

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE ADVENTURES OF
HARRY RICHMOND.
VOLUME 8

George Meredith

**The Adventures of Harry
Richmond. Volume 8**

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CHAPTER LII

STRANGE REVELATIONS, AND MY GRANDFATHER HAS HIS LAST OUTBURST

My father and I stood at different windows, observing the unconcerned people below.

'Did you scheme to bring Prince Hermann over here as well?' I asked him.

He replied laughing: 'I really am not the wonderful wizard you think me, Richie. I left Prince Ernest's address as mine with Waddy in case the Frau Feld-Marschall should take it into her head to come. Further than that you must question Providence, which I humbly thank for its unflinching support, down to unexpected trifles. Only this—to you and to all of them: nothing bends me. I will not be robbed of the fruit of a lifetime.'

'Supposing I refuse?'

'You refuse, Richie, to restore the princess her character and the prince his serenity of mind at their urgent supplication? I am utterly unable to suppose it. You are married in the papers this morning. I grieve to say that the position of Prince Hermann is supremely ridiculous. I am bound to add he is a bold boy. It requires courage in one of the pretenders to the hand of the princess to undertake the office of intercessor, for he must know—the man must know in his heart that he is doing her no kindness. He does not appeal to me, you see. I have shown that my arrangements are unalterable. What he will make of your grandad! . . . Why on earth he should have been sent to—of all men in the world—your grandad, Richie!'

I was invited to sympathetic smiles of shrewd amusement.

He caught sight of friends, and threw up the window, saluting them.

The squire returned with my aunt Dorothy and Janet to behold the detested man communicating with the outer world from his own rooms. He shouted unceremoniously, 'Shut that window!' and it was easy to see that he had come back heavily armed for the offensive. 'Here, Mr. Richmond, I don't want all men to know you're in my apartments.'

'I forgot, sir, temporarily,' said my father, 'I had vacated the rooms for your convenience—be assured.'

An explanation on the subject of the rooms ensued between the old man and the ladies;—it did not improve his temper.

His sense of breeding, nevertheless, forced him to remark, 'I can't thank you, sir, for putting me under an obligation I should never have incurred myself.'

'Oh, I was happy to be of use to the ladies, Mr. Beltham, and require no small coin of exchange,' my father responded with the flourish of a pacifying hand. 'I have just heard from a posse of friends that the marriage is signalled in this morning's papers—numberless congratulations, I need not observe.'

'No, don't,' said the squire. 'Nobody'll understand them here, and I needn't ask you to sit down, because I don't want you to stop. I'll soon have done now; the game's played. Here, Harry, quick; has all that money been spent—no offence to you, but as a matter of business?'

'Not all, sir,' I was able to say.

'Half?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Three parts?'

'It may be.'

'And liabilities besides?'

'There are some.'

'You're not a liar. That'll do for you.'

He turned to my aunt: her eyes had shut.

'Dorothy, you've sold out twenty-five thousand pounds' worth of stock. You're a truthful woman, as I said, and so I won't treat you like a witness in a box. You gave it to Harry to help him out of his scrape. Why, short of staring lunacy, did you pass it through the hands of this man? He sweated his thousands out of it at the start. Why did you make a secret of it to make the man think his nonsense?—Ma'am, behave like a lady and my daughter,' he cried, fronting her, for the sudden and blunt attack had slackened her nerves; she moved as though to escape, and was bewildered. I stood overwhelmed. No wonder she had attempted to break up the scene.

'Tell me your object, Dorothy Beltham, in passing the money through the hands of this man? Were you for helping him to be a man of his word? Help the boy—that I understand. However, you were mistress of your money! I've no right to complain, if you will go spending a fortune to whitewash the blackamoor! Well, it's your own, you'll say. So it is: so 's your character!'

The egregious mildness of these interjections could not long be preserved.

'You deceived me, ma'am. You wouldn't build school-houses, you couldn't subscribe to Charities, you acted parsimony, to pamper a scamp and his young scholar! You went to London—you did it in cool blood; you went to your stockbroker, and from the stockbroker to the Bank, and you sold out stock to fling away this big sum. I went to the Bank on business, and the books were turned over for my name, and there at "Beltham" I saw quite by chance the cross of the pen, and I saw your folly, ma'am; I saw it all in a shot. I went to the Bank on my own business, mind that. Ha! you know me by this time; I loathe spying; the thing jumped out of the book; I couldn't help seeing. Now I don't reckon how many positive fools go to make one superlative humbug; you're one of the lot, and I've learnt it.'

My father airily begged leave to say: 'As to positive and superlative, Mr. Beltham, the three degrees of comparison are no longer of service except to the trader. I do not consider them to exist for ladies. Your positive is always particularly open to dispute, and I venture to assert I cap you your superlative ten times over.'

He talked the stuff for a diversion, presenting in the midst of us an incongruous image of smiles that filled me with I knew not what feelings of angry alienation, until I was somewhat appeased by the idea that he had not apprehended the nature of the words just spoken.

It seemed incredible, yet it was true; it was proved to be so to me by his pricking his ears and his attentive look at the mention of the word prepossessing him in relation to the money: Government.

The squire said something of Government to my aunt Dorothy, with sarcastical emphasis.

As the observation was unnecessary, and was wantonly thrown in by him, she seized on it to escape from her compromising silence: 'I know nothing of Government or its ways.'

She murmured further, and looked at Janet, who came to her aid, saying: 'Grandada, we've had enough talk of money, money! All is done that you wanted done. Stocks, Shares, Banks—we've gone through them all. Please, finish! Please, do. You have only to state what you have heard from Prince Hermann.'

Janet gazed in the direction of my father, carefully avoiding my eyes, but evidently anxious to shield my persecuted aunty.

'Speaking of Stocks and Shares, Miss Ilchester,' said my father, 'I myself would as soon think of walking into a field of scythe-blades in full activity as of dabbling in them. One of the few instances I remember of our Jorian stooping to a pun, is upon the contango: ingenious truly, but objectionable, because a pun. I shall not be guilty of repeating it. "The stockmarket is the national snapdragon bowl,"

he says, and is very amusing upon the Jews; whether quite fairly, Mr. Beltham knows better than I, on my honour.'

He appealed lightly to the squire, for thus he danced on the crater's brink, and had for answer, 'You're a cool scoundrel, Richmond.'

'I choose to respect you, rather in spite of yourself, I fear, sir,' said my father, bracing up.

'Did you hear my conversation with my daughter?'

'I heard, if I may say so, the lion taking his share of it.'

'All roaring to you, was it?'

'Mr. Beltham, we have our little peculiarities; I am accustomed to think of a steam-vent when I hear you indulging in a sentence of unusual length, and I hope it is for our good, as I thoroughly believe it is for yours, that you should deliver yourself freely.'

'So you tell me; like a stage lacquey!' muttered the old man, with surprising art in caricaturing a weakness in my father's bearing, of which I was cruelly conscious, though his enunciation was flowing. He lost his naturalness through forcing for ease in the teeth of insult.

'Grandada, aunty and I will leave you,' said Janet, waxing importunate.

'When I've done,' said he, facing his victim savagely. 'The fellow pretends he didn't understand. She's here to corroborate. Richmond, there, my daughter, Dorothy Beltham, there's the last of your fools and dupes. She's a truthful woman, I'll own, and she'll contradict me if what I say is not the fact. That twenty-five thousand from "Government" came out of her estate.'

'Out of—'

'Out of be damned, sir! She's the person who paid it.'

'If the "damns" have set up, you may as well let the ladies go,' said I.

He snapped at me like a rabid dog in career.

'She's the person—one of your petticoat "Government"—who paid—do you hear me, Richmond?—the money to help you to keep your word: to help you to give your Balls and dinners too. She—I won't say she told you, and you knew it—she paid it. She sent it through her Mr. Bannerbridge. Do you understand now? You had it from her. My God! look at the fellow!'

A dreadful gape of stupefaction had usurped the smiles on my father's countenance; his eyes rolled over, he tried to articulate, and was indeed a spectacle for an enemy. His convulsed frame rocked the syllables, as with a groan, unpleasant to hear, he called on my aunt Dorothy by successive stammering apostrophes to explain, spreading his hands wide. He called out her Christian name. Her face was bloodless.

'Address my daughter respectfully, sir, will you! I won't have your infernal familiarities!' roared the squire.

'He is my brother-in-law,' said Dorothy, reposing on the courage of her blood, now that the worst had been spoken. 'Forgive me, Mr. Richmond, for having secretly induced you to accept the loan from me.'

'Loan!' interjected the squire. 'They fell upon it like a pair of kites. You'll find the last ghost of a bone of your loan in a bill, and well picked. They've been doing their bills: I've heard that.'

My father touched the points of his fingers on his forehead, straining to think, too theatrically, but in hard earnest, I believe. He seemed to be rising on tiptoe.

'Oh, madam! Dear lady! my friend! Dorothy, my sister! Better a thousand times that I had married, though I shrank from a heartless union! This money?—it is not—'

The old man broke in: 'Are you going to be a damned low vulgar comedian and tale of a trumpet up to the end, you Richmond? Don't think you'll gain anything by standing there as if you were jumping your trunk from a shark. Come, sir, you're in a gentleman's rooms; don't pitch your voice like a young jackanapes blowing into a horn. Your gasps and your spasms, and howl of a yawning brute! Keep your menagerie performances for your pantomime audiences. What are you meaning? Do you pretend you're astonished? She's not the first fool of a woman whose money you've devoured,

with your "Madam," and "My dear" and mouthing and elbowing your comedy tricks; your gabble of "Government" protection, and scandalous advertisements of the by-blow of a star-coated rascalion. If you've a recollection of the man in you, show your back, and be off, say you've fought against odds—I don't doubt you have, counting the constables—and own you're a villain: plead guilty, and be off and be silent, and do no more harm. Is it "Government" still?'

My aunt Dorothy had come round to me. She clutched my arm to restrain me from speaking, whispering:

'Harry, you can't save him. Think of your own head.' She made me irresolute, and I was too late to check my father from falling into the trap.

'Oh! Mr. Beltham,' he said, 'you are hard, sir. I put it to you: had you been in receipt of a secret subsidy from Government for a long course of years—'

'How long?' the squire interrupted.

Prompt though he would have been to dismiss the hateful person, he was not, one could see, displeased to use the whip upon so exciteable and responsive a frame. He seemed to me to be basely guilty of leading his victim on to expose himself further.

'There's no necessity for "how long,"' I said.

The old man kept the question on his face.

My father reflected.

'I have to hit my memory, I am shattered, sir. I say, you would be justified, amply justified—'

'How long?' was reiterated.

'I can at least date it from the period of my marriage.'

'From the date when your scoundrelism first touches my family, that's to say! So "Government" agreed to give you a stipend to support your wife!'

'Mr. Beltham, I breathe with difficulty. It was at that period, on the death of a nobleman interested in restraining me—I was his debtor for kindnesses . . . my head is whirling! I say, at that period, upon the recommendation of friends of high standing, I began to agitate for the restitution of my rights. From infancy—'

'To the deuce, your infancy! I know too much about your age. Just hark, you Richmond! none of your "I was a child" to provoke compassion from women. I mean to knock you down and make you incapable of hurting these poor foreign people you trapped. They defy you, and I'll do my best to draw your teeth. Now for the annuity. You want one to believe 'you thought you frightened "Government," eh?'

'Annual proof was afforded me, sir.'

'Oh! annual! through Mr. Charles Adolphus Bannerbridge, deceased!'

Janet stepped up to my aunt Dorothy to persuade her to leave the room, but she declined, and hung by me, to keep me out of danger, as she hoped, and she prompted me with a guarding nervous squeeze of her hand on my arm to answer temperately when I was questioned:

'Harry, do you suspect Government paid that annuity?'

'Not now, certainly.'

'Tell the man who 'tis you suspect.'

My aunt Dorothy said: 'Harry is not bound to mention his suspicions.'

'Tell him yourself, then.'

'Does it matter—?'

'Yes, it matters. I'll break every plank he walks on, and strip him stark till he flops down shivering into his slough—a convicted common swindler, with his dinners and Balls and his private bands! Richmond, you killed one of my daughters; t' other fed you, through her agent, this Mr. Charles Adolphus Bannerbridge, from about the date of your snaring my poor girl and carrying her off behind your postillions—your trotting undertakers! and the hours of her life reckoned in milestones. She's here to contradict me, if she can. Dorothy Beltham was your "Government" that paid the annuity.'

I took Dorothy Beltham into my arms. She was trembling excessively, yet found time to say, 'Bear up, dearest; keep still.' All I thought and felt foundered in tears.

For a while I heard little distinctly of the tremendous tirade which the vindictive old man, rendered thrice venomous by the immobility of the petrified large figure opposed to him, poured forth. My poor father did not speak because he could not; his arms dropped; and such was the torrent of attack, with its free play of thunder and lightning in the form of oaths, epithets, short and sharp comparisons, bitter home thrusts and most vehement imprecatory denunciations, that our protesting voices quailed. Janet plucked at my aunt Dorothy's dress to bear her away.

'I can't leave my father,' I said.

'Nor I you, dear,' said the tender woman; and so we remained to be scourged by this tongue of incarnate rage.

'You pensioner of a silly country spinster!' sounded like a return to mildness. My father's chest heaved up.

I took advantage of the lull to make myself heard: I did but heap fuel on fire, though the old man's splenetic impetus had partly abated.

'You Richmond! do you hear him? he swears he's your son, and asks to be tied to the stake beside you. Disown him, and I'll pay you money and thank you. I'll thank my God for anything short of your foul blood in the family. You married the boy's mother to craze and kill her, and guttle her property. You waited for the boy to come of age to swallow what was settled on him. You wait for me to lie in my coffin to pounce on the strongbox you think me the fool to toss to a young donkey ready to ruin all his belongings for you! For nine-and-twenty years you've sucked the veins of my family, and struck through my house like a rotting- disease. Nine-and-twenty years ago you gave a singing-lesson in my house: the pest has been in it ever since! You breed vermin in the brain to think of you! Your wife, your son, your dupes, every soul that touches you, mildews from a blight! You were born of ropery, and you go at it straight, like a webfoot to water. What's your boast?—your mother's disgrace! You shame your mother. Your whole life's a ballad o' bastardy. You cry up the woman's infamy to hook at a father. You swell and strut on her pickings. You're a cock forced from the smoke of the dunghill! You shame your mother, damned adventurer! You train your boy for a swindler after your own pattern; you twirl him in your curst harlequinade to a damnation as sure as your own. The day you crossed my threshold the devils danced on their flooring. I've never seen the sun shine fair on me after it. With your guitar under the windows, of moonlight nights! your Spanish fopperies and trickeries! your French phrases and toeings! I was touched by a leper. You set your traps for both my girls: you caught the brown one first, did you, and flung her second for t' other, and drove a tandem of 'em to live the spangled hog you are; and down went the mother of the boy to the place she liked better, and my other girl here—the one you cheated for her salvation— you tried to cajole her from home and me, to send her the same way down. She stuck to decency. Good Lord! you threatened to hang yourself, guitar and all. But her purse served your turn. For why? You 're a leech. I speak before ladies or I'd rip your town-life to shreds. Your cause! your romantic history! your fine figure! every inch of you 's notched with villany! You fasten on every moneyed woman that comes in your way. You've outdone Herod in murdering the innocents, for he didn't feed on 'em, and they've made you fat. One thing I'll say of you: you look the beastly thing you set yourself up for. The kindest blow to you 's to call you impostor.'

He paused, but his inordinate passion of speech was unsated: his white lips hung loose for another eruption.

I broke from my aunt Dorothy to cross over to my father, saying on the way: 'We 've heard enough, sir. You forget the cardinal point of invective, which is, not to create sympathy for the person you assail.'

'Oh! you come in with your infernal fine language, do you!' the old man thundered at me. 'I 'll just tell you at once, young fellow—'

My aunt Dorothy supplicated his attention. 'One error I must correct.' Her voice issued from a contracted throat, and was painfully thin and straining, as though the will to speak did violence to her weaker nature. 'My sister loved Mr. Richmond. It was to save her life, because I believed she loved him much and would have died, that Mr. Richmond—in pity—offered her his hand, at my wish': she bent her head: 'at my cost. It was done for me. I wished it; he obeyed me. No blame—' her dear mouth faltered. 'I am to be accused, if anybody.'

She added more firmly: 'My money would have been his. I hoped to spare his feelings, I beg his forgiveness now, by devoting some of it, unknown to him, to assist him. That was chiefly to please myself, I see, and I am punished.'

'Well, ma'am,' said the squire, calm at white heat; 'a fool's confession ought to be heard out to the end. What about the twenty-five thousand?'

'I hoped to help my Harry.'

'Why didn't you do it openly?'

She breathed audible long breaths before she could summon courage to say: 'His father was going to make an irreparable sacrifice. I feared that if he knew this money came from me he would reject it, and persist.'

Had she disliked the idea of my father's marrying?

The old man pounced on the word sacrifice. 'What sacrifice, ma'am?'

What's the sacrifice?'

I perceived that she could not without anguish, and perhaps peril of a further exposure, bring herself to speak, and explained: 'It relates to my having tried to persuade my father to marry a very wealthy lady, so that he might produce the money on the day appointed. Rail at me, sir, as much as you like. If you can't understand the circumstances without a chapter of statements, I'm sorry for you. A great deal is due to you, I know; but I can't pay a jot of it while you go on rating my father like a madman.'

'Harry!' either my aunt or Janet breathed a warning.

I replied that I was past mincing phrases. The folly of giving the tongue an airing was upon me: I was in fact invited to continue, and animated to do it thoroughly, by the old man's expression of face, which was that of one who says, 'I give you rope,' and I dealt him a liberal amount of stock irony not worth repeating; things that any cultivated man in anger can drill and sting the Boeotian with, under the delusion that he has not lost a particle of his self-command because of his coolness. I spoke very deliberately, and therefore supposed that the words of composure were those of prudent sense. The error was manifest. The women saw it. One who has indulged his soul in invective will not, if he has power in his hand, be robbed of his climax with impunity by a cool response that seems to trifle, and scourges.

I wound up by thanking my father for his devotion to me: I deemed it, I said, excessive and mistaken in the recent instance, but it was for me.

Upon this he awoke from his dreamy-looking stupefaction.

'Richie does me justice. He is my dear boy. He loves me: I love him. None can cheat us of that. He loves his wreck of a father. You have struck me to your feet, Mr. Beltham.'

'I don't want to see you there, sir; I want to see you go, and not stand rapping your breast-bone, sounding like a burst drum, as you are,' retorted the unappeasable old man.

I begged him in exasperation to keep his similes to himself.

Janet and my aunt Dorothy raised their voices.

My father said: 'I am broken.'

He put out a swimming hand that trembled when it rested, like that of an aged man grasping a staff. I feared for a moment he was acting, he spoke so like himself, miserable though he appeared: but it was his well-known native old style in a state of decrepitude.

'I am broken,' he repeated. 'I am like the ancient figure of mortality entering the mouth of the tomb on a sepulchral monument, somewhere, by a celebrated sculptor: I have seen it: I forget the city. I shall presently forget names of men. It is not your abuse, Mr. Beltham. I should have bowed my head to it till the storm passed. Your facts . . . Oh! Miss Beltham, this last privilege to call you dearest of human beings! my benefactress! my blessing! Do not scorn me, madam.'

'I never did; I never will; I pitied you,' she cried, sobbing.

The squire stamped his foot.

'Madam,' my father bowed gently. 'I was under heaven's special protection—I thought so. I feel I have been robbed—I have not deserved it! Oh! madam, no: it was your generosity that I did not deserve. One of the angels of heaven persuaded me to trust in it. I did not know. . . . Adieu, madam. May I be worthy to meet you!—Ay, Mr. Beltham, your facts have committed the death-wound. You have taken the staff out of my hand: you have extinguished the light. I have existed—ay, a pensioner, unknowingly, on this dear lady's charity; to her I say no more. To you, sir, by all that is most sacred to a man—by the ashes of my mother! by the prospects of my boy! I swear the annuity was in my belief a tangible token that my claims to consideration were in the highest sources acknowledged to be just. I cannot speak! One word to you, Mr. Beltham: put me aside, I am nothing:—Harry Richmond!—his fortunes are not lost; he has a future! I entreat you—he is your grandson—give him your support; go this instant to the prince—no! you will not deny your countenance to Harry Richmond: let him abjure my name; let me be nameless in his house. And I promise you I shall be unheard of both in Christendom and Heathendom: I have no heart except for my boy's nuptials with the princess: this one thing, to see him the husband of the fairest and noblest lady upon earth, with all the life remaining in me I pray for! I have won it for him. I have a moderate ability, immense devotion. I declare to you, sir, I have lived, actually subsisted, on this hope! and I have directed my efforts incessantly, sleeplessly, to fortify it. I die to do it! I implore you, sir, go to the prince. If I' (he said this touchingly) 'if I am any further in anybody's way, it is only as a fallen tree.' But his inveterate fancifulness led him to add: 'And that may bridge a cataract.'

My grandfather had been clearing his throat two or three times.

'I 'm ready to finish and get rid of you, Richmond.'

My father bowed.

'I am gone, sir. I feel I am all but tongue-tied. Think that it is

Harry who petitions you to ensure his happiness. To-day I guarantee-it.'

The old man turned an inquiring eyebrow upon me. Janet laid her hand on him. He dismissed the feline instinct to prolong our torture, and delivered himself briskly.

'Richmond, your last little bit of villany 's broken in the egg. I separate the boy from you: he's not your accomplice there, I'm glad to know. You witched the lady over to pounce on her like a fowler, you threatened her father with a scandal, if he thought proper to force the trap; swore you 'd toss her to be plucked by the gossips, eh? She's free of you! You got your English and your Germans here to point their bills, and stretch their necks, and hiss, if this gentleman—and your newspapers!—if he didn't give up to you like a funky traveller to a highwayman. I remember a tale of a clumsy Turpin, who shot himself when he was drawing the pistol out of his holsters to frighten the money-bag out of a market farmer. You've done about the same, you Richmond; and, of all the damned poor speeches I ever heard from a convicted felon, yours is the worst—a sheared sheep'd ha' done it more respectably, grant the beast a tongue! The lady is free of you, I tell you. Harry has to thank you for that kindness. She—what is it, Janet? Never mind, I've got the story—she didn't want to marry; but this prince, who called on me just now, happened to be her father's nominee, and he heard of your scoundrelism, and he behaved like a man and a gentleman, and offered himself, none too early nor too late, as it turns out; and the princess, like a good girl, has made amends to her father by accepting him. I've the word of this Prince Hermann for it. Now you can look upon a game of stale-mate. If I had gone to the prince, it wouldn't have been to back your play; but, if you hadn't been guilty of the

tricks of a blackguard past praying for, this princess would never have been obliged to marry a man to protect her father and herself. They sent him here to stop any misunderstanding. He speaks good English, so that's certain. Your lies will be contradicted, every one of 'em, seriatim, in to-morrow's newspapers, setting the real man'in place of the wrong one; and you 'll draw no profit from them in your fashionable world, where you 've been grinning lately, like a blackamoor's head on a conjuror's plate—the devil alone able to account for the body and joinings. Now you can be off.'

I went up to my father. His plight was more desperate than mine, for I had resembled the condemned before the firing-party, to whom the expected bullet brings a merely physical shock. He, poor man, heard his sentence, which is the heart's pang of death; and how fondly and rootedly he had clung to the idea of my marriage with the princess was shown in his extinction after this blow.

My grandfather chose the moment as a fitting one to ask me for the last time to take my side.

I replied, without offence in the tones of my voice, that I thought my father need not lose me into the bargain, after what he had suffered that day.

He just as quietly rejoined with a recommendation to me to divorce myself for good and all from a scoundrel.

I took my father's arm: he was not in a state to move away unsupported.

My aunt Dorothy stood weeping; Janet was at the window, no friend to either of us.

I said to her, 'You have your wish.'

She shook her head, but did not look back.

My grandfather watched me, step by step, until I had reached the door.

'You're going, are you?' he said. 'Then I whistle you off my fingers!'

An attempt to speak was made by my father in the doorway. He bowed wide of the company, like a blind man. I led him out.

Dimness of sight spared me from seeing certain figures, which were at the toll-bar of the pier, on the way to quit our shores. What I heard was not of a character to give me faith in the sanity of the companion I had chosen. He murmured it at first to himself:

'Waddy shall have her monument!'

My patience was not proof against the repetition of it aloud to me. Had I been gentler I might have known that his nature was compelled to look forward to something, and he discerned nothing in the future, save the task of raising a memorial to a faithful servant.

CHAPTER LIII
THE HEIRESS PROVES THAT SHE
INHERITS THE FEUD AND I GO DRIFTING

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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