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In the Wet

NEVIL SHUTE

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Nevil Shute



VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL
Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

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eISBN: 978-0-307-47406-3

www.vintagebooks.com

v3.1

Lord God of Hosts, through whom alone

A Prince can rule his nation,
Who settest Kings upon their throne
And orderest each man's station;
Now, and through ages following,
This grace to us be given:
To serve and love an earthly King
Who serves our King in Heaven.

C. A. ALINGTON

(from a hymn sung at
Shrewsbury School)

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I HAVE never before sat down to write anything so long as this may be, though I have written plenty of sermons and articles for parish magazines. I don't really know how to set about it, or how much I shall have to write, but as nobody is very likely to read it but myself perhaps that is of no great consequence. The fact is, however, that I have been so troubled in my mind since I came back from Blazing Downs that I have not been able to sleep very well or to work whole-heartedly upon my parish business, and my services in the church have been mechanical and absent minded. I think it will help me if I try to write down what it is that has been bothering me, and then I think that I may send it to the Bishop for him to look over. Perhaps the trouble is that I am getting a little old for duty in this somewhat unusual parish, and if that should prove to be the case I must accept whatever he decides.

Writing materials are not very easy to come by here, because Landsborough is only a small town. I went down to Art Duncan's store just now to buy some paper, but all he had was packets of thin airmail paper and these exercise books that Miss Foster uses for the older children at the school when they have got past using slates. I got six of these books and I expect I shall want more before I have written all that I have to say, but that only leaves nine books in the store and I would not like to think that I was running the school short. I have asked Art to get in some more, and he will send an order out to Townsville by next week's aeroplane.

In fairness to anybody who should read what I am writing I think I should begin by putting down something about myself, so that he can form his own judgment on the credibility of my account. My name is Roger Hargreaves and I have been ordained as a priest in the Church of England for forty-one years; I was sixty-three years old last month. I was born in the year 1890 at Portsmouth in the south of England and I was educated at Portsmouth Grammar School. I was ordained in 1912 and became curate of St. Mark's, at Guildford. In 1914 when the war broke out I went into the army as a chaplain, and I saw service in Gallipoli and France. I was very fortunate in the war, because although I was blown up by a shell at Delville Wood during the Somme battle I was only in hospital for a few weeks, and I was able to return to the front line in less than four months.

After the war I was rather unsettled, and disinclined to return to parochial work in an English town. I was twenty-eight years old, unmarried, and with nothing very much to keep me in England. It seemed to me that while I was still young and vigorous I should give a few years of my life to service in more difficult places, and after talking it over with the Bishop I left for Australia to join the Bush Brotherhood in Queensland.

I served in the Bush Brotherhood for fourteen years, travelling very widely from Cloncurry to Toowoomba, from Birdsville to Burdekin. During that fourteen years I had no settled home, and I did not very often sleep more than two nights in one place. I drew fifty pounds a year from the Brotherhood, which was quite sufficient for my clothes and personal expenses, and I had a small expense account for travelling though I seldom had to draw upon it. The people of the outback were most generous in helping me to travel from station to station for my christenings and weddings and funerals and services. They would always take me on to the next place in a truck or a utility, and in the wet when the roads are impassable to motor

because of the mud I have been given the loan of a horse for as long as three months, so that I have been able to continue with my duties all through the rainy season.

In 1934 I got appendicitis at a place called Goodwood near Boulia, three hundred miles west of Longreach, where there was a hospital. There was no Flying Doctor in those days, of course, and I had to travel for two days in a truck in very hot weather over rough country roads to get to the hospital. I had peritonitis by the time I got there and I very nearly died and might have done if Billy Shaw of Goodwood station hadn't driven me all through the night. I was poorly after the operation and I didn't pick up very well, so very reluctantly had to resign from the Brotherhood, and I went back to England. The Bishop was most kind and gave me a very good living, St. Peter's at Godalming, and there I settled down and met my dear wife, Ethel. Our few years of married life together were so happy I can hardly begin to write about them, so I shall not try to do so.

Ethel died in 1943, and we had no children. In wartime England there was much work for a vicar, and I did not feel the call to greater service till the war was over. But then it seemed to me that Godalming required a married priest more than a widower, and that there were still parts of Queensland where a man of my experience could be of use, even though he was fifty-six years old. I gave up my parish and went back to Australia as the clergyman of an emigrant ship, and to my great delight I found that the Brotherhood were willing to take me back into their service again in spite of my age.

I soon found that work in the outback was much easier than it had been ten years before. The war had brought improvements to the roads, for one thing, and small wireless receivers and transmitters were in general use on the more isolated stations, so that air communications were vastly easier. Most important of all was the greater use of aeroplanes; there seemed to be airfields all over the place, and even regular passenger services from them. All these developments made it possible for a priest to do a great deal more for the people than had been the case before, and I found that over much of my district it was possible to visit a given town or station as frequently as once in six months instead of once in two years as was the case when I first came to the country.

In 1950 an acute shortage of clergy developed in New Guinea; at one time owing to leave and sickness there was only one priest of the Church of England there to serve an area of a hundred and eighty-one thousand square miles in Papua and the Mandated Territory. It seemed to me that their needs were even greater than those of the Queenslanders, and with the consent of the Brotherhood I volunteered to go there for a few months to help them out of their difficulty. I was fifty-nine when I flew up to Port Moresby, much too old for such a job, I suppose, but there was nobody else to go. I travelled widely in the country for a year from the Fly River to Rabaul and from the goldfields at Wau to the plantations of Samarai. I am afraid that I was careless in taking my Paludrine because in September 1951 I went down with a severe attack of malaria at Salamaua, and I was in hospital at Port Moresby for some weeks. That was the end of my service in New Guinea.

I mention that attack of malaria because I still get recurrences of it from time to time though in a milder form. It has a place in the events that I am trying to write down. I am told that these malarial fevers are likely to go on for some years after the first attack before they gradually die away, and the recurrences that I get now are already much less severe than the

first bout I had at Salamaua. I find now that I can go on with my work quite well when the fever is on me, certainly as regards travelling, although occasionally I still have to postpone service for a day while I go to bed and sweat it out. However, that first bout was a severe one and left me rather weak, so that I was glad to give up New Guinea and to go and stay with friends up on the Atherton Tableland behind Cairns in North Queensland while I recovered and regained my health.

The Bishop was travelling in the district at that time, and he wrote to me proposing that I should come to see me, and saying things that I did not deserve. I travelled down to meet him at Innisfail because I was quite well enough to go to him, and we had a very friendly talk in which he spoke about my age and the desirability that I should take on less exacting work. He told me then that he was anxious to reopen the parish church at Landsborough and to provide a resident priest for the parish. He spoke about my experience of the country, and asked me if I would like to go there for a few years to start up the church again in the district. He said that he would not expect me to travel very widely in the parish, which is about twenty-eight thousand square miles in area though sparsely populated, because he hoped to be able to provide me with a young man as a curate within a year. Money is always a difficulty in the Church, of course, but he said that he would send me a truck in a few months time, although it might have to be rather an old one. It hasn't come yet, but I really get on very well without it.

Landsborough is a town at the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria in what is known as the Gulf Country. The town was much larger fifty years ago than it is now; at the time of the gold mining boom it had about twenty-five hotels—probably mere drinking shops, most of them—but now it has only two. There are about eighty permanent white residents there, counting men, women, and children, and a floating population of two or three hundred blacks who live in deplorable conditions in iron shanties outside the town. The place is about two hundred miles from Cloncurry and five hundred by air from Cairns and Townsville on the coast. It has a hospital staffed by a couple of nursing sisters, and it has a house for a doctor though no doctor has ever been induced to practise there. In an emergency they speak upon the radio to Cloncurry and the Flying Doctor comes in the air ambulance; there is a very good aerodrome built during the war, and an aeroplane calls with mail and supplies once a week.

My church at Landsborough is a very simple weatherboard building that was rebuilt about thirty years ago after a bush fire. I am afraid it is rather sparsely furnished, and it could do with a coat of paint both inside and out as soon as we can get the money for it. It has chairs instead of pews, and this is a great convenience because once every two or three months we get a travelling cinema in Landsborough and then we can take the chairs out of the church and put them in the Shire Hall, or in Art Duncan's yard in the hot weather. It is a convenience to me personally, too, because my vicarage is rather short of furniture, so that if I have notice of anybody coming to see me I can go and borrow a chair from the church and take it back before the next service.

Both church and vicarage have been rather neglected, because the last incumbent died of a snake bite in 1935 and since then there had been no resident priest at Landsborough till I arrived in the autumn of 1952. Of course, the church had been used from time to time for services by visiting priests, and I used it myself on several occasions when I was in the

district, so that I knew all about Landsborough. I was very glad to go there, because although by English standards it's not much of a parish, perhaps by English standards I'm not much of a clergyman, and for me it was a place where I could carry on the work that I was used to from a base where I could gather a few books around me and live in comparative rest and comfort. In spite of what I told the Bishop, I must privately admit that I'm not the man I was before the malaria. It's probably only a passing weakness, and as the thing wears off I shall get back my strength again. I hope so, because there's so much to be done, and so few years now left to do it in.

The Bishop, when I met him at Innisfail, forbade me to take up my living at Landsborough until April, when the rains would be over in the Gulf Country, and although I was a little annoyed about that at the time I think perhaps that he was acting wisely in view of my infirmity and the state of the vicarage. In the seventeen years that had elapsed since the death of the last incumbent there had been little money available for the maintenance of either church or vicarage, and what money there was had been spent on the church to keep the roof in order and to repair the ravages of the white ants. Not very much had been done in the vicarage in those years; most of the corrugated iron roof was rusted through, and there was little glass left in the windows. However, I bought some corrugated iron in Atherton and took it with me in the mail truck when I went to Landsborough in April. It was so expensive that I thought it best to leave the windows for the time being; one doesn't really need glass in the windows in the tropics.

It took five days for the mail truck to get from Cairns to Landsborough because we stopped at a great many places. Moreover, it was early in the season and the roads are never very good in April; we got bogged three times in one day near the Gilbert River. It seemed a long time to me, because of course I was impatient to get to my living and commence my ministry. When finally we drove into Landsborough and unloaded my corrugated iron and my swag in front of the church, I found that the vicarage was not in quite such good condition as I had thought. It has two rooms with a verandah in front, but the white ants had got into the floor of the verandah and one room. However, the other room was quite safe and that is all I need, and I soon had the new corrugated iron nailed down on the roof beams with the help of Jim Phillips the constable and one of his black trackers, called Sammy Three, to distinguish him from all the other Sammies. They were most kind, and found me some packing cases and beer crates, because the vicarage had little furniture. Within a few hours I was very comfortably installed, with my camp bed set up and my swag unrolled upon it under my mosquito net, and a chair out of the church, and a packing case for a table with my hurricane lamp on it, and a little book case made out of a beer crate for the half-dozen books I had brought with me, and my tin trunk with my clothes in it.

My parish is a large one. It extends about a hundred and sixty miles to the south, to the border of the Northern Territory a hundred and twenty miles to the west, and about fifty miles to the east in the direction of Normanton. It has two other churches in it, St. Mary's at Leichardt Crossing and St. Jude's at Godstow. St. Mary's is in good repair though very small, seating no more than fifteen people; it stands on Horizon station and Mr. Kimbell the manager has seen that it was kept in order. St. Jude's, I am afraid, is little more than a ruin, but I make a point of holding a Celebration there twice a year, and I am hoping that we may be able to get some iron for the roof in a few months.

In the dry months of the year, from April to the end of November, I can get about in the large parish fairly easily. The roads are not metalled, of course, and in England they would be described as cart tracks, but in a truck you can depend on averaging fifteen miles an hour, so that most of my parish lies within a couple of days' journey of the vicarage. In the wet season, however, travelling is very difficult. About fifty or sixty inches of rain falls in three months; the rivers, which are dry for the rest of the year, turn into swollen torrents, and much of the country is submerged in floods. In the wet no motor vehicle can move a hundred yards outside the town without getting bogged, so that there is little movement in the countryside; station managers get in the stores that they require for four months in November and seldom appear again in Landsborough before the beginning of April. A horse is the best way to get about the country then if one must travel, but the crocodiles are rather a nuisance in the floods and the incessant rain makes camping very unpleasant.

Like every other parish in the world, the parish of St. Peter's, Landsborough, has its own special problems. There are only nineteen white families in Landsborough itself, seven of whom are Roman Catholic, so that much of the local parish work revolves around the school and the hospital and the office of the Protector of Aborigines. The town, however, is the social centre for a number of cattle stations in the country round about, the smallest of which is eight hundred square miles and the largest over three thousand. The managers and stockmen from these stations total nearly a hundred Europeans and perhaps twice the number of half-castes and aborigines, who usually make very good stockmen. The white stockmen come into town frequently on business and to spend the evening in the hotel, and everyone from the whole countryside comes in to town for the race meetings, which are held twice a year in the dry. Each meeting lasts for four days and the town is then very full with men sleeping everywhere, in bedrooms, on the verandahs, in their utilities or on the bare earth of the paddocks rolled up in their swags, drunk or sober, but more frequently the former.

A parson who arrives to live in such a town, the first parson for seventeen years, must act with some discretion. The problem of drink in outback towns like Landsborough is not an easy one; right is not wholly right nor wrong completely wrong in such communities. Landsborough lies at sea level only seventeen degrees from the Equator; it can be very hot indeed at certain times of the year. In such places the body requires not less than a gallon of liquid each day to replace the losses due to evaporation, and there are few liquids more palatable and more refreshing in hot climates than the cold, light Australian beer. The two bars in the town are the natural meeting place for men in from the stations; indeed they are about the only places in Landsborough where men can meet and talk their business. If a stockman from a station far out in the bush comes into town to meet his friends and to hear new voices stating new ideas, he must stand in the bar all day, for there is nowhere else for him to go. If then with his starved mind refreshed with news and human company he lies in a drunken slumber in the back of his truck, should the parson rail against him from the pulpit? I do not know if he should or not; I only know that I have never done so.

I started modestly and rather cautiously in Landsborough. I visited each of my white parishioners in the first week and got a Sunday School going for the children. That went all right, and presently I got some of the women to come to matins; I found, as I had found in other places, that the half-caste women and quadroons were more devout than the pure

whites. Presently I started a short children's service each morning five minutes before school consisting of one hymn and a short Bible reading, and a lot of the children used to come that because my church is on their way to school. I visited the hospital each morning and the iron shanties of the blacks each afternoon, and I engaged in a good deal of correspondence to try to get hold of an old cinema projector for the town to make a diversion from the bars.

All this was well enough, but it did little to touch the major social problems of the district which concerned the men. I had hardly been six weeks in Landsborough when the first race meeting brought all the stockmen into the town in one body. At that time I was taking all my meals at the Post Office Hotel, the larger of the two, run by Bill Roberts and his wife. Cooking a meal is hardly practicable in my vicarage; I have a Primus stove on which I can boil a kettle for a cup of tea for my breakfast, but dinner and tea I usually take at the hotel, changing from one to the other every week to avoid offence.

For the next four days the hotel was a bedlam. Normally only one or two of the ten bedrooms would be occupied, but for the race week Bill Roberts set up seventeen extra beds in the verandahs, and the other place had as many. A travelling roundabout for the children turned up from Cloncurry and was erected in the main street; it had a great loudspeaker that blared canned dance tunes every night till one in the morning, and could be heard ten miles out in the bush. Two pedlars arrived in trucks that opened up as shops, and to crowd everything the cinema truck arrived on one of its infrequent visits, displaying films that I had seen ten years before in distant Godalming on the far side of the world. Miss Foster closed her school, and all the town went to the races.

A race meeting at Landsborough has one or two features that distinguish it from Ascot. All the horses must be bred in the district and they come straight off the cattle station ungroomed of course, and sometimes covered in mud where they have been rolling. The jockeys are the stockmen from the stations decked out in brilliant racing colours, each riding a horse that he has picked out from the mob of two or three hundred in the horse paddock of his own station, and that he confidently believes will one day win the Melbourne Cup. The racecourse itself is in a natural clearing in the bush, the posts and rails are rough, untrimmed saplings cut a hundred yards away. The centre of the racecourse is the aerodrome and the ambulance aeroplane was there in case of accidents, and for a more mundane reason, because its crew were busily running a gambling wheel to pay for the aeroplane. There is no grand stand, but over the horse lines and the bar rough roofs of gum tree boughs with the leaves of them have been erected to provide a little shade. There is a stockyard for the Rodeo which comes on the last day of the meeting. There is a great deal of unrelieved sunshine, a great deal of beer, and a great deal of dust.

I drove out to the races with Mrs. Roberts and her coloured maid, a girl of about seventeen called Coty. We were a little late in starting because they had served over sixty hot dinners cooked on an old fashioned kitchen range with the shade temperature in the yard outside at a hundred and five. It seemed only fair to stay and help them with the washing up, so it was after three o'clock when we got out to the racecourse. I knew a number of the managers and stockmen by that time, of course, and I spent the afternoon with them pleasantly enough drinking one beer to every three of theirs and putting my two shillings on the tote each race on their advice.

Towards the last race, I met Stevie for the first time in my life. I was standing with a little group that included Jim Maclaren, manager of Beverley station, when I saw a very tattered old man zig-zagging towards me. He wore a dirty blue shirt without a collar, open to show his skinny chest, and dirty drill trousers held up by a ringer's belt with a leather slot for the knife and a leather pocket for the tin box of matches. He had no hat; he was very tanned with lean, not unpleasant features; he had worn out elastic sided riding boots upon his feet. He was unshaven and rather drunk; indeed, he looked as if he had been rather drunk for some considerable time.

He came up to us and stood swaying a little, and said, "You're the new parson."

"That's right," I said, and held out my hand to him. "My name's Roger Hargreaves."

He took my hand and shook it, and went on shaking it; he wouldn't let it go. "Roger Hargreaves," he said seriously. There was a pause while he considered that information. "That's your name."

"That's right," I said. "That's my name." I knew that everyone beside me was smiling a little, watching to see how the new parson reacted to this drunk old man.

"Good on you," he said at last, after another pause. "The Reverend Roger Hargreaves. That's what they call you."

"That's right," I assured him. "That's my name."

He stood motionless, still holding my hand, while his mind changed gear. "I heard about you," he said. "You're a Pommie. A bloody Pommie."

"Aw, cut it out," Jim Maclaren beside me said. "Mr. Hargreaves, he's been in Queenslander twenty years. Buzz off and buy yourself a beer, Stevie. I'll shout you one."

"Mr. Hargreaves!" said the old man scornfully. He still had me by the hand. "If he's right, why don't you call him by his name? His name's Roger."

"He's right," said Jim. "I called him Mr. Hargreaves because he's the vicar. Buzz off and go yourself a beer. Tell Albert that I'm shouting for you—I'll be along in a minute."

"He's all right," I said to Jim. I turned to the old man. "What's *your* name?"

"Stevie," he said.

"Stevie what?"

"Stevie," he repeated. "I'm Stevie and you're Roger. Put it there, chum." He shook my hand vigorously. He peered up into my face and breathed stale beer at me. "Cobbers, ain't we?"

"That's right," I said. "You're Stevie, and we're cobbers."

He released my hand at last, and stood swaying before us. "He's right," he informed Jim, "even if he is a bloody Pommie." He turned to me, full of goodwill. "Who're you betting on?"

I smiled. "I'm the vicar," I said. "Two bob on the tote is my limit. I was thinking of going on Frenzy."

"Don't do it," he said earnestly. "Don't do it, Roger. Black Joke. You go on Black Joke and you'll be right."

"Aw, you're nuts, Stevie," said Fred Hanson. "Come on over 'n I'll shout you one." He took the old man by the arm and drew him away towards the bar.

I glanced at Jim Maclaren, and we were both smiling. "Who's he?" I asked.

"Stevie? Oh, he's always about. Lives with a Chinaman about ten miles out. He don't do nothing now—he's too old. Used to be a good man once, they tell me. I did hear he was manager of Wonamboola, years ago." He hesitated, and glanced at me. "Bit of a nuisance now and then."

I turned and looked at the tote board behind us; up till then only one punter had fancied Black Joke. "What about Black Joke?" I asked.

"He's a joke all right," said Jim. "You stay on Frenzy, Mr. Hargreaves."

I wandered away just before the race and had a look at the horses as they cantered down to the start. Frenzy was the only one with any breeding; Black Joke was a thin, starved-looking animal with a big head and a small rump. I strolled towards the tote and there was still only one backer for Stevie's fancy, against over forty on Frenzy. The dividend, if certain, would be very small. I thought of old Stevie, whom I was sure to meet again, and who was sure to ask me what I had backed, and I put my two bob on Black Joke.

I sometimes think that Ascot misses something that places like Landsborough have got. Tommy Ford was riding Frenzy, and Tommy was resolved to win that race; he came surging forward at each start and spoiled six starts in quick succession. By that time every horse was dancing on its toes and practically out of control, and the starter had a rock in his hand. On the seventh start he flung this stone at Tommy's head and checked his rush as the two-pound rock whizzed by within an inch of his ear. One of the other horses spoiled that start. On the eighth start Tommy came surging forward again and the starter flung another rock which ricocheted off Frenzy's head between the ears and hit Tommy fair and square in the chest. Frenzy, startled by the blow upon his head and the yank on his mouth, went bush; the starter was a good one but fifty yards down the course Frenzy crossed the field, barging against Daisy Bell, who fell, and Coral Sea, who sat down on his haunches for a rest, while Frenzy jumped the low rail and made off into the gum trees with Tommy standing in the stirrups, sawing at his mouth and cursing. Black Joke was left to race against a poor little mare called Cleopatra, and won by a length. I collected two pounds seventeen and sixpence from the tote.

I looked around for Stevie, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was rather glad of that because if I had seen him then I could hardly have avoided standing him a beer, and he had had quite enough. Jim told me later that he had gone to sleep in one of the horse stalls, on the ground, where there was a patch of shade. Most of the horses stayed out at the racecourse for the night with a few of the black stockmen to look after them. When Stevie woke up it was dark and starry, one of the magnificent Queensland winter nights, cool and balmy, when the stars burn right down to the horizon and it is a pleasure to sleep out on the bare earth. The black boys had built a fire to boil up and they were sitting around and yarning. They gave Stevie a mug of tea out of their billy and a tin plate of meat, and presently he left them and started on the mile and a half walk into town, to the bar.

I did not see Stevie again that night. I had my tea at the hotel and helped them with the washing up. Then I made off towards my vicarage, but Jim Maclaren saw me as I passed by the bar out in the street and I had to go in and have a drink with them, and shout one pound return out of my winnings. I found that my bet was the main topic of the evening; not only was the whole of the last race an interest and an amusement to the men who thronged the

bar, including Tommy Ford, but they all showed genuine and unaffected pleasure in the fact that the parson had won two pounds seventeen and sixpence on a long shot. North Queensland is a rewarding place to work in.

I tried to find out a little more about Stevie in the half hour that I was in the bar before I could withdraw without offence, but I did not get very far. He was much older than most of the men present, and he had been in the Gulf Country for as long as they could remember. There was a tradition, backed by the pilot of the air ambulance, that Stevie had served in the Royal Flying Corps in the 1914–1918 war, and that he had been a pilot. He was known to have been manager of Wonamboola station some time in the Twenties, probably soon after that war, but nobody was old enough to remember that time personally. Since then he had gone steadily downhill. He had worked as a saddler and as a cook on various stations at various times; nobody in the bar that night knew his surname and nobody knew of any relatives that he might have. He was now unemployable, but he had a pension of some kind that he drew from the post office. He lived with an old Chinaman called Liang Shih who ran a market garden ten or twelve miles out of town, and he helped in the garden in return for his keep. These two men lived alone. Stevie never had any money in his pocket because his habit was to go straight from the post office to the hotel and drink his pension before going home, but when his clothes became indecent Sergeant Donovan of the mounted police would wait for him outside the post office and take him to the store and make him buy a new pair of pants before releasing him to the bar.

I knew a little bit about Liang Shih, because he was the only source of fresh vegetables in Landsborough. At that time I had not seen his house, though I saw plenty of it later on. He had his garden between two long waterholes on rather a remote part of Dorset Downs station, about fifteen miles from the homestead. The waterholes were really part of a river that ran only in the wet season and joined the Dorset River lower down; in the dry the land between these waterholes was very fertile and adjacent to permanent water for irrigation. Here Liang Shih cultivated two or three acres of land and on it he grew every kind of vegetable in great profusion; he had an old iron windmill to pump water, and he worked from dawn till dark. He had a house built on a little rising knoll of ground near by, above the level of the floods. Twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, he would drive into town in a two wheeled cart drawn by an old horse to sell his vegetables, and then he would go straight back home. He did not drink at all.

I met Stevie next morning in the street as I was on my way to the hospital. The bar did not open until ten o'clock, and he was looking pretty bad; his hair was matted, his eyes bloodshot, and his hand shaking. Clearly he had slept out somewhere, because his shirt and trousers were dirty with earth, and there was a little hen manure on his left shoulder.

I stopped by him, and said, "I got on Black Joke, like you told me to."

He mouthed his dry lips, and said, "Good on you. They told me last night in the hotel. You're Roger, aren't you?"

"That's right," I assured him. "I'm Roger, and you're Stevie."

"Got a drink in your place, cobber?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," I said. "I don't keep it in the vicarage." I paused, and then I said

because his distress was evident, "The bar opens at ten."

"Too long," he muttered. "The last one, he was better than this bloody chap. He'd give you a drink any time. This mugger, he's scared of the bloody policeman."

"I tell you what," I said. "Go up to my place, the first house this side of the church, and have a shower and wash your shirt and pants. They'll be dry before ten, and it'll pass the time. I've got to go up to the hospital, but I'll be back by then, and I'll shout you a drink for Black Joke."

"It might pass the time, at that," he said. "Up by the church?"

"That's right," I said. "You'll find soap and everything up there. A razor, if you want to use it. I'll be back before ten, and then we'll come back here and have a beer."

I went up to the hospital—I forget what for, or who the patients were. I didn't stay long in the wards; I call them wards for courtesy, though they were no more than three bedrooms with two beds in each. When I was ready to go Sister Finlay asked me to stay for a cup of tea; they usually gave me morning tea when I went to the hospital.

I went into the sitting room, where Nurse Templeton was pouring out. There were only two of them to staff the little place. "I mustn't stay long," I said. "I've got Stevie up in my house waiting for me."

"For Heaven's sake!" said Sister Finlay. "What's he doing there?"

"Having a bath," I replied.

Nurse Templeton looked up, giggling. "He usually has that here."

"Do you see a lot of him?" I asked.

"Do we not!" said Sister Finlay, sighing a little. "He's a horrible old man. He gets drunk and gets in a fight, or just falls down and hurts himself, and then he comes to us and we have to patch him up. Last time he went to sleep in Jeff Cumming's yard behind the house, and Jeff's dog came and bit him in the arm."

"Sister would have bitten him herself, only he smelt too bad," said Templeton. "Here's your tea, Mr. Hargreaves."

"I made him go and have a bath before I dressed his arm," the sister said. "Templeton washed his clothes and turned him out spruce as a soldier. But he didn't stay that way."

"He's a bit of a nuisance, is he?"

She nodded. "He'd be all right if it wasn't for the drink. It's not as if he was a vicious man. But the drink's got him now, and he's got to have it. That, or something else."

"Something else?"

She said, "He lives out in the bush, with that Chinaman who brings in vegetables. Out of Dorset Downs."

"I know. I ought to go out there some time and visit them."

She glanced at me, and hesitated. "I don't know that they're very Christian, Mr. Hargreaves," she said at last. "I think you ought to know that, if you're thinking of going there. I don't know about Stevie, but Liang Shih's a Hindoo or a Buddhist or something, and there's an idol stuck up in a sort of niche in the wall." She hesitated again. "It's none of my

business, but I wouldn't like you to get a surprise."

I smiled. "Thanks for the tip. Is Stevie a Buddhist, too?"

She laughed. "Oh—him! I shouldn't think he's anything, except a Beerist." She paused, and then she said, "Sergeant Donovan took me out there with a party one day when they were shooting duck on the waterholes, and we looked in and called on them. Stevie was sober, and he looked ever so much better—quite respectable. The Sergeant says it's only when he gets some money and comes into town he gets like this. He's all right living with Liang Shih out in the bush."

I left the hospital soon after that and went back to the vicarage. Stevie had washed himself and he had made an attempt to shave, but he had cut himself and given it up; he was now sitting on the rotten verandah steps with my towel around his waist while his shirt and trousers, newly washed, hung in the sun over the rail. Clothes dry in ten minutes in North Queensland, in the dry.

"I had a shower," he said. "My word, I'm crook today." He licked his dry lips. "You got whiskey, cobber?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," I replied. "I don't keep anything up here. The hotel will be open in ten minutes." I paused. "Going out to the track today?"

"Suppose so," he said listlessly. "I done my money, so I won't be betting." He reached for his shirt and trousers and began to clothe his skinny, scarred body.

"That was a good tip you gave me yesterday," I remarked. "What made you think the Black Joke was in the running against Frenzy?"

"Aw, something was bound to happen in the last race," he said. "Nothing hadn't happened up till then, but something was bound to happen. I knew that three nights ago, out in the bush. I know when something's going to happen—I do, cobber." He rambled on as he pulled his dirty boots on his bare feet. "Pisspot Stevie," he said resentfully. "That's what they call me. But I know more'n any of them. I'll show them all one day. I know more than any of them. Mark my words."

"Of course you do," I said. "Come on down to the hotel and I'll shout a beer, if it'll clear your head."

He came forward with alacrity, buttoning his trousers as he came. "I done my money," he explained ingenuously. "I got to wait now till some other bastard shouts."

"They tell me you were in the Flying Corps in the first war," I remarked. "Is that right?"

"Ninth Batt. and R.F.C.," he told me. "That's what I was. Sergeant Pilot, maternity jacket all, 'n wings on it, flying R.E.8s artillery spotting. Armentears, St. Omer, Bethune—I know all them places, 'n what they look like from on top. I know more than any of them, cobber. Pisspot Stevie!"

He walked down to the hotel. "I'll stand you one beer and then I'll have to go," I told him. "If you'll take my advice, you'll go, too." He did not answer that, and when I left the bar he was deeply involved in rounds of drinks, and looking a lot better, I must say.

I did not see him that day at the races. He was in the bar at tea time, rather drunk, but avoided getting drawn into the bar that night. I went to the dance later on to put in a

appearance for half an hour. The Ladies' Committee had done their best to decorate our rather sombre Shire Hall, and they managed to produce an orchestra composed of Mrs. Frase at the piano, the half caste Miss O'Brian with her violin, and Peter Collins with his cornet. Everybody seemed to be having a good time and I stayed there till about eleven o'clock when the fight took place.

It happened on the verandah outside the bar of the Post Office Hotel. When I heard about it and got out into the street to try and stop it, it was all over. The police were marching Ted Lawson off to spend the night in the cooler, one on each side of him dragging him along and standing no nonsense; the crowd were putting Stevie, streaming blood, into a utility to take him to the hospital. It seemed that Ted had been very rude to Stevie, calling him Pisspot, and Stevie, very drunk, had hit out at Ted and by a most incredible fluke had knocked him down. Ted was a man of about twenty-five, a ringer on Helena Waters station, too young by far to hit such an old man. However, they fought on the verandah, and with the first blow Ted knocked Stevie out; as he fell he caught his left ear on the edge of the verandah or against a post and tore it half off, which made another job for Sister Finlay. There was nothing much that the parson could do about it till the morning, so I went back to the vicarage and said a prayer before I went to bed for wandering, foolish men.

When I got to the hospital next morning Stevie was just leaving for the hotel. Sister Finlay had put a couple of stitches in his ear and dressed it, and he now wore a large white bandage all around his head. He had little to say to me, and we watched him as he shambled down the hot, dusty road to the town a quarter of a mile away. "I'd like to see him put into a truck and taken out to Dorset Downs, where he belongs," the sister said. "He's all right when he's out there."

"I could try that," I said. "One of the men would run him out, if I asked them."

"He's got to have the stitches taken out on Sunday," she replied. "This meeting will be over by then, and he'll go on his own."

The police let Ted out of their little gaol about the middle of the morning after giving him a good dressing down for hitting an old man, and Ted came back into circulation rather ashamed of himself. To make amends, for Ted was quite a decent lad, he went straight to find Stevie and to stand him a drink, so that bygones should be bygones. Bygones were still being bygones that afternoon out at the rodeo; Stevie and Ted were firm friends and half drunk, and the name Pisspot was being bandied about in the most amicable way without any offence at all.

That was the last day of the races, and there was a fancy dress dance that night in the Shire Hall at which I had to help in judging the costumes and giving away the prizes. Few of the men had managed to do anything about a fancy dress, but all the girls had attempted it and had given them a great deal of pleasure; there were two Carmens and four Pierrettes. The prizegiving was not till about half past eleven, and when it was over I was shepherded into the hotel by Jim Maclaren for some refreshment as a reward for my labours.

Ted and Stevie were there, still drinking, still the firmest of friends, and Stevie was singing 'My Little Grey Home in the West' for the entertainment of the company, singing in a cracked voice as many of the words as he could remember, and beating time with one hand. I stood at the other end of the bar drinking the one beer with which I hoped to escape, and chatting

the men. Presently Stevie saw me and made towards me unsteadily, clutching the bar as he came to steady his course.

He came to a standstill before me. "You're Roger," he said.

"That's right," I replied. "And you're Stevie."

He held out his hand. "Put it there, cobber."

I shook hands with him, and again he held my hand. "He's the parson," he told the men. "His name's Roger."

I disengaged my hand. "That's right, Stevie," said Jim a little wearily. "He's the parson, and his name is Roger. Now you beat it."

The old man stood holding on to the bar, swaying a little, his head grotesque in the white bandage. It suddenly occurred to me that he was half asleep. "He's a good cobber, even if he is the parson," he said at last. "He's a good cobber."

"That's right," said Jim patiently. "He's a good cobber, and he's the parson. Now you bust off and leave him be. We've got business to talk here."

"He's in the wrong job," said Stevie. There was a long pause, and then he said, "He's a good cobber, but he's in the wrong job."

"Aw, cut it out, Stevie."

"He believes people go to Heaven when they die," said Stevie. "Harps and angels' wings." He turned to me. "That's right, cobber?"

"Pretty well," I said. And beside me Jack Picton said, "You're not going to Heaven when you die, Stevie, and if you don't stop annoying Mr. Hargreaves I'll dot you one and bust the other ear."

I put a hand upon Jack's arm. "He's right—he's doing no one any harm." To Stevie I said, "I don't know if you'll go to Heaven, but I do know that it's time you went to bed, with that ear. Where are you sleeping, Stevie?"

There was no answer. One of the men said, "He hasn't got a bed, Mr. Hargreaves. He just sleeps around, any place he fancies."

I turned to Mr. Roberts behind the bar. "Got a spare bed, Bill? He should sleep somewhere on a bed tonight, with that bandage."

"That's right," said the innkeeper. "There's a spare bed on the back verandah. He can sleep on that."

I turned to the men. "Let's take him up there."

Jim and Jack Picton grasped Stevie by each arm and marched him out into the back yard, followed them. They stopped there in the still moonlight for a certain purpose, and then they took him up the outside stairs to the back verandah and deposited him upon the vacant bed. "Now see here, Stevie," said Jim Maclaren. "The parson's got you this bed, and you've got to stay up here and sleep on it. If I see you downstairs again tonight I'll break your bloody neck."

"Let's take his boots off," I said.

We took his boots off and dropped them down beside the bed, and pushed him down on it.

Jim said, "Want a blanket, Stevie? You'd better have a blanket. Here, take this." He threw one over the old man. "Now just you stay there. Nobody's shouting you another drink tonight, and if you come downstairs again I'll break your neck. That's straight. I will."

"Harps and angels' wings," the old man muttered. "That's no way to talk."

Jim laughed shortly. "Come on down, Mr. Hargreaves. He's right now."

"I could tell you things," Stevie said from the semi-darkness of the bed. "I could tell you better 'n that, but you wouldn't believe me." There was a pause, and then he muttered, "Pisspot Stevie. Nobody believes what Pisspot Stevie says."

I said in a low tone to Jim Maclaren, "I'll stay up here till he goes off to sleep. He won't be long. I'll see you downstairs later." It was a subterfuge, of course. I wanted to avoid going back with Jim to the bar.

"All right, Mr. Hargreaves." He went clattering down the stairs with the other men laughing and talking, and their voices died away into the bar. It was very still on the verandah after they had gone. Half of the verandah was in brilliant, silvery moonlight, half in deep black shadow, hiding the beds. Under the deep blue sky a flying fox or two wheeled silently round the hotel in the light of the moon.

"I could tell you things," the old man muttered from the darkness. "You think I told you something when I said Black Joke, but that ain't nothing. I could tell you things."

"What could you tell me?" I asked quietly.

"Being born again," he muttered sleepily. "All you think about is harps and angels' wings, but Liang's a Buddhist, 'n he knows. Old Liang, he knows, all right. He tol' me all about it. He knows."

It was somewhat dangerous, but the night was quiet, and I wanted to explore the depths of this old man. "What does Liang know?" I asked.

"About another chance," he muttered. "About being born again, 'n always another chance of doing better next time. I know. I got the most beautiful dreams, 'n more and more the older that I get. Soon I'll be living next time more'n this time. That's a mystery, that is. There was a long, long pause; I thought that he had gone to sleep, but then he said again, "mystery. Liang says it's right, 'n no one ever dies. Just slide off into the next time, into the dream."

It wasn't very comprehensible, but one would hardly have expected it to be because Stevie was very drunk. I asked for curiosity, "What do you dream about?"

"You want a pipe for it," he said drowsily. "Lie down with a pipe, 'n the dreams come. All about Queens and Princes and that, and flying, and being in love. All across the world backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, all across the world, and carrying the Queen."

I stood by the verandah rail in silence, wondering at the jumble of words generated by the muddled, alcohol-poisoned brain. Flying, because this man long ago had been a pilot, though that seemed incredible now. Being in love—well, that lasts till the grave in some men. The Queens and Princes—figures on a pack of cards, perhaps. The pipe, and lying down—did that mean opium? It was at least a possibility for one who shared a home with an old Chinaman.

A phrase of Sister Finlay's came into my mind; had she been hinting at that?

I stood there silent: under the bright moon thinking about all these things till the steady rhythm of breathing from the darkness told me that Stevie was asleep. Then I went quietly down the wooden stairway to the yard and slipped away from the hotel, and went back to my vicarage to go to bed.

I did not see much more of Stevie after that. The race meeting was over, and most of the people left town early next morning to go back to their stations. Stevie hung around for a couple of days, moody and bad-tempered because he was out of money and there was nobody left in town to stand him a drink except a couple of engineers belonging to the Post Office and Reg McAuliffe selling life insurance to the residents. Finally Sister Finlay took the stitches out of Stevie's ear, started him off with a clean bandage, and dismissed him. Somebody going out to Dorset Downs gave him a lift in a truck, and that was the end of him. Everybody in the town was glad to see him go.

I started then to get acquainted with my parish. Miss Foster very kindly undertook to carry on the little daily hymn service for the school children, and I set out one day to go to Godstow to see what was to be done about St. Jude's. I travelled on the mail truck and stopped at every house and station on the way, of course—perhaps once every twenty miles or so. It was very hot and dusty and I wore a khaki shirt and shorts, but I had my case with me, of course, containing my cassock and surplice and the sacramental vessels, and I baptised three children on the first day, and held two Celebrations. The driver of the mail truck was most kind and waited for me while I held these services, although it meant that he would have to drive far on into the night to keep his schedule.

Sergeant Donovan was riding in the truck with us, because he had police business out in the same direction. We stayed at Beverley that first night with Mr. and Mrs. Maclaren. One or two matters that concerned Stevie were still running through my mind, and rather foolishly raised the question of opium at the tea table.

I said, "Old Stevie said one thing that night in the hotel, Jim, after you went down. He said he got beautiful dreams."

"I bet he does."

"I know. But he said he gets them when he's lying down with a pipe. Would you say he smokes opium? He lives with that Chinese."

Sergeant Donovan said a little tersely, "No reason to think that. He could smoke tobacco couldn't he?"

"I suppose so." Something in his tone pulled me up, and made me feel that there was more in this than I quite understood. I said no more, but later in the evening Jim Maclaren had a word with me privately. "About Stevie and that Chinaman, Liang Shih," he said. "I wouldn't talk about opium to Donovan unless you've got some reason."

"You think they smoke it?"

"Of course they do. Liang Shih smokes opium—what Chink doesn't? It doesn't do them any harm, no more than smoking tobacco. Liang grows the poppies in his garden out on Dorset Downs, along with all the other stuff. Donovan knows all about it."

I said, "But that's illegal. If Donovan knows all about it, why does he let it go on?"

He grinned. "Arthur likes fresh vegetables."

I was silent for a moment. "You mean, if Liang Shih was prosecuted he might go away?"

"Of course he would. He'd pack up and go and grow his lettuces and poppies somewhere else, and then there'd be nothing but tinned peas in Landsborough. Arthur reckons that it's more important that the town should get fresh vegetables than that he should go out of his way to persecute one old Chinaman for doing what he's done all his life and that doesn't hurt him anyway." He paused. "Only, if people get to talking about it too much, he'll have to do something or else lose his job."

Right is not wholly right nor wrong completely wrong in the Gulf Country. I said no more about the opium.

With that, I put Stevie out of my mind. I had more important things to think about because the dry season was already well advanced and I had determined that before the rains came in December and stopped travelling I would visit every family in my rather extensive parish, and hold a service upon every cattle station. That may not seem a very ambitious programme for five months because there are only a hundred and ten families all told, but it meant a great deal of travelling. I did not care to leave Landsborough for longer than a week. I was trying to get the people of the town into the habit of going to their parish church again, and I felt it to be very important that I should be there on Sundays if it were humanly possible. I had no transport of my own, so I had to depend on the mail truck or on lifts from casual vehicles travelling about the area, and these seldom fitted in with my desire to be back in Landsborough every Sunday.

I worked hard all through the dry that year, and I succeeded in getting to know most of my parishioners. I think they appreciated it, because as time went on I began to get messages more and more frequently asking that I should go back to some family to comfort some dying old woman, or to conduct a funeral service over a new, hastily dug grave, or to baptise a baby. These calls set back my schedule, of course, but I was able to attend to all of them and get to the place where I was needed within two or three days.

There was another race meeting at Landsborough in September, but I did not go to it. A clergyman can do little in a town that is enjoying a race meeting; his opportunity for service comes at quieter times. It seemed to me that I was better occupied in visiting in the more distant parts of the parish, and I did not bother to return to Landsborough until that Saturday. By then the meeting was over and most of the people had gone back to their stations, but half a dozen station owners and managers had stayed in the town with their wives to come to church on Sunday, and that was a great encouragement to me.

I asked Sister Finlay if she had had Stevie up at the hospital. "No, not this time," she said. "He was in town for the races, but Liang Shih came in with the vegetables on Friday, and I think he went back with him." She paused. "He wasn't looking at all well."

I smiled. "I'm not surprised at that."

"No ..." She thought for a minute. "I believe he's got something the matter with him," she said. "I was saying so to Templeton only the other night. He's got that sort of grey look about him." She paused. "Dr. Curtis was here with the flying ambulance and I asked him to have

look at Stevie if he got a chance, but they got a call to go to Forest Range on the second day to take an Abo stockman to the hospital at the Curry with broken ribs. I don't think he even saw Stevie."

"Is there another doctor coming here, at any time?"

"There's nothing fixed," she said. "I've got it in mind. But it's a bit difficult, with him living out there in the bush. I don't suppose he'd come in to see a doctor, and anyway the doctor would be gone before we could get a message to him, probably. It's only a fancy that I got when I saw him this time. It may have been just that he had a hangover that day."

I kept it in my mind that I should go out to the market garden upon Dorset Downs before the wet, to visit Liang Shih and Stevie in their home. But a visit such as that came low down on my list of priorities; I could not hope to do much for them spiritually, and their house was off the beaten track and difficult for me to get to without a truck of my own. I always meant to go to them before the wet, and I never went.

Those last few weeks were very exhausting. November is always a hot month in North Queensland, and that year it was particularly trying. I was hurrying against time, moreover to finish getting around my parish while travelling was still easy, and I took a good deal of myself. I knew that when the rains set in about Christmas time I should have plenty of time for rest in my vicarage, since it would be impossible to move very far from Landsborough till March or April. I drove myself hard in those last few weeks; I'm not a young man any longer, and I must confess that I got very tired indeed.

We got a few short rainstorms early in December and as usual these made conditions worse than ever, for they did little to relieve the heat and brought the humidity up very high. Every movement now made one sweat profusely, and once wet one's clothes stayed wet for a long time. I got prickly heat, which is a thing I seldom suffer from, and the continuous itching made it very difficult to sleep. Everyone began to suffer from nervous irritability and bad temper, and everyone looked anxiously each day for the rains that would bring this difficult season to an end.

The rains came at last, a few days before Christmas. For three days it rained practically without ceasing, heavily and continuously. The dusty roads gradually turned into mud wallows, and motor traffic ceased for the time being. Landsborough retired into winter quarters, so to speak. I lay on my bed for most of those three days revelling in the moderation of the heat and in the absence of sunshine, and reading the fourth volume of Winston Churchill's war memoirs which an old friend had sent me from Godalming.

The wet brought its own problems, of course. I had to go down to the hotel twice a day for my meals and it was still so hot that a raincoat was almost unbearable; if one walked down without a coat one got as wet from sweat as if one went without one. If the rain was light I went without a coat, because wet clothes are no great hardship in the tropics. The difficulty, of course, lay in getting any dry clothes to put on; my vicarage has no fireplace and there was now no sunshine to dry anything. Mrs. Roberts was very kind and let me dry some of my washing by her kitchen fire, but the difficulty was a real one, and I often had to wear wet clothes all day and sleep in a wet bed.

Christmas came and went. We had a carol service in the church with *Good King Wenceslas*

and *See amid the Winter Snow*, and Miss Foster had to spend some time and energy explaining to the children what snow was, a task made more difficult by the fact that she had never seen it herself. We had a children's party in the Shire Hall with a Christmas tree with imitation snow on it, and I dressed up as Santa Claus and gave the presents away. The aeroplane from Cloncurry brought us the cinema operator with his projector, three dramas and *Snow White*, which none of the children had ever seen, so altogether we had quite merry time.

After these excitements things went rather flat in Landsborough, and the rain fell steadily. In these conditions and although I had been taking my pills, I fell ill with an attack of malaria. It was nothing like so bad as the first bout that I had had in Salamaua, and I knew what to do about it now. I lay in bed sweating and a little delirious for a day, dosing myself. Mrs. Roberts was very kind and brought some things up to my vicarage and either she or Coty looked in every two hours to make me a cup of tea. On the second day Sister Finlay heard that I was ill and came to see what was the matter, and gave me a good dressing down and wrapped me up in blankets and took me to the hospital in Art Duncan's utility, which was bogged a hundred yards from the hospital, so that I had to get out and walk the rest of the way. Finlay and Templeton put me to bed in more comfortable surroundings than I had been in for some time, and I stayed in hospital for the next week.

The fever spent its force after the first few days, as I had known it would, and they let me get up for dinner and sit in a dressing gown to write my parish magazine, going to bed again before tea. My temperature was generally normal at that time though it rose a point or so each evening, but that was nothing to worry about. I was sitting writing in their sitting room on the afternoon of January the 8th; I remember the date particularly because it was two days after Epiphany. I had not been able to preach in church the previous day, the first Sunday after Epiphany, and so I was writing what I wanted to tell my parishioners in the magazine. January the 8th it was, and I was sitting writing in the middle of the afternoon when I heard the sound of a horse and wheels. I got up and went to the verandah, and I saw Liang Shih draw up before the hospital in the vegetable cart.

I was surprised to see him, because we had had no fresh vegetables since Christmas and we all thought that we should see no more until the rains were over and the roads improved. Sister Finlay and Templeton were lying down; I went and called them, and then went back to the verandah. It was raining a little; Liang was getting down from his two wheeled vehicle and tying the reins to the fence. He had an old Army waterproof sheet tied with a bit of string around his shoulders to serve as a cape; under that he was in his working shirt and dirty, soaked trousers; he wore a battered old felt hat upon his head to shed the rain.

I said, "Come in out of the wet, Liang. Nice to see you."

He came on to the verandah. "Sister, she here?" he asked.

"She's just coming," I replied. "We didn't expect to see you for a bit. What have you got for us?"

"I no got vegetables," he said. "Garden all under the water. I come see Sister. Stevie, he got sick in stomach."

"Sick in the stomach, is he?" I asked. "What sort of sickness, Liang?"

He put his hand upon his lower abdomen. “He got pain here, big pain. He been sick three days.”

“Is he very bad, Liang?”

He nodded. “Very bad now. I want Sister come see him, or perhaps he die.”

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