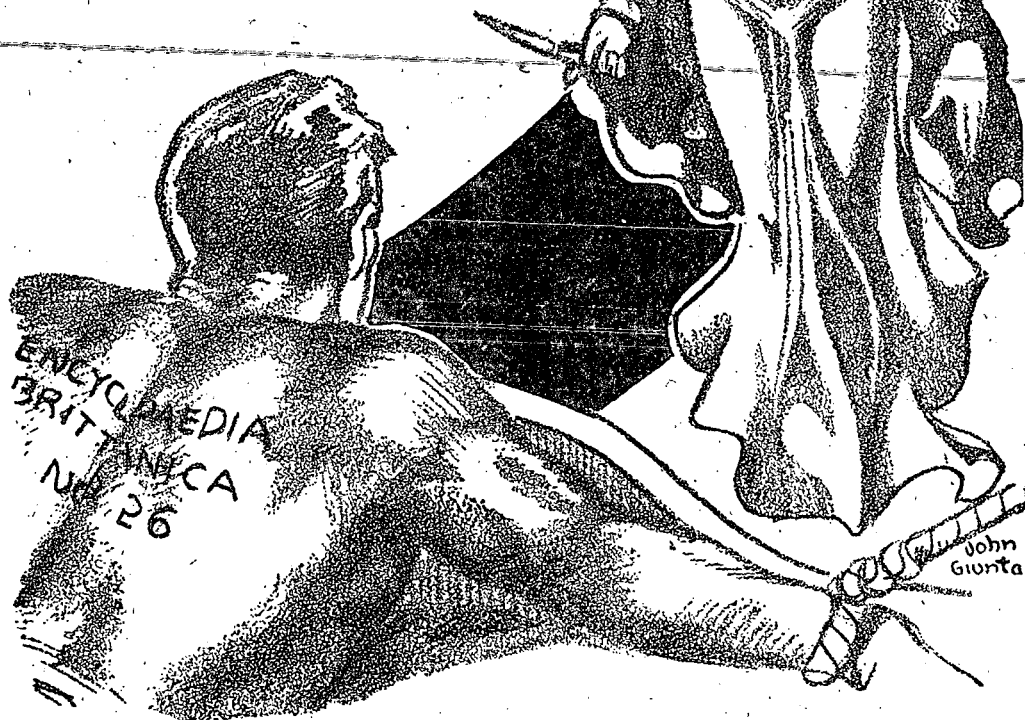


Bindings Deluxe

Certainly he hated women. Hadn't one tried to murder him, after first killing twenty-five of his best friends?



By DAVID H. KELLER

“I DON’T 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 be-

ginning the sweat. Only two of us in the room, on steamer chairs, with the temperature at one-hundred and seventy but feeling more like two hundred. The other man had evidently been in for some time before I entered for his appearance indicated that

he was beginning to suffer. At least he had surely reached the point of irritation. I thought this cutaneous irritability might be the reason for his outburst against the fair sex. At least there was no other obvious reason. To make his antipathy toward women in general all the stronger he repeated the idea with variations.

"I just don't like them. They do things differently; they think differently. I can't even say that I believe they think; perhaps they just react to their emotions. Why, I have seen women calmly do things that a man wouldn't think of. Fond of books?" he asked abruptly changing the subject.

"You bet!" I replied enthusiastically. "Ought to be. I collect and bind them as an avocation. I make some money by binding and spend it collecting. Make a specialty of early Pennsylvania imprints."

"I have some really nice books." He sighed as he said it. "A few of them are distinctly rare. Odd! I'm a binder myself. Must get out of here now. I can stand just 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, continuing to look, incredulous. At last I was satisfied that what I saw on his skin was really there and not an illusion, then I made myself comfortable on my cot and began to ponder this thing. 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 approaching the like of that one.

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

After the alcohol rub I invited him to have a snack of refreshment. Wrapped in sheets we became better acquainted over a Swiss sandwich and a cup of coffee. We found that, being bookbinders, we had much in common. He was an older man than I by perhaps twenty years and when I told him of having bound an *Erotica* in the skin of a diamond back rattler, for a customer, he acknowledged it to be both a new and unique idea.

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

I agreed with him. At least I let him think I did. His almost violent dislike of women intrigued me and I wanted his explanation of why he felt as he did. But more than that, I wanted the story I was sure was connected with his back. So I sat there, expounding largely on all the strange behavior of women which I had observed in my medical practice; called them traitors; cited history to prove them scheming, devious and cruel.

All the while I was talking thus I was glad I was in the bathhouse instead of my own home, where my wife might hear me. Of course she would have known I was just egging him on but she never did like it if I gave my opinion of her sisters.

It all ended by his inviting me to visit him the next time I was in Boston. The address he gave was in the Back Bay section. I told him I expected to visit his city soon and he replied that the sooner the better pleased he would be; and added with a sly wink:

"Do you suppose you could bring some rattlesnake skins?"

THREE weeks later I sat in his library. It was an aristocrat's room done in natural burled walnut panels between wide and well-filled glass-enclosed bookcases

which were built into the wall. The ceiling was of the same wood, carved in squares and supported by rough-hewn beams. Two large windows looked out across Boylston Street to the beautiful public gardens, which were colorful with fall foliage. At one end of the room was a great fireplace of Redstone granite facing flanked on either side by deep, restful leather upholstered chairs. Before this fireplace was a table set for supper.

"I thought you might enjoy a quiet evening here," my host remarked. "Besides, Ling, my Chinese boy, is a fine cook. I like the Chinese for many reasons, but chief of all possible reasons is the fact that they, as a nation as well as individuals, despise women."

The supper served by the quiet Chinese boy was excellent indeed; the wine of exquisite bouquet and the tobacco smooth and mild. By the time supper was over we were rather mellow and confidential.

I ventured to recall his great obsession by remarking, quite casually:

"Neither do I like women!"

"Are you married?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted with a wry twist to my lips to prevent the smile I could hardly resist.

"Too bad! You ought to really know about them. They certainly outdo themselves to make a fool of a man. I was in love once, just once though, but the woman nearly killed me— After that lesson—no more women." He was becoming vocally reminiscent. "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 me and men in general. But one can never be too sure of the female of the species, you know."

"Better be careful. She may poison you some day," he warned.

"Gracious! I hope not."

"So do I. But be on your guard. I'm

naturally suspicious of all these she-devils and that's why I'm alive today—and the other poor trusting fellows dead."

"Some of them died?"

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

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

"It was a war; a sure enough war, but terribly one-sided. Men have no show when a woman, especially an unscrupulous one, 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 that she was 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."

"Let's toast these brave men who have, for all these centuries, fought so valiantly against so wily a foe," I suggested.

We drained our glasses.

"Now tell me the story," I urged.

"It was some forty years ago when 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, young, and enthusiastic over fine books and their covers. The world was our market and playground where we spent countless happy hours digging in musty book piles and museums as children dig in the beach

sand. We were all single, except for the wedding with our art. We held meetings once a year, each in a different country, where we read papers, exhibited specimens and discussed all phases of the work and our discoveries. One week in every fifty-two, spent in goodfellowship, clean, wholesome, profitable pleasure. For four years we carried on the meetings—then a woman applied for membership.

"It was at the London meeting. She came well introduced—it seemed impossible to justify a denial of the privilege for her to attend the meetings of the Society. As a founder of the organization I was able to prevent her being elected to membership, even though 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; there was nothing in the laws to prevent a woman from becoming a member. I tried to amend the bylaws, but I was outvoted. So—there she was—a member.

"She turned up at Paris the next year with a lengthy paper all ready to read. I guess she knew how to bind a book. In fact I was much later to know that she knew how, but some of the statements made in that paper were all but, if not wholly impossible, and proved her to be a rank amateur. She was not the person to belong to our group of specialists.

"In the open discussion following the reading of her paper we told her so. Man after man rose and explained to her exactly how much in error she was on this point and that. She waited till we were through with our criticisms and then she said emphatically that she knew she was right because she owned an Encyclopædia Britannica, twenty-six volumes of it, and every statement she had made was in those twenty-six books; that we could discover for ourselves, if we would only trouble to do so. We laughed at the idea that a person could learn to bind a book, especially a

fine, rare one, by reading the Britannica. Finally we became silly about it and passed from simple laughter to masculine heehawing and lastly we were sarcastic.

"She sat stiffly, first flushed and then dead white. At last, rising, she said she would see us later on and walked unsteadily from the room. Some of the men realized then they had behaved harshly and most unmannerly to a beautiful and earnest woman and tried to make amends.

"The next meeting was at Chicago. She failed to attend. Ten of our younger members likewise were absent. Just sixteen of us were present. We were disturbed, in a way, for always the response had been unanimous—and now so many absent without any explanation. At San Francisco, the following year, there were only six of us and we were frankly astonished and discussed disbanding. But I pleaded for unity and a continuance—for another year, at least.

"Not one of the old crowd appeared at the meeting in my home in Boston. Not one! I decided they were all either married, dead or fed up on the idea of an international association—or perhaps they were too busy—but why not some word from some of them, especially those whom I had called friend?"

MY HOST paused long enough to replenish the glasses and I found I had been sitting rigidly, intent, as the story flowed from his lips.

"I was worried," he resumed, "and decided to spend a few months and a bit of money seeking some of them out and try to discover the reason of the breaking up of our group. Investigation showed they had all followed the same pattern of behavior; all had done the same thing. One by one they had gone to Spain and there all trace of them vanished. It all seemed very queer.

"I was all the more mystified when

I returned to Boston and found a letter, in a feminine hand, from Spain.

"It was an invitation from the Lady Leonora Sonada to visit her. The reasons she gave were not too clear; merely that she was lonely and was desirous of my advice regarding some difficulty in her work. Would I please come if expenses and other financial matters were attended to?

"Perhaps I was tired and distressed, anyway my mind was not working very fast. However, at last I identified her. She was the bookbinder who had read such a foolish paper at the Paris meeting. But Spain? Spain? Why all the rest of the boys had gone to Spain! And now I was being invited there! Why? And where were the other twenty-five? Spain!

"However, I went. With my fingers crossed and knowing I was doing something foolish, I went to Spain. Not until I met her in her castle did I realize why I had gone. Once I saw her I knew. I was in love with her; realized I had been in love with her from the first time I had seen her.

"Oh! Of course I was a fool, but I was younger then, and she was exquisitely beautiful and dainty as an elf.

"She entertained me delightfully. She sang like a lark and knew how to bedevil a man. We were very much alone; there seemed to be no servants—they must have been extraordinarily well trained—for surely there must have been some serving folk—but I never remember seeing any from the first day after I drove my car into the courtyard of her castle to the day I drove out, we were alone; and as I remarked, she was very lovely and enticing.

"I cannot tell you what we talked about—but it must have been all of romance, because you see, I was in love and I remember distinctly, of telling her so. We swam in the cool, blue lagoon under the palms, both in the warm sunlight and the soft sense-murdering light of the moon.

And, lying on the white sands, her fragrant, tempting self close to me, I forgot my hatred of women: I thought no more of the mystery of the twenty-five bookbinders. All I could think of was that she was delectable and desirable; that I was young and in love.

"One night she was especially beautiful in a soft, misty gown which clung to her, revealingly, so that I was half mad with desire to crush her to me, never to let her go from my arms. She was particularly nice to me—even yet I can't remain calm as I remember—for she was sly and full of evil plotting even as she accepted my caresses—and we drank deeply of that rare old Spanish wine.

"**A**T JUST what point I fell asleep I don't, of course, know, but when I woke I realized I had been drugged. My head was nearly splitting with pain and I found myself, face downward, spread-eagled, tied hand and foot to the four corners of one of her huge Spanish beds.

"And she sat there beside the bed, waiting for me to waken, still in that transparent gown intensifying her ravishing beauty—waiting for me to waken so that she might further torment me and talk to me. I didn't say anything, but I did a lot of thinking, especially about those 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 the bindings, which she decided to change. So one at a time, she had invited the members of the association to visit her, those men who had laughed at her. One at a time she had driven them insane with her beauty and wiles. I well knew her ability. And one at a time she had drugged them and tied them, as she had me. Then on their backs she had tattooed, in purple ink, the words:

ENCYCLOPÆDIA
BRITANNICA
VOL. I

or two or three or ten as the case might be. Careful lest she damage the skin she removed the derma as a pelt from an animal, 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 Twenty-six.

SHIVERING, I laughed hollowly, at my host. I had suspected all the time and now I knew that he was either insane or the greatest liar of all time.

"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—with a name on the marker at the head of each grave. Perhaps you do not believe me? It is all true. She told me about it and then started to work on me. You saw my back in the bathhouse. She finished the title part—of the last job. Do you want to see it in good light?"

"No. No, thanks," I hastened to disavow any desire for further investigation and ashamed of my suspicions. "I saw your back. The words ENCYCLOPÆDIA 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—not the way you tell it. Such things don't occur these days!"

"I'll show you the books!" he exclaimed, and flung open a bookcase. "There they are."

I rose to examine them—all the titles in

purple ink. I took one in my hand, felt of its smooth leather.

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

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

"It's a nice story," I said. "A nice, gentle, 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 twenty-six, all bound like the rest. How about that?"

"Look at it again," he urged.

I picked it out and carefully examined it.

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

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

"No! You don't mean—"

"Just that. She thought she was clever, but I outwitted her. She was very sure of herself. In an unguarded moment she lay the scalpel too close to my fingers—I used it to turn the tables on her. I bound that last volume with her skin. Now I have all the society together."

Gingerly I replaced Volume Twenty-six.

There was a definite discomfort at the pit of my stomach.

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

"That's why," he laughed coldly—so coldly that I shook as with an ague. "Whenever I feel there is a woman becoming interested in me I come in here and look at my ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA in Deluxe bindings."

Seventh Sister

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

THE night Seven Sisters was born, a squinch-owl hollered outside the cabin from sundown until the moment of her birth. Then it stopped its quavering cry. Everything stopped—the whippoorwills in the loblollies; the katydids in the fig tree beside the well; even the tree-frogs, burring their promise of rain as

*They came to her by night, hissed at her window and proffered silver
in return for her magic.*



"The dogs sounded nearer."