HISTORY This Week EP 337: The Radium Girls Fight Back
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. September 12, 1922. I’m Sally Helm.

It started with a toothache.

Mollie Maggia’s dentist took a look at her aching mouth and said she had a run-of-the-mill infection in her gums. It’d probably get better. Only…it didn’t. The dentist removed one tooth. And then another. And another. Each time, the abscesses left behind refused to heal. And strange pains began to appear not just in Mollie’s mouth, but in her hips, her feet. One day in the spring of 1922, Mollie went to see her dentist again. He poked a painful spot on her jaw…the bone gave way…and he realized that he was able to just lift Mollie’s jawbone out of her mouth. That’s how much this girl in her early twenties is falling apart.

One tiny bright spot: Mollie has Edith Mead, a trained nurse who happens to live in the same boarding house Mollie does in Orange, New Jersey. She knows Mollie pretty well. Knows that she’s full of energy and determined to live independently. Knows, too, that she loved her job painting glow-in-the-dark numbers onto watch faces so that you could read them in the night … until she became too sick to continue.

Edith has been doing what she can to keep Mollie comfortable. But on this horrible afternoon in September…she can’t do anything. The infection has spread to Mollie’s throat. And Mollie starts hemorrhaging blood. Edith tries to stop the bleeding, but she can’t. Around five o’clock in the afternoon, Mollie Maggia dies.

Edith Mead never forgot her.

Two years later, someone comes asking about Mollie. A woman from the Consumer’s League of New Jersey. Edith welcomes her in, tells her everything she knows. Because she says, she doesn’t want anything like that to happen to anyone ever again.

Unfortunately…it already has. The reason this investigator is here is because other girls in New Jersey have gotten sick. Other girls have watched their bodies fall apart. And the thing that links all those girls is the job that Mollie Maggia loved. Painting glow-in-the-dark numbers onto watch faces so that you could read them in the night.

Today: The Radium Girls. For years, radium was treated as not only harmless but healthy – how could that happen? And how did a group of women devote themselves to fighting their employers’ lies … and to creating a safer world that they wouldn’t live to see?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Art Fryer lives just up the road from the factory where Mollie Maggia used to work. In Orange New Jersey.

Art Fryer: It was on Alden Street, and it was like an industrial city
Sally Helm: Industry was at the heart of the town. Art remembers that factory whistles set the tempo of the day.

Art Fryer: We used to go to school with their whistle, go to lunch on their whistle. Go in, go in for dinner on their whistle when the guys were being led out of the factory.

Sally Helm: A lot of Art’s family worked in these factories. Including his aunt Grace. Who had worked with Mollie Maggia at the United States Radium Corporation—USRC.

Art Fryer: I lived half a block away from that factory and nobody talked about it. One of the buildings was still there. And when I was a kid, it was a sequin factory.

Sally Helm: Art and his friends would walk around the old building, peeking in at the workers. They’d rummage around in the garbage, looking at the odd detritus that sequins left behind.

Art Fryer: These rolls of iridescent plastic that they had punched the sequence out of.

Sally Helm: Art and his friends would hang out next to the factory. Play kickball.

Art Fryer: So, we didn't have any real good playground facilities on that side of town. So a lot of us would sneak in and play ball on this level, empty lot.

Sally Helm: There are warning signs on the walls but Art’s a kid—so he and the others don’t really pay attention. It’s not like the adults in town are raising an alarm.

Art Fryer: Nobody told us it was radioactive.

Sally Helm: April 6, 1917. Five years before the death of Mollie Maggia. The US has just entered WWI. Art Fryer’s aunt, Grace Fryer, is 18.

Art Fryer: You know, she was kind of the cool kid, a cool aunt, you know, she had a job, she was independent.

Sally Helm: Two of her brothers have gone overseas to fight. And Grace Fryer, wanting to find her own way to contribute to the war effort, has joined USRC. She works as a ‘dial painter’.

Art Fryer: So, there was a little patriotism thing because a lot of this dial painting was for wartime stuff.

Kate Moore: The radium girls were employed to paint watches and clocks with glow in the dark radium paint.

Sally Helm: Kate Moore is an author who’s written a book all about the radium girls. That’s what the dial painters came to be called. Radium Girls.

Kate Moore: They were generally very young women. Many of them were 14, 15, 16 years of age when they're starting in the dial painting studios.

Sally Helm: Grace and the other girls are taught to mix the glowing paint by hand.
Kate Moore: They sort of scatter in a little dash of radium powder with some water and adhesive, and they'd stir it all up.

Sally Helm: It would splash all over their hands and clothes. Once they get the mixture right, they start to paint the numbers onto the watch faces.

It’s meticulous, detailed work. Some of the watch faces were just 3 centimeters across. So, the numbers had to be tiny.

Kate Moore: And so, to get a fine point on the brushes, the women are taught to lip point. So, they literally suck on…Brushes so that the bristles will taper to a point, and they do that over and over again.

Sally Helm: The girls are paid by the watch. So, they have to be precise…but also fast.

Kate Moore: And Grace, by the time she is trained is painting 250 dials every single day.

Sally Helm: 250 dials a day. It’s demanding work but being a dial painter is also considered a great job. One of the best that a working-class girl can get.

Art Fryer: If you were artistic, this was not a bad job. Plus, the money was great.

Kate Moore: And so, it was the job that everybody wanted. And therefore, if there were vacancies, which there were, as the war started, they used to promote the jobs to their sisters and their cousins and their friends.

Sally Helm: The dial painters would say, “hey, come work with me!” Which made the dial pointing studio feel kind of like a big family.

Kate Moore: The company used to organize company picnics. So, there are lots of photographs that I found in the archives of the women, you know, hanging out together.

Sally Helm: There was a small brook that ran behind the studio.

Art Fryer: I have a picture of my aunt with two other girls on boards, over the brook.

Kate Moore: And the girls are swinging their legs, on this makeshift bridge and they're eating ice cream cones.

Art Fryer: It was like an idyllic looking. You know, it's cute.

Sally Helm: So, for the girls working in the studio, there’s a homey family feeling. And to outsiders, the work is actually pretty glamorous.

Kate Moore: Glamorous because the women got to work with this glow in the dark, you know, wander substance that everyone was raving about.
**Sally Helm:** That wonder substance is radium. The element had just been discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie. And the world was obsessed.

**Kate Moore:** Marie Curie herself was fascinated by its glow in the dark shine. You know, she used to be entranced by, “my beautiful radium,” she called it.

**Sally Helm:** It glows. With an eerie pale green light. And it’s not only beautiful. Radium has real medical benefits.

**Kate Moore:** It was found that this immense radiation that it had could destroy cancerous tumors.

**Sally Helm:** And doctor’s figure. Ok it can treat cancer. If it can do that…what else might we be able to do with it? The answer, it seemed, was…radium can do anything.

**Sally Helm:** Got dull hair? Try some Radium and Rainwater shampoo. Have a sinus infection? A product called Radithor promised to give you a dose of ‘Internal sunshine’ and clear that right up.

**Kate Moore:** It was put. Literally everything. You could get radium cosmetics to give you a glowing complexion. You could buy radium lingerie, and jock straps to boost your sex life.

**Sally Helm:** That’s right: lingerie and jockstraps. And it gets worse: ads say that if you really care about your health, and you’re rich enough to afford it, then you should definitely be drinking Radium water.

**Kate Moore:** The recommended dose was five to seven glasses a day.

**Sally Helm:** People are crazy for radium. There was even a popular Broadway tune called the ‘Radium Dance.’ And the dial painters get to work with this magical element all day. They take full advantage.

**Kate Moore:** There was one Italian girl who once painted her teeth with the glow in the dark radium paint, because she had a date that night and she wanted a smile that would knock him dead

**Sally Helm:** The girls would wear their best dresses to work.

**Kate Moore:** So, when they went out dancing afterwards in the music halls and later the speakeasies, the radium girls would be the ones shining and shimmering on the dance floor covered in this glowing radium dust.

**Sally Helm:** Moore told us, the girls looked like glowing spirits when they walked home in the dark. So, their neighbors gave them a nickname, “the Ghost Girls.”

**Kate Moore:** Which is so haunting, given what comes next.

**Sally Helm:** It’s worth picturing the women as they were at this moment. Grace Fryer, for example, who looks straight at the camera in an early photo. There’s a knowingness to her expression. It looks like, if you told her something she found silly, she might just roll her eyes at you. Her hair has the short, tight curls favored by movie actresses then…and she’s wearing what looks to be a pearl-necklace. She’s a confident young woman with a sought-after job.
One day, Grace Fryer is at her workstation in the studio. Trying to keep up with her daily quota of watches. Lipping and dipping her brush over and over again. When, she says, she notices a man walking past. That man is the founder of USRC. And the inventor of the paint that Grace is using.

**Kate Moore:** And he sort of froze as he passed through and looked at Grace as though seeing her for the first time.

**Sally Helm:** He sees her lip-pointing. Popping that radium-covered brush in and out of her mouth.

**Kate Moore:** And he comes over to her…and he says very clearly do not do that. You will get sick.

**Sally Helm:** Von Sochocky knows radium better than anyone else at the company. He’d studied under Marie and Pierre Curie.

**Kate Moore:** He was reportedly completely transfixed by radium.

**Sally Helm:** And he knew it was dangerous. Once while working in the lab, a bit of radium had gotten onto his finger.

**Kate Moore:** Apparently his finger looked as though an animal had gnawed it because, you know, the radium had destroyed the tip of his finger.

**Sally Helm:** Von Sochocky cut off the fingertip to contain the damage…and kept working. So, when he sees Grace Fryer putting his radium paint into her mouth…he issues a warning.

**Kate Moore:** Well, Grace is never one to back down from something that she thinks needs investigating.

**Sally Helm:** She goes straight to her boss. And asks: Is this true? Will I get sick from this paint? Her boss says absolutely not. And Grace believes it. After all, rich people drink radium in their water by choice.

**Kate Moore:** You know, if her manager, if the company are saying it's safe, then it has to be safe. Why wouldn't you think it's safe? If you are reassured that it is.

**Sally Helm:** After World War I ends, Grace decides to leave her job as a dial painter. A lot of other radium girls do the same. They move on to other jobs. They get married, have children, live their lives.

**Kate Moore:** The first sign of something being wrong is so innocent that nobody heated the warning bells.

**Sally Helm:** It’s Mollie Maggia’s toothache.

**Kate Moore:** Just a painful tooth, like any of us could get.

**Sally Helm:** But then there’s the fact that things don’t get better for Mollie when the dentist removes her tooth. In fact, over the course of about a year, things get as bad as they can possibly get.

**Kate Moore:** She was dressed in a white dress. She wore stockings and she had black pumps on her feet and she was buried in a wooden coffin with a silver name plate.
Sally Helm: The doctors had been flummoxed by Mollie’s case. Her terrible falling apart. But after her death, they give her family an explanation. They say: Mollie had syphilis.

Kate Moore: Some of her symptoms do marry syphilis. And of course, this is an independent young woman. Who's left the family home. You know, you can see the moral color to this story, you can see the assumptions that they jumped to.

Sally Helm: But Mollie isn’t the only Radium girl to get sick. Grace Fryer develops mysterious back pains. Her hips start to ache, and she begins to walk with a limp. And other radium girls are having problems that their doctors can’t explain…or cure.

Kate Moore: They're all friends they're related to each other. And so, they start to share that they're all suffering. And it's the women really who first band together and realized that there is a problem.

Sally Helm: Rumors begin circulating in town. People are saying, don't take these jobs and that's beginning to hurt the company. So, they commission a report from some reputable doctors. The report finds the cause of all these problems is radium. That is not the answer. The company was hoping for. They do their best to suppress the report, but the word gets.

Kate Moore: You know, the fact that radium is identified as the problem is. Shocking cutting-edge news.

Sally Helm: The company still has a way to dodge what they see as a burgeoning PR crisis: whatever the report says, there’s still no proof. Because in 1925, doctors don’t know how to measure radiation in the body of a living person.

Kate Moore: You had to have died before anyone could, you know, test your bones and see if it was radiant inside them.

Sally Helm: But…the radium girls don’t want to wait for an autopsy. They want proof now.

Kate Moore: Critical to this step was a doctor called Harrison Martland, who was the chief medical examiner in New Jersey.

Sally Helm: Martland fancies himself a bit of a detective. And the Radium Girls are the medical mystery of the day. He comes up with a groundbreaking diagnostic tool: a breath test to measure the amount of radiation trapped in the women’s lungs.

Kate Moore: And there's another one that reads the radiation coming from their skeletons. So, in the summer of 1925, the girls are called in one by one by Harrison Martland to be tested.

Sally Helm: When it’s Grace Fryer’s turn she walks in and sees…Dr. Sabin Von Sochocky.

Kate Moore: And Grace obviously remembers that warning, that wartime warning that he gave her.

Sally Helm: The warning about putting the paintbrush in her mouth.
**Kate Moore:** “Do not do that. You will get sick.”

**Sally Helm:** And it hits her. He had known all this time that the paint was dangerous. And if he knew all along… then the *company* knew all along, too. Apparently, they hadn’t cared. But now it seems that Von Sochocky, at least, has had a change of heart. Because here he is helping the Radium Girls prove their case. Dr. Martland later says that there’s no way they could have devised these tests without his help.

**Kate Moore:** I think a combination of guilt and scientific curiosity probably motivates him to get involved in the way that he does.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Von Sochocky is helping now. But Grace wonders: why didn’t he do something sooner?

**Kate Moore:** She confronts him. She says, you know, directly, why didn't you tell us?

**Sally Helm:** Von Sochocky deflects. Says, “I tried to warn the corporation about the dangers. But in the end, I had no control over how the painters used the paint.” This isn’t a satisfying answer.

**Kate Moore:** But I think the fact that she was courageous enough at all to ask the question, tells us a lot about her personality.

**Sally Helm:** Grace gets the tests. Martland scans her body with an electrometer. She blow into test tubes to measure the amount of radiation in her lungs. And when the results come back…

**Kate Moore:** It's a huge moment because it's the first time they received definitive scientific evidence that it is radium that is hurting them.

**Sally Helm:** Grace and the others have radiation poisoning. They’re going to die.

**Kate Moore:** But many of the women realize in this moment, as horrifying and tragic as it is for them personally, they realize that it gives them hope as well.

**Sally Helm:** Because with this proof they can hold the company accountable.

**Kate Moore:** They can try and bring this knowledge to the world that actually radium is dangerous. They can try and protect the other workers who are still dial painting.

**Sally Helm:** And protect anyone else who encounters radium in those household and beauty products. In their butter. Their chocolate. Their milk.

The Radium Girls join forces to fight back. On May 18, 1927, five former dial painters file a lawsuit against the United States Radium Corporation.

**Kate Moore:** Grace fryer is leading the charge. She's the one who manages to find a lawyer because so many lawyers turn them down.

**Sally Helm:** But now they have one: Raymond Barry.
Kate Moore: Raymond Barry realizes that they're gonna need all the scientific proof that they can get. And that includes looking again at Molly Maggia's death.

Sally Helm: Did she die from syphilis, as stated on her death certificate? Or was radium to blame? To find out, they need Mollie’s bones. So, they have her body exhumed.

Kate Moore: The coffin was aglow as they lifted it out and exposed the skeleton to the world.

Sally Helm: Doctors take Mollie’s glowing bones to a lab.

Kate Moore: And that test shows that she died of radiant poisoning and there is not a single trace of syphilis in her body.

Sally Helm: Now the women have their evidence. They tell the company: we'll see you in court.

[AD BREAK]

Kate Moore: When the women arrive for court in January 1928, there are flash bulbs going off everywhere. The world's media have, have come to witness what's going on.

Sally Helm: The trial of the Radium Girls is huge international news. Because radium wasn’t just a problem in the US. It was also found in French cosmetics and British boots and stockings.

Kate Moore: So, this is something that concerns the whole world.

Sally Helm: USRC had spent years silencing anybody who might imply that radium caused health problems. They’d hired doctors to give the dial painters clean bills of health. They’d bullied the families of girls who started to ask questions.

They’d even buried the report that they had commissioned when it suggested their employees were being routinely exposed to dangerous levels of radiation. When the trial starts, the company comes out swinging.

Kate Moore: You know, the company is trying everything. It can, every legal argument possible to try and avoid even getting to that question of, is there any guilt involved?

Sally Helm: The first thing they try is to get the case thrown out on a technicality. USRC points out that if you want to sue over a workplace injury suffered in New Jersey, there’s a strict two-year statute of limitations. These injuries happened way more than two years ago. So, the case should be dismissed.

Kate Moore: The women's lawyer, Raymond Barry, he has a very clever interpretation of the two-year statute of limitations.

Sally Helm: Barry tells the court: it’s only been two years since doctors figured out how to confirm that radium poisoning even existed. He said that’s when the clock on the statute of limitations should start ticking. Meaning that the Radium Girls have filed their complaint in the nick of time.
Sally Helm: That argument wins the day. And the trial begins. The radium girls present a mountain of damning evidence, including Dr. Harrison Martland’s research and Mollie Maggia’s glowing bones. The press laps it up.

Kate Moore: You know, people are hanging on their every word, they, you know, newspapers want to speak to them to do interviews with them.

Sally Helm: Grace Fryer and the other girls become celebrities overnight. And then it comes time for Grace to testify.

Kate Moore: She's fairly weak at the time when she takes the stand.

Sally Helm: Her jaw is bandaged from an operation. She needs a metal back brace just to stand.

Kate Moore: Her x-rays have shown that her vertebrae have been crushed by the radium that's inside her spine.

Sally Helm: But, with effort, she pushes through.

Kate Moore: She's incredibly determined, and her testimony is clear and concise and elegant. Exactly what she needs to do to get, you know, to get through the case.

Sally Helm: Grace explains how she was taught to lip-point. And how Sabin Von Sochocky had warned her that lip-pointing might make her sick. Her testimony is devastating. And when it's finished, the defense calls its next star witness: Dr. Sabin Von Sochocky himself. Defense lawyer Raymond Barry is eager to get this testimony on the record.

Kate Moore: Barry is really excited because he thinks this is gonna be the nail in the coffin moment. This is gonna be what wins the case for the girls.

Sally Helm: Remember; Von Sochocky is a foremost expert on radium. Trained by the Curies.

Kate Moore: You know, if anyone knows about it, it's this guy.

Sally Helm: Not to mention he had invented the poison paint and helped develop the tests to prove that the paint—the radium—had made the dial painters sick.

But now: he has a chance to redeem himself. By testifying on the dial painter’s behalf.

Kate Moore: And so, Barry asked, you know, isn't it true that you had warned the company and that you felt you couldn't do anything about it because the dial painters were not in your jurisdiction.

Sally Helm: That’s the way Von Sochocky had explained it to Grace that day in Dr. Martland’s office. But on the stand:

Kate Moore: The doctor replies. Absolutely not. That’s not true.
Sally Helm: He denies it. The courtroom is stunned. And then Von Sochocky compounds his lie, *Not only did I not warn the company,* he says, *I never told Grace Fryer that lip-pointing would make her sick.*

Kate Moore: *He didn't have any memory of the specific warning, because he said the danger was unknown to us. That us is really important because it puts him back on side with the company. He's not saying the danger was unknown to me, he's saying the danger was unknown to us.*

Sally Helm: At the crucial moment, under oath, Von Sochocky betrays the Radium Girls. He’s partially responsible for their deaths and maiming’s but he sides with the company when it counts.

Kate Moore: *It doesn't make any sense. Given the previous assistance that he'd given them, given his previous, you know, support of the fact that this was an occupational disease.*

Sally Helm: What could have made him do such a thing?

It turns out, Von Sochocky was dying, too.

Remember, he’d worked closely with radium for years.

Kate Moore: You know, you can imagine that if you are immering your arm into solutions of radium, you know, that's not going to end well.

Sally Helm: Around the same time the girls were undergoing their tests, on a whim, Von Sochocky had blown into the breath test he’d helped create. And he found, to his horror, that his radiation levels were the highest that test had ever recorded.

Kate Moore: So perhaps his own mortality influenced his decisions perhaps staring death in the face, affected him in some way.

Sally Helm: Moore says: she found no definitive evidence about the *motive* behind Von Sochocky change of testimony. However, she did find a memo in the files of the United States Radium Corporation. As the trial approached, a company official had written—quote— “we need to get a line on what Von Sochocky is doing and where he is.” Moore says, perhaps they tracked him down. Perhaps a conversation took place behind closed doors that helped pry him away from Grace and the other women…and back to the company’s side.

A few months later, in November 1928, Von Sochocky dies of radiation poisoning. The papers liken him to Dr. Frankenstein—a victim of his own creation.

Sally Helm: Whatever the reason for Von Sochocky’s about-face, his testimony seriously damages the Radium Girls’ case. In the end, they settle with the company out of court.

Sally Helm: *I guess my, my sort of biggest question about it is, is it a victory?*

Kate Moore: *It's not a full victory, let's be frank, but it's a victory for these women who have fought against the most unimaginable physical hardships to even get to this point. They have fought against countless doctors who are telling them that they're wrong when they know that their bodies are telling them that they're right.*
Sally Helm: The United States Radium Corporation agrees to cover the women’s medical costs and pay each woman $10,000—the equivalent of about $170,000 today. Plus, they pay a small annual stipend.

But there’s a catch. Grace and the others must submit to annual exams by a committee dominated by company doctors. It’s essentially to prove that they haven’t made a miraculous recovery. After all, the company can’t have these women taking advantage of its generosity...and sure enough, four years later, the in-house doctors stopped approving most of the women's medical expenses for repayment.

Grace Fryer’s nephew, Art, told us that his dad would drive Grace to her doctor’s appointments.

Art Fryer: I think it affected my father very, very strongly and not in a good way.

Sally Helm: He says his dad had to watch Grace fall apart, piece by piece.

Art Fryer: And you know, when he took her into the city, they would cut pieces of her jaw out and then he is driving her back and she couldn’t have been a very happy ride coming back, right?

Sally Helm: Grace Fryer dies on October 27, 1933. The cause of death is ‘radium sarcoma’ caused by ‘industrial poisoning.’ The truth is right there on her death certificate.

Kate Moore: And that is something that Grace herself managed to achieve through her fight for justice and recognition.

Sally Helm: But Grace’s story doesn’t end in her death. She knew it wouldn’t. That’s why she fought so hard in court.

Kate Moore: So perhaps one of Grace's most lasting legacies is that because of her bravery in bringing suit and because of the international recognition that the case attracted, it meant that other dial painters in other centers saw that news. They read those newspaper articles; they confronted their managers.

Sally Helm: Seven years after Grace's death, in 1939, a group of dial painters in Illinois takes their employers to court. And...they win.

Art Fryer: An employer was found liable for what they had done to employees.

Sally Helm: It gets people thinking differently about safety and workers’ rights. And that eventually leads to the creation of a new federal agency: the Occupational and Safety Health Administration or OSHA.

Art Fryer: So, this kind of laid the basis for, workers' compensation and OSHA. If you've ever been on a job site and something's terribly—you know, and I have been, you know, because I work construction for years. So, you know, you could call OSHA and they'd send an inspector down and say, you can't do this. So, what these women did back then has implications for all of us today and it makes me very proud of my aunt. It makes me feel now that I know her.

And there are so many girls in my family named Grace, if not their first name, it's their middle name in honor of Grace.
Sally Helm: The radium used in those watch dials has a half-life of 1,600 years. And so, it is still very much present in the dial painter’s bones.

Kate Moore: Even as we’re talking now and the women are laying at rest in their graves, their bodies are still glowing from the radium.

Sally Helm: Those isotopes live on. But so do the protections that the women fought for, through all their pain, so that they could leave the world safer for the rest of us.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests, Kate Moore, author of The Radium Girls: The dark story of America’s Shining Women. If you want to learn more about the radium girls head on over to theradiumgirls.com. Thanks also to Art Fryer. By the way Art wants you to know that Grace is in the running for this year’s American Woman’s Quarters program. It honors influential women who have shaped American History.

This episode was produced by Rebecca Nolan. Sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jim O’Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press, Morgan Givens, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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