

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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Merry Christmas



"The Christmas-Tree," by Winslow Homer. From *Harper's Weekly*, Dec. 25, 1858

**INSIDE: The Letters of James Henry Gleason
'Enjoying Life So Pleasantly'**



Letters from Monterey 1846-1859

Editor's Note:

The letters of James Henry Gleason give a vivid picture of life in California from 1846 to 1859. The following excerpts from these letters have been taken from the book "Beloved Sister," compiled with notes by Duncan and Dorothy Gleason, with a preface by Joe Duncan Gleason. In this preface Mr. Gleason points out "Except for a slight extra spacing at the end of sentences, no attempt has been made to correct spelling or punctuation, as the quaint errors give a better picture of a young man of limited schooling suddenly thrown into an environment of culture and trying to overcome his handicap."

by Virginia Stone

The slight young man bent over the page in front of him and settled down to his writing despite the sound of music in the next room. His letter, as so many others in the course of the last 14 years, began:

"My Dear Sister"

James Henry Gleason, a native of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and a nephew of the redoubtable brothers, Henry, William, and John Paty, who made their mark trading between the United States, the Sandwich Islands, and the new settlements of Alta California, ⁽¹⁾ was celebrating Christmas with his parents-in-law. James Pedro Watson and his wife, Mariana Buena Ventura Escamillo, had lived in Monterey one block north of the Thomas O. Larkin family on Calle Principal for many years but were now living on the acreage they called San Benito Rancho, south of Salinas.

James Henry missed his wife, the delightful Caterina Demetria Watson, who had given birth just the month before and was staying in Monterey with their latest child during the festive season, but his letter to his sister expresses his delight with the holidays shared with the Watsons:

I came here to celebrate Christmas and New Years with the old folks, they must have all their relatives with them at Christmas my father in law one of old fashion Eng. Gentlemen cannot of course forget the old Custom, and a delightful time we have had for the last week the house crowded with guests from all parts of the country Turkeys--plum puddings--roast pigs--music--dancing--bull fighting and racing continually kept up with a perfect looseness this day finishes the feast and tomorrow hurrah for home. My wife was confined on the 30th of November and on that day I became father to my fourth child all in healthy & promising condition and smart as steel traps. ⁽²⁾

Again and again he had urged his sister to come west to join him in

Monterey, promising he would take care of her every need.

You would enjoy your life so pleasantly. to be sure you would find the manners and customs different from what you are accustomed to but at the same time you would find them to your taste give me the harp and guitar for music in preference to your piano or Boston Brigade or Brass Bands and for song what is there more sweet than a spanish song they are still singing in my ears while I am writing this.....while I have stowed myself away in the farthest corner of the house to give my thoughts to thee.....The songsters I think are in the sala and they are singing one of my old favorite songs "El Relampago" ("Flash of Lightning").

I have discontinued writing for a few moments to listen, and lit one of my Manilas No 3 thrown myself back in the rocking chair and swinging to and fro occasionally sipping my sherry which stands at my elbow in a wine glass which perhaps might have been manufactured for all that I know in the Sandwich glass factory, that is the glass, the wine I am certain came from Europe the cigars are some of my old stock brought over from the Islands in 1846.....I feel myself now approaching old age (he was then 32 years of age!) or to that point when a man feels little inclined to hard work I am very fond of laying by and see others work but not disposed to lend a hand myself. ⁽³⁾

He describes the workday of his father-in-law, "the old Governor", who hurried on his "feild labourers" (sic) with a hickory cane. Dinner was at one, and then a "lounge" until three. There was an afternoon hunt, but when the day's work was over:

....all assemble in the large hall around that large old fashion fire place being 6-1/2 feet wide 5 feet high & 2 ft. deep (it is a fact) and I dare say it consumes in cold weather a large wagon load of wood each day now and then out comes the guitar almost every one plays and all dance--sometimes play whist and others of more sober turn lounge about the corners of the room reading or looking on, and the old lady & Gentleman sitting in the corner of the fire place the latter continually smokeing and spitting at the embers and chatting and spinning his old yarns with some new guest ⁽⁴⁾

On this New Year's Day of 1855, James Henry Gleason had good reason to feel contented with his life. He had married one of the most charming girls in Monterey, was the father of four healthy children and was accumulating property in Monterey and San Francisco. Five years before he had been elected alderman in Monterey. In 1857 he would become county clerk and recorder.

The only ominous note is the feeling of lassitude that he mentions in the letter to his sister, for this genial young man would die at the age of 38, after a prolonged period of ill health, leaving his widow and eight children.

Born in Plymouth, October 22, 1823, his home life was an unhappy



James Henry Gleason, 1823-1861

one. His mother died when he was eight years old, and there are a number of references in his letters to his sister Frances concerning their father's drunkenness and the difficult living conditions which existed for his sister and three younger brothers after he left home to make his fortune.

The letters begin on December 6, 1841, four days after he arrived in the Sandwich Islands (the Hawaiian Islands) and went to work for his uncle, William Paty, as a clerk in the store there. Uncle John Paty was often away on trading missions, and this letter makes mention of the death of Uncle Henry, "that good kind, and affectionate unkle", who had

recently died by his own hand during a bout of smallpox. Uncle William was obviously a stern taskmaster, and young James Henry worked long hard hours. However, he comments in one letter to his sister:

the society that I am introduced into here hold high stations in life guided wholly by the laws of Etiquete a person unacquainted with these and without a refined education and graceful in their manners is considered unfit for their company....It seemed odd to me when I first arrived here being always used to hand labour and then suddently introduced into high society where I had half a dozen servants under me to command not even to put my hand to any thing but it would seem still more odd to me to go home now and split wood & bring water &c...⁽⁶⁾

Letters were sent to Plymouth courtesy of various sailing ships. Ships with the romantic names of "Delaware"; whaleships "Briganza", "Chenamus", "Miceno", "William and Eliza", "Nimrod", and "Inez" carried young James Henry's correspondence back to New England where they were delivered by the kindness of the captain or were mailed. A postmark was used in lieu of a stamp and the dates often show it took eight months for a letter to be delivered. The handwriting is in a beautiful Spenserian script, and each letter is folded and then sealed with wax so no envelope is necessary. Since paper was dear, as well as the postage, many letters are written left to right as usual and then turned and written at a right angle across the original text. (6) Life in the Sandwich Islands was not all work though. There were a number of memorable parties which the young man attended and described in glowing terms:

Wednesday, February 22

This evening a splendid Ball, and supper was given by the american residents here to Capt Long and Officers of the U.S. Ship "Boston" in commemoration of the birth of Gen George Washington...It was kept up till 5 O.c. in the morning by the gentleman, singing songs, dancing, drinking toasts &c...we paraded the streets with a band of music till near daylight, when each one retired to their respective homes.⁽⁷⁾

Monday, February 27th

I attended a splendid party to night on bourd of the "Boston" given to american residents here by Capt Long and the Ward Room Officers. the supper table groaned under the weight of everything that was good, rich, and nice it was "Kept up" by the gentlemen (after the ladies left) till after four O.c. in the morning, and a glorious time we had I tell you, the utmost cordiality, kindness, and attention was shown us....War, and splendid parties seem to be the order of the day here at present.⁽⁸⁾

Despite the busy life young James Henry led in the Sandwich Islands,

there were moments of desperate homesickness as well. In one letter he describes getting a package from home which he tore up in a "savage" manner in his eagerness to see the contents. His comments on his sister's letter show how starved he was for communication from home.

I do not remember crying over a letter before in my life but I must say that on this occasion the pleasure heightened as it was by a long interval of silence and disappointments, the tears sparkling and bright would ascend from the fountain of sympathy and fall glittering on your tender lines before me in spite of my endeavors to restrain them. Your letter was the longest and certainly the most beautiful composition that I have ever received from you. ⁽⁹⁾

He urged his sister to disregard another letter in which he reproached her for not writing but explains "It was wrote in one of those moods that people speak of when one feels seriously inclined to 'tear his shirt' and bite off the heads of 20d Nails!" ⁽¹⁰⁾

He responds to one of her questions saying he loved poetry, especially Lord Byron. He mentions the "intense imagery" and the "loftiest sentiment and thought" of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" but considers "Manfred" his favorite, "Byron's masterpiece."

The only historical event he touches on at this time is the aftermath to Thomas ap Catesby Jones' mistaken "capture" of Monterey in 1842. Evidently, Commander Jones was the "mouse" to the Navy's "cat". James Henry wrote a Commander Dallas who was attempting to deliver some papers ordering Jones home for possible court martial:

...it is with feelings of regret mixed with pity that we consider his circumstances he has heretofore shown himself zealous and patriotic in his country cause and that he should now rise up and commit an act so degrading to the American interest throughout California is to us a matter of no little wonder and surprise he will in all probability be discharged from the navy and I do not think that I judge harshly of him when I say that thus had ought to be his punishment without ceremony. ⁽¹¹⁾

James Henry Gleason's first letter from Monterey was dated March 30, 1846, and headed "upper California". He had arrived on the "Don Quixote", the well-known ship captained by his uncle, John Paty. Besides keeping accounts on board, he was now engaged in disposing of the cargo from Oahu valued at \$8000.

I am much pleased with this coast, the climate is very healthy, and the Spanish lasses you are aware are so exceedingly amiable that one could almost imagine himself a portion of heaven while moveing through a dizzy waltz with a beautiful blue eyed Spanish maid for a partner. ⁽¹²⁾

The "beautiful blue-eyed Spanish maid" that James Henry Gleason

refers to may well have been the thirteen-year-old Caterina Watson whom he continues to write about in his letters to his sister:

May 2, 1847

I have just finished my fourth business letter to the Sand'ch Islands--lit my cigar--and now I am ready to devote my time to a dear acquaintance. I am not married yet but tomorrow I intend to ask for the hand of Catarina, Watson, *we must be united*, she is one of the loveliest--sister that the world can boast of--a disposition that an angel might envy, her father is a merchant in this place, worth about 50,000,\$ these are large numbers however I have hopes of success Kate tells me that she loves me--that she will wed me and no other-- David Spence, my rival, has been her companion from infancy yet my happy disposition and *good looks* has removed from her all the attachments she had to him and the charm of *Fifty thousand*. I am received into the family as a favorite I have shared at Mr. Watson's table for more than five months and he will not receive anything for my board and her mother extends to me a thousand kindnesses that would be refused an older acquaintance.

There is not a young man in California with more promising prospects before him that are now presented to me Mr. Watson is aware of this and encourages me to hope for success. I am acting at present as Agent for Paty & Co on this Coast. I have a large establishment in this place and the whole cargo of "Don Quixote" two months since brought from Oahu was placed in my hand for sale...You must excuse me for a few moments my servant has just brought into the office a piece of pie. I wish I could share with you it looks so nice.

15 minutes later

Having ate my pie--smoked a cigar--walked the terrace, blowed my nose, and censured the servant for a blunder I again return to you--...

The above ten lines I filled with nonsense I must quit that for I pay 1.50¢ postage for this letter in advance. ⁽¹³⁾

On May 18, 1848, he wrote his sister from Pueblo de Los Angeles where he had gone on business. He was procuring six horses with three more for his boy "Friday" readying for a journey of 600 miles to San Francisco. Along the way he would stop in Monterey to attend to a bit of romantic business. He wrote his sister of his longing for Caterina:

....heigh ho! for the north-- to my Catalina (sic)--the star of my pathway through life--the beacon that guides me to happiness. Twelve days will bring me to thy arms.--to once more forget the world in thy presence -- to gaze (candle in the saucer has just fallen) in those large melting expressive eyes and "ser feliz contigo." ⁽¹⁴⁾

Caterina's parents had demanded a wait of 18 months before the marriage could take place. On November 15, 1849, he addressed his sister as Doña Francesca Gleason and announced that he was married to his "bonny Kate":

...now reclining over my shoulder & anxious to know what I am about to say, to my sister. ...she understands but few words in english. She saw "My" & "Kate" in the second line and knew what it meant at once but the "bonny" which intervened was a damper. I told her it was saltfish and she curled her pretty lip and tapped me under the chin with all the gentleness of a boy eating a peice of pumpkin pie.

I was married on the 7th of Oct at 3 Oc in the morning. (sic) a large dinner party was given by my father at his house in the afternoon and a dance followed in the evening. the expenses must have been nearly \$1000 ⁽¹⁵⁾

Later on March 31, he mentions that Kate will send her "Deguerotype in her bridal dress and reclining on a harp as she was at a moment on the marriage eve." ⁽¹⁶⁾

In his letter home written on New Year's Day of 1855 he, like Walter Colton before him, commented on the fecundity of the female in the salubrious California climate. ⁽¹⁷⁾ There were four little Gleasons already in the family within six years' time and no end in sight:

It is astonishing what effect this climate has on the female as soon as she is married, they all have babies--every one of them, and they keep having them at least one in every twelve months as long as they live unless they live to be very old or their husbands die, why confound it ladies born in the East & lost all hopes of having any have arrived on our shores and all at once they swell out like old Falstaff and the next thing Papa is in a state of extacy and delight If I thought it would have the reverse effect by taking my wife to the atlantic shores I would be tempted to undertake it, so much for family matters. ⁽¹⁸⁾

When Caterina was expecting their first child in 1850, he had written in a very offhand manner to Frances:

My wife tells me that I shall be a father in about 6 or 8 weeks, of course she ought to know. I've nothing more to say about it. ⁽¹⁹⁾

However, when his son was born, he is obviously transported with joy:

I've got a boy that I'm proud of born on the 31st of October makes him one month old. We have given him the name of Henry. the name is short and in Spanish it sounds sweet Henrique. At his birth we did not weigh him but we supposed to weigh about 10 pounds. you can see the Paty stick out in him at every point. only a month old his large bright blue eyes flash and sparkle like a metior and his pretty little mouth will curl itself into a smile so cunningly that I would give anything to have you by. Catharine says that he is to large for her to take care of & in a few years he will be strong enough to master his father & advises me to ship him off on the next steamer to you. ⁽²⁰⁾

In the ensuing years there are progress reports on the growing family. One wonders what modern-day pediatricians would say about the following comment in a letter to his sister on March 3, 1851:

Our little Henrique is in fine health and growing rapidly we feed him on beef-steak (five months old!) poor little fellow got a peice down his throat the other day & it came very near making a finish of him ⁽²¹⁾

and furthermore:

Myself & wife think that we have the finest boy that could possibly be manufactured, he is only six months old and we feed him on slops if you know what that is and at times we find him knawing away at a peice of beef with right good relish, he is just commencing to crawl and never cries which makes him more interesting. Cradles are not known in this part of the world, I'll tell you how we or rather how my wife manages. A peice of cord is stretched from one bed post to the other so as to swing loose, then a blanket is folded over the cord and opened by two sticks one at the head and one at the foot just wide enough to admit the little cherub, and this is the way we swing him to sleep. It would please you more to see the little fellow in his bath-tub he enjoys it so much spattering the water with his hands and jumping about in it as though it was his only true element. ⁽²²⁾

On January 15, 1852, he writes:

Little Lucia is our pet now & is as charming as a good turtle soup or a plate of oysters. Henrique is by my side kicking up considerable excitement because the nurse delays bringing in his dinner I think he will be some pumpkins when he has a few more years on his head he can fight now when there is cause. ⁽²³⁾

More than a year later on February 15, 1853, he writes to his beloved sister telling her of the anxieties that beset the family in November and December the previous year. They were staying with his in-laws on their farm when a traveler arrived dying of smallpox. Within ten days eleven family members were down with the dreaded disease despite efforts to cleanse the house and burn everything that had come into contact with the dead man.

James Henry and two sisters-in-law escaped but were exhausted ministering to the sick day and night. His wife, Caterina, was briefly ill but soon recovered, and little Henrique had been vaccinated. However, his baby daughter, Lucia, was desperately ill and her life despaired of:

it is impossible for me to describe to you in words the distress beneath that roof about Christmas time and the anxiety felt by the sick and the well. I had never been amongst it before and not having been vaccinated since my infancy (in Sandwich which I recollect perfectly

well for I was frightened nearly out of my juvenile senses). I felt almost sure of taking it being continually by the bedside and walking the room for hours together with my little Lucia the poor little infant was blind for three days and nights at the time the disease reached its height should I live a hundred years the moment she opened her eyes would be fresh in my memory she extended her little hands toward me and seemed to feel so glad to see me that I could not leave her a moment for the whole day. I had before given up all hopes of saving her, partly from the circumstance of my father in law telling me that I must be prepared to loose her for she could not live and when she opened her eyes and appeared so cheerful and called for her playthings I could not restrain the gush of tears that started from my eyes. she is dearer to me now than ever.⁽²⁴⁾

In the same letter he proudly tells Frances about his little boy:

Little Henrique is the finest little boy out of jail, he is very forward of his age and his parents (of course) believe he will make a smart man his main ambition at the present day is to throw the lasso over the dogs and lambs and throw them down as the rancheros do the cattle.⁽²⁵⁾

He finishes the letter by telling his sister:

The probability is that should no accident interfere with the workings of nature I will have an addition to my family in about four months is it possible I am so "adelantade" in domestic affairs I can hardly realise it, for it appears to me I am nothing but a boy yet "sic transit gloria mundi."⁽²⁶⁾

He signs the letter "Santiago", and in a large hand begs Frances to write.

Only a few more letters survive, one in June, 1856, in which he writes about how his family affairs go on "delightfully" and describes the children and their appearances and dispositions. The last two letters in the collection are both written to his brother, Herbert Gleason. The first, written on October 16, 1858, concerns the contested estate of his uncle, William Paty, and Captain John Paty's efforts to disentangle the affairs which involved money owed to James Henry.

The last letter was dated July 20, 1859, "At Sea off California", on a return trip from the Sandwich Islands where he had journeyed to collect the money owed him from his uncle's estate. After expenses he had cleared only \$1000 but was reconciled to his Aunt Martha Ann who he felt had wrongly accused Captain John Paty of mismanaging his brother's estate.

Two years later, James Henry Gleason was dead at the age of thirty-eight.

Although most of the letters in the collection are written to his sister, Frances, about his personal life and business concerns, a few are written to others and chronicle the dramatic developments taking place

in Alta California at the time.

After all James Henry arrived in Monterey just a few months before the momentous Sloat landing on July 7, 1846, when the American flag above was raised above the tile roofs of the little town.

His first mention of the rapidly brewing events taking place that spring was in a letter to his uncle, William Paty, in Honolulu.

Dr. Stokes had arrived bringing news of the Bear Flag Revolt:

thirty seven americans had risen in Sacramento and taken Sonoma by force and made prisoners of four California officers & Don M.G. Vallejo Don Salvador Vallejo Don Victor Prudon and Mr Luis Leace General Castro immediately mustered his forces in this place about 80 in number and this forenoon marched out to San Juan and proceed to Sonoma to retake the place. ⁽²⁷⁾

The merchant disposition shows itself in a further addendum to the same letter:

A revolution has now boldly commenced which will undoubtedly end very soon in an entire change of Government. This difficulty will greatly interfere with the traders in making collections this season. ⁽²⁸⁾

After describing the flag of the revolutionists as "white with a red fly and a Star and a Bear in the Union" he comments:

A Brig sailed a few days since for Mazatlan which carried the news of this revolution as soon as it reaches Mexico she will evidently send on a large force to protect California should this happen every foreigner on the coast will be obliged to join the 'Bear' or leave the country. ⁽²⁹⁾

He enclosed a copy of Wm. B. Ide's proclamation of the revolt and a translation of General Castro's counter-proclamation. Also included in the letter to his uncle was a copy of Larkin's letter to the Secretary of State in Washington regarding the prospective mining possibilities in Alta California. No mention is made of gold on the American River.

In a letter to his Uncle William dated on July 3, 1846, four days before the American occupation, he tells of a plot to capture Oliver Larkin:

Last evening we expected to have a hot skirmish in this place, it seems that a Californian being a friend to the americans, informed Mr Larkin the american Consul that a secret meeting was to be held that night among the authorities of the place to see whether it would be adviseable to seize him prisoner, about twilight he {Larkin} sent round word to his friends to have their fire arms ready for immediate use, and should there be a report of fire arms in the night to hurry to his house it seems that the Californians did not deem it prudent to make

the attack...it is supposed that they wish to make prisoner of Larkin to influence the release of the prisoners in the possession of Ide. ⁽³⁰⁾

It is not until July 23 that James Henry reports to his uncle on the American takeover, and ironically sends the letter courtesy of Mr. Hencley, first lieutenant of the "Collingwood", the British ship that Commodore Sloat was so anxious to beat to Monterey. There seemed to be little ill feeling between the men of the two opposing navies. Unfortunately, there is no eye-witness account by our correspondent. Certainly, his lively style and eccentric spelling would have enlivened any report. Nonetheless, his pleasure in the new government is obvious:

Commodore Sloat took possession of this place on the 7th inst. a courier was immediately sent by the Commodore to San Francisco with orders to Captain Montgomery of the Portsmouth to hoist the flag of the United States at that place we are now on american soil and it is generally believed that the flag will never be lowered again...American goods are now imported here duty free and foreign goods one quarter what they paid heretofore...

Captain Fremont arv'd here last Sunday with a party of 170 riflemen under his command he is now camped about quarter of a mile from town. it is supposed that his next movement will be to go to the leeward to take Castro and bring him to this place. If this can be effected the peopel of the country will go quietly about thier occupations and trade will again revive. ⁽³⁰⁾

To his sister he wrote in a letter dated July 25, 1846, that it "seems exceedingly pleasant to me to place my feet once more on american soil." He reported he had already purchased a house in Monterey and was planning on buying a farm near Sacramento.

On July 20, 1849, he mentions the discovery of gold in California. "Such a discovery has never been known since the commencement of the world." ⁽³¹⁾ His accounts of the frenzy on the American River and the repercussions that affected the state and the nation have a fever about them.

Later he wrote Frances that he had spent ten days mining gold and had made \$1800 and would have made a great deal more had he not been taken ill. He sent her some gold to make jewelry from but added in an aggrieved tone:

You will prize this much as I nearly forfeited my life in washing for it for 3 days. I was on the edge of the grave I shall never visit the mines again I can coin money fast enough in this country by speculating. I shall send you more gold when less pressed for payments. ⁽³²⁾

James Henry Gleason never became a truly rich man, but in the short time left to him, he found coin of a different sort. His obvious love for his wife and children, and the approbation of the inhabitants of the city

his wife and children, and the approbation of the inhabitants of the city of Monterey who elected him as alderman and then as county clerk and recorder, made it certain that his sleep under the pines of the old Monterey cemetery would be a peaceful one.

FOOTNOTES

1. "John Paty, Yankee Trader", Parts 1 and 2 are the titles of the June, 1991, Noticias, Vol. XLIII, No. 2, and the September, 1991, Vol. XLIII, N. 3, in which his busy life is told.

2. Gleason, James Henry, Beloved Sister, the letters of James Henry Gleason, 1841 to 1859, from Alta California and the Sandwich Islands, compiled with notes by Duncan and Dorothy Gleason, the Arthur H. Clark Co., Glendale, California, 1978, p. 195.

3. Ibid., pp. 195-6.

4. Ibid., p. 197.

5. Ibid., p. 41.

6. Ibid., p. 16, Preface by Joe Duncan Gleason, 1950.

7. Ibid., p. 53.

8. Ibid., p. 54.

9. Ibid., p. 83.

10. Ibid., p.83.

11. Ibid., p. 67.

12. Ibid., p. 90.

13. Ibid., pp. 143-5.

14. Ibid., p. 157.

15. Ibid., pp. 164-5.

16. Ibid., p. 173.

17. The exact quotation from Walter Colton's "Three Years in California (1850)" is as follows:

The fecundity of the Californians is remarkable, and must be attributed in no small degree to the climate. It is no uncommon sight to find from fourteen to eighteen children at the same table, with their mother at the head. There is a lady of some note in Monterey, who is the mother of twenty-two living children. The youngest is at the breast, and must soon, it is said, relinquish his place to a newcomer, who will, in all probability, be allowed the same brevity of bliss.

Walter Colton as quoted in "Tales of Monterey," ed. by Davis and Judy Dutton, p. 32, Ballantine press, N.Y.C., 1974.

18. Op. cit., p. 200.

19. Ibid., p. 176.

20. Ibid., p. 182.

21. Ibid., p. 185.

22. Ibid., p. 186.

23. Ibid., pp. 188-9.

24. Ibid., pp. 193-4.

25. Ibid., p. 193.

26. Ibid., p. 194.

27. Ibid., p. 103.

28. Ibid., p. 104.

29. Ibid., p. 104.

30. Ibid., pp. 116-7.

31. Ibid., p. 160.

32. Ibid., p. 164.

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