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THE AGE OF GYMNASTICS.

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"**W**HAT can we learn from the ancient Greeks?" was the theme which the Florentine Art-School proposed to the competitors for the De Rossi prize last year: the most suggestive theme, perhaps, that could be recommended to the consideration of the nineteenth century.

"Neither in delicacy of execution nor in grandeur of conception can we measure ourselves with the Greeks of the ante-Alexandrian era," says *L'Abbate Pintore*, "The Painter Priest," as the successful competitor signs himself, "nor would it be easy to say in what they were *not* our superiors."

The latter question would, indeed, be difficult to answer, even if we should extend its application, which the Painter Priest probably restricts to art-matters; and the theory which ascribes our progress in secular as well as in spiritual insight to the "revealed light" of our religion can hardly be reconciled with the fact that, in the very branches of knowledge which refer to the conduct of human life, our latest and best ideas were anticipated by those Nature-taught heathens, while even in the objective sciences our fancied superiority would be sadly reduced, if we should subtract the chance discoveries and technical details which are the cumulative bequest of all preceding generations.

It does really suggest a general revision of our physical and meta-physical standards, if we consider in how many senses of the word the proudest progress of our latter-day civilization is but a return to the standpoints which the pagan inhabitants of a Mediterranean peninsula occupied twenty-four centuries ago. After an infinitude of political experiments with absolute and most puissant monarchs, elective monarchs, constitutional monarchs, and figure-head monarchs, the most advanced nations of our century have come to the conclusion that the old Hellenic form of government by representatives of the people was the most sensible, after all; that armed citizens can fight as well as, if not better than, standing armies, and that the ancient method of appointing and removing public functionaries by a majority of votes was far superior to the *par ordre du mufti* system of Mohammedan and Christian sultans. Religious toleration, which the fearful experience of the middle ages has made the watchword of all liberals and reformers, was practised among the Greeks and republican Romans to an extent which we are as far yet from having reattained as their freedom of speech, of commercial affairs, and of domestic life. Popular education, the national stage, and all the fine arts, have to be emancipated from innumerable prejudices and paralyzing restrictions before they can be restored to their pristine prime, not to speak of the science of health nor of the science of happiness, which will, perhaps, never recover from their long neglect.

But, of all the national institutions of ancient Greece which we have abolished or altered to our disadvantage, there is none whose reintroduction would be attended with greater benefits than that system of physical education which so influenced the national spirit and reacted upon the character of the representative Grecian heroes, statesmen, and philosophers, that it may be considered as the distinguishing feature of their age. At a very early period the Greeks of Southern Europe and Asia Minor had recognized the truth that, with the advance of civilization and civilized modes of life, a regular system of bodily training must be substituted for the lost opportunities of physical exercise which Nature affords so abundantly to her children in the daily functions of their wild life. "It is impossible to repress luxury by legislation," says Solon, in Lucian's "Dialogues of Anacharsis," "but its influence may be counteracted by athletic games, which invigorate the body and give a martial character to the amusements of our young men."

The nature of ancient weapons and the use of heavy defensive armor made the development of physical force a subject of national importance, but military efficiency was by no means the exclusive object of gymnastic exercises. The law of Lycurgus provides free training-schools for the thorough physical education of both sexes, and cautions parents against giving their daughters in marriage before they had attained the prescribed degree of proficiency in certain exercises, which were less ornamental and probably less popular than what we call callisthenics. Greek physicians, too, prescribed a course of athletic sports against various complaints, and had invented a special curriculum of gymnastics, which, as Ælian assures us, never failed to cure obesity. When the increase of wealth and culture threatened to affect the manly spirit of the Hellenic race, physical education was taken in hand by the public authorities in almost every Grecian city; and the ablest statesmen at Athens, Thebes, and Corinth, emulated the Spartan legislator in founding palaestræ, gymnasia, and international race-courses, and devising measures for popularizing these institutions. Four different localities—Olympia, Corinth, Nemea, and the Dionysian race-course near Athens—were consecrated to the "Panhellenic games," at which the athletes of all the Grecian tribes of Europe and Asia met for a trial of strength at intervals varying from six months to four years, the latter being the period of the great Olympic games which formed the basis of ancient chronology. The honor of being crowned in the presence of an assembled nation would alone have sufficed to enlist the competition of all able

bodied men of a glory-loving race, but many additional inducements made the Olympic championship the day-dream of youth and manhood, and served to increase the ardor of gymnastic emulation. The victors of the Isthmian and Nemean games were exempt from taxation, became the idols of their native towns, were secured against the vicissitudes of fortune and the wants of old age, by a liberally-endowed annuity fund, and enjoyed all the advantages and immunities of the privileged classes.

Egenetus, a humble citizen of Agrigentum, won three out of the five prizes of the ninety-second Olympiad, and was at once raised from poverty to opulence by the magnificent presents which the enthusiasm of the spectators forced upon him before he had left the arena. His return to his native city was attended by a procession of three hundred chariots, each drawn, like his own, by two white horses, and all belonging to the citizens of the town. All international quarrels and family feuds were suspended when the preparatory interval of forty-eight months approached its close, and even prisoners of war and political culprits were released on parole if they wished to contest the laurel wreath of any championship, for to deprive them of the chance of winning such a distinction was thought a penalty too severe for a merely political offense. The ecstatic power of an Olympian triumph is well illustrated by the story of Diagoras, the Rhodian, who had been a famous champion in his younger days, and was present when his two sons won the entire *pentathlon*, i. e., carried off the five prizes for which the athletes of all Greece had been training during the four years preceding the sixty-first Olympiad. When the boys lifted their father up and carried him through the arena, the shouts of the assembled multitude were heard in the harbor of Patræ, at a distance of seven leagues, but Diagoras himself had heard nothing on earth after the herald's voice had proclaimed the names of the victors; "the gods," as Pindar says, "had granted that the happiest moment of his life should be his last." Would Diagoras have exchanged that moment for a week of those "beatific visions" which rewarded St. Dominic for his seven years' penance?

If any athlete received more than one prize of the same Olympiad, his victory was commemorated by a statue executed by the best contemporary sculptor of his native state. What a terrestrial Walhalla it must have been, that sacred mountain-grove of Elis, where these statues were erected in the shade of majestic trees, while the summit of the hill and the open meadows were adorned by such masterpieces of Grecian architecture as the temple of Jupiter Olympius and the Pantheon of Callicrates! Besides the military drill-grounds and the public gymnasia, of which every hamlet had one or two, and where the complete apparatus for all possible sports was often combined with free baths and lecture-halls, the larger cities had associations for the promotion of special favorite exercises, the brag-accomplishments of the rival towns. Wrestling, javelin-throwing, running, leaping, pitching the quoit, riding, driving, climbing ropes, shooting the arrow, were all practised by as many amateur clubs, which commonly owned a race-course or a private hall.

How many of the most admirable character-traits of the ancient Greeks, and how much of their success in the arena of life may be distinctly traced to these sources of mental and physical health! Health in the widest sense of the word was, indeed, the primary characteristic of their age, for health and vigor are synonyms. The same process of adaptation that qualifies the body for the performance of athletic feats disqualifies it for the development of any morbid elements, and accelerates the elimination of effete matter from the organism. We accordingly see that, among the creatures of the wilderness whose normal condition is one of muscular vigor, disease is wholly abnormal, and premature death only the consequence of wounds or protracted famine. "The immunity of hard-working people from the consequences of wrong or over-feeding," says Dr. Boerhaave, "is a proof that nine-tenths of your fashionable diseases

might be cured *mechanically* instead of *chemically*, by climbing a tree, or chopping it down, if you prefer, instead of swallowing castor-oil and sulphur-water." Physical exercise, by accelerating the circulation of the blood, stimulates the activity of all those internal organs whose functions conjointly constitute the phenomenon of life, and counteracts innumerable functional disorders, any one of which is sure to react on the nervous system and the organ of the soul.

Mental pathology, if rightly understood, is a physiological science which must recognize the intimate connection and interaction of soul and body, and the influence of every physical derangement on the most subtle functions of the brain.

The physical superiority of the ante-Alexandrian Greeks to the hardiest and most robust nations of modern times is perhaps best illustrated by the military statistics of Xenophon. According to the author of the "Anabasis," the complete accoutrements of a Spartan soldier, in what we would call heavy marching order, weighed seventy-five pounds, exclusive of the camp, mining, and bridge-building tools, and the rations of bread and dried fruit which were issued in weekly installments, and increased the burden of the infantry soldier to ninety, ninety-five, or even to a full hundred pounds. This load was often carried at the rate of four English miles an hour for twelve hours *per diem*, day after day; and only in the burning deserts of Southern Syria the commander of the Grecian auxiliaries thought it prudent to shorten the usual length of a day's march by one-fourth. The gymnastic tests applied by the *systarchus*, or recruiting-officer of a picked corps, would appear even more preposterous to the uniformed exquisites of a modern "crack regiment." Even tall and well-shaped men of the soundest constitution could not pass the preliminary examination unless they were able to jump their own height vertically, and thrice their own length horizontally, and two-thirds of those distances in full armor; pitch a weight equal to one-third of their own to a distance of twenty yards, and throw a javelin with such dexterity that they would not miss a mark of the size of a man's head more than four out of ten times at a distance of fifty yards, besides other tests referring to their expertness in the use of the bow and the broadsword.

Where the average physical standard was so far superior to our own, it need not surprise us that the achievements of the national champions surpassed the feats of our professional athletes in the same proportion. Polydamus, the victor of the ninety-seventh Olympiad, was able to fracture the skull of a steer with a single blow of his fist, and tamed a wild horse by catching it by the hoofs of the hind-legs, which he twisted inward till the joints of the fetlocks creaked whenever the animal attempted the least rebellious movement. Milo of Crotona, the same athlete who carried a young bull around the racecourse, could not be moved from his position by a four-horse team, if he planted his left foot on the level ground, and braced his right against a slightly-projecting rock; and once saved an assembly of Pythagorean philosophers when the roof of a dilapidated temple threatened to fall, by supporting the keystone of the porch with his uplifted arms till all had escaped, after which he saved himself by two rapid leaps. A Theban gladiator, whose renown had reached the court of Persia, was invited to Sardis, the summer resort of King Darius, and on the day after his arrival entered the list against three picked men of the "Immortal Band," as the Persian body-guard was called. A savage combat followed, in which the three Persians began to lose ground, and would have been driven beyond the lists if the fight had not been stopped by command of the king. But his order came too late; in the few minutes which the contest had lasted the three "immortals" had received their death-wounds.

Deerfoot, a Cherokee Indian, who was brought to England in 1758, was able to outrun the swiftest horses, if the length of the race-course did not exceed two-thirds of a mile; and during the administration of Niccolo Marcello, the inhabitants of Ravenna witnessed the feats of a young Savoyard, who repeatedly distanced the favorite racer of the doge, and offered to run against any horse in the world and for any distance, provided the direction of the race was to be more or less uphill, not down-hill or over a sandy level. But the amateur runners of the Grecian and Roman armies frequently engaged in contests with race-horses and trained hounds without any such reservations; and Pindar sung the praises of a Rhodian athlete who could keep pace with a relay of four trotting horses, and tire them out successively.

The *hemerodromes*, or foot-couriers of ancient Greece, made from eighty to ninety miles a day, and the volunteer messenger who arrived in Athens with the news of the victory of Marathon on the night after the battle, must have run at the rate of fourteen miles an hour. Dion Chrysostomus speaks of a Thessalian patriarch who had followed the trade of a hemerodrome for upward of ninety years, having made his first trip on his twentieth birthday, and his last after the completion of his hundred and tenth year. During this long career, as his life might well be called, he had never been known to betray a trust, never was behind time, and never had been sick for a single hour.

Longevity was not the least of the benefits which the ancients derived from their health-giving exercises. The second census of Trajan furnishes some curious statistics on this subject, and shows that among the 28,000,000 inhabitants of Northern Italy, Greece, and *Magna Græcia* (Southern Italy and Sicily), there were 11,000 centenarians, 750 of whom had passed six-score years, eighty-two their one hundred and fiftieth, and twenty their one hundred and seventy-fifth year of life, while three were double centenarians and respectively two hundred and six, two hundred and eight, and two hundred and eighteen years of age. Four brothers of an Albanian family had all passed their hundred and tenth year. The same census shows that, among the indolent races of Asia Minor, Egypt, and Palestine, the proportion of centenarians to every 1,000,000 of inhabitants was considerably lower and not much above the present average.

That the Hebrew Psalmist's threescore and ten was not our original term of life will not be denied by orthodox readers of the Mosaic genealogies, and the ablest biologists agree that it would be far below the normal average even now, if our manner of life itself was not wholly abnormal. It would explain the most vexing contradictions and enigmas of our existence if we could be sure that by strict observance of the health-laws of Nature the Psalmist's maximum might be increased by thirty or forty years: it would amount to a satisfactory solution of the whole problem of life. Under the present condition of things our lives are mostly half-told tales, dramas ending in the middle of the first act; our season terminates before the tree of life has had time to ripen its fruits. That "hunger after immortality" which is often alleged as a proof of a future existence, arises most likely from an instinctive perception of the truth that our present spans of life are too short for reaching the goal of our destination; for those vague yearnings were unknown to the Semitic and Grecian patriarchs. They died in peace, "full of years," and satisfied, as any reasonable man might be who had witnessed one hundred and fifty rotations of the four seasons, and enjoyed all their blessings in perfect health.

There is no doubt that the military triumphs of the ancient Greeks were the natural result of their physical education. "A nation," says Jean Jacques Rousseau, "which can boast of 20,000 *men*, is not vincible." Virility as well as virtue was originally derived from a word which means simply strength, just as our Anglo-Saxon ancestors used to speak of the *best man* of a parish, without special reference to the most regular

church-goer. Strength is the parent of valor and self-confidence, and confidence in the valor and strength of armed companions begets that national heroism which enabled the republican Greeks, the Swiss, the Circassians, and the Montenegrins, to defy the most powerful and numerically superior of their would-be conquerors.

Not to their political but to their physical constitutions these nations owed their long independence. The historical records of the last three thousand years demonstrate the strange fact that international wars, almost without a single exception, ended by *the victory of northern nations over their southern rivals*. The Carthaginians, originally natives of Phœnicia, conquered the Numidian principalities, but were in turn conquered by their Roman neighbors; Rome, victorious against all her southern, southeastern, and southwestern rivals, was herself struck down by the iron arm of the Visigoth, the north-Spanish Christians overcoming the south-Spanish Moors, the northern Turks wresting the sceptre from their southern fellow-Mohammedans, the north Mongol Tartars oppressing the south-Mongol Chinese, the North-German Prussians bullying the southern members of the Confederation, the Northmen of Scandinavia conquering Normandy, Brittany, and Great Britain, the house of Hapsburg eclipsed by the house of Hohenzollern, a North-Italian kingdom absorbing the southern states of the peninsula—the same phenomenon, in hundred variations, repeating itself from China to Peru, from the Trojan War to the civil war of the North American States.

What does all this mean, but that the fortune of war is biased by bodily strength? Rome was not vanquished by the intellectual superiority of the Visigoths, nor Maria Theresa by the moral merits of Frederick's cause, but we may safely assume that in all international contests the physical advantage was on the side of the northern champion. The climate and the comparative sterility of a cold country necessitate a continual struggle with the adverse powers of Nature, and beget that hardy and robust constitution which is the basis of all military efficiency. But, this incidental advantage which northern races derive from the inclemency of their latitude, any nation might secure in a more direct and much more agreeable way, by introducing a thorough and popular system of physical education.

The fallen races, as the nations of Southern Europe and South South-America have been called, are not wholly blind to the causes of their degeneracy. "How dare you appeal to the God of battles?" says Simon Bolivar, in that famous protest against the endowment of convents, "if you devote all your worship to a score of sickly saints?" and in still plainer language honest Boileau denounces the effeminacy of his countrymen: "What has become of the image of God!" he exclaims in his second epistle; "want of physical exercise and vicious indulgences, what have they left of that form that once furnished the model for Grecian statues? We are a generation of cripples!"

Open-air exercise also bestows that beauty and that native grace in which a New Zealand warrior is the superior of a cockney dandy. Not only the North American red-skins but also those semi-barbarians whose noble forms induced us to make them the representatives of the "Caucasian" tribes, the natives of Circassia and Daghestan, belong to the Mongol or Turanian race, which originally was far inferior to our Aryan ancestors. Under the influence of an effete civilization that same race has, begot those Chinese caricatures of the Creator which are justly despised even by Sambo Africanus, whose dark skin covers at least a vigorous body. Old Montaigne already remarks that "the handsomest man was a hunter and not a hair-dresser," and was by no means astonished to find brighter eyes and more faultless noses among the woodchoppers of the Pyrenees than among the exquisites of a Parisian ballroom.

There was at least a theoretical consistency in the dogma of the mediæval monks who pretended to despise the pagan culture of the manly powers and extolled self-torture, maceration, and abasement of the body, as so many Christian virtues. We cannot doubt that they reasoned from false premises; but are there not still millions of their spiritual progeny who persist in the belief that the Creator approves the marring of his image, and that "a sickly, whining wretch, who fears to walk upright or raise his eyes, lest the Deity might be offended at his want of humble contrition"—is a more pleasing sight in the eyes of God than a man like Milo, who walked earth *incessu invicti*, "with the gait of one who has not known defeat," and did not think it necessary to ruin his body in order to save his soul? "A good creed to die by," that monstrous belief is often called, just as if the sun had been created for the sake of the twilight; but it is a curious circumstance that on the eve of the long night the eyes of many of these world despising ascetics have been opened to the significance of their mistake, and the consciousness of having wasted an irretrievable day can hardly have made its close more cheerful.

"I have sinned against my brother, the ass" (referring to his abused body), were the last words of St. Francis of Assisi, when his self-inflicted martyrdom at last brought on a hæmorrhage from the lungs, which his physician told him would prove fatal.

Baron Oxenstiern, the Swedish chancellor, who was a stanch Protestant, but a gloomy ascetic nevertheless, passed the last week of his life on the mountain-farm of his brother, an honest farmer, who had never left the paternal manse. One evening, two days before the chancellor's death, his biographer tells us, the brothers were sitting on a rustic bench, on the edge of a mountain-lawn, where the boys of the farmer were disporting themselves, running races, shouting in the joy of exuberant health, or resting arm-in-arm at the foot of an old beech tree, in the intervals of their play. While the chancellor watched their sports, a vision was haunting his inner eye: the dreary college of Upsala, and two pale-faced students, whose features resembled or had resembled his own. Staggering suddenly to his feet he drew a dagger from its sheath and handed it to his brother, with the words, "Cut my throat, Hendrick—I cannot stand that any longer!" "What's the matter?" said the old farmer, smiling; "are you in such a hurry to go to h—? If Dr. Hochstratten" (a Catholic controversialist) "is right, you will get there soon enough!" "Better be there," said the chancellor, grimly, "than in the other place, where I might meet my sons. How can I answer for the earthly paradise they have lost through my fault? What have I robbed them of!"

Open-air labor is the most effective cosmetic, an almost infallible panacea against all kinds of bodily deformity. But the remedial virtue of labor, i. e., sound bodily exercise, is greater than that of open-air life *per se*, for among the rustic population of Scandinavia, Scotland, and Northern Germany, who perform a large portion of their hard work indoors, we frequently find models of health and vigor; far more frequently than among the inhabitants of Italy, Spain, etc., who pass the greater part of their indolent lives in open air.

But, besides all this, athletic exercises have a moral value, which our social reformers have strangely failed to recognize; they afford a diversion and a vent to those animal energies which otherwise are sure to explode in debauch and all kind of vicious excesses. The sympathetic thrill by which the mind accompanies a daring gymnastic feat and the enthusiasm of athletic contests form the most salutary and perhaps the only normal gratification of that love of excitement which is either the legitimate manifestation of a healthy instinct, or else a wholly irremediable disease of our nature. The soul needs emotions as the body needs exercise, and the exciting sports of the palæstra met both wants at once. We try to suppress these instincts, but their motives

remain, and if thwarted in their normal manifestations they assert themselves in some abnormal way, chemically instead of mechanically, as Dr. Boerhaave would say; by convulsing the organs of digestion, since the organs of motion are kept in unbearable inactivity. In times of scarcity the paupers of China and Siam silence the clamors of their hungry children by dosing them with opium; and for analogous reasons millions of our fellow-citizens seek relief in alcohol: they want to benumb a feeling which they cannot satisfy in a healthier way.

After finishing his day's work the Grecian mechanic went to the gymnasium, the Roman to the amphitheatre, and the modern European and American goes to the next "saloon," to satisfy by different methods the same instinct—a longing for a diversion from the dull sameness of business-routine. There is no question which method was the best—the only question is which of the two bad substitutes may be the worse: the brutalizing, i. e., soul-hardening spectacles of bloodshed of the Roman arena, or the soul and body destroying poisons of the liquor-shop?

Not a few of the victims of alcohol have contracted their fatal passions with their eyes open to all its consequences—but what should they do? After masticating the dry bread of drudgery for six days, we cannot expect them to content themselves on the seventh with sleeping under a tree, or in church; and the very classes whose want of mental culture incapacitates them for purely intellectual recreations also lack the material resources by which the rich can more easily forego the advantage of public and free opportunities of healthy amusements. The cruel sports to which our bull-fighting ancestors devoted their holidays have perhaps been justly suppressed, but what have we substituted for them? Sunday-schools, revivals, and reading-rooms of the Young Men's Christian Association? Alas!—*Deflebilis manet hiatus*—a deplorable void remains; man is a compound of body and soul, and the unmixed joys of the New Jerusalem will be found insufficient for terrestrial wants, till the spiritualists have invented the art of dematerializing bodies as well as of materializing ghosts.

The pagan Greeks had discovered and divulged a secret which seems not to have been rediscovered yet by our philanthropists, viz., that the highest well-being of the body and of the soul cannot be attained separately, but must go hand-in-hand like thought and action, or will and force. They also had found out that it is the safest plan to improve each day as it comes, they celebrated life as a festival, and their poor as well as their rich enjoyed heaven on this side of the grave. In going along, they found time to do what we postpone to the end of the journey, which too often is never reached. The joyous love of life, of men to whom existence itself was a luxury, has therefore given way to very different moods—sad misgivings and doubts, provoked by ever-present but never-satisfied longings. "He who has done his duty can die in peace," we are told; but is it a duty to work for such rewards?

"So much labor for a winding-sheet?"

It may be said that we, too, have our national sports, trials of skill if not of strength, such as base-ball, cricket, target-shooting, and the like, or trials of strength *by proxy*: horse-races, cock-fighting, etc., on which a man may bestow all the time and stake all the money he has to spare. Well, we cannot afford to despise these things—they are the best we have; but can any man seriously compare the dreary fun of the cockpit with the enthusiasm of the palæstra, or the rapture of a Derby-day or even of a base-ball match with that of the Olympic race, and the moment when the *νικηφορια*—the shout of victory—was echoed by a million voices, and an assembled nation rose to hail the victor in the presence of his relations and friends! Men whose hearts were stirred

by such scenes had no need of buying inspiration at the gin-shop. The *Turnverein* is yet but in its egg, and competitive gymnastics has yet to take rank again as the noblest, the happiest, and the most popular, of all our national pursuits.

We have emerged from the *aphanasia* of the middle ages, that fearful eclipse of reason and happiness that followed like an unnatural night upon the bright sunrise of Grecian civilization, and the spiritual lethargy of that night has been shaken off by all that deserve the name of men; how is it, then, that so much of its physical torpor still remains behind? Have we really forgotten that God is the creator of our bodies as well as of our souls? Our limbs seem to have been paralyzed by long disuse; the gates of our hierarchical Bastille have been forced, but the great majority of the prisoners seem in no hurry to leave their cells. Though freed from Jesuitical control, our educational system is still not only unnatural but anti-natural to such a degree that we think it our duty to suppress the healthiest instincts of our children and keep them in the beaten track which has led us deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of dogmatism, till we have almost forgotten that there is a brighter light and purer air outside.

Yet there is hope. The spirit of our Nature-loving ancestors will assert itself before long, and the inhabitants of *Greater Britain* will return from the languid repose of the Hebrew heaven to the healthier pastimes of the Anglo-Saxon Walhalla. The Germans, too, are seeing the dawn of a long hoped-for morning, and the prophetic words of their philosophical Messiah are beginning to be fulfilled. "The spiritual juggler-guild," says Gotthold Lessing, "who derive their revenues from the supernatural dogmas of the three Semitic religions, have found it to their advantage to divert our attention from the natural laws of God, but those laws cannot be outraged with impunity. I foresee a physical reformation, and its advent-sermons will be preached before long."



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