

The Perfect Tribute

by George Gilbert



ALESSANDRO MASSO had a profession, a trade, a passion—and his usual love affair.

By profession he was an artist in hammered brass, making, when he felt impelled by the spirit of the design, lovely vases, calendar-frames, and other *objets d'art* in his little two-room place over Landri's fruit-store, in the suburb of Crownsville. He sold his pretty little wares through an agent and never inquired what became of them. They represented a living, if they sold.

His usual love affair consisted in his paying publicly sedate—but privately tempestuous—attentions to Paula Landri. With what success it is useless to put into print. But as he was happy if his usual love affair went to his liking, and as Paula made him happy, you may draw your own conclusions.

His passion was for a certain finely modeled 'cello, with one small crack in the back, skilfully repaired, by no less light, deft finders than those of Masso himself. Like all artists, he had digital skill to compass almost anything that appealed to his artistic sense, and he could not consign the 'cello, with its beautiful lines, to the clumsy fingers of such

repairers as he could afford to pay.

Masso could play his 'cello fairly well, and often very well—when he was swayed by certain moods—such as memories of past loves; of the way the sun kissed the hills of Sicily, where he was born; of the tug of the present love, and the possibilities of future ones. Like the 'cello, that needed fresh bowing every time it sang, Masso needed a fresh love affair every little while to yield up his harmonies and melodies.

Masso was by turns either a philosophic anarchist or even spilled back into mild syndicalism. But he could not abide socialism. Like every artist, he was an aristocrat to his finger ends, and believed thoroughly in himself, one of the sure proofs of artistry, for without an aspiring ego, what man would have the audacity to achieve anything beautiful in the midst of the world's insistent attempts to shackle originality in human nature?

In person, Masso was compact, strong of build, active as a ferret, and his little, pointed mustache had a habit of twitching, like a ferret's when it trails a rat. His eyes, black, intense, could flash fire or be filled with slumberous languor, and women whom he had loved, had envied him the color of his

freshly shaved cheeks. His arm was like quicksilver for lightness and adroitness: his hands deft, fingers supple. Altogether his person suited well his profession, his trade, his passion and his usual love affair, for a man so endowed physically plainly could not fail to do well as an artist, a player of the 'cello when in the right mood, and as a progressive lover of women meant to be loved. As for his trade, of which no mention yet is made, why, a quick eye, arm, finger, body, brain, were essential in it, and as Masso excelled in it above all others who followed it among the mixed populations of an empire-like city, with its many colonies of aliens who bowed often to the law of force near at hand, that was more terrible to them than the legal law that seemed to them so distant, he must have been an adept indeed.

Paula Landri approved of Masso's profession, for it brought him in some money, part of which he spent on her; she approved of his passion, for a lover who spends a deal of his spare time loving a cracked 'cello, skillfully repaired, is not apt to fall in love with another girl; she approved of Masso's loving her—but she looked askance at his trade, yet with the understanding of her kind she accepted the good things it brought her, through him, and kept silence, with the silence that is the heritage of Romany blood turned citywise through two generations following the escape from "the old thing."

Giuseppe Frascali had one love, one passion, one trade, one profession, one everything. His 'cello was a copy of a genuine Gaspari by some unknown, and, therefore, uncatalogued Cremona maker, therefore not worth a great sum as a relic, but worth more than most famous old 'cellos as an instrument of music—sheer music. To be sure, Frascali had to have a love to make

it worth while to his joy of living. For the best in music, like the best in love, must be shared. No matter how well man or maid can sing or play, they must needs have some one to listen, to make the music most sweet, exactly as one needs another pair of lips to share the kiss one yearns, with perfect yearning, to give. As well kiss the air as send forth perfect music whose vibrations strike only your own ear!

Of course Frascali found it easy to be in love with Gioconda Moreni, the more especially as she was in the chorus of the Neapolitan Opera Company, and he played first 'cello there. Frascali found it beautiful to play in the orchestra, even though the pay was small, for his brother players were all artists in their respective lines. And if the orchestra work was humdrum at times because the Neapolitan's patrons liked certain operas so well that the repertoire was not much diversified, yet Frascali could solace himself with the thought that he might in time attract notice by his playing, and so get into some greater orchestra, even the Metropolitan or Symphony. Meanwhile, when he felt the orchestra work to be too drab, even in company with his brother artists, he could solace himself by playing alone in his little room in Mme. Rosalie O'Brien's boarding-house in Irvington Street, or to charming Gioconda when he was privileged to call upon her, which was often, in her larger rooms in a building in the howling Forties given up to theatrical folk, *et al.*

But one day the Neapolitan company went bankrupt, the little theater was closed—and there was a great scattering of artists and rearrangement of theretofore more or less happy and placid lives. To Frascali, to whom his orchestra place had been a snug harbor ever since he had arrived in New York, two years before, from Roviglio, with his 'cello, in its green bag, slung by its cradling strap

from his shoulder, the disbanding of the opera company was a tragedy. He took its misery at once to Gioconda, the one being in America he knew well enough to enable him, in converse, to break through his shell of artist-stubborn reserve.

“This woe, like others, will soon pass,” she flashed on him from the little portal between her rows of perfect teeth, behind which her little pink tongue had a disconcerting way of winking—when it was not pressing its enticing tip against her pouting lips.

“But I must work,” he protested.

“I have friends over the river, where there are many cafes and gardens that employ musicians. It is now nearly summer. Let us go over there. I have some savings, you some. You earn some money. We shall have a little vacation of it, and in the autumn—who knows?”

She kissed him, and he began to improvise on a G minor melody of his own.

And so it fell out that Frascali and Gioconda left their places in the greater division of the greatest city, and went for an idyllic interlude in their little love affair across a certain stretch of water that is so bebridged and betunneled that millions are forgetting that it is there, because they are enabled to get past it without seeing it whenever they want to, if they go under it, or without being bothered by it, even if they see it, if they go over it.

Gioconda spake truly as to having friends in that suburb, for she was born there, and knew its polyglot speech, and was able, in a few days, after she and Frascali had settled down in their respective places—he in a room half a block from Fresnoli’s Gardens, where he played; she with a maiden aunt near by—to make him feel fairly at home. He had appreciative auditors at Fresnoli’s, for Antonio’s patrons knew and liked good music. Moreover, he could

improvise at will on his own themes, and in other ways enjoy a real musical rest from the sameness of orchestra work. So he was happy, the more especially as Gioconda showed signs of being sensible and not insisting upon spinning out their already humdrum love affair to the bitter end, but began to stroll about on her own account, and to laugh and be gay apart from him.

Frascali kept to himself a great deal, but soon found himself a local celebrity, and if he had been avid for gold, might have doubled his takings from Fresnoli, because his coming to the Gardens had caused a great increase in patronage there, and Antonio Fresnoli soon became nervous lest the ’cellist quit him. But the low-browed, brown-haired, sallow-cheeked musician had no idea of changing his place, any more than he had of changing his instrument, his bow, or the low-crowned, wide-rimmed hat and baggy, light-gray suit he wore with such an air of artistic excellence.

But if Fresnoli’s gardens, throve on the playing of Frascali, the rival gardens of John Papaloudis, the Greek, languished. To be sure, each “garden” was just a vacant space back of a café, with too-weary tenements sagging all around, and the palms in them were artificial, except for two in each, kept for a show near the entrance, and nothing grew in either save thirsts and appetites that could be appeased with profit to the respective proprietors. But they were gardens, none the less—that of Fresnoli burgeoning; that of the Greek withering, and all because of the importation from across the bebridged and betunneled water of a man with a golden-toned ’cello that he stroked with a silver-clear bow—not for money, but because he loved to make love to his instrument.

Papaloudis knew of Alessandro Masso’s profession and trade, more dimly of his love, and nothing of his passion. But if he had

known of his passion he would not have understood, else he never would have kept a piano with out-of-tune strings going in his garden, after Fresnoli had hired Frascali to woo his 'cello in his garden each fine night. No; if Papaloudis had been capable of understanding Masso's passion he would have hired a good 'cello player to meet the opposition. But, being what he was, a mere seller of food and drink and, moreover, fat, not only in body but in everything—gross, animal—he did not understand. Therefore, double dolt as he was, he consulted Masso, with relation to Fresnoli and especially Frascali, about his (Masso's) trade. The consultation took place in Papaloudis's garden, at the beginning of a beautiful June night. A little marble-top table was between Masso and his presumptive patron, and on it two green-tinged *frappe* drinks.

"I have an enemy," the Greek said, reaching across the table to touch Masso's left side, under his armpit, where something sinister, nestled in its silken holster.

"Yes?" and Masso sipped anew, appreciatively admiring the light-glints through the green liquid by holding the little glass up to the light.

"For years have I not paid for protection?" again touching that sinister thing, "and without asking anything in return?"

"Yes; what is his name?" sipping again. His tone was businesslike. Paula had been insistent upon larger presents of late, and he needed some employment at his trade. The venture promised to be profitable.

"Fresnoli's new music-maker, that dog's brother, Frascali."

"Ah, I never go in there, but I heard he was making some stir. What has he done to you—made love to your wife?"

"No, stolen my custom."

"But why not blame Fresnoli?"

"His successor," touching the sinister

thing again, "would be able to hire that ape's son to play, and it would be as before."

"Well, then must it be to the death," sipping anew.

"No; you should be able to frighten him away—maim him. Fix a quarrel upon him; shatter his hand—the one that holds the bow. It would be enough and not dangerous. You, or your friends, know what does best in such a case."

"And the money?"

"I will pay five hundred dollars cash when he is no more able to steal my customers."

"Agreed!"

"When shall it be?"

"Let me fix my own time. He is not like some unknown—to be set upon at random. It requires thought, care. In a few days, perhaps ten. Neither of us wishes to bring down upon us the American law."

"Ah, not that!" and the Greek's yellow face went gray-green.

"I drink to you, M. Papaloudis. Give me one hundred dollars in advance."

"Yes," producing his wallet.

Masso sipped the last of his green-dripped liqueur, lighted a cigarro, got up, hummed a little air—"Donne e Mobile"—that he loved well, and strolled out onto the pavement, where American law governed in the person of a bluecoat who lounged along, swinging his club and looking very wise.

He had not seen Frascali, for he did not go to Fresnoli's, it being off his regular nightly tour of pleasure by half a block. He was minded now to go there, and started, but half-way he saw a set of flashing teeth displayed in a bright smile, a little pink tongue that flicked out enticingly to caress a pair of pouting lips. Paula had been insistent lately, and Masso was in search of some novelty, as was Gioconda. So they presently found themselves chatting gaily together, after a brief curbstone flirtation, and so when

Frascali looked for her in her usual corner of the garden that night, she was not to be seen, which rather relieved the 'cellist of threatened *ennui*, and he played all the better for it. He was beginning to wish for something to happen to end their idyllic experience—without painful, wordy scenes.

Nor did he chide her when she began an open flirtation with Masso. She had the good sense to carry it on away from the garden, and fully occupied Masso's spare time to such an extent that he forgot for a while to play his 'cello and took her to Papaloudis's place for entertainment. Frascali felt her gradually chilling toward him as she warmed toward the other, and so they slid apart, as so many others like-hearted have done and will do till the end of time. After the manner of her kind she did not tell him of her former love, and he, equally discreet, kept his passage with Paula to himself and did not inquire into her past. They were experienced and disposed to take what the flying hour brought. She sang for him; he, after a time, boldly showed her the pleasures of his 'cello. She danced for him to parts of songs she had in her repertoire, and he, having for the first time a woman who could appreciate music, did not badly, but Gioconda knew he was not to be mentioned in the same breath with Frascali as a 'cellist. But as a lover she had her own ideas as to the two, and Masso being the newest lover of hers, naturally she thought him best. Masso, having the one hundred dollars earnest-money from Papaloudis, and, moreover, some little savings, quit making hand-hammered brass. And if Paula scowled as he passed up-stairs with Gioconda, why, he cared not. And if Papaloudis once mentioned the job for which Masso had taken one hundred dollars earnest-money—true arles—Masso had only to scowl, touch a certain sinister holstered thing under his armpit, and the Greek was silent.

"In good time; it needs care, thought," he said to John, who had to smile, perforce, and contemplate his growing deficit with what equanimity he could muster up.

To find another woman to make love to was farthest from Frascali's thoughts as he strolled about that June morning. What between his playing for money, his playing in his room for love of his 'cello, and the time Gioconda had taken up, his idyllic vacation had been pretty well occupied until Masso had stolen the girl. After that he had certain leisure hours, and he meant to enjoy them to the full before seeking inspiration in even a flirtation again, not to speak of love, or what passes for love with some. To tell the truth, he was looking for ripe bananas—mellow, fragrant, sun-kissed ones. not the dull, tasteless, hard ones that hang in north windows of stores. So he sought the north side of the street whereon the Landri store was, at the corner, and in the window facing to the south found what he sought—and more.

For just then Paula, coming out on the walk to wait on him, heard noises on the stairway that told her that Gioconda and Masso were coming down, and she, wishing to hide her chagrin over her rival's easy triumph, began to beam upon the new customer, who found himself waited upon with a grace and warmth that were pleasing, because mystifying. The laughter, meant to prove to Masso and Gioconda that Paula was happy, made Frascali's heart-strings vibrate, and he continued to hold her in conversational play long after the two had turned the corner and gone about their affairs.

And now matters ran evenly again. Frascali, of course, would be the last man to hear that Paula had had Masso for a lover, and he found her, moreover, to be a good girl, man-wise through tradition and inheritance; but one who had enough

woman's wit to keep herself clean even in her passage with so accomplished a woman-hunter as Masso, and so, having his 'cello to love, and a not too inclusive woman to admire, he became content again, and presently New York and Rovigio and all things else faded out of his mind. Summer drew on apace. He even forgot Gioconda, yet snapped sharply awake to her existence when he got a note from her one morning, informing him that the old Neapolitan had been revived from its ashes of bankruptcy, and she was going back. Did he care to have her speak for his old place in the orchestra?

He sent a reply by the bare-legged messenger of the pavement that he thanked her, but that he did not. And, so she went, and Masso, and Paula, and Frascali remained, with Papaloudis insistent in the background that something be done by Masso to earn the first one hundred dollars arles, and also the second that already had almost been spent.

"Are you chicken of heart?" the Greek found courage to nag one warm August night.

"No," said Masso, sipping at his green drink; "no, I have been busy. But now I have time. I will attend to the matter."

"Even if you were caught in American law, it would not matter now, as you see that fiddle-scraper runs with Paula that was yours," Papaloudis tempted; "it would pass as a mere fight over a girl, and I would bail you out and then—pouf!—it would blow over, with care in selecting your lawyer."

"I know," and Masso darkly scowled. "I have a reason now. Paula should have waited for me."

He sipped his green drink to its sweetly aromatic dregs and went out.

And as he went he hummed his favorite "Donne e Mobile," and puffed out delicate plumes of smoke on either side.

"Decidedly," he said to himself, "this must be settled. If word gets out that I am chicken of heart, and take the affront of him stealing my Paula, the protection money from the merchants will not flow in, and there will not be so much to divide among the circle."

As he strolled he took toll of paper-shell almonds from one curb-stone stand, an orange from another, Zantes currants from another. Proprietors of shops nodded to him with wise tolerance and approval. He spoke here a word, there another. Soon behind him stalked half a dozen dark men. At the door of Fresnoli's gardens he paused to whisper to them:

"Be guided by me. It is the 'cello-player here, not Fresnoli, who always has paid promptly. I must watch, observe. You, Gecko, be ready if I signal. No killing; just his thumb, the one on his right hand, that he may never use a bow again. Let me do it. You others, Gecko leading, make it so I can get away."

Fresnoli, who saw them come in, paled. The people there, of whom many knew what the visit might portend, were listening to Frascai's playing. The 'cellist, like one inspired, was bowing softly, surely, and the reason for it was to be seen in Paula, sitting at the table nearest him, devouring him with her great, swimming black eyes. Fresnoli's money paid for the "Serenade" the bow was enunciating, but it was for the girl alone.

"Sit there," Masso ordered Gecko and his other men, motioning them to a vacant table near Paula's. He sat down across from her. She glanced across at him—knew his errand, but guessed it had to do with her unfaithfulness to him. Her face went white, then the color mounted, and he saw again that she was lovely, and he found himself beginning really to rage at the 'cellist just within arm's reach.

"Do not move," he ordered; "let me

listen to him a moment. I, too, am a 'cellist, as you *used* to know."

She sighed, shivered, the phrases of the "Serenade" came to her, tragic with its throbbing minors now, whereas before it had been vibrant with the pleasures of hope. The deft right hand, holding the bow, slid across and back, and each time the hand carried so into full view Masso found himself saying:

"It needs but one shot in the full of the thumb, at its base, and it is done."

He touched the butt of the sinister thing bolstered snugly under his armpit. The girl shivered, turned an appealing eye onto him. That he could draw, shoot, before she could do a thing to prevent, she well knew.

Gradually the hush outside the crowd's center crept inward as more and more people became aware of what was toward. Whispers went over the heads of some, sibilant with fear. Gecko and his men, grim and saturnine, glowered over the long, thin, drinks with which they had been served with lightninglike agility by white-lipped waiters.

Still the lilt of the "Serenade" went on and on. Frascali, seeing a man sitting at Paula's table, at first had taken thought that the man might try to make the girl's acquaintance, as in that place might have been expected. But as he saw them sitting, apparently indifferent after a moment of conversation, he gradually became enwrapped in his music again, and at the close of the piece swept into an improvisation of his own, without prelude or warning flourish.

"He plays well," Paula heard Masso whisper out of a tense mouth corner to her; "well, indeed. Ah, if I could but play like that!"

The music throbbed on and on. The silence else was complete. Once, twice, thrice, Masso reached over and touched the butt of the thing; once, twice, thrice, his hand went back to rest as the music held him in

thrall! Gecko, alert, stirred each time, then sighed as no action followed.

And now the improvisation ended, the bow arm of the 'cellist swept over until the second string only was engaged, and, swinging up from a shimmering glory of resolving chords, the finale of the improvisation came winging the mystic, alluring phrases of "Donne e Mobile":

Woman is faithless;
She's constant never.
Love's like a feather,
Blown on the breezes.

"Sapristi!" Masso whispered. "He is a great artist. What a pity to shoot off his bow thumb!"

Again he touched the butt of the bolstered thing. Again the girl shivered.

And now the music swept to the bass, as the artist transposed to the lowest range of notes the theme would carry on a 'cello. And again he took the tantalizing, poignant refrain up and up and up, until it all but ran from the fingerboard as he nursed it through the flutelike glories of the 'cello's higher harmonic. He came to a perfect close, after a brilliant double-stopped trill, and then glanced up and waited for the applause.

There was none! The people, fearful, afraid to move in the presence of the killers, waiting for the act that would stampede them, morbidly hoping to see that which they feared to see—blood flowing—did not applaud.

A pained look came upon Frascali's face. The blood ebbed from it.

He had played his best. The audience, for the first time in his life, had failed to respond. And Paula—white faced, cold! She was watching him. Those dark men at the table near her glowered at him. Why?

He passed his cold hand over his forehead. What had come over him? Had his

cunning failed, his art grown stale? He stood up, laid the 'cello carefully against the chair, shivered, took a step forward, stumbled.

There was a clatter as Masso's chair fell over backward. A woman somewhere behind screamed just a little. Paula's breath came like a sob. Gecko and his men got up stormily.

Masso faced the silent crowd, his face drawn with anger, his arms upraised:

"*Bravo! Bravo!*" he yelled. "Give the artist the praise that is his due, then. *Bravissimo!*"

His hand went to his armpit, where was the thing so many knew of, snugged tight. He clapped his hands together loudly, scowled menacingly at them all. Gecko and the others began to applaud. Thus assured of the safety of it, the people, fearing not thereby to anger the men of the queer trade, whose nature all save Frascali knew, broke out into a tumult of cheering. At once Frascali's face lighted up with smiles, and he bowed.

"Call him to me and introduce me to him," Masso said to Paula, who, wide-eyed, incredulous, had watched this odd outcome.

"But I thought," she began, "you were seeking him, for a *purpose*; a particular

purpose! But remember I did not go to him until you had taken up with that chorus singer."

"I forgive him for taking you," he said grandly, "because he is such a fine 'cellist. A man who can play the 'cello like that deserves the best in life. I wish to congratulate him, as artist to artist; so call him here. I only came in to hear him. I had *one* other purpose in view. I wish now to pay him a personal tribute of praise."

"Already, by not doing what you came to do," she said, "you have paid him the perfect tribute."

She smiled knowingly and beckoned to Frascali, who came.

"Eh!" Masso whispered, arising to greet her lover. "You women are wise—readers of the mind. Be at ease; with his bow he has earned more than his life—his thumb of golden melody."

He called Gecko to him, handed him a roll of something and whispered to him: "You take this to Papaloudis and tell him I will return the remainder in due time, and that I decline to fulfil his commission. I am going to stay to drink a bottle of Chianti with my two friends here. Now, go!"