

16. THE CASE OF THE MISSING ELEPHANTS - CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

'Heart of Darkness' is, obviously, a savage indictment of colonialism. As Conrad wrote in a letter, what was going on in the Congo was 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'. But it needs no imaginative novelist to tell us this. It was not the realization of this alone which made the Congo experience so transforming: 'Before the Congo, I was just a mere animal', he told his friend Edward Garnett. Months after his return he wrote: 'I am still plunged in deepest night, and my dreams are only nightmares'. That 'deepest night', the heart of darkness, was not merely the folly and greed of certain Belgian traders. It was clearly something within Conrad which the experience had forced him to confront.

On the surface of the story, the darkness is the jungle, the African wilderness, but it is not a story which allows us long to remain on the surface. At an early stage in his tale Marlow reveals that the journey into the dark heart of Africa has for him the character of a quest into his own inner darkness:

It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me - and into my thoughts. [11]

As the company doctor had told him, 'the changes take place inside, you know' [65].

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In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* Sir Thomas Bertram is the guardian of most of the novel's positives, a man of kindness, conscience and justice, a man of sound English decency. The plot needs him to be absent for some months, so Jane Austen sends him off to Antigua on 'business'. His 'Estate' there has been 'making poor returns'. No character in the novel has any curiosity about the nature of this 'business' which is the source of their wealth and on which their life of luxury and idleness depends; nor does Jane Austen expect any reader to be interested in it. It is highly likely that to obtain cheap labour for his estate, Sir Thomas would have been involved,

like all the other absentee landlords, in the slave trade. The issue of slavery is raised only to be immediately dropped as beyond the concerns of a novel whose world ends at Portsmouth. Antigua is but a name. Jane Austen defined her art as 'the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a brush'. 'Ivory' here is a dead image, completely cut off from any awareness of what ivory is, where it comes from, and what must be paid for even two inches of it in terms of suffering and death. Perhaps at that time only Blake and Coleridge were capable of making such connections - connections made by few at any time. Ivory is still intermittently a legal trade.

Even the socially and economically conscious novelists of the later nineteenth century were concerned exclusively with abuses within England. Yet this was the age of Empire, and England a trading even more than a manufacturing nation. The Liverpool dockers and Lancashire cotton workers went on strike rather than handle cotton from the slave-owning estates of the West Indies. Conrad picks up the thread where it begins in London or Brussels and follows it, in pursuit of the ultimate truth, into the heart of darkness, which is simultaneously at the other end of the earth and within every human heart.

Like *Wuthering Heights* 'Heart of Darkness' is a box within a box within a box - a meaning within an initially confident but ultimately inadequate narration, within another, still less dependable narration. The first narrator is anonymous, but his attitudes, together with the fact that his friends are a Director of Companies, a Lawyer and an Accountant, place him as a member of the decent, complacent conspiracy of trade. What these companies are and where they operate is a question not to be asked. The 'work' of these men is not 'out there' in the darkness beyond the luminous estuary, but behind them, in London, 'the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth'. They are, in Eliot's words 'assured of certain certainties'. They are much the same certainties Marlow takes to Africa with him. The first white man he meets at the first station there is also an accountant. He 'had verily accomplished something':

In the great demoralization of the land, he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. ... And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order. [26]

His achievements include coping with distractions not experienced by his London counterpart:

The groans of this sick person [a dying agent] distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate. [27]

The first narrator expatiates upon 'the great spirit of the past', on 'all the men of whom the nation is proud', their ships 'like jewels flashing in the night of time'. These conquerors, 'adventurers', 'settlers', traders, 'hunters for gold or pursuers of fame' (he names such pirates and sackers of cities as Sir Francis Drake), are indiscriminately described as 'bearers of a spark from the sacred fire' - heirs of Prometheus.

Marlow's first words - 'And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth' - lead us to anticipate an end to this claptrap. Marlow avoids the worst of the first narrator's verbal clichés, but not his clichés of thought. For him, too, dark means simply uncivilized. To be a man is to get on with your work, to 'face the darkness ... without thinking much about it'. For the incomprehensible is 'also detestable', and 'what saves us is efficiency'.

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ... [10]

Marlow has plenty of opportunity in what follows to justify his distinction between 'sentimental pretence' and his own redeeming 'idea'. His superiority is evident in his clear-sighted recognition that it is 'not a pretty thing', but virtually forfeited by his distaste for looking into anything 'too much'.

Again Marlow parades his superiority to his 'excellent aunt' who, having been taken in by 'all that humbug' treats him 'like an emissary of light': 'I ventured to hint that the company was run for profit'. But again Marlow undercuts his own position immediately afterwards by his generalizations on 'how out of touch with truth women are':

They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.

[18]

We are to learn what 'facts' he is prepared to live with. He descends by the end into lies far more sentimental and damning than those of the first narrator or his aunt.

If Marlow's 'redeeming idea' is not that the colonist is 'something like an emissary of light', what is it? He is shortly to be describing colonialism as 'rapacious and pitiless folly'. His sense of taking part in 'a sordid farce' is strengthened by the superior reality, the naturalness, of the natives:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. ... They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks - these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. [19-20]

What is Marlow's excuse for being there? The next black men he sees are a chain-gang. They toil past him 'with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages'. He admits that he is 'a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings'. A moment later he steps into 'the gloomy circle of some Inferno':

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die. They were dying slowly - it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on

unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. [24]

Marlow gives one a ship's biscuit, then returns to his own affairs:

I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life. Still, one must look about sometimes. . . I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. [33]

He answers himself 'unreal' or 'absurd', and turns away again:

I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.

A wilderness is by definition something the civilized man turns his back on. Marlow will never discover whether it is evil or truth. The 'redeeming facts of life' shrink to a speck, and that speck Marlow identifies with Kurtz.

From the moment he sees the French gunship 'incomprehensible, firing into a continent', Marlow registers mercilessly the 'insanity', the 'lugubrious drollery' of all he sees. A vast hole is being dug to no purpose. There is a hole in the bottom of the pail of the man trying to put out a fire. There is a brickmaker unable to make any bricks because some essential materials cannot be found and will never be sent. It is a sick real-life version of 'The Hunting of the Snark':

He came as a Baker: but owned, when too late -
And it drove the poor Bellman half mad -
He could only bake Bridecake - for which, I may state,
No materials were to be had.

But Marlow's easy recourse to the words 'absurd' and 'unreal' is a way of shrugging off responsibility.

If he has already lost faith in 'the work', Marlow retains to the end his faith in 'work' and efficiency, oblivious of the fact that all his work is part of 'the work'. He deliberately blinkers himself henceforth to the point where all he can see is rivets - 'a certain quantity of rivets - and rivets were what really

Mr. Kurtz wanted, if he had only known it' [40-41]. Marlow rationalizes his escapism by claiming that he likes 'what is in the work, - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality - for yourself, not for others - what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means' [41]. In the circumstances this is pathetic. The truth comes out a few pages later:

When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality - the reality, I tell you - fades. The inner truth is hidden - luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for - what is it? half-a-crown a tumble - [49]

Here Marlow is asked to be civil by one of his listeners. He apologizes. Don't rock the boat. 'And what does the price matter, if the trick be well done?' But he cannot allow himself to go on thinking of his work as no more than monkey-tricks. At the end he is still justifying himself in terms of his 'power of devotion to an obscure back-breaking business', even when this is no more than 'the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in', the 'stuff' being dead hippo. [71]

When Marlow signed his contract in Brussels, he sold his soul to the company. Marlow himself had an inkling of this ('It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy' [15]). Brussels itself had always made him think of 'a whited sepulchre' [14]. Was he aware of the rest of that quotation from *Matthew 23:27*?

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

Minutes after landing at the first station, the inkling deepens into an appalling warning:

I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. [23]

The warning goes unheeded. Blindly he follows in the footsteps of a Faust-like man who, blessed with great gifts and the highest principles, had been betrayed and degraded by that devil into setting himself up as a god, and using the power that gave him to indulge in 'abominable satisfactions' in the devil's name. Is Marlow's very name an echo of that of Christopher Marlowe, who sold himself to the highest bidder, and followed so closely in the steps of his overreaching hero? Kurtz' final cry: 'The horror! The horror!' is a condensation of the last lines of Faustus.

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The narrator has told us that the Thames is 'a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth', though it is not until the final sentence of the story that the pride of that claim is qualified by his realization that it also 'seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness'. Marlow connects the black wool being knitted 'feverishly' by the old woman in the Company offices with the white wool round the neck of the dying Negro. Had he not bid her goodbye with the words *morituri te salutant*? There are many such connecting threads. The *raison d'être* for the whole show is ivory.

At each trading station on the Congo, 'the word ivory', we are told, 'would ring in the air for a while - and on we went again into the silence'. The word rings like a refrain on, it seems, every page of 'Heart of Darkness', once we have reached the Congo; and so it should, since it is the holy grail all these 'pilgrims' are seeking, the 'spell' which holds them captive, the tune to which is danced 'the merry dance of death and trade' [20]. Yet though the word 'ivory' chimes insistently, we hear surprisingly little about this substance for which so many men are dying, about where it comes from before it comes into the hands of the traders, or goes to after it leaves them. Nowhere does Marlow mention what this precious substance is used for back in the civilized world. We must make our own connection with the 'bones' the Accountant is toying with on the first page of the story, the dice on which some young Roman is imagined to have squandered his fortune [9], and the billiard-ball to which Kurtz' bald head is compared. These are the invaluable end-products. For the shareholders back in Europe the ivory is converted into wealth which buys leisure for the cultivation of civilized values, the best of which, like the rectitude of Marlow's listeners or the innocence, beauty and honour of the Intended, is founded on a lie.

The price which has to be paid is not only the sordid deaths of so many 'pilgrims' and negroes. Marlow speaks of ivory-traders as if they were

involved in a mining operation: 'To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot' [44]. In Norman Sherry's *Conrad* [p.58] is an obscene photograph of the man himself, Alexandre Delcommune, standing proudly with his rifle by the side of a pile of thirteen hippopotamus heads. Marlow is, at this stage of the story, secure in his moral superiority to such people. But is there not a certain moral obtuseness in the comparison with burgling, and the refusal to look too closely into who paid and what was paid for such enterprises?

The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. [33]

What corpse? 'Ivory' is a processed, polished word, an evasion, a 'whited sepulchre'. Only three times, towards the end, does Marlow use the word 'tusks', and only once, in the entire story, the word 'elephant' (which slips out in another context). One gathers from Marlow that the traders get the ivory from the natives, and ivory is just something the natives happen to have plenty of. The final link in the chain is one Marlow shrinks from acknowledging, the slaughter, the agony, the protracted deaths of thousands of elephants. The elephants are conspicuous by their absence from Marlow's consciousness.

This would perhaps be a slender thread on which to hang a charge of moral obliquity against Marlow were it not part of a complex web of such threads woven by Conrad. It is, in fact, characteristic of Marlow, in moral or psychological matters, to come to the brink and then turn away with a failure of nerve. The darkness fascinates him, draws him, but he cannot, as Kurtz had done, look into its heart. He is no fool. He knows his limitations. It is not so much that he lacks imagination as that he fears that his imagination might take him out of his depth, as Kurtz' had taken him for all his 'genius'.

And it is not only elephants. There is no description, or even naming, of any of the flora and fauna of Africa. There are many descriptions of the jungle, but always in vague terms, as an impenetrable barrier or incomprehensible face. Marlow obviously fears it. He prefers to stay on his boat, in the little world where he is master. He is very ambivalent about the jungle, and never even attempts to reconcile his wildly fluctuating responses

to it. At one extreme he regards it, as he had done those first natives, as providing a standard of reality and sanity against which the artificial human settlements can be judged: 'the silence of the land went home to one's very heart - its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life' [90]. But at the other extreme it is 'the lurking death', 'the hidden evil', 'the unseen presence of victorious corruption'. We remember his description of the Romans in Britain having to live in the midst of 'the incomprehensible, which is also detestable'. Since he refuses to enter the jungle, either in the body or in imagination, it can only be for him a mirror, or a screen on which he projects whatever preconceptions are already in his mind, the blank gaze of a sphinx:

I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out from there, and I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there. I had heard enough about it, too - God knows! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it - no more than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in there. [38]

It is like the surrounding darkness into which Ursula gazes from the little clearing lit by man's consciousness, and sees there gleams which might be the swords of angels or the flash of fangs.

Marlow's ambivalence about the jungle explains his failure to understand Kurtz. Before he meets Kurtz, he takes him to be a gifted, good and brave man, whose brightness has been heightened, not extinguished, by the surrounding darkness. After having met him, Marlow regards him as one who has simply gone too far into the darkness, too far from the sanity of rivets, and has succumbed to the horror, the nameless abominations, which lurk there. But as we have seen there is no reason to suppose that the jungle contains anything of the sort. The horror Kurtz finally sees is inside his own skull. It is not, as Marlow thinks, the dying Kurtz who is a 'hollow sham', but 'the original Kurtz' [98]. The journalist who sums Kurtz up as an 'extremist', who would have made a splendid leader of an extreme party - 'any party' [104] - is close to the mark. In his zeal for the cause of 'the Suppression of Savage Customs', Kurtz had claimed 'unbounded' power for good for the white races: 'we approach them [savages] with the might as of a

deity' [72]. His extremism manifests itself in 'burning noble words', soaring perorations. To put such a man in a position where everything is permitted ('there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased' [81]), is to subject him to the same test to which Shakespeare subjects Angelo. And the result is the same: Benevolence suddenly collapses and is supplanted by its opposite: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' [72].

And the vital twist, the mysterious chemical change that converts the resisting high-minded puritan to the being of murder and madness, is that occult crossover of Nature's maddened force - like a demon - into the brain that had rejected her. [Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, 114]

Marlow is no such extremist. Unlike Kurtz he can recognize a 'remote kinship' with the savages and their customs. He admits that there is even an 'appeal' to him in the 'fiendish row' [52]. In this he is like Escalus, who suggests to Angelo that he, in certain circumstances, might have done that for which he now condemns Claudio. Angelo denies his common humanity with fornicators, as Kurtz with savages, and that part of himself he denies then turns upon him and overturns the whited sepulchre of his psyche. It is, apparently, a common psychological phenomenon, this sudden psychic flip from extreme high-mindedness to extreme viciousness, from the tightest discipline to utter licence.

Later Marlow comes to the brink of understanding:

But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core [83]

The ellipsis is Marlow's. It is his way of saying 'I don't want to go any further down that path'. A moment later he interrupts his informant, shouting : 'I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz'. To know more would be too 'withering to one's belief in mankind' [95]. It would be to reveal that the heart of darkness is not only in Kurtz: it is in Marlow himself: it is in the best of men. It is the heart of man.

* * *

Marlow peeps over the edge and is permitted to draw back his hesitating foot. But he has seen enough to alienate him temporarily from his species:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. ... Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. [102]

Unlike the Ancient Mariner, he has no desire to enlighten them, stops no unwilling wedding guest in the street; merely regards himself as not very well, suffering from a feverish imagination. Though he is subsequently to tell his tale to equally complacent people, he shows little sign of finding them offensive, and they regard him as no more than a good spinner of yarns.

Marlow has, he tells us, a temperamental aversion to lying:

You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. [38-9]

Yet he ends the story a liar, a purveyor of the shabbiest humbug, a sentimentalist and a moral coward.

Marlow calls the Intended's ignorance a 'great and saving illusion'. What it saves is not so much the Intended as Marlow himself from the darkness of the truth. That the Intended should express her grief that she will never see Kurtz again with the words 'never, never, never' is one of Conrad's most savage ironies, reminding us, as it does, of Lear's lament for Cordelia, a young and innocent woman who did not need to be protected from the truth, who not only had an aversion to sentimental lies but saw that

even the whitest of them leads to the triumph of evil, for whom truth, not illusion, was redeeming, even if it lead to the overthrow of the state and her own death. A character in Ted Hughes' *Eat Crow* says of Lear's line: 'the king is using this word NEVER like a knife, to carve up his own insides. ... He's forcing it down into the last, deepest cellars and underground resistance of his life-illusion' [16]. Nothing could be further than the Intended's use of the word to seal her ignorance from any staining truth. And this 'innocence' is what Marlow ultimately sets up, bows down before, and offers a sacrifice to, the sacrifice of his own integrity, his real innocence. He becomes an accomplice in the great lie and the great crime.

Conrad has often been accused of identifying too closely with Marlow, of failing to see how inadequately Marlow interprets his experiences and how suspect is the probity and integrity on which he so prides himself. Conrad is certainly, to a large extent, Marlow. Marlow's values are Conrad's: the belief in the redeeming idea of colonialism (Conrad was still able to speak, after his Congo experience, of 'the civilizing work in Africa'), efficient work as an end in itself, irrespective of its purpose (like the British officer in *Bridge on the River Kwai*). But the Conrad who is Marlow is Conrad the seaman, Conrad the employee, the member of society, perhaps even the author of the worst of his fiction; it is not Conrad the author of 'Heart of Darkness'. Marlow, in spinning his yarn, makes himself the hero of it - again unlike the Ancient Mariner; offers himself with disingenuous modesty as the standard by which others are judged. But his creator accepts the curse of the Ancient Mariner, which is also the curse of the great imaginative writer, the obligation to accuse himself, to tell the deepest truth that is in him, however humiliating that may be. If Conrad, Conrad the man, was a 'mere animal' before the Congo, after it he was, in the judgement of Conrad the writer, a mere criminal. Marlow is his criminal self.

Whether the writer accuses himself of complicity in a larger, almost universal crime, or of some unique aberration (for which it would be best for all concerned if he were put out of his misery), as in the case of Kafka, the truth the imagination unlocks is always general, always representative. I, the hypocrite reader, must recognize such a writer, even a writer as extreme and eccentric as Baudelaire, as 'mon semblable, - mon frère' [Preface to *Fleurs du Mal*]. We are all guilty of Marlow's crime.

What was happening in the Congo in the eighteen-nineties is not just a regrettable page of history. Almost every act we perform (or neglect to perform) has endless repercussions. Every product we buy, investment we

make, job we do, is one end of a chain which leads, in many cases, to the ends of the earth. The other end is a burning rainforest, a desecrated waterway, animals dying needlessly in fear and pain, native peoples evicted, exploited or exterminated. Like Marlow we prefer not to follow the chain too far. Like his London friends we prefer not to follow it at all. At one point Marlow turns on them with scathing words we might well apply to ourselves:

Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal - you hear – normal from year's end to year's end. [68]

But Marlow returns to Europe to become part of the great conspiracy of silence.

In 1946 Jung wrote:

But already we are fascinated by the possibilities of atomic fission and promise ourselves a Golden Age - the surest guarantee that the abomination of desolation will grow to limitless dimensions. And who or what is it that causes all this? It is none other than that harmless (!), ingenuous, inventive and sweetly reasonable human spirit who unfortunately is abysmally unconscious of the demonism that still clings to him. Worse, this spirit does everything to avoid looking himself in the face, and we all help him like mad.

[*Collected Works*, 9.i.253]

Marlow turned back from the brink. Conrad the man looked over, then turned back. Conrad the artist looked himself (and therefore Western man) in the face long enough to create this one supreme work. So dark, so terrible a vision had to be externalized in a work of art, in order to exorcise it from his thoughts if not from his dreams. Life must go on.

Eliot twice took epigraphs from 'Heart of Darkness'. Two quotations from Eliot seem particularly apt here, the first for Marlow:

Human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

['Burnt Norton']

the second for Conrad

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

['Gerontion']

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