

BINDING DELUXE

By DAVID H. KELLER, M. D.

"I do not like women!"

"I feel the same way," was my reply. "Now when it comes to men, or books, why that is something different."

We were in the turkish bath, and just starting in with the sweat. Only two of us in the room, on steamer chairs, temperature at one hundred and seventy, and feeling much more like two hundred. The other man had been in for some time before I entered and looked as though he were beginning to suffer. At least he had reached the point of irritation. I thought that this cutaneous irritability might be the reason for his outburst against the fair sex. At least there was no other reason. To make it stronger he repeated the idea with variations,

"I just don't like them. They do things differently. They think differently. I don't even know that they can think; perhaps just react to their emotions. Why, I have seen women do things that a man wouldn't think of doing. Fond of books?"

"You bet!" I replied. "Ought to be. I collect them and bind them. Make a living binding and spend it buying. Make a specialty of early Pennsylvania imprints."

"I have some nice books." He sighed as he said it, and then continued. "A few of them are rather rare. Odd! I'm a binder myself. Must get out of here. I can just stand so much and then the heat worries me."

He walked out, a rather portly, middle aged man. Ten minutes later I followed him. An hour later I caught up with him in the sun ray room. He was exposing his back to the lamps. I looked at that back; sat down quietly on the cot next to his, and kept on looking. At last I was satisfied that what I saw on his skin was really there, and then made myself comfortable, and started to think it over. I had never seen anything like that back. Not once, on all the thousands and hundreds of thousands of men I had examined in the army had I ever seen a back like that.

Of course it was something that could not be discussed, certainly nothing that one man could ask another man about; but if he offered to tell you of his own accord, it certainly would be interesting.

After the alcohol rub I invited him to have something to eat. Wrapped in sheets we became acquainted over a Swiss sandwich and a cup of coffee. We found that, being book binders, we had much in common. He was an older man than I, perhaps twenty years older, but when I told him of binding an Erotica in rattlesnake skin for a customer he had to acknowledge that it was a new idea.

"And rather appropriate," he added, 'because it would not have been an erotica without having a woman in it for a villain, and if a woman is not a rattlesnake, I'd like to have you tell me just what she is.'

I agreed with him. At least I let him think I did. He evidently did not like women, and I wanted to know why; but above all I wanted to know about his back. So I sat there, saying all the mean things I could think of about the sex, and rather glad that I was in a bath house instead of my own home, where my wife could hear me. Of course she would have known I was just fooling but she never did like it if I gave my opinion of her sisters.

It all ended in his inviting me to visit him the next time I came to Boston. I told him that it would be soon, and he said that the sooner it was the better pleased he would be, and could I bring him over some rattlesnake skin?

Three weeks later I sat in his library. The supper served by the Chinese boy was fine, and his wine and tobacco even better. We were rather mellow and confidential by the time the supper was over.

Remembering his favorite dislike I ventured to recall it.

"I don't like women!"

"Are you married?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted.

"Then you ought to know about them. If they can they certainly will make a fool out of a man. I was in love once, just once, but the woman nearly killed me and that taught me a lesson. Is your wife sadistic? Has she ever tried to kill you?"

"Not yet. Of course she has told me several times what she thinks of my bridge game."

"Better be careful. She may poison you some day."

"I hope not."

"And so do I. But you be on your guard. I'm naturally suspicious of all of them and that's why I am alive today and the other poor fellows dead."

"So some of them died?"

"Twenty-five of them. Some of my best friends among them. Of course a few I was not acquainted with, but all were nice boys."

"Was it during the war?" I asked. I wanted to get him started on the story, and was sure that he would tell it if it were properly led up to.

"It was a war. A sure enough war, but rather one sided. Men have a poor show when a woman gets after them."

"Women are clever," I admitted.

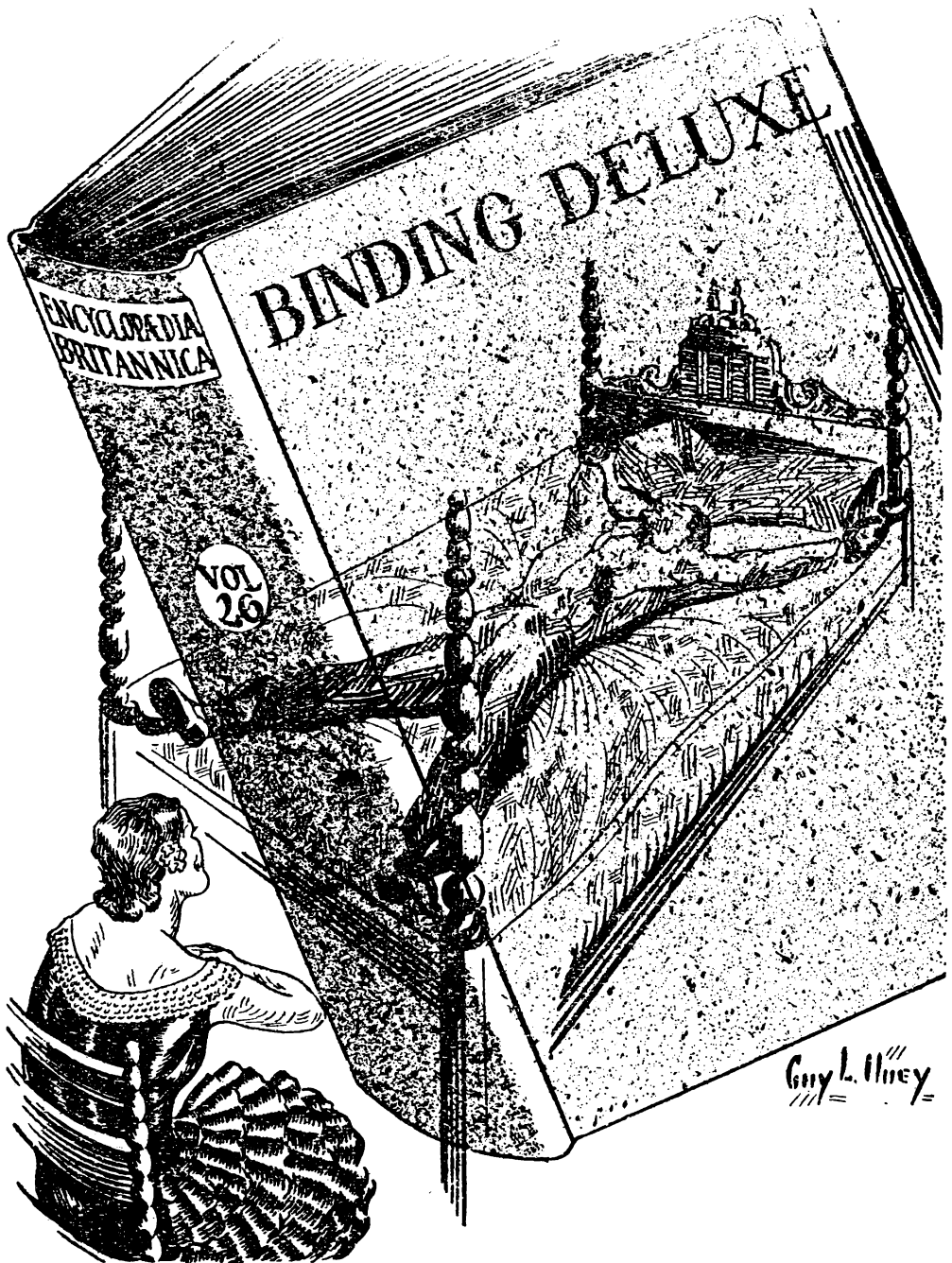
"This one was, and beautiful. Just about as wonderful a female as the Devil ever made."

"Genesis states she was first made by another Deity."

"Wrong!" he cried. "Man, perhaps, was made in the Garden, but the woman was made Below and crawled over the fence in the dark of the moon. Poor Adam! If he had only had enough sense to hit her on the head with a big stone, and continued the race with some form of parthenogenesis, what a beautiful world it would have been."

"Have another drink and tell me the whole story," I urged.

"It was some years ago, that it started," he began. "You were probably in High School at the time. Some of us in the trade thought of organizing an international association of bookbinders. There were twenty-six of us, all wealthy, all young and all enthusiastic over books and their covers. We were all single, wedded, you might say, to our art. We held a meeting once a year, read papers and exhibited specimens of our bindings. A week, out of every fifty-two, spent in good fellowship, clean, wholesome, profitable pleasure. For four years we carried on the meetings and then a woman applied for membership. It was at the London meeting. She came well introduced, and it was just impossible to deny her the right to attend the meetings of the Society. As a member of the organization, I was able to prevent her being elected to membership, but some of the younger fellows thought I was wrong. They argued that so long as she was a bookbinder she should be permitted to join and that there was nothing in the



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laws to keep a woman out. I tried to amend the by-laws, but I was outvoted. So there she was, and the next year she turned up at Paris and had a paper all ready to read.

"I guess she knew how to bind a book. In fact I know that she knew how, but some of the statements she made in that paper were just about impossible and showed her to be just an amateur and not at all the proper person to belong to our society. In the discussion of her paper we told her so. Man after man rose and explained to her just how much in error she was in this point and that. She waited till we were through our criticisms and then simply said she was right and she knew she was right because she had the Encyclopaedia Britannica, twenty-six volumes of it, and the very statement she had made was in those twenty-six books, as we could find out for ourselves if we would only take the trouble to do so. At the very idea that a person could learn to bind a book by reading the Britannica, we laughed. Finally we became rather silly about it, and passed from simple laughter to masculine heehawing. She simply sat there, first red and then white, and at last she said she would see us later on and left the room. Some of the men realized then that they had behaved harshly to a beautiful woman and started to make amends.

"At the next meeting she failed to attend. Ten of our younger members likewise were absent. Just sixteen present at Chicago. At the San Francisco meeting the following year there were only six, and the following year not one of the old crowd accepted my invitation to come to Boston. Not one! They were all either dead or fed up on the idea of an international society of Bookbinders.

"I was worried and decided to spend a few months and some money in finding out what was the matter with them. Investigation showed that all of them had done about the same thing. One by one in the last three years they had gone to Spain and disappeared. That seemed queer to me, but when I returned to Boston and found a letter there it became a little clearer.

"The Lady Leonora Sonada was asking me to come to Spain. The reason was not at all clear but it seemed that she was lonely and wanted my advice in regard to some of her work. Would I come if expenses and other financial matters were attended to? My mind was not working fast but at last I identified her. She was the bookbinder who had read such a foolish paper at the Paris meeting. All the rest of the boys had made the trip to

Spain and now she was asking me to make it. Why? And where were the other twenty-five?

"I went. With my fingers crossed and knowing I was doing something foolish, I went. Not till I met her in her Castle did I realize why I went. Once I saw her I knew. I was in love with her. Perhaps I had been in love with her from the first. Oh! Of course I was a fool, but I was younger then, and she was very beautiful.

"She entertained me. It was hard to understand it all. We were very much alone; there seemed to be no servants. At least I never saw anyone else. From the day I drove my car into the courtyard of her Castle to the day I drove out, we were alone; and she was very lovely.

"I cannot tell you what we talked about, but it must have been something silly, because you see I was in love with her and told her so. I forgot about the mystery of the twenty-five bookbinders. I forgot about my hatred of women, and the only thing I could remember was that I was very young.

"One night, after being particularly nice to me, she drugged me. When I awoke with a splitting headache, I found that she had me spread-eagled, tied hand and foot to the four corners of one of her Spanish beds. And she was in a chair, waiting for me to wake so she could talk to me. I didn't say anything, but I did a lot of thinking, especially about the other twenty-five bookbinders.

"It did not take her long to tell the story. It seems that after the Paris meeting she had become dissatisfied with her Britannica, not with the pages but with the bindings. So, one at a time, she had invited the members of the association, the men who had laughed at her, to come and visit her. One at a time she had made them insane with her beauty and one at a time she had drugged and tied them. Then, on their backs she had tattooed, in purple ink, the words,

ENCYCLOPAEDIA

BRITANNICA

VOL. 1

or VOL. 2, or 3, or 10 as the case might be. Later on she took the skin, tanned it and bound her volumes, one man's skin for each binding. And I was to serve as leather for the last one, volume "26".

Shivering, I laughed at my host. I had suspected all the

time, and now I knew he was spoofing me.

"But the thing is impossible!" I cried. "You cannot take enough skin off a man's back to bind a Britannica without killing him.

"Who said she didn't kill them?" he retorted savagely. Of course she killed them, and buried them. I saw the graveyard. Perhaps you do not believe me? It's all true. She told me about it and then she started to work on me. You saw my back in the bath house. She finished that part of the last job. Do you want to see it in a good light?"

"No," I replied, rather ashamed of my suspicions. "I saw your back. The words ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA VOL. 26, are there in purple ink and properly spaced so if you were skinned it would serve for a binding. But you know it really did not happen. Such things don't occur these days."

"I'll show you the books," he cried, and flung open a book case. There they were, with the titles in purple ink. I examined one.

"I never saw leather like that," I murmured.

"Probably not, since it is made from human skin. Well, there is all that is left of my twenty-five friends."

"It's a nice story," I said. "A nice bedtime story, but incomplete. You say twenty-five of your friends died. You were prepared for the last volume, your back shows that, yet there is volume 26 all bound like the rest. How about that?"

"Look at it," he urged.

I picked it out, and carefully examined it.

"It is different," I cried incredulously. "It's like the others but the leather is finer, of a different grain."

"It should be," he admitted, "for that last book is bound with female skin. That is all that is left of the Lady Leonora Sonada."

"No! You don't mean to say—"

"Just that. She thought she was clever, but I outwitted her. At the last moment I turned the tables on her. I bound that last book with her skin and now I have all of the old society together."

Rather gingerly I replaced the 26th volume.

"And that is why you hate women the way you do?" I asked.

"That's why," he laughed coldly. "Whenever I feel there is a woman becoming too interested in me I come in here and look at my ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA in the DeLuxe binding."