

Mystery on Pluto

by Ward Fleming

Frank Grove's mining business on Pluto was in danger of being ruined. And it was up to Nick Anders to find out the reason why...

An ANN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

“Someone among you here is stealing faltronium!” Old Frank Grove looked slowly from one to the other of the fourteen men gathered before him in the brightly-lit dining room of Interstellar Mining Company’s plant on Pluto. His wrinkled face, usually wearing an expression of humor, was twisted with bitterness. A deep hurt had replaced the twinkle in his eyes.

From the group of men arose exclamations of astonishment, and each looked at his neighbor in shocked incredulity. They had known that something was wrong when the grey-haired superintendent summoned them to this meeting. But none had guessed that anything so serious would be in the offing.

Grove raised a hand for silence. Almost wearily he continued: “It’s true. During the last few months our production of the element has been falling off. Since I am in charge of operations here, and therefore responsible for maximum production, I found it necessary to determine the exact cause of this deficiency. After a thorough check-up of every step of the process through which the element goes, I found nothing wrong. But somehow or other, small quantities of the element have been disappearing. This can only mean that it has been stolen. One of you men here—someone I trusted—is responsible!”

Grove swept the faces before him with pain-filled accusing eyes.

Nick Anders shook his head slowly, a puzzled frown upon his clean-lined face. It was hard to believe that one of the men present was a thief. And even more difficult to believe was the fact that faltronium had been stolen steadily over a two-month period. Why, it was impossible! Every bit of the element was accounted for from the time it was wrested from Pluto’s frozen interior to the time it was refined in the laboratory.

Nick covertly surveyed the men standing about him. There were his fellow laboratory technicians, Rod Boldt, and Guglo Atska. Boldt was leaning against the back of a chair, his dark face sober for once. With a feeling of disgust, Nick noticed that his eyes were fixed upon the face of Ann Grove, the old superintendent’s pretty daughter.

Boldt’s immobility suddenly gave way to a wracking cough. Nick eyed him wonderingly. He had spoken to Boldt about that cough, advised him to see the doctor when the supply ship came in. But Boldt had laughed his counsel off, and Nick in resentment had not mentioned it again.

Wizened little Guglo Atska, the Martian who comprised the third member of the laboratory staff—the test-tube trio, as Ann laughingly called them—was staring intently at the floor, while he pulled at his thin, black beard. The eight miners who braved Pluto’s interstellar cold to mine the precious faltronium ore were huddled together in a stolid, patient group. Their two foremen—one for each shift—stood near them, eyeing their respective men calculatingly. Hans, the fat European cook, tried to appear unconcerned, but he twisted his plump hands and blinked his eyes as if the cold finger of suspicion were

surely levelled at him. In spite of the gravity of the moment, Nick could not help grinning.

“These thefts,” Grove resumed grimly, “must stop! You all know how rare the metal is and how badly our government needs it now in the war. Only the lowest of men would steal faltronium for private gain, knowing the urgency of this need. The future progress of the Solar System depends upon keeping the unscrupulous Venerian monarchy from coming back into power.

“All I’m going to ask is that these thefts cease. There will be no investigation. I’ll try to double our output to cover the loss. If the thief has a spark of decency left in him, he’ll make full restitution. But if the thefts continue, I’ll turn this plant inside out to find the culprit and bring him to Justice!” Grove paused to let the force of his words sink in. Then he turned and walked swiftly from the room.

The old superintendent’s words seemed to leave a black cloud of distrust hanging over the room behind them. The men stood about in silent unease. But the common desire to air opinions at last drew them together, and slowly small groups gathered to discuss the situation.

Nick started toward Ann Grove, but Boldt had already reached her side and was speaking gesturing animatedly. Nick glared at the other, muttered under his breath, and stalked to his room. Under his breath he cursed the day Rod Boldt was born. If it wasn’t for that pest, he thought bitterly, he’d have more of a chance with the girl. Boldt’s rivalry was keen.

Thought of Ann always made Nick go soft inside. She was gay and charming, yet serious, and desperately loyal to anyone she loved. She was content to spend her days on desolate Pluto, gladly shouldering an innumerable assortment of minor tasks just to be with her father. Like faltronium, she was a rarity, the kind of girl that would make a splended wife.

IN HIS tiny room Nick undressed and stretched out upon the bed. He mentally reviewed the events of the last several minutes. Some unknown person was stealing faltronium—stealing it so cleverly that more than two months had passed before the loss was discovered. Who, Nick wondered, was that person?

The miners were clearly out, for they lacked the ingenuity which the thefts demanded. Besides, their foreman kept an eagle eye upon them while they worked, and they would have very little opportunity to hide any of the ore they mined. Even if they did, they would have to hide away tons, since it took approximately a ton of ore to make a bar of faltronium.

The two foremen were out for exactly the same reason. Frank Grove’s honesty was not to be doubted. As superintendent of the plant, he would be hurting himself by stealing the element. Ann, too, was in the clear, for she seldom if ever came near faltronium, either in the laboratory or in the mines. And Hans? Nick smiled in the darkness. The fat little European would give himself away immediately even if he had stolen so much as a speck of faltronium.

There remained only the men who refined the ore in the laboratory—Atska, Boldt, and Nick himself. The technicians were the only ones who came near faltronium in its pure form. Atska was a furtive, queer old gnome who spoke only when absolutely necessary. If anyone was the thief, Nick felt that the little Martian would be the most likely.

But again there remained the fact that it would be difficult if not impossible for Atska to steal any faltronium. His task was to operate the massive pulverizing machine which crushed the ore as it came from the mines. The element was closely mingled in the resulting gravel, and was therefore very difficult to extract. Atska, naturally, could not spend all his time picking minute grains of faltronium from the gravel.

Boldt? Almost fervently Nick wished that Boldt were the thief. Then, he thought wistfully, he’d have Ann all for himself. But Boldt couldn’t be, for like Atska he came near faltronium only in gravel form. His

job was to spread the gravel upon a long metal pan, which was inserted into a sealed electric oven and heated. Faltronium became a heavy vapor at fifty-four degrees Centigrade, thus allowing it to be easily separated from its rock and silica composite.

Nick operated the condensation unit which cooled the vapor and formed it into small rectangular bars. Grove then tested the bars for purity, weighed them, and locked them in a safe. Thus, from the first to the last steps of its production, faltronium was practically impossible to steal.

Nick shook his head. Could Grove be mistaken? But the old man knew his business—if he said faltronium was being stolen, it was being stolen. But how? How?

Faltronium, as he knew, was used primarily as a catalyst to accelerate the reaction in the Gerelli-Stevenson, rocket engines, which were the most economical and powerful yet devised. No other element was as effective. It had originally been discovered on Titan and after some experimentation, had been added to the list of known elements. Succeeding search had unearthed it on a few other out-lying planets and their moons. But the largest deposits yet discovered were on Pluto. These were owned by the famous Interstellar Mining Company.

Because of Faltronium's scarcity it was easy to understand why stealing even the smallest quantity of it was a serious crime. Only radium of the last century had been as valuable and as rare.

Use of the element was now under subsidy to the United Earth government in its war to prevent a resumption of the Ziractyl regime which had been one of the most blood-thirsty and tyrannical ever known. If such a government came back into power the future welfare of the entire Solar System would be menaced. Consequently, every tiniest bit of faltronium was needed now more than ever before.

THE WEEKS following old Grove's startling declaration were ones of unnaturalness and strain. Black suspicion had permeated the little group of cubical metal buildings on Pluto. There was watching, sly and incessant watching.

Nick, who felt positive that faltronium could only be stolen from the laboratory, kept a close, though apparently casual, eye upon the activities of his fellow technicians, Atska and Boldt. But everything went on as usual, and nothing of any special significance took place. Boldt's cough seemed to have improved.

At the end of one dinner period the old superintendent stood up to address the men. There were new lines in his face, and his manner was cold and grim.

"I have just received a special radio message from America on Earth," he announced. "We are being asked to double our output. From reading between the lines of the message, I gather that the war is swinging in the favor of the Venerians. America is entirely alone in her fight, for the United States of Europe are still smarting over her decision in the partition of the Martian redlands. The other countries are busy with troubles in their own colonies.

"Therefore I want to ask that a full return of the stolen faltronium be made. Our ships and guns need it badly to win the war. The safety of every colonist and miner in the Solar System depends upon bringing the Venerians to submission, though none but America realized this at present."

While the old man spoke Nick glanced swiftly around the men to gather in their reactions. All were apparently intent upon Grove's words, but Nick knew that one of them was pretending. Would that person be impressed enough to give up what he had stolen? Nick doubted it.

"Full restitution must be made by the time the supply ship arrives to relieve us of our quarterly production of faltronium. How the restitution is made does not matter, but it must be made or drastic means to recover the stolen element will be resorted to."

As soon as he finished speaking Nick made a rush for Ann. This time he reached her without interruption, and it became Boldt's turn to glare and stalk away.

"Look here," said Nick, "we've practically become strangers. I've seen you only twice during the last few weeks. Boldt seems to be pretty effective at snaring pretty girls and keeping them occupied."

Ann smiled. "And aren't you?" she asked.

"You know darn well that Boldt doesn't give me a chance."

"Well, first come, first served, you know."

"That means you aren't very particular."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you don't seem to care one way or the other."

"Maybe I do, Nick."

Nick was puzzled this time. "You do?" he queried. "Who?"

"Maybe I haven't made up my mind yet," she teased. "Now I simply have to get rid of these dishes. If you can run faster than Rod, you might see me later on."

"It's a deal," agreed Nick. "I'll start training right away." He watched her go, his heart beating a little faster at the meaning he had made of her words. Perhaps she didn't care for Boldt as much as he had thought she did. There was some hope after all.

NICK DID manage to see Ann later on. Though it did not amount to much as a race, he beat Boldt in reaching her. Boldt retired sullenly, for he did not take these minor affairs as philosophically as Nick did. He sourly watched them don spacesuits and leave the airlock to take a stroll over Pluto's barren surface.

"You know, some guys never realize when they're licked," remarked Boldt to Atska in the laboratory the following work period. "They keep hanging onto something even when they know it's not theirs any more. It's funny." He coughed a little, and glanced at Atska for approbation, but the little Martian remained silent.

Anger flared up in Nick. He knew very well that Boldt's words were addressed to him. And he knew what Boldt meant. But he kept his anger tightly in check.

He casually held up a bar of faltronium to the light and inspected it critically. "No," he drawled, "I wouldn't say that. Maybe the guy knows that the thing he's hanging onto is his just as much as anyone else's. If he keeps hanging on long enough, he may even get it."

Boldt looked around with a tight grin. He spoke directly to Nick. "It may be that the thing in question doesn't want the guy to hang on."

"Oh, it wants him to hang on, all right. In fact, it wants him to hang on more than it wants to be grappled in by a woman-pirate."

"What did you call me?" cried Boldt, abandoning a subterfuge.

Nick was grimly exultant at having shifted the taunts to the other. "I said," he repeated, "that Ann does not want to be taken in by a—"

He never completed the sentence, for Boldt had leaped at him with swinging fists, his dark face twisted in rage.

NICK WAS crowded against the laboratory bench by the suddenness of the attack. Tools and instruments fell to the floor with a ringing clatter. Warding off a storm of blows with up-raised hands, Nick braced himself against the bench and pushed with all his strength. Boldt went reeling backwards, his balance momentarily lost. Before he could regain it, Nick's fast-travelling right fist had broken through his faltering guard. It made a loud pop on Boldt's chin and sent him swaying against the pulverizing machine with glassy eyes.

Panting a little, Nick watched him. "You started it!" he snapped. "Now come on and finish it!"

Atska was startled out of his customary silence. With popping eyes and mouth agape, he looked like a frightened gnome. "Boys... boys!" he admonished anxiously.

"Come on!" repeated Nick.

While leaning against the pulverizing machine, Boldt's hand had come into contact with a long, heavy wrench. He gripped it hard, the red gleam of murder, in his eyes. Bringing it suddenly from behind his back, he once again charged at Nick.

Though Nick had been expecting some sort of action from his adversary, the wrench was a complete surprise. He whirled to one side—but his move was not quick enough to escape its whistling descent. Searing pain lanced through his left shoulder, and exploded in his brain.

Mad fury flamed through him, and with total disregard of the weapon, he flung himself forward. He smashed into Boldt hard, knocked him against the pulverizer, and drove in swift powerful blows. As the wrench lifted for another deadly stroke, he ripped it from the other's hand, brought it up with murderous intent.

"Nick!"

The horrified cry penetrated his consciousness, and sanity immediately returned to him. He felt hands pulling him away from Boldt. Only then did he become fully aware of the pain which throbbed within him. He stumbled back weakly, focussing his eyes on Ann's pale face.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" cried the girl. "Only a coward would use a weapon on a helpless man! And I—oh, get out! Get out, you unspeakable brute!"

Nick stared at her. She thought—"Ann," he tried to explain, "I—"

"Did you hear me? Get out!"

Nick's face went a shade whiter, and it was not from the pain in his body. He shrugged, turned abruptly, and left the laboratory. He gritted his teeth as he recalled the triumph he had seen in Boldt's eyes.

AFTER THE fight in the laboratory Ann avoided Nick as if he were a Martian vampire-bird. Nick was too proud to force his presence upon her and plead his case. About all he could do was stalk about the debris of his tumbled dream castles, and watch bitterly as Boldt and the girl smiled at each other and went for long walks in the darkness that cloaked Pluto's desolation.

Boldt seemed not to be aware of the fact that Ann's favors were a direct result of his own cowardice. He went about his work with a superior smugness, and often he would boast to taciturn old Atska of his

plans to build a little home upon one of Jupiter's warm moons, knowing that Nick would hear. At these times there would be a mocking glint in his sidelong glances.

At length Nick could no longer bear the taunts which were so obviously directed at him. His armor of silence had been worn thin by constant battering.

"Boldt," he said, in a voice of cold rage, "either stop making those remarks, or find yourself another wrench and start fighting!"

Boldt opened his mouth to reply, but after taking in Nick's blazing eyes and taut fists, thought better of it. Sullenly, he returned to his work.

Unknown to both of them, Ann stood in the laboratory entrance, one hand at her white throat. She stared from Nick's grim back to Boldt's. Then she slowly turned and thoughtfully walked away.

Nick was not prepared for what happened soon after that. It was in the first few hours of the next working period that Grove came into the laboratory. Nick almost dropped the pan he was holding when he looked at him. The old man's mouth was a sprung steel trap, and his eyes were as cold as the ammonia banks on Uranus.

"I want to see you in my office—immediately!" he snapped at Nick. He stalked out.

NICK STARED after him in bewilderment. Something was wrong—seriously wrong. He glanced at Boldt and Atska as if they might be able to offer some explanation. But Atska was intent upon his work, and Boldt was coughing a little as he spread gravel upon a pan. Nick shrugged, and went swiftly to Grove's office.

Grove looked at him coldly as he entered.

"What's this all about?" asked Nick.

"Plenty!" snapped the superintendent. He handed Nick a small irregular object. "Do you know what this is?"

Puzzled at the old man's hostile manner, Nick peered at the little lump. "Why... why, it's faltronium!" he gasped out. "Where did you find it?"

"In your room, hidden in the bed," replied Grove grimly. "You're a thief!"

Nick flinched under the shock of it. "I'm afraid not," he said quietly. "I've never seen that piece of metal before, and I'd rather have my right hand cut off than to have taken it."

"The indisputable fact that it was found in your room shoulders aside all alibis," stated Grove. "I knew very well that the man who had stolen the element would not give it up, so I decided to search for it myself. All right, where have you hidden the rest of it?"

"There isn't any more. The guy who planted that in my room wanted to leave some for himself."

Grove sighed. "I'm sorry that you have to take this attitude. If you told me everything, it would be easier for you. The government needs faltronium badly, and when it learns that you have something like six bars of it hidden away, it'll go through any lengths to learn where the element is."

"You're taking too much for granted," said Nick. "I haven't stolen any faltronium, and therefore I don't know where it can be."

"Look here, under the articles of Interstellar any miner convicted of the theft of a rare element will

receive one-third of his imposed sentence if he makes full restitution. But if he refuses to do so, he'll receive the full sentence, without any chance for a pardon. Now, Nick, if you refuse to give up the stolen metal you'll get the full sentence. You know what that means—life!”

“How in the world can I give up something I haven't got?” cried Nick, becoming angry. “I've never so much as taken a smell of faltronium!”

Grove rose to his feet. “You're making this hard for me—and for Ann. She loves you, in case you don't know it. Now come with me peaceably, for I'll have to lock you in your room until the supply ship comes to take you to Earth. I hope you'll change your mind before then.”

Nick raged inwardly at the old man's blunt hastiness. But he realized that he'd have to submit. He would be able to think things out more calmly later on.

IN THE TINY room—a cell now—Nick lay down upon the bed and swore. It was clear, all too clear! He had been framed by the real thief, who no doubt wished to divert suspicion from himself. Who could that person be?

But it just wasn't reasonable, for there was no possible way in which faltronium could be stolen, and the finger of suspicion had never been pointed at any special person in the plant. Yet, where had that little lump of the element which Grove had showed him come from? And why had it been hidden in his room?

One of the miners might have found the lump, but why should he have planted it on Nick? Nick could find no credible motive for this. It had to be by someone who hated him—Boldt or Atska, but Boldt especially.

If it was Boldt, then where had he obtained that nugget of faltronium? He could have stolen it, of course. But how? How could he have stolen it without being discovered by Nick or Atska, without leaving any clue whatsoever?

Nick groaned. Hell, the whole setup was crazy from start to finish. Here he was, accused of something he hadn't done, and as good as bound for one of the more savage of the Jovian or Saturnian satellite penal colonies already. And Ann—Ann loved him. But she probably hated him now.

But he must not give up! He had to think—think! There must be some loophole to enable a thief to steal the precious element! He had to find that loophole before the supply ship came...

Faltronium vaporized at fifty-four degrees Centigrade—that was little warmer than pipe or cigarette smoke... Suddenly he remembered something he had said to Grove while in the office—something about smelling. And then he thought of Boldt's cough. In a flash of realization, the whole puzzle clicked into place!

He knew how faltronium had been stolen! And he knew who the thief was!

BUT HE couldn't go shouting his discovery around the plant. After all, just what evidence did he have? He had to have proof, and the only way to get that was to determine where Boldt would hide the stolen element.

Nick put himself into Boldt's place. He'd have to hide the element in his room, of course, for that was the only place one could visit many times a day without arousing suspicion. But the hiding place would have to be good. The first requisite was that it be cold... Nick had several ideas about that.

Quickly he mapped out a plan of action. He'd have to get into Boldt's room—but first he'd have to get out of his. Though that would require violence, it had to be done, for he had more to gain than he had

to lose.

Nick's face went grim. If he was wrong... Why, it would mean a penal colony for the rest of his life! Interstellar was harsh where infringement of its rules were concerned—and especially those regarding the precious faltronium.

Nick waited impatiently until the gong for the lunch period sounded. Then he swung off the bed and crossed to the door, taking a position just to the left of it where the opening panel would conceal him from anyone who entered. He tensed his muscles and began another wait.

A half hour crawled by.

And then a key rattled in the lock. Hans the fat European cook entered the room carrying a tray of food. Nick pushed the door shut, grabbed the tray with one hand, and socked Hans with a fist made of the other.

Hans sunk to the floor, a look of surprise and reproach upon his round face. Nick placed the tray upon a chair, and began ripping the bed covers into strips. With these he bound the cook.

Then he opened the door and looked out into the hall. There was no one there, for all were in the dining room having lunch, and Grove had probably thought it unnecessary to post a guard over him. He slipped out and went swiftly to Boldt's room.

Nick looked around the little cubicle, which was an exact duplicate of his own. He had to find some cold place where Boldt would hide the element. That place would logically be along the walls, for they were next to the almost absolute-zero cold of Pluto's exterior. Grove had already searched the room, of course, but he hadn't looked in the right places.

NICK SCANNED the walls. Upon one was a picture, and with leaping heart, he crossed over to it. He tore the picture aside. But nothing more than a series of bolts with which the inner and outer walls were held together met his eyes. He carefully searched all the remaining walls, and finding nothing out of the ordinary, was ready to give up in despair.

That picture—it just had to have some purpose. Boldt was not the kind to use a picture for its mere esthetic value.

Nick went back to where the picture had hung, and at a sudden idea closely scrutinized the bolts which it had hidden. His eyes glittered in triumph—for some of them projected a bit more from the wall than the others!

At that moment a shot rang out.

Hans the cook had recovered and had loosened his bindings to give the alarm.

Nick tightened his lips—there was no time to lose now! Quickly, he inserted a fingernail beneath a suspicious-looking bolt and pried. A thrill of utter joy shot through him, for it gave, slid out! He was looking into a narrow hole which penetrated the inner wall and the insulation behind it—right up to the outer wall. By peering very closely he could just make out the tiny, dull lump that lay at the furthest end of the hold—faltronium!

Just then he became aware of the clatter of footsteps. He whirled around just in time to see Boldt come catapulting into the room!

“Damn you!” rasped Boldt. “I thought so! Well, you’ll never live to tell anyone about this. You’re an

escaped prisoner, see? I shot you in self-defense!” He grinned wolfishly and gestured with the small automatic that he held.

Nick took the only chance that was left to him—he flung himself at Boldt’s legs. While he was still in midair the gun roared. He felt a dull blow in one shoulder. And then he and Boldt were in a writhing tangle upon the floor.

Nick grasped at Boldt’s wildly-flailing arms, got a grip on his gun-hand. Using both hands, he savagely bent Boldt’s arm backward. The other screamed in pain, but did not relinquish his hold on the weapon. He smashed at Nick’s face and head with his free hand. Doggedly, Nick held on, exerting more effort.

The gun dropped to the floor.

Boldt went mad. Face contorted with rage, fear, and pain, he lashed out with kicking legs and flying fists, sobbing and cursing at the same time. Nick rolled aside and got to his feet. As Boldt followed the move and scrambled upright, Nick hit him a swift, powerful blow that started from his knees and contacted Boldt’s chin with a loud smack. Boldt folded up limply and sprawled back to the floor.

Nick straightened up and turned. In the doorway crowded the entire personnel of the plant.

“What a fight!” cried the miners.

“You hit me!” accused Hans.

“Nick, oh, Nick!” sobbed Ann.

“Easy there,” said old Grove from behind a huge heat gun. “I’ve got you covered.”

Nick swayed and clutched at his wounded shoulder where daggers of pain were stabbing. “Wait!” he gasped. “Look there... That’s where Boldt hid the metal he stole... He tried to kill me just now to keep from telling you—”

HERE!” said Ann, as she patted the bandage about Nick’s shoulder. “How’s that?”

Nick grinned up at her from where he lay in bed. It was some time later. “Fine!” he replied.

“All right,” growled Grove impatiently. “Spill everything. How did you know it was Boldt? How did he steal the metal I found in that hole?”

“Well, it’s like this,” began Nick. “Faltronium becomes vapor at fifty-four degrees Centigrade, and at that temperature it’s not so very hot. It can be inhaled without much pain, but it irritates the membranes of the throat and lungs. That’s why Boldt coughed, and that’s what gave him away.

“I never thought it unusual before, but each day when the lunch or the end of the working period gong rang, Boldt would raise the cover of his heating unit, presumably to see how much gravel remained in the pan. But what he really did was to take a big breath of faltronium vapor into his lungs!

“Then he’d go quickly to his room, move that picture aside, pull out the bolt which he had previously loosened, and exhale the vapor into the hole revealed. Naturally, contact of the vapor with the extreme cold of the outer wall caused it to condense and form a tiny lump like you showed me.

“Whenever he took a stroll, Boldt would extract the solidified lumps and hide them somewhere out on the surface. I suppose he didn’t have any more in the hole when he wanted to get me away from Ann by framing me, so he had to inhale and condense more vapor. If he hadn’t done that, he wouldn’t have gotten back his cough, and I’d never have guessed that he was the thief.”

“I must be getting old,” said Grove, shaking his head. “I know everything that happens to the element, but I never thought of that before. And—er—I’m sorry about my hastiness in accusing you. You see, I was getting calls from the home office and the government so many times of the day that I was ready to go space-crazy. Of course, the element being found in your room...well, you know how it is.”

“I understand,” said Nick.

“Anyway, the government will have six more bars in addition to what we have produced by our increased output. It ought to have enough to run a thousand ships. Those Venerians are as good as licked right now.”

“And now you go on out,” ordered Ann firmly. “Nick is badly hurt and needs rest.”

Grove looked from his daughter to Nick. Suddenly, his face was jolly again. The old twinkle was back in his eyes. “And to think I nearly jailed my future son-in-law!” he chuckled as he obediently left.

THE END.

Notes and proofing history

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