

ORIGINAL

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21
BURO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21
No. W.S. 834

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BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.

STATEMENT BY WITNESS

DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 834

Witness

Michael Knightly,
65 St. Laurence Road,
Clontarf,
Dublin.

Identity.

Member of 'F' Company,
1st Battalion, Dublin Brigade, 1916.

Subject.

Press reporting and Intelligence work
for I.R.A. 1919-1920.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.

Nil

File No S.404

Form B S M 2

STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAEL KNIGHTLY,

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On September 7th, 1919, the I.R.A. disarmed a British force at Fermoy. Two of the British forces were killed and others wounded. I was dispatched by my paper to Fermoy to report the engagement. Before leaving Dublin, Liam Tobin asked me to contact Liam Lynch for information on the matter. He told me to inquire at Barry's hardware shop where Liam Lynch worked. On arrival in Fermoy I called into Barry's and, picking out a young man whom I judged to be friendly to the movement, I asked if he could get me in touch with Liam Lynch. He looked at me rather doubtfully and told me he knew nothing about Mr. Lynch. I was not aware at the time that Liam Lynch had been wounded in the engagement and it did not strike me that my request to a complete stranger on such a matter was rather unusual, but that night I was surprised when accosted by a young man in the main street and asked if my name was Knightly. When I replied "Yes", my friend, who was a Tralee man, said: "My goodness, you have been taken for a detective here!" I considered myself rather lucky that I had not been taken for a ride.

There was another occasion when I might easily have been taken for a detective. The late Mr. Larry Ginnell was being released from Mountjoy Prison after serving a term of imprisonment, and, as his re-arrest was anticipated, it was arranged to rescue him if the rescue could be carried out without loss of life. I was asked by Harry Boland to be at Mountjoy to watch the proceedings and to let him know, if the rescue was not carried out as planned, whether or not I thought it could have succeeded. I was at the prison in the early hours of the morning and kept the rescue party, to whom I was

unknown, under observation. They were at the outer gate when a Black Maria drew up at the other end of the avenue near the main door of the prison. There was considerable police activity and when Mr. Ginnell emerged from the prison, carrying two cases, he was unceremoniously bundled into the van. He shouted "Up the Republic!" The van was locked and driven past the men outside the outer gate without interference. If the attempt at rescue had been made, shooting would undoubtedly have ensued.

On a few occasions I was asked by Headquarters to procure photographs of wanted men. On the 8th March 1920, a British Inquiry into the funds of Sinn Féin, the I.R.A. and other national bodies was opened by Mr. Alan Bell, R.M. Banks were requested to produce documents. I was asked to get a photograph of Mr. Bell. The best I could do was a newspaper picture and this I supplied to Headquarters. On the 27th March, while down the country on reporting work, I got rather a shock when I read in a morning newspaper that Mr. Bell had been taken from a tram at Ballsbridge and shot. I wondered if the photograph had been used for the purpose of identification.

On the 16th September 1920, a British intelligence agent, named Hardy - a confidence trickster who had been sentenced to a ten years' term of imprisonment some months earlier - was exposed by Arthur Griffith in the presence of American and English journalists. I was asked to attend an important meeting at a house near the Queen's Theatre in Pearse Street - Brunswick St. as it then was. On arrival, the purpose of the meeting was explained to Sean Lyster, who was the only other Irish journalist present, and myself and we were instructed to play the parts of members of the inner council of the I.R.A. When we took our place in the meeting room, Arthur Griffith, who was accompanied by Desmond Fitzgerald, asked the foreign journalists to remain silent during the proceedings. Mr. Hardy

was shown into the room to what he believed was a very secret meeting of the inner council. Taking his seat at a table directly opposite me, he proceeded to tell us how he could help the cause, chiefly in the procurement of arms. He was aware, he said, that some secret organisations tested new members by asking them to carry out a shooting. I told him that he need have no worries on that account as we would look after any shooting that had to be done. He was particularly anxious to pay off old scores against the British and was very voluble. After considerable discussion, Mr. Griffith, addressing him, said "Now, listen to this!" He proceeded to read out the agent's criminal record and, as he proceeded to do so, Hardy sat up in surprise, while darting his right hand into his pocket where I have no doubt he had a gun. I signalled to Desmond Fitzgerald to watch his hand. The record having been finished, Arthur Griffith said: "Now, Hardy, there is a boat leaving Dún Laoghaire this evening and my advice to you is to take it". Hardy relaxed and the meeting concluded. The English journalists were disgusted, while the Americans expressed surprise at such methods being resorted to by the British authorities.

In August 1919, I visited Ennistymon to report an inquest on a policeman. Calling at the Courthouse, I asked the caretaker the time of the inquest. "On the boy who was shot last night?" he inquired. I had no knowledge of the shooting and, on hearing the news, I went at once to Glen, a short distance from Ennistymon, where I was informed that Francis Murphy, a Fianna boy scout, had been shot the previous night while reading in the kitchen of his father's house. I gave the matter some publicity and, on returning to Dublin, I went to Sinn Féin Headquarters and informed Mr. Griffith that I had no doubt that young Murphy had been

shot by Crown Forces. Mr. Griffith attached considerable importance to the matter and appeared to think that it would be a serious blow to British rule in Ireland if it could be proved that their forces had resorted to such measures. He engaged Mr. Patrick Lynch, K.C., to attend the inquest on behalf of the Murphy family. I attended the inquest as a reporter and gave what assistance I could to elucidate the facts. A verdict of murder against British Crown forces was returned.

Mr. Griffith certainly did not think that, before many months had passed, organised murder by the British forces would be a daily occurrence throughout the country and that all inquests would be suppressed; but his judgment was sound in view of the harvest the British Government reaped from these methods.

An efficient Irish publicity service gave the matter world-wide publicity, causing alarm in British Government circles. "Never since the Middle Ages has such savage brutality been recorded", a French newspaper reported; while the 'Daily News' exposed the police methods in such strong terms that the life of Mr. Martin, the paper's special representative in Ireland, was threatened. "In all our annals there has been nothing to parallel this record of organised and senseless savagery" the paper stated in October 1920.

"Methods inexcusable even under the loose code of revolutionaries are certainly not methods which the Government of Great Britain can tolerate on the part of their servants", the 'London Times' stated in September 1920.

".... An army already perilously undisciplined and a police force avowedly beyond control have defiled by heinous acts the reputation of England", the 'Times, London' stated in November 1920.

I travelled to Listowel in June 1920, to glean the facts of the mutiny of the R.I.C. in that town and was able to combine my newspaper work with intelligence work for the I.R.A. Newspaper work also afforded opportunities of helping the cause in the political field and I was always glad to assist in this way. In the East Cavan election I reported verbatim a famous speech by Father O'Flanagan at Ballyjamesduff. The speech was suppressed by the Castle authorities, a rather startling innovation at that time. I took the report to Sinn Féin Headquarters. It was got out in pamphlet form and circulated throughout the constituency, proving of considerable help in winning the election.

Service generally in those days was unpaid; it was given enthusiastically and was more valuable than the paid service rendered by our opponents. I travelled to Cavan to work for the return of Arthur Griffith and with others canvassed from early morning till late in the evening. My food in the week's hard canvassing was bacon and eggs and tea in the morning and bacon and eggs in the evening.

While helping the movement financially as well as in other respects, it was rather annoying to have cries of "German gold" hurled at us.

One night in December 1919, Peadar Clancy asked me if I could let him have some money as he had a chance of buying a few rifles. I gave him the required money and soon after he called at 11 Great Denmark St. with two Lee Enfield rifles, which he had purchased from a British soldier, and asked me to take charge of them. I had received a letter that evening to come to Tralee, where my mother was dying, and had not time to give much care to the rifles. As I was leaving Dublin next morning, I placed them under the mattress of my bed.

A few days later, as I was about to return, I read that the machinery in the 'Irish Independent' offices had been wrecked. When I reached 11 Great Denmark St., I discovered that my landlady, while accompanied by her maid, had turned up my mattress. They were startled at seeing the rifles. On being asked what I was going to do about it, I explained that it was only a temporary arrangement and that I would have the offending weapons removed at once. I was afraid of a leakage through the maid, who was rather friendly with British Tommies. Contacting Peadar Clancy, we conveyed the rifles in a horse cab to a house near Christchurch. During the operation Peadar informed me that he had been in charge of the 'Independent' operation, that it had been proposed to shoot T.R. Harrington, the editor, for the reference to Martin Savage, who had been killed at Ashtown in the attack on Lord French, as an assassin, but that he had proposed as an alternative the wrecking of the machinery. I expressed my pleasure at his action, explaining that Mr. Harrington was not as bad as he was painted, that, in fact, he had a high regard for the Volunteers before 1916, but that he was afraid, as I once heard him say, that "they would do something foolish". When I returned from Frongoch, he asked me if another situation such as Easter Week arose would I take part in it. I replied that I would with more heart than on the previous occasion. "I would build a special asylum for you people", he said, "and put you all in it". Later, a son of his was an active member of the I.R.A.

When I asked the Chief Reporter on that occasion how I stood with regard to my job, he asked me how I was off for money. I replied that I had none. "I suggest", he said, that you work till the end of the week and then take your holidays, drawing four weeks' pay. Here is some money to carry on in the meantime" - handing me a few pounds. I spent seven weeks in Mountjoy Prison in 1920 and, on my release, was paid my salary for the period of my

incarceration. Nearly all my colleagues on the editorial staffs were sympathetic and helped the movement in no small way.

My work as a newspaper reporter brought me into contact with the police and I had some friends in the Detective Branch. Among those were two who had come under the notice of Mick Collins. On one occasion he asked me what I thought of Detective-Sergeant McCarthy, who did clerical work with Ned Broy in the Superintendent's office. I replied that I thought he was all right. He said: "The! He is translating all the Irish correspondence for them". Shortly before, Paddy Kelly, the chief reporter of the "Freeman's journal" had told me that McCarthy had asked him if he could get him a job in England as he had no desire to work against his countrymen and wanted to get out. I told this to Mick Collins and he seemed impressed. I do not know what representations were made, if any, to McCarthy, but soon afterwards he resigned and took up a job in London. Later, when copies of very secret police documents were discovered beneath the floor of a flat in Dawson St. Ned Broy was placed under arrest. The I.R.A. immediately got in touch with McCarthy and had him smuggled to America. He was held up at Ellis Island, but was soon handed over to two I.R.A. men in the guise of police officers, armed with papers authorising his removal. His disappearance, I think, helped to remove suspicion from Ned Broy, though he was kept under a strong guard in Arbour Hill till the Truce. McCarthy rejoined the police as an inspector after the Treaty and was promoted superintendent when Ned Broy was made Commissioner of the Guards.

Mick asked me about another detective who was then on political work. I had been very friendly with this man while he confined his attentions to ordinary detective work, but ignored him when I observed him on duty outside Sinn Fein Headquarters with Detective Sergeant Smith who was later

shot at Drumcondra because of his activity against the I.R.A. He discussed me with a colleague of mine and said he felt his position, that he was put on political work against his will and did not like it. I told this to Mick Collins. He said: "My information is that he did not like the work at first, but that he is getting to like it". I said I would have a talk with him. I availed of the first opportunity I had to invite the detective to have a drink and discussed his position with him. He told me that he had done nothing against us, that on one occasion Smith had information that ammunition was stored in a certain house and brought him along to search. While Smith was searching one room he directed him to search another. In a corner of the room, covered with a sack, he found the ammunition. He put back the sack in the presence of the owner and reported a negative search. Smith, however, he said, had definite information about the ammunition and on searching the room himself found the ammunition. When I informed Mick Collins of this, he expressed doubt. I told him that, as the man who witnessed the occurrence was in Mountjoy, the story could be tested. Anyhow, this detective resigned.

One night I was in the reporters' room of the 'Independent' the offices then being near Liffey St. I received a message that I was wanted at Bannon's licensed premises across the street. As I entered the premises, I noticed a man watching me from a doorway. Mr. Bannon said there was a man outside who wanted to see me. On going out, I was approached by Detective Officer McNamara, who said that he had rushed over from the Castle and had not time to go any further. The Castle authorities, he said, had information as to where Mick Collins was staying that night and he asked me to convey the information. I thanked him and went immediately to Vaughan's Hotel with the information. I was not aware until that night that McNamara was one of Mick's men in the Castle, but I saw

him one day seeing off a young girl at Kingsbridge and took particular notice of the Sinn Féin newspapers which his friend carried openly in her hand. Had I been a British agent, McNamara would, I am sure, have come under suspicion because of this fact.

I knew that Dave Neligan had returned to the Detective Branch as an I.R.A. agent by a ruse after his resignation from the Force. I met him occasionally and attended a theatre with him on one occasion. Later, he told me that I had become a suspect and that there might be occasions when he would not show a sign of recognition.

After my release from Mountjoy at the end of 1920, I received no attention from the British forces until shortly before the Truce when 11 Great Denmark St., where I had stayed until the time of my arrest, was raided by Auxiliaries. After a search of the house, they asked where I was and were told that I had left the country. Apparently the military, who had arrested me, and the police forces worked independently and the organisation of both forces was rather lacking in efficiency.

Early in 1921, Mountjoy Square was encircled by military who carried out a house-to-house search, all the male residents having been ordered into the square. A colleague of mine who carried a British military headquarters pass remarked to me that he was all right, he could get through with his pass, but that I was stuck as I had not such an advantage. He left me and, when the raid was lifted, that night and I reached my office, there was no trace of my colleague. Days passed and minute inquiries failed to unearth him. The position became such that a police officer remarked that he took a very serious view of the case. Eventually he turned up and explained what had happened.

When he approached the military with his pass, he was ordered into a house near Parnell St. where there was a guard. Nobody took the slightest notice of him and he was kept there along with some others until the military were leaving, when they were ordered into a lorry and brought to the Castle and placed in cells. There was no record of the arrests. After some days he asked a soldier to bring a note to Basil Clarke, who was in charge of British propaganda in the Castle. The soldier did so and Basil Clarke, who was one of those who had been trying to trace him, had him released at once. I had the laugh on my friend but only by a narrow squeak, as I barely escaped arrest myself. While searching the hotel where we stayed, a British officer came on some rather incriminating documents in my trunk and inquired for me. An old man who was staying in the house, innocently pointing to me in the crowd in the Square, said: "Mr. Knightly, you are wanted inside". On going inside, the officer said he was arresting me because of the documents. I said: "I have already been arrested over these". He asked me when. I said: "I have just been released". "Very well", he said after a pause, "I will let you go".

When H.T. Quinlisk, a former member of the Casement Brigade, was shot by the I.R.A. in Cork, his body remained unidentified for some days. I had been informed by Tom Cullen of the shooting, but dare not disclose the information. One night a comrade of Quinlisk's in the Casement Brigade came to the 'Independent' office with the information that, in his opinion, the body was that of Quinlisk. I interviewed the man, who was very perturbed, and, on the strength of his story, I was able to report the identity of the man whose body was found in a marsh in Cork.

Sometime before my arrest in 1920, Dick McKee told me that they had a chance of capturing a British armoured car

and asked me for advice as to its concealment if they succeeded in the venture. I suggested an arrangement with a Co. Dublin farmer to run it into a hayshed and build a bench of hay over it, making sure to leave no tyre marks. Recently I asked Mick Lynch, who was in charge in North Co. Dublin, what they had proposed doing with the armoured car which was captured at the Dublin abattoir for the attempted rescue of Sean McEoin from Mountjoy, and which broke down on the Howth road when heading for the county. He said he had arranged to have it concealed in a hayshed exactly as I had suggested to Dick McKee, a rather remarkable coincidence. When I told Mick Lynch of my suggestion, he said that had reference to an armoured car at Phibsboro. On the 14th October 1920, an unsuccessful attempt was made to capture this car. One I.R.A. man was killed in the attempt.

Following Sean McKeon's arrest, the 'Weekly Bulletin' issued by the Propaganda Department was devoted largely to General McKeon's exploits and praise of his leadership. By arrangement with Erskine Childers, a few trusted pressmen received copies of the "Bulletin" each week at appointed places. On this occasion the appointment was at Barry's hotel. I looked over my copy and remarked to Mr. Childers that I thought such an issue was unwise. When he asked me for my reasons, I said in the first place none of our newspapers would publish the matter contained in the issue; secondly, that there was every likelihood of its reaching the Castle authorities and that drawing attention to Sean McKeon in such a manner might dispose them to hurry his courtmartial. I suggested that a striking statement on the lines of the 'Bulletin' at his courtmartial would get wide publicity and might help to save his life. Mr. Childers saw the force of my argument and took back the copies which he had distributed. Usually Mr. Childers arrived at the appointed place on a bicycle.

Piaras Beaslai has dealt in detail with famous prison breaks - the escape of Mr. R.C. Barton from Mountjoy, the bog break from Mountjoy in which he, J.J. Walsh and others participated, and the escape of six prisoners from Strangeways Prison, Manchester.

I had first-hand news of these matters from Rory O'Connor, who played a large part in the escapes. It was he who designed the ladders used for scaling the walls.

After the big break from Mountjoy he dashed to me breathless to the 'Independent' office to give me the news. He was very excited and I had to allow him to rest on a chair for a little while before taking particulars of the escape. He brought me news of Mr. Barton's escape and the story was being read in the 'Evening Herald' while the prison authorities were still searching the prison for Mr. Barton.

Next day, Michael Collins informed me that on the previous evening an 'Irish Times' reporter had called on Superintendent Brien in the Detective Office to get particulars of the escape. The Superintendent, who appeared annoyed, said: "Go over to the 'Herald' office; they know more about it than we do." "No wonder they would", the 'Irish Times' reporter replied, "when they have a Frongoch man on the staff". The Superintendent asked me who he was and was informed that it was a "fellow named Knightly". I asked Michael Collins who the man was and he said: "I didn't get his name, but I will find out and let you know". Without delay, he let me know the name of the reporter, a man who subsequently joined the "Hansard" staff in Belfast. I worked in close association with this man at subsequent meetings but refrained from showing the least sign of ill-will. Any hint of his action would, of course, bring my friend in the Detective Office - Ned Broy - under suspicion.

After the Manchester escape, I had a note from Mick Collins

asking if I would like to see Austin Stack. He knew that Austin and I were close friends. I replied in the affirmative and was directed to the house of Batt O'Connor, Donnybrook, where I visited Austin Stack on the night that "Johnnie" Barton, a famous Dublin detective, was shot. The first question Austin asked me was: "Can you tell me why Johnnie Barton was shot? The whole city is upset and even Mrs. O'Connor is worried". I replied that I could not say but I presumed that he had agreed to do political work. I learned later that that evening he had agreed to do political work and was shot a quarter of an hour later.

As I entered Batt O'Connor's house, Mr. Barton, who was, of course, then on the run, was about to leave with a bucket of paste and some posters to do a bit of bill-posting.

I discussed the escape with Stack and informed him that had I known it was coming off and had news of the previous arrangement which miscarried owing to the height of the wall - I think it was 19 feet - and the absence of a ladder to fix the rope ladder - a kind of chair arrangement which caught on the top of the wall, allowing a rope ladder to drop on the inside. Stack remarked that it was an extraordinary thing that everyone who had called at Batt O'Connor's had news of the escape plan and that it was a wonderful tribute to them that no knowledge of it had reached the British authorities,

By a strange coincidence the other escapees visited Batt O'Connor's house that night and there was an interesting exchange of experiences.

Piaras Beaslai in his story of the escape referred to a curious sequel - the visit to a house in the suburbs where they were lodged by an unknown young Irish lady, who stated that she had an important message for the heads of the Sinn Féin organisation and was actually trying to assist two of Beaslai's comrades. These two men told me that Stack and

Beaslai were sent off in a taxi and that they were handed two bicycles and told to follow. They soon lost the taxi and cycled along aimlessly to the suburbs. They stopped a girl and asked if she could direct them to a Catholic Presbytery. They were hoping to find an Irish priest who might help them. She actually brought them to the house where Stack and Beaslai were lodged.

The two remaining prisoners were likewise lost, but found a Catholic Presbytery. They explained their position to the Parish Priest who happened to be an Englishman. He became very upset and said that he would have nothing to do with them. At that moment a young Curate, a cousin of mine, appeared on the scene and, on discovering the position, took over. He said that he would take responsibility. He fixed them up for the night and had them transferred to safe quarters next day, giving one of them his overcoat which he was wearing when telling me the story.

After Mr. de Valera's escape from Lincoln Prison, he, too, was brought to Manchester and his whereabouts were kept a close secret, but little time had elapsed before I discovered his new address and shocked Harry Boland by disclosing the information.

Mr. de Valera's benefactor was a Tralee man. He had a brother in the Irish Guards who happened to be on leave and visited his brother in Manchester. Travelling to Tralee he let a friend of mine, the late Joe Harrington, another newspaper man, into the secret that Mr. de Valera was a guest of his brother in Manchester. I called on Harry Boland and casually asked when Mr. de Valera was returning from Manchester. He was surprised and was still more surprised when I told him with whom he was staying. "My God", he said, "how did you hear that? Only two men in Ireland were aware of it" -

apparently Mick Collins and himself. I enjoyed the situation saying there was nothing unknown to reporters. I kept him in suspense for a little while before telling him what happened.

Later I discussed the matter with Mr. de Valera and he remarked: "The morning that man left for Ireland I said he would tell somebody or burst".

I am not aware if the story of Rory O'Connor's own escape from the Curragh has been told, but I had better relate it as I heard it from Rory himself.

There was a big demonstration on a Sunday evening outside Mountjoy prison on the eve of executions. I was proceeding by the Mater Hospital in the company of an American journalist when I met Rory. I had known that he was a prisoner at the Curragh and I asked: "When did you get out?" Speaking in his usual slow manner, he said: "Ah, I escaped yesterday". I asked if anybody else had escaped and he said: "Yes, a man named Ryan escaped with me". "How did you manage it?" I asked. He explained that there were some men working in the camp. He supplied one of them with money and asked him to bring in two suits of dungarees. He did so. "And as the men left the camp yesterday", he said "Saturday being the half-day, we donned the dungarees and walked out with them". It was as simple as that.

Later, Mr. R.C. Barton was re-arrested and brought before a Court of British officers in Ship St. barracks. He was conveyed to Ship St. from Mountjoy Prison in a closed van which was kept under close observation by the I.R.A. A rescue attempt on the return journey was arranged. I was attending the trial as a newspaper representative and I was asked to convey a message to Mr. Barton to sit at the right top corner of the van going to Mountjoy. The trial was in a rather small room. Mr. Barton was seated facing the Court between two British soldiers, also seated on two chairs

so close that my task seemed an impossible one. Fortunately the Press table was immediately behind the prisoner and, seizing a chair, I placed it immediately behind Mr. Barton. We sat back to back and, as I turned around to catch the evidence, I whispered into Mr. Barton's ear, a word at a time, "sit - right - top - corner - van - going - to - Mountjoy". The Tommies could not catch the words and I felt that even if they realised that some communication was taking place they would not have the nerve to draw the attention of the Court to it.

Unfortunately, however, the rescue plan miscarried. It was decided to convey the officers to "try" Mr. Barton back to their barracks in the van before making the journey to Mountjoy. As it left the Castle Yard it was taken for granted that Mr. Barton was the occupant and word of its departure was conveyed to the rescue party at Berkeley Road. As the van approached what was known as "J.J. Walsh's corner", a ladder was carried slowly across the road. The van had to pull up and on inspection it was found to contain the officers. It was allowed to proceed. An armoured car was later sent to Ship St. to convey the prisoner to Mountjoy. The newspapers, reporting the incident at Berkeley Road, stated that it was thought to be an attempt to rescue Mr. Barton who was courtmartialled at Ship St. earlier.

I did not know that Mr. Barton was aware of my identity and gave the matter little or no thought until I called at the Gresham Hotel to make an inquiry some time after Mr. Barton's release from Portland Prison shortly before the Truce. A room in the Gresham had been used in connection with the peace negotiations. I knocked at the door and a voice said: "Come in". As I entered I saw Mr. Barton in company with Mr. D.L. Robinson. He jumped up and said: "Hello, Hello". I felt embarrassed, thinking he was making a mistake, but was

relieved to hear him say to Mr. Robinson: "This is Mr. Knightly. He risked his neck for me". I asked him if he had got my message and he said: "Yes, every word, quite clearly".

Signed: Michael Knightly
(Michael Knightly)

Date: 27/4/53.
27/4/53.

Witness: M. F. Ryan Comdt.
(M.F. Ryan) Comd't.

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