

LONDON AND THE MACHINE IN THE GARDEN

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On 26 May 1905 Jack London revealed to George Brett of Macmillan that he had "for a long time been keeping steadily the idea in mind of setting down somewhere in the country."¹ He hoped Brett would advance funds for this purpose. Two days later he gave this plan to George Sterling as reason why he could not contribute to a new socialist periodical. The same day he urged Frederick Bamford to settle in the country. Living in a tent, Bamford could "cease being intellectual altogether," and "take delight in little things, the bugs, the crawling things, the birds, the leaves, etc. etc."² Though London advised his friend to return to pastoral bliss, as will be evident, he was not intending such for himself.

With Macmillan's help, London purchased the first parcel of his Beauty Ranch, with its magnificent groves of redwoods, firs, oaks, and madrone. Most significant was the water, which in semiarid California was essential. The Spanish approach to water use was the *zanja madre*, the cooperatively managed irrigation ditch system; after statehood, whoever owned riparian lands had dominion of the water flowing through. London would control his water from the mountain sources so no one could cut him out. He mentioned this advantage in his description to Brett of the land's barns, livestock, harnesses, plows, and more. He clearly meant to work the land, and, as we know, poured much of his earnings from writing into this effort.

Moving to the country would also result in a series of writings that remarked up on the theme of what Leo Marx has called "the machine in the garden."³ The garden is the Virgilian pastoral idyll that continues to

appear through American culture in many expressions, symbolic and material. It is a place of fecundity, growth, peace, even bliss, whether in a poem or a self-sufficient homestead. Marx is less precise in his meaning of "the machine," for in interpreting various 19th-century artistic works, he finds it may mean an actual machine, such as the railroad, technology in general, or just the city. For "machine," naturalists substituted

"man," its creator.

Both perspectives described a non-natural force that threatens to bring disorder, anxiety, deprivation, and struggle. As Marx reminds us, most Americans in the 19th century welcomed new technology and had little difficulty reconciling a Jeffersonian agrarian philosophy with the Hamiltonian steam behemoths.

Among their beliefs



was a conviction that the factory could be a stepping stone, a way a young man could earn a small sum to emigrate west and purchase a garden plot. Furthermore, as William Cronon has shown, by the close of the 19th century wilderness was more often portrayed as sublime rather than dangerous.⁴

It was the artists who more readily explored the contradiction between the rural myth and the more dominant power of the industrial, urban world, and who applied their talent to illuminate and attempt to resolve the contradictions. The ills of the era are well-known. Protests rose against alcohol abuse, white slave trade, slum housing, child labor, polluted water systems, corrupt politicians, unsafe working places, and more. The locus of disorder was identified with cities; consequently, the first suburbs and commuter transit developed for those who could afford to move out.

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Another preferred solution was the Country Life movement. A popular treatise, which London read, was Edward Payson Powell's *The Country Home*. Powell claimed this home would offer "the primal art of nature to assist us, with its latest interpretation by science."⁵ Not only was escape possible, but success as well. Though aimed at moral ends, the rhetoric translated the pastoral myth into a scientific, pragmatic discourse. Powell pointed to the proliferating research from the land-grant agricultural colleges established after 1862, and the Department of Agriculture experimental stations created in 1887.

Readily available were bulletins urging the application of science towards "planting new empires in the wilderness."⁶

While Country Life writers wrote of self-sufficiency, the scientists

supported monoculture agriculture, which was well underway in California. Following the Gold Rush, factory-scale food production ruled California valleys. Homesteaders were left to poorer, rock-laden foothill slopes. Efficiency, commercial value, and greatness of scale resulted in an agriculture dominated by elite urban men, not family farmers. Their role was explicitly stated: to break nature, to submit the virgin forest and prairie to man. (Hoes then were called "breakers.") They deemed technology used by homesteaders—Indians, Filipino, Japanese—as primitive.

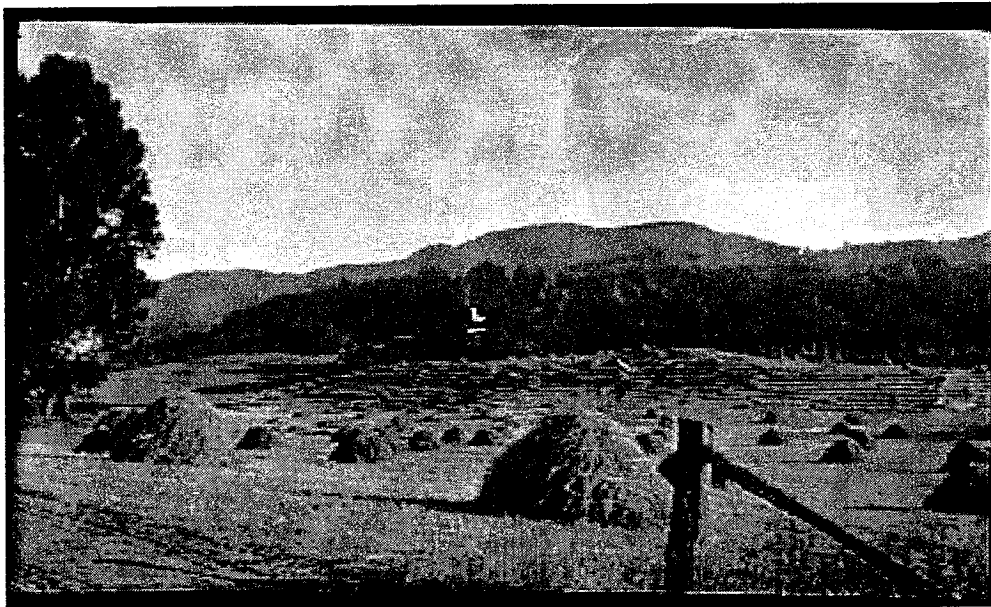
London furthered the Country Life movement through both his ranch and his transforming of science into art through literature. Through his California writings he adheres to a tripartite model of the land, where wild nature is an actor in its own right, urbanism represents the fearful disorder of the capitalist machine, while the middle-ground small farm allows a separation from history, "a simple life where wealth is of little

importance."⁷ Though he had unpleasant childhood memories of rural life, London committed to this return-to-land movement, though with his own special interpretation.

London's first forthright commentary on the California landscape, "The Golden Poppy," appeared in *The Delineator* in 1904.⁸ This charming example of London's humor reminds us that he was interested in leaving the city well before his commitment to Glen Ellen. Just before his precipitate affair with Charmian Kirtledge in 1903, London discussed with Bess a plan to

move to Southern California, away from urban life.

The story's setting is the bungalow in Piedmont, with Bess and the narrator serving as affectionate protagonists. Upon moving to the hills above Oakland, when the poppies burst forth they "danced, and clapped our hands, freely and frankly



mad." They agree to remove the "No Trespassing" signs posted by the previous renter. Then come "the Goths," the city people who swoop up large armfuls of the plants and denude the field.⁹ Mannerly requests to stop fail. With Bess "only a woman and not prone to fisticuffs," the narrator takes to chasing, threatening, and even hoisting a rifle against the "piracy."¹⁰ To emphasize the tall tale, the narrator descends into madness, and frightens friends with his monomania. Eventually an "embittered and disappointed man," he finds all the light has "gone out of my life and into my blazing field. So one pays for things."¹¹

What he was paying for was environmental preservation as well as aesthetic pleasure. Explaining why he returns the No Trespass signs, the narrator invokes a Darwinian explanation. Where before the poppies maintained an equilibrium with the destructive forces of nature, the city folk disrupted that relation. By

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plucking "those with the longest stems and biggest bowls," only a "stunted, short-stemmed variety...sparsely distributed as well" remain.¹² But in his fenced yard, where unharvested wheat protected the poppy seeds, the plants thrived. The city dwellers have many faults. They seem to have "an alarming condition of blindness and deafness in their inability to heed to his requests. Children ignore him. Women are the worst, for they are "less afraid of guns than men" and "suckled the land-robbing Anglo-Saxon men."¹³ Most fail to realize that a few flowers in a bowl are more attractive than "five hundred poppies crushed and bunched." Others pick for mercenary reasons, committing "the most high-handed act of piracy" ever seen. Starved for the pleasure of nature, "their relation to country flowers is quite analogous to that of a starving man to food."¹⁴ Defeated by the sheer number of intruders, the narrator, like nature, is simply mowed over by this human machine.

Among his most admired short stories, "All Gold Canyon" was begun the very day he wrote of his Beauty Ranch plans to Bamford and Sterling.¹⁵ The plot offers a more explicit account of the consequences of the machine in the garden. The opening paragraphs brilliantly evoke a timeless, virginal spot in the Sierras. While a buck drowns in the quiet pool of a dustless canyon, "three cottonwoods sent their snowy fluffs fluttering down the quiet air....An occasional butterfly drifted in and out through the patches of light and shade. And from all about rose the low and sleep hum of mountain bees." Emphasizing the transcendental meaning, London describes "a spirit of peace that was not of death, but of smooth-pulsing life...that was quick with existence without being violent with struggle and travail."¹⁶ London well knew that nature was fraught with death, struggle, and travail, but he was addressing a view of the wilderness more familiar to his readers, who would be steeped in John Burroughs and John Muir, naturalists who emphasized wild landscape as cathedral.

The awakening comes with the "harsh clash of metal upon rock" and the chanting of a gold prospec-

tor, Bill. Though celebrating the "warm, sweet breath of the canyon-garden," he also reads the spot as ideal for pocket mining.¹⁷ "Like a shepherd he herded his flock," not of sheep, but of golden specks.¹⁸ London minutely details the technique of digging out the gold, all the while building sympathy for Bill, who addresses the land as "Mr. Pocket," and displays competence and industry to reach his goal.

Nonetheless, Bill's "progress was like that of a slug, befouling beauty with a monstrous trail."¹⁹ When he mounts the canyon to scan the unbroken chain of white-peaked Sierras, he notes below "the torn bosom of the hillside at his feet."²⁰ The land is further sullied when he murders a miner and buries his body in the exposed pocket. Once Bill rides out with his heavy sacks of gold, silence returns, with only the torn hillside left, a reminder of the break in the peace. In a brilliant ironic touch, London twice quotes in full Bill's song as

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he enters and departs. This spiritual urges listeners to turn to "them sweet hills of grace" and throw off their sins.²¹ But in one of these hills, the all-

gold canyon, sins abounded: lust, greed, envy, murder. Through understatement he hints that Nature's ultimate victory remains.

"All Gold Canyon" is an apt metaphor for the 1849 gold rush, where the ecological damage extended well beyond that occurring from pocket mining. Hydraulic mining washed away entire mountainsides, with the debris so filling watersheds that even today it has consequences for farming and flooding in the Sacramento Valley below. Accordingly, London's depiction of the Sierras as transcendental aligned him with the burgeoning conservation movement. Under Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, Congress had recently passed laws establishing new national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, partly to meet the growing demand for a nature-based recreation. Ever conscious of middle-class trends, London's story can be seen as consistent with his selecting some literary themes to please his market. Wilderness was to be visited, not destroyed by humans. Prior to becoming a park, Yosemite's ecology had been

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ravaged by sheep grazing, lumbering, and hay growing.²²

Then why would London write "All Gold Canyon" as he was embarking upon his ranch? His doing so makes sense in light of contradictory forces in the contemporary discourse about the land. Where John Muir urged preservation of nature with limited human use, Gifford Pinchot urged for wise use through scientific management. Pinchot had been a forester who appreciated the past error of wanton tree removal. He believed that administration based upon careful research could allow extraction of natural resources without destroying the natural equilibrium. It was a view congenial to business and industry of course, and found its rural analogue in schools of agriculture and agribusiness.²³

London would apply "wise use" practices at his ranch, yet in his writings he would continue his war against the large scale practices of monopoly capitalism. His agrarian novels form a trilogy here. *Burning*

Daylight establishes the motive to settle in the country. *The Valley of the Moon* provides a primer on finding and working the land.

The Little Lady of the Big House tempers his valedictory for country life by warning of how the machine could destroy the garden.²⁴ Throughout these works he blends myth and reality, and to be untutored in the agricultural and environmental discourse of the era is to miss part of his message.

Burning Daylight follows the classic monomyth pattern. The eponymous hero leaves the countryside to find adventure in the Yukon, enjoys success in the "underworld" of San Francisco, struggles with antagonistic Dede Mason, and returns transformed to a rural homestead. Critic Charles Watson has emphasized the novel's comic elements, and argued that the domestication of the hero by the woman is more than mawkish sentimentality.²⁵ Agrarian practicality weakens the couple's standard gender roles and strengthens their marital bonds. Interdependence is both necessary and complex, a blend of division of labor by gender with mutual involvement. Christopher Gair views the conclusion a "retreat into history and into the economic structure of

the nation at least fifty years earlier."²⁶

Pastoralism suggests a more complex message. Significantly, the settings form a tripartite structure. The Yukon is dominantly wilderness, a Nature ruthless toward the ignorant or foolish; San Francisco is civilization gone awry, greedy capitalists robbing and murdering; Sonoma Mountain is the middle ground, a place relatively free from threats on either side. It is during a ride on the mountain that Daylight's meditation on the land leads to a transformation of his thinking. Apart from unpredictable cataclysms, the homesteader has little to fear from nature if he treats it with respect. And through the market mechanism, nature's bounty allows one to feed the city without being prey to its nefarious forces.

Gair is correct in recognizing how Daylight continues to protect his money rather than give it up. Thus the couple do not repudiate the big capitalism they abhor, nor their easy access to money. Gair asserts there

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is a lie in the story, but it is not in being nostalgic and reactionary. Small farming in 1910 had more reason for success, thanks to

improved transportation, horticultural science, soil science, animal husbandry, and more. California's microclimates and diverse ecosystems favored specialty crops, but required a capital investment beyond most of London's readers, and as we've noted, London himself. Overall, *Burning Daylight* focuses upon the reasons for adopting the country life, and not the consequences of taking it on. London's readers would understand that the new country home was hardly a 19th century homestead.

The Valley of the Moon concerns only two aspects of pastoralism: the city/machine and the middle ground. Through his own familiarity with working-class life in Oakland, London graphically and sensitively relates the various trials of Saxon and Billy Roberts: the gritty elements of their jobs, the bleak settings of their homes, the violence during a strike, the tensions of all upon a marriage. Watson sees Saxon's emotional breakdown as one of questioning both the economic system and

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religious faith. Where Sonoma Mountain provided the epiphany for Daylight, another natural setting, the Oakland estuary, provokes an insight to Saxon: "It was a more rational world.... There were no men there, no laws or conflicts of men. The tide ebbed and flowed; the sun rose and set, regularly each afternoon the west wind came romping in through the Golden Gate Everything was free." She reflects upon "the smudge of Oakland at her back," where man had "made a rotten job of it," and nature was "right, sensible, and beneficent."²⁷ Yet it takes modern technology, a movie about chickens, to spur Saxon and Billy to consider a move to the country.

Watson questions how the Roberts could in fact find escape from the chaos they have fled. Gair agrees, and relates how the couple have moved into the world of free will by adopting middle-class behaviors and its accompanying privileges. As owners of property they can employ rather than be employed. In striking confirmation, it is a vein of clay good for brick making, just what the city requires, that alerts Billy to the potential wealth from the earth. Their long odyssey in the later section of the book has been characterized properly as little more than a travelogue combined with an agricultural bulletin. The lure of success is always present.

London marked up magazines and pamphlets as sources of information for the story. In addition, he annotated books by men who had left other careers to establish small farms, such as William Streeter's 1904 *The Fat of the Land*, an account of a physician turned rancher.²⁸ Streeter argued that success should be measured less by the size of the profits and more by self-sufficiency, a position London took in own ranch, though less so in his fiction. In addition, London was familiar with the achievements of immigrant farmers on the poorer soils. He had been to Japan and saw firsthand the value of terracing hillsides and applying ma-

nure on fields, and would adopt such older methods. Yet the Roberts' preoccupation with their American identity leads to a rejection of that approach. As Joan Didion observes, they are too determined to redeem their birthright as "old stock" Americans, and will depend upon scientific agronomy.²⁹

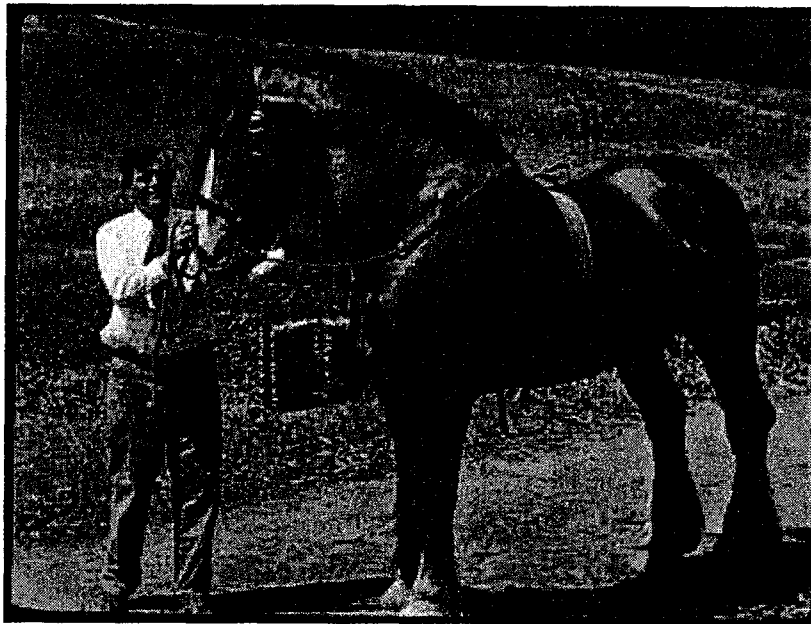
The achievement of *The Valley of the Moon* is its depiction of "the machine" in its first section. Despite portraying many examples of successful farming during the odyssey sequence, the appeal of country life remains undeveloped. The Madrono ranch purchased by the Roberts is an investment bought on time. There is

little hint of a more moral or healthy life. Perhaps the city has not left them, which may be why so many readers find the second part of the story faulty.

London's ranch practices rejected the stark individualism of his fictional characters. Among values incorporated by the Country Life movement missing from his novels was the Arts and Crafts aesthetic emphasis upon

beauty and function. The design and cleanliness of a barn were deemed good for the animals through the conscious expression of purity, unity, and repose. Again, profit was secondary to environmental concerns. For example, Powell asserted it was important to feed birds, to devote some field segment to their needs because birds provided both beauty and pest control. Furthermore, animals were to be treated humanely, the horses educated, not "broken." London extended these ideas further, by using animal power in preference to machinery, and by choosing ecological over chemical practices.³⁰ He incorporated some of the latest scientific findings, such as in planting eucalyptus or inoculating his pigs, but only within his own framework of wise use.

London's ecological model also extended to his work-force. Not only should one cooperate with nature



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rather than dominate it, one should consider relationships among those living on the farm, in effect, a rural application of cooperative commonwealth. Where the Roberts looked forward to others doing the labor, London was attentive to the workers' conditions. His management applied principles of capital industry—efficiency and economy—to ease labor. If he could manage his own labor to have afternoon hours free, then he wished the same for his workers. One sees this in the design of the Pig Palace, which ingeniously met the needs of animals and their handlers in a perfect solution. His plans were still unfolding, for, as he shared with Eliza just before his death, he was about to add more facilities for workers and the families. Though aspects of the *padrone* run through his ranch management, his intentions were honorable.

The Little Lady of the Big House is not located in Sonoma County, and with good reason. This dark, puzzling novel reinforces London's agrarian vision through counterexample.³¹

The Central Valley ranch managed by Dick Forrest is so gargantuan that he must spend all his time in the office. He is "the center of a system"³² dominated by attention to "the last tick of the clock" and calculates "an hour's labor for a draught horse to the third decimal place."³³ In addition to devotion to efficiency, Dick has become successful partly by buying the expertise of university agricultural specialists. Being preoccupied with ranch business, he ignores his wife Paula, who initiates a flirtation with guest Evan Graham as a provocative gesture. As Watson has noted, in this regard the story is one of middle age and loss. Falls from *hubris* affects all three characters, leading to the suicide of Paula.

Dick Forrest is Billy Roberts reincarnated into more fortunate circumstances. In his drive for profit, he

perverts Country Life values. He plans to divide five thousand acres into twenty-acre holdings, pay a salary to men to farm intensively, in return for a profit of six percent. "The stupid and the inefficient will be bound to be eliminated."³⁴ A visitor chides him for so "repulsive" a plan, one where men would toil for a bit of bread and shelter from the cold. "Is meat an' bread an' jam the end of it all, the meaning of life, the goal of existence?"³⁵

It is the Little Lady, Paula, a musician and athlete full of zest for life, who expresses opposing values. Her intuitive and successful breeding of horses ignores Dick's scientific husbandry, and she enjoys needlework,

though he would rather hire someone to do it for her. (Nonetheless, she maintains a gold-fish breeding business, and pays her husband for the costs incurred.)

Dick's practices encourage ready destruction of nature. He drains tule swamps, "worthless, save for ducks and low-water pastorage."³⁶ The result is new fields that earn two million dollars



in potatoes and asparagus. He also invents a device that allows a tractor to control itself, thus saving the expense of a worker. Though he is fascinated by Paula's attention to the simpler life, one enhanced by beauty, he belittles her to shore up his own false sense of control in the world. As London repeatedly reminds readers, this man who brings so much fecundity in the fields is unable to conceive a child.

The epiphany in this novel occurs during a mountain ride, when Evan kisses Paula and realizes one of the romantic triad will be hurt as a result. A later ride between Dick and Paula results in killing squirrels and no kisses. Tensions mount as a result of the flirtation: thus the "Big House ran on in its frictionless, happy,

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and remorseless way."³⁷ Loving both men, Paula plans her exit. Before doing so, a visitor observes how she is "like the wild canaries you see bathing in the fountain....Everything on earth and in the sky contributes to the passion of her days."³⁸ Dick is observed as "flat on the good ground...four square to fact and law, set against all airy fancies and bubbly speculations."³⁹ Art and nature meet science in a fatal encounter, and as in the reality of the 20th century, science prevails.

Little Lady succeeds insofar as it reveals the complex intertwining of masculinity, domination over nature, and imperialism. Influenced by his own preoccupation with his ranch and Charmian's actual flirtation with a guest, London offers a brutal self-realization. Transforming this private episode to industrial agriculture was exactly appropriate for his purpose. It is as much a confessional as *John Barleycorn*, though transformed into a critique of corporate agriculture.

Little Lady's accurate depiction of California's agribusiness reminded readers that the ills of capitalism were not limited to the city. Paula admires her husband's achievements, and therein lie the seeds of her self-destruction. The Jeffersonian agrarian submits to the Hamiltonian marketer. The ravaging of the landscape reached a new peak during London's life when business elites in Los Angeles and San Francisco destroyed the Owens River and Hetch Hetchy valleys for water to fund development. London exposes the men who would make such destructive decisions.

Once again we are reminded of the importance of distinguishing the authorial voice from the authorial life. London replied upon well-known scientific and Country Life experts in both his writing and his Beauty Ranch operations. His California fiction continued the pastoral tradition within the context of contemporary naturalist rhetoric, Progressive era discourse, and his own anti-capitalist stance. Both *Burning Daylight* and *Valley of the Moon* were less eloquent than his shorter fiction in achieving his purposes. Both plots failed to deliver a convincing proof of the Country Life promise. On the other hand, *Little Lady of the Big House* well provided the dystopian counterexample, yet was marred by overwritten, sometimes mawkish prose. As a rancher, London was more successful directing his actions to fit his commitment to the land and a lifestyle less devoted to profit than to experience.

Clarice Stasz's latest book is *Jack London's Women* (Univ. of Massachusetts, 2001). She is also the editor of <http://London.sonoma.edu>.

Notes

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17. *Ibid.*, 72-3.
18. *Ibid.*
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