

SIMON CHESHIRE

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# THE BOOK OF THE NEARLY DEAD

“The Book Of The Nearly Dead”

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by Simon Cheshire  
[www.simoncheshire.co.uk](http://www.simoncheshire.co.uk)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Cheshire is the author of many hugely popular books for children, including the bestselling Saxby Smart detective stories. He writes in a tiny little office which used to be a cupboard, and which is bursting at the seams with books, old chocolate wrappers and letters from his readers. All his stories are based on fact - only names, dates, places, descriptions and events have been changed, to make them more believable. He lives in Warwick, but spends most of his time in a world of his own.

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# CHAPTER 1

Let's get one thing straight, right from the start. Ben never intended any of it to happen. If he'd had the slightest idea of what horrors the book would stir up, he wouldn't have gone anywhere near it. He'd have run screaming, or buried it as deep as he could, or persuaded Dad to let them move house. Preferably to the other side of the world.

The only thing that Ben can rightly be accused of is curiosity. And that's not a bad quality in a boy his age is it? It's simply that, on this one occasion, things turned out badly, that's all. Ben was a tidy, organised and precise person, and never meant to cause harm.

The one thing he DID do deliberately was fling his sister Ruby's Mandie doll across the garden. Not anything to be proud of, but that's what he did.

Ruby had been driving him nuts with the wretched thing all morning. Ruby's age wasn't

even into double figures yet, and Ben was three years older. Anyone with a younger sister like that will tell you just how very... persistent they can be.

“Come and play with me, Ben! Mandie’s a nuclear scientist and you can operate the reactor!”

“No, I’m reading,” said Ben.

“I can’t do it all by myself,” said Ruby. “She’s got to split these atoms and then have her hair done by four!”

“Well, she can do it without me,” mumbled Ben.

If there was one thing Ben liked, it was curling up in a fold-out chair in the garden, in the shade of the twisty red-leafed tree, with the sun shining, and something good to read. His picture of happiness did not include twiddling the cardboard dials on his sister’s home-made atomic testing facility.

“Go away,” he said.

She didn’t. And after another twenty minutes of her calling “Mandie needs your help” and “Mandie thinks you’re a rude boy”, he’d had enough.

He jumped off his fold-up chair, hopped

over to the rug on which Mandie was variously having her hair done, living in a luxury apartment and preventing the meltdown of the reactor core, and grabbed the doll by her remarkably long and remarkably blonde hair.

He flung Mandie as hard as he could. Ruby was too traumatised to utter a sound.

Mandie spiralled through the air, twirling, twirling. Her remarkably long hair splayed out in a golden fan. Her velcro-fastened outfit clung to her straight, unbending arms and legs, and her tiny, toeless feet pointed down, moulded to fit the tiny, plastic shoes that were now spinning off all on their own. Her face was smiley, smiley, smiley all the way, round and round and round, head over heels, heels over head.

The garden was quite long, and Ben was quite good at flinging. Mandie whirled right to the back fence, smacked her head on it, and dropped out of sight in the thick, barbed bushes that nobody ever went near.

Ruby folded her arms. "OK," she said calmly. "Now go and get her back please. And if you've broken her, you can buy me a new one. And if this reactor goes critical while

she's having to leave it unattended, it'll be your fault."

She sniffed and re-folded her arms to underline the point. Ruby looked as different to Mandie as it was possible to be, but that didn't stop her wearing T-shirts with "I'm Mandie" printed across them in glitter. And it didn't stop her whining at Dad until he gave in and bought her a pair of high-heeled sandals that looked almost, kind of, sort of, like the ones on the Movie Star Mandie that Ruby wanted for her birthday.

"Well?" she demanded.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll get the wretched doll. Anything for a quiet life.

Ben was feeling guilty, though. His tidiness, and his organisation and his precision, extended to just about everything. Flinging Mandie to the far end of the garden had felt good at the time, but already it was upsetting his sense of order. You didn't leave things lying around in bushes, even if they were stupid pieces of plastic called Mandie.

The bushes seemed to scowl at him. They were a dense knot of spiky undergrowth that dominated the corner of the garden, boxed in

by low fences on two sides. Over the back fence was a tangled, overgrown strip of land and beyond that the woods. Over the side fence was the garden of No.5, but neither Loopy Cliff nor Wendy were out weeding their flower beds at the moment. On the opposite side of Ben's garden, over the other fence, was the garden of No.9, where Ben's friend Max lived with his mum and dad.

Ben paused in front of the bushes. They always looked the same: patchy, scratchy, ugly. They never appeared to grow, and nobody ever cut them back. Every garden's got a left-alone-and-gone-wild area, and this was the one in Ben's.

He edged forward, leaning over to try to see where Mandie had gone. All he could see were branches and thorns, knitted together into a snare for unwary clothes. Ben breathed in to allow himself more room without actually touching anything. His shirt and trousers were clean on this morning, and his socks had been a present from Auntie Jo. The last thing he wanted to do was get them all snagged and mucky.

It was no good. There was no sign of the

stupid doll. He was going to have to – he shut his eyes and gulped – crawl into the bushes.

“I’ll go inside and change first,” he called back to Ruby. “And get Dad’s shears out of the shed. I’ll cut a path.”

“You might cut her head off!” squealed Ruby. “You get in there and get her back NOW!” She carried on at the top of her voice for a few minutes, until bubbling anger made Ben turn back and take a huge stamp at the branches, to try to flatten them.

It wasn’t the sort of thing Ben did very often. His foot slipped, and he toppled over, head first. His yell was cut off as his face thudded into the muddy soil beside the back fence, leaving most of the rest of him suspended in the bushes, painfully entangled.

One of his arms was free, flapping above his head. He scraped dirt off his face frantically, spitting again and again to get it out of his mouth.

“Urgh! URGH! There could be diseases in this muck! UURRGH! HELP! HELP!”

“Get Mandie!” Ruby’s voice seemed to come from about half a million miles away. “Then I’ll get help!”

Ben spat a few more times. Typical! He pulled a clotted lump of earth from out of his dark hair. It felt like there was a trail of slime left across the top of his head. He didn't dare touch it.

Where was it then? Where was that wretched, stupid, plastic, grinning...?

Mandie was dangling beside his left ear, one of her gently bendy feet neatly caught by a curling branch. He plucked her free. She was completely unharmed, and he considered rubbing her in the mud for a bit just for the sake of it. But he'd only have got himself even filthier, so he decided not to.

With a grunt, he flipped the doll back over his shoulder and heard it bounce on the lawn.

"Now go and get help!" he cried.

"Alright, alright!" called Ruby, picking up the doll. "There's an overheating reactor core to deal with first! Lives are at stake! Don't be so selfish!"

"Now!" he shouted.

He heard her footsteps stomping along the garden path, back to the house. Then he spat a few more times, just to make sure that the last of the soil was out.

He shuffled sideways, trying to twist enough to free his legs, but all he managed to do was slip on his elbows. His hand flashed out to steady himself, and it was as his palm squished another lump of earth out of the way that he saw it.

The book.

Part of its spine was poking up out of the mud. He frowned. No, that couldn't be a book, not buried in the garden.

The very idea of someone digging a hole and dropping a book into it just seemed downright peculiar. Must have been a REALLY bad read to deserve that kind of treatment.

Shuffling to steady himself, he took hold of the poking-out bit of the book and pulled. It slid from the mud with a slimy shlllerr-plop.

It was caked in earth, and only recognisable as a book by the fact that its covers hung slightly open. It was an average-size paperback. Ben flipped through its pages. It was blank.

“Weird,” said Ben to himself.

Now that most of his top half was similarly caked in earth, it wouldn't make much difference if he scraped away some of the mud

on the book's covers with his fingernails.

And there was the title, printed in shiny silver on a black background, with the letters embossed so that they stood out slightly: **The Book Of The Nearly Dead.**

Hmm. Bit creepy. No wonder somebody buried it.

And where had Ruby got to, or goodness' sake? Ben wriggled, pulling his knees in as far as he could. The thorns picked painfully at his legs.

"Oi!" he called, doing his best to sound helpless and in urgent need of assistance. "Are you there? Ruby? Halloooooo?"

No answer. Typical.

He wriggled some more, and managed to pull himself round until he was crouched against the back fence. He stood up carefully to avoid the snatching twigs and, muddy book held between two fingers, he hopped over the fence. He trudged a few yards along the other side, through the overgrown grass, and hopped back over the fence once he was clear of the bushes.

He stood at the end of the garden path, looking down at his mud-splattered shirt and

his thorn-snicked trousers. With a humph of disgust he dropped the book onto the lawn and it landed with a wet splat.

The back door of the house flew open and out ran Dad. Oh, NOW help arrives. NOW his ratty little sister decides to do something.

“Whassamatter?” cried Dad. A tea towel dangled from one hand, and a washing up cloth from the other. Ben couldn’t be bothered to point out to Dad that he had put his shorts on back to front again. “Whatisitben? Whassamatter?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Ben. “I’m fine. False alarm.”

Dad visibly relaxed. He ran the tea towel across his forehead.

“Don’t scare me like that, Ben. I nearly had kittens. Why can’t you play nicely out here instead of fighting?”

“What?” said Ben quietly.

“You started it,” said Dad. He was putting on his Stern-Discipline-Father face, which changed him from looking like a lost puppy to looking like a lost puppy that was a tiny bit cross. “Ruby told me what happened. You shouldn’t have thrown Mandie in the first

place. Now go indoors and apologise.”

Ben smiled sweetly and walked slowly into the house. While Dad got back to the washing up, Ben rubbed a smear of mud into Ruby’s hair. So Ruby gave him a kick in the stomach. So Ben threatened to break Mandie’s legs off. So Ruby threatened to tell Dad that Ben had left his phone downloading all night and in about three weeks they were going to get a bill the size of an elephant.

A couple of hours later, things had settled down, and Dad still had no idea about the phone downloads. Ben had changed his clothes and had a bath with his special disinfectant soap. Ruby had brought all her stuff in from the garden, and was in her room admiring Mandie’s first week as Editor In Chief of *World Fashion* magazine.

By the time Ben remembered the book, it was raining. Thin, hardly-visible rain that barely showed on the windows but still managed to utterly drench anything it fell on. The rosy orange-colours of a late summer tea-time gave the garden a gentle hug.

And there was the book, on the lawn where he’d dropped it. Washed clean by the rain.

Ben eyed it warily from the bathroom window. How long had it been buried there? Why wasn't it tatty and eaten away? Why weren't the pages a muddy mess and the covers all wrinkled? Why was it blank inside?

The rain stopped just before it got dark. Ben tiptoed out along the path in his dressing gown and slippers. The book was clean and dry.

"Weird," he said to himself again.

He picked it up, once again between thumb and forefinger, and took it upstairs, putting it exactly square on the corner of his desk. Leaning over it, he read the back cover. There was a bar code at the bottom, and above that was:

A book is forever, Whatever the weather  
Only the brave, Face the fiery grave  
This story is horrid, The style is torrid  
BUT  
With your life to defend,  
Can you read to the end?

Also in this series

The Book Of The Almost Alive

The Book Of The Definitely Deceased

£8.99 ISBN 9780956504951

# CHAPTER 2

Longandwinding Road was short and only slightly curved. Which was absolutely fine with Ben. It felt comfortable, and ordered, and that was how he liked things to be.

There were only ten houses, and they all looked pretty much alike. Which also suited Ben's sense of neatness.

At the far end of the street were No.s 1,2 and 3. Ben called these the Old Folks' Homes - they were homes, and they were lived in by old folk. Ben had never discovered the old folks' names, and had trouble telling them apart most of the time, but there was Mr and Mrs Comfortably-Retired at No.1, with their red BMW, Mrs Hair-Like-A-White-Crash-Helmet at No.2, and Mr and Mrs Creaky-Ancient at No.3.

Pay attention, this will all be relevant later on.

At No.4 were the Bales. Father Bale, Mother Bale, and the six little Bales. Actually, three of

the little Bales were teenagers, so they weren't so little, really. They were all exactly alike, however: scowling, stained, razor-haired, in stretchy-fabric clothing. Ben thought they were a bit horrible, but they kept themselves to themselves most of the time. There'd been a wedding at No.4 a while ago, and drunken Bales - dozens of them - had spilled out along the street in the early hours of the morning. As it had only happened once, Ben had decided to overlook the matter. He officially labelled them 'scary' rather than 'problem'.

No.5, next door to Ben, were Loopy Cliff and Wendy. Loopy Cliff was quite old too, and he would be drilling and hammering in his shed at all hours of the day and night. Ben never once saw the results of Loopy Cliff's DIY projects. Not a shelf, nor a TV cabinet, nor a magazine rack. He reckoned Cliff was just sticking bits of wood together for something to do.

Wendy was his live-in nurse. At least, that's what Cliff called her. She was very tall, and built like a pop star, all hair and curves. Dad would give Ben a funny look now and again and whisper to him that she was probably

after his money. Ben had never been entirely sure what Dad meant. Loopy Cliff didn't exactly seem rich.

Across the road at No.6 were the Invisibles. Ben knew there was a family living in the house: there was a car that came and went, there were curtains that opened and closed, there were bikes that appeared and disappeared from the front garden. But he only ever got fleeting glimpses of the people themselves. What they were called or what they looked like, Ben had no idea.

Ben, Ruby and Dad were at No.7 and opposite them, at No.8, were Sopyy Petula and her toddlers. Ben thought the woman was wetter than a haddock's swimming pool, but Dad went all silly and moon-eyed whenever she was about. Ruby, true to form, thought that was romantic. Ever since Mum ran off with her evening class tutor, Ruby had been frantically searching for a Second Wife for Dad, and now she had the highest of hopes. She was determined to be a bridesmaid somehow, sometime.

Sopyy Petula might have been bearable, thought Ben, if she hadn't come with those

two hideous children attached. And 'hideous' was, thought Ben, exactly the right word to use. They had cross-eyes, jug ears, bad skin and noses like mushrooms. The Vegetable Twins! What kind of cruel genetic joke, thought Ben, could have produced such offspring? No wonder the father was dead. The sight of them had probably killed him.

No.9, the other-next-door to Ben, was his friend Max and Max's parents. Dad Max and Mum Max had exciting, demanding, high-powered jobs miles away. Ben had hardly seen them in months. Neither had Max, which explained why he was so often round at Ben's. Max was a chubby-faced, sporty, unhurried, sunny, instantly likeable kid, and therefore the exact opposite of Ben. But the two of them had known each other, technically speaking, since they were four months old, and they'd always been the best of friends. Ruby adored him, and fully intended to marry the boy as soon as she was a grown-up. Max didn't know that yet.

And at No.10, on our guided tour, was Mr Snotty-Get-Lost. Last, but not least. He had an overgrown front garden, a bald head, a beard that could keep his chest warm in winter and

a badly-behaved dog who appeared to be called Comebackhereyoulittlebugger. Ben couldn't quite work out what he did for a living, since he was almost always at home but didn't seem the type to have a computer link to an office or anything like that. Max said he was a serial killer. Ben said you couldn't do that for a living. If anyone, especially anyone under the age of about fifty, attempted a "Good morning" or even a "Hallo", back came the standard reply "Get lost". At least the man was consistent.

And one thing he was absolutely consistent about was his afternoon walk. It was the one thing Ben liked about him. Every day, at precisely 4:30pm, he'd take Comebackhereyoulittlebugger out for walkies come rain or shine. Ben admired that level of dedication to timekeeping.

Mr Snotty-Get-Lost's timekeeping was as perfect as ever on the day it all started. The day after Ben found the book. The day the worst began to happen: all the stuff that Ben would never, ever have meant to happen in a million years.

"He's out, so it must be half past four," said

Ben, standing in front of his bedroom window.

Max nodded wisely to himself. Mr Snotty-Get-Lost never let them down.

Ben took a look up and down the street, just in case there was anything that needed his attention - strangers, stray animals, stray litter, that sort of thing. There was only Mr Snotty-Get-Lost, chasing his dog down the street. Right on time.

“What’s this?” said Max.

Ben turned to find Max picking up the paperback from the garden. He flipped it over to read the blurb on the back.

“The Book Of The Nearly Dead,” said Max. “You’re not usually into horror stories.”

“I found it in the garden. It was covered in mud,” said Ben. “I should put it down, it might still be harbouring harmful bacteria.”

Ben didn’t need to add the bit about putting the book down, as Max had already dropped it. To put it bluntly, he was a very uncoordinated person. Or, as Ben would have it, a clumsy, ham-fisted numpty.

“Sorry,” said Max, picking up the book. “Slipped.”

Ben tutted to himself and sat in the chair by his desk. He'd spent the afternoon re-labelling his drawers ('Socks And Pants'... 'Jumpers'... 'Shirts'... 'Assorted Other' and so on) and then re-sorting his books in alphabetical order. Then he'd arranged the board games on his top shelf into levels of playability. Then he'd hoovered the house. So all in all, he'd had a pretty good day. There was just that Nearly Dead book niggling away at the back of his mind.

“What I can't understand,” he said, “is why it's blank. I mean, the pages are fine, so where have the words gone?”

“What, these words?” said Max.

He'd opened the front cover, and flipped past pages which repeated the title and then blurbled on about “All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system...” blah blah blah.

And there was the first page of the story:

## CHAPTER ONE

And a page-ful of words. Then over on the next page: blank again. Flip back:

## CHAPTER ONE

They looked at each other.

“That wasn’t there before,” said Ben quietly. He was getting a funny knotted feeling in his stomach which had nothing to do with knowing it’d be ravioli for tea. Max was totally sure that a guy like Ben wouldn’t have made a mistake and simply missed it.

“Spooooooky,” he said, spookily.

“Don’t joke,” said Ben. “It really wasn’t there before.”

“I believe you,” said Max. “Spoooooooky.”

They stared nervously at the page for a while. Max wondered whether to tell Ben that he’d accidentally peeled off one of those new drawer labels Ben had spent the afternoon doing. Maybe, err, y’know, tell him about the label to help distract Ben from the spookiness of the book? But in the end, he decided against it.

“Well,” said Max. “Are we going to read it, or what? Must be a very short story if it’s only a page long.”

CHAPTER ONE: It had been a warm summer’s day. The boy and his friend were in the boy’s neat and tidy room. Suddenly, without warning, a clap of

thunder sounded overhead...

Suddenly, without warning, a clap of thunder sounded overhead.

Ben and Max flinched. Ben ran to the window and peered upwards. He couldn't see any rain clouds.

Footsteps bounded up the stairs and Dad flew into the room. The spoon he was holding dripped tomato sauce onto the carpet.

"Whassappened?" he gasped. "Whawas-thatbang?"

"Umm, I think it was a sudden clap of thunder," said Max. Ben was too busy wiping up the tomato sauce with a tissue to comment.

"Thunder?" said Dad. "Oh, right. I thought something had happened. Nearly fainted. Are you staying for tea, Max?"

"Yes please," said Max with a grin. "Me mum's got an executive meeting in Carlisle. Won't be back 'till Thursday."

"Fine," said Dad, and returned to the cooker.

Ben popped the tissue into his waste paper basket, and returned to the book. Max tried to put the drawer label back, but the sticky side

had got fluffy and wouldn't stick. He quietly stuffed the label under the top sheet on Ben's bed.

"That thunder was a coincidence," said Ben, confidently. "It's a story. Books aren't real life. Let me read the beginning again."

CHAPTER ONE: It had been a warm summer's day. The boy and his friend were in the boy's neat and tidy room. Suddenly, without warning, a clap of thunder sounded overhead...

Ben looked up. They listened. No thunder.

"There," said Ben. "Told you."

They flinched. The clap of thunder was followed by a cold breath of air, a chilling, icy atmosphere of frost that gripped them like a frozen claw...

"Is it me?" said Ben quietly. "Or is it...?"

Max raised his head, put his mouth in an O, and puffed out a couple of clouds, like a child playing steam trains on a freezing cold morning. Ben wasn't entirely sure if it was real or not, but there also seemed to be a thin fog in the room.

"We read it in the book," murmured Max, "it turns up in real life."

Little did they know that it was unstoppable now. Horror was about to engulf them, a horror like no other, a horror that crawled from the very depths of the human heart, to feed upon the unwary and the unworthy...

“Eurgh,” said Ben. They were nearing the bottom of the page now.

In the dead of night they came. Scuttling, crawling, on many legs. Up through the soil, through the grass. Filling the garden, spreading out across the lawn. Their feelers sniffed the air, smelling for food, searching for sustenance. They came by the hundred, by the thousand, by the million. They were hungry. They were hideous. They were...

Bottom of page one.

“That’s not the end, surely?” said Max.

Ben turned the page over.

Pages two and three were now full of words too. Blank no more.

...bugs of every shape and size. Wriggling through the grass, tottering on spiky legs...

Ben slapped the book shut. Without a word, they dashed into the bathroom, jumped onto

the toilet cistern and flipped open the window.

The garden was peaceful. The sun hung low on the horizon. A bird or two twittered from the roof of Loopy Cliff's shed, from which drifted the sounds of Loopy Cliff sawing and hammering a bookcase together.

"I think we'll leave the book for a while," said Ben.

"Let's go and have some ravioli," said Max.

## SOME MORE TITLES TO COLLECT

### PANTS ON FIRE

A hilarious tale of fame, fortune, fake celebrities and shocking lies. Tom thinks he's the world's greatest actor. People at his school disagree. He's not a popular kid. When he's mistaken for a new soap opera star, and suddenly everyone wants to be his friend, Tom finds that he can't resist the temptation to lie... and lie... and lie...

"This is a story about fame and celebrity, so it taps into our modern obsessions. It's also one of the funniest stories I've ever read!" - Bookfinder4U.com reader reviews

### THEY MELTED HIS BRAIN!

Matthew Bland will grow up to be the greatest movie director of all time. Or so he thinks. His home-made movies are awful. However, one night he stumbles across a secret transmission which could literally change the world. Only he and his two friends can save the human race from a total brain meltdown...! Beware! This book might make you burst your lungs laughing! (Although, probably not)

### BOTTOMBY

A crazy crime-busting adventure. Sam worries about things. A lot. But when a family crisis looms, and the clock starts ticking, Sam and his friends must go on a madcap undercover mission to recover a stolen painting from a notorious con-man.

"A hilarious tale... that will appeal to anyone who likes books with plenty of knockabout humour" - Books For Keeps

### TOTALLY UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

"Ladies and gentlemen, the next act in tonight's show is TOTALLY unsuitable for children!" The Galactic Coliseum, a spaceship theatre which tours the universe, has a brand new attraction. The problem is, it's a hideous alien monster. The theatre lands on Earth, the monster attacks the local school, and just as the pupils think it's safe to come out of hiding, an entire alien invasion begins...

"Reminiscent of *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. It positively bubbles with jokes" - The Independent On Sunday

# SAXBY SMART: PRIVATE DETECTIVE

"My name is Saxby Smart, and I'm a private eye. I go to St.Egbert's School, my office is in the garden shed, and these are my casefiles. Unlike some detectives, I don't have a sidekick, so that part I'm leaving up to you -- pay attention, I'll ask questions!"

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"I was so engrossed with it that I couldn't put it down!... This is a truly action-packed book" - First News

"Each [case] throws out real clues for the reader - as a Dr Watson foil to the cheerful jokes of Saxby Smart - to follow and to have a good crack at solving things first... This is a good concept very well realised in a different and involving format" - School Library Association

"Simon Cheshire writes comedy mysteries better than anyone. Young readers will love this: there are thrills and humour throughout and good mental exercise as well" - Carousel

"What is so attractive about this series of stories is the fact that it is the reader who acts as Saxby's side-kick... Add to this exciting, complex plots and a protagonist who is warm and funny and you have a winning formula... This style of writing really does succeed: there are enough twists and turns in the plot to retain the reader's interest right up to the very last page, and the clues, while accessible, are never too obvious" - Thebookbag.co.uk

"The stories also occasionally include Saxby having to consider the moral issues of right and wrong - these are not simply stories about finding a fellow pupil's missing cat. They involve fraud, theft, organised crime and so on. These stories really will make young readers use their 'little grey cells', whilst also having a laugh at the time as Simon Cheshire's writing is laced with good humour" - The Book Zone blog

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