

ELIZABETH AND HER GERMAN GARDEN

BY

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Elizabeth and her German Garden

May 7th.--I love my garden. I am writing in it now in the late afternoon loveliness, much interrupted by the mosquitoes and the temptation to look at all the glories of the new green leaves washed half an hour ago in a cold shower. Two owls are perched near me, and are carrying on a long conversation that I enjoy as much as any warbling of nightingales. The gentleman owl says [[musical notes occur here in the printed text]], and she answers from her tree a little way off, [[musical notes]], beautifully assenting to and completing her lord's remark, as becomes a properly constructed German she-owl. They say the same thing over and over again so emphatically that I think it must be something nasty about me; but I shall not let myself be frightened away by the sarcasm of owls.

This is less a garden than a wilderness. No one has lived in the house, much less in the garden, for twenty-five years, and it is such a pretty old place that the people who might have lived here and did not, deliberately preferring the horrors of a flat in a town, must have belonged to that vast number of eyeless and earless persons of whom the world seems chiefly composed. Noseless too, though it does not sound pretty; but the greater part of my spring happiness is due to the scent of the wet earth and young leaves.

I am always happy (out of doors be it understood, for indoors there are servants and furniture) but in quite different ways, and my spring happiness bears no resemblance to my summer or autumn happiness, though it is not more intense, and there were days last winter when I danced for sheer joy out in my frost-bound garden, in spite of my years and children. But I did it behind a bush, having a due regard for the decencies.

There are so many bird-cherries round me, great trees with branches sweeping the grass, and they are so wreathed just now with white blossoms and tenderest green that the garden looks like a wedding. I never saw such masses of them; they seemed to fill the place. Even across a little stream that bounds the garden on the east, and right in the middle of the cornfield beyond, there is an immense one, a picture of grace and glory against the cold blue of the spring sky.

My garden is surrounded by cornfields and meadows, and beyond are great stretches of sandy heath and pine forests, and where the forests leave off the bare heath begins again; but the forests are beautiful in their lofty, pink-stemmed vastness, far overhead the crowns of softest gray-green, and underfoot a bright green wortleberry carpet, and everywhere the breathless silence; and the bare heaths are beautiful too, for one can see across them into eternity almost, and to go out on to them with one's face towards the setting sun is like going into the very presence of God.

In the middle of this plain is the oasis of birdcherries and greenery where I spend my happy days, and in the middle of the oasis is the gray stone house with many gables where I pass my reluctant nights. The house is very old, and has been added to at various times. It was a convent before the Thirty Years' War, and the vaulted chapel, with its brick floor worn by pious peasant knees, is now used as a hall. Gustavus Adolphus and

his Swedes passed through more than once, as is duly recorded in archives still preserved, for we are on what was then the high-road between Sweden and Brandenburg the unfortunate. The Lion of the North was no doubt an estimable person and acted wholly up to his convictions, but he must have sadly upset the peaceful nuns, who were not without convictions of their own, sending them out on to the wide, empty plain to piteously seek some life to replace the life of silence here.

From nearly all the windows of the house I can look out across the plain, with no obstacle in the shape of a hill, right away to a blue line of distant forest, and on the west side uninterruptedly to the setting sun--nothing but a green, rolling plain, with a sharp edge against the sunset. I love those west windows better than any others, and have chosen my bedroom on that side of the house so that even times of hair-brushing may not be entirely lost, and the young woman who attends to such matters has been taught to fulfil her duties about a mistress recumbent in an easychair before an open window, and not to profane with chatter that sweet and solemn time. This girl is grieved at my habit of living almost in the garden, and all her ideas as to the sort of life a respectable German lady should lead have got into a sad muddle since she came to me. The people round about are persuaded that I am, to put it as kindly as possible, exceedingly eccentric, for the news has travelled that I spend the day out of doors with a book, and that no mortal eye has ever yet seen me sew or cook. But why cook when you can get some one to cook for you? And as for sewing, the maids will hem the sheets better and quicker than I could, and all forms of needlework of the fancy order are inventions of the evil one for keeping the foolish from applying their heart to wisdom.

We had been married five years before it struck us that we might as well make use of this place by coming down and living in it. Those five years were spent in a flat in a town, and during their whole interminable length I was perfectly miserable and perfectly healthy, which disposes of the ugly notion that has at times disturbed me that my happiness here is less due to the garden than to a good digestion. And while we were wasting our lives there, here was this dear place with dandelions up to the very door, all the paths grass-grown and completely effaced, in winter so lonely, with nobody but the north wind taking the least notice of it, and in May--in all those five lovely Mays-- no one to look at the wonderful bird-cherries and still more wonderful masses of lilacs, everything glowing and blowing, the virginia creeper madder every year, until at last, in October, the very roof was wreathed with blood-red tresses, the owls and the squirrels and all the blessed little birds reigning supreme, and not a living creature ever entering the empty house except the snakes, which got into the habit during those silent years of wriggling up the south wall into the rooms on that side whenever the old housekeeper opened the windows. All that was here,--peace, and happiness, and a reasonable life,--and yet it never struck me to come and live in it. Looking back I am astonished, and can in no way account for the tardiness of my discovery that here, in this far-away corner, was my kingdom of heaven. Indeed, so little did it enter my head to even use the place in summer, that I submitted to weeks of seaside life with all its horrors every year; until at last, in the early spring of last year, having come down for the opening of the village school, and wandering out afterwards into the bare and desolate garden, I don't know what smell of wet earth or rotting leaves brought back my childhood with a rush and all

the happy days I had spent in a garden. Shall I ever forget that day? It was the beginning of my real life, my coming of age as it were, and entering into my kingdom. Early March, gray, quiet skies, and brown, quiet earth; leafless and sad and lonely enough out there in the damp and silence, yet there I stood feeling the same rapture of pure delight in the first breath of spring that I used to as a child, and the five wasted years fell from me like a cloak, and the world was full of hope, and I vowed myself then and there to nature, and have been happy ever since.

My other half being indulgent, and with some faint thought perhaps that it might be as well to look after the place, consented to live in it at any rate for a time; whereupon followed six specially blissful weeks from the end of April into June, during which I was here alone, supposed to be superintending the painting and papering, but as a matter of fact only going into the house when the workmen had gone out of it.

How happy I was! I don't remember any time quite so perfect since the days when I was too little to do lessons and was turned out with sugar on my eleven o'clock bread and butter on to a lawn closely strewn with dandelions and daisies. The sugar on the bread and butter has lost its charm, but I love the dandelions and daisies even more passionately now than then, and never would endure to see them all mown away if I were not certain that in a day or two they would be pushing up their little faces again as jauntily as ever. During those six weeks I lived in a world of dandelions and delights. The dandelions carpeted the three lawns,-- they used to be lawns, but have long since blossomed out into meadows filled with every sort of pretty weed,-- and under and among the groups of leafless oaks and beeches were blue hepaticas, white anemones, violets, and celandines in sheets. The celandines in particular delighted me with their clean, happy brightness, so beautifully trim and newly varnished, as though they too had had the painters at work on them. Then, when the anemones went, came a few stray periwinkles and Solomon's Seal, and all the birdcherries blossomed in a burst. And then, before I had a little got used to the joy of their flowers against the sky, came the lilacs--masses and masses of them, in clumps on the grass, with other shrubs and trees by the side of walks, and one great continuous bank of them half a mile long right past the west front of the house, away down as far as one could see, shining glorious against a background of firs. When that time came, and when, before it was over, the acacias all blossomed too, and four great clumps of pale, silvery-pink peonies flowered under the south windows, I felt so absolutely happy, and blest, and thankful, and grateful, that I really cannot describe it. My days seemed to melt away in a dream of pink and purple peace.

There were only the old housekeeper and her handmaiden in the house, so that on the plea of not giving too much trouble I could indulge what my other half calls my *_fantaisie_ _dereglee_* as regards meals-- that is to say, meals so simple that they could be brought out to the lilacs on a tray; and I lived, I remember, on salad and bread and tea the whole time, sometimes a very tiny pigeon appearing at lunch to save me, as the old lady thought, from starvation. Who but a woman could have stood salad for six weeks, even salad sanctified by the presence and scent of the most gorgeous lilac masses? I did, and grew in grace every day, though I have never liked it since. How often now, oppressed by the necessity of assisting at three dining-room meals daily, two of which are

conducted by the functionaries held indispensable to a proper maintenance of the family dignity, and all of which are pervaded by joints of meat, how often do I think of my salad days, forty in number, and of the blessedness of being alone as I was then alone!

And then the evenings, when the workmen had all gone and the house was left to emptiness and echoes, and the old housekeeper had gathered up her rheumatic limbs into her bed, and my little room in quite another part of the house had been set ready, how reluctantly I used to leave the friendly frogs and owls, and with my heart somewhere down in my shoes lock the door to the garden behind me, and pass through the long series of echoing south rooms full of shadows and ladders and ghostly pails of painters' mess, and humming a tune to make myself believe I liked it, go rather slowly across the brick-floored hall, up the creaking stairs, down the long whitewashed passage, and with a final rush of panic whisk into my room and double lock and bolt the door!

There were no bells in the house, and I used to take a great dinner-bell to bed with me so that at least I might be able to make a noise if frightened in the night, though what good it would have been I don't know, as there was no one to hear. The housemaid slept in another little cell opening out of mine, and we two were the only living creatures in the great empty west wing. She evidently did not believe in ghosts, for I could hear how she fell asleep immediately after getting into bed; nor do I believe in them, "mais je les redoute," as a French lady said, who from her books appears to have been strongminded.

The dinner-bell was a great solace; it was never rung, but it comforted me to see it on the chair beside my bed, as my nights were anything but placid, it was all so strange, and there were such queer creakings and other noises. I used to lie awake for hours, startled out of a light sleep by the cracking of some board, and listen to the indifferent snores of the girl in the next room. In the morning, of course, I was as brave as a lion and much amused at the cold perspirations of the night before; but even the nights seem to me now to have been delightful, and myself like those historic boys who heard a voice in every wind and snatched a fearful joy. I would gladly shiver through them all over again for the sake of the beautiful purity of the house, empty of servants and upholstery.

How pretty the bedrooms looked with nothing in them but their cheerful new papers! Sometimes I would go into those that were finished and build all sorts of castles in the air about their future and their past. Would the nuns who had lived in them know their little white-washed cells again, all gay with delicate flower papers and clean white paint? And how astonished they would be to see cell No. 14 turned into a bathroom, with a bath big enough to insure a cleanliness of body equal to their purity of soul! They would look upon it as a snare of the tempter; and I know that in my own case I only began to be shocked at the blackness of my nails the day that I began to lose the first whiteness of my soul by falling in love at fifteen with the parish organist, or rather with the glimpse of surplice and Roman nose and fiery moustache which was all I ever saw of him, and which I loved to distraction for at least six months; at the end of which time, going out with my governess one day, I passed him in the street, and discovered that his unofficial garb was a frock-coat combined with a turn-down collar and a "bowler" hat, and never loved him any more.

The first part of that time of blessedness was the most perfect, for I had not a thought of anything but the peace and beauty all round me. Then he appeared suddenly who has a right to appear when and how he will and rebuked me for never having written, and when I told him that I had been literally too happy to think of writing, he seemed to take it as a reflection on himself that I could be happy alone. I took him round the garden along the new paths I had had made, and showed him the acacia and lilac glories, and he said that it was the purest selfishness to enjoy myself when neither he nor the offspring were with me, and that the lilacs wanted thoroughly pruning. I tried to appease him by offering him the whole of my salad and toast supper which stood ready at the foot of the little verandah steps when we came back, but nothing appeased that Man of Wrath, and he said he would go straight back to the neglected family. So he went; and the remainder of the precious time was disturbed by twinges of conscience (to which I am much subject) whenever I found myself wanting to jump for joy. I went to look at the painters every time my feet were for taking me to look at the garden; I trotted diligently up and down the passages; I criticised and suggested and commanded more in one day than I had done in all the rest of the time; I wrote regularly and sent my love; but I could not manage to fret and yearn. What are you to do if your conscience is clear and your liver in order and the sun is shining?

May 10th.--I knew nothing whatever last year about gardening and this year know very little more, but I have dawns of what may be done, and have at least made one great stride-- from ipomaea to tea-roses.

The garden was an absolute wilderness. It is all round the house, but the principal part is on the south side and has evidently always been so. The south front is one-storied, a long series of rooms opening one into the other, and the walls are covered with virginia creeper. There is a little verandah in the middle, leading by a flight of rickety wooden steps down into what seems to have been the only spot in the whole place that was ever cared for. This is a semicircle cut into the lawn and edged with privet, and in this semicircle are eleven beds of different sizes bordered with box and arranged round a sun-dial, and the sun-dial is very venerable and moss-grown, and greatly beloved by me. These beds were the only sign of any attempt at gardening to be seen (except a solitary crocus that came up all by itself each spring in the grass, not because it wanted to, but because it could not help it), and these I had sown with ipomaea, the whole eleven, having found a German gardening book, according to which ipomaea in vast quantities was the one thing needful to turn the most hideous desert into a paradise. Nothing else in that book was recommended with anything like the same warmth, and being entirely ignorant of the quantity of seed necessary, I bought ten pounds of it and had it sown not only in the eleven beds but round nearly every tree, and then waited in great agitation for the promised paradise to appear. It did not, and I learned my first lesson.

Luckily I had sown two great patches of sweetpeas which made me very happy all the summer, and then there were some sunflowers and a few hollyhocks under the south windows, with Madonna lilies in between. But the lilies, after being transplanted, disappeared to my great dismay, for how was I to know it was the way of lilies? And the hollyhocks turned out to be rather ugly colours, so that my first summer was decorated

and beautified solely by sweet-peas. At present we are only just beginning to breathe after the bustle of getting new beds and borders and paths made in time for this summer. The eleven beds round the sun-dial are filled with roses, but I see already that I have made mistakes with some. As I have not a living soul with whom to hold communion on this or indeed on any matter, my only way of learning is by making mistakes. All eleven were to have been carpeted with purple pansies, but finding that I had not enough and that nobody had any to sell me, only six have got their pansies, the others being sown with dwarf mignonette. Two of the eleven are filled with Marie van Houtte roses, two with Viscountess Folkestone, two with Laurette Messimy, one with Souvenir de la Malmaison, one with Adam and Devoniensis, two with Persian Yellow and Bicolor, and one big bed behind the sun-dial with three sorts of red roses (seventy-two in all), Duke of Teck, Cheshunt Scarlet, and Prefet de Limburg. This bed is, I am sure, a mistake, and several of the others are, I think, but of course I must wait and see, being such an ignorant person. Then I have had two long beds made in the grass on either side of the semicircle, each sown with mignonette, and one filled with Marie van Houtte, and the other with Jules Finger and the Bride; and in a warm corner under the drawing-room windows is a bed of Madame Lambard, Madame de Watteville, and Comtesse Riza du Parc; while farther down the garden, sheltered on the north and west by a group of beeches and lilacs, is another large bed, containing Rubens, Madame Joseph Schwartz, and the Hen. Edith Gifford. All these roses are dwarf; I have only two standards in the whole garden, two Madame George Bruants, and they look like broomsticks. How I long for the day when the tea-roses open their buds! Never did I look forward so intensely to anything; and every day I go the rounds, admiring what the dear little things have achieved in the twentyfour hours in the way of new leaf or increase of lovely red shoot.

The hollyhocks and lilies (now flourishing) are still under the south windows in a narrow border on the top of a grass slope, at the foot of which I have sown two long borders of sweetpeas facing the rose beds, so that my roses may have something almost as sweet as themselves to look at until the autumn, when everything is to make place for more tea-roses. The path leading away from this semicircle down the garden is bordered with China roses, white and pink, with here and there a Persian Yellow. I wish now I had put tea-roses there, and I have misgivings as to the effect of the Persian Yellows among the Chinas, for the Chinas are such wee little baby things, and the Persian Yellows look as though they intended to be big bushes.

There is not a creature in all this part of the world who could in the least understand with what heart-beatings I am looking forward to the flowering of these roses, and not a German gardening book that does not relegate all tea-roses to hot-houses, imprisoning them for life, and depriving them for ever of the breath of God. It was no doubt because I was so ignorant that I rushed in where Teutonic angels fear to tread and made my tea-roses face a northern winter; but they did face it under fir branches and leaves, and not one has suffered, and they are looking to-day as happy and as determined to enjoy themselves as any roses, I am sure, in Europe.

May 14th.--To-day I am writing on the verandah with the three babies, more persistent than mosquitoes, raging round me, and already several of the thirty fingers have been in

the ink-pot and the owners consoled when duty pointed to rebukes. But who can rebuke such penitent and drooping sunbonnets? I can see nothing but sunbonnets and pinafores and nimble black legs.

These three, their patient nurse, myself, the gardener, and the gardener's assistant, are the only people who ever go into my garden, but then neither are we ever out of it. The gardener has been here a year and has given me notice regularly on the first of every month, but up to now has been induced to stay on. On the first of this month he came as usual, and with determination written on every feature told me he intended to go in June, and that nothing should alter his decision. I don't think he knows much about gardening, but he can at least dig and water, and some of the things he sows come up, and some of the plants he plants grow, besides which he is the most unflinchingly industrious person I ever saw, and has the great merit of never appearing to take the faintest interest in what we do in the garden. So I have tried to keep him on, not knowing what the next one may be like, and when I asked him what he had to complain of and he replied "Nothing," I could only conclude that he has a personal objection to me because of my eccentric preference for plants in groups rather than plants in lines. Perhaps, too, he does not like the extracts from gardening books I read to him sometimes when he is planting or sowing something new. Being so helpless myself, I thought it simpler, instead of explaining, to take the book itself out to him and let him have wisdom at its very source, administering it in doses while he worked. I quite recognise that this must be annoying, and only my anxiety not to lose a whole year through some stupid mistake has given me the courage to do it. I laugh sometimes behind the book at his disgusted face, and wish we could be photographed, so that I may be reminded in twenty years' time, when the garden is a bower of loveliness and I learned in all its ways, of my first happy struggles and failures.

All through April he was putting the perennials we had sown in the autumn into their permanent places, and all through April he went about with a long piece of string making parallel lines down the borders of beautiful exactitude and arranging the poor plants like soldiers at a review. Two long borders were done during my absence one day, and when I explained that I should like the third to have plants in groups and not in lines, and that what I wanted was a natural effect with no bare spaces of earth to be seen, he looked even more gloomily hopeless than usual; and on my going out later on to see the result, I found he had planted two long borders down the sides of a straight walk with little lines of five plants in a row--first five pinks, and next to them five rockets, and behind the rockets five pinks, and behind the pinks five rockets, and so on with different plants of every sort and size down to the end. When I protested, he said he had only carried out my orders and had known it would not look well; so I gave in, and the remaining borders were done after the pattern of the first two, and I will have patience and see how they look this summer, before digging them up again; for it becomes beginners to be humble.

If I could only dig and plant myself! How much easier, besides being so fascinating, to make your own holes exactly where you want them and put in your plants exactly as you choose instead of giving orders that can only be half understood from the moment you depart from the lines laid down by that long piece of string! In the first ecstasy of having a garden all my own, and in my burning impatience to make the waste places blossom

like a rose, I did one warm Sunday in last year's April during the servants' dinner hour, doubly secure from the gardener by the day and the dinner, slink out with a spade and a rake and feverishly dig a little piece of ground and break it up and sow surreptitious ipomaea, and run back very hot and guilty into the house, and get into a chair and behind a book and look languid just in time to save my reputation. And why not? It is not graceful, and it makes one hot; but it is a blessed sort of work, and if Eve had had a spade in Paradise and known what to do with it, we should not have had all that sad business of the apple.

What a happy woman I am living in a garden, with books, babies, birds, and flowers, and plenty of leisure to enjoy them! Yet my town acquaintances look upon it as imprisonment, and burying, and I don't know what besides, and would rend the air with their shrieks if condemned to such a life. Sometimes I feel as if I were blest above all my fellows in being able to find my happiness so easily. I believe I should always be good if the sun always shone, and could enjoy myself very well in Siberia on a fine day. And what can life in town offer in the way of pleasure to equal the delight of any one of the calm evenings I have had this month sitting alone at the foot of the verandah steps, with the perfume of young larches all about, and the May moon hanging low over the beeches, and the beautiful silence made only more profound in its peace by the croaking of distant frogs and hooting of owls? A cockchafer darting by close to my ear with a loud hum sends a shiver through me, partly of pleasure at the reminder of past summers, and partly of fear lest he should get caught in my hair. The Man of Wrath says they are pernicious creatures and should be killed. I would rather get the killing done at the end of the summer and not crush them out of such a pretty world at the very beginning of all the fun.

This has been quite an eventful afternoon. My eldest baby, born in April, is five years old, and the youngest, born in June, is three; so that the discerning will at once be able to guess the age of the remaining middle or May baby. While I was stooping over a group of hollyhocks planted on the top of the only thing in the shape of a hill the garden possesses, the April baby, who had been sitting pensive on a tree stump close by, got up suddenly and began to run aimlessly about, shrieking and wringing her hands with every symptom of terror. I stared, wondering what had come to her; and then I saw that a whole army of young cows, pasturing in a field next to the garden, had got through the hedge and were grazing perilously near my tea-roses and most precious belongings. The nurse and I managed to chase them away, but not before they had trampled down a border of pinks and lilies in the cruellest way, and made great holes in a bed of China roses, and even begun to nibble at a Jackmanni clematis that I am trying to persuade to climb up a tree trunk. The gloomy gardener happened to be ill in bed, and the assistant was at vespers-- as Lutheran Germany calls afternoon tea or its equivalent-- so the nurse filled up the holes as well as she could with mould, burying the crushed and mangled roses, cheated for ever of their hopes of summer glory, and I stood by looking on dejectedly. The June baby, who is two feet square and valiant beyond her size and years, seized a stick much bigger than herself and went after the cows, the cowherd being nowhere to be seen. She planted herself in front of them brandishing her stick, and they stood in a row and stared at her in great astonishment; and she kept them off until one of the men from the farm

arrived with a whip, and having found the cowherd sleeping peacefully in the shade, gave him a sound beating. The cowherd is a great hulking young man, much bigger than the man who beat him, but he took his punishment as part of the day's work and made no remark of any sort. It could not have hurt him much through his leather breeches, and I think he deserved it; but it must be demoralising work for a strong young man with no brains looking after cows. Nobody with less imagination than a poet ought to take it up as a profession.

After the June baby and I had been welcomed back by the other two with as many hugs as though we had been restored to them from great perils, and while we were peacefully drinking tea under a beech tree, I happened to look up into its mazy green, and there, on a branch quite close to my head, sat a little baby owl. I got on the seat and caught it easily, for it could not fly, and how it had reached the branch at all is a mystery. It is a little round ball of gray fluff, with the quaintest, wisest, solemn face. Poor thing! I ought to have let it go, but the temptation to keep it until the Man of Wrath, at present on a journey, has seen it was not to be resisted, as he has often said how much he would like to have a young owl and try and tame it. So I put it into a roomy cage and slung it up on a branch near where it had been sitting, and which cannot be far from its nest and its mother. We had hardly subsided again to our tea when I saw two more balls of fluff on the ground in the long grass and scarcely distinguishable at a little distance from small mole-hills. These were promptly united to their relation in the cage, and now when the Man of Wrath comes home, not only shall he be welcomed by a wife decked with the orthodox smiles, but by the three little longed-for owls. Only it seems wicked to take them from their mother, and I know that I shall let them go again some day-- perhaps the very next time the Man of Wrath goes on a journey. I put a small pot of water in the cage, though they never could have tasted water yet unless they drink the raindrops off the beech leaves. I suppose they get all the liquid they need from the bodies of the mice and other dainties provided for them by their fond parents. But the raindrop idea is prettier.

May 15th.--How cruel it was of me to put those poor little owls into a cage even for one night! I cannot forgive myself, and shall never pander to the Man of Wrath's wishes again. This morning I got up early to see how they were getting on, and I found the door of the cage wide open and no owls to be seen. I thought of course that somebody had stolen them-- some boy from the village, or perhaps the chastised cowherd. But looking about I saw one perched high up in the branches of the beech tree, and then to my dismay one lying dead on the ground. The third was nowhere to be seen, and is probably safe in its nest. The parents must have torn at the bars of the cage until by chance they got the door open, and then dragged the little ones out and up into the tree. The one that is dead must have been blown off the branch, as it was a windy night and its neck is broken. There is one happy life less in the garden to-day through my fault, and it is such a lovely, warm day--just the sort of weather for young soft things to enjoy and grow in. The babies are greatly distressed, and are digging a grave, and preparing funeral wreaths of dandelions.

Just as I had written that I heard sounds of arrival, and running out I breathlessly told the Man of Wrath how nearly I had been able to give him the owls he has so often said he

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