

# BECHE-DE-MER

By LEO CRANE

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**S**OME of us live in cities, and some of us go down to the sea in ships. Of these last had him Johannesen. But when I first met him his sailing days were over, and he kept a shipchandler's shop—a gloomy, much-cluttered place smelling of rust and oil—down on the water-front. At twilight one could see him stumping outside, his wooden leg solidly prodding the cobblestone pavement, putting up his shutters. The water-front is a lonely place at night, and Johannesen kept his shop like a fort; it has been a warehouse since Beche-de-Mer came . . . but I will give you Johannesen's story first. Then he would light his two ship's lamps, the globes of them greasily yellowed and with a crony or two and a glass of grog in his room back of the shop, would pass the time amid yarns and tobacco smoke.

I met with Johannesen in this way: MacDougal wrote Shipping for the "Press." He could get a captain's story when others failed, and the men of the sea knew him and welcomed him every one with that heartiness born of loneliness and fog. Therefore, on many a night, Mac stumbled down their ladders and into his dingy, with too much of his welcome inside him; and on such a one I located him at Johannesen's. "A frien' o' mine," mumbled Mac, seeing that he was discovered and the obligation of introducing me. He apologized for my condition—"Don't mind what I do, Joe—hansome; it's a right, an' . . . an' I'm sorry for 'im. . . ."

This recommended, I made a friendship with the old man. He had been apprentice, and mate, and master at last; he had sailed the seven seas and loved them all; in his talk was mention of a thousand ports, the friends he knew no more. Once he grew reminiscent to a degree that was unusual, and concluded by saying: "Aye! that was the trip 'fore I was married, too— which helps me remember it so clear."  
Now I had listened to him on many nights, but the things he had told were rough romance, concerning gales and wrecks of ships and men; whereas I suspected a bit of sentiment in this. "There's the yarn for me," I suggested.  
He turned with a sad smile, a wistful expression for such a man.  
"Aye, lad! that is a story. . . . but one I never tell." By prodding the memory of some woman dead I had earned the snub, and so, rebuked, I left him.

Perhaps a month passed without my seeing more of Johannesen; and then one night it came on wet and wintry, with a driving rain beating around the old warehouses, and the wind sweeping in from the river, and the townships moaning as they felt their ways through the mists. A tramp with one had reported in at "the Hollow," the captain thereof an old friend of Mac's, and they both Scotch; when he had not reappeared at ten o'clock a short cut took me to Shakespeare Street, from the foot of which, where the ferries come in, I hoped to chance on a small boat. Shakespeare Street is one of those lanes "where sailorsmen abide," and Fultah Fisher's boarding-house is many times repeated, and its tragedy, too, perhaps, were the truth but known. The street was as dark as a ship's hold, and when crossing it I was hustled by a man who came swiftly out of the dark. He mumbled an apology with an oath in the same breath, and as he tried to recover himself I heard a wooden tap on the pavement; lo! it was Johannesen.  
"Hello!" I said. "What's the rush?"  
He gave me a frightened stare and stammered something thickly.  
"What is it?" I asked. "Have you seen a ghost?"  
"God, lad!" he said, breathlessly, "God! . . ." and these were the only words he seemed capable of uttering at once. I caught his arm and demanded to know what had happened.  
"Let me go!" he protested, glancing behind him, "let me go—when you're down street, cast an eye about; if yeh see anything strange-like, let me know soon." With that he broke away and stumped off hurriedly.

I was carrying a heavy stick—my custom in such quarters, where one may meet a policeman, and then one may not; I shifted it to a balance nicely, and with a whistle for courage went on. At the next corner, I came suddenly upon a fellow who lounged against a lamp-post, as if content despite the vile weather. Water gleamed from his oil-skins—he might have been overboard recently, so wet he was. As I passed the yellow light fell on his face, and I started, involuntarily, as if I had touched something clammy and had got a chill. His skin was of a bluish-white color, this pallor even to the lips and his eyes had a vacant stare, which was only seeming, for the cold penetrating gaze from those filmy eyes was deadly. I hurried on, half shivering.

Not finding Mac, eventually I returned to Johannesen's. He was a long time answering my knock, and first surveyed me from a hole in a shutter panel. When he did open the door I noticed a nasty-looking blue steel gun in his hand, and I did not relish going ahead through the dark of the old shop. How did I know but that he had been a buccaneer?  
"Come on back," he invited, leading the way and putting his weapon on the table. He looked at me narrowly, as if he debated the wisdom of yielding a confidence, and then asked:  
"Down there—did yeh see anything?"  
"On Shakespeare Street? Why, yes; a fellow who looked as if some one had pitched him overboard, and he had the queerest fishy eyes."  
Johannesen sighed in a troubled way. "I know . . . shaking his head, 'I thought I had sighted him—that's him. . . .'" He tapped me with one finger impressively. "That's Beche-de-Mer."  
Then he commanded me as if on his own deck, master again, and a hundred leagues out.  
"There's paper an' a pen. I had got it out for myself, but I cramp at writin'. Yeh asked me once about the—my courtin' and that voyage. Well—write down, write down—there's a lot in it concernin' this Beche-de-Mer."  
And follows Johannesen's story:

"You have not been in the Pacific, or yeh would understand beche-de-mer. That's where I got to know them an' . . . an' him. I was mate then, the bark *Auckland*, and the captain's daughter along. I had begun to see what a fine bit of a girl she was long before we picked up the distress signal. Now that came about this way—we had a spell o' good weather, when sudden the glass begins to fall. We had time to prepare for it, an' we made the craft as tight as a drum. One gale is like another, anyway, unless yeh're caught napping, an' we weren't, so we rode through safe enough. Anxious times, though—when we was in waters so choked with the backbones of reefs that a man with a sweet-heart aboard couldn't rest easy. But we clawed through all right, a day an' a night of it, and when the dawn comes, a yellow griffin dawn, we saw that the worst was over. We made some guesses as to where we had arrived at, an' the captain said he thanked God for decent daylight, for away off to starboard was a thin reef, low an' wicked, a lang of coral, lookin' like the bones of somethin' that had died and bleached out. An' that was where we sighted the signal."

"'tis a fancy of those gales to whip back-track on yeh."  
"I take it, Mr. Johannesen," says the captain, "that reef is one o' the Twins." And he showed me a nasty place he had marked on the chart. Likely it was one of the Twins, I thought, and mean enough for anything.

"Well, a comber swept our boat across a spur of the reef, spite of all the men could do, an' we dropped a second one to save what we could from the first. Crushed like an eggshell was that first boat, and two men gone, which event started our trouble.  
"I went off with the second boat, an' we made a landing. There was one lone man to meet us, the strangest-lookin' figure he was—I can't describe what a creep that fellow gave me—he was most naked, looked like a bunch of mouldy seaweed that had dried, an' the starved bones of him, an' the stare in his eyes.  
"We had lost two men for him, an' without more ado we pulled back to the ship. Making sail, we cleared for the open, an' as the captain had said, to the nor'-nor'-east we picked up the second reef, as wicked lookin' as the first, but with more bone above the water line.

"Now about that man we had picked up—even after we had togged him out he was a creepy object. Weak!—he was weak as . . . as beche-de-mer. Trepan' they're called in the places where folks eat 'em—God! I couldn't eat any. An' that fellow couldn't speak a word—I guess he was dazed, mebber, anyway . . . he had lost his tongue. After he'd been fed a bit, he brightened up some, an' one of the men, old Fritz, tackled him in German. He caught a little of that, an' we took it that he was German. But he looked no nationality at all, an' the men were leery of him. He kept that queer glazed look in his eyes, too, which no amount of comfort seemed to disturb, an' so none of them was anxious to make friends, I didn't blame the men—he felt cold to the touch, clammy. . . . Ugh!—mebbe yeh've touched a ish. . . ."  
Johannesen loaded his pipe. He said he was shaky and wanted something to bite on.

"With sunlight an' fair weather it would have been different; but we did get the lash end of that gale. Close-reefed we tried to run before it, until the foremast went over, an' the old bark got crazy. Matt Larzen was at the wheel for a long trick, an' he swore she was bewitched, 'cause she wouldn't answer half the time, an' Matt had known her for years. Well, spite of all we could do, she went the way of many a good ship, did the *Auckland*; the wrath o' the sea was up, an' she wrecked—but where, do yeh s'pose? On the rack of coral bones off where we'd got that man the day before. An' when she struck, the way she went to pieces was strange to see—like a boat determined to commit suicide.

"I knew then how much the captain's girl meant to me. She was a plucky one, lad—I went overboard with her that night, clingin' to a piece of raft we had lashed with my one arm caught round her and the other twisted in the rope. It near pulled both off me, but I held to it, an' when her white face would come close up, wet and miserable-lookin', I forgot everything else and damned the South Seas with all the spleen there was in me. An' by God! I went through it, we two, though the arms I had were bloody, an' when we'd got to the reef, her eyes closed an' her teeth biting into her lip, I thought she was dead—an' somehow, since we had stood on the deck together, waitin' for the last of it, we separated from the rest, I knew—though never a word did she speak, only—she had gripped me by the arm, tight, an' when we were lifted away from the deck she called out, so I knew that the others were forgot, an' that she wanted me."

Johannesen smoked hard for a minute, and I lost his face in the drift of it; but there was a husky note in his voice—and he kept on smoking.  
"Mornin' found us huddled together, ten of us beside the captain, like a bunch of drenched sheep. But she smiled when the sun came out, an' that put life back into me, lad. There was something to live for, and to fight for, so I went to work knowin' the world would have nothing worth goin' back to if she wasn't along. Women are the only rainbows we ever find, I guess."

"Work! There was the wreck, a tidy distance out, an' fast going to pieces, so we had to sit by idle and watch it breaking up. Some things of use came ashore, an' by sheer rush we got them. Water we baled out of the reef's hollows, an' after the bark was gone we counted a three days' supply of food—or say five of starvin' rations. When that was exhausted we had nothin'."

"Then we sought advice from the . . . from Beche-de-Mer. Oh yes! he saved himself—while most of us had cuts and bruises to show for our swim, an' we were a worn-out lot, he hadn't seemed to mind the experience a whit. He wasn't changed, nor wince—just the same forlorn object he had been. For all we knew, he could have been a squid, that picked the reef to sun on. But he could give advice. He had lived on this reef, months, perhaps, an' we found him with nothing. So we wanted to know—*how* he had lived!"

"Old Fritz tried to make him understand, and finally he managed it. Mebbe his dullness was put on, an' mebbe not; a fish has got no great store of brains, an' he was as much that as man can be without having scales. During all this time no one had even a sympathy for him. He was the sort yeh wanted to let alone. We didn't have to shun him, for he kept apart. The reef was of considerable extent and he held to his place on the far side of it, where he would sit in the sun for hours without stirring, gazing out, silent—enough to give yeh the creeps to look at him."  
"But he had lived. And to all him the process of existin' on practically nothing at all. When he finally came to understand the question, he went off an' in a short time he comes back with the things we afterward named him for—beche-de-mer."

"Yeh know what beche-de-mer is? Trepan' is the common name—sea-slugs—why, yeh've heard of 'em, sold in Manila and Eastern ports. I've seen the stuff when dried, lookin' like charred sausages, an' crackly. There is a trade in them; they are gutted with a knife, boiled by the fishers, an' dried for sale. The Chinese like 'em, an' the black sort, 'chao sah oo,' they call 'em, fetch as much as five hundred dollars a ton. But since the wreck, the Chinks can have 'em all; I know that I've had my fill of beche-de-mer, whether eighteen inches long and black, or man-big, like the one we tried to save for civilization."  
"Well, lad, that was what he ate; he had lived on 'em raw—the sort of food to make a man dull and chilly. So many times had he been in the sea after them, his hands looked bloodless an' fin-like; and so he was fishy-eyed, vacant, without a human emotion, an' no use for a tongue or words. That was what we thought, anyway. An' I s'pose if he hadn't been somewhat bloodless to begin with, he couldn't have lasted there alone, as we found it, 'cause it was a hellish place. Day an' night the sea hissed in, churning over an' tearing at the coral, as if it was greedy to make way with it, an' the sun broiled down on the white crumbly back of the reef, and the dark made bones of it again. Fine weather, an' yeh could see the other Twin for company, just another bleacin' skeleton—then the blue-gray sea clear off to the skyline, with never a sail, an' the white-topped waves always lickin' in—enough to drive a real man daff, lad!"

"So we lived on beche-de-mer for some time—I don't know how long. He'd get them in the reef-end

shallows at low tide, an' sometimes he'd dive into deep water for the bigger ones. There was black ones, an' red sort too, soft pasty things, and some that were called 'the prickly fish,' green color. Now we had a bucket from the wreck, a copper-bottomed tin thing, an' we would boil beche-de-mer in it. We didn't ask questions 'bout the green ones, an' then, sudden we were all sick, dog-sick, every man of us, and Larzen died that night. Yes, Larzen died—from what? Why, it must have come from the green beche-de-mer; but the men began to whisper, saying that he died from 'the Beche-de-Mer,' meanin' him.

"We were now ten people on the reef—not countin' him, yeh know. There was the captain an' Mary; Wirt, the second mate; old Fritz, Steernerson, Dodd, McCauley, Freebus, Martin, an' myself. You can guess what a scare Larzen's going off gave us all; an' while the men couldn't say, they believed he had something to do with it. Old Fritz came to me with the tale; he wanted to know if we weren't takin' big chances.  
"Better stand a watch at nights, sir," he said. 'Ever notice how he looks at us, sir? He's got the evil eye!"

"I had paid little attention to the castaway, but I found that he did take a stealthy sort of interest in our affairs, though all the time he kept off to himself. When the captain heard of the men's ideas, he only laughed, for he feared nothing. He said the fellow was a poor creature, unfortunate like ourselves, an' that loneliness had made him queer; and he added to me, speaking grim, 'we're all like to resemble him, Mr. Johannesen, unless some ship is sighted!'"  
"But you can imagine what I felt when Mary came to me with the same such idea. Toot. Women, lad, feel these things keener than do we rough men. She said this fellow was like our shadow, that she had got



The strangest looking figure he was, most naked, looked like a bunch of mouldy seaweed that had dried.

awake nights to see him spying on the camp. I tried to show that she was only timid, but she makes answer that one man has died, an' that if we went, not one by one, would become of her. Then she broke down, like women do, an' she puts her arms about me, beggin' that I mustn't leave her alone."

"God! when I think of that time an' the suspicions I had, I get the creeps, such creeps as you had tonight, only a hundred times worse; for think of bein' off on a reef with a man like that, a vacant-eyed bloodless sort, misfortune followin' in his footsteps . . . think of it!"  
"But the captain would have none of our old-wives tales, an' no regular watch was set. To quiet her nerves, though, old Fritz an' I determined to have a watch, notwithstanding, he takin' the first part of the night, and I the rest of it. It was not always as easy to keep awake as it is to tell about it—the days came a fellow out of sheer monotony, an' once I came to doze off when I should have been wakeful. . . . Well, yeh know that feeling of how thing ain't goin' just right when yeh suddenly wake up? It was just that way with me. I came to myself with a jump, an' I knew that he was around somewhere. Then I see somethin' making off, stealthy as a shadow, an' it must have been him. What could he have been up to? What, indeed!"

"The next mornin' I knew, Dodd was cook, an' he complains that he must be going dotty, else why did he think he counted nine beche-de-mer on the night before, when there was fifteen now? So—I had surprised the fellow changin' the stock of food, an' he had made off without evening up the trick. What could we expect, but another man to go—mebbe two or three—if we ate the stuff. This was proof, an' we laid it before the captain.  
"All right, Dodd," he says, cheerful, 'go ahead and get breakfast!"

"But sir," Dodd argues, horrified, 'you ain't thinking of eatin' it!"  
"No," said the captain, 'but I intend that he shall eat it!"  
Then that fellow Dodd went to work like a man who expects to see some wicked fun. We sent a hail for Beche-de-Mer to come in to breakfast. It wasn't often that he got such an invitation, an' he came in slow. He said he'd had something to eat, already.  
"Go ahead, man," ordered the captain; 'there's a feed!"  
He didn't show any eagerness to, an' he wanted to take the stuff off with him. But the captain wouldn't have that. 'Eat it here an' now,' he says.  
"After all, there must be love of life in even Beche-de-Mer; for he glances all around like a rat that is

cornered, and he was edging away, an inch at a time, when old Fritz lost patience and grabbed for him. That settled the question. He turned guilty—for with a leap an' a dodge he got clear away, and legged it. Fritz and Dodd were for going after him, so mad were they, but the captain ordered them to stop.

"We can get him when we want," he says; which was right enough, there being no place for him to run to; and besides, he's scared," says the captain. 'Mebbe he'll drown himself an' save us some trouble.'  
"From this I could see that the old man realized our true situation. He had always been determined upon wrought up, an' he proved not to have lost any of his character. He sets the case before us.  
"This man seems to be dangerous," he says. 'We've lost one member of this crew, and . . . .'  
"Also then lost wicn we sent the boats after him, captain, an' in the wreck afterward.' He's to blame for the whole parcel of luck we're in,' interrupted old Fritz. 'Begg'n' your pardon, sir, but he has the evil eye, he has. An' this beche-de-mer ain't the stuff he's lived on all these months, either; it ain't supportin'!"

"The captain looked as if he had been suddenly struck with a very bad thought.  
"That may be," he said, 'and then, again, it may not be so. I've seen circumstantial evidence as bad and bowled over. But this is the point of the matter: He seems to be dangerous. Now who accuses him, an' of what is he charged?"

"The men muttered among themselves. They knew the only thing that could be charged was murder, an' they didn't dare. I was about to make some sort of reply to him, when Mary's voice startled me.  
"I accuse him!"  
"You! And of what? . . . What charge do you prefer?"

"If we . . . if we are to live here, we must depend on each other, and a woman ought to be able to trust every one. I want a night's peace . . . and . . . and I have been afraid of him so long. He watches me. . . ."  
"Suddenly her voice got high and it ended in a quavering shriek, when she begins to sob. I tried to comfort her, forgetting the rest of them, and she made a surprise for the old man by putting her head down on my shoulder . . . an' all that . . . Well, he asks me quick and sharp—

"Mr. Johannesen, do you verily believe that a man's oath can be respected here, like in a 'Frisco court?"  
"Mine can, sir," I said, somewhat indignant, for I thought he referred to me two, an' I didn't relish it.  
"Well," he went on, as if making a decision, 'you

as if we'd been clinging to the last ledge of rock, it was so lonely and dismal, enough to make a man's heart seem a big farce—for if I acquired him, I'd have no living in peace, an' we could only keep the way to be safe."

"Finally the arguments were finished. The captain told the jury that they must come to a decision the best of their belief. He said they should and think it over, it was concluded by telling that a serious business it was. They went down to the reef's end while the four of us left sat with the captain. He hadn't said a word, an' he just went over that waste of water, as he had been wont to know how long, before we came. To think of an' long days, an' that sea coming in with the an' the same dripping over the coral ledges. It was a death watch we kept, an' we waited until . . . .  
"Then we heard a hail from the men, an' we returned. Old Fritz led; he seemed a good deal white, and trembly.

"Well?" asked the captain.  
"He's got to . . . . to go, sir," said the captain.  
"The captain turned to Beche-de-Mer."  
"Have you anything to say before . . . ."  
"Then, to every one's surprise, he stepped up to his place, and begins to talk; in fair English, though he felt for a word now and then. There were there astonished, and I don't believe a man of them had said a word or moved a hand, no more had big eel, an' sudden he spoke to yeh.  
"I guess you can do what you please with me in this . . . . an' you never ever get to go from the reef—nobody ever does. When I was here, we found the bones of three men—well, yes, I see. There were six of 'em, but we were living on beche-de-mer, just as you have, but we couldn't last on it . . . . and no one else could. We just had to live somehow. Fritz drew lots, and the five men left began to think they might last that way. At length, there was a fog . . . . When you came I didn't care much, but you weak; but you came, and . . . . and then, I had to live again. That's all I have to say for you. But you can't live on beche-de-mer, an' you will have to live . . . . somehow."  
"Meantime, we had shuddered to listen to him, was worse than anything we had believed—and of everything we had suspected, he admitted. He terminated to live, even though it meant we must die by one, to save him.  
"Then the captain called on him to stand up, an' all stood up, solemn an' white, while the captain fessed. It is the sentence of this court that you die!"  
"He ordered Fritz and Dodd to take the man away, an' stand guard over him. Then went off some distance, while the captain paced up an' down the rest of us uttering never a word. It all seemed ridiculous that yeh wanted to laugh, an' they couldn't laugh for bein' so trembly, an' for seein' the captain's face, which was like death itself. So they stopped his walk.  
"Now, there is one thing more to be settled, the captain, an' we'll draw lots."  
"For what?" asked Wirt, who was shaky.  
"To see who must act as executioner."  
"I wake up nights, sometimes, cold an' shivery, thinkin' of that lot-drawing. We could see Dodd and Fritz and . . . . an' him, off at the spit end; slowly we drew the little bits of wood the captain cut and marked. It seemed to me that I could see each else but that and Mary's white face, staring at an' an' hear nothing but the long solemn wash of that hissing and dripping, and . . . . and then I heard the captain's voice, hard over it all, saying:  
"Mr. Johannesen, you're the only one to carry out the court's sentence!"  
"Then Mary gave a cry and fell back; the whole place began to swim before me, and I thought that thing ought to be done before she came round to her again . . . . so I turned and went out toward the three figures, away off at the end of the reef. It seemed a long way to go . . . .  
"Johannesen paused, and I thought he might mean for the end of his story. A man does not care to die anything. But I could not help springing up, claiming:  
"Then you . . . . you did see a ghost—down there on Shakespeare Street?"  
"He shook his head."  
"Wish I had," he said. "No—I sent Dodd and Fritz back to the party. Then he had a few words to know. 'You made a fine fight to save me, didn't yeh?' says Beche-de-Mer, and he laughed. Think of a man like that laughing. Such a thin, crawly laugh it was and it most unmerved me. And you're killin' me with that woman,' he says, and the look in his eyes was poison; 'I'll remember ye,' he says; and then he starts out to sea again—as if he didn't care."  
"Sudden—I see him pointing one of his long thin fingers out there . . . . and, thinks I, he's gone off his head, when I heard a hail. And the captain comes runnin', waving to me. It was a stay of sentence, yeh see for away off on the sea's edge showed a scrap of . . . .  
The beads of sweat had come out on Johannesen's face. All this time he had been striding up and down the room, but now, as if he grew weak and nervous, he reached for a chair and fairly dropped into it.  
"That saved him . . . . 'cause I had got my own . . . . but the sail saved him. We waited, and waited . . . . and waited; it grew bigger and bigger, finally, they caught our signal."  
"She was a small vessel, one of the beche-de-mer boats, I think, an' so he had a right to go aboard. The fleet took us off. But his stay wasn't for long. The men got wagging their tongues among the ship's crew—yeh can trust sailors to tell their yarns . . . . when, strange-like, within the hour, dirty water showed, why there was plain mutiny. They were tossing him over the side. The captain of the crew was no determined fellow; he listened to them, an' he weakened. They put back. They dropped a load of supplies, and on that reef they marooned him. He stood out near the spit end and watched us as we drew away. The men said that was where he lay longed—down with his kind—the beche-de-mer."  
"Johannesen stopped again, and then feverishly ran up the story anew. He pointed his finger at me as if said in a tone of accusation:  
"Somebody took him off. That's no ghost we saw; but Beche-de-Mer himself. It's the second time I sighted him. One night in 'Frisco, when she was with me still, I saw him—but he didn't see me. And I called what he had said, an' how he had said it."  
"You're doin' this accuse of that woman . . . ."  
"We left 'Frisco that night, Mary and me—then it but that was a long time back, an' she's safe away from him where there's no call to worry, thank God!"  
"Johannesen seemed to have grown much older within the hour. He started whenever there sounded a note, and his hand trembled close to the gun. I tried to laugh away his fear, and told him that this was no beche-de-mer reef, but a great city with a police department. He shook his head and would take no comfort.  
"Wirt died sudden in a bigger city than this—New York—killed one night on the docks; old Fritz and I thought I had a sailor's boarding-house in New Orleans, but they said Dodd was drunk when he fell off the quay. I was in Liverpool, but why should I have marks on him? . . . ."  
"He said in a dry tone, wetting his lips, 'That was him . . . . down on Shakespeare Street . . . . that was Beche-de-Mer."  
The last I heard from Johannesen was the sound of his door-bell when I departed, and, "You keep these notes safe," he called.  
No—that was not the last. I learned other things later. There had been a struggle, and a sailor's blade was used. The search took in all the water-front, and I recall that one captain said, when the cut-throat blade was shown to him . . . .  
"South Seas—a beche-de-mer knife; which may lend some weight to Johannesen's story. Universal Syndicate

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