

GEORG EBERS

THE SISTERS.

VOLUME 4

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The Sisters. Volume 4

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The Sisters – Volume 4:

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CHAPTER XVII

A paved road, with a row of Sphinxes on each side, led from the Greek temple of Serapis to the rock-hewn tombs of Apis, and the temples and chapels built over them, and near them; in these the Apis bull after its death—or "in Osiris" as the phrase went—was worshipped, while, so long as it lived, it was taken care of and prayed to in the temple to which it belonged, that of the god Ptah at Memphis. After death these sacred bulls, which were distinguished by peculiar marks, had extraordinarily costly obsequies; they were called the risen Ptah, and regarded as the symbol of the soul of Osiris, by whose procreative power all that dies or passes away is brought to new birth and new life—the departed soul of man, the plant that has perished, and the heavenly bodies that have set. Osiris-Sokari, who was worshipped as the companion of Osiris, presided over the wanderings which had to be performed by the seemingly extinct spirit before its resuscitation as another being in a new form; and Egyptian priests governed in the temples of these gods, which were purely Egyptian in style, and which had been built at a very early date over the tomb-cave of the sacred bulls. And even

the Greek ministers of Serapis, settled at Memphis, were ready to follow the example of their rulers and to sacrifice to Osiris-Apis, who was closely allied to Serapis—not only in name but in his essential attributes. Serapis himself indeed was a divinity introduced from Asia into the Nile valley by the Ptolemies, in order to supply to their Greek and Egyptian subjects alike an object of adoration, before whose altars they could unite in a common worship. They devoted themselves to the worship of Apis in Osiris at the shrines, of Greek architecture, and containing stone images of bulls, that stood outside the Egyptian sanctuary, and they were very ready to be initiated into the higher significance of his essence; indeed, all religious mysteries in their Greek home bore reference to the immortality of the soul and its fate in the other world.

Just as two neighboring cities may be joined by a bridge, so the Greek temple of Serapis—to which the water-bearers belonged—was connected with the Egyptian sanctuary of Osiris-Apis by the fine paved road for processions along which Klea now rapidly proceeded. There was a shorter way to Memphis, but she chose this one, because the mounds of sand on each side of the road bordered by Sphinxes—which every day had to be cleared of the desert-drift—concealed her from the sight of her companions in the temple; besides the best and safest way into the city was by a road leading from a crescent, decorated with busts of the philosophers, that lay near the principal entrance to the new Apis tombs.

She looked neither at the lion-bodies with men's heads that guarded the way, nor at the images of beasts on the wall that shut it in; nor did she heed the dusky-hued temple-slaves of Osiris-Apis who were sweeping the sand from the paved way with large brooms, for she thought of nothing but Irene and the difficult task that lay before her, and she walked swiftly onwards with her eyes fixed on the ground.

But she had taken no more than a few steps when she heard her name called quite close to her, and looking up in alarm she found herself standing opposite Krates, the little smith, who came close up to her, took hold of her veil, threw it back a little before she could prevent him, and asked:

"Where are you off to, child?"

"Do not detain me," entreated Klea. "You know that Irene, whom you are always so fond of, has been carried off; perhaps I may be able to save her, but if you betray me, and if they follow me—"

"I will not hinder you," interrupted the old man. "Nay, if it were not for these swollen feet I would go with you, for I can think of nothing else but the poor dear little thing; but as it is I shall be glad enough when I am sitting still again in my workshop; it is exactly as if a workman of my own trade lived in each of my great toes, and was dancing round in them with hammer and file and chisel and nails. Very likely you may be so fortunate as to find your sister, for a crafty woman succeeds in many things which are too difficult for a wise man. Go on, and if they seek

for you old Krates will not betray you."

He nodded kindly at Klea, and had already half turned his back on her when he once more looked round, and called out to her:

"Wait a minute, girl—you can do me a little service. I have just fitted a new lock to the door of the Apis-tomb down there. It answers admirably, but the one key to it which I have made is not enough; we require four, and you shall order them for me of the locksmith Heri, to be sent the day after to-morrow; he lives opposite the gate of Sokari—to the left, next the bridge over the canal—you cannot miss it. I hate repeating and copying as much as I like inventing and making new things, and Heri can work from a pattern just as well as I can. If it were not for my legs I would give the man my commission myself, for he who speaks by the lips of a go-between is often misunderstood or not understood at all."

"I will gladly save you the walk," replied Klea, while the Smith sat down on the pedestal of one of the Sphinxes, and opening the leather wallet which hung by his side shook out the contents. A few files, chisels, and nails fell out into his lap; then the key, and finally a sharp, pointed knife with which Krates had cut out the hollow in the door for the insertion of the lock; Krates touched up the pattern-key for the smith in Memphis with a few strokes of the file, and then, muttering thoughtfully and shaking his head doubtfully from side to side, he exclaimed:

"You still must come with me once more to the door, for I

require accurate workmanship from other people, and so I must be severe upon my own."

"But I want so much to reach Memphis before dark," besought Klea.

"The whole thing will not take a minute, and if you will give me your arm I shall go twice as fast. There are the files, there is the knife."

"Give it me," Klea requested. "This blade is sharp and bright, and as soon as I saw it I felt as if it bid me take it with me. Very likely I may have to come through the desert alone at night."

"Aye," said the smith, "and even the weakest feels stronger when he has a weapon. Hide the knife somewhere about you, my child, only take care not to hurt yourself with it. Now let me take your arm, and on we will go— but not quite so fast."

Klea led the smith to the door he indicated, and saw with admiration how unfailingly the bolt sprang forward when one half of the door closed upon the other, and how easily the key pushed it back again; then, after conducting Krates back to the Sphinx near which she had met him, she went on her way at her quickest pace, for the sun was already very low, and it seemed scarcely possible to reach Memphis before it should set.

As she approached a tavern where soldiers and low people were accustomed to resort, she was met by a drunken slave. She went on and past him without any fear, for the knife in her girdle, and on which she kept her hand, kept up her courage, and she felt as if she had thus acquired a third hand which was more

powerful and less timid than her own. A company of soldiers had encamped in front of the tavern, and the wine of Kbakem, which was grown close by, on the eastern declivity of the Libyan range, had an excellent savor. The men were in capital spirits, for at noon today—after they had been quartered here for months as guards of the tombs of Apis and of the temples of the Necropolis—a commanding officer of the Diadoches had arrived at Memphis, who had ordered them to break up at once, and to withdraw into the capital before nightfall. They were not to be relieved by other mercenaries till the next morning.

All this Klea learned from a messenger from the Egyptian temple in the Necropolis, who recognized her, and who was going to Memphis, commissioned by the priests of Osiris-Apis and Sokari to convey a petition to the king, praying that fresh troops might be promptly sent to replace those now withdrawn.

For some time she went on side by side with this messenger, but soon she found that she could not keep up with his hurried pace, and had to fall behind. In front of another tavern sat the officers of the troops, whose noisy mirth she had heard as she passed the former one; they were sitting over their wine and looking on at the dancing of two Egyptian girls, who screeched like cackling hens over their mad leaps, and who so effectually riveted the attention of the spectators, who were beating time for them by clapping their hands, that Klea, accelerating her step, was able to slip unobserved past the wild crew. All these scenes, nay everything she met with on the high-road, scared the girl

who was accustomed to the silence and the solemn life of the temple of Serapis, and she therefore struck into a side path that probably also led to the city which she could already see lying before her with its pylons, its citadel and its houses, veiled in evening mist. In a quarter of an hour at most she would have crossed the desert, and reach the fertile meadow land, whose emerald hue grew darker and darker every moment. The sun was already sinking to rest behind the Libyan range, and soon after, for twilight is short in Egypt, she was wrapped in the darkness of night. The westwind, which had begun to blow even at noon, now rose higher, and seemed to pursue her with its hot breath and the clouds of sand it carried with it from the desert.

She must certainly be approaching water, for she heard the deep pipe of the bittern in the reeds, and fancied she breathed a moister air. A few steps more, and her foot sank in mud; and she now perceived that she was standing on the edge of a wide ditch in which tall papyrus-plants were growing. The side path she had struck into ended at this plantation, and there was nothing to be done but to turn about, and to continue her walk against the wind and with the sand blowing in her face.

The light from the drinking-booth showed her the direction she must follow, for though the moon was up, it is true, black clouds swept across it, covering it and the smaller lights of heaven for many minutes at a time. Still she felt no fatigue, but the shouts of the men and the loud cries of the women that rang out from the tavern filled her with alarm and disgust. She made a wide circuit

round the hostelry, wading through the sand hillocks and tearing her dress on the thorns and thistles that had boldly struck deep root in the desert, and had grown up there like the squalid brats in the hovel of a beggar. But still, as she hurried on by the high-road, the hideous laughter and the crowing mirth of the dancing-girls still rang in her mind's ear.

Her blood coursed more swiftly through her veins, her head was on fire, she saw Irene close before her, tangibly distinct—with flowing hair and fluttering garments, whirling in a wild dance like a Moenad at a Dionysiac festival, flying from one embrace to another and shouting and shrieking in unbridled folly like the wretched girls she had seen on her way. She was seized with terror for her sister—an unbounded dread such as she had never felt before, and as the wind was now once more behind her she let herself be driven on by it, lifting her feet in a swift run and flying, as if pursued by the Erinnyes, without once looking round her and wholly forgetful of the smith's commission, on towards the city along the road planted with trees, which as she knew led to the gate of the citadel.

CHAPTER XVIII

In front of the gate of the king's palace sat a crowd of petitioners who were accustomed to stay here from early dawn till late at night, until they were called into the palace to receive the answer to the petition they had drawn up. When Klea reached the end of her journey she was so exhausted and bewildered that she felt the imperative necessity of seeking rest and quiet reflection, so she seated herself among these people, next to a woman from Upper Egypt. But hardly had she taken her place by her with a silent greeting, when her talkative neighbor began to relate with particular minuteness why she had come to Memphis, and how certain unjust judges had conspired with her bad husband to trick her—for men were always ready to join against a woman—and to deprive her of everything which had been secured to her and her children by her marriage-contract. For two months now, she said, she had been waiting early and late before the sublime gate, and was consuming her last ready cash in the city where living was so dear; but it was all one to her, and at a pinch she would sell even her gold ornaments, for sooner or later her cause must come before the king, and then the wicked villain and his accomplices would be taught what was just.

Klea heard but little of this harangue; a feeling had come over her like that of a person who is having water poured again and again on the top of his head. Presently her neighbor observed that

the new-comer was not listening at all to her complainings; she slapped her shoulder with her hand, and said:

"You seem to think of nothing but your own concerns; and I dare say they are not of such a nature as that you should relate them to any one else; so far as mine are concerned the more they are discussed, the better."

The tone in which these remarks were made was so dry, and at the same time so sharp, that it hurt Klea, and she rose hastily to go closer to the gate. Her neighbor threw a cross word after her; but she did not heed it, and drawing her veil closer over her face, she went through the gate of the palace into a vast courtyard, brightly lighted up by cressets and torches, and crowded with foot-soldiers and mounted guards.

The sentry at the gate perhaps had not observed her, or perhaps had let her pass unchallenged from her dignified and erect gait, and the numerous armed men through whom she now made her way seemed to be so much occupied with their own affairs, that no one bestowed any notice on her. In a narrow alley, which led to a second court and was lighted by lanterns, one of the body-guard known as Philobasilistes, a haughty young fellow in yellow riding-boots and a shirt of mail over his red tunic, came riding towards her on his tall horse, and noticing her he tried to squeeze her between his charger and the wall, and put out his hand to raise her veil; but Klea slipped aside, and put up her hands to protect herself from the horse's head which was almost touching her.

The cavalier, enjoying her alarm, called out: "Only stand still—he is not vicious."

"Which, you or your horse?" asked Klea, with such a solemn tone in her deep voice that for an instant the young guardsman lost his self-possession, and this gave her time to go farther from the horse. But the girl's sharp retort had annoyed the conceited young fellow, and not having time to follow her himself, he called out in a tone of encouragement to a party of mercenaries from Cyprus, whom the frightened girl was trying to pass:

"Look under this girl's veil, comrades, and if she is as pretty as she is well-grown, I wish you joy of your prize." He laughed as he pressed his knees against the flanks of his bay and trotted slowly away, while the Cypriotes gave Klea ample time to reach the second court, which was more brightly lighted even than the first, that they might there surround her with insolent importunity.

The helpless and persecuted girl felt the blood run cold in her veins, and for a few minutes she could see nothing but a bewildering confusion of flashing eyes and weapons, of beards and hands, could hear nothing but words and sounds, of which she understood and felt only that they were revolting and horrible, and threatened her with death and ruin. She had crossed her arms over her bosom, but now she raised her hands to hide her face, for she felt a strong hand snatch away the veil that covered her head. This insolent proceeding turned her numb horror to indignant rage, and, fixing her sparkling eyes on her bearded opponents, she exclaimed:

"Shame upon you, who in the king's own house fall like wolves on a defenceless woman, and in a peaceful spot snatch the veil from a young girl's head. Your mothers would blush for you, and your sisters cry shame on you—as I do now!"

Astonished at Klea's distinguished beauty, startled at the angry glare in her eyes, and the deep chest-tones of her voice which trembled with excitement, the Cypriotes drew back, while the same audacious rascal that had pulled away her veil came closer to her, and cried:

"Who would make such a noise about a rubbishy veil! If you will be my sweetheart I will buy you a new one, and many things besides."

At the same time he tried to throw his arm round her; but at his touch Klea felt the blood leave her cheeks and mount to her bloodshot eyes, and at that instant her hand, guided by some uncontrollable inward impulse, grasped the handle of the knife which Krates had lent her; she raised it high in the air though with an unsteady arm, exclaiming:

"Let me go or, by Serapis whom I serve, I will strike you to the heart!"

The soldier to whom this threat was addressed, was not the man to be intimidated by a blade of cold iron in a woman's hand; with a quick movement he seized her wrist in order to disarm her; but although Klea was forced to drop the knife she struggled with him to free herself from his clutch, and this contest between a man and a woman, who seemed to be of superior rank to

that indicated by her very simple dress, seemed to most of the Cypriotes so undignified, so much out of place within the walls of a palace, that they pulled their comrade back from Klea, while others on the contrary came to the assistance of the bully who defended himself stoutly. And in the midst of the fray, which was conducted with no small noise, stood Klea with flying breath. Her antagonist, though flung to the ground, still held her wrist with his left hand while he defended himself against his comrades with the right, and she tried with all her force and cunning to withdraw it; for at the very height of her excitement and danger she felt as if a sudden gust of wind had swept her spirit clear of all confusion, and she was again able to contemplate her position calmly and resolutely.

If only her hand were free she might perhaps be able to take advantage of the struggle between her foes, and to force her way out between their ranks.

Twice, thrice, four times, she tried to wrench her hand with a sudden jerk through the fingers that grasped it; but each time in vain. Suddenly, from the man at her feet there broke a loud, long-drawn cry of pain which re-echoed from the high walls of the court, and at the same time she felt the fingers of her antagonist gradually and slowly slip from her arm like the straps of a sandal carefully lifted by the surgeon from a broken ankle.

"It is all over with him!" exclaimed the eldest of the Cypriotes. "A man never calls out like that but once in his life! True enough—the dagger is sticking here just under the ninth rib! This is mad

work! That is your doing again, Lykos, you savage wolf!"

"He bit deep into my finger in the struggle—"

"And you are for ever tearing each other to pieces for the sake of the women," interrupted the elder, not listening to the other's excuses. "Well, I was no better than you in my time, and nothing can alter it! You had better be off now, for if the Epistrategist learns we have fallen to stabbing each other again—"

The Cypriote had not ceased speaking, and his countrymen were in the very act of raising the body of their comrade when a division of the civic watch rushed into the court in close order and through the passage near which the fight for the girl had arisen, thus stopping the way against those who were about to escape, since all who wished to get out of the court into the open street must pass through the doorway into which Klea had been forced by the horseman. Every other exit from this second court of the citadel led into the strictly guarded gardens and buildings of the palace itself.

The noisy strife round Klea, and the cry of the wounded man had attracted the watch; the Cypriotes and the maiden soon found themselves surrounded, and they were conducted through a narrow side passage into the court-yard of the prison. After a short enquiry the men who had been taken were allowed to return under an escort to their own phalanx, and Klea gladly followed the commander of the watch to a less brilliantly illuminated part of the prison-yard, for in him she had recognized at once Serapion's brother Glaucus, and he in her the daughter of the

man who had done and suffered so much for his father's sake; besides they had often exchanged greetings and a few words in the temple of Serapis.

"All that is in my power," said Glaucus—a man somewhat taller but not so broadly built as his brother—when he had read the recluse's note and when Klea had answered a number of questions, "all that is in my power I will gladly do for you and your sister, for I do not forget all that I owe to your father; still I cannot but regret that you have incurred such risk, for it is always hazardous for a pretty young girl to venture into this palace at a late hour, and particularly just now, for the courts are swarming not only with Philometor's fighting men but with those of his brother, who have come here for their sovereign's birthday festival. The people have been liberally entertained, and the soldier who has been sacrificing to Dionysus seizes the gifts of Eros and Aphrodite wherever he may find them. I will at once take charge of my brother's letter to the Roman Publius Cornelius Scipio, but when you have received his answer you will do well to let yourself be escorted to my wife or my sister, who both live in the city, and to remain till to-morrow morning with one or the other. Here you cannot remain a minute unmolested while I am away— Where now—Aye! The only safe shelter I can offer you is the prison down there; the room where they lock up the subaltern officers when they have committed any offence is quite unoccupied, and I will conduct you thither. It is always kept clean, and there is a bench in it too."

Klea followed her friend who, as his hasty demeanor plainly showed, had been interrupted in important business. In a few steps they reached the prison; she begged Glaucus to bring her the Roman's answer as quickly as possible, declared herself quite ready to remain in the dark—since she perceived that the light of a lamp might betray her, and she was not afraid of the dark—and suffered herself to be locked in.

As she heard the iron bolt creak in its brass socket a shiver ran through her, and although the room in which she found herself was neither worse nor smaller than that in which she and her sister lived in the temple, still it oppressed her, and she even felt as if an indescribable something hindered her breathing as she said to herself that she was locked in and no longer free to come and to go. A dim light penetrated into her prison through the single barred window that opened on to the court, and she could see a little bench of palm-branches on which she sat down to seek the repose she so sorely needed. All sense of discomfort gradually vanished before the new feeling of rest and refreshment, and pleasant hopes and anticipations were just beginning to mingle themselves with the remembrance of the horrors she had just experienced when suddenly there was a stir and a bustle just in front of the prison—and she could hear, outside, the clatter of harness and words of command. She rose from her seat and saw that about twenty horsemen, whose golden helmets and armor reflected the light of the lanterns, cleared the wide court by driving the men before them, as the flames drive the game from

a fired hedge, and by forcing them into a second court from which again they proceeded to expel them. At least Klea could hear them shouting 'In the king's name' there as they had before done close to her. Presently the horsemen returned and placed themselves, ten and ten, as guards at each of the passages leading into the court. It was not without interest that Klea looked on at this scene which was perfectly new to her; and when one of the fine horses, dazzled by the light of the lanterns, turned restive and shied, leaping and rearing and threatening his rider with a fall—when the horseman checked and soothed it, and brought it to a stand-still—the Macedonian warrior was transfigured in her eyes to Publius, who no doubt could manage a horse no less well than this man.

No sooner was the court completely cleared of men by the mounted guard than a new incident claimed Klea's attention. First she heard footsteps in the room adjoining her prison, then bright streaks of light fell through the cracks of the slight partition which divided her place of retreat from the other room, then the two window-openings close to hers were closed with heavy shutters, then seats or benches were dragged about and various objects were laid upon a table, and finally the door of the adjoining room was thrown open and slammed to again so violently, that the door which closed hers and the bench near which she was standing trembled and jarred.

At the same moment a deep sonorous voice called out with a loud and hearty shout of laughter:

"A mirror—give me a mirror, Eulaeus. By heaven! I do not look much like prison fare—more like a man in whose strong brain there is no lack of deep schemes, who can throttle his antagonist with a grip of his fist, and who is prompt to avail himself of all the spoil that comes in his way, so that he may compress the pleasures of a whole day into every hour, and enjoy them to the utmost! As surely as my name is Euergetes my uncle Antiochus was right in liking to mix among the populace. The splendid puppets who surround us kings, and cover every portion of their own bodies in wrappings and swaddling bands, also stifle the expression of every genuine sentiment; and it is enough to turn our brain to reflect that, if we would not be deceived, every word that we hear—and, oh dear! how many words we must needs hear—must be pondered in our minds. Now, the mob on the contrary—who think themselves beautifully dressed in a threadbare cloth hanging round their brown loins—are far better off. If one of them says to another of his own class—a naked wretch who wears about him everything he happens to possess—that he is a dog, he answers with a blow of his fist in the other's face, and what can be plainer than that! If on the other hand he tells him he is a splendid fellow, he believes it without reservation, and has a perfect right to believe it.

"Did you see how that stunted little fellow with a snub-nose and bandy-legs, who is as broad as he is long, showed all his teeth in a delighted grin when I praised his steady hand? He laughs just like a hyena, and every respectable father of a family looks on

the fellow as a god-forsaken monster; but the immortals must think him worth something to have given him such magnificent grinders in his ugly mouth, and to have preserved him mercifully for fifty years—for that is about the rascal's age. If that fellow's dagger breaks he can kill his victim with those teeth, as a fox does a duck, or smash his bones with his fist."

"But, my lord," replied Eulaeus dryly and with a certain matter-of-fact gravity to King Euergetes—for he it was who had come with him into the room adjoining Klea's retreat, "the dry little Egyptian with the thin straight hair is even more trustworthy and tougher and nimbler than his companion, and, so far, more estimable. One flings himself on his prey with a rush like a block of stone hurled from a roof, but the other, without being seen, strikes his poisoned fang into his flesh like an adder hidden in the sand. The third, on whom I had set great hopes, was beheaded the day before yesterday without my knowledge; but the pair whom you have condescended to inspect with your own eyes are sufficient. They must use neither dagger nor lance, but they will easily achieve their end with slings and hooks and poisoned needles, which leave wounds that resemble the sting of an adder. We may safely depend on these fellows."

Once more Euergetes laughed loudly, and exclaimed: What criticism! Exactly as if these blood-hounds were tragic actors of which one could best produce his effects by fire and pathos, and the other by the subtlety of his conception. I call that an unprejudiced judgment. And why should not a man be great even

as a murderer? From what hangman's noose did you drag out the neck of one, and from what headsman's block did you rescue the other when you found them?

"It is a lucky hour in which we first see something new to us, and, by Heracles! I never before in the whole course of my life saw such villains as these. I do not regret having gone to see them and talked to them as if I were their equal. Now, take this torn coat off me, and help me to undress. Before I go to the feast I will take a hasty plunge in my bath, for I twitch in every limb, I feel as if I had got dirty in their company.

"There lie my clothes and my sandals; strap them on for me, and tell me as you do it how you lured the Roman into the toils."

Klea could hear every word of this frightful conversation, and clasped her hand over her brow with a shudder, for she found it difficult to believe in the reality of the hideous images that it brought before her mind. Was she awake or was she a prey to some horrid dream?

She hardly knew, and, indeed, she scarcely understood half of all she heard till the Roman's name was mentioned. She felt as if the point of a thin, keen knife was being driven obliquely through her brain from right to left, as it now flashed through her mind that it was against him, against Publius, that the wild beasts, disguised in human form, were directed by Eulaeus, and face to face with this—the most hideous, the most incredible of horrors—she suddenly recovered the full use of her senses. She softly slipped close to that rift in the partition through which the

broadest beam of light fell into the room, put her ear close to it, and drank in, with fearful attention, word for word the report made by the eunuch to his iniquitous superior, who frequently interrupted him with remarks, words of approval or a short laugh-drunk them in, as a man perishing in the desert drinks the loathsome waters of a salt pool.

And what she heard was indeed well fitted to deprive her of her senses, but the more definite the facts to which the words referred that she could overhear, the more keenly she listened, and the more resolutely she collected her thoughts. Eulaeus had used her own name to induce the Roman to keep an assignation at midnight in the desert close to the Apis- tombs. He repeated the words that he had written to this effect on a tile, and which requested Publius to come quite alone to the spot indicated, since she dare not speak with him in the temple. Finally he was invited to write his answer on the other side of the square of clay. As Klea heard these words, put into her own mouth by a villain, she could have sobbed aloud heartily with anguish, shame, and rage; but the point now was to keep her ears wide open, for Euergetes asked his odious tool:

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