

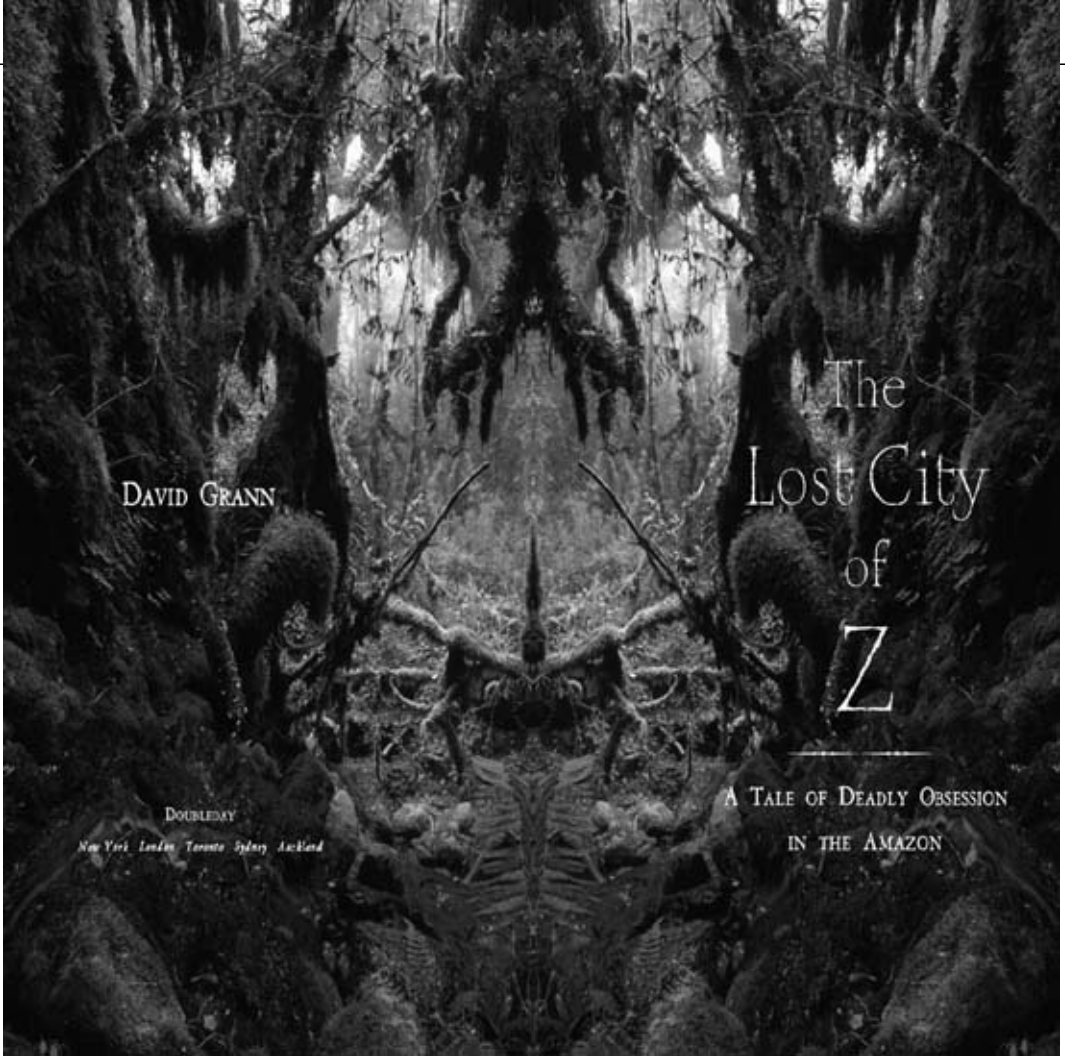
# THE LOST CITY OF Z

*A Tale of Deadly Obsession  
in the Amazon*

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Doubleday



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The  
Lost City  
of  
Z

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A TALE OF DEADLY OBSESSION  
IN THE AMAZON



At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city ... If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed,

***you must not believe the search for it can stop.***

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Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

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I pulled the map from my back pocket. It was wet and crumpled, the lines I had traced to highlight my route now faded. I stared at my markings, hoping that they might lead me out of the Amazon, rather than deeper into it.

The letter Z was still visible in the center of the map. Yet it seemed less like a signpost than like a taunt, another testament to my folly.

I had always considered myself a disinterested reporter who did not get involved personally in his stories. While others often seemed to succumb to their mad dreams and obsessions, I tried to be the invisible witness. And I had convinced myself that that was why I had traveled more than ten thousand miles, from New York to London to the Xingu River, one of the longest tributaries of the Amazon, why I had spent months poring over hundreds of pages of Victorian diaries and letters, and why I had left behind my wife and one-year-old son and taken out an extra insurance policy on my life.

I told myself that I had come simply to record how generations of scientists and adventurers became fatally obsessed with solving what has often been described as “the greatest exploration mystery of the twentieth century”—the whereabouts of the lost City of Z. The ancient city, with its network of roads and bridges and temples, was believed to be hidden in the Amazon, the largest jungle in the world. In an age of airplanes and satellites, the area remains one of the last blank spaces on the map. For hundreds of years, it has haunted geographers, archaeologists, empire builders, treasure hunters, and philosophers. When Europeans first arrived in South America, around the turn of the sixteenth century, they were convinced that the jungle contained the glittering kingdom of El Dorado. Thousands died looking for it. In more recent times, many scientists have concluded that no complex civilization could have emerged in so hostile an environment, where the soil is agriculturally poor, mosquitoes carry lethal diseases, and predators lurk in the forest canopy.

The region has generally been regarded as a primeval wilderness, a place in which there are, as Thomas Hobbes described the state of nature, “no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death.” The Amazon's merciless conditions have fueled one of the most enduring theories of human development: environmental determinism. According to this theory, even if some early humans eked out an existence in the harshest conditions on the planet, they rarely advanced beyond a few primitive tribes. Society, in other words, is a captive of geography. And so if Z was found in such a seemingly uninhabitable environment it would be more than a repository of golden treasure, more than an intellectual curiosity; it would, as one newspaper declared in 1925, “write a new chapter of human history.”

For nearly a century, explorers have sacrificed everything, even their lives, to find the City of Z. The search for the civilization, and for the countless men who vanished while looking for it, has eclipsed the Victorian quest novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and H. Rider Haggard—both of whom, as it happens, were drawn into the real-life hunt for Z. At times, I had to remind myself that everything in this story is true: a movie star really was abducted by Indians; there were cannibals, ruins, secret maps, and spies; explorers died from starvation, disease, attacks by wild animals, and poisonous arrows; and at stake amid the adventure and death was the very understanding of the Americas before Christopher Columbus came ashore in the New World.

Now, as I examined my creased map, none of that mattered. I looked up at the tangle of trees and creepers around

me, and at the biting flies and mosquitoes that left streaks of blood on my skin. I had lost my guide. I was out of food and water. Putting the map back in my pocket, I pressed forward, trying to find my way out, as branches snapped in my face. Then I saw something moving in the trees. "Who's there?" I called. There was no reply. A figure flitted among the branches, and then another. They were coming closer, and for the first time I asked myself, *What the hell am I doing here?*



On a cold January day in 1925, a tall, distinguished gentleman hurried across the dock in Hoboken, New Jersey, toward the SS *Vauban*, a five-hundred-and-eleven-foot ocean liner bound for Rio de Janeiro. He was fifty-seven years old and stood over six feet tall, his long arms corded with muscles. Although his hair was thinning and his mustache was flecked with white, he was so fit that he could walk for days with little, if any, rest or nourishment. His nose was crooked like a boxer's, and there was something ferocious about his appearance, especially his eyes. They were set close together and peered out from under thick tufts of hair. No one, not even his family, seemed to agree on their color—some thought they were blue, others gray. Yet virtually everyone who encountered him was struck by their intensity: some called them “the eyes of a visionary.” He had frequently been photographed in riding boots and wearing a Stetson, with a rifle slung over his shoulder, but even in a suit and a tie, and without his customary wild beard, he could be recognized by the crowds on the pier. He was Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett, and his name was known throughout the world.

He was the last of the great Victorian explorers who ventured into uncharted realms with little more than a machete, a compass, and an almost divine sense of purpose. For nearly two decades, stories of his adventures had captivated the public's imagination: how he had survived in the South American wilderness without contact with the outside world; how he was ambushed by hostile tribesmen, many of whom had never before seen a white man; how he battled piranhas, electric eels, jaguars, crocodiles, vampire bats, and anacondas, including one that almost crushed him; and how he emerged with maps of regions from which no previous expedition had returned. He was renowned as the “David Livingstone of the Amazon,” and was believed to have such unrivaled powers of endurance that a few colleagues even claimed he was immune to death. An American explorer described him as “a man of indomitable will, infinite resource, fearless;” another said that he could “outwalk and outthieve and outexplore anybody else.” The London *Geographical Journal*, the preeminent publication in its field, observed in 1953 that “Fawcett marked the end of an age. One might almost call him the last of the individualist explorers. The day of the aeroplane, the radio, the organized and heavily financed modern expedition had not arrived. With him, it was the heroic story of a man against the forest.”

In 1916, the Royal Geographical Society had awarded him, with the blessing of King George V, a gold medal “for his contributions to the mapping of South America.” And even a few years later, when he emerged from the jungle, spidery thin and bedraggled, dozens of scientists and luminaries would pack into the Society's hall to hear him speak. Among them was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was said to have drawn on Fawcett's experiences for his

1912 book *The Lost World*, in which explorers “disappear into the unknown” of South America and find, on a remote plateau, a land where dinosaurs have escaped extinction.

As Fawcett made his way to the gangplank that day in January, he eerily resembled one of the book’s protagonists, Lord John Roxton:

Something there was of Napoleon III, something of Don Quixote, and yet again something which was the essence of the English country gentleman . . . He has a gentle voice and a quiet manner, but behind his twinkling blue eyes there lurks a capacity for furious wrath and implacable resolution, the more dangerous because they are held in leash.

None of Fawcett’s previous expeditions compared with what he was about to do, and he could barely conceal his impatience as he fell into line with the other passengers boarding the SS *Vauban*. The ship, advertised as “the finest in the world,” was part of the Lamport & Holt elite “V” class. The Germans had sunk several of the company’s ocean liners during World War I, but this one had survived, with its black, salt-streaked hull and elegant white deck and striped funnel billowing smoke into the sky. Model T Fords shepherded passengers to the dock, where longshoremen helped cart luggage into the ship’s hold. Many of the male passengers wore silk ties and bowler hats; women had on fur coats and feathered caps, as if they were attending a society event, which, in some ways, they were—the passenger lists of luxury ocean liners were chronicled in gossip columns and scoured by young girls searching for eligible bachelors.

Fawcett pushed forward with his gear. His trunks were loaded with guns, canned food, powdered milk, flares, and handcrafted machetes. He also carried a kit of surveying instruments: a sextant and a chronometer for determining latitude and longitude, an aneroid for measuring atmospheric pressure, and a glycerin compass that could fit in his pocket. Fawcett had chosen each item based on years of experience; even the clothes he had packed were made of lightweight, tear-proof gabardine. He had seen men die from the most innocuous-seeming oversight—a torn net, a boot that was too tight.

Fawcett was setting out into the Amazon, a wilderness nearly the size of the continental United States, to make what he called “the great discovery of the century”—a lost civilization. By then, most of the world had been explored, its veil of enchantment lifted, but the Amazon remained as mysterious as the dark side of the moon. As Sir John Scott Keltie, the former secretary of the Royal Geographical Society and one of the world’s most acclaimed geographers at the time, noted, “What is there no one knows.”

Ever since Francisco de Orellana and his army of Spanish conquistadores descended the Amazon River, in 1542, perhaps no place on the planet had so ignited the imagination—cured men to their deaths. Gaspar de Carvajal, a Dominican friar who accompanied Orellana, described woman warriors in the jungle who resembled the mythical Greek Amazons. Half a century later, Sir Walter Raleigh spoke of Indians with “their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in the middle of their breasts”—a legend that Shakespeare wove into *Othello*:

And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

What was true about the region—serpents as long as trees, rodents the size of pigs—was sufficiently beyond belief that no embellishment seemed too fanciful. And the most entrancing vision of all was of El Dorado. Raleigh claimed that the kingdom, which the conquistadores had heard about from Indians, was so plentiful in gold that its inhabitants ground the metal into powder and blew it “thorow hollow canes upon their naked bodies untill they be all shining from the foote to the head.”

Yet each expedition that had tried to find El Dorado ended in disaster. Carvajal, whose party had been searching for the kingdom, wrote in his diary, “We reached a [state of] privation so great that we were eating nothing but leather, belts and soles of shoes, cooked with certain herbs, with the result that so great was our weakness that we could not remain standing.” Some four thousand men died during that expedition alone, of starvation and disease and at the hands of Indians defending their territory with arrows dipped in poison. Other El Dorado parties resorted to cannibalism. Many explorers went mad. In 1561, Lope de Aguirre led his men on a murderous rampage, screaming, “Does God think that, because it is raining, I am not going to . . . destroy the world?” Aguirre even stabbed his own child, whispering, “Commend thyself to God, my daughter, for I am about to kill thee.” Before the Spanish crown sent forces to stop him, Aguirre warned in a letter, “I swear to you, King, on my word as a Christian, that if a hundred thousand men came, none would escape. For the reports are false: there is nothing on that river but despair.” Aguirre’s companions finally rose up and killed him; his body was quartered, and Spanish authorities displayed the head of the “Wrath of God” in a metal cage. Still, for three centuries, expeditions continued to search until, after a toll of death and suffering worthy of Joseph Conrad, most archaeologists have concluded that El Dorado was no more than an illusion.

Fawcett, however, was certain that the Amazon contained a fabulous kingdom, and he was not another soldier of fortune or a crackpot. A man of science, he had spent years gathering evidence to prove his case—digging up artifacts, studying petroglyphs, and interviewing tribes. And after fierce battles with skeptics Fawcett had received funding from the most respected scientific institutions, including the Royal Geographical Society, the American Geographical Society, and the Museum of the American Indian. Newspapers were proclaiming that he would soon startle the world. The *Atlanta Constitution* declared, “It is perhaps the most hazardous and certainly the most spectacular adventure of the kind ever undertaken by a reputable scientist with the backing of conservative scientific bodies.”

Fawcett had determined that an ancient, highly cultured people still existed in the Brazilian Amazon and that their civilization was so old and sophisticated it would forever alter the Western view of the Americas. He had christened this lost world the City of Z. “The central place I call ‘Z’—our main objective—is in a valley . . . about ten miles wide, and the city on an eminence in the middle of it, approached by a barreled roadway of stone,” Fawcett had stated earlier. “The houses are low and windowless, and there is a pyramidal temple.”

Reporters on the dock in Hoboken, across the Hudson River from Manhattan, shouted questions, hoping to learn the location of Z. In the wake of the technological horrors of World War I, and amid the spread of urbanization and industrialization, few events so captivated the public. One newspaper exulted, “Not since the days when Ponce de León crossed unknown Florida in search of the Waters of Perpetual Youth . . . has a more alluring

adventure been planned.”

Fawcett welcomed “the fuss,” as he described it in a letter to a friend, but he was careful about how he responded. He knew that his main rival, Alexander Hamilton Rice, multimillionaire American doctor who commanded vast resources, was already entering the jungle with an unprecedented array of equipment. The prospect of Dr. Rice finding Z terrified Fawcett. Several years earlier, Fawcett had watched as a colleague from the Royal Geographical Society, Robert Falcon Scott, had set out to become the first explorer to reach the South Pole, only to discover when he got there, and shortly before he froze to death, that his Norwegian rival, Roald Amundsen, had beaten him by thirty-three days. In a recent letter to the Royal Geographical Society, Fawcett wrote, “I cannot say all I know, or even be as precise as to locality, for these things leak out, and there can be nothing so bitter to the pioneer as to find the crown of his work anticipated.”

He was also afraid that if he released details of his route, and others attempted to find Z or rescue him, it would result in countless deaths. An expedition of fourteen hundred armed men had previously vanished in the same region. A news bulletin telegraphed around the globe declared, “Fawcett Expedition . . . to Penetrate Land Whence None Returned.” And Fawcett, who was determined to reach the most inaccessible areas, did not intend, like other explorers, to go by boat; rather, he planned to hack straight through the jungle on foot. The Royal Geographical Society had warned that Fawcett “is about the only living geographer who could successfully attempt” such an expedition and that “it would be hopeless for any people to follow in his footsteps.” Before he left England, Fawcett confided to his young son, Brian, “If with all my experience we can’t make it, there’s not much hope for others.”

As reporters clamored around him, Fawcett explained that only a small expedition would have any chance of survival. It would be able to live off the land, and not pose a threat to hostile Indians. The expedition, he had stated, “will be no pampered exploration party, with an army of bearers, guides and cargo animals. Such top-heavy expeditions get nowhere; they linger on the fringe of civilization and bask in publicity. Where the real wilds start, bearers are not to be had anyway, for fear of the savages. Animals cannot be taken because of lack of pasture and the attack of insects and bats. There are no guides, for no one knows the country. It is a matter of cutting equipment to the absolute minimum, carrying it all oneself, and trusting that one will be able to exist by making friends with the various tribes one meets. He now added, “We will have to suffer every form of exposure . . . We will have to achieve nervous and mental resistance, as well as physical, as men under these conditions are often broken by their minds succumbing before their bodies.”

Fawcett had chosen only two people to go with him: his twenty-one-year-old son, Jack, and Jack’s best friend, Raleigh Rimell. Although they had never been on an expedition, Fawcett believed that they were ideal for the mission: tough, loyal, and, because they were so close, unlikely, after months of isolation and suffering, “to harass and persecute each other”—or, as was common on such expeditions, to mutiny. Jack was, as his brother, Brian, put it, “the reflection of his father”: tall, frighteningly fit, and ascetic. Neither he nor his father smoked cigarettes or drank. Brian noted that Jack’s “six feet three inches were sheer bone and muscle, and the three chief agents of bodily degeneration—alcohol, tobacco and loose living—were revolting to him.” Colonel Fawcett, who followed a strict Victorian code, put

slightly differently: “He is. . . absolutely virgin in mind and body.” Jack, who had wanted to accompany his father on an expedition since he was a boy, had spent years preparing—lifting weights, maintaining a rigid diet, studying Portuguese, and learning how to navigate by the stars. Still, he had suffered little real deprivation, and his face, with its luminescent skin, crisp mustache, and slick brown hair, betrayed none of the hardness of his father’s. With his stylish clothes, he looked more like a movie star, which is what he hoped to become upon his triumphant return.

Raleigh, though smaller than Jack, was still nearly six feet tall and muscular. (A “fine physique,” Fawcett told the RGS.) His father had been a surgeon in the Royal Navy and had died of cancer in 1917, when Raleigh was fifteen. Dark haired, with a pronounced widow’s peak and a riverboat gambler’s mustache, Raleigh had a jocular, mischievous nature. “He was a born clown,” said Brian Fawcett, the “perfect counterpart of the serious Jack.” The two boys had been virtually inseparable since they roamed the countryside around Seaton Devonshire, where they grew up, riding bicycles and shooting rifles in the air. In a letter to one of Fawcett’s confidants, Jack wrote, “Now we have Raleigh Rimell on board who is even a bit as keen as I am . . . He is the only intimate friend I have ever had. I knew him before he was seven years old and we have been more or less together ever since. He is absolutely honest and decent in every sense of the word and we know each other inside out.”

As Jack and Raleigh now excitedly stepped on board the ship, they encountered dozens of stewards, in starched white uniforms, rushing through the corridors with telegrams and voyage fruit baskets. A steward, carefully avoiding the aft quarters, where passengers in steerage rode, guided the explorers to the first-class cabins, in the center of the ship, far from the rattling of the propellers. The conditions bore little resemblance to those that had prevailed when Fawcett made his first South American voyage, two decades earlier, or when Charles Dickens, crossing the Atlantic in 1842, described his cabin as an “utterly impracticable, thoroughly hopeless and profoundly preposterous box.” (The dining room, Dickens added, resembled a “hearse with windows.”) Now everything was designed to accommodate the new breed of tourists—“mere travelers,” as Fawcett dismissed them, who had little notion of the “places which today exact a degree of endurance and a toll of life with the physique necessary to face dangers.” The first-class quarters had beds and running water; portholes allowed in sunlight and fresh air, and electric fans circulated overhead. The ship’s brochure touted the *Vaubarts* “perfect ventilation secured by modern appliances which helped to “counteract the impression that a voyage to and through the tropics necessarily attended with discomfort.”

Fawcett, like many other Victorian explorers, was a professional dabbler who, in addition to being a self-styled geographer and archaeologist, was a talented artist (his ink drawings had been displayed at the Royal Academy) and shipbuilder (he had patented the “ichthyo-curve,” which added knots to a vessel’s speed). Despite his interest in the sea, he wrote to his wife, Nina, who was his staunchest supporter and served as his spokesperson whenever he was away, that he found the *SS Vauban* and the voyage “rather tiresome”: all he wanted was to be in the jungle.

Jack and Raleigh, meanwhile, were eager to explore the ship’s luxurious interior. Around one corner was a lounge with vaulted ceilings and marble columns. Around another was

dining room with white-linened tables and with waiters, in black tie, who served roasted rack of lamb and wine from decanters as an orchestra played. The ship even had a gymnasium where the young men could train for their mission.

Jack and Raleigh were no longer two anonymous kids: they were, as the newspapers hailed them, “brave,” “ramrod Englishmen,” each of whom resembled Sir Lancelot. They met dignitaries, who wanted them to sit at their tables, and women smoking long cigarettes who offered what Colonel Fawcett called “looks of unblushing boldness.” By all accounts, Jack was uncertain how to act around women: to him, it seemed, they were as mysterious and as remote as Z. But Raleigh was soon flirting with a girl, surely boasting of his upcoming adventures.

Fawcett knew that for Jack and Raleigh the expedition was still no more than a feat of imagination. In New York, the young men had relished the constant fanfare: the nights in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where, on their final evening, dignitaries and scientists from around the city had gathered in the Gold Room to throw them a “Godspeed” party; the toasts at the Camp Fire Club and at the National Arts Club; the stopover at Ellis Island (an immigration official had noted that no one in the party was an “atheist,” a “polygamist,” an “anarchist,” or “deformed”); and the motion-picture palaces, which Jack had haunted day and night.

Whereas Fawcett had built up his stamina over years of exploration, Jack and Raleigh would have to do it all at once. But Fawcett had no doubt they would succeed. In his journals, he wrote that “Jack has the makings of the right sort,” and predicted, “He is young enough to adapt himself to anything, and a few months on the trail will toughen him sufficiently. If he takes after me, he will not contract the various ills and diseases . . . and in an emergency I think his courage will stand.” Fawcett expressed the same confidence in Raleigh, who looked up to Jack almost as intensely as Jack did to his father. “Raleigh will follow him anywhere,” he observed.

The ship’s crew began to yell, “All ashore that’s going ashore.” The captain’s whistle reverberated across the port, and the boat creaked and heaved as it receded from the dock. Fawcett could see the skyline of Manhattan, with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower, once the tallest on the planet, and the Woolworth Building, which had now surpassed it—the metropolis blazing with lights, as if someone had gathered up all the stars. With Jack and Raleigh at his side, Fawcett shouted to the reporters on the pier, “We shall return, and we shall bring back what we seek!”

How easily the Amazon can deceive.

It begins as barely a rivulet, this, the mightiest river in the world, mightier than the Nile and the Ganges, mightier than the Mississippi and all the rivers in China. Over eighteen thousand feet high in the Andes, amid snow and clouds, it emerges through a rocky seam—a trickle of crystal water. Here it is indistinguishable from so many other streams coursing through the Andes, some cascading down the western face toward the Pacific, sixty miles away, others, like this one, rolling down the eastern facade on a seemingly impossible journey toward the Atlantic Ocean—a distance farther than New York City to Paris. At this altitude, the air is too cold for jungle or many predators. And yet it is in this place that the Amazon is born, nourished by melting snows and rain, and pulled by gravity over cliffs.

From its source, the river descends sharply. As it gathers speed, it is joined by hundreds of other rivulets, most of them so small they remain nameless. Seven thousand feet down, the water enters a valley with the first glimmers of green. Soon larger streams converge upon it. Churning toward the plains below, the river has three thousand more miles to go to reach the ocean. It is unstoppable. So, too, is the jungle, which, owing to equatorial heat and heavy rainfalls, gradually engulfs the riverbanks. Spreading toward the horizon, this wilderness contains the greatest variety of species in the world. And, for the first time, the river becomes recognizable—it is the Amazon.

Still, the river is not what it seems. Curling eastward, it enters an enormous region shaped like a shallow bowl, and because the Amazon rests at the bottom of this basin, nearly 40 percent of the waters from South America—from rivers as far as Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador—drain into it. And so the Amazon becomes even mightier. Three hundred feet deep in places, it no longer needs to rush, conquering at its own pace. It meanders past the Rio Negro and the Rio Madeira; past the Tapajós and the Xingu, two of the biggest southern tributaries; past Marajó, an island larger than Switzerland, until finally, after traversing four thousand miles and collecting water from a thousand tributaries, the Amazon reaches its two-hundred-mile-wide mouth and gushes into the Atlantic Ocean. What began as a trickle now expels fifty-seven million gallons of water every second—a discharge sixty times that of the Nile. The Amazon's fresh waters push so far out to sea that, in 1500, Vicente Pinzón, a Spanish commander who had earlier accompanied Columbus, discovered the river while sailing miles off the coast of Brazil. He called it Mar Dulce, or Sweet Sea.

It is difficult to explore this region under any circumstances, but in November the onset of the rainy season renders it virtually impassable. Waves—including the fifteen-mile-an-hour monthly tidal bore known as *pororoca*, or “big roar”—crash against the shore. At Belém, the Amazon frequently rises twelve feet; at Iquitos, twenty feet; at Óbidos, thirty-five feet. The Madeira, the Amazon's longest tributary, can swell even more, rising over sixty-five feet

After months of inundation, many of these and other rivers explode over their banks cascading through the forest, uprooting plants and rocks, and transforming the southern basin almost into an inland sea, which it was millions of years ago. Then the sun comes out and scorches the region. The ground cracks as if from an earthquake. Swamps evaporate, leaving piranhas stranded in desiccated pools, eating one another's flesh. Bogs turn into meadows and islands become hills.

This is how the dry season has arrived in the southern basin of the Amazon for as long as almost anyone can remember. And so it was in June of 1996, when an expedition of Brazilian scientists and adventurers headed into the jungle. They were searching for signs of Colonel Percy Fawcett, who had vanished, along with his son Jack and Raleigh Rimell, more than seventy years earlier.

The expedition was led by a forty-two-year-old Brazilian banker named James Lynch. After a reporter mentioned to him the story of Fawcett, he had read everything he could on the subject. He learned that the colonel's disappearance in 1925 had shocked the world—"among the most celebrated vanishing acts of modern times," as one observer called it. For five months, Fawcett had sent dispatches, which were carried through the jungle, crumpled and stained, by Indian runners and, in what seemed like a feat of magic, tapped out on telegraph machines and printed on virtually every continent; in an early example of the all-consuming modern news story, Africans, Asians, Europeans, Australians, and Americans were riveted by the same distant event. The expedition, one newspaper wrote, "captured the imagination of every child who ever dreamed of undiscovered lands."

Then the dispatches ceased. Lynch read how Fawcett had warned that he might be out of contact for months, but a year passed, then two, and the public fascination grew. Were Fawcett and the two young men being held hostage by Indians? Had they starved to death? Were they too entranced by Z to return? Debates raged in salons and speakeasies; cables were exchanged at the highest levels of governments. Radio plays, novels (Evelyn Waugh's *Handful of Dust* is believed to have been influenced by Fawcett's saga), poems, documentaries, movies, stamps, children's stories, comic books, ballads, stage plays, graphic novels, and museum exhibits were devoted to the affair. In 1933 a travel writer exclaimed, "Enough legend has grown up round the subject to form a new and separate branch of folklore." Fawcett had earned his place in the annals of exploration not for what he revealed about the world but for what he concealed. He had vowed to make "the great discovery of the century"—instead, he had given birth to "the greatest exploration mystery of the twentieth century."

Lynch also learned, to his amazement, that scores of scientists, explorers, and adventurers had plunged into the wilderness, determined to recover the Fawcett party, alive or dead, and to return with proof of Z. In February 1955, the *New York Times* claimed that Fawcett's disappearance had set off more searches "than those launched through the centuries to find the fabulous El Dorado." Some parties were wiped out by starvation and disease, or retreated in despair; others were murdered by tribesmen. Then there were those adventurers who had gone to find Fawcett and, instead, disappeared along with him in the forests that travelers had long ago christened the "green hell." Because so many seekers went without fanfare, there are no reliable statistics on the numbers who died. One recent estimate, however, p



the total as high as a hundred.

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Lynch seemed resistant to flights of fancy. A tall, slender man, with blue eyes and pale skin that burned in the sun, he worked at Chase Bank in São Paulo. He was married with two children. But, when he was thirty, he had become restless and began to disappear for days into the Amazon, trekking through the jungle. He soon entered several grueling adventure contests: once, he hiked for seventy-two hours without sleep and traversed a canyon by shimmying across a rope. “The idea is to drain yourself physically and mentally and see how you respond under such circumstances,” Lynch said, adding, “Some people would break, but I always found it slightly exhilarating.”

Lynch was more than an adventurer. Drawn to quests that were intellectual as well as physical, he hoped to illuminate some little-known aspect of the world, and he often spent months in the library researching a topic. He had, for instance, ventured to the source of the Amazon and had found a colony of Mennonites living in the Bolivian desert. But he had never encountered a case like that of Colonel Fawcett.

Not only had previous search parties failed to discover the party’s fate—each disappearance becoming a conundrum unto itself—but no one had unraveled what Lynch considered the biggest enigma of all: Z. Indeed, Lynch found out that unlike other lost explorers—such as Amelia Earhart, who disappeared in 1937 while trying to fly around the globe—Fawcett had made it all but impossible to trace him. He had kept his route so secret that even his wife, Nina, confessed that he had concealed crucial details from her. Lynch dug up old newspaper accounts, but they provided few tangible clues. Then he found a dog-eared copy of *Explorations of Fawcett*, a collection of some of the explorer’s writings edited by his surviving son, Brian, and published in 1953. (Ernest Hemingway had kept a copy of the book on his shelf.) The book appeared to contain one of the few hints of the colonel’s final course, quoting Fawcett as saying, “Our route will be from Dead Horse Camp, 11°43’ south and 54°35’ west, where my horse died in 1921.” Although the coordinates were only a starting point, Lynch plugged them into his Global Positioning System. It pinpointed a spot in the southern basin of the Amazon in Mato Grosso—its name means “thick forest”—a Brazilian state bigger than France and Great Britain combined. To reach Dead Horse Camp would require traversing some of the Amazon’s most intractable jungle; it would also entail entering lands controlled by indigenous tribes, which had secluded themselves in the dense forest and fiercely guarded their territory.

The challenge seemed insurmountable. But, as Lynch pored over financial spreadsheets for work, he wondered: What if there really is a Z? What if the jungle had concealed such a place? Even today, the Brazilian government estimates that there are more than sixty Indian tribes that have never been contacted by outsiders. “These forests are . . . almost the only place on earth where indigenous people can survive in isolation from the rest of mankind,” John Hemming, the distinguished historian of Brazilian Indians and a former director of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote. Sydney Possuelo, who was in charge of the Brazilian department set up to protect Indian tribes, has said of these groups, “No one knows for sure who they are, where they are, how many they are, and what languages they speak.” In 2000, members of a nomadic tribe called Nukak-Makú emerged from the Amazon in Colombia and announced that they were ready to join the modern world, though they were unaware that Colombia was a country and asked if the planes overhead were on an invisible road.

One night Lynch, unable to sleep, went into his study, which was cluttered with maps and relics from his previous expeditions. Amid his papers on Fawcett, he came across the colonel's warning to his son: "If with all my experience we can't make it, there's not much hope for others." Rather than deter Lynch, the words only compelled him. "I have to go," he told his wife.

He soon secured a partner, Rene Delmotte, a Brazilian engineer whom he had met during an adventure competition. For months, the two men studied satellite images of the Amazon, honing their trajectory. Lynch obtained the best equipment: turbocharged jeeps with puncture-resistant tires, walkie-talkies, shortwave radios, and generators. Like Fawcett, Lynch had experience designing boats, and with a shipbuilder he constructed two twenty-five-foot aluminum vessels that would be shallow enough to pass through swamps. He also put together a medical kit that contained dozens of antidotes for snake poisons.

He chose his party with equal care. He recruited two mechanics, who could repair all the equipment, and two veteran off-road drivers. He also enlisted Dr. Daniel Muñoz, an acclaimed forensic anthropologist who, in 1985, had helped to identify the remains of Josef Mengele, the Nazi fugitive, and who could help confirm the origins of any object they might find from Fawcett's party: a belt buckle, a bone fragment, a bullet.

Although Fawcett had warned that large expeditions have "only one and all come to grief," the party soon grew to include sixteen men. Still, there was one more person who wanted to go: Lynch's sixteen-year-old son, James, Jr. Athletic and more muscular than his father, with bushy brown hair and large brown eyes, he had gone on a previous expedition and acquitted himself well. And so Lynch agreed, like Fawcett, to take his son with him.

The team assembled in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, along the southern edge of the Amazon basin. Lynch handed out T-shirts that he had made up with a picture of footprints leading into the jungle. In England, the *Daily Mail* published a story about the expedition under the headline "Are We About to Solve the Enduring Mystery of Colonel Percy Fawcett?" For days, the group drove through the Amazon basin, traversing unpaved roads scarred with ruts and brambles. The forest grew thicker, and James, Jr., pressed his face against the window. Wiping steam from the glass, he could see the leafy crowns of trees unfurling overhead, before breaking apart, as shafts of sunlight poured into the forest, the yellow wings of butterflies and macaws suddenly visible. Once, he spotted a six-foot snake, half-burrowed in mud, with a deep depression between its eyes. "*Jararaca*" his father said. It was a pit viper, one of the most venomous snakes in the Americas. (A *jararaca* bite will cause a person to bleed from the eyes and become, as a biologist put it, "a corpse piece by piece.") Lynch swerved around the snake, while the roar of the engine sent other animals, including howler monkeys, scattering into the treetops; only the mosquitoes seemed to remain, hovering over the vehicles like sentries.

After stopping several times to camp, the expedition followed the trail to a clearing along the Xingu River, where Lynch tried to get a reading on his GPS.

"What is it?" one of his colleagues asked.

Lynch stared at the coordinates on the screen. "We're not far from where Fawcett was last seen," he said.

A net of vines and lianas covered the trails extending from the clearing, and Lynch decided that the expedition would have to proceed by boat. He instructed several members to turn back with some of the heaviest gear; once he found a place where a bush plane could land, he would radio in the coordinates, so that the equipment could be delivered by air.

The remaining team members, including James, Jr., slipped the two boats into the water and began their journey down the Xingu. The currents carried them quickly, past spiny ferns and *buriti* palms, creepers and myrtles—an endless mesh that rose on either side of them. Shortly before sunset, Lynch was going around another bend, when he thought he spotted something on the distant bank. He lifted the brim of his hat. In a break amid the branches, he could see several pairs of eyes staring at him. He told his men to cut the engines; no one made a sound. As the boats drifted onto the shore, scraping against the sand, Lynch and his men leaped out. At the same time, Indians—naked, their ears pierced with dazzling macaw feathers—emerged from the forest. Eventually, a powerfully built man, his eyes encircled with black paint, stepped forward. According to some of the Indians who spoke broken Portuguese and served as translators, he was the chief of the Kuikuro tribe. Lynch told his men to get out their gifts, which included beads, candy, and matches. The chief seemed welcoming, and he granted the expedition permission to camp by the Kuikuro village and to land a propeller plane in a nearby clearing.

That night, as James, Jr., tried to sleep, he wondered if Jack Fawcett had lain in a similar spot and seen such wondrous things. The sun woke him the next morning at dawn, and he poked his head in his father's tent. "Happy birthday, Dad," he said. Lynch had forgotten that it was his birthday. He was forty-two years old.

Several Kuikuros invited Lynch and his son to a nearby lagoon later that day, where they bathed alongside hundred-pound turtles. Lynch heard the sound of a plane landing with the rest of his men and equipment. The expedition was finally coming together.

Moments later, a Kuikuro came running down the path, yelling in his native language. The Kuikuros rushed out of the water. "What is it?" Lynch asked in Portuguese.

"Trouble," a Kuikuro replied.

The Indians began to run toward the village, and Lynch and his son followed, branches ricocheting in their faces. When they arrived, a member of their expedition approached them. "What's happening?" Lynch asked.

"They're surrounding our camp."

Lynch could see more than two dozen Indian men, presumably from neighboring tribes, rushing toward them. They, too, had heard the sound of the arriving plane. Many wore black and red paint slashed across their naked bodies. They carried bows with six-foot arrows, antique rifles, and spears. Five of Lynch's men darted toward the plane. The pilot was still in the cockpit, and the five jumped into the cabin, though it was designed for only four passengers. They shouted for the pilot to take off, but he didn't seem to realize what was happening. Then he looked out the window and saw several Indians hurrying toward him, aiming their bows and arrows. As the pilot started the engine, the Indians grabbed onto the wings, trying to keep the plane grounded. The pilot, concerned that the plane was dangerously heavy, threw whatever he could find out the window—clothes and papers, which

twirled in the propellers' thrust. The plane rumbled down the makeshift runway, bouncing and roaring and swerving between trees. Just before the wheels lifted off, the last of the Indians let go.

Lynch watched the plane disappear, red dust from its wake swirling around him. A young Indian, whose body was covered in paint and who seemed to be leading the assault, stepped toward Lynch, waving a *borduna*, a four-foot-long club that warriors used to smash the enemies' heads. He herded Lynch and the eleven remaining members of his team into small boats. "Where are you taking us?" Lynch asked.

"You are our prisoners for life," the young man responded.

James, Jr., fingered the cross around his neck. Lynch had always believed that there was no adventure until, as he put it, "shit happens." But this was something he had never anticipated. He had no backup plan, no experience to call upon. He didn't even have a weapon.

He squeezed his son's hand. "Whatever happens," Lynch whispered, "don't do anything unless I tell you."

The boats turned off the major river and down a narrow stream. As they floated farther into the jungle, Lynch surveyed the surroundings—the crystal clear water filled with rainbow-colored fish, the increasingly dense thicket of vegetation. It was, he thought, the most beautiful place he had ever seen.

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THE SEARCH  
BEGINS

Every quest, we are led to believe, has a romantic origin. Yet, even now, I can't provide a good one for mine.

Let me be clear: I am not an explorer or an adventurer. I don't climb mountains or hunt. I don't even like to camp. I stand less than five feet nine inches tall and am nearly forty years old, with a blossoming waistline and thinning black hair. I suffer from keratoconus—degenerative eye condition that makes it hard for me to see at night. I have a terrible sense of direction and tend to forget where I am on the subway and miss my stop in Brooklyn. I like newspapers, take-out food, sports highlights (recorded on TiVo), and the air-conditioning on high. Given a choice each day between climbing the two flights of stairs to my apartment and riding the elevator, I invariably take the elevator.

But when I'm working on a story things are different. Ever since I was young, I've been drawn to mystery and adventure tales, ones that had what Rider Haggard called "the grip." The first stories I remember being told were about my grandfather Monya. In his seventies, at the time, and sick with Parkinson's disease, he would sit trembling on our porch in Westport, Connecticut, looking vacantly toward the horizon. My grandmother, meanwhile, would recount memories of his adventures. She told me that he had been a Russian furrier and a freelance *National Geographic* photographer who, in the 1920s, was one of the few Western cameramen allowed into various parts of China and Tibet. (Some relatives suspect that he was a spy, though we have never found any evidence to support such a theory.) My grandmother recalled how, not long before their wedding, Monya went to India to purchase some prized furs. Weeks went by without word from him. Finally, a crumpled envelope arrived in the mail. There was nothing inside but a smudged photograph: it showed Monya lying contorted and pale under a mosquito net, racked with malaria. He eventually returned, but, because he was still convalescing, the wedding took place at a hospital. "I knew then I was in for it," my grandmother said. She told me that Monya became a professional motorcycle racer, and when I gave her a skeptical look she unwrapped a handkerchief revealing one of his gold medals. Once, while in Afghanistan collecting furs, he was driving through the Khyber Pass on a motorcycle with a friend in a sidecar when his brakes failed. "As the motorcycle was spinning out of control, your grandfather said goodbye to his friend," my grandmother recalled. "Then Monya spotted some men doing construction on the road beside them was a big mound of dirt, and he steered right for it. Your grandfather and his friend were catapulted into it. They broke some bones, nothing worse. Of course, that never stopped your grandfather from riding again."

For me, the most amazing part of these adventures was the figure at the center of them. I had known my grandfather only as an old man who could barely walk. The more m

grandmother told me about him, the hungrier I became for details that might help me understand him; still, there was an element about him that seemed to elude even my grandmother. “That’s just Monya,” she’d say, with a wave of her hand.

When I became a reporter, I was drawn to stories that put you in “the grip.” In the 1990s, I worked as a congressional correspondent, but I kept wandering off my beat to investigate stories about con men, mobsters, and spies. While most of my articles seem unrelated, they typically have one common thread: obsession. They are about ordinary people driven to do extraordinary things—things that most of us would never dare—who get some germ of an idea in their heads that metastasizes until it consumes them.

I have always thought that my interest in these people is merely professional: they provide the best copy. But at times I wonder whether I’m more similar to them than I care to believe. Reporting involves an endless quest to ferret out details, in the hopes of discovering some hidden truth. To my wife’s chagrin, when I work on stories, I tend to lose sight of everything else. I forget to pay bills or to shave. I don’t change my clothes as often as I should. I even take risks that I never would otherwise: crawling hundreds of feet beneath the streets of Manhattan with tunnel diggers known as sandhogs or riding in a skiff with a giant-squid hunter during a violent storm. After I returned from the boat trip, my mother said, “You know, you remind me of your grandfather.”

In 2004, while researching a story on the mysterious death of a Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes expert, I stumbled upon a reference to Fawcett’s role in inspiring *The Lost World*. As I read more about him, I became intrigued by the fantastical notion of Z: that a sophisticated civilization with monumental architecture could have existed in the Amazon. Like others, I suspect, my only impression of the Amazon was of scattered tribes living in the Stone Age—a view that derived not only from adventure tales and Hollywood movies but also from scholarly accounts.

Environmentalists have often portrayed the Amazon as a “virgin forest,” which, until recent incursions by loggers and trespassers, was all but unspoiled by human hands. Moreover, many archaeologists and geographers argue that conditions in the Amazon, like those in the Arctic, had made it impossible to develop the large populations necessary for a complex society, with divisions of labor and political hierarchies such as chiefdoms and kingdoms. Betty Meggers of the Smithsonian Institution is perhaps the most influential modern archaeologist of the Amazon. In 1971, she famously summed up the region as a “counterfeit paradise,” a place that, for all its fauna and flora, is inimical to human life. Rains and floods, as well as the pounding sun, leach vital nutrients from the soil and make large-scale agriculture impossible. In such a brutal landscape, she and other scientists contend, only small nomadic tribes could survive. Because the land had provided so little nutrition, Meggers wrote, even when tribes had managed to overcome attrition from starvation and disease, they still had to come up with “cultural substitutes” to control their populations—including killing their own. Some tribes committed infanticide, abandoned their sick in the woods, or engaged in blood revenge and warfare. In the 1970s, Claudio Villas Boas, who was one of the great defenders of Amazonian Indians, told a reporter, “This is the jungle and to kill a deformed child—to abandon the man without family— can be essential for the survival of the tribe. It’s only now that the jungle is vanishing, and its laws are losing their meaning, that w

are shocked.”

As Charles Mann notes in his book *1491*, the anthropologist Allan R. Holmberg helped crystallize the popular and scientific view of Amazonian Indians as primitives. After studying members of the Sirionó tribe in Bolivia in the early 1940s, Holmberg described them among “the most culturally backward peoples of the world,” a society so consumed by the quest for food that it had developed no art, religion, clothes, domesticated animals, shelter, commerce, roads, or even the ability to count beyond three. “No records of time are kept,” Holmberg said, “and no type of calendar exists.” The Sirionó didn’t even have a “concept of romantic” love. They were, he concluded, “man in the raw state of nature.” According to Meggers, a more sophisticated civilization from the Andes had migrated down to Marajó Island, at the mouth of the Amazon, only to slowly unravel and die out. For this civilization, the Amazon was, in short, a death trap.

While looking into Z, I discovered that a group of revisionist anthropologists and archaeologists have increasingly begun to challenge these long-standing views, believing that an advanced civilization could have in fact emerged in the Amazon. In essence, they argue that the traditionalists have underestimated the power of cultures and societies to transform and transcend their natural environments, much the way humans are now creating stations in outer space and growing crops in the Israeli desert. Some contend that the traditionalist ideas still carry a taint of the racist views of Native Americans, which had once infused earlier reductive theories of environmental determinism. The traditionalists, in turn, charge that the revisionists are an example of political correctness run amok, and that they perpetuate a long history of projecting onto the Amazon an imaginary landscape, a fantasy of the Western mind. At stake in the debate is a fundamental understanding of human nature and the ancient world, and the feud has pitted scholars viciously against each other. When I called Meggers at the Smithsonian Institution, she dismissed the possibility of anyone discovering a lost civilization in the Amazon. Too many archaeologists, she said, are “still chasing El Dorado.”

One acclaimed archaeologist from the University of Florida, in particular, disputes the conventional interpretation of the Amazon as a counterfeit paradise. His name is Michael Heckenberger, and he works in the Xingu region where Fawcett is believed to have vanished. Several anthropologists told me that he was the person I should talk to, but warned that he rarely emerges from the jungle and avoids any distractions from his work. James Peterse, who in 2005 was head of the anthropology department at the University of Vermont and had trained Heckenberger, told me, “Mike is absolutely brilliant and on the cutting edge of archaeology in the Amazon, but I’m afraid you’re barking up the wrong tree. Look, the guy was the best man at my wedding and I can’t get him to respond to any of my communications.”

With the University of Florida’s help, I eventually succeeded in reaching Heckenberger on his satellite phone. Through static and what sounded like the jungle in the background, he said that he was going to be staying in the Kuikuro village in the Xingu and, to my surprise, would be willing to meet me if I made it that far. Only later, as I began to piece together more of the story of Z, did I discover that this was the very place where James Lynch and his men had been kidnapped.

“YOU’RE GOING TO the Amazon to try to find someone who disappeared two hundred years ago?” my wife, Kyra, asked. It was a January night in 2005, and she was standing in the kitchen of our apartment, serving cold sesame noodles from Hunan Delight.

“It was only eighty years ago.”

“So you’re going to look for someone who vanished *eighty* years ago?”

“That’s the basic idea.”

“How will you even know where to look?”

“I haven’t quite figured that part out yet.” My wife, who is a producer at *60 Minutes* and is notably sensible, put the plates on the table, waiting for me to elaborate. “It’s not like I’ll be the first to go,” I added. “Hundreds of others have done it.”

“And what happened to them?”

I took a bite of the noodles, hesitating. “Many of them disappeared.”

She looked at me for a long moment. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

I promised her that I would not rush into the Xingu, at least until I knew where to begin my route. Most recent expeditions had relied on the coordinates for Dead Horse Camp contained in *Exploration Fawcett*, but, given the colonel’s elaborate subterfuge, it seemed strange that the camp would be that easy to find. While Fawcett had taken meticulous notes about his expeditions, his most sensitive papers were believed to have been either lost or kept private by his family. Some of Fawcett’s correspondence and the diaries of members of his expeditions, however, had ended up in British archives. And so, before plunging into the jungle, I set out to England to see if I could uncover more about Fawcett’s zealously guarded route and the man who, in 1925, had seemingly vanished from the earth.



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