Analysis to date of anti-semitism on the part of G.K. Chesterton and his associates has usually focussed less on the attributes of the group as a whole than on the beliefs, attitudes and actions of its individual members. In this model, Cecil Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc are usually discussed as being in relative terms on the reprehensible end of the spectrum, and Gilbert Chesterton as having been relatively less culpable, while some less prominent - but for the present purpose not necessarily less significant - figures, such as Ada Jones, the journalist who became Cecil's wife in 1917, and the remarkable F. Hugh O'Donnell, largely escape scrutiny. A close reading of the Distributist periodicals *The Eye-Witness* and *The New Witness* suggests that focussing instead on the group and inter-actions within it might be more profitable.\(^1\).

While Gilbert and his associates can usefully be thought about as one of many sub-sets within a wider late-Victorian and Edwardian social order where relatively low-level anti-semitism of one sort and another was widespread, did the group as a whole have characteristics which set it apart as one of a smaller class of sub-sets which were in the nature of closed or semi-closed systems? To what extent did the fears, anxieties and fantasies of the individual members feed off one another and become magnified in the process? Was there a social pathology within the group that allowed seriously disturbed - depraved may be the more accurate description - individuals such as O'Donnell to exercise a disproportionate influence? Was the sum of the group's anti-semitism greater than its parts? A useful starting-point is to draw attention to items from the periodicals that may point to an overall pattern that calls for further study.

In 1911, the Distributists started their first journal. Its name was *The Eye-Witness*. Belloc was the editor, and Cecil his deputy. Cecil took over *The Eye-Witness* from Belloc in 1912, and re-named it *The New Witness*. Gilbert in turn edited *The New Witness* on a temporary basis

\(^1\) ""Distributist" only for want of a better name, as the papers also pursued agendas other than Distributism, anti-semitism among them.
during Cecil's service with the army in France, and permanently following his death there in 1918. By 1923, *The New Witness* had so much lost circulation and was experiencing financial difficulties of so great a magnitude as to require it to cease publication. It resumed in 1925 as *G.K.'s Weekly*. When Gilbert died in 1936, Belloc was again briefly the editor, but shortly handed over the position to his son-in-law, Reginald Jebb. In 1938, there was a further - and final - change of name to *The Weekly Review*, and the paper appeared for the last time in 1947.

A key account of the Distributist Movement - Jay Corrin's *G.K. Chesterton & Hilaire Belloc: The Battle Against Modernity* - notes that ‘The Eye and New Witness were not polite papers: they intended to shock readers by laying bare the rottenness of British politics’. Belloc and Cecil had written in their book *The Party System* that: ‘The political education of the democracy is therefore the first step towards reform. The first step is exposure’. Their papers were intended to put the recommendation into effect. The strategy was to bring to public attention specific abuses such as where collusion between the front benches in parliament had resulted in benefits to the plutocracy or was in other ways detrimental to the public interest. What was seen by some as the finest moment of *The Eye Witness* and *The New Witness* - and by others as a characteristic excess - was the exposure by Cecil in 1912 of the involvement of prominent public figures - including such leading identities in the Liberal government as the Postmaster-General, Herbert Samuel, the Attorney-General, Sir Rufus Isaacs, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George - in what was effectively an abuse of office arising from insider trading in Marconi shares.

The coverage gave heavy emphasis to the fact that three of the key offenders were Jews. Cecil was ultimately found guilty of libel in an action brought against him by a further party to the Marconi transactions, Geoffrey Isaacs. The judge commented in his summing up

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that those responsible for the offending material had been ‘partly instigated by racial prejudice and partly blind to business matters’.4 While Belloc was privately critical of aspects of Cecil's handling of The New Witness, he stood by his friend in public and was a defence witness at his trial. The episode was in his eyes one more confirmation of the connivance between the front benches and the plutocracy which he, Cecil and Gilbert, so passionately detested.

Hindsight suggests a harsher judgement. For all the good The Eye-Witness and The New Witness achieved - for all their outstanding contributions to the development and advocacy of Distributist thought, most notably in contributions by Belloc such as his seven-part series on the Servile State in 1917 and his ten-part series ‘The Reconstruction of Private Property’ in 1919 - they also paraded to damaging effect the dark side of some Distributists which so frequently brought Distributism into disrepute and alienated potential supporters. The tainting of the Marconi episode with anti-semitism was in no sense an isolated occurrence in The New Witness, but rather reflected a pervasive prejudice among the paper's key contributors. Defenders and sceptics alike of the view that the leading Distributists were in their varying degrees anti-semitic usually base their arguments on such readily accessible material as their books, poetry and better-known public statements. The more conclusive - and deeply disturbing - evidence of anti-semitism is in the largely forgotten files of distributist weeklies.

The anti-semitism that The New Witness featured so conspicuously was not limited, as is sometimes supposed, to Belloc and Cecil, but extended to Gilbert and even the normally level-headed and warm-hearted Ada Jones. What the group thought they were doing - and their obliviousness to its dreadful significance - is conveyed graphically in the grotesque self-congratulatory passages with which Belloc and Gilbert celebrated the achievements of The Eye-Witness and The New Witness in - as they saw it - bringing the Jewish problem to public attention for the first time. Belloc trumpeted that ‘The New Witness was the first paper to tell an instructed public what the Jewish peril was, not only in England but in

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Europe'. Gilbert concurred. ‘Our notions do not always turn out to be nonsense.’, he wrote, ‘The Jewish Problem, once regarded as a fad, is now recognised as a fact; and a fact that fills the world’.

Under Gilbert’s editorial control as under Cecil before him, The New Witness carried a broad range of anti-semitic material, including the expressions of anti-semitic opinion which featured from time to time in its leading articles. There was, for example, anti-semitism of the petty, mean-spirited variety, as in an item in the ‘Comments of the Week’ column of The New Witness for 19 April, 1918, which complained in regard to rail travel of ‘hordes of Jews who congest the traffic between London and Brighton and overcrowd the trains to the Thames Valley. ‘It is nothing less than a scandal’, the item continued, ‘that while the Jews are allowed to overcrowd the trains on certain lines that the workmen should be deprived of any trains at all, and should have to contemplate a long and dreary journey before he can get home’.

A related item on an earlier occasion was scornful of Jews for taking shelter in the London Underground during air-raids, while supposedly more courageous sections of the population remained on the surface. What was objected to was - among other things – ‘a Jew with a gold watch-chain grovelling on the floor of the tube’. The report originated from Ada Jones. ‘Now that the unhappy 'alien' by diving bodily under the earth, has come politically to the surface", wrote Gilbert in his regular column ‘At the Sign of the World's End’, ‘I almost begin to have a humanitarian reaction in his favour’. The implicit snigger - the inability to imaginatively get inside the head of a suffering fellow human being - was as uncharacteristic of Gilbert as it was unworthy. Unsurprisingly to anybody but Gilbert, the editor of The Jewish Chronicle and The Jewish Herald was critical of the item. ‘He says’, reported Gilbert, ‘that what I have called 'these unhappy racial collisions' are due solely to malice against Jews; in other words that Christians hate Jews without cause; and have only to leave off hating. This, I believe, is the sincere, not to

say innocent, opinion of many influential Jews; and it is utter balderdash'.

At a second and graver level, anti-semitic material of an abusive, hysterical and overtly malevolent character appeared regularly in *The New Witness* over by-lines such as of F. Hugh O'Donnell. O'Donnell – previously an Irish MP under Parnell, with an unsavoury reputation for disloyalty to his leader – would not have been out of place in the notorious Julius Streicher’s Jew-baiting Nazi journal, *Der Sturmer*. It is unclear how decent human beings such as the Chesterton brothers and Belloc are known to have been could have allowed themselves to have anything to do with him, much less allowed him to chair their National League for Clear Government – the future Distributist League in embryo – and to access seemingly unlimited space for his disturbed and depraved opinions in their periodicals. Distasteful in the extreme as it is to quote from the contributions to *The New Witness* of O'Donnell and others of his ilk, there can be no more persuasive demonstration of the vicious prejudices to which Gilbert and his associates were prepared to give currency and in so doing render themselves complicit.

A representative extract from a contribution by O'Donnell to *The New Witness* for 13 November, 1913, reads:

> Jews are still more discordant with, and destructive of, European civilisation than are Javanese, Mongols, Moors, Zulus or Malays. ... the Zulu, the Mongol or the Malay is probably far less removed from European ideals than all these rodent and parasitic Asiatics who stammer our speech and imitate our exterior. At any rate, neither the Zulu, the Mongol nor the Malay has come in hundreds of thousands and in millions to batten on struggling populations of laborious men and pallid women whose livelihoods were scanty enough without the clutching fingers of the Arch-sweater, the Arch-monopolist, the Arch-usurer, the Arch-cheat. ‘It is the tragedy of entire nations’, O'Donnell concludes, ‘which underlies the crawling, creeping, pustulate advance of the Universal Parasites’.

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O'Donnell's reference to ‘the Universal Parasites’ is from one of a protracted series of articles in *The New Witness* in 1913, about a supposed Jewish ritual murder of a Christian child – the so-called ‘Beiliss Affair’ - in Kiev. His account of the purported crime reads:

The adjoining brickworks or brick factory of the Chassidim Jews Saizef are in a palisaded enclosure; and into this enclosure the Christian children Andrew Yusstshinsky – who was to be stabbed with 47 sacrificial stabs – and Eugene Tchesberiak with his little sisters Valentine and Ludmilla Tchesberiak slipped to play hide-and-seek on the 25th of March, the Jewish month of Adar – but the Chassidim caught Andrew, and the Tchesberiak children managed to run away. ... The post-mortem examination was made by Professor Sikorsky of the University of Kiev in person. His report attests the presence of 47 wounds on the little body, seven in the head, four in the neck, eight near the throat, seventeen in the chest and ribs, six in the liver, kidneys, etc. The operations were so delicate and simultaneous that ‘at least six assassins’ were at work, and high surgical or sacrificial skill was evident. The torture must have been horrible and deliberately prolonged. The deathstroke was dealt with a knife twisted round in the heart. ... On the official Visit of the Whole Tribunal accompanied by the only person in custody, the Chassidim Jew Mendel Beiliss, to the ‘cave’ in which the mutilated remains were discovered, a surprising and horrible thing was attested by the court itself. The so-called ‘cave’ was in reality a crypt dug in a hillside, and carefully excavated in the form of a Cross! The plan was a Greek Cross with all the arms just four feet long! At the centre of the Cross, but huddled away a little out of sight to one side, the body of little Andrew Yusstshinsky had been found, bloodless, pierced with 47 torturing wounds. ... There can be no doubt as well that the bloodless and mutilated remains of the little Christian martyr of Kiev, Andrew Yusstchinsky, were also placed by the fanatic murderers in ‘a Cross-shaped Crypt’, a crypt dug in the form of a crypt, ‘in sacriligeous contempt of the Christian faith’. Self-evident evidence cannot be more evident than that.10

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When Beiliss was acquitted, O'Donnell challenged the verdict: The verdict of the Jury on the general question of the Ritual murder leaves no moral doubt that the hideous butchery of the little Russian lad in the factory of the fanatic Chasidim of the Zaitseff Jews was *equally the work of the whole of the residents and workers within those walls*. ... Here was this creature Beiliss notoriously, certainly, undeniably present in the House of Murder in Kiev, in his place of authority among his own kind, while the little Russian lad was being sliced and bled in the hideous Rite of Voodoo or JuJu like in Congoland; and how did he come to be ‘acquitted’? Where Corporate Murder had been done, where the Jury had agreed that corporate murder had been proved against the awful denizens of the Den of Horror, how came it that Beiliss, who had been there all the time, had been acquitted? And, in addition, a child witness, playfellow of the Dead, had deposed that Beiliss had been the seizer of the Living Boy in the House of Death. Other children, also playfellows on the Day of Death, had also related the same of the same Beiliss. And they had died mysteriously, by poison it was also deposed. How came this Beiliss of the Murder House to be acquitted?11

The Beiliss Affair has long since been shown conclusively to have been a fabrication, perpetrated by the Tsarist authorities to distract public attention from their shortcomings and bolster their failing fortunes. The Cambridge University historian Orlando Figes writes in his magisterial *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* that the episode ‘shocked the whole of Europe with its medieval persecution of an innocent Jew on trumped-up charges of the ritual murder of a Christian boy. ... In the eyes of the Western World, however, the Beiliss Affair came to symbolize the struggle between the despotism of medieval Russia and the new European-style society of twentieth-century Russia based upon the civil rights of the Duma era. The tsarist regime, by siding with the former, had committed moral suicide in the eyes of the civilised world’.12 The actions of Chesterton and his associates in extending the

hospitality of their paper – and by extension the imprimatur of their good names – to O'Donnell’s inflammatory fantasies was indicative of the prejudices they shared with O'Donnell, and likewise morally culpable.

O'Donnell was no less incensed by what he saw to be the influence of the Jews in France. ‘The constant element in the development of French Republicanism since the Revolution that founded the Republic’, he wrote in *The New Witness* for 12 February, 1914, ‘has been, as almost anybody less ignorant than an average newspaper reader is aware, nothing else than the Judaean Directory’:

One of the Three Dictators - Cremieux, Gambetta, Freycinet - who seized power behind the back of the Army, fighting the Germans in 1870, was a Jew Leader; and Gambetta was thoroughly Judaised in feeling, as well as being probably Jew as well as Italian. His Jewish mistress became Queen of the Republic. Judaea was the subsidizer of the of the rising of the Paris mob which drove the Empress into exile. The Jewish dictator Cremieux actually conferred French citizenship on all the Algerian Jews, one of the most degraded populations in the world, and placed the whole Arab population beneath their feet. The Algerian Arabs rose in desperate insurrection against the outrage; but were suppressed by the Army of the Republic. Two Jews, Hertz and Reinach, organised the vast Panama Swindle which scattered stolen money among scores of the Republican Senators and Deputies. Dreyfus, the son of a German Jew, was twice convicted of treason by the Highest Military Court; but was made the hero of a Universal Jew Rumpus exceeding the recent uproar to conceal the Ritual Murder and Mutilation at Kiev. Gambetta and his Jew Attorney-General organised the destruction of the great French bank, the *Union Generale*, which engulfed the fortunes and estates of 10,000 of the best families of France.

‘Every Semitic cutpurse on the Bourse", O'Donnell concluded, ‘stole a chateau in the scramble. ...'.

Bad as O'Donnell saw the situation in France to be, it was no better in Britain. ‘We have the spectacle" reads his article "The Dublin Strike and

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the Impotent Democracy" in The New Witness for 8 January, 1914, of Isaacs bribing a Chancellor of the Exchequer to support the flotation of a swindle condemned as infamous by the Stock Exchange Committee itself, of Samuel getting the India Office to supply him with Inside Information and Exclusive Monopoly against the Native Silver Traders of India, of Meyer de Rothschild robbing the British public by the false and treacherous financial panic after Waterloo; but though these instances of Jew Wreckers in actual trade and business are as characteristic as they are horrible, it may happen that Jew Wrecking of Christian Civilisation may be infinitely more wrongful and pernicious in the region of theory than in any cheating and sharping whatsoever:

Taking hold of the two factors of industrial life, Capital and Labour, the Judaeans reconstructed the sphere of Capital so as to reduce the working world to wage-slavery, and revolutionised the sphere of Labour in order to perpetuate the War of the Classes for the supreme benefit of Judaean Capitalism dominant in the Slaver State and the Servile Proletariate, in the shrewd brain of the Jew David Ricardo - the Apostle of the Manchester School - Political Economy became the systematic application of Materialist Reason to the accumulation of Pelf. The human being becomes 'a Hand'.

Fortunately, O'Donnell argued, a formula for salvation was available for nations which had the wit and will to take it to heart. 'It is a Law of History - perhaps the Fundamental Law of Contemporary History', he wrote, "that so long as an historical nationality maintains intact the inherited type and institutions of its history, it is immune against the Judaean. In exact proportion to its surrender of its historical type and institutions, whether European or Asiatic, exposes itself to the Alien penetration and the Alien domination and exploitation'.

Finally - and most revealingly - anti-semitic material was the subject of leading articles in The New Witness, where it must be seen as having in some sense the status of an official expression of the paper's policy and the views of its editors and proprietors. For example, a leading article headed 'Insularity and the Jews' in The New Witness for 26 July, 1917 reads:

It is the English error that doubt or dread of the Jew is narrow; that it is an old prejudice from which wide experience and emancipation frees the mind. The contrary is the fact. It is because the English are narrow in virtues and vices that they do not recognise the danger. They are indifferent because they are insular. The notion that the Jew is merely a poor persecuted creature who does not eat pork us is exactly like the idea that the Frenchman is a vivaciously polite creature who does eat frogs.

‘The one thing such 'tolerance' emphatically is not’, the article continued, ‘is what it is always called. It is not enlightened’.\(^{15}\)

Such reasons as The New Witness may have felt it had for so inflammatory a warning may have been those it set out in a further leading article - headed ‘The Palestine Ramp’ - which appeared in the issue for 30 April, 1920, while Gilbert was on a fact-finding tour in Palestine at the invitation of the Zionist leader of the day and future President of Israel, Chaim Weizmann. The article reads:

> We have always been in favour of settling the Jews in Palestine - not so much to improve the prospects of Palestine or Jewry as to improve the prospects of Europe, and incidentally this country. We have nothing against the Jews individually except their passion for usury, but collectively we know them to be a blight on Christendom. They were a blight because they were a nation without a country, and so, while remaining aliens everywhere, they were allowed to usurp the privileges of citizenship without being capable of appreciating its responsibilities.

> ‘And so’, the article stated, ‘the Jew was quartered upon us, he ate into our life, and his ties with Jews in other countries created a secret organisation cutting across all national boundaries and threatening to extinguish all particular patriotisms’.\(^{16}\)

While Belloc and Cecil are now generally acknowledged to have been anti-semitic, Gilbert is sometimes exonerated on grounds such as that Weizmann would not have invited an anti-semite to visit Palestine as he


did in 1920, nor, if Gilbert had been anti-semitic, would the invitation have been accepted.\textsuperscript{17} It is at least as likely that Weizman was not familiar with \textit{The New Witness}, and had not had its more egregious excesses drawn to his attention. Nor would the dedicated journalist in Gilbert have allowed him to pass up an opportunity to see for himself a situation which was so frequent a subject of comment in \textit{The New Witness}.

Exoneration is likewise sometimes claimed on the grounds that Gilbert had Jewish friends, including the Jewish writer, Israel Zangwill. It is at least open to question whether the friendship with Zangwill is likely to have survived the claim by Gilbert in 1920 that ‘Every Jew is at once National and International, working for his race against the interests of the rest. This is precisely where the Jewish peril lies, and Mr Zangwill is a notable example; disintegration of European civilisation with the breakup of national frontiers is accompanied by a fierce and secret desire for the supremacy of the Jewish race’.\textsuperscript{18}

A further extract from the leading article ‘The Palestine Ramp" reads "If England is to be saved from destruction, if Christendom is to be saved from destruction, the Jewish peril must be met and overcome. ... We are glad that our Editor has gone to Palestine to gain at first hand some idea of a just solution'\textsuperscript{19}. The context rules out any possibility that the irony was intentional. The kindest, if not most likely, construction that can be placed on the action of some Jews and Jewish bodies such as the Wiener Library - the archives of anti-semitism and holocaust history in London - in classifying Gilbert as a friend is that they too have insufficiently familiarised themselves with what he wrote, allowed to be written or otherwise associated himself with in \textit{The New Witness}\textsuperscript{20}.

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\textsuperscript{19} Chesterton (ed), 1920. p. 2.
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Attempts to explain away the anti-semitism of the leading Distributists on the grounds that events and attitudes prior to the Holocaust should be judged differently from those after it are similarly misguided. What is overlooked is that, while Gilbert and his associates could not have foreseen Hitler's slaughter of the Jews, they were well aware of the pogroms which had been going on for centuries in Eastern Europe and continued to do so. Far from condemning the pogroms, The New Witness consistently denied, minimised or excused them, and was critical of Jews in Britain for trying to protect or otherwise help out their endangered relatives. Where the Jews were concerned, the approach of The New Witness was consistently to blame the victim.

‘All over Eastern Europe, especially Eastern Europe’, wrote Gilbert in The New Witness for 21 June, 1918, ‘there are whole populations who will talk of Jews as they would of locusts; will say that Jewish usury has wrecked homes and wasted villages, has spread terror about its passage and left famine in its trail:

What has any nation done', a famous Polish patriot said to me, "that it should be visited with such a plague of parasites?". Now I do not say the Jews are merely locusts; still less do I say there is nothing to be said for locusts; least of all do I wish to be cruel to locusts. But I do wish to wake the Jews up, for their sakes as well as ours, to the practical nature and prodigious scale of the charges their enemies really have against them ... For anybody facing realities, the Jews are a race in a unique and unnatural difficulty, cutting them off from the creative functions of a soil and the fighting responsibilities of a flag and therefore breeding certain evils. The chief, though by no means the only, evils are a nomadic money-lending in time of peace and a disaffection and indiscipline in time of war. I do not assert that it is entirely the fault of the Jews; I do assert that it is merely nonsense to talk as if it were not at least as much the misfortune of the Christians.  

How precisely the Jews may have offended had been enlarged upon two weeks earlier in an article ‘The Jews in Poland’ by H.E. Kennedy.

Kennedy wrote:

21 Chesterton, 1918. p. 149.
Jews in Warsaw are the owners of licentious houses, into which they draw school-boys and initiate them into every kind of vice. In the country every band of robbers is directed by a Jew. At the Jewish inn the peasants drink bad vodka and are persuaded into crime. Poland has indeed reason to hate the Jews, but she has never turned upon them, and never treated them as the enemies they are. Let England and Europe remember that every Jew is a Bolshevik. If Bolshevism ruled Europe tomorrow the future of Europe would be in the hands of a Jew.22

‘We do not write to arouse Anti-Semitic passion’, Gilbert’s article concluded, ‘because it is already aroused and raging; but we certainly do believe in the normal expression of popular feeling, and not least when so loud a warning seems to be wanted to awaken the unpopular party’.23 The sentiment is as ingenuous as it is distasteful.

That Gilbert was anti-semitic - albeit less so than Belloc or Cecil - was not lost on his contemporaries, including such friendly critics as Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.24 ‘With viperish violence you then fell upon the Jews.’, Shaw accused Gilbert in the course of a debate which took place privately in London in 1923, ‘Forgetting, with characteristic absence of mind that Jesus Christ was distinctly Hebraic, you implied that all the dark and dirty dealings in the world were directly traceable to the malign activities of that race’.25 Wells - himself by no means innocent of anti-semitic utterances26 - also took Gilbert to task. ‘That sort of race exclusiveness’, Wells wrote, ‘isn’t an English feeling’.27

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24 For a useful account of the depth and durability of the friendship between Gilbert and Shaw, see Furlong W.B. 1970. Shaw and Chesterton: The Metaphysical Jesters. The Pennsylvania State University Press.
What sort of conclusions - however tentative - can be drawn from this mountain of prejudice? Can it perhaps be concluded that, in sorting out where individuals such as Gilbert stood in regard to anti-semitism, what they associated themselves with - the influences to which they were exposed on a day to day basis - is at least as significant as what they actually wrote or said? And can it reasonably be supposed that what was said in private was a great deal more lurid than remains on the public record?

What *The New Witness* has to disclose makes it the more remarkable and praiseworthy that Gilbert was so much shocked into a change of heart by Hitler as to write shortly before his death ‘I am quite ready to believe now that Belloc and I will die defending the last Jew in Europe’28. It is less clear if he - much less Belloc - ever understood the contribution of journals such as *The New Witness* and the groups associated with them to the climate of opinion which made Hitler possible. He and his associates are not necessarily well-served by those of their admirers who persist in denying or down-playing their anti-semitism. What matters is less that their vilification of the Jews was greatly to their discredit than why they were that way, what can be learned from the fact and whether their more positive attributes atone for it.

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