifolio Melcissidecchi: 34, her business manager of one year, illegitimate son of a Venetian candlemaker

Mariah Roentgensdottir: 32, lady-in-waiting to Olivia of 11 years, high-born Dutch

Sir Toby Belacci: 43, a retired Crusader, widower, first cousin to Olivia

Feste: 35, a clown or zanni from Venice, hired annually for Lenten season

Setting:

The manor house of the Trismontaignac family estate, near Trieste, on the Illyrian coast of Austro-Croatia.

Time:

Winter 1542-43 AD

10

Eleventh Night

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Scene 1: Olivia's private office

MELLIFOLIO (Addressing OLIVIA who, veiled in mourning, stares out a window)

My lady, one month it's been since I entered your employ.

Yet your fool Feste lately hints that your brother's death

may occasion my dismissal. In your state of grief

I ought to shield you from further cares, but it is imprudent,

even uncharitable, not to warn you 'gainst the heavier woes

my departure must surely hasten.

It's true I undertook this counting house at your brother's request and not your own.

But betwixt the young baron's summons and my arrival hence,

I chartered merchant routes for him, and bespoke all manner of goods for trade,

unaware of the injury he sustained. I live by wits and worldly sense,

And promised partner profits here, left Venice at some expense.

The morning I arrived, shown ignobly through your kitchen door,

We must not disturb M'lady's slumber, the porter swore,

You'd stayed the night by your brother's bed 'til the cocks did crow.

Your Clown was sent to welcome me, and my brief to know.

As may be desired in a Fool, Feste conveyed some veiled news:
The fallen Baron's tenants were then much arrears in rents.
Indeed the servants whisper 'twas no hunter's misfired bolt
that pierced the Baron's thigh, but rather a well-aimed farmer's shaft,
shot by one who, his mortgage in default, feared enslavement of his sons.
The Fool said no one dared to bring such Rumors to your ear.

"No matter how the Baron got his suppurating wound," he told,
"Our crisis is that governance has broke down on this estate.
Thus this house is ill-supplied with bread and game and furs.
Milord's manor lives by foreign commerce, but few goods it has to trade.
A house of ladies living in mourning requires little repast
Therefore take our ale and cheese, and bestow them to the seas,
that the Baroness may see some profit in what barter they return."
"Something must be undertook to revive our better days!"

"Good Fool," said I,
"A trade of beer and cheese is ill-conveyed by ship:
Beer at Sea is heavy-taxed by sailors' frequent sip,
and cheese is lost to gnawing rats, or spoiled by ocean's drip."
The fool with jests persisted: "Canst not embark with cats, to ward the cheese from rats?
And Guard the barrels by laying them round with snakes which in our swamp are found!"
I would hear no more of folly and his boyish schemes unsound
He taxed my store of patience and my too-little leisure.
I bade him tell his Lady I awaited at her pleasure.
The Fool withdrew and some little time after, there came
Sober, tearful, and richly decked, a most comely Dame.
She carried a parchment and a collar made of mink,
That unsealed paper, said only this in still-wet ink:
 "My brother's convalescence
 Depressed the produce of our fields.
 Indeed our serfs seem indisposed to work,
 some loyally grieving, others uncertain of their yoke.
 Let not a change in masters give excuse to run amok.
 If you will take this manor's business into hand,
 At year's end I'll tithe you, and give you cottage land."

Both letter and fur collar she told were her command
And no nuptial ring was there upon the giving hand.
Thus woo'd by the adoréd frown upon her golden mien,
It never seemed that skeptic of the note I should have been.
Seeking to profit you by this, my own honor I pledged.
I only had as bond to act, this writ the Dame alleged. (unfolds the letter)

OLIVIA

The note is drawn much like my hand---

MELLIFOLIO

---but needs a guarantee

That you, and no one else, affirm my order and its fee.
The month we prayed and hoped your Baron brother might recover,
I spent some time inspecting his affairs, and did discover
long since some disarray had reduced his wealth's estate.
Nay, I must recall aright: it's now your own, of late.

At the Elephant Inn there often stop such captains as do look
fierce enough to carry goods vouchsafed in merchant's book.
The best of them can fight and hold the pirates from our shores,
and Pirate other ships in turn, strengthened by these Wars.
The Seawolf's man, Antonio, I found and hired just this morn,
entrusting him your cattle hides to sail around the Horn.
In Messaline my uncle shall then broker these for shoes.
And send back spices we can sell at any price we choose.

It matters greatly, now that valued goods I have bespoken.
To render moot these troubles you need only give a token.
If you will undersign your name, to record that you intend
To traffic with my tribe Melchizidek, I will append.

If you renounce this note as false, such prospects you'll insult.
My cousins far with whom we trade run hazard in result.
If we can keep their custom and good Fortune does permit,
You stand to reap repeat profits, by mending now this writ.

(MELLIFOLIO dips the pen in ink and holds it out to OLIVIA)

OLIVIA

Your wish to prove your worth in this, is not a little thing.

MELLIFOLIO

And henceforth when your ship comes in, much comfort it will bring.

(OLIVIA hesitates, takes the pen, and signs)

MELLIFOLIO

MELLIFOLIO

In my good faith I undertook the increase of your wealth,
And 'til I saw her next to you, I did not know her stealth.

(Olivia exits)

Though this note was her design and not done in your name,

I'd rather vanish from your house than cause Mariah shame.
And now our year of brisk returns on profits can commence!

MELLIFOLIO (CONTINUED)

A cottage for Mariah I'll raise up along the fence.
I'll make Mellifolio a name in trade none will forget,
And proudly pass that name along, to sons we shall beget.

xxx

Mariah kept me from seeing you this fortnight since his death.
She feared your grief had weakened you beyond the reach of reason.

xxx

Scene 2: One Year Later, The Banquet hall of Olivia's manor house, before dawn.

TOBY and Feste the Fool enter laughing, with wine jugs and a basket of apples and oranges.

TOBY (singing)

More wanton wine!
It gives us energy.
It makes us shine,
Forgives our devilries!
But it doesn't go ve-ry far.
Now we're holding an empty jar.
Line ye up for a taste.
Help me pull out the cork,
Not a moment to waste!

(MARIAH enters the gallery above. TOBY pours the wine into his cupped hands
and much goes on the floor.)

FESTE

Have a care of the flagstones, that they not tell a ruddy tale of wantonness against you.

MARIAH

My lord you will regret these slops. Your cousin Olivia's birthday feast begins today, with guests due to arrive in the fore-noon! Mellifolio has ordered all in our house to keep this banquet hall pristine and ready for tonight.

TOBY

I care not for any orders issued by that fatherless rogue. A very climber he, who hopes to rise above his state. Dogs-blood in Mellifolio's veins there may well be, for all we know of his pedigree.

MARIAH (seeing Olivia coming along gallery)

Good Sir Toby, you must not libel against him! Our Lady Olivia has entrusted Mellifolio with the management of all her house and lands. Why, he plans to purchase certain fields to add to her estate, and more besides, to build himself a cottage of his own.

FESTE (singing and juggling apples)

“Some to Riches are born, some to Riches achieve,
Some have Riches thrust upon, but all the Earth must leave.”

OLIVIA

To Mellifolio we owe the increase of our partridges, our woods and hives, our cheesemaking, our brewery, and indeed these very apples.

MARIAH

Ay, and with silks and exotic spices he’s got from lands afar, he’s brought the town much trade.

TOBY

I never tire of hearing maids repeat the litany of his womanly accomplishments! Mellifolio’s done no more trading for you, niece, than any sea-dog would do. I credit not a man who scratches out a sharp living by exchange. And land? No merchant’s blood will ever be suited to householding, if by his sword he canst not hold his house from marauding men of force. Merchant blood is thinner than the seawater on which it sails.

OLIVIA

Cousin Toby, I knew he was no noble, but certain letters of past service he brought to vouch for his repute. He’s done well by me. I keep him, not to set upon a pillar, but to hold a post.

TOBY

In regards to partridge broods, you know, he’s forbade my falconing. Imagine! Instead asks me to fox. I’ll not curb gentlemanly pursuits to suit his household quota! Mellifolio, “honeyed pages”, I call him instead “bad-willed”: Mal-volio. I’ve heard it told he was lately barred from tutoring Greek, for some unseemly teachings.

OLIVIA

Toby, Hush! A scandal may be raised to more alarm than it merits, by constant whispering of in pubs. I’ll hear no more repeated of such soiled, sordid roots, until Mellifolio himself has a word to interpose. (Olivia exits above)

MARIA

Surely this is some drunken jest? He seems a very able clerk, and measures every purse and pouch. What have you heard that may be relied upon?

TOBY

Ahhh, I know certain tales of Melli-Folly’s past that would blanch your pretty face, if you knew the very Venetian gutters from whence he sprang. In that town of cats, it’s said his mother was, and still is, but a common chandler, a Jewess who bore our “man of honeyed pages” amid a

sweatshop filthy with rendered tallow. Indeed, a very “man of wax” she raised him amongst her candle butts, and trimmed his wick by frequent dipping, for no husband ever had she---

MARIA

Wait you there, I’ll come anon!(exits above)

FESTE

You’ve hooked her ear, though she’s been watching hard the measuring of Mellifolio’s pouches. If a man were to marry Fraulein Mariah, his purse would not lose much. I’ve heard it said, to save a florin, poor men should go Dutch.

TOBY (singing)

We’re out of wine!
It gives us energy.
It makes us shine.
Forgive our enemies!
But it doesn’t go ve-ry far.
Now I’m holding an empty jar

(This time TOBY pours it into his mouth, but only the last few drops remain. Mariah enters below)

FESTE

Dame Mariah, I see you have descended from on high. I’m sorry you’ve had a come-down, though I’m glad to see you nigh.

MARIAH (embarrassed)

This Venice Fool, good sir, refers to my former noble position: The husband I almost had, a Duke, was lost to the physician.

TOBY (Kneeling to Mariah)

Please, mistress, let you filch the cellar key and bring some more sack.

MARIAH

You dare not take another flagon, you’ve emptied three so far. Milady is sure to notice if you lie long abed this morn, and distinctly bade me get you fed before your belly sloshed over with grape. I’ll hear more of your Venetian gossip, but first how’d you like a cold capon’s leg from the larder?

TOBY

A caper? Why I can leg a caper longer than larder men, ...harder than longer men....
(He attempts to dance, and slips in the wine puddle)

(sings) Line ye up for a taste.
Help me pull out the cork,
Not a moment to waste!

OLIVIA (entering gallery above)

Oh! Sir Toby, beware! You must not bring a broken head into our much-awaited feast.
You should off to bed now, else a poorly to your recent portrait you'll compare.

OLIVIA (CONTINUED)

I must sleep a little too, to knit up the ragged sleeve of Care.
Mariah will fetch some honeyed cakes to sop your sleepless spirits. (exits above)

MARIAH

My lady is like to see a seemly suitor today, or several, and you'll not be thanked for stealing the regard which is her rightful due. Await you here, on this couch of Araby, and count your silent thoughts, that the footmen not awake, to exorcise your devils out of doors. (She exits)

TOBY

A seemly suitor indeed. I seem to dream I once was one to dear Olivia. Why I dandled her on my Nuncle knee when she was but two or three, and much bethought to join our legacies when she came into an age for marrying. But now the Lady is done with formal weeping, she has no use for an old widower, who never held woman higher than her Ladyship! Nay, not even my own wife, who gave me my soon-departed boy. Alas, there is no sunset that does not recall to me the setting of my own Son below the earth's horizon.

FESTE (sings)

I loved a girl too young to bear
and took her too early to wife.
She gave me an heir,
but he not strong,
and she not long for life.

TOBY

Hist and hie thee, foolish Tearful Knight! You who banished the pagan Turk from popish shores, should stand stronger than this Sorrow. Stand now! And let go your stream of sorrow. Bear up, Nay, let these hot tears flow from your bare bodkin instead.

(He unlaces his codpiece, takes the empty wine jug and begins to urinate into it.
Mariah enters with tray of small cakes)

MARIAH

Good Sir Toby, are you mad? This is no stable,
wherein ye can expel your wastes, then fill yourself at table.
Draw you behind yonder arras, while I clean up this mess.
It's hours of work you'll give the maids, this hall again to dress.
Feste, arouse milady's twin footmen, Gregory and Georgio

To come and prevail upon this knight to bed he must needs go!

(Feste exits. Mariah drags the Turkish bench away from the spills, then gathers up fruit rinds. TOBY takes a cake, and sits on bench to eat it, his codpiece still unlaced.)

MARIAH

Sir Toby, though I know you are most taken with milady and her newfound wealth, even I can see that you want a gentler wife than she. No one seems to like her own way more than does my lass. If you were to ask me.... I would say.... Olivia was too long without a mother's hand, before her father engaged me.... to govern her as cicerone.

MARIAH (CONTINUED)

I found she thought herself this house's very son, and flouted both her father's and her brother's wills. But the elder Baron and his junior sprig, both delighted in her willful ways. Since it's she now rules this house, I've held my tongue. For as you see, I was raised to be a very proper Lady-in-Waiting, in the old fashioned way, to serve a noble lord and husband. Perhaps you should---

(TOBY snores, by now laid flat upon the bench, passed out, still unlaced. MARIAH places a cushion under his head to stop the snoring, then draws the curtain over him. Mellifolio enters, still in sleeping attire and startles her)

MELLIFOLIO

Mariah, are you up late or early? Why it needs two hours more before the dawn. The cock has not yet stirred awake to stretch his throat for crowing. Have ye lost your bed, or found a new, (aside) or do ye seek a bed with room for you?

MARIAH (Trying to conceal TOBY) Oh, Mellifolio!

I've such a care for the coming feast I wanted to be certain
Our hall was dressed for noble eyes, e'en down to the curtain.
Take you back to bed, therefore, I have these matters in hand,
This chilly vault at morning's hour is more than you should stand!
A fire is laid in the coffee room I'll send the lad to light,
And see you warmed if will not sleep any more this night.

MELLIFOLIO

I thank you kind Mariah, my needs you do foresee!
But one thing more I'll mention closely in our privacy:
For my lady's honor dance, the couples I've made pair
Leave short a perfect minuet and more are needed there.
If you allow that I might face you in that stately walk,
Then after, when the nobles toast, perhaps we'll closely talk?
My mind's much occupied of late with futures in our halls
And I know yours must also wonder what to you befalls.
Of late few maids and bachelors do visit our neighbor lands
Who'd think to marry me or you, and we such seasoned hands.

MARIAH (aside)

If he only knew the tales of him that lately I've been told!

MELLIFOLIO

Does it ever cross your mind to marry, if I may be bold?

MARIAH

I would have married milady's brother, sir, had he asked,
and very nearly did he, but for that untimely spear
that pierced his manly thigh. As we carried him indoors,

MARIAH (CONTINUED)

he clasped my hand and smiled, recalling our many
walks around these his Baron's lands.

The bone surgeon bade him save his breath, though not before my love
exchanged with me my handkerchief for his hunting glove.

I've laid that precious glove aside, alas to mind the day
When life of promised happiness from me Fate took away.

Then, we were equals in this house and nearly sisters,
And had I married him, I'd be this house's mistress.

MELLIFOLIO

But mistress of a nearby house you could shortly be,
And mistress of a husband's liberal purse as his trustee.
A new age dawns, a man of trade may now quite out-afford
His former landed noble master, or average titled lord!

MARIAH

Dearest Mellifolio, I know my lady owes to all your skills
Her much increase in profits and the produce of our hills.
But if you allude to my marrying any, he must Titled be,
Of noble blood, not merchant class, the husband I will see.
Perhaps you do not know, good sir, my father was an Earl.
And though I did not title gain, or marry when a girl,
I dare not throw away my gentle blood as lessers do.
My prospects are not lessened simply now that they are few.

MELLIFOLIO

What's in a title? That which you call promotion,
or any other swell, is but chaff to cover wheat.
Without lands and purse to spend, a title is a hollow gourd:
impressive in its swollen Spring, but rattling by the Fall.

MARIAH

You do not please me with that comparison, Sir!

MELLIFOLIO

My tongue is tied by nerves, my dear. I meant nothing amiss!
But I insist, for both our sakes, our interests join in this.
Since we are all alone now I'll go farther to confess:
Become wife to Mellifolio, no longer penniless.
Of you I know no ill repute, I hold no woman higher.
To keep you as you well deserve, in much improved attire,
Whatever sweetmeats you could ask, or books or birds desire,
To build a house and lands for you, and sons, my dream entire!

(TOBY grunts and snores behind the arras. Mellifolio investigates)

MELLIFOLIO

What employment have we here?
Sir Toby all ungirt, exposed to the night and drowned in drink!
And have you laid him in M'lady's couch of Araby?
Tis' her most beloved private seat,
wrapped in precious rubbed and oiled skins,
worth twice the hide of yours and mine!
This man, undressed, seems like to go to seed.
You've both gone mad with wine or honeyed mead!
Were he to leave a stain on such a couch, pray heed:
M'lady's house were thought to be ill-kept indeed.
All this laid bare the very day before her feast,
when all should be made ready even down unto the least.
Give me your decent kerchief for my hand,
And turn your lady face away, understand?
Then find you out a woollen cloak or sable,
and cover him as well as you are able.
The shame of this would dowse your lights in our lady's eyes
To truck with such a man, title'd even, is not wise!
Dear Mariah, I'll not speak of this, but conceal your judgement's lapse
As I have done for you before, though you know it not perhaps.
I pray you clear this alcove used for table.
I must return his drunken horse into its stable!
(He goes behind the arras to gird TOBY's loins)

MARIAH

My judgement, sir, is not subject to a merchant's son's review!
Ye give harsh counsel, but how to answer what I've heard of you?
It's said a bastard born of wax you are, a tallow-chandler's son.
How can you harbor thoughts to marry me, false as you've begun?
I've not fallen yet so low, to need such governings.
Good day! I've higher men to know, as well as cleaner things.
(she exits)

TOBY

(awakening to Mellifolio lacing up his codpiece)

Zounds, man! How hast your hand found its way beneath my cod?

A catamite I heard you were: 'Tis certain now, by God.

Had I my steel to hand, I'd extract from you the price

My honor demands. I'll prick your flesh if you again e'er try on me this vice!

(He stumbles off, overturning the bench and bottles)

MELLIFOLIO

(amidst the clutter)

Tis' ever thus, that higher names destroy the order made

By abler souls who work and build, but are then betrayed.

Toby's interrupted now my chance to win a wife.

I've lost much I hoped, before sunrise e'en, by his drunken strife.

MELLIFOLIO (CONTINUED)

You serve Olivia, Mellifolio, these others do not matter!

Discharge your duties well, and let your hopes not shatter.

Women wish to daily collect the payment of their toils,

But Men postpone reward today, for later, larger spoils.

A man's more than his lowly birth, this I vow to prove,

And by my skill I'll find Fortune, then win Mariah's love.