The IRON CLAW

by Arthur Stringer

Author of "THE OCCASIONAL OFFENDER," "THE WIRE TAPPERS," "GUN RUNNERS," ETC. Novelized from THE PATHE PHOTO PLAY OF THE SAME NAME

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SYNOPSIS.

On Windward Island Palidori intrigues Mrs. Golden into an appearance of evil which causes Golden to capture and torture the Italian by branding his face and crushing his hand. Palidori floods the island and kidnaps Golden's little daughter Margery. Twelve years later in New York a Masked One rescues Margery from Legar and takes her to her father's home. Legar sends Golden a demand for the chart. The coveted chart is lost in a fight between Manley and one of Legar's henchmen, but is recovered by the Laughing Mask. Count Da Espares figures in a dubious attempt to entrap Legar and claims to have killed him. Golden's house is dynamited during a masked ball. Legar escapes but Da Espares is crushed in the ruins. Margery rescues the Laughing Mask from the police. Manley finds Margery not indifferent to his love. He saves her from Mauki's poisoned arrows. Manley plans a mock funeral which fails to accomplish the desired purpose, the capture of the Iron Claw and his gang. Margery is saved from death at the hands of the Iron Claw by the Laughing Mask. An attempt by the Iron Claw to blow up the O'Mara cottage is frustrated in the nick of time. The Laughing Mask discloses his identity to Margery. Margery overhears the police's plan to take the Laughing Mask prisoner and hastens to warn him. They escape both the police and the Iron Claw. Later the Laughing Mask is almost taken while with Margery at her home. He eludes capture. Margery's father tells her that the Mask has met death. A mysterious woman frightens Legar's henchman into a promise of confession to clear the Laughing Mask. She meets Margery and discloses herself to that young lady as David Manley. Legar and his gang get possession of some loot and escape, taking Margery with them. The Laughing Mask adds to his mysteriousness by once more saving her from death. Margery rescues the chart of the Van Horn loot. The police attempt to arrest David as the Laughing Mask. The Mask appears on the scene. David saves Margery and her friends from Legar's henchmen, one of whom loses his life trying to escape.

SEVENTEENTH EPISODE

The Vanishing Faker

The staid Wilson, who in his many years of faithful service as butler in the Golden household had seen many strange and unusual happenings, was at that moment decidedly perplexed. Unless his beloved young mistress had been suddenly bereft of her senses why was she indulging in such queer and childish antics out there in the rose garden.

As Wilson turned from the window sadly shaking his old head the object of his solicitous anxiety turned to her red-faced companion.

"I think I understand the code fairly well now," she said with quiet satisfaction, "and you certainly have been a very efficient teacher."

"Don't mention it, Miss Golden," an- a pleasure to teach a quick learner like you, an' if you ever want a job in the signal corps come to me for a refe[illegible]

[illegible]king in this jocular [illegible]edoubtable Captain [illegible] headquarters, who had taken upon himself, to the exclusion of all other duties, the self-assigned task of rounding up that mocking and elusive personage known as the Laughing Mask.

A thick-set detective now came briskly down the grass-bordered path and respectfully saluted his chief. After a low-toned conference with this man, Captain Brackett excused himself and hurried away. Left alone, Margery sat down on a rustic bench close by a flowering bush of fragrant lilacs, her hands toying idly with the mirror as she gave herself up to her not altogether pleasing thoughts. For these thoughts, in large measure, concerned her father's secretary, David Manley, and of late she had been greatly disappointed in that young man.

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In order to win her love he had led her to believe that in the guise of the Laughing Mask he had protected her from the machinations of that archfiend, Jules Legar. But now this shallow pretense had been ignominiously exposed and Margory's heart was curiously torn between a deep-rooted affection for the boyish secretary and hot indignation because of his shameful deception.

The silver-backed mirror slipped from the fingers of the abstracted girl and dropped with a little clatter on the graveled walk at her feet. Roused from her reverie she stooped to pick it up, and as she did so a curious thing happened. Reflected in that circular hand-glass was the image of a man, peering out through an opening in the lilac bush. Covering his face was the familiar yellow mask with the laughing mouth-slit. More determined than ever to ascertain the identity of her mysterious protector Margery quickly dodged around the lilac bush, hoping by this flank movement to take the intruder by surprise. But Margery, herself, was the one surprised, for no trace of that masked and evasive figure rewarded her thorough search.

To her further bewilderment she suddenly saw David Manley, dressed in his motorcycle togs, standing on the other side of the strangely productive bush.

"What are you doing here?" she inquired icily. "You seem to have acquired a rather impolite habit of startling people by springing out of the ground quite unexpectedly."

As David reddened under the sting of this cutting remark he realized that Margory's faith in him was decidedly shaken.

"I—I'm awfully sorry I annoyed you, Margery," he stammered apologetically, "but Aunty Ricks over at the old homestead telephoned I could have one of the litter of collie pups—they're prize-winning stock, you know. Before I pick one out I thought I'd ask you if you had any particular preference for markings."

Margery promptly and ungratefully rejected this proposed peace offering.

"Thank you, but I am not at all interested in the prospect of raising a troublesome puppy," she answered with quiet scorn as she turned toward the house.

But despite her cool treatment of Davy, Margery sent a look of tender concern after his dejected figure hurrying toward the garage that would have consoled him greatly could he have seen it. The next moment that look changed swiftly to one of horrified surprise. Over the top of the ivy-mantled brick wall flanking the garage slowly appeared a man's head and shoulders. Then followed a lean-fingered hand clutching a glittering heavy calibered revolver.

She saw Legar raise the nickeled revolver and squint with deliberate and careful aim over the sights. Before she could utter the cry of warning which was trembling on her lips the revolver in Legar's hand was suddenly lowered and that malignant-faced outlaw slipped out of sight.

The white-lipped girl saw that Legar's hurried retreat was due to the fact that at the moment he was about to press the trigger of that menacing revolver a liveried chauffeur had emerged from the garage pushing a clumsy-looking motorcycle. She saw Davy, still in ignorance of his near approach to death, jump into the saddle of the cumbersome affair, which developed a surprising burst of speed as it flashed down the drive and veered sharply onto the macadam highway.

Certain that the unrelenting master criminal would not so readily relinquish his savage purpose of exterminating the young secretary, and more anxious for Davy's safety than she would admit even to herself, Margery ran lightly to the broad veranda of the manor house and caught up the field glasses which were kept hanging against the wall. Sweeping the long stretch of highway with the powerful lenses, she quickly picked up the straight young figure guiding the racing motorcycle. With a sigh of relief she saw him nearing the crest of that ridgelike elevation called Seven Oaks hill.

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But as she was about to lower the glasses she gave a sudden exclamation of dismay, for the motorcycle slowed down and came to a stop just on the brow of the hill. The khaki-clad rider dismounted, and after a searching glance about him, proceeded with some difficulty to drag the heavy machine over the stone wall, where it was effectually concealed from the view of any chance passerby. Then he struck off along the top of the ridge in the direction of the row of stately trees standing like sentinels guarding the valley.

Even as Margery stood puzzling over the meaning of these strange maneuvers, a look of startled apprehension came into her eyes as she saw a group of sinister figures slinking along the side of the road a short distance below the house. She studied them for a moment through the glasses, and it was apparent these skulkers were no honest tillers of the soil, for their leader's left arm dangled straight at his side, and terminated in an ingeniously fashioned iron hook.

As she glanced hurriedly about the place she saw the only man available was old Tim, the head gardener, who was engaged in languidly spraying a rose bush, but that rheumatic old servitor could be of little use in such an emergency. Something must be done, and done quickly, if Davy was not to be struck down unawares. To the astonishment of old Tim, Margory's girlish figure went suddenly racing across the lawn, and with a flutter of white, lightly scaled the fence into the adjoining fields.

She knew she must run as she had never run before, if by taking advantage of a short-cut she hoped to reach Davy before that evil band of gunmen, bent on his destruction. She became conscious of something persistently bumping against her knee, and then remembered she had slipped the circular mirror into the outside pocket of her serge outing skirt. The distance was not great, but this desperate cross-country chase exacted a heavy toll on Margory's strength, and it was with labored breath she finally reached the highway at the crest of Seven Oaks hill.

But even as she was about to burst through the bushes fringing the highway she heard the low murmur of approaching voices and realized her resolute efforts had been in vain. Legar and his fulsome crew of jailbirds had outstripped her in that arduous race. As she crouched low in the bushes panting like a hound-harried rabbit, Margory saw the one-armed criminal ringed about by his henchmen holding a hurried council of war.

"He must be in back of those rocks," she heard Legar say in positive tones, "and if we go out along the ridge he is going to plug a couple of us before we get him. The best way is to go down the hill and circle around back of him."

This cold-blooded plan of assassination apparently met with general approval for the group stealthily moved off down the road leading to the foot of the ridge. It flashed into the mind of the hidden eavesdropper that one chance yet remained to save her father's secretary from a shower of bullets fired from a cowardly ambush. By running directly along the crest of the ridge she might still reach Davy before that band of savage marauders, who were seeking to creep up on him by a more circuitous route.

But at that moment the straggly bush at which she had clutched to steady her precarious footing suddenly uprooted in her hand, and, flinging up her arms in a vain effort to regain her toppling balance, she went jolting down the sharp declivity into the midst of the astonished gunmen. For a second they stared in stupid wonder at the slender white figure which had launched itself among them in this precipitous manner. And that second was all that Margory needed to spring to her feet and swiftly start toward the rocky bastion on the summit of the ridge.

It was then Legar took a hand in the proceedings.

"Get that she mountain-goat and get her quick!" Legar stormed at his vicious followers.

One of the younger gangsters made a flying leap after the agile girl, who now had a start of several yards. As she frantically scrambled up the broken slope, she could hear the heavy, crunching steps of her pursuer coming closer and closer. She could hear the profane encouragement shouted by Legar's men to their straining companion. Then, with the goal almost within reach, her overtaxed strength commenced to fail. Her struggles became weaker, and the world seemed clouded with a strange darkness. She heard the sound of heavy breathing and felt a rude hand clutching at her arm.

Even as that offensive hand started roughly dragging her back, a pistol cracked out of the enveloping darkness and the gripping fingers suddenly relaxed their hold. She heard the sound of a heavy body thudding down the hillside. Then another hand caught her arm, this time in a firm, steady hold, and pulled her upward onto the stretch of level ground back of the rampart of massive bowlders.

When the mist finally cleared from Margery's eyes she expected to see the familiar figure of David Manley standing by her side. But when her rescuer turned from gazing cautiously and intently into the valley it was with an involuntary gasp of surprise that she perceived his face was covered by a yellow cambric mask, which on so many previous occasions had shrouded the identity of that self-appointed righter of wrongs. On this occasion he also wore a long, loose automobile coat reaching nearly to his feet.

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"We are going to have a fight on our hands in a minute," he said quietly. "Legar and his men are getting ready to rush the place."

Almost as he spoke, a group of determined and grimly silent figures, each armed with a formidable-looking revolver, came storming up the peaceful hillside. The Laughing Mask, with a quick movement, drew his companion to a place of safety. Then he leaned slightly over the natural stone breastwork and leveled his black automatic at the foremost of the oncoming bandits.

With the spiteful crack of the pistol that figure stopped short, wavered uncertainly for a moment, and then plunged headlong into the valley. From that advancing line of gangsters came a sharp fusillade of answering shots, but the man in the mask seemed to bear a charmed life. He continued to pump his automatic in apparent indifference to the rain of bullets flattening against the rocks about him. A second gunman spun about in his tracks, and dropping heavily, caught on a projection, where he hung limply suspended.

When the third of Legar's evil soldiery dropped his revolver, and with a howl of pain clapped his hand to his shoulder, his companions broke and scurried for cover, followed by their blaspheming captain. Legar's attempt to rally his demoralized forces to a fresh attack was apparently futile, for there followed a long and oppressive silence. But as the Laughing Mask warily raised his head for a brief reconnoissance of the situation, a bullet whistling perilously close to his ear gave warning that his hidden enemies were decidedly on the alert.

He flung up his automatic for a quick shot at the sniper whom he saw half-concealed behind a tree trunk. But only a dull click followed his pressure on the trigger. Margery's defender hastily explored his pockets, but his search proving fruitless, he realized that it was only a matter of minutes before his lack of ammunition would be discovered by his wily adversary, with a consequent rush of his rabid followers. For himself it did not matter, but he shuddered at the thought of his brave-spirited companion falling into those remorseless hands.

As he turned to tell her of the desperate situation confronting them, he could not repress an exclamation of startled surprise. For at this most danger-fraught hour of her existence, he saw Margery Golden apparently amusing herself with a round hand mirror, on which she caught the rays of the midday sun and sent them glancing off into space in the direction of the great manor house topping the hill across the intervening stretch of valley.

"Isn't this a rather ill-chosen time for such childish diversions?" he inquired a little sternly.

The preoccupied girl continued for a full moment to turn and twist that ever-shifting mirror before she spoke.

[illegible]on, as you call [illegible] means of saving [illegible] calm answer. "I [illegible] meant your last [illegible] trying to helio-[illegible]

[illegible] quick movements [illegible]ns of light radiating across the valley. Suddenly they saw an automobile filled with passengers turn off the highway and wind rapidly up the drive. They saw the distant figures of the men as they got out of the machine and started to enter the house. Then the bulky figure in the lead stopped abruptly and concentrated his attention on that faint spot of light flickering on the side of the veranda. After a moment he turned and spoke excitedly to the little group around him.

It was apparent the stalwart police captain had interpreted those dancing splashes of light into the frantic call from Seven Oaks hill for badly needed help.

Throwing aside his useless weapon, the Laughing Mask seized a heavy rock and hurled it down upon the advancing group, now half-way up the slope. He followed this by another granite projectile, and still another. But it was an easy matter for the attackers to dodge these clumsy missiles, and it was evident that at best only a brief respite could be gained by this medieval method of warfare. One of the gangsters drew a deliberate bead on the exposed figure of the Laughing Mask, but Legar struck up his arm before he could fire.

"I want to snare those birds alive," Margery heard him grimly announce.

Then, with a concerted rush, the besiegers of that rocky citadel covered the remaining distance and came swarming over the rough-hewn battlements. The Laughing Mask threw a protecting arm about his slender comrade and stood waiting for the shock of hand-to-hand conflict. But even as contaminating hands were reached out toward the shrinking girl there came the sound of many feet pounding along the ridge.

"Beat it, the bulls are comin'!" shouted one of the gangsters as a group of flying figures charged down upon them. Out of that inferno of raging fighters whose lurid oaths were punctured by revolver shots and the crash of heavy clubs on thick skulls, two men detached themselves and made a quick dash for liberty. The scar-marked fugitive, with two detectives close at his heels, succeeded in reaching the highway. Here he seized upon the motorcycle belonging to David Manley, and the next moment, its chugging explosions woke the echoes as with a flying leap he was in the saddle and rocketing down the road.

The other refugee, who wore a yellow mask, was honored by the hot chase of the russet-faced Captain Brackett himself. Making straight for a huge, round bowlder standing in solitary isolation, he outstripped his somewhat portly pursuer and dodged around the globular mass of stone.

A little later that self-possessed young woman was sitting peacefully on the wide and shady veranda of her father's home when David Manley, still in his cycling togs, ca[illegible] up the steps toward her [illegible] his arms was [illegible] lumpish and wriggling collie puppy. Margery fixed on him a stern look of interrogation.

A Group of Silent Figures Stormed Up the Hill.

"What were you doing at Seven Oaks hill this morning?" she inquired brusquely.

Davy's eyes fell before the direct gaze of his inquisitor.

"I haven't been near Seven Oaks hill today," he replied slowly, after a little pause. "I have been over to Aunty Ricks' ever since I talked with you this morning. I thought you might change your mind about wanting a puppy, so I picked out the best of the lot for you."

As Margery rose to her feet there came into her face an expression of intense scorn.

"This is the second deliberate falsehood you have told me," she replied, making each word a stab, "and I do not care to accept a gift of any kind from your hands." As she finished speaking the wrathful girl turned and swept into the house, leaving a saddened young man absently holding a sprawling collie puppy in his arms.

The Dice of Chance.

David Manley was decidedly unhappy. And his dejected spirits were due entirely to the fact that he had fallen under the scornful displeasure of a certain adorable young woman who had caught him in a deliberate and unwarranted falsehood.

Following his disastrous rout at the battle of Seven Oaks hill, their one-armed enemy had seemingly declared a truce, and now the gentle Mrs. Golden, in the hope that it might prove a distraction for the deeply brooding girl, planned a gay lawn fete, to which the whole countryside was invited. Under the stimulus of preparation for this elaborate affair, Margery's drooping spirits revived to a certain extent. But in thinking that Legar would for long relinquish his relentless purpose to revenge, they had sadly misjudged that vicious master-criminal.

From certain inside sources he learned of the proposed festivities, and at once decided the opportune moment had arrived for him to strike, and strike hard. Among the pernicious crew which did his bidding was a swarthy-faced Neapolitan bomb-setter known as Black Tony. Because of this man's proclivities for high explosives he was selected as the particular instrument for the consummation of Legar's iniquitous scheme.

A little later, in the Owl's subterranean retreat, he was receiving his final instructions from the lips of his scar-marked leader. Black Tony might well prove a pliant and dangerous tool in skilled hands, but he was sadly deficient in that initiative essential for any work more complicated than dynamiting the grocery shops of his extortion-resisting compatriots. For this reason Legar had prepared a rough diagram, which he now carefully explained to the furtive-eyed blackmailer.

That this diabolical undertaking was entirely to the liking of Black Tony was evidenced by his evil, yellow-toothed grin as he took the paper from Legar's fingers and placed it in his pocket. Carrying a small and well-worn black bag, he started blithely forth on his terrible errand of destruction.

Dressed in a rusty tuxedo, the supposed waiter emerged from the gayly striped marquee where the long supper table was receiving its finishing touches and paused for a moment on his way to the small service tent which was pitched near by. His eyes roved over that assemblage much as the eyes of a cold-blooded butcher might appraise a flock of sheep herded for slaughter. As his glance rested upon the massive oak towering over the refreshment tent, he made a little grimace of evil satisfaction.

Several feet from its base the great trunk had been nearly sawn through by Legar's picked henchmen. And now their ruthless handiwork had been supplemented by the charge of powerful explosive which waited only the spark of ignition to send that huge oak patriarch crashing down upon the flimsy affair of canvas under its branches.

The dark-skinned Italian, exulting over the successful completion of the first part of his deadly mission, stood amidst a scene of wondrous beauty. High in the heavens swung the full moon, casting its mellow effulgence over shimmering lake and wooded hill. Dispelling the wavering shadows were myriads of softly glowing lights, festooning the trees and bespangling the shrubbery. From the rose garden came the sound of gently splashing fountains as they flung their silvery cascades into the scented air. Beautifully gowned women and their somber clad escorts danced on the velvety lawns to the softly swelling music of the great orchestra, or strolled arm in arm about this brilliant land of enchantment.

A slender, golden-haired girl was the center of a laughing group. As she caught sight of something moving at her feet she stooped and picked up a sleepy and blinking-eyed collie puppy, which she held snuggled in her arms for a moment.

"Now, Sandy," she admonished, as she set him down, "it is time all good little dogs were in bed, so run home as fast as you can."

The dutiful Sandy started for the house in obedience to the commands of his mistress, but as he passed the caterer's service tent sundry whiffs and odors assailed his nostrils with an insistent temptation that was not to be denied. He quietly slipped through that inviting opening and, finding no one to dispute him, nosed inquisitively into various hampers of savory edibles. As the clumsy puppy bumped against an improvised table consisting of a board resting on two barrels, a large bowl containing a siruplike mixture toppled onto his back and deluged him with its entire contents.

At that moment there entered the tent a swarthy Italian dressed in the garb of a waiter. Either through a doggish distrust of this forbidding figure or because of a guilty dread of the punishment his recent mischief might bring, the sirup-drenched puppy slunk into a dark corner of the tent and waited for Black Tony to leave. But that worthy showed no immediate intention of departure. Instead he seated himself on a cracker box and studied a small square of paper with every evidence of satisfaction.

He made a movement to stuff that soiled bit of parchment into his hip pocket, but in his haste he missed the pocket and the paper fell to the ground, where a puff of wind, creeping under the tent, fluttered it under the nose of the frightened puppy. He sniffed at it curiously, but the gluelike substance now soaking through his shaggy coat was a matter needing much more urgent attention. Forgetting the menace of that repellent stranger, he rolled frantically on his back, endeavoring to rid himself of that cohering and exasperating liquid with which he was smeared. His long, sticky hairs caught up that scrap of paper, which, by his distracted wallowing, was worked into his matted coat until it clung with burrlike tenacity.

Although Black Tony was in ignorance that his incriminating diagram had been appropriated in this odd manner, he had an inherent dislike for all animals, which he now manifested by bestowing a well directed kick with his heavy boot upon the struggling Sandy. The injured and much aggrieved puppy gave one yelp of pained surprise and darted out of the tent. With drooping tail and equally drooping spirits, he started as fast as his short legs could carry him for the home of Aunty Ricks, which was the place of his nativity, and where no such brutal treatment as this had ever been meted out to him.

The maltreated Sandy, reaching the old gray farmhouse which had formerly been his home, raced through the open door into the cheerful living room where a somewhat dejected young man was sitting with an elderly, kindly-faced woman.

"Sakes alive, if it ain't that pup come back home!" she ejaculated.

Her younger-eyed companion immediately saw that something was amiss with the pet he had bestowed upon Margery Golden as a parting gift.

Then he saw the scrap of paper sticking in the dog's matted hair and his face grew serious. Perhaps the one he loved was in danger and in this strange way had sent a message asking his help. With swift fingers he disentangled the paper and, smoothing out its gummy creases, studied it with frowning intensity. What he saw was a rough sketch of a large field tent, with a tree outlined close beside it.

To the puzzled-eyed young man came a sudden and startled comprehension of those apparently meaningless drawings. Only that afternoon he had passed the great manor house and had seen the preparations for the lawn fete to which he had received no invitation. He had noted the striped marquee put up directly under the mammoth oak.

That time would undoubtedly be the supper hour. Davy's face went white as he hurriedly glanced at the clock on the mantel. A fearful apprehension seized him that it might already be too late to prevent the frightful massacre planned by the one-armed criminal. Paying no heed to the anxious queries of his wondering companion, he rushed from that room in a frenzy of dread foreboding. As he flung himself upon his pulsating motorcycle and shot out into the darkness. His fear would have been a hundredfold intensified could he have seen the murderous Italian, who at that moment touched a lighted match to the end of the time fuse projecting from the nearly severed oak.

It was a race between a spark of fire eating its way up the ever-shortening fuse and a wildly driven motorcycle lurching through the night. The stakes of that desperate race were precious human lives. Once the race was nearly lost, as the pounding machine missed by a hair's breadth a heavy touring car with vision-blinding headlights. Then it careened into the driveway of the brilliantly lighted grounds, raced madly across the level stretch of lawn and into the very tent itself before its white-lipped rider leaped from the saddle.

"Run, all of you! Run for your lives!" he cried frantically.

As his meaning dawned upon the startled guests they stampeded from that threatened tent like a flock of fear-crazed sheep. Even as they cleared the guy-ropes a dull, muffled detonation split the air and the stricken oak swayed unsteadily for an instant; then it came toppling down on those deserted walls of canvas with a roar like the mighty crash of thunder clouds.

As David Manley relinquished his hold on the white-faced girl whose life he had saved, Enoch Golden grasped him tremulously by the hand in silent thanks for their deliverance from disaster. Margery turned to him a little shyly.

"I don't know how to thank you for what you have done, Davy," she said impulsively.

But the deeply hurt young man only acknowledged her gratitude with a stiffly formal bow as he turned and strode away into the darkness.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Enoch Golden Grasped Him Tremulously by the Hand in Silent Thanks for Their Deliverance From Disaster.

The Unknown Quantity.

Men, money, markets, materials, methods, machines. We can understand and perfect everything except the first.—Hugh S. Fulkerton.

[illegible] did [illegible]ith im- [illegible]other of a [illegible]y own house [illegible] TIMMONS, 216 Al[illegible] Bluff, Mo.

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In the American total, church music accounts for $10,000,000 a year. The sale of pianos reaches $27,000,000, of organs $2,000,000, of gramophones and records $13,000,000, and of sheet music and music books $2,100,000.

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