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*PROPORTIONS AND VALUES IN AMERICAN  
HISTORY*

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE

**The New York Historical Society**

ON ITS

*ONE HUNDRED AND SECOND ANNIVERSARY*

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1906

BY

WILLIAM MILLIGAN SLOANE, LL.D. L.H.D.

SETH LOW PROFESSOR OF HISTORY IN COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



NEW YORK  
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN :

Fellow-members of The New York Historical Society. There are two reasons for the profound sense of responsibility felt by me on this occasion. We are assembled for the first time in this splendid though incomplete building, a fitting home for our work and our invaluable collections, a promise in enduring stone of greater exertion and wider usefulness. This splendid benefaction we owe in the main to the munificence of Mr. Henry Dexter, a public-spirited and far-sighted man, perpetuating by this gift the tender sentiments he feels for a beloved son cut off in his prime. We had hoped to welcome him to-day as the guest of honor, but though absent he is yet uppermost in our thoughts. We trust he will be spared to grace the more formal opening of the building on our next anniversary. Furthermore, you have selected a loyal son of Columbia University as your speaker. He and all who guide the destinies of that ancient and noble institution of learning see in this fact a harbinger of the closer union which should exist between two great organizations in the same metropolis, cherished by the same community, and vitalized by the same indomitable purposes—to

cherish science, to uplift the general intelligence, and to preserve the foundations of society. With these two eminent facts clearly in view it has seemed well to consider the value of the work in which we are engaged.

## PROPORTIONS AND VALUES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

THE most specious assumptions are generally the most fallacious. Patriotism is not a virtue at all, unless it be disinterested. Otherwise, as Dr. Johnson said, it is the last refuge of the unmitigated scoundrel. It is difficult for many honest men to look you in the eye; it is the essential prerogative of the hardened criminal to stare the honest man out of countenance. Similarly it is untrue that the first history we should study is the present-day history of our own land, and this for the simple reason that it is too hard. There are only two ways of approach to such a vital, difficult study—either through the past or through the comparison of the existing nation with its existing contemporaries: in the unity of history we know things partly through their origins, partly in their environment. To know ourselves historically we must study Genesis, but full Revelation in the present comes only to the patient observer of developments and proportions through all the intermediate scriptures or records.

The scriptures of history: how long and yet how short they are! Within them lie both the time

and space of human experience, bottomless and shoreless—so, at least, considered by the very greatest sages, to whose sense and reason the sum of human trial and experiment and conclusion is boundless. On the other hand, as we are accustomed to measure, reckon, and compute, all true written history lies within a hundred centuries of time—less than a hundred and fifty successive possible lives—and throughout most of its duration, within a continental mass of space covering the fringes only of the smallest continent of this globe, perhaps a ten-thousandth of the surface of this little earth. It is a reasonable estimate, that of all the beings in the form and semblance of man, those who were and those who were not inspired with the breath of divine life, all upward-gazing bipeds who have existed since the tertiary epoch of geology, perhaps, but not probably, ten thousand million millions in number, not more than one in a hundred thousand has lived under a system which by the broadest stretching of the term could be called historic. Of such petty dimensions, proportionately, is history and all that it embraces.

And where, then, come into reckoning the Americans of these United States, with their three centuries of total life, their one century of national life, and their less than half a century of world-power? Exhausting with dizzy speed the mineral

and agricultural resources of their great land until the end of coal, lumber, iron, and even water supply are already, if the stripping of forest and mine continue, in full sight; reaping and scattering wealth like Sybaris of old, their future bids fair to be as short as their past. It is a merry whirl; life is short, but poignant; posterity has done nothing for us; there are other peoples and other lands, and other continents to be exploited. Goethe's Earth Spirit might well sing of us:

'Tis thus at the roaring loom of time, I ply,  
And weave for God the garment thou see'st Him by.

If this material side of our life be His visible garment, His outward appearance, it is easy to conclude what divinity is within and behind it. The gods of Hellenism were not more greedy, nor sensual, nor reckless, nor earthy.

History, as appears most certain, may be studied for its examples, or it may be studied to gratify intelligent curiosity, or it may be studied in a cold, calm, scientific spirit merely to establish fact—for all these excellent purposes it may be studied; but it must be studied because we are living history every hour, and being here we must know how we got here in order not to repeat the mistakes of the fathers—to decide where we are going, and how we shall reach our goal. History does not

repeat itself, but it does record and exhibit repeated and accumulated human experience, with the reasons for success or failure. After the backward gaze, and only then, can we determine the forward outlook, the possibilities of the future. If we search for the examples and warnings in our own history, they are many. If we scrutinize it for interesting curiosities, there is no scant supply. If we seek for the critical and scientific determination of truth, there is ample room. But above all, we must remember that every movement of national life is a crisis of national existence, and in every critical moment we must choose this course or that; unless we be mere "dumb, driven cattle," we must know the past in order to exercise the right of choice. Either we choose for ourselves, or others choose for us.

Accordingly, with a history actually so short, and an experience so relatively circumscribed, the value of our past must either be insignificant—as it is from the extensive view-point—or it must be significant and important from the intensive view-point. Which is it? Have causes here been constant and uniform, like the imagined laws of nature, or have they worked at different rates from those in older lands? Has the subject-matter been stubborn or fluid? Have the resulting effects been disproportionately important, transcending the mere

considerations of space and time? Does it pay to give such absorbing attention to American history—civil, political, institutional, local, genealogical? Are the interests at stake such as to justify the enormous outlay of energy?

We choose the second horn of the dilemma, and answer: Beyond a peradventure, yes. Whatever the ages, far distant in the dim future, may say of our recklessness and our luxury, even if they be forced to moralize over our all too rapid evolution and decay, there must be written to our credit in the world's account book of history one monumental fact at least. The traveler by the Ionian Sea, who beholds the desolate sites of Tarentum, Sybaris, and Crotona, finds it well-nigh impossible to realize that there, more than two thousand years ago, were the most exquisite of ancient states—opulent, elegant, influential. The permanent contribution they made to history is, nevertheless, infinitesimal, because, like ours, their private life was so interesting, their dilettante taste was so refined, their ease so charming. The one desire of the people—a Hellenic people, democratic, simple, and pious in its near origins—was material prosperity; to enjoy life, to revel in the gratification of the senses. For this purpose they intrusted the troublesome, exacting exercise of political power to one able man, who in return enjoyed not merely the

dignity of statesman and warrior, but a manifold share of temporal rewards. The name of tyrant was honored and honorable for centuries; only when the rude shocks of envious invaders shattered the social structure, and the system proved worthless for defense, did that name fall into execration and become the reproach of later ages.

Uneasy as an imperfect parallel with the states of Great Greece might, and perhaps should, make the American scholar and student; exact as is the resemblance of a New York voluptuary to the luxurious Sybarite, of the sleek modern athlete to a Milo of Croton; for all this, the Kalmuk or other wild man of to-day, ruminating centuries hence in his philosophic mood from the summit of Mammon's temples on Manhattan island, must and will confess that the lesson of America differs in its value and permanence from that of all other then-exhausted and desert civilizations which shall have been either forgotten or known only in the cabinet of the coin collector. Here was a people, he must say, which developed and established institutions for themselves—a homogeneous, Calvinistic, Anglo-Saxon folk. Having set their system in operation, they opened their doors to all peoples, nations, and tongues which dwelt upon the earth, and drilled the heterogeneous immigrants in the school of politics, enticing them to learn civil liberty and



the practice of it; inculcating respect for religion, property, and law. Suppose the early stock to have succumbed before the temptation of money-getting by wage slavery; suppose them, during the life of ten generations, to have stripped the earth of life-munitions sufficient for a hundred; suppose the prevalence among them of all greed and recklessness; yet during this brief period of history there came from the uttermost ends of the earth the outcast, the oppressed, the ignorant; the cowed and the suspicious of all races—and these millions were lifted into a knowledge of method and a habit of virtue which at that distant date, when the Kalmuk is the historian, were scattered all abroad over the teeming fields of Asia and Africa. The world is then the better for our having lived, though we knew not how to transmit our virtues to our own posterity.

A pessimist has been well defined as one who of two possible evils chooses both. Now, it is easy to decry the men and the story of our democracy. A statesman is not necessarily a gentleman, nor are the gentlemen the only statesmen. Our beginnings were almost fiercely aristocratic, when viewed from a certain angle. The political system under which we live continues this *régime*, in a sense, for it makes office not only a trust, but a privilege for a definite period. The important offices are secure

to their holders for a considerable term, and men succeed themselves in Washington so as to create a great political aristocracy of portentous dimensions. Should we desire to change men and measures radically, it requires six years at least to do what Great Britain, permanently royal and aristocratic on the social side, but out-and-out democratic in politics, can accomplish in a few weeks. Until the election of Andrew Jackson, in 1828, all our presidents and most of our great officials were, with perhaps one exception, members of a landed gentry, and all were trained in public affairs, dignified in character and manners. From 1828 to 1861, the real leaders—like Clay, Calhoun, and Webster—were relegated to comparatively subordinate place, while shrewd politicians or dashing soldiers sat in the highest seats. From the outbreak of the Civil War to the present day, plain men of plain origins have for the most part done the work for us which the same sort of men did for the revolutionary epoch of France and the Continent. The Commonwealth has been managed by the common people for the extraction of riches from earth and land, the exploitation of both land and people for the creation of boundless money power. Most of this money power is well divided into moderate, and even modest, fortunes. The day laborer of a century ago would think the day

laborer of to-day a pampered child of fortune, a swollen aristocrat. Some of the money power is concentrated in a few hands, which use it for personal and class advantage, and this fact obscures the other. But, with this exception, the common folk have inherited the common earth, and the plutocracy is not even a governing oligarchy; in the main, it is a badly entrenched camp, to be despoiled by unscrupulous demagogues—free-booters, who endanger the public morals in the process. There never was a time or place where greater pity was due for the sorrows of the rich.

Without venturing to prophesy, there seems little doubt that, religious, political, and civil equality having been secured through strife and agitation, the contest for economic equality is under way. The words anarchy, communism, socialism, and paternal government have long been terms of horror and dread to the thrifty, steady, moral citizen. The reason is not inherent in either the terms or what they mean; the two first are impossible, and could not last an hour among us. Socialism we have in full swing; inheritance taxes, pension system, prohibitive tariffs, exemption laws—all these are but examples of what individuals pay, with scarcely a murmur, for society at large, and even for classes which are but a privileged minority of society. Paternal government has full sway in the

post office, many of us wish we had it in the express service; fewer still stand out for the state ownership of railways, and for the municipal ownership of all public utilities in the cities, as we have always had municipal ownership of the water supply. The terror of these terms is because the ignorant, shiftless, vicious, and desperate profess a nihilistic faith which they designate by those words; declaring war on all good men under those watchwords and badges.

Until the end of time, imported, wire-drawn, social philosophies will break in vain upon our Anglo-Saxon conception of property which in the last analysis is the cement of our society. The struggle for economic equality which is opening is not a struggle for theft in any sense. It is a part of our life, the mainspring of our vital energy. As Lowell sang:

In vain we call old notions fudge,  
And bend our conscience to our dealing,  
The Ten Commandments will not budge,  
— And stealing will continue stealing.

The struggle for economic equality is a struggle for equal opportunity under the law—nothing more, nothing less. The plain people, ground between the millstones of combination in capital and combination in labor, demand such a modification of the legal and social system as shall restore to

every man the liberty to exert his powers, great or small, and to enjoy the fruits of his exertion, whether it be intellectual or physical. The great, numerous, hustling, strenuous class of those who already have something, little or much, ought not to stand aghast at such a movement, but should further it in every possible way; for the greater the division of property, the safer property is, in the numbers who stand ready to defend its guarantees, the men who instinctively believe with John Locke that the state exists to safeguard individual property, and not that property is the creation of the state, and may be resumed at any moment by the creator of it.

In the matter of historical epochs, it is impossible to say in what relation thought or conduct, theory or legislation, ideals or struggles stand to each other—which is cause and which effect. Thought, theory, ideal at least display themselves on the eve of struggle, but they await the morrow of it for full exposition; the will to fight is probably formed simultaneously with the sanction for fighting under the stimulus of vague, uncertain, indefinite restraints, none the less real because we do not accurately know them. Just as thought and speech well up together in the man, so violence and sanction for violence simultaneously declare themselves in the race. The right of revolution we hold among

the most sacred. Policies are important during the calms of history; in its storms they are either furled or shattered in the blast. We began our revolutionary agitation because we were hampered, and we appealed to a theory of the British constitution for peaceful redress; we changed our theoretical base three times in the struggle. We emerged an inchoate nation, but we would not admit it. We fought the War of 1812 for a national principle, but the Treaty of Ghent did not even mention it. We were democratic in theory, but we were ruled by a landowning gentry and had a limited suffrage to and through the days of Jackson. When the strict construction party came into power, it perpetuated indirect taxation, chartered a new national bank, and practised every form of "federal" usurpation. In thirty years we acquired, by conquest, annexation, and exploration, a territory which was strictly national, and while from the outset we declared to other nations that we were not of the family, yet as a nation we made national treaties, as a nation we fought France by sea, and wrested the free transit of the Mediterranean from the Barbary states; as a nation we brought Russia to terms on the question of colonizing the Pacific coast, and as a nation evolved from that success the Monroe Doctrine, which by diplomacy prevented the Holy Alliance from intervening, as

it intended, ostensibly to safeguard the Spanish colonies, really to give Russia further expansion in the Northwest and France an empire around the Gulf of Mexico.

It was Heeren, the great Goettingen professor, who discovered the extraordinary fact that all nations of a certain type pass through identical stages of development, and in the process exhibit a unity of movement corresponding to the unity of the race. Each has its idiosyncrasy and does its work in its own way, but they all pass to their destinies by the same road and count the same milestones. Emerging from the womb of the Holy Roman Empire, they secured some degree of religious liberty, then of political liberty, then of civil liberty. They were all dynastic, absolutist, and feudal in a high sense as late as the eighteenth century. Then came the nineteenth, and with it the lusty infant which is now the United States. As Englishmen we had completed the cycle of the three liberties, and as Britons we had the same survivals as our kinsfolk in political conviction, survivals not merely interesting, but invaluable as points of comparison in the evolution of the new age.

For example, we knew that the "king can do no wrong." The ruler was presumed to be righteous, and our system was just as sacred as that of kings. So we passed a Sedition Act, only to

discover that the king could do wrong, that we no longer held either sedition or seditious libel to be a crime. The Federalist party was brought to the verge of ruin by that act. Yet at this hour, King Demos, the sovereign people can, in a widely different sense, not be wrong legally; and, though we murmur, we submit to a verdict which is established because a few persons, neither wiser nor better than those in the minority, have so voted as to create a majority, however insignificant its size. The vital difference between the old clear-cut personal sovereignty and our present-day vague, uncertain, homeless sovereignty is that now the ruler is the servant of the ruled, to be censured, and even deposed, if he does not give satisfaction in his place. This reversal of mental attitude dates from the days of Jackson. It came not from antecedent conviction alone, but because of the fact that democracy at last was strong enough to demand its heritage.

In Europe, the Congress of Vienna had struggled to restore the feudal concept that territorial boundaries are sacred, but the decision was unpopular. It contravened a new belief. Language, blood, geographical unity were now held to be the essence of developed and permanent nationality. This doctrine of nationality had overthrown Napoleon, thereby capturing the imagination of Euro-



peans, and they are still struggling to secure what the doctrine connotes. Along with democracy, it dominated the conduct of peoples and their rulers, because otherwise the royal servants must lose their situations. So, when democracy had asserted its predominance with us, the struggle began; not for a national territory, we had that; nor for national policy, we had that; but for the close-knit, centralized economic unity which was the full expression of nationality. Slavery lay athwart this tendency; to many it was a beneficent patriarchal social institution, having no relation to politics; to many it was a denial of humanity, equality, and justice, an abomination. Proslavery men thought the negro an inferior human animal, to be kept down for his own good; antislavery men were sure he was a complete man, with original and natural rights of which he was cruelly deprived. The former were federal, States rights, and anti-national; the latter carried the banner of the larger world, being centralizers and firm believers in complete nationality. What was the Union? No one knew. What was the negro? There were two opinions. How could democracy express itself? Given its goal, what were its means? The final arbitrament was war, and war decided; the safeguard of liberty was intrusted to the nation and taken from the States.

Economically, politically, socially, the nation, and even its great cities, have since attained an importance which would transcend that of the States were it not for the bulwark of the latter in the Senate, which still stands rock-fast, though often assaulted. The fact and doctrine of nationality have since the Civil War found their staunchest defenders among the men of the new South, who, in their local governments, are effectually blocked by the negro question, and hence appeal incessantly, urgently, persistently to Congress for the material and moral support of the all-powerful white elements found elsewhere in the national population. They out-Herod Herod in their eagerness to share the economic unity of the country.

With democracy established as the rule for internal affairs and nationality as the regulator of foreign affairs, we have frankly entered the family of civilized states, all of which are impelled by the same motive powers. England has democracy under royal forms, Germany has democracy under imperial forms, France has democracy under parliamentary forms, other states less completely under various forms; but all have substituted for dynastic unity the notion of national sovereignty. In such a loose federation of the world, under the sanction of international law, we do not hesitate to share responsibility openly, as we had before done

in a furtive and apologetic, self-excusing way. While perhaps the value of American example and service might be overrated in comparison with the march of other nations yet it may be set very high. Even the Monroe Doctrine, misunderstood and despised, though feared, by the outside world, has come to mean nothing more than the establishment of the American continent as the sphere of our influence exactly as the European powers have apportioned Africa among themselves, and would apportion the rest of the inhabited globe if they could.

Democracy and nationality combined have at our hands produced a new public law for the civilized world. The states and statesmen who administer it do so according to the character, habits, and needs of their respective peoples, but its bold outlines are everywhere the same. In our period of settlement we scorned the sacredness of territorial boundaries; so now does the world. We held that the earth belongs to those who dwell on it only in so far as they make the best use of it; so now does the world. We took from England the contract theory of government, but we made its basis the consent of the governed; so now do all peoples. We held that the function of government was not merely international, in diplomacy and war, but domestic, in legislation and administration un-

der democratic control; so now do all nations, more or less imperfectly. We scorned privilege, declaring that common, not individual, well-being was the goal; so now do all other peoples. Finally, we established the principle that ability is the only test of fitness to govern; opportunity must be opened regardless of birth, wealth, or influence. These are the headings of the chapters in which all contemporary history is being written. Nationality in natural frontiers, expansion in lands unexploited or abused by those who dwell therein, the sovereignty of the democracy—these concepts have replaced the ambitions of monarchs whose passion for glory and strength is now the passion of democratic nations. So far as Europe is concerned, this new international and world-wide policy has been accepted most directly from the hands of France and Great Britain, but chronologically each of these notions was initiated on our soil.

When, therefore, we come to consider on the one hand the proportions of American history, we must admit its short duration, its illogical evolution, the reaction between theory and practice to produce a startling resultant, and above all the contradictions of profession and practice. On the other hand, its values cannot be overestimated because, as we regard its epochs, they have in swift succession illustrated every article of the public law which

is for the present and coming age accepted in civilized states—gladly in the most enlightened, reluctantly and grudgingly in the more backward. Nationality and democracy in their latest meaning, as the essential facts of advance, came to light here before others were conscious of their mighty compulsive power. The rest of the world has followed in the train.



PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY





## PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY

A meeting of The New York Historical Society was held in the Assembly Hall of the new building, 170 Central Park West, on Tuesday afternoon, November 20, 1906, to celebrate the One Hundred and Second Anniversary of the Founding of the Society.

The proceedings were opened with prayer by the Rev. Francis Thayer Russell, D.D.

The President addressed the Society as follows:

### FELLOW-MEMBERS OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY:

To express gratitude in the name of the Society to our patron and benefactor, Mr. Henry Dexter, for his munificence is my first duty in addressing you, and also to those whose gifts have made this day a possibility.

With a warm heart, generous spirit, and reverence for truth, Mr. Dexter decided to erect a fitting memorial to his son, which should be a lasting monument to a loving father's devotion to a son's memory.

At first only intending to erect the basement and first story of this building, with a temporary roof, his clear-sighted business instinct saw the dangers which might result to our collections in completing an edifice already occupied. With noble self-sacrifice he gave from his principal, additional funds to erect the walls of the completed central portion of our main building. To-day we ask you here to see what has been accomplished with the

means at our disposal. We hope to go ahead and complete this portion shortly.

It is with deep regret that I have to announce that our benefactor and patron, Mr. Henry Dexter, is unable to be with us to-day. Mr. Dexter was invited to be our only guest of honor.

When other names are forgotten, when the names of your officers and building committee will only be a matter of record, the name of Henry Dexter will stand out as a benefactor to our Society and American History.

Nor must we forget to-day those who have gone before, our Founders and their successors, to whose wisdom and guidance we owe our prosperity. I know that the name of John Alsop King, President from 1887 to 1900, at once occurs to you. It was he who acquired this land for you, securing by personal effort the funds for its purchase. After him came my father, who, had he been spared for a few years, would have had the deep gratification and honor of dedicating this building. It was one of the great problems he set before him in his declining years, to place this Society on such a firm foundation that it should be secure for the future.

This building has been planned and erected with one aim in view. It has been built as the dignity of the work demanded, and having in mind that wise provision in our charter, that we can have no debts, we have only built as our funds permitted. It is better to build a little and do it right rather than a great deal and do it meanly. We are building for the future, and in this day of hastily built buildings we must expect criticism.

Our Society has too long hid its head; let us now, without in the slightest departing from our old traditions, claim for ourselves the position we are entitled to. In the past thirty years many patriotic societies have come

into being—we welcome their advent—they are doing a noble work; but do the members of those societies realize that their very existence depended on the records preserved and made accessible by this Society? Their patriotism, I am sure, now that their attention is called to the fact, will show itself by enrolling their names on our books as members.

Let us hope in the years to come, instead of incomplete specialized libraries, we may welcome them to our hall as their headquarters for meetings, for information from our records and books, and for cooperation, that duplication of books and waste of energy and money may be prevented.

This afternoon a Fellow-member, Professor Sloane, of Columbia University, has kindly consented to address us. It is a pleasure to welcome him here to-day at this first assemblage in our future home, as symbolic of a nearer approach to that seat of learning which is doing so much for American History. Here in the future we hope to offer attractive quarters where students may imbibe love of country and patriotism from the precious records of the past, cooperating with all earnest workers for the cause of historical truth.

The Anniversary Address was then delivered by William Milligan Sloane, LL.D., L.H.D., Seth Low Professor of History in Columbia University, entitled, "Proportions and Values in American History."

Upon its conclusion, the Reverend George R. Van De Water, D.D., was recognized, and addressed the Society as follows:

All the way from our founder, John Pintard, down to our honored presidents, John Alsop King and Dean

Hoffman, the father of our present President, and our great benefactor, Henry Dexter, who is still with us, we are thankful to say, eminent citizens have managed the affairs of our Society. We should have a feeling of pride that we live in this great city, where there are so many great men engaged in noble pursuits and professions. This Society has always numbered among its members some of the noblest families in the city. It does so still. We have been more or less like lights under a bushel, but now, through the unusual and munificent gift of Mr. Dexter, we shall be like a city set on a hill, and in the future The New York Historical Society cannot be hid. We have been doing good work, or we would not be here to-day. Our officers have been doing the best they could with the facilities at their command.

It is not generally known, as it should be, that this is not the New York *City* Historical Society, but that it is The *New York* Historical Society. Now that we are in this building, it is impossible for us to express our gratitude to the benefactor of this Society for his gift that enables us to be here. Sufficiently to say our "Thank you" is not possible. The members of this Society should strive to make its interests and objects known to the people of this community, so that we may have increased membership and support, and at our monthly meetings we may have goodly numbers present. Those who live in this cultured neighborhood may now feel that they have something to do besides going to places of amusement—that instead they may often come to this place, where they can stimulate their intellects and learn to be loyal to their city, state, and country.

I move you, in no ordinary way, but with special emphasis, that our thanks be given Professor Sloane, and that a copy of his inspiring and able address on

“Proportions and Values in American History” be requested for permanent record in the archives and that it be published by this Society.

The exercises were closed with a benediction by the Rev. Dr. Russell.

Extract from the Minutes.

ACOSTA NICHOLS,  
*Recording Secretary.*

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