

## Marnie's Last Christmas

**Background:** the story is set in the late 1990s. Marnie Walker, thirty-something interior designer, runs her own business from a renovated canalside farmhouse in Northamptonshire. She lives with her partner, Ralph Lombard, professor of economics at Oxford, and her friend and colleague Anne Price – often known as Anne with an 'e' – who is about twenty. Anne's boyfriend, Donovan Smith, half-German, is a regular visitor. Now read on ...

Marnie Walker was preparing coffee when Anne led Donovan into the farmhouse kitchen. It was barely two weeks before Christmas, and Marnie and Ralph were finalising their plans for the holiday season.

'Look who's arrived,' Anne said.

Marnie turned to say hello. 'Impeccable timing. Coffee?'

'Great, and I've brought some German biscuits to go with it.'

When the four of them were settled round the kitchen table by the Aga Donovan made another pronouncement. From his bag he produced an envelope addressed to him bearing a German stamp celebrating Advent. His name and address were printed in capital letters. He slid it across the table to Marnie.

'This arrived yesterday. Have a look.' He smiled. 'You'll find it interesting, and it rather concerns you, well all of us really.'

Marnie slipped the letter out and stared at it, bewildered. 'What *on earth* is this?' She passed the letter to Ralph who looked equally puzzled.

'Can I see?' Anne asked. She studied the text, frowning. 'What kind of writing is this, Donovan? Can you understand it?'

'It's Old German Script and no, I can't.'

Marnie said, 'Any idea at all what it means?'

'Oh yes.' He reached into his bag and pulled out a sheet of paper. 'I scanned the original and sent it to an elderly aunt in Göttingen. This is the modern version. The gist of it is, an old friend of the family, Frau Keppler, has a special request.' He pointed at the original letter in German. 'See that fairly long word there? It's the name Northampton, and there's your clue.'

'Are you going to enlighten us?' said Marnie.

'It's a long story, but basically Frau Keppler has learnt that a girl she knew years ago before the war is apparently now living in Northampton. She hasn't seen her since 1938 and would like to make contact.'

'If she writes to her, I hope the friend can read it,' Marnie observed.

'That's just it.' Donovan looked as if he was searching for the right words. 'You see, the girl – she must be an old lady by now – is Jewish. Frau Keppler is worried that if she writes, she might not get a reply. It's delicate, but she really wants to see her old friend. What she wants to do is meet her ... face to face.'

There was silence while they considered the implications.

Eventually Ralph said, '*Delicate* is the word. That's quite a brave thing to do, but of course it could backfire horribly.'

Marnie said, 'You said it concerns us, Donovan. Where do we fit in exactly?'

'Frau Keppler needs somewhere to stay. I could book her into a hotel up here, but then she'd be on her own most of the time. She doesn't speak any English. My place in London is too far to be of any use, and I can't really bring the boat up and install her on it. I was wondering if your cottage number three might be empty, Marnie.'

'When does she want to come?'

'She'd ideally like to come next weekend, so she could be back home a few days before Christmas. She'd be happy to pay rent.'

Marnie pondered. 'I have a tenant moving out next Friday, so if she came at the weekend she could have it. I'm not bothered about rent. This is personal, and she wouldn't be staying for more than a few days. That's okay.'

'Thanks, Marnie. I'll send her a quick reply straight away.'

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Donovan sent his reply by e-mail to his family who lived not far from Frau Keppler. His cousin Ursula offered to deliver the message without delay.

Over supper that evening Marnie asked Donovan to outline what he knew about Frau Keppler. His knowledge was sketchy, but he filled them in as best he could.

Frau Keppler was now a widow. She had grown up in the small village of Grensbach in northern Germany and had been very friendly with a girl whom she had known since her first days in Kindergarten. That girl was called Ilse Hirsch, and her parents ran the village bakery. They went to primary and secondary school together and were inseparable. After leaving school they remained friends. Ilse worked in the family bakery while Frau Keppler – who in those days was Maria Schultz – trained as a book-keeper in an accountant's office. Then one day in 1938 the Hirsch family disappeared. It seems they packed what possessions they could in their small car and drove away in the night. Nobody knew that at the time, and there were rumours. It was not uncommon for Jewish families to be taken away, though that was mainly in towns and cities.

'How old were the girls at that time?' Marnie asked.

'I think they were born in around 1918, so they'd be about twenty.'

'And about eighty now.'

Ralph said, 'Presumably the family got out before November, the month of *Kristallnacht*, when all the synagogues were desecrated and thousands of Jewish people were attacked, abused, rounded up and taken away to concentration camps.'

No doubt,' said Donovan, his expression grim. 'But even earlier in the year people were hearing strange tales of Jewish persecution. And it wasn't a good idea to ask too many questions. The Nazis could be brutal towards anyone who even seemed to step out of line.'

'How did Frau Keppler trace her old school-friend?'

Donovan shrugged. 'Not sure, and I don't really want to interrogate her too much about the past.'

'Understandable,' said Marnie.

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Thus it was that a week later on Sunday Donovan collected Frau Keppler from the airport and drove her up to Northamptonshire. For some reason Marnie had expected a rather frail little old lady, but Frau Keppler could best be described as *sturdy*. When Donovan brought her to the house Marnie found herself welcoming a well-dressed woman in a dark blue suit, with wavy white hair drawn back into a bun and a pleasant round face with pink cheeks. When they shook hands Marnie detected the hint of a bow, accompanied by a continuous stream of evidently effusive German, with a broad smile and head constantly bobbing up and down.

Beside her, and carrying her suitcase, Donovan gave a discreet running translation of her words. With a gesture Marnie showed her guest to cottage number three and invited her to settle in. She extended an invitation to supper at seven o'clock. Frau Keppler seemed almost overwhelmed at this, and Marnie gained the impression that Frau Keppler was not accustomed to receiving hospitality on that scale from outside her immediate family.

Donovan returned from seeing Frau Keppler into the cottage to report that their visitor had expected Marnie, as a *woman of property with her own business*, to be much older.

'Advise me, Donovan,' Marnie said. 'What should I call her?'

'Frau Keppler. Germans are very formal. Don't be surprised to hear her refer to you as Mrs Walker – or possibly even *Frau* Walker. You're her landlady and she wouldn't presume to call you otherwise. Don't even suggest she calls you by your first name. She would find that odd. It's not unfriendly. It's just the German way.'

'And Ralph?'

'Probably *Herr Professor*. Titles are important in Germany.'

'What about me?' Anne asked.

Donovan mulled this over. 'She'll probably just address you as *Fräulein*. She'll love it if you say a few words in German. Oh, there is one other thing.' Donovan paused. 'While she's here, I'll sleep in the cottage. I'll then be on hand if she has any queries and ... well, it would be embarrassing for her if I stayed with you, Anne, in your room.'

Anne grinned. 'Wouldn't want her to think of me as the scarlet *Fräulein*.'

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For supper that evening Frau Keppler had changed into a traditional German blouse and skirt, combined with a woollen sweater fastened with pewter buttons. She arrived promptly at seven carrying a canvas shopping bag, pronounced herself enchanted with the cottage and proceeded to offer gifts to her hosts, smiling all the while.

She had chosen typical German Christmas biscuits and a cake – a *Stollen* – all of which she had made herself from old family recipes. One parcel contained traditional hand-crafted wooden ornaments for the tree.

Marnie thanked her warmly. 'We shall look forward to a real German Christmas.'

Frau Keppler was clearly touched by this and delighted when, at Donovan's prompting, Marnie and Ralph and Anne rose to shake her hand. For them it seemed highly formal, but they realised it was just the German way.

The cordial atmosphere continued over supper. Frau Keppler showed her appreciation of the meal – baked salmon with sautéed potatoes and green salad, followed by crème brûlée – and accepted a small glass of dry Riesling from the Rhineland that Donovan had brought.

They were loading the dishwasher after Frau Keppler and Donovan had retired for the night when Ralph made an observation.

'Nice old lady. And your menu for the meal was just right, Marnie.'

Marnie held her jaw in both hands and waggled it from side to side. 'I don't think I've ever spent a whole evening smiling like that. My jaw muscles are aching.'

Anne laughed. 'Mine, too!'

'And is it true,' Marnie added, 'that I've really invited her for a tootle tomorrow on *Sally Ann*? Did I really do that?'

'You certainly did,' Ralph said.

'In the middle of December?'

'Yep. You did say the weather forecast was good for the time of year. And Donovan did say he could help things along whatever the weather.'

'I wonder what he has in mind,' Marnie said.

Ralph closed the dishwasher door and smiled at her. 'Oh, I think we have a fair idea about that.'

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Frau Keppler had a further surprise for her hosts when she arrived for breakfast the next morning. She had brought with her a jar of homemade spicy plum jam, a great favourite in her country. Everyone tried it on toast, and she was delighted with the reaction. She beamed when they all declared it delicious.

Marnie proposed that as the weather seemed moderately favourable they should have their tootle on *Sally Ann* that afternoon. That would give her guest a chance to relax until they had a light lunch together, and they would drive to Northampton the following day. Frau Keppler declined the offer to use the phone to arrange the visit to Frau Rosenbaum. She definitely wanted to meet her old friend in person. Marnie and the others kept their misgivings to themselves. After travelling all the way from Germany for this occasion, her mind was made up.

The weather kept its promise, and shortly after lunch Marnie steered *Sally Ann* out of her docking area and pointed her south for the short trip. Frau Keppler had never experienced anything like it in her life and was clearly excited. When Marnie offered her the tiller on a straight stretch of canal, she held up both hands and spoke the only words they ever heard her use in English.

‘Oh no, no.’ She smiled radiantly, shaking her head. ‘Thank you.’

Donovan kept his promise, too. He had said he would help things along whatever the weather, and that could mean only *Glühwein*. The five of them clinked their mugs together and sipped the steaming liquid. It was a happy crew that navigated the calm waters of the Grand Union Canal that afternoon, though Marnie noticed ominous grey clouds gathering away to the west.

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The Big Day arrived under billowing leaden clouds creeping slowly across the sky. The temperature had fallen to zero in the night despite the cloud cover, and there was a hint of snow in the air as everyone gathered for breakfast in the farmhouse kitchen. Frau Keppler appeared in what must have been her Sunday best, a dark grey suit over a white blouse buttoned to the neck, the jacket adorned by a silver brooch in the form of an edelweiss. She produced a slip of paper torn from a notepad bearing the address, their destination in Northampton. They were all grateful that it was written in normal letters, not in Old German script.

Marnie took out a map of the county town and checked the index for Grace Street. She ran her finger down the page and pointed.

'Here it is, not far from the town centre, and we'll be looking for number twenty.'

'*Ja, Nummer zwanzig,*' Frau Keppler murmured.

The old lady seemed calm and composed, though Marnie noticed that her cheeks were a little more pink than usual as they headed out to the car. It had been decided that Donovan would accompany Marnie and Frau Keppler in case his language skills were needed. Ralph and Anne would remain behind so that Frau Rosenbaum was not overwhelmed by a multitude descending on her. The surprise – if that was the right word – of Frau Keppler arriving on her doorstep would no doubt be enough for her to handle.

The gap of some sixty years in their lives was bridged by a journey of less than thirty minutes. Marnie confidently steered the Discovery through the town towards Grace Street where the surprise of a lifetime awaited a woman who had been cut off from a past she probably never expected to confront again. Marnie wondered if she herself was more nervous than her passenger. On entering the town, Frau Keppler had made a series of observations in German to Donovan. But as they drew closer to their destination nothing but silence came from the back seat.

'This is it,' Marnie said, turning into Grace Street.

She leaned forward to check the house numbers. Number twenty, in common with all the houses in the street, was semi-detached behind a small front garden. Marnie brought the car to a halt immediately outside and took a deep breath.

'Okay,' she said, turning to face her passengers. She smiled encouragingly. 'I think this is where Frau Keppler takes over.'

Donovan climbed out and opened the door for Frau Keppler. After a moment's hesitation she exited the car and walked slowly towards the front door. She glanced at the number on the wall before pressing the bell. A two-tone chime sounded in the house. There was no response. Marnie heard Donovan say something softly in



German, and Frau Keppler tried again. Nothing. Marnie unbuckled her seat belt and went to join them. After travelling all the way from Germany this was a severe disappointment. Marnie made a suggestion.

'We could go back into town, have coffee and come back later, perhaps?'

Donovan thought that was a good idea, but when he translated it for Frau Keppler she was less enthusiastic. Marnie could see her point. It would risk repeating the disappointment and sense of anti-climax.

'Then I think perhaps a note through the letter-box?'

Despite some misgivings, Frau Keppler acquiesced. Marnie retrieved a notebook from the car, and Frau Keppler wrote a brief message in German, giving Marnie's address and phone number and asking Frau Rosenbaum – *my dear Ilse* – to be in touch. She signed it 'Maria Schultz (now Keppler)', folded the paper and slipped it through the letter-box. Without another word, she sighed and walked back to the car as snow began swirling around her.

No-one spoke on the return to Knightly St John. At the wheel Marnie noticed that the flakes were not only bigger, but were falling more heavily. On all sides she saw that the snow seemed to be settling.

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That night and for the next two days it snowed heavily and continuously. The weather forecasters were promising that it would not last, but for Marnie and the others that was irrelevant. Living at the end of a steep field track they were effectively snowed in. Even Marnie's four-wheel-drive Discovery would be hard put to climb up to the village through drifts over three feet deep. Normally they would be unfazed. They had plenty of provisions on hand and had already stocked up for Christmas. The problem was Frau Keppler.

As it was clear that she would not be able to fly back to Germany, they cancelled her flight and, with the airport closed, there would be no problem with rebooking when the time was right. In other circumstances Frau Keppler would have fretted over such matters and would be worrying even more about the imminent approach of

Christmas while she was away from home. But none of this seemed to bother her. More than anything she was troubled at receiving no contact from Frau Rosenbaum.

'I suppose we should look on the bright side,' Marnie said. 'Looks like we'll be having a white Christmas.'

They were sitting in the living room of Glebe Farm with mugs of coffee and plates of German Christmas biscuits in front of a crackling log fire. Outside the afternoon slipped by in an opaque panorama of snow upon snow. Donovan smiled across at her.

'Probably not much comfort to Frau Keppler.' Hearing her name the old lady turned towards him. He continued. 'In our part of Germany we're more or less guaranteed a white Christmas every year.'

He quickly translated. Frau Keppler nodded agreement.

'Have you thought about what we're going to do for Christmas?' Donovan asked. 'Seeing that we're all likely to be snowed in here for a while and tomorrow is Christmas Eve.'

'We've got everything we need,' Marnie said evenly. 'There's even a tree out in the garage barn. We should have brought it in days ago, but we've been focused on other things.'

'Not necessarily,' Donovan said.

'What does that mean, Donovan?' Anne asked. 'Or are you being your usual enigmatic self?'

'I was just thinking we might do something a bit different as we have a guest whose traditions shaped the British Christmas, but where they do things quite differently.'

Marnie said quietly, 'Would it bring a modicum of comfort to our guest if we did things, as you say, differently?'

'It might be a consolation.'

'Okay,' Marnie. 'I'm game. What does everyone think?'

'Sure,' said Ralph.

'Let's go for it,' said Anne.

Donovan explained what they had in mind to Frau Keppler and it had the desired effect. She instantly perked up, and they began making plans. First of all they learnt the German word for Christmas: *Weihnachten*. After a few attempts they all managed to pronounce it passably well, though their initial efforts caused Frau Keppler some mirth. Everyone was pleased to see her smiling again.

'There is one snag,' Ralph pointed out. 'We don't have a turkey.'

'Or any chance of getting one up here in the Arctic Circle,' Anne added.

Marnie reached for her mobile and pressed buttons. 'Not so sure,' she muttered, pressing the phone close to her ear. 'Hello, Waitrose? Any chance of having a turkey delivered tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow? Oh dear. We've just sold the last turkey crown. That's it, I'm afraid. We can offer you a chicken, if that's any help. They're beautiful free range birds and \_'

Seeing Marnie's expression, Donovan interjected. 'Have they got a goose?'

Marnie passed on the question and waited for the reply. When it came she smiled. 'They can let us have a frozen one,' she told the others.

'Take it,' Donovan said. 'And see if they have any frozen trout ... and oh yes, a large jar of red cabbage.'

While Marnie made the arrangements for payment and delivery to the top of the field track, Donovan explained to Frau Keppler what was happening.

'*Perfekt*,' was her reaction.

Their knowledge of German was increasing at a steady rate.

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The delivery arrived soon after eight the next morning, which was Christmas Eve, and Anne and Donovan trudged up through the snow to meet the van at the field gate. The trout and goose were placed close to the Aga to thaw slowly throughout the day. Frau Keppler asked if she could borrow a pinafore and announced with Donovan's help that she wanted to prepare a real German *Weihnachtsfest* for her kind hosts. Her offer was accepted, and the old lady rolled up her sleeves. Her good spirits had returned, though everyone suspected that Frau Rosenbaum was never far from her thoughts.

And a real German Christmas celebration was duly produced, with Donovan acting as back-up and gofer to Frau Keppler. The others spent much of the day tidying the house and wrapping presents in an atmosphere of anticipation. When they offered to install and decorate the tree later in the morning, Donovan explained that that was not the German way. He added that Frau Keppler would no doubt take over the kitchen, adding that that was most definitely the German way. There were no arguments.

When darkness fell in the late afternoon, with Frau Keppler busy at the Aga, Donovan went out to fetch the tree. Everyone joined in with decorating it. Frau Keppler was mildly disappointed not to have real candles, but was content that at least the lights were white. The next departure from British tradition was to exchange presents round the tree before supper while fortified with a mug of *Glühwein*. The German Christmas had begun and was already being received with approval.

The evening meal was baked trout with sauerkraut and baby potatoes in butter and parsley. For dessert, Frau Keppler had made a modest fruit salad, then tarnished her virtuous image by adding generous helpings of vanilla-flavoured whipped cream.

The next morning, Christmas Day – or what Frau Keppler called *the first holiday* – produced more amusement as Frau Keppler confronted the Aga's oven. To

everyone's surprise, she was undaunted. For her, its saving grace was that the oven was capacious enough for the goose which by then had thawed right through.

As the morning wore on and Frau Keppler worked on, Donovan sniffed the air.

'That,' he said, 'is the smell of Christmas Day in Germany. All over the land is the aroma of roasting goose and simmering red cabbage.'

When lunch was eventually served, those ingredients were joined by Frau Keppler's potato dumplings. Anne was touched to discover that Donovan had alerted Frau Keppler to the fact that Anne ate no meat. For her a special dish had been prepared of traditional German hard-boiled eggs with a filling of mustard mayonnaise.

For dessert Marnie produced her own version of *Rumtopf* which she had made back in the summer with soft fruits – strawberries, raspberries and redcurrants – soaked in rum, a recipe that she had learnt in years past from Donovan.

The German Christmas – *Weihnachten* – met with universal acclaim at Glebe Farm. By late afternoon participants rounded off the celebration by indulging in *Kaffee und Kuchen* in the form of coffee with a selection of German biscuits and *Marzipan-Stollen*.

On the whole Frau Keppler was reasonably pleased with the approximation to a German Christmas that she had managed to concoct. Marnie and the others assured her that they had not just taken part out of politeness, but out of sheer pleasure, tinged of course with a modicum of greed.

The air was surprisingly mild as they said goodnight to their guest, and Donovan accompanied Frau Keppler back to the cottage.

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They awoke on Boxing Day morning to discover that unseasonably mild weather had settled in during the night. Anne joked that it was probably a traditional German flash thaw. In reply, Donovan remarked that it would probably result in a traditional British flash flood.

Frau Keppler called Boxing Day by its German name – translated as *the second holiday* – and set about preparing further German meals involving creative using up of left-overs enhanced with delicacies such as potato salad, Frankfurter sausages and apple strudel. In the intervals between eating and drinking they kept up to date with the weather reports and learned that throughout most of the country the white Christmas had disappeared to be replaced with damp fog. It was less picturesque than before, but at least made travel possible if not enjoyable.

They began making plans for Frau Keppler's return home.

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The next day began like any normal day. Marnie and Ralph went back to their respective work, and Anne spent the morning reading for her college course. Over in cottage number three Donovan set about tidying up while Frau Keppler attended to her packing. They agreed to meet for lunch at twelve-thirty. It would be their last German meal together.

Marnie remembered a carton of veal *Schnitzel* in the freezer that Donovan had brought on an earlier occasion. After packing, Frau Keppler returned to the Aga and produced a lunch of *Wiener Schnitzel* in breadcrumbs garnished with a slice of lemon and rocket leaves, plus cucumber salad. They were finishing coffee with the last of the Christmas biscuits when the doorbell rang. Marnie got up to answer it.

She checked her hair in the hall mirror and opened the door wide. Facing her was an elderly lady in a tweed coat and hat and wellington boots. The two looked at each other for some seconds without speaking.

Then the visitor said simply, 'Maria Schultz ... Keppler.'

Marnie swallowed. 'Of course.'

She was about to say more when she heard a sound behind her in the hall. The lady on the doorstep shifted her gaze beyond Marnie and stared. Marnie turned to see Frau Keppler, her normally rosy cheeks unusually pale, her expression stunned. She said one word.

'Ilse.' Her voice was little more than a whisper.

Frau Rosenbaum replied, 'Maria.'

Marnie made a gesture as she stood aside and managed to say, 'Please come in, Frau Rosenbaum.'

Marnie stepped back to give the women more room. For a long moment nothing happened. Then Frau Rosenbaum stepped into the hall and Frau Keppler moved towards her. After a brief hesitation they advanced and embraced without speaking. Wishing to give them time and space, Marnie withdrew. As she reached the door to the kitchen she turned and looked back. She noticed that Frau Rosenbaum's hand on Frau Keppler's shoulder was shaking.

Seeing the two childhood friends meeting again after a lifetime's separation, Marnie heard a rushing in her ears, imagined fog on the railway lines to Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, places where the sun never shone but was constantly shrouded in smoke from the chimneys. She saw the perimeter fencing, the gas chambers and the crematoria, saw the anguished faces of parents and the terrified expressions of the children, all of them dressed in rags or striped tunics. It was as if the greatest calamity and inhumanity of the twentieth century had found its way to her home. In that intense moment Marnie found the strength of emotion almost unbearable. She knew she had no place there but felt unable to leave.

Suddenly she became aware of movement. She glanced round to see Donovan standing beside her. She felt him take her hand in his and squeeze it gently. He turned his face towards her and whispered, 'I know.'

Afterwards Marnie could not remember who had suggested that the two old ladies walk together through the spinney to sit quietly with their memories in the cabin of *Sally Ann*. It was Donovan who offered to run ahead and turn on the heating. It was Donovan who made them coffee and set out a plate of biscuits. And it was Donovan who lit a candle on the table, that most German of gestures of hospitality and welcome.

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Frau Keppler never revealed what she and her old friend had talked about that day or even whether they had agreed to keep in touch. Certainly no-one asked her for any details of that memorable encounter. But an intangible change had come over her. Something significant was manifest in her demeanour the next day when Donovan drove her to the airport at the start of her journey home. Frau Keppler hugged everyone when saying goodbye, though few words were spoken. Few words seemed to be needed.

Marnie and Ralph and Anne waved her off up the field track with Donovan driving carefully to avoid sliding on the wet surface. Simultaneously Ralph and Anne slipped an arm round Marnie's shoulders as the black Volkswagen Beetle merged into the mist above them. Marnie's sigh seemed to express what they were all feeling.

'I've come to a decision,' she said. 'I've had my last Christmas the English way.'

'I understand,' Ralph said.

'Me too,' said Anne quietly.

Marnie nodded as if to confirm her decision. 'Yes. From now on I'd like us to have a real German *Weihnachten* in memory of this year, and I'll think of Frau Keppler and remember her meeting with Frau Rosenbaum for the rest of my life.'

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