

margo



dio



gwynn



cassandra

ASTRA'S
 TOWER
 Leaflet #1
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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Most of the members of the F A P A have already been introduced to Gwynn Leynier, the hero of the "Sevener" tales. A flattering number of you have requested that, rather than writing "about" the Sevener stories and the characters therein, that I forthwith publish excerpts from the stories themselves. And without further ado I present this leaflet, which introduces not only Gwynn, but several other of the "Seveners."

At the time when I planned and wrote the first of the Sevener tales (not counting various juvenilia) I named it "The Dark Flower", in blissful ignorance that the renowned English romantic writer, John Galsworthy, had written a great novel by that name. However, having remedied this gap in my literary education, I am ready and willing to confess that this leaflet takes its form from Galsworthy's novel -- the effect of three women on a sensitive young man.

The title, and theme, of Galsworthy's novel, is taken from a dark-red flower, a carnation, given to the young hero by his first sweetheart, and its recurrent symbolism in the other loves, the first of which ends in disillusion, the second in tragedy, the third in renunciation. This all-too-familiar Tales-of-Hoffman theme has been used in other books; but I will admit my indebtedness only to Galsworthy.

This leaflet, consisting of episodes from Whip Hand, and The Children of Kings, as well as the preliminary incident taken from The Dark Flower, has a unity not of symbolism but of place. Three times in his life, and only three times, his fate led Gwynn Leynier to an abandoned shepherd's cabin at the edge of the moorlands of Armida; each time in the company of one of the three women who shaped his fate. The three incidents, then, have been changed only slightly to compensate for their presentation out of context, to make them self-contained and to eliminate the necessary for explanatory footnotes and synopses of the stories from which they were taken. Whether or not this process has been successful is for the readers to judge.

* * * * *

The following notes were written months ago, while this leaflet was still an unborn brainchild, but as far as I am concerned, they still apply. I would like to own myself, however, somewhat unsatisfied with the final, or Cassandra, episode-- a not incomprehensible result of the wanton telescoping of three chapters into four pages, and censoring phrases meaningless to readers unfamiliar with the former books.

Lastly, but far from leastly; compliments to Max Keasler, who from my briefly scribbled notes brought to life characters who formerly existed only in my brain, and to Redd Boggs, whose introductory poem seems to me admirably to sum up the theme of this leaflet. What that is, the individual reader must decide for himself, or for herself.

.....Marion Zimmer Bradley

LOVE AS AN IDEAL

The flame unwrinkled upward
as the living cyclone whirled,
obliged to blindly seek
the edges of the world,

and, over all, the rain,
alive to destiny,
sought pores and crevices
under the rooted tree;

but being you, sweet lady,
you do not strive, but draw;
you're essence in yourself,
divine, without a flaw.

But I become, like circles,
aspiring to be right,
all sensible to Form,
to drown my soul in light.

Tell me with just one word:
where shall my love aspire --
the center or the edge?
Shall it be earth or fire?

--REDD BOGGS

I

Marga of the Darriells

The flight was already hopeless.

Gwynn pulled his horse to a stop, looking at the girl who rode beside him. "This finishes us," he said slowly, "The snow will drift down across the canyon. If we'd crossed yesterday-- but now we couldn't make it. We can either ride like hell for Armida-- and probably freeze on the moors -- or we can crawl back to Aldaran-- and make up some good lie."

The drooping girl drew her head courageously erect. "We won't go back! They'd take me away, and I'd never see you again!"

Gwynn shrugged. "Well, we're already on Armida land, we'll try for it. One thing-- I know these moors. Kadarin's mountain-bred; scared of open land. in a blizzard, he might not--"

"I'm afraid of open land, too--" Marga said shakily.

"I know, preciosa. But it's our only chance. Here-- you ride with me. Your horse will follow all right." Leaning over, he lifted her from the saddle and settled her in front of him. In his own heart, Gwynn knew it was less to protect her than to reassure himself with her closeness. "Now I can't lose you," he said in her ear, and she leaned back against him a little; not

enough to hinder his riding, but close enough to comfort them both.

Gwynn was never again to ride in snow without feeling Marga close in his arms and the white lashing of the snow racing and flurrying past their bent heads. The storm blotted out space and sense and sound and direction, but the moor-bred stallion sped sure-footedly along the hidden trail. They had ridden for what seemed hours when the horse halted, whining and lifting his feet uneasily. Gwynn peered through the blinding whiteness at the dark mass looming ahead. After a moment's deliberation he slid from the saddle. "Marga," he said, "Here's where we'll have to stay. The snow's getting thicker, and if we lost the trail--"

"Who lives here?"

"Herdsmen, sometimes. I've stayed here hunting." He waded thru the deep snow to the door, stumbling a little where the wind had piled it in drifts. "Old Nicolas! Old Nicolas!" he shouted, pounding; the wind blew his shout away and blew it back in eerie echo, but he had no other answer. He shouted to Marga. "Come on!"

The girl slid down, leading the horse forward. Gwynn thrust the door inward, then flung it hard against the wind, bolting the storm outside. The cabin was dark and bare, furnished rudely but adequately, and utterly deserted. One corner, piled deep with hay, had served as stable; into this corner Gwynn led and tethered the horse, without glancing at Marga; then turned back, staring with something like anger at her. Suddenly "Be damned to them all!" he said savagely, and strode to the fireplace where some vanished herdsman had left wood piled. He struck fire; Marga came and stood close, watching. "Can I help?"

"No. You rest." He spoke irritably. He dragged the tinking from one ragged couch, pulled it to the fire, covered it with his cloak and gently pushed Marga down. "Here-- by the fire. You little fool, you're freezing!" He pulled off her boots, and began to rub the chilled bare toes with his hands.

"You're hurting!" the girl protested. He looked ruefully at his roughened hands, but went on without stopping. "It wouldn't help for you to go lame from frostbite!" he snapped. Marga laughed, with a sudden flare of spirit. "How you worry! Do you think I am made of silk?" she protested. Gwynn looked up suddenly and met her eyes; his smile faded. He said quietly "Yes. I do."

They toasted meat and bread from the saddlebags; even the panic of flight had not impaired their appetites, and they ate like the healthy children they were. He had a stone bottle of the mountain wine; they both despised the thick, sweetish stuff, but Gwynn drank a little and made the still-shivering Marga swallow a few mouthfuls. "Marga-- are you still so cold?"

"No-- not cold-- but--" her voice caught in a shivering sob.

Gwynn sat up straight, looking at her gravely. "Listen, Marga mea, are you still afraid of me, preciosa? You know--"

"No--not-- of you--" Marga breathed, "But-- they'll follow us, and send me back-- back to the-- Sharra-- shrine, and I was--sworn, and now that I've-- forsaken-- the-- Goddess--"

"Just let them try to touch you!" The boy's voice was savage. "They'll have to kill me before they drag you back to that-- damn shrine!" He tried to quiet his voice, to reassure her. "I'll take you to my cousin Cassandra. We were betrothed, but she will be good to you."

"Betrothed? You never told me! Is she-- pretty? Do you--"

"She's exquisite. You'll love her. She'll love you, too."

"Do you -- are you in love with her?"

"With Cassandra?" Gwynn chuckled. "You jealous baby! Goodness, no! She's like a sister!"

Silence again, while Marga drowsed and Gwynn stared into the fire. He was tasting maturity for the first time. Marga was so young, she must never regret or be afraid..... it was all very strange and still, and Gwynn, in years after, remembered with incredulous disbelief that he had no thought of any further lovemaking than this, to sprawl with his head in her lap and her hands now and again rumpling his hair. They talked in undertones for an hour, but at last the fire burned down, and Marga's voice grew sleepy. Gwynn murmured "You're tired, preciosa. Sleep." He pulled the cloak up over her. She murmured drowsily "You'll be cold. Take some of the cover!"

Gwynn's face burned a moment in the darkness, but after a moment he spread the cloak over them both. She snuggled her face in his shoulder. "This is nice," she murmured, and he kissed her hair softly. "I'm glad you think so-- because I'll never let you go. Go to sleep." She was already asleep, but Gwynn lay awake for minutes, feeling love like a hurting thing in him. Whatever happened, this girl must be safe---

Hours later he woke with a start, hearing hooves. The storm had quietened; it was still dark, but the grey bitter dawn was beginning to steal through the chinked wall. Gwynn moved gently from Marga's side, loosening his knife; then sat by her side, hopeless, shielding her eyes from the light.

Kadarin's men found them like that. Rakhal's eyes in the dying firelight had an unholy scorn. "Pretty sight!" he mouthed the words maliciously, "Little Marga and the Leynier whelp, cuddled like proper sweethearts!" His laugh was a whiplash; he bent and caught Marga's bare arm, twisting it cruelly. "Wake up, girl. Your fun is over."

She woke with a scream of pain, and Gwynn's knife was out, as he sprang up facing the man wrathfully. "Let her alone, you-- werewolf-whelp! She is my wife."

"Wife!" Rakhal Kadarin howled laughter. "Yours?" He pulled the girl roughly to her feet, and Gwynn leaped at him---

"Hold him," Kadarin commanded.

Gwynn was six feet tall, and strong for his age; but no boy of seventeen is a match for four hefty trailmen. They held him exhausted at last, gasping. "Renegade son of-- a wolf's bit--"

The whip in Kadarin's hand cut off his voice in a strangled cry, with a quick lash that laid Gwynn's face bare to the bone. He raised the whip again. Marga screamed, fighting Kadarin's other hand that held her; she got one hand free, raked her nails down his face; he dropped the whip, shaking the girl till her head flopped limply, then pushed her down in the straw where she lay sobbing weakly, too bruised to rise. Gwynn stood collapsed between the trailmen, blood streaming down his face.

The laughter was gone from Kadarin's face. He bent and ceremoniously lifted Marga to her feet. At his signal, the trailmen freed Gwynn and he caught Marga crushingly to him, holding her away from Rakhal. "Gwynn-- Gwynn, your face--" Marga sobbed.

"Don't cry, preciosa--" he muttered, "Keep your head--"

"Marga," Kadarin spoke gently, "You, Sharra's priestess, married this Sevenser runagate?"

Gwynn thrust Marga behind him, his voice cracking in blind fury. "Don't call her priestess! I'll kill her myself before

she goes to that dirty shrine again!"

Kadarin wet his lips. "Nobody's going to be killed ro do any killing. Marga, you; answer me, if you want your lover's life. Are you his wife-- or his bride alone?"

"My wife" snapped Gwynn before Marga could dare her brother's eyes. But the question had hit home. He was berating himself for a young fool, for an idiot, for a childish imbecile. He knew perfectly well the laws governing Sharra's servants. It had been, for two days and two nights, in his power to put Marga completely and forever out of the reach of Sharra. What idiocy had made him delay until too late?

Kadarin said musingly "I don't believe you'd have had the sense. A pity we have no women here. But lacking them--" with a swift movement he caught Marga away from Gwynn and signed to the trailmen to hold the boy. Guessing his intent, the rude men guffawed as he dragged the struggling, screaming girl forward. Gwynn was struggling between the men, swearing with maniac fury. Suddenly Kadarin loosed Marga's arms.

"I've no mind to shame my sister before these men," he said angrily. "Don't force me to it!" Marga dropped to her knees, her face a ghostly white.

"Pity us," she begged, "Pity us-- brother!"

"So," Kadarin frowned, "I leave you to Sharra's pity, then. You go to the fires this spring! You know your fate-- if you have lied to me. I thought as much; a pair of silly children playing at sweethearts!" He jerked his head at the trailmen; they released Gwynn and he came slowly forward. Marga was still kneeling in the firelight; she trembled, then rebelliously she made an archaic sign with her hands. "Kadarin, Sharra-" she murmured, "Let it be so." Her hand was tight in appeal on Gwynn's. The boy bent his head. "Kadarin, Sharra," he acknowledged helplessly.

"You were wise," Kadarin said bitterly. "Had it been true marriage, young Leynier--" he nudged the whip with his foot, "And for Marga--" his oninous glance went around the room, lighting on each man in turn, "The usual fate." He looked at the boy and girl, somberly. "Your punishment, Marga; you serve at the fires-- you lover at the pole of your power! You know the law-- you may prepare him. O priestess!" His sudden bitter laughter sounded loud. He gestured roughly to the men. "Get the horses. We ride back to Aldaran tonight." The door of the hut banged behind him.

The trailmen closed in, ceremonious but thorough as they bound Gwynn's hands and set him on a horse; he saw Marga, untouched, taken up and led along. He followed without protest.

There would be another chance-- for life or death.

II

Dio Ridenow of Serrē

Gwynn lingered interminably in the stables, fussing about the horses, a dark confusion blurring his senses. Now he was in the very devil of a fix...! Aldones only knew what that minx Dio was thinking. Perhaps, then, he should have taken her to Armida where she could be placed under the proper care of his sister.....but he would expose no good young girl to 'D on Estaban's bawdy glances and words and surreptitious fingerings.. aaagh, he snarled at himself angrily, stop being so damn!

sanctimonious? How are you any better than your precious father now, my boy?

Because, whatever he might tell himself, whatever excuse he might make, he knew that-- in some secret place inside of him-- this he had planned, since the moment when Kermiac had thumbed the greasy dice across the table. Dio knew it too, he guessed--- else what had her final taunts meant? Certainly she had not been afraid of Kermiac. Her mockery still rang in his ears. "Kermiac? That -- that she-male!"

He shrugged and tramped through the mucky grass toward the cabin. The heat had died a little, but the ground still felt x swampy underfoot, and a rank pine-smell from the thick low trees around the door made his head swim a little. Dio-- a slim, hard little thing she was-- she would be like a gold lynx-kitten, like the tawny young lynx Mario had tamed -- Gwynn laughed mockingly at himself. "She knows there's no chemise under my breeches!" he muttered, and went in. Inside it was cooler, and Andres had made the place clean and habitable. But Dio was not in the room. The door to the inner, partitioned room stood ajar; Gwynn pushed it back and stepped into the small cubicle.

The girl was lying on the narrow cot under the window, her long riding-cloak huddled over her. Gwynn drew in his breath sharply and went to her side. Malaria again? She had had it when he did last year--- "Dio?" he asked. She turned her head a little, and Gwynn touched the tanned cheek. He felt the feverish heat under his hands, Her eyes seemed too bright, and she trembled a little under his hands. "Dio--" he said clumsily, "Dio, girl! What's wrong?"

The girl moved toward him a little and smiled; he sat down on the edge of the cot. "I'm all right, Gwynn; don't look so frightened. How you worry!" she teased. "You got into this by worrying about me. Why?"

Gwynn gave a short little laugh. The smile melted from Dio's face; She had never seemed to Gwynn to be a shy girl, but she spoke timidly, almost wistfully. "I--I feel so strange here. x It's such a -- a lonely place. Stay by me, Gwynn ---"

"Of course, dear --" The man put his arm around her and they stayed silent for a few minutes; then Gwynn pulled back the cloak. He saw with surprise that she no longer wore the boyish riding-dress, but something soft and silk-fine and dainty. Her x tawny curls made a little short cap around her ears. Her hair had the fresh scent of clover in a summer field. Gwynn half-lost himself, burrowing his face into the silk at her throat and he felt her small hand at his neck, a soft warm thing, a curled softness like a kitten climbing on his shoulder. Her voice was curiously soothing, curiously mature and unchildlike. Had she ever been a child? "Gwynn-- there--"

To his own tremendous self-disgust he discovered that he was shak ing, as if he had a chill himself. What was this slip of a girl that he should be afraid of her? Almost without volition, he gathered up in his arms; she was very still, trembling a very little, but-- he felt it, with that subtle awareness --- eager, expectant. The awareness of her trembling seared along his nerves like hot wires. He shared every nuance of her emotion now, and knew they shared that bittersweet of Severer* heritage, that touching of minds which no Severer, so swayed, so dominated by emotion, can ever control. Still his lips

framed the question against her mouth softly,

"You are not afraid of me now, Sweetheart?"

But he did not hear her answer "Why, no," for his own nerves had exploded and he was wrenched, numbed by the flare of the memory he had unwittingly evoked. The fragrant scent of pine-wood, the softness of a girl and the question he had shaped like that -- Dio melted from his arms, tenanted now by a mournful little ghost, a frightened girl-ghost trembling against his shirt and younger face, and again he heard or imagined that mournful little voice--

"No -- not of you-- but they'll follow us---"

Again the murdered child-wife he had thrust out of his mind lay trembling in his arms, and once again, Gwynn began to soothe her, gently, but half-mad with self-invoked torment. Vaguely he knew he was maddened, but he closed his mind to the knowledge, and went on with his wild endearments, while Dio lay paralyzed with a sudden new terror. Was Gwynn mad after all? Don Estaban had said ----

Gwynn's eyes were closed convulsively. Dio in his arms, warm and tender, and he-- he was numbed, held impotent by the unexorcised memory that thrust a wall of ice between them. What kept him so, he wondered in ragged torment? Not the ghost, no, his closed eyes could not shut out Marga from his sight, no, only to close away knowledge and recognition of this tawny intruder in his arms, this wanton Serre girl whose hair curled in a golden small halo instead of scattering auburn fires about them both ... he could see Marga, he could touch her, and this stranger, this blonde-girl-thing in his arms lay between them, her body a sword to cut him away from the beloved ghost

"Marga--" he muttered thickly, and the word was an incantation to dispel ten years and more, "Marga!"

Dio pulled away, wide-eyed with horror, knowing that she embraced madness. "Gwynn-- don't--" she begged, bitter with agony, and the man, clutching at her voice as a dying sinner grips the hand of the priest, floundered waist-deep from his own haunted brain.

"Dio-- it's you--" he whispered, half-aloud, unsurely.

The girl hung away from him, a white fear behind her eyes already giving way to a tormented pity, and she sensed, almost visibly, her youth going out to him and fading along the barren road of mercy. She felt his plea to her sanity, and guessed what he would have her do, but her whole soul rose in rebellion. Dio was very young, and deeply, stormily in love. The muttered name-- not hers-- had broken her heart. A cruelty she had not known she possessed flung words to her mind, but she denied them, she forced them back into an unspoken limbo, and only begged, stammering, "Gwynn-- oh, Gwynn! It's me-- Dio-- Dio--"

The struggling torment in his eyes flayed her. There was still a barrier between them, the remembered hell that came out of the past to spread him before her, crucified in dumb appeal.

"Dio--" he breathed again, and brokenly "Marga! Marga!" Dio, shaken by her own compassion, felt the twist of cold steel in her throat, and with desolate tenderness rending her, she gave herself up to his unspoken plea. She reached

out to him, slowly, then more surely, and drew his face down to hers.

"Marga, preciosa --" he breathed wildly again, and Dio, crying soundlessly, silenced the name with her lips.

III

Cassandra Marceau-Leynier

The summer faded. Now the nights were sharp with frost, and by day the tang of forest fire swept down from the hills. From some far place in his spirit, Gwynn was rallying. Days, he was still content to lie drowsing with closed eyes, dim pictures coming and going across his mind; and to lie half-dreaming thru the nights, watching the firelight flickering on the wall. Now and then, Cassandra spoke to him, but he either did not answer or answered so vaguely that Cassandra knew he had not recognized her. Still, as the torn shoulder healed, the scars on his mind had begun to close, and one day he drifted up out of the long dream and lay with alert eyes, knowing where he was. "By that fire," he allowed himself to remember, I slept one night with Marga in my arms. Surely not twenty years ago? Whips had cut his face, and now he was healed-- of a greater wound. How had he come here? He remembered the battle by the river-- the bomb-pain that tore his arm half loose, and the long night on the bank with Rafe raving and cursing near him, and the sudden quiet at sunrise when Rafe had fainted or died -- he suddenly became conscious that Cassandra was sitting by the window. How-- and why-- had she come here? The problem stirred his mind only lazily; he lay watching her with lowered lids, content to look at ~~her~~ her fantastic beauty. She seemed so frail and small, so remote ~~am~~ and untouchable-- curiously untouched; at thirty, she looked twenty. Her profile was as innocent and dainty as a child's. She was sewing, a rare thing for her; her little fingers made a small flicker back and forth. Had he in truth ever possessed this distant little saint? Had she truly borne him children and surmounted the tragedy of their oldest son? Gwynn's thoughts grew grim. Yes; their poor little Val was real enough. At his birth they had known that the curse on Cassandra's line was no idle superstition. He had reaped the fruit of a blood old and curiously tainted. In his frail babyhood, they had feared for his life; now they knew that would have been the lesser pain. The intelligence in Val's eyes was voiceless; sometimes he seemed normal, they had taught him to walk and to speak, but with such loving toil that their hearts had sickened while they loved. Now and then, accessible, he would speak with a wild, beautiful understanding; but his terrible remoteness held them accursed; he was fey, a faun-child; he could not understand their simple speech, and for weeks altogether he would retreat into some queer fastness in his soul, whether mad or only dreaming who could tell? Mike had looked grave and talked of mutations and evolution. Gwynn only thought, with choking misery, of Mike's own healthy sons, and returned at night to kneel by the crib of his wild changeling-child, denied even tears.

Gwynn looked at Cassandra, his throat tight. Their two daughters had seemed normal, though strangely frail. The second son had been-- like Val, and Gwynn could not honestly regret it

when he had died before his weaning. Twice after that, the breathless hope; twice, disappointment. With a sudden stab of memory, Gwynn remembered Cassandra's words, murmured just before he had left Arnida this time. Hope-- hope again--

The memory shook him free of his lethargy of months.

"Cassandra!" he said. His voice came out a husky whisper.

The woman turned, then dropped her sewing and hurried across the room. "Gwynn! Oh--"

"Have you been here long?"

"Weeks. You've had the lung-fever; you nearly died. Don't you remember, Gwynn? We've talked before."

Gwynn tried to remember. The effort was exhausting. "Dinly," he said, "I can't remember anything much after the shells exploded. Is Rafe--" he stopped, reading the answer in her eyes.

"Rafe died," she said. "We found you together; he was dead, and you-- just breathing. We didn't think you'd live through the day. We couldn't take you to Arnida, even."

Gwynn closed his eyes. "Poor Rafe--" he said. "Mike?"

"He's as well as ever. He went back to Serre; Dio has a little daughter, born two weeks ago."

"Good," said Gwynn, and meant it; he could think of Dio and Mike without jealousy now. He had long resolved, with all the manhood in him, that Cassandra should never know how he envied Mike and Dio. He fought away the treachery that if he had married Dio, he might have had a normal son-- he said tightly "I remember what you told me before I left. You shouldn't have come here."

He could not see her eyes. "I doesn't matter," she said, "It was --" she paused, then flung Mike's phrase at him with a bitterness so deep-drowned that she herself did not know it was bitter, "Another mistake of nature." But at the hurt in his face, she relented a little. "It's really just as well."

"Yes. It's as well." The words sounded cruel to Gwynn, but try as he might he could find no way to soften it for her. Had she cried or broken down even a little, he could have comforted her, but her closed and bitter face repulsed him. He knew he did her injustice; it was not her fault she had been born into a family tainted by a curse. His had been the folly, hers the blame.

They did not speak much after that. Cassandra resumed her place at the window. Gwynn looked around the cabin; it touched him that Cassandra should have come here to care for him, to nurse him through a long and confining illness. This lonely hut was no place for a delicately-reared woman. She had never so much as dressed herself or brushed her own hair; now, weak from the loss of a child, she had come to him. He felt, guilty, unworthy. He had given her little in this marriage. He could not say she had failed him. He remembered the meticulous hours she spent patiently, teaching Val in his rare intervals of accessibility. He asked suddenly "Have you taken care of me alone, Cassandra?"

"Andres was here. I sent him to Arnida on an errand; he'll be back this evening. Tomorrow if you feel well enough we'll move you back to Arnida."

"I feel well enough," he told her. Suddenly he begged "Come here and sit by me--"

"If you like." She came and sat on the edge of the bed, smiling into his face. The place, the old memories, made Gwynn's mind twitch; but the pain was gone. Quite suddenly, he smiled at her, a soft, tender smile.

"Marga," he said gently.

Her look of pain made him contrite. Once, in the first rebellious year of their marriage-- eight years ago-- he had murmured, in a moment ~~xx~~ when he was carried away by passion, "Marga!" and her hysterical misery had precipitated one of those deep scars which never heal between a man and his wife. But now her face was even and she reached out and took his hand in hers, understanding what he meant. "You were here with her?" She asked. Her voice was so soft that he could have pretended not to hear without losing face, but but he said "Yes, I was. Years ago. I was only a boy then." Suddenly, the floodgates opened and he found himself talking of Marga as he had never talked to anyone. "It's strange. I've forgotten her-- her death now. I can think of her, living. It isn't-- do you understand?"

"I understand." She held on to his clenched hands with her two little ones, tears on her face, listening, less to his words than to their echo in her mind. She had been hurtlingly jealous of Gwynn's dead child-wife; it had been torment to know that Marga had seen in Gwynn something he had never, till tonight, shown any other woman. What had it been, burned on his heart as Sharra's fires had been burned on his body? As Gwynn's voice trailed silent, she said softly "I remember Marga so well. I loved her, because of you." She was remembering; her own love for Gwynn had been born in that hour when Marga, in the peace before her death, had smiled that white radiant smile and said-- in her voice so curiously gay and tender, "Be good to Gwynn!" She had raised her face, then, and kissed Cassandra as a child kisses its mother goodnight; and somehow, Cassandra felt that from Marga's dying lips something had passed into her, some virtue in that strange kiss, because from that night until their marriage twelve years later, she had known inescapably that she loved Gwynn. How could he not have known?

Cassandra startled Gwynn then by deliberately breaking the mood of sympathy and tragedy. "Gwynn," she said sternly, "Lysara Heriot is at Arnida now."

Gwynn shut his eyes. "Zandru send me scorpion whips," he prayed. He had utterly forgotten the girl; it had been a brief infatuation, no more, and Cassandra's news had driven the last traces from his mind. Bleakly, he remembered that Cassandra's coming child was-- not to be. "I-- I had--"

"I know," Cassandra cut his explanation short. "I do not interfere with what you do. It is between you and her. But the girl is with child; and ---"

"Did she come to you?"

"No. I went to her. I have known from the beginning."

"Are you very angry?"

Cassandra shook her head. She said with a humility that hurt him "I have no right to be angry. Your father --" (*)

"No--" Gwynn begged, "I could not humiliate you that way! There is no more to be said."

Cassandra said "There is much. Her child might be a son. Perhaps -- for an heir to Arnida."

(*) Gwynn was the son of Don Esteban's second, morganatic wife, Mara Aldaran, a Darriell. Gwynn's older brother, a cripple, was debarred by Severer law from being his father's heir; only those physically and mentally competent are allowed to sit in the Seveners.

Gwynn did not answer at once, and Cassandra added in a low voice "I think the girl loves you."

Suddenly, eager to right himself in his wife's eyes and yet do her will, Gwynn broke out "Very well. We will take the child. I will send her away; truly, she is nothing to me---"

The woman's voice was suddenly cold and far away. "Nothing but the mother of your son-- which I am not." Her voice softened and she touched Gwynn's hand. "I understand. You are thinking of me. Don't you see that in shaming her, you shame yourself and me as well? I --" she stopped and said shyly, turning her face away, "I would show her only honor."

"I do not love her," said Gwynn with a quiet honesty.

Cassandra smiled without bitterness. "If you did, perhaps I could not be quite so--"

"Generous?"

"I am not generous. I want-- freedom for Val. If you had a- a normal son, he would be free to be-- what he is. Whatever that may be." She paused. "I would not find it hard to honor any woman who could give me-- you-- us, that."

The room was very silent. Two sticks fell together in the fire with a whispering sound, and the smell of pines blew through the open window. Gwynn lay looking at Cassandra, but he did not see her face. He was seeing other faces against this same cabin, other voices, which came and faded swiftly; ghosts that moved, but did not torment him. Faces. Voices. Memories. One by one, they ~~walked~~ smiled, like ghosts that were bidding him goodbye forever.

Far away, Gwynn ~~found~~ heard the sound of hooves on the road. For a moment, he hung un-nerved between today and yesterday; then the past dimmed and he knew he had come the full circle. He laid his hand over Cassandra's. "That will be Andres coming now."

"Yes." She said softly "I've missed the children."

The comfort Gwynn had wanted to give before came out of his suddenly-overflowing heart. He spoke out of a deep conviction. "I have been cruel to you. I am sorry about-- the other. But we have Val, and the little girls-- and they need you. They need you too much to risk again. I need you too much. I never knew how much. We will have no more children, Cassandra."

"We do not need them," she agreed quietly. "Not now."

Outside they heard the horses approaching, and Gwynn knew that the interlude was about to end, that soon Andres would be there and they would return, tomorrow, to Armida. It was waiting for them, Armida and the children and Lysare's son-to-be, and all the rest of life.

In a sense, he knew, he had never left this cabin, and he would never leave it. His soul was somewhere here. He had left it here twenty years ago, but now he had found it, and he would take it with him when he went. But not quite all. In its place he was leaving the last of his youth; but he did not regret it.

He smiled up at Cassandra, and his marred face looked curiously young and at ease.

"Yes," he said, "Now we can go back."

THE END



ASTRA'S TOWER

LEAFLET # 1

is a Serious Destructive Fanzine,
written, edited and published by Marion
Zimmer Bradley, Box 246, Rochester, Tex.
It comprises such sub-titles as ASTRA'S
TOWEL, GEMINI, GEMINI JUNIOR and ASTRA'S
TOWER LEAFLET SERIES.

...it wrings from us the anguished howl of a werewolf in childbed..

I wrote a novel once about Lesbians, and everybody thought I was a queer. I turned from that to Weird Tales and everybody thought I was a follower of oriental mystic philosophy. I have done some experimenting with psychic phenomena and some people have gained the impression that I am a spiritist. For obvious reasons, I would not dream of writing a muder mystery.

Manly Banister- TLMA

...after all, it's your reputation!

"How about THE LOVERS ? Is it any good ? I like the cover for it -- I like it better than the gadget covers on recent issues --- but I don't dare to read the story that goes with it. The blurb built the yarn too high for it to match. It's probably the same old crud and I'd rather enjoy the cover without the spoilment of associating it with a stupid story...

(a FAPA correspondent)

(That's the most beautifully perverted reason for not reading a given story that we ever heard! Cardinal Spellman could hardly do better than that!)

yet another variation; we are clucks. yacking.....

DEPARTMENT OF YOU BET ;

"But surely it isn't against the law just to possess obscene postcards in the United States, is it ? What's the world coming to! " ... Walter Willis, in TANGENT, FAPA /59

ELSA (English girl) ; "But surely it wasn't against the law to ... (simply) ..strip and swim naked, was it ?

ANDREW (American) : Yes, I reckon maybe it was. There's a fool law against absolutely anything you want to do, in the States. That's what makes blackmail so easy.

...Talbot Mundy in OLD UGLY FACE;