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*Shown at age twenty-seven in 1888, Mary Catherine Craghead had already experienced hardship on the rugged West Texas frontier, given birth to six children, losing three of them in death, and been widowed. Shown with their mother are: Maude (the author's grandmother), Newton, and Leeta.*

# My Frontier Granny

## Panthers and rattlesnakes and spunk on the West Texas frontier

by A. C. Greene

HE WAS MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER, AND IN MY EARLIEST memories of her she is in a rocking chair, humming to herself in a whiney, old-woman key, and pulling a fine-tooth comb through her long hair which is hanging down behind the rocker, almost touching the floor each time she rocks. The songs she hummed in her broken soprano were hymns, hymns with stirring themes like "Marching to Zion" or "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." She never counted the comb-strokes and she never used a mirror; what she did lacked female vanity. She parted her hair severely in the middle and twisted the long strands into a knot at her nape, fixed in place with two large, tortoiseshell hairpins. It was a practical hairdo, one more approach to life she had been forced to adopt on the frontier. And as I played at her feet, quietly unnoticed, there was a look on her of being in another time, at another place.

Once upon a time she was Mary Catherine Dockray, born October 25, 1861, in San Saba County, on the raw western edge of Texas. Her birthplace was a log cabin with loopholes to fire from when the Comanches raided, and throughout her girlhood the tomahawk was a fearful weapon; yet when she died, jet planes were taking over the sky and "atomic weapon" was a household phrase. And though I was born many decades after it closed, I was raised on the frontier because she raised me; she was my frontier granny, just as she had been a frontier daughter, a frontier wife, and a frontier mother.

Her father, Sam Dockray, had marched off to war, a Confederate soldier, by the time of her birth, in that passionate year that had seen the firing on Fort Sumter. He was no slaveholder, nor were his kin that I have discovered, and his presence was more urgently needed there on the frontier than somewhere east of the Mississippi. But a Southern man, if he thought of it

at all (and I am sure many of them like Sam Dockray, who had nothing to gain from a slavocracy, gave it lots of thought), realized that to express doubt, to question or display hesitation meant almost certain death—the Confederacy being the most repressive regime in North American history.

Happiness never came easily or in abundance to my frontier granny. When she was six months old, her mother Eliza Jane died during the night, and next morning the baby was found nuzzling her cold, dead breast. With the father off at war and her brothers mere boys of three and four years, Mary Catherine was taken to raise by her mother's sister Paralee Tankersley and her family, who wanted to adopt the little girl. But when Sam returned from fighting he demanded his children back, leading to hard feelings between him and the Tankersleys, who became a famous ranching family of West Texas. Sam married again after the war, and probably because of the rivalry over her, Mary Catherine and her new stepmother, Martha, were never to be close, although the girl came to love the numerous half sisters and brothers whom she helped raise.

And somehow, she got some schooling, although it couldn't have been easy in San Saba County of the 1860s and 1870s. She could not only read and write, but her grammar, save for the frontier idioms that never left her speech, was quite passable. She, in fact, taught me to read. In addition to helping raise the younger ones, she learned the things frontier daughters and wives were required to know: she could spin thread, she could weave and dye cloth if necessary—milled fabric was cut off from the frontier during the war—and she could card cotton, piece quilts, sew all kinds of garments, including tailoring for men and boys, make soap, render lard, strip gut for sausage casing—in fact, she learned to use every part of the hog from tip of snout to twist of tail. One of her favorite foods, which she could not understand later generations' resistance to, was a

delicacy called hog's head cheese, or souse. It was not the victual itself that created resistance but the manner in which she insisted it be prepared. First off, you must lay hands on a freshly slaughtered hog's head, eyes, ears, bristles, tushes, and all. On the frontier, of course, obtaining a fresh-killed head was no problem: the problem was obtaining the hog. But in the 1930s and 1940s few butchers even knew how to get delivery on a fresh head, much less what to do with one when it arrived. The first time she made souse when I was a boy, I strolled into the kitchen one day to discover a washtub atop the stove, and glaring out at me was a huge porcine head, boiling away.

Mary Catherine needed those skills, for although Sam Dockray eventually moved his family from San Saba to the relative safety of Bell County, at age sixteen she married Lytle Craghead, and after the birth of Maude (my grandmother) and the death of baby William, they moved back out to the West Texas frontier. Mary Catherine's choice of a husband was probably the final time she let herself be guided by romantic notions—and I say "choice" because knowing her, I can't believe even Lytle could have swept her off her feet had she not chosen him. Lytle Craghead was reportedly quite handsome (I have never seen a picture of him), and he had two distinctions seldom found on the frontier: he was a musician and a poet.

Again, the woman I knew so many years later shouldn't guide my conjectures about the girl who married him; so, surely this ability to create music and make words sing had something to do with her choice. It had something to do with me because it was passed on to the next generation, and my grandmother (Mary Catherine and Lytle's only offspring to survive to maturity) was author, painter, and poet and in her young days played the violin.

**B**UT THAT IS SKIPPING TOO FAR AHEAD. LYTLE'S older brother Jim, who had settled near Carbon, a new village in Eastland County, wrote for him to bring his family out to the frontier. But when the poet and fiddle player took his family to the frontier his artistry was a detriment. Word got around of his music making, and before long there were requests that he perform at weddings, at someone's play party (dancing was looked on as sinful on that portion of the frontier), or merely entertain the men who had nothing better to do than spit, whittle, and tap a toe to "Waverly Wheat" or "Soldier's Joy" or "Rosin th' Beau."

Consequently, once when she was pregnant, Mary Catherine returned from helping a neighbor quilting to discover that her husband had unloaded a barrel of flour off the wagon and

left the barrel sitting in the middle of her dirt-floored kitchen—which was one end of the little log structure they lived in. A bunch of men had come by and persuaded Lytle to ride off with them for a fiddle serenade down at the store, although she didn't find this out until later. Furious, she wrestled the heavy wooden barrel from the middle of the work space into a corner—but the effort was too much (she was a small woman) and her twins, Oscar and Bertha, were born prematurely and died after one day.

From the first it had been a terrible life for this young wife and mother. Lytle got a job digging wells for a rancher near the Carbon settlement who promised them a home. When they got there the "home" turned out to be a one-room dugout, barely tall enough for Mary Catherine to walk erect in and causing Lytle to have to crouch to enter. But worse than that, the first day on arrival they discovered the dugout, which had not been inhabited for nearly eight years, was full of rattlesnakes. I suppose Lytle had gone off to pick up certain promised household items from the rancher (I hope that was the case), but whatever the cause of his absence, it was left to his wife to rid the place of snakes. And Mary Catherine, who, though born at a blood-drenched time in a raider-haunted valley, had never fired a gun, took Lytle's old single-action Colt pistol and somehow, shaking with fear as she reloaded, killed thirty-two rattlesnakes to clear the dugout. She said she laid them out in a row for Lytle to find when he returned that night, but a pack of wild boars descended on the clearing where the dugout sat, drove her back inside the filthy hole, and ate the evidence before her husband could see and be ashamed—not ashamed that he had left her to do it all but that he had accepted such a disgrace as their home.

Another time, after they moved from the dirt-floored dugout to the dirt-floored cabin, Lytle's casual view of marriage nearly led to his death. Telling Mary Catherine he and some friends were going to ride to Eastland and the railroad to get some badly needed supplies (she forgot what they were by the time she told me), he left her alone with their two children. At nightfall he had not returned; so, she presumed, not too happily, the men had been forced either to remain in Eastland or to camp on the trail.

Although the territory had suffered its last Indian raid five or six years before, fear of the Comanche was still vibrant in that part of West Texas where he had done his deadly work so often. In addition to leftover Indian fears, a wave of nightriding by a group called White Caps had the whole county armed and suspicious. The White Caps, modeled after the original Ku Klux Klan, acted as vigilantes, driving the immoral and



*A frontier photographer posed Sam Dockray and his motherless children for this tintype around 1869–70. The young Dockrays are Martin, Mary Catherine, and John.*

worthless from the community, policing the range—by the members' own standards and convictions, of course, not always from evidence. Historically, vigilantes eventually got out of hand, but there was sometimes a need for such drastic control in parts of West Texas. Lytle's brother Jim was said to be a White Cap leader. This created bitter resentment and opposition on the part of some who felt wronged by the White Caps, or who opposed them for more subtle, but mundane, reasons. Mary Catherine, out of fear of reprisal, had urged Lytle to disclaim any association with the White Caps and his brother, but Lytle was afraid Jim's feelings would be hurt if he disowned him (as Lytle put it) just because he was said to be a nightrider.

Then, that night, long after dark when she and the children were abed, Mary Catherine heard a noise at the cabin door. She rose, taking the old pistol with her (not knowing if it was loaded), and stood rigid by the door, ready to repel redman or rider. Someone was, unmistakably, trying to force the cabin door open. In panic she fired the pistol, hoping that the noise would scare the intruder away more than that a bullet might

stop him. She heard a cry and a moan and after several moments, someone calling her name. When her name was repeated time after time, and her frantic fears quashed for the moment, she opened the door and found the badly wounded Lytle lying there, a bullet wound in his groin. The rest of the riders to Eastland had remained at an overnight camp on the Leon River. Lytle had ridden back alone, hurrying to reach his family. There had been some liquor, and although Lytle was never one for strong drink, he'd downed enough to see the red-eyed demon, as the saying went, and even a long night ride failed to wear it off—hence his fumbling around his own front door.

**B**UT THE EPISODE THAT BECAME OUR MOST BELOVED family legend took place a few months later when Mary Catherine, by now carrying another baby, was doing the washing out in the yard of the cabin. The clothes had been boiled in the big iron pot with lye soap over a wood fire—the traditional pioneer laundry—then rinsed in the same pot with water from the rain barrel (there was no spring or running creek near that cabin). The soapy water was carefully poured on some hardy flowers she planted along the rail fence—flowers which not only survived the lye treatment but actually thrived. The rinsed clothes, wrung out by hand, were spread over the bushes and small trees around the cabin, clotheslines and pins being unknown on her frontier.

As she carefully stretched the garments across the tree limbs, some trees and bushes being mesquite with sharp, destructive thorns, Mary Catherine glanced up to check on Maude, who was tending little Leeta (Amelia) in her homemade crib. What she saw almost, but not quite, froze her with terror. There, between her and her children, was a panther, creeping, belly to the ground, and obviously stalking the tiny prey. She started to scream in an attempt to scare off the cat, then realized it might create unpredictable panic in cat and child. The thought took only a split second, and she was already running to the woodpile to grab the old rusty ax by the time her brain had told her throat not to scream.

She said the panther didn't retreat and never stopped its stalking when she charged toward him, the ax high over her head. Perhaps that saved her life, because she struck the beast before it had a chance to turn and spring on her. She hit it over and over, impelled by fear to greater strength than her small, pregnant frame would normally supply. The panther dead, she gathered her children—Maude had been standing frozen against the little home—and shoved them inside. She barred the door, fell across the bed, and wept in exhaustion for the rest

of the afternoon. When Lytle returned from wherever he had been off to, she refused to open the door and let him in. Maude had to do it.

The great drought of 1887 drove the family back to Bell County where Lytle tried to run a store. But his failure on the frontier seemed to take all the music and the passion out of him. He never touched his violin again. And he died within a year. He was buried in the Sutton cemetery beside his children. I am told that an oak tree grows straight up from his grave and is all the monument he has—but that story was imparted years ago; so perhaps even the oak is gone. Love him? I am sure Mary Catherine did, but the frontier may have cost some of the love she had for him—and most of her affection. The frontier made demands on men as well as women—and she stood up to its demands better than her man did. No cause for lessening of true love, you say? But perhaps it was, in a time when love had to face daily trials of reality and was measured by respect. Lytle sounds to me like a delightful companion, but I am not living a century ago, dependent on him not just for upkeep and daily reliables, but for emotional and sensual food. The violin sufficed for the loafers at the crossroads store, but not for home.

What did a young widow with three young children do in a part of rural Texas which was not far in time or philosophy from being frontier itself? Unequipped to teach, the only female occupation available, she must try to remarry. Her father, with children still at home, urged his oldest daughter to unite with Campbell Longley, age seventy-three, whose own children, all older than Mary Catherine, agreed, thinking their aged father needed the support and presence of a wife.

Cam Longley was famous in Texas, not for having been a soldier in the Texas Revolution in 1836, which he was, or for being a well-thought-of music teacher: no, Cam Longley was famous for being the father of the late William Preston Longley, better known as "Wild Bill" Longley, gunman and outlaw, who may have killed as many as thirty-two persons and was finally hanged in 1878 (finally, because according to legend, two previous hangings had failed).

Mary Catherine was twenty-nine when they married, and trouble started immediately. She thought it was understood that there was to be no trickery, no sexual hanky-panky from the old man. Yet, on their wedding night, here he came padding down the hall to her bedroom (her daughter's daughter told me this, seventy-five years later; my frontier granny would never have hinted such a thing to me). The thought of a young woman, now legally his, apparently served to restore the supposed dormant masculine instincts in him. I don't



*In their Sunday best, John Dockray and his wife, Alabama Rebecca, face the camera. This portrait was taken at about the time that John threatened to go "rescue" his sister, Mary Catherine, from the Longleys.*

suppose anyone can say for sure what this resurgence of youth in the chin-whiskered elder eventually led to, but to keep peace in the marriage, and to keep her children housed and fed, I would guess certain compromises were made by Mary Catherine.

But not too many. When Cam Longley insisted her children should be sent to an orphanage, the young mother/widow/wife rejected the idea with fury, and when little Newton suffered a particularly horrible death, his eyes bursting from his head two weeks before his demise, and Leeta passed away from "blind" fever, without prior illness, Mary Catherine screamed accusations against the old man that he had poisoned her children, which Cam denied just as vehemently. She moved out, Maude being all that was left to go with her, and announced she would not live with Cam until he had built her a house to replace the one where his first wife had lived for so many years. He wanted her back: the new home was built along the Lampasas River. But even this failed to make the Spring and Winter marriage work. A son and a grown grandson "moved in on her" (as one side of the story put it), and she

sent a frantic message to her older brother John to cross over the river and rescue her from her prison. John Dockray was as tough a character as any outlaw, and the younger Longleys feared him. My grandmother Maude, by then a teenager, told me, "I stood around and watched Jim Longley mold bullets so if Uncle John crossed the river the Longleys would be ready to fight him." She painted a dramatic picture: her mother, Mary Catherine, off in a bedroom with the door shut and locked, the old man with son Jim and a grandson, working by coal-oil lamplight, with the shades drawn, pouring molten lead into the molds and making bullets for their guns. In actuality, Maude seems to have gotten along well with the Longleys and didn't share her mother's antipathy, although she said she never liked to have to kiss old Cam because his whiskers were always stained with snuff.

**A**LTHOUGH BILL LONGLEY HAD BEEN DEAD FOR SEVERAL years before she married his father, his ghost haunted Mary Catherine. As mentioned, the legend was already created about Longley that since he had escaped death on two other occasions, his third hanging had also been rigged. Many and various things were said to have been devised to deliver Wild Bill from the dose of hemp tea given him before a crowd of two thousand. One story said a special harness had been strapped on him before he was brought to the gallows by the sheriff; another related a curious (and quite unbelievable) tale of a silver throat mechanism that was installed to prevent the noose from breaking his neck or strangling him, and the most widely believed turn of the tale had Longley surviving the drop and a hog substituted for his body in the coffin. Although Campbell Longley himself officially denied all the tales and declared his renegade son deceased, those who chose to believe the legend shrugged and asked what did you expect a father to say?

At any rate, Mary Catherine discovered letters supposedly written by Bill to a sister who lived in Utah, sent from his hiding place in South America. When she asked about the letters, she was told by Cam that they were fakes, written by the sister and sent back to Texas to assuage the grief of Bill's mother. But (and is this her contribution to the myth?), Mary Catherine whispered to her kin, the letters were still coming. My grandmother, who turned out to be a librarian, with great respect for facts, was never quite certain about the affair. Although she was not the superstitious sort, she was a romantic, and the thought that her outlaw stepbrother might be existing off in some jungle undoubtedly appealed to her. One of her later friends was the daughter of the doctor who had

certified Bill Longley was dead—took the corpse's head and turned it almost 360° to prove it. But that daughter failed to overcome Maude's romanticism entirely.

Eventually Mary Catherine used Maude as her way out of the Longley marriage. She didn't divorce the old man. Even had the Texas community of that day not put a stigma on divorce, she and Campbell Longley were devout members of a religious group that took the strongest views against this action. Although her marriage as a marriage lasted but a few years, the name lasted the rest of her life. She was "Mrs. Longley" to everyone. I wouldn't have known who "Mrs. Craghead" was if accompanied by a certificate, and all my life I have felt kinship with any Longley I've run into, though not entitled to it by blood.

When Maude married Ambrose Cole in 1897, Mary Catherine came with the bride. It didn't work too well, having a mother-in-law in the newlyweds' home, but Maude, from inheritance or environment, also had a streak of frontier hard-headedness. She informed Ambrose there were two conditions to marrying her: her mother was to live with them and Maude's pet jackrabbit (said to weigh eighteen pounds) was to occupy the foot of the bridal bed every night. Ambrose, my grandfather, was a redhead with the redhead's traditional temper. I was told he blew up and cussed at both suggestions—but he accepted them. The new family moved to Galveston where, in November of 1898, Maude's first child, Grady, was born, and at the mere age of thirty-seven, Mary Catherine became a grandmother, for the rest of her life to be called Granny.

She and Maude were ironing the week's washing when the terrible Galveston hurricane hit in 1900, the greatest natural disaster in American history. With water invading the parlor and Ambrose yelling for them to get aboard the big fire department ladder wagon, the last vehicle big enough to buck the waves, Maude and Granny carefully folded the ironing and put it away in a trunk before they abandoned the blown and quaking frame house they lived in. Next day, when the storm had passed and Ambrose, Maude, Granny, and little Grady were safe, they found their home demolished but the trunk of fresh ironing floating in the wreckage, its contents unharmed. They were the only people on Galveston Island wearing clean clothes.

Although born on the frontier in a ranching region, Mary Catherine never learned to ride a horse. Except in such obvious cases as pursuit by savages, a decent woman didn't ride astride (any more than she wore pants), and the frontier considered sidesaddles useless. But she did learn to drive a team, for wagon, buggy, or plow. When Ambrose bought his first au-

tomobile, an open (topless) EMF, he tried to teach his mother-in-law to operate the thing. He explained the various functions, the gears, clutch, brake, and so on, and they started out with her at the wheel. But the mysteries of speed were too much for her, and within a hundred yards or so they were sailing down the road (fortunately dirt) with ever-increasing velocity. As they approached a turn, Ambrose was shouting, "Slow down, dammit!" But by then Mary Catherine was terrified, and all she could do was tug on the steering wheel and yell, "Whoa! Whoa!" They ended up in a bar ditch full of water, neither one hurt, and "Every Man's Friend" (as the EMF was nicknamed) bent and muddy but operable. She never learned to drive a car.

By the time I came into her life, she was a curiosity, a museum piece. She wasn't mean and she wasn't hardhearted, but she had a quick way with you when you balked, and she was unsympathetic with indecision. The luxury of "making up your mind" had been denied her in her frontier youth. People who took too long to decide ended up running for their lives. It took me a long time to realize what had gone into making her what she was. Survival was the rule in all her early training, her first decades bound to one idea: stay alive.

Then, suddenly, it was gone. One day she was living a hard but virtuous life with pain and death as next-door neighbors. Then, with the suddenness of a theater curtain being lifted, everything was transformed. There were railroads, hotels, sidewalks, electric lights, hospitals—and she was still wearing linsey, dipping candles, and watching for Comanches. It was too quick, too stunning. The sacrifices and cautions that had made her hard, tough, and successful as a wife and mother were useless. She was laughed at for habits which, a decade before, had kept her and her family alive. So she lived out her years in a daze, never comfortable in the new civilization.

**G**RANNY WAS SMALL BUT GNARLED AND HEAVY WITH strength. She worked incessantly because work was part of the chemistry of her blood. Idleness was the devil's workshop, she said, and if you stayed around her the devil seldom got a chance at you. She was born to a world where you worked for everything you got, and everything you got you got for yourself. To do things any other way was immoral. An old-fashioned quilting frame hung by pulleys from her bedroom ceiling to the day she died, lowered for those increasingly rare visits by other ancient quilters. She insisted on making batches of lye soap and soaking corn for hominy. I helped her build an ash hopper to use in making lye for both processes. The soap was harsh, cutting a young boy's



*Ambrose H. Cole was a dashing Lothario when he married Maude Craghead in 1897. His affection was generous enough to include his mother-in-law and Maude's pet jackrabbit in the newlyweds' household.*

skin within a millimeter of the living bone, but its clean smell can't be replaced by detergents in my memory.

Twice a year she had me help her gather dried broomweed so she could bind it to a stick and make something she called her yard broom: on the frontier there were no lovely lawns of Bermuda or San Augustine grass. Your yard was dirt, swept clear with a yard broom. And she sulked for twenty years having to do ironing with an electric iron, until one of my uncles scoured the secondhand stores and found her an old charcoal-burning iron: of course it was hot and smelly, and of course it weighed ten pounds—but it was virtuous. Now, at the time I was growing up under her tutelage, laundry soap, bought at Mr. Rogers's store next door to us, was cheaper, hominy in cans was much simpler to buy than make, factory brooms were sturdier, and the advantages of an electric iron past numbering—but her frontier instinct demanded she be as self-sufficient as possible, and those were the self-sufficiencies instilled and installed in her heart.

Her speech bristled with threats and was dark with disaster. "Not fit to shoot, let alone scalp," she would say of some man



*Maude Craghead was twelve when this photograph was taken, showing her holding a poem that she had composed. The author, her grandson, says that she was a poet all her life. Maude Craghead Cole died in 1961 at the age of eighty-one.*

she considered worthless—usually the husband of some female descendent. “If I was a man I’d kill ye,” she growled when outraged, and “Plague on it all,” was a constant invective, pronouncing plague to rhyme with “flag.” Nearby towns were always referred to as settlements.

Telephones were an especial annoyance to her. She was never persuaded that long distance conversations might be carried on at the same voice level as local calls, and when the French sets, as they were called, were introduced, she invariably tried to talk into the earpiece or listen at the mouthpiece, and would berate whoever was on the other end for not talking up. It took her years to stop jiggling the hook and trying to get “Central” when making a call on the dial phone. Even the sun served her independence. If you told her the time and she didn’t believe you, she would look up at the sky and snort, “I know better.”

She dipped snuff from the age of thirteen, massaging it into her gums with a peach-tree twig, for which I was often commissioned to go clip her a supply. But there was no quicker way for a woman to draw her scorn than to smoke a cigarette in

her presence. She was a staunch churchgoer, one of those to whom the only excuse for missing a Sunday service was death, or at least, a broken leg. Another of my tasks, as a boy, was to arise early on Sunday and “walk Granny to church,” a pilgrimage of nearly two miles each way. She wanted to be early enough to get her accustomed seat in the amen corner where the ancients sat. Also, she was of the South Southern; she never forgot and she never forgave “The North.” The only allegiance she gave the federal union was to lick a postage stamp.

Ironically, it was her ill-fated marriage to Campbell Longley that brought her, years later, the only security she ever knew: a pension from the State of Texas for his services in the war of independence from Mexico. Her pension became Granny’s most jealous possession as she grew older, and she frequently threatened to move off and “live on my money.” The payment was \$12 per month.

When Texas celebrated its centennial of independence in 1936, she became a mildly famous figure because she and two other women were the last surviving widows of revolutionary war fighters. (She lived to be the last.) The big Centennial Exposition at Dallas set aside a day in their honor, and the Governor had two of the old ladies as guests. It was too much for her frontier soul. She hadn’t done anything to earn it but live a long time. On the frontier, staying alive was not earning. The dazzle of the affair seemed to take the temper out of her like an old buffalo knife dropped in the fire. She quit spading the garden and she gave up her cow and her private-yard of chickens, which she had kept, city ordinances to the contrary. When I departed to go to college, she had no companion left at home but our old German shepherd dog, Tinny. I was in China with the Navy when the family wrote that Tinny had died. I knew my frontier granny was not long to follow.

She went quietly, her last days spent visiting with friends in some far-off settlement. Her talk was of quilting and crops, preparing for winter, and clearing new acres for spring planting. The ashes of Hiroshima were already cold, and commercial television was battling her Indians when she passed on. A new generation was rubbing its eyes, startled and unbelieving that a mushroom cloud had wiped out all frontiers in a boiling blast. Granny left at a good time. ❀

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Dockray, Cole  
Craighead Family

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