

Titus, a Comrade of the Cross  
A TALE OF THE CHRIST FOR THE CHRISTMAS-TIDE.

BY FLORENCE M. KINGSLEY.  
CHAPTER XVII.

"We have very little to do so far," said the child; "only a few farthings." And he rattled the coins in a small brass cup, and held out to a passer-by: "Wilt thou not have pity on a blind man? No, he hath gone by without even looking."

"Well, child," said the blind man wearily, "Thou knowest that there are so many of us beggars in Jerusalem."

"But not born blind," insisted the child in a tone of pride. The two were sitting in one of the beautiful porches of the temple; assuredly a pleasant spot, for the pillared portico sheltered them from the sun, and the breeze softly in this lofty place, when the heat in the city below was well-nigh unbearable.

Day after day they came there, the man and the tiny child with his dark curls blowing about his eyes. Early in the morning they waited for the temple gates to open. Once admitted, they sat all day under the shadow of the portico; at noon sharing the scanty meal of bread and olives which the man brought in his wallet, and at night trudging home with the earnings of the day.

To the blind man the temple was home, and he loved it. The child had told him, over and over, of the wonderful great stones of pure, white marble of which it was built; of its courts shining with gold, and of the priests in their gorgeous robes. They could hear the chanting of the almost never-ending service from their place on the porch, and catch spicy whiffs of the incense, as it floated out on the warm air. Morning and evening, the child led him into the court of the temple, where he took part with the congregation in the service of the hour; and now, as he sat leaning back against one of the great pillars, fragments of the prayer of adoration came back to him:

"Blessed be Thou by whose word the world was created: blessed be Thou for ever! Blessed be Thou who hast made all out of nothing! Blessed be He Who has pity on the earth; blessed be He Who has pity on his creatures; blessed be He Who richly rewards His saints; blessed be He Who lives forever, and is forever the same; blessed be He the Saviour and Redeemer. Blessed be Thy name; blessed be Thou, O Eternal! Our God, King of the universe! All-merciful God and Father."

"Ah, if He would but have pity on me—a blind, useless ciod! Yet am I strong, and shall live—yes, live long, and beg." And the man silently clenched his strong hands.

"Here are more passers-by," said the child. "Have mercy, kind masters! Have mercy on one born blind!" The quick ear of the blind man heard the steps of a number of men coming along the marble pavement. Now as the cry of the child shrilled forth, they paused.

"Master, who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The head of the blind beggar sank upon his breast, as he heard these words. The old question!—had he not heard it from his youth? "I am accursed," he thought. "He Who hath pity on His creatures, yet punishes the innocent for the guilty."

But what was it the rabbi was saying? Assuredly something new and strange: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

"The light of the world!" The man had raised his head now, and was straining his sightless eyes in the direction of the voice. Presently he felt the touch of something cool and soft on his sunken lids.

"Go," said the mysterious voice again, "wash in the pool of Siloam." And the sound of the steps died away.

"Come!" said the beggar, rising and stretching forth his hand to the child. "Come!"

"They gave us no money," said the child complainingly. "And He put wet clay on thine eyelids. Why did He do it?"

"Hold thy peace, child!" said the man. "Take me to the pool. I will wash even as He bade me."

Down—down—the marble steps went the twin.

"I heard them call the man Jesus," said the child softly. Then after a moment, he cried:

"Stay, master! Here is the pool. Kneel down; I will hold thy robe. Now if thou wilt reach out thy hand, thou canst touch the water."

The man plunged his hand and arm deep into the gurgling water, and dashed it over his eyes. Then he drew back silently, with so strange a look on his face, that the child cried out:

"What is it? What hath happened to thee?"

The man now turned and regarded him steadfastly. "Thou art the child," he said at length.

"I am he who hath led thee forth at morning and at evening," answered the child, trembling.

"Thou shalt lead me forth no more. Thanks be to the Eternal One! From henceforth I shall care for thee."

"Wilt thou come with us before the Pharisees, and confess this thing, even as thou hast told it to us?"

"Assuredly," answered the beggar. "I will gladly make known my deliverance. Would that I knew my Del deliverer, that I might kiss the hem of His garment!"

"I believe him not!" said one of the group of neighbors who were gathered around him. "Tis one who resembleth the blind man, and that marvelously."

"But why should he lie to us in the matter?" questioned another. "What would it profit him?"

"Nay," said the man earnestly. "I lie not; I am he that was born blind, and my eyes were opened, even as I declared unto you."

"Most worthy and revered members of the council," said a Pharisee, whose pious mind, broad phylactery, and flowing robes, marked him a zealous religionist. "I have brought before thee, for action in thy behalf, in that this miracle was unlawfully wrought upon the Sabbath day, it merits thy consideration."

"Thou has done wisely, good sir," said Caiaphas, with a stately inclination of the head. Then turning to the beggar, he continued: "Speak, fellow, and make known the cause for our judgment."

"I have little to tell," said the man simply. "One who is called Jesus made clay and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' I went and washed, and I received sight."

This statement was received with a few murmurs and solemn shakings of the head by the august assembly. Finally one spoke:

"This man, Jesus, is not of God, because He keepeth not the Sabbath day. He hath repeated this offense many times already, as is known to all of us."

"But how," said Nicodemus, "can a man that is a sinner do such a miracle as this Jesus?"

"I think that He is a prophet," replied the man.

"Let me advise," said another member of the council, "that an officer be sent to fetch the parents of this man, that we may question them of the matter."

This being approved and acted upon, the members of the council engaged in whispered consultation one with another, while the beggar stood apart and watched the scene with his quick, bright eyes.

Presently the officer returned, accompanied by an old man, and a woman heavily veiled. As they entered the room, they cast a furtive glance at their son, then made humble obeisance to the assembled dignitaries.

Caiaphas regarded them in silence for a moment, then demanded with a frown: "Is this man in our presence thy son, who ye say was born blind? How is it that he doth now see?"

The old man again made obeisance; and spreading abroad his hands, and lifting his shoulders apologetically, answered: "Most noble lord, we know that this is our son; and that he was born blind. But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not. He is of age, therefore ask him; he shall speak for himself."

"Stand forth!" said Caiaphas imperiously to the beggar.

The man came forward and stood beside his parents. The high priest looked at him threateningly, but the bright eyes did not flinch.

"Thou shalt be dealt with after thy deserts, if thou hast not a care, at length said the high priest. Confess the truth concerning this matter, and give God the glory for thy cure—if such it be; for we know that the man Jesus is a sinner."

He had had time to look about him; and saw that, while the appointments of this home were very humble, it was as daintily pure and neat as a flower. And now he looked more closely at the woman herself. She was tall and of noble proportions; and though past middle age, her face was beautiful, with its clear, hazel eyes, firm yet tender mouth, and wavy reddish-brown hair, slightly tinged with gray.

"Thou art weary," she continued, with a smile which irradiated her face like sunshine. "Thou must eat, then thou shalt sleep also. So saying, she set before the boy a wooden bowl containing milk, and some cakes of barley-bread. "Tell me," she said, when the boy had finished, "how is it that ye are traveling alone, and so far from home?"

For thy mother tells me that ye dwelt in Capernaum. Thus enquiring, the boy poured forth the whole story, telling the wondrous tale of his healing by the Nazarene.

"We had to go away from Capernaum, as thou seest," he said. "And we came to Nazareth, because I wanted to see His home. I thought perhaps we should find Him here. Dost thou know this Jesus?"

The woman's eyes filled with tears, yet again a smile transfigured her face, kindling it to a beauty almost divine.

"He is my Son," she said simply. "And this is His home."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Toward the close of an early spring day two travellers were toiling up the steep, rocky path which led to the little mountain village of Nazareth. The way was rough and difficult, and the woman sighed painfully, as she moved slowly onward; the boy turned and looked anxiously at her face, which gleamed white in the waning light.

"Thou art weary, mother, we should have stopped for the night in the village below. Sit here, and rest awhile."

With a sigh of relief, the woman sank down on the rough stone which the boy had covered with his sheep-skin coat.

"Ye," she said at length, with another long-drawn breath, which was almost a groan. "I am very tired; my strength faileth me for toiling up these hills."

"Thou wilt feel better presently, when thou hast had time to rest," said the boy tenderly. "We have wandered too widely of late; it may be that we can bide in yonder village till thou art stronger. Is it not beautiful here? See the hills, how green they are; and the flowers—let me gather some for thee while thou art resting."

The woman smiled patiently. "Dost thou not need to rest, my Stephen?"

"I am never tired now, mother," said the boy, gayly, springing up as he spoke.

The mother's eyes followed him fondly, as he climbed a steep bank for some bright, lured blossoms. "The dear one!" she murmured to herself. "He is almost a man now, but he hath the heart of a loving child still."

"Look, mother!" said the lad as he laid a great sheaf of blossoms in her lap. "Here are roses—pink, white and yellow; and nigella too, and these tiny yellow flowers, like little stars. From the high rock where I gathered these pink roses, I could see the scarlet blossoms of the pomegranate, and orange trees as white as snow."

"What thou dost not like to live in such a spot? I can work hard now, and surely I could earn enough to buy bread for thee while thou art here."

"Nay, mother," said the boy, "I do not wish to leave thee. I shall be ready within half an hour," said Titus briefly. "Thou wilt give me plain directions how to find the place?" he added.

"I will do more," said the old man, looking thoughtful. "I will give thee Asa for company; he knoweth the way, for he hath been there many times on the like errand."

"And when he on errands of the like, went he alone, or did another go with him?" asked Titus.

"He went alone," replied the old man unguardedly. Then, seeing the angry flush on the cheek of Titus, he added soothingly: "Thou knowest that the country is infested with robbers; surely it would be safer for two than for one."

"If thou canst not trust me to go alone, I will not go at all; let old Asa take the bag, and go as heretofore."

"Nay, nay, lad! Now that thou in an unseasonably temper; thou must bridle thy tongue and thy temper if thou wouldst do well. Did I not tell thee that I trust thee? Nay, more—I love thee, lad, as if thou wert mine own son; but something tells me that thou shouldst not go forth alone to-day."

He had had time to look about him; and saw that, while the appointments of this home were very humble, it was as daintily pure and neat as a flower. And now he looked more closely at the woman herself. She was tall and of noble proportions; and though past middle age, her face was beautiful, with its clear, hazel eyes, firm yet tender mouth, and wavy reddish-brown hair, slightly tinged with gray.

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"He is my Son," she said simply. "And this is His home."

CHAPTER XIX.

"Thou hast won favor in the sight of thy master, young man; I will tell thee that. As for myself, thou hast been faithful in thy duties above most that have come under my authority, and I am disposed to befriend thee. I am waxing old now, and the labors of mine office, in respect to thee, I can no longer continue to do well, and art discreet and wise, I see no reason why in time thou shouldst not become steward in my place. For I have been proud with my wages; and have bought a vineyard of mine own, whither I can retire when old age shall overtake me."

The speaker was Benoni; he was sitting at ease on a bench in the garden, while Titus stood before him respectfully.

The lad flushed with pleasure at these words, but he made no reply, for he saw that the old man had more to say.

"I have an important commission for thee," continued Benoni, "and I entrust it to thee by special request from the most noble Jairus himself—for I do not another to perform it. Not that I do not trust thee, but that thou lackest wisdom, by reason of thy youth. The commission is this: that thou shouldst visit the vineyard which lieth a little beyond Tiberias, carrying with thee the moneys which shall be paid to the man Caleb, whom thou wilt find in charge of the vineyard. He will dispose of them according to the directions which I have written herein, and which thou shalt deliver to him together with this bag."

In the bag are the moneys of which I spoke; thou must secure it to thy person, and go heavily armed. I shall place at thy disposal a fleet-footed mule, and the journey can be made between now and moonrise, if thou gettest speedily on thy way."

"I shall be ready within half an hour," said Titus briefly. "Thou wilt give me plain directions how to find the place?" he added.

"I will do more," said the old man, looking thoughtful. "I will give thee Asa for company; he knoweth the way, for he hath been there many times on the like errand."

"And when he on errands of the like, went he alone, or did another go with him?" asked Titus.

"He went alone," replied the old man unguardedly. Then, seeing the angry flush on the cheek of Titus, he added soothingly: "Thou knowest that the country is infested with robbers; surely it would be safer for two than for one."

"If thou canst not trust me to go alone, I will not go at all; let old Asa take the bag, and go as heretofore."

"Nay, nay, lad! Now that thou in an unseasonably temper; thou must bridle thy tongue and thy temper if thou wouldst do well. Did I not tell thee that I trust thee? Nay, more—I love thee, lad, as if thou wert mine own son; but something tells me that thou shouldst not go forth alone to-day."

"But am I not strong?—fit to meet robbers if there be any?" demanded Titus, drawing himself up to his full height, and throwing back his broad shoulders. "I know the way of robbers, and their haunts; and thou art the link, my good Benoni," he added to himself; then aloud, "The excellent Asa would actually be in the way, should we be unfortunate enough to fall among thieves. I can imagine him in the grasp such as one as Dumachus."

"What sayest thou?" asked Benoni abstractedly.

"Titus bit his lip. "It is time for me to be off, good Benoni," he said. "And if it please thee, I would not be burdened with the company of the worthy Asa."

"Well, thou shalt have the way in the matter; and may Jehovah protect thee."

"Tis a pious wish, assuredly; and I will back it up with my stout staff and a brace of knives," said Titus, laughing.

hill road. It was a blithe spring morning; the sunshiny lay warm and bright on field and vineyard, green with that vivid emerald tint seen only in spring. The roadsides were gay with blossoms, pink, yellow and blue, over which floated great butterflies—living blossoms. Birds, busy with nest-building, fitted hither and thither in hedge and thicket, while overhead the lark mellowed a thousand acres of sky with melody."

Titus drew in long breaths of the fragrant air, then throwing back his curly head, he began to sing lustily. Assuredly 'twere a good thing to be alive and young, on such a morning. Towards noon, he began to leave behind the region of vineyards and cultivated fields alive with busy peasants, and entered upon a comparatively uninhabited and desolate tract of country. Here the narrow road, or bridge track—for it was little more—wound among rugged hills, amidst dense thickets of oleander, tamarisk and wild olive trees. Titus knew the place well. He was silent now and alert. Presently he stopped, and fastening the mule, crept cautiously through the underbrush to a little open space, which was perfectly concealed from the roadway. Here a tiny spring, clear as crystal and ice-cold, gushed out of the side of the hill, trickled into a rocky basin beneath, then overflowing, lost itself among the flowers and grasses, which grew lush and rank in this favored spot.

Titus laid his ear to the ground and listened; then he climbed a tall oak and looked out over the forest. From his lofty perch he could see the road by which he had come, winding like a narrow ribbon along the hillside; the fresh green leaves dancing in the sunshine; glimpses of blue water hundreds of feet below him; while out and away, beyond the hills flecked with shadows, lay Hermon like a snowy cloud on the clear horizon. He slid down the tree well satisfied; and pushing through the branches, seized the bridle of the mule.

"Thou shalt have water, and that the best thou hast ever tasted!" he cried cheerily, slipping the sleek neck of the animal; then having attended to the wants of the beast, he dropped down on the soft turf and began to refresh himself with the contents of his wallet.

The spot was deliciously cool and swept the silence broken only by the distant twitter of birds, the trickling of the water, and the steady munching of the mule, intent upon his noonday meal. Titus felt so drowsiness stealing over him; he glanced sleepily at his beast, and seeing that he had disposed of only about half of his provender, he stretched himself out comfortably, and pillowing his head on his arm, fell fast asleep.

How long he slept he did not know, but he awoke with a dim sense that something was wrong. Moving unasily, he opened his eyes; then the full extent of his folly burst upon him. He was bound securely hand and foot. Against a tree trunk near by, lounged Dumachus, regarding him with a hideous leer of triumph, while the rest of the band stood, or sprawled at full length on the ground, around him.

His awakening drew the signal for a burst of loud laughter and mocking jeers.

"Art thou refreshed, my pretty youth?" said one.

And another: "In truth we did not think to find thee here; but 'tis an old tryst, and well known to thee. Thou wert awaiting us, no doubt."

Titus made an ineffectual struggle to free himself from his bonds, glancing fiercely at his captors as he did so.

"With thy mule and thy money-bag, thou art quite a pretty prize," quoth Dumachus, shaking the bag which he held in his hand, till the coins within clinked musically.

"And all the more welcome, since we have had nothing but bad luck of late," growled another. "We must push on to Jerusalem without further delay; if all goes well there we shall soon see an end to it," said Dumachus. "This,"—giving the bag another shake—"will serve us for the present."

"Shall I loose the lad?" asked Gaius, with whom Titus had always been the prime favorite. "Loose him? No!" roared Dumachus. "I have a score to settle with him first. Some time ago," he added, planting himself in front of Titus, and gazing at him ferociously. "I had occasion to scourge my son Stephen for disobedience; whilst I was so scourging him, someone stung me with a blow, and I was helpless. 'Tis he!"

"Aye, 'twas handsomely done too," broke in Gaius with a huge laugh. "He lay there shrieking like a demonia, till I myself happened along and loosed him. By my faith! he was so securely bound, that he might have lain there yet, had the dogs spared him."

"'Twas the fate that thou didst intend for Stephen," said Titus, bailing with indignation at the remembrance. "So thou wert the one who did it! I knew it, thou dog of a Jew!" hissed Dumachus.

Then, quite beside himself with rage, he hurled his long, two-edged knife at the helpless boy. It barely missed his head, striking with a dull thud the bole of the tree just behind him, where it stuck fast, quivering with the force of the blow.

"What dost thou mean, man?" cried Gaius, starting forward. "Wouldst thou murder the lad for a trifle like that? Thou own son, too—as thou hast always declared."

"I tell thee he is not my son. He is an accursed Jew and I hate him!" shrieked Dumachus.

"Tis no news to any of us," said Gaius, with a short laugh. "But thou shalt not murder him, for all that. What sayest thou?—Shall I loose him and let him go? Or shall we take him with us to Jerusalem?"

"We will take him to Jerusalem," said Dumachus sullenly, pulling his knife from the trunk of the tree, and cutting the cords which bound the lad's feet. "I shall ride the mule; as for this fellow, let him try to escape me, and I will kill him with my hands!"

The whole party was presently under way, two of the men going ahead as scouts, Titus walking with bound hands between two of the others, while the remainder of the band, with Dumachus riding comfortably on the mule in their midst, brought up the rear.

Titus was too much wrapped up in his own unhappy thoughts to pay any heed to his companions. "Fool that I was," he thought, "to sleep in that place of all others! But I made so sure that they were nowhere about. Why did I not take the other road? What will Benoni think when I fail to come to-night?—when he finds that I never reached the vineyard with the money? If they had only taken me after I had paid it!" And he groaned aloud.

"Do the cords lurk thy wrists?" asked one of the men kindly enough.

"No," said Titus shortly; then, with a gleam of hope, "Thou wert always my friend, Gaius—wilt thou not help me to escape?"

"Thou talkest like a fool, boy! Why dost thou wish to escape from us? We are thy friends; thou hast passed many a merry day in our company ere now. Use thy wits to placate our worthy chief yonder, and all will yet be well with thee."

"Nay; that I cannot do," said Titus sullenly. "He hates me; and for my part, I hate him. I wish I had killed him the day he beat Stephen."

"The world might have spared him," said the man, chuckling. "And I doubt not, 'twould have been better for him in the end."

After a pause, Titus turned to his companion abruptly: "Canst thou tell me who I am? Thou didst hear him twice call me a Jew."

"Now thou askest me something I fain would know myself," replied the man thoughtfully. "For I doubt not that a handsome sum would be paid for thy return. I opine that thou wert stolen from Jerusalem; for when I first fell in with the worthy Dumachus, he had recently come from Judea, and was a stranger in these parts. Thou wert then about three years of age; once in my presence thou didst strike Dumachus in a fit of pique, because he called himself thy father."

Titus made no reply. "I am glad I am not the son of yonder brute," he thought gloomily. "But whose son am I? He hath taught me to hate the Jews. I am a Jew. Stephen is not my brother; and mother—is not mother. She must hate me, too, for she hath known this thing, and kept it from me all these long, unhappy years."

It was night now, and lifting his eyes, he saw the moon rising, large and yellow, behind the dark masses of the hills. The hot tears rose to his eyes. "Tis moonrise. Benoni is expecting me now. I shall not come. They will think me—a thief!"

CHAPTER XX.

The band of robbers, with Titus always closely guarded, pushed on as rapidly as possible toward Jerusalem, travelling chiefly at night by the light of the moon, which was now at its full. Daytimes they skulked in thickets or ravines, lying in wait for their prey. Several unucky travellers thus fell into their clutches during the journey; these were promptly stripped of their possessions, their subsequent fate depending upon their behavior during the stripping process. If they submitted quietly, they were allowed to go, albeit half naked. But woe to the man who dared to resist, or make any outcry! A dozen ready knives quickly quieted him, the wicked old saying, "Dead men tell no tales," being a favorite maxim with Dumachus.

At dawn of the fourth day, they reached the hills lying to the west of Jerusalem, and encamped in one of the narrow valleys for a few hours of rest and refreshment.

"I shall go into the city alone," said Dumachus, after he had eaten. "Rest of you will await me here. Let there be no disturbance amongst you, lest we be foiled in our purpose ere it be undertaken."

Then he drew Gaius aside, and talked with him in a low tone for a few moments. Titus felt sure that the conversation referred to him, but he made no sign; he hoped in the excitement there he had escaped. His brain was already teeming with vague, impossible plans for seeking out his parents—if indeed they were to be found in Jerusalem—and for making himself known to them. How he was to do this he did not know; but he was full of unreasoning hope.

After some hours Dumachus returned. "All is well," he announced shortly, but with an air of triumph. Then after draining a cup of wine, he threw himself down in the shade and slept heavily.

The men conversed in low tones, snatches of their conversation at times reaching the ears of Titus.

"There he already above five hundred men in the plot; 'tis sure to succeed."

"Will the attempt be made to-night?"

"Before the moon rises—when 'tis dark."

"We shall force the temple gates with ease. 'Tis the plan of Barabbas to tear down the golden eagle from the inner gate. Herod hath set it up; 'tis an abomination in the eyes of the Jews."

"What care we for the golden eagle, or for the Jews! 'Tis plunder we want!"

"Hist! Once inside the gates, man, 'twere good hard with us if we cannot secure some of the golden vessels with which the temple is crammed. Then there is the other."

Here they lowered their voices, so that Titus lost what followed. Then one spoke a little louder.

"Tis there still?"

"Tis a plan worthy of our chief; hath Jesus Barabbas any knowledge of it?"

"Not He! He is a devout Jew, the Son of a rabbi, and thinketh only of the temple of the golden eagle, which, in His notion, desecrate it. He is a turbulent fellow though, and hath an unsavory reputation with the authorities."

"All the more reason why He should have no share in our plunder. We be reasonably unknown in these parts, and can therefore hope to get away. Let them take Him and crucify Him if they like; 'twill be the better for us."

"May Jove help us!" said Gaius devoutly. "I vow a golden chain at every shrine in Greece, if we be successful!"

"I also!" shouted another.

Dumachus roared up at the sound, and rebuking them savagely for their folly, called for wine and food.

As he ate and drank, he now and then cast a fierce look in the direction of Titus. The boy paled, and clenched his hands, while, for he guessed his thoughts, or fancied that he did.

"What shall we do with the lad here?" asked one of the men presently, observing these glances.

"Tis in my mind—'began Dumachus, fixing his red eyes upon Titus with an evil smile.

TO BE CONTINUED.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PURPLE.

You'll be having them next in the soup tureen." Biddy's voice was choked with indignation.

Father Flavin laid down his spoon and spoke reprovingly, though there was a twinkle in his eye. "Tureen, Bridget, he corrected. "There is only one in the house, I believe."

"God bless the innocence of him, muttered Biddy to herself; but about she still expressed her disapproval. "And so the sparrows is to litter up the postbox with their messey eggs and things; and what's to become of the letters, eh?"

"How could I disturb them, and the place suiting them so well? Why, five minutes they've grown out of a knowing in it; they were wrens just now, Bridget." But Biddy had left the room in disgust.

There was no getting a sensible answer out of his Reverence when Biddy was in the question, and, indeed, was more for the honor of the postbox than from any ill-will towards its uninvited inhabitants that the house-keeper remonstrated.

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