

Press, Politics and the Abdication of Edward VIII

by Brandi McCary

The Press creates; the Press destroys. All my life I had been the passive clay which it had enthusiastically worked into the hackneyed image of Prince Charming. Now it had whirled around and was bent upon demolishing the man who had been there all the time.

--Edward VIII

At the death of George V in January of 1936, the loyal subjects of the British Empire expressed reverent sorrow at the loss of an old king who had stood as a relic of Victorian continuity in a postwar England that was rapidly outgrowing those stoic virtues of a bygone era. The First World War and the Depression earlier in the century had reinforced the tendency of the majority of British subjects to put the strenuous past decade behind them and look to the future. This break with the past was made all the easier by the accession of the moderm, charming and progressive figure of Edward VIII to the throne. As the Prince of Wales, Edward had gained admiration, not only within the Empire, but throughout the world. His genuine sympathy for the poor and unfortunate, his valiant service during the Great War and his popular overseas goodwill tours, not to mention his handsome, yet boyish appearance, resulted in the view of British subjects throughout the Empire that their new monarch, at the age of forty-one, would "usher-in a new age of peace and hope." <1>

This age of "peace and hope," however proved to be a dream that the British people, and indeed the entire world, would have to postpone. Forces were already in motion, as they had been since the conclusion of the Great War, that in just three short years would culminate in another conflict of global proportions. However, the year 1936 proved to be significantly important. In the first seven months of Edward VIII's mere ten-month, 19-day reign Germany reoccupied and remilitarized the Rhineland, Spain became embroiled in a tumultuous civil war and Hitler and Mussolini formally aligned under the auspices of the Rome-Berlin Axis. However, in this age of ever increasing worldwide violence and political polarity, the British people held steadfast to their constitutional monarchy as the one symbol of the solidarity of their empire and as the protector of their liberty and democracy. In a time of rising nationalism, when calls for independence were being heard throughout the Empire, it remained the general consensus that the Crown was "the sole visible link of Empire." <2>

However, by the mid 1930's the main function of the monarch was, primarily, to serve as a symbolic figure that linked the Empire together and that exhibited the grandeur of this Empire to the world. By 1911 it was generally recognized that the sovereign, in practice, held only three rights. These were the rights to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn. <3> Further more, it was at this time that the monarch began to accept two realities: 1) the monarch reigns but does not rule the Empire 2) to remain above politics the sovereign must "abide by the decisions of a cabinet that possesses the confidence of a Parliamentary majority." <4> George V was the first British monarch to think of himself as a constitutional, and thus limited, monarch. By the end of George V's reign, the

subordination of the monarchy to the will of Parliament was complete. However, the accession of a new, young and dynamic King to the throne, in the person of Edward VIII, had the effect of bringing an unwarranted optimism to many who sought change in the economy and society in England and throughout the Empire. Thus, It was generally felt by the majority of subjects that the new King, enjoying immense popularity and exhibiting promising qualifications, could actually strengthen the position of the Crown at home and abroad. <5>

These were the conditions under which Edward VIII assumed the imperial crown in late January of 1936. Yet those who knew him well did not share in the optimism surrounding the new reign. The new King was impulsive, lonely, somewhat depressed and not entirely comfortable in his role as king. Upon his deathbed, King George V expressed his personal fears for his son's reign to the Archbishop of Canterbury when he said, "When I am gone, the boy will ruin himself in six months." <6> Actually, it would be more like ten.

The road to future trouble began in 1934 when the King met and subsequently fell in love with Mrs. Wallis Warfield Simpson, the American divorcee who was, at the time, married to the London merchant, Earnest Simpson. Although those who were close to him, as well as the foreign press, knew of their relationship, no one ever imagined that the King honestly intended to marry Mrs. Simpson. <7> Yet, as his Ministers would find out a mere month before his abdication, this had been the Kings intention all along,

Contrary to popular speculations, the King did not seek out this disapproved union in order to force a situation in which abdication would be the inevitable result. The truth was that the King "was prepared to rule, but only on his own terms." <8> As he states in his memoirs, "I wanted to be a successful King, though King in a modern way." <9> Unfortunately, this "modern way" included a marriage to a woman who would not be tolerated on the throne by either England or her Dominions.

Much has been written about the reign and abdication of Edward VIII, which has, for the most part, gone down in history as a romantic tale of a youthful and handsome king who gave up his throne for the woman he loved. However, this is not merely a story of "love and sacrifice." <10> The events that led up to the King's abdication are those of a very political nature which involved the King, his Government, his political enemies and allies, and last but not least, the Press. Therefore, through the close examination of firsthand sources, such as the personal accounts of the abdication crisis from Edward VIII himself, Prime Minister Baldwin and Lord Beaverbrook, as well as *The Times'* coverage of the "crisis," a more accurate sense of the importance of these events emerges. *The Times* was the dominant Conservative newspaper in England. By contrasting its coverage, beginning on December 3rd and ending on December 12, with more intimate accounts of the situation, one is able more accurately to determine the importance of the role of the Press and the Government throughout this incident and the effect they had on shaping public opinion on this issue and the public perception of the Monarchy in general.

Amid articles dealing with German aggression, bombings in Madrid, and pledges of French support against the growing tide of fascism which appeared in *The Times* on December 3, 1936, there also appeared a small article which must have confounded British subjects at the time. Simply stated, *The Times* ran an extract of an article appearing in the Yorkshire Post which referred to "the great deal of rumor regarding the King" which as of late, had appeared in the "more sensational American newspapers." <11> The article goes on to say, that although rumor is commonly associated with "European Royal persons," the appearance of "certain statements" about the British Monarch in more reputable U.S. journals should not be treated with "indifference." <12> When one considers that the majority of contemporary readers had, at this point, never heard of Mrs. Simpson, nor of her relationship with the King, this article did nothing more than induce excitement and anxiety.

December 4th brought to the British people more clarity on the issue under the headline of "The King and a Crisis," which tended to take the position, ironically, that there was no impending "Constitutional crisis" between the King and his Ministers as had been intimated in other newspapers throughout the Empire on the previous day. <13> *The Times* relates the situation as follows: "The King has expressed his desire to contract such a marriage as would require a special act of Parliament; that he has himself taken the initiative in asking whether such a measure can be passed; and that Ministers, after full consideration and consultation, have replied that in their opinion it is impossible." <14>

The King had consulted his Ministers the week of November 27th and it is assumed by *The Times* that the following week was spent by Mr. Baldwin in ascertaining the opinion of his colleagues, leaders of the Opposition, and the Dominion Governments as to whether they would be prepared to support legislation that would allow a, by this time, twice divorced woman to marry the King. This legislation would allow the King to contract a morganatic marriage with Mrs. Simpson. The concept of morganatic marriage originated with the old German monarchies and is defined as that "between a man of exalted rank and a woman of lower station in which it is provided that neither the wife nor her children share the dignities of the husband." <15> Yet, the result of this inquiry was that it would be most improper and "detrimental to the dignity of the Crown" if the King as head of the Church of England (an institution that did not recognize divorce), entered into a marriage of any kind with a woman whose two previous husbands were still living. <16> The situation was simple, according to *The Times*. The King asked for advice, had gotten a negative response and it was up to him either to take or reject the advice of his Ministers. If the King did decide to go against the advice of his Ministers, it would then be his option to seek other advisors who could command the support necessary to carry out the King's will. The latter possibility was viewed by *The Times* as not being an option in that it would involve the King in purposely making his personal life a point of division in Parliament, which would most definitely have the effect of doing irreparable damage to the prestige of the Crown.

The first official statement from the Government appeared in *The Times* on December 5, basically reiterating the impossibility of morganatic legislation. However, Prime Minister Baldwin added several key points to the Government's position. First, any act that would

have the effect of changing the line of succession to the throne would require, by the Statute of Westminster, the approval of the Parliaments of all of the Dominions. Second, having "sufficient reason" to believe that the Dominions would not approve such legislation he advised the King accordingly. <17> "Finally, the Prime Minister emphasized the fact that the King "requires no consent" to legally marry and that "the sovereign's decision," which he must now make alone, "is fettered only by his sense of what is due to the dignity and authority of the crown." <18> Thus, if the King refused to follow the advice of his Ministers which was supposedly given only on the issue about which they were consulted, and abandon the projected marriage, the only possible course left was the voluntary abdication of the throne.

Therefore, in between the official statement made by the Government on December 5th and the King's decision to abdicate on December 10th, *The Times* was filled with articles expressing the anxiety felt by the entire Empire at the thought of being abandoned by their Monarch when "the need for national calm and national unity was never greater." <19> Many of the views expressed are of particular significance and several noteworthy themes emerge. First, there is the justified idea that while the King's decision should not be rushed, a decision should come quickly so that the strength and prestige of the Crown should avoid further damage. While the December 7th issue of *The Times* denied that the King was neither being hurried to make a decision nor pressed to follow a path of abdication, it was generally felt that "to prolong the acute and exhausting dilemma now confronting the Sovereign and to keep the whole Empire in a state of profound anxiety, perhaps until the eve of the Coronation with uneasiness fermenting into downright controversy would be to court irreparable injury to the authority of the Throne itself." <20>

The fear of a prolonged decision was twofold. First, it was felt that the longer the King delayed the greater the chance would be of the formation of a "King's Party," which would factionalize Parliament in a manner reminiscent of the Cavaliers (supporters of the Crown) and Roundheads (supporters of Parliament) of England's Civil War period. <21> However, wishing to avoid this painful association and reflecting the subsequent idea that the Monarch should remain above politics, the King did remark that he found "any idea of a 'King's Party' abhorrent." <22> The second fear was that the Dominions that were unhappy with colonial rule may seize this opportunity of weakness to attempt to break away from the Empire. This fear was not unjustified. In South Africa the abdication prompted *The Burger* to run an article on December 12th which stated, "The South African people are not enamored of the Crown, and it would be far better and safer for South Africa to be a Republic." <23> Furthermore, in the Irish Free State, De Valera, President of the Executive Council, used the abdication crisis to revive his "Document No. 2" which essentially called for a "republic within the Empire." <24> Thus, the momentary weakness in the Crown revealed a glimpse of future problems that would have to be dealt with in years to come.

A second theme found in *The Times* between December 5th and December 10th is that of the overwhelming support for the Cabinet and for Prime Minister Baldwin in particular. Statements of sympathy for the position in which Mr. Baldwin and the Cabinet had "been

placed by the King" and of the overwhelming support for the Government's action of all parties in Parliament are found in almost all articles concerning the matter. <25> Furthermore, excerpts from Dominion newspapers reveal the same level of support and also guarantees the support of their Parliaments to uphold the British Parliament's decision not to introduce morganatic legislation. On December 9th, an excerpt from *The Times* of India states. "The whole Empire, including India, appears to stand behind the Government. That patent fact cannot be disputed." <26> Moreover, while there appeared, in almost all articles, sentiments expressing heartfelt sympathy for the King's stressful position, there emerged, simultaneously, the view that, "Of the King and the Empire, the Empire is the greater." <27> It seems that while popular desire expressed the wish to keep a King whose youth, sense of compassion, and ability to reach out to "the people" of the Empire made him immensely popular, the overriding feeling was that the stability of the Government was more important.

Although expressing support for Baldwin's Cabinet is the undeniable intention of *The Times* throughout this ordeal, it is also interesting to note the articles which express an opposite view point, and the way these views are either diminished or discounted. *The Times* would have had the British people believe that the only opposition in Parliament to Baldwin on the issue of the King's marriage consisted of the independent Conservative backbencher, Mr. Winston Churchill and his followers whose numbers, according to *The Times*, amounted to an "insignificant size." <28> On Monday, December 7th, *The Times* published a statement issued by Churchill on the preceding Saturday under the headline, "A Plea For Delay." <29> The crux of his argument rests on the fact that Mrs. Simpson's divorce would not be finalized until April of the following year. In lieu of this fact Churchill maintains that since the proposed marriage would be impossible for at least another five months, the King should be granted more time to consider all of his options in making this most grave decision. During this extra time, Churchill feels that "every method should be exhausted which gives the hope of a happier solution." <30> More importantly is Churchill's expression of the notion that, despite repeated assurances that the Cabinet is not rushing the King to make a decision, immense pressure from the Ministers is being exerted on the King to bring this "crisis" to an end. Churchill's statement culminates in a powerful expression of the utter helplessness of the King's position when he concludes, "The King has no means of personal access to his Parliament or his people. Between him and them stand in their office the Ministers of the Crown. If they thought it their duty to engage all their power and influence against him, still he must remain silent." <31>

Needless to say, both the Cabinet and *The Times* regarded Mr. Churchill's statement as an accusation that not only was Baldwin not being truthful when he claimed that no pressure was being placed on the King for a decision but there was actually something in the form of a conspiracy taking shape to prevent the facts of the case and the true feelings of the King from becoming public. Thus, it is no coincidence that on the following day, December 8th, two articles appeared which had the consequences of negating Churchill's argument while simultaneously showing the "hardening of support behind the Prime Minister and the Cabinet." <32> The first article sets the tone by commenting that

Churchill's statement resulted in "the most striking rebuff of modern Parliamentary history," and was opposed by "Conservative Liberal, and Labour members alike." <33>

The second article, "Making Mischief," goes about rebuilding Churchill's insinuations of the Government's mishandling of the situation in a manner which seems, at first glance, not to be directed towards any one person. This article systematically denies three points of contention insinuated by Mr. Churchill. First, it is denied that the Ministers presented the King with some form of ultimatum. Next, It is denied that the Ministers have used their influence in the Dominions and upon Opposition leaders to put united pressure on the King. Finally, it is denied that the Ministers were putting pressure on the King to either renounce the marriage or abdicate. <35> However, upon the study of first hand accounts published after the abdication, one finds that all of these accusations contain some element of truth.

By December 5th it was known by those in higher circles that the King had already made the decision to abdicate. However, this announcement came to the public on December 10, 1936 along with the first statement issued by the King on the matter. A copy of the *Instrument of Abdication* was released along with an assurance that "after long and anxious consideration" he had come to his decision which is both "final and irrevocable." <36> His only words in defense of his decision were "I would beg that it should be remembered that the burden upon the shoulders of a sovereign is so heavy that it can only be borne in circumstances different from those in which I now find Myself." <37>

Thus the "crisis" was resolved. With the passage of the *Instrument of Abdication* through all of the Parliaments of the Dominions the reign of King Edward VIII came to a close and no time was wasted in making arrangements for the proclamation of the new King, Edward VIII's brother and Duke of York, who took the title George VI. Yet certain questions arise: Was the so called "crisis" really as simple as *The Times* would have the public believe? Was there merely a threefold decision to be made by the King between either taking the advice of his ministers, plunging Parliament into conflict over his private issues, or voluntarily abdicating? Or were there greater political forces at work that had a profound effect on public opinion, although the public was not aware of it?

A comparison of the personal accounts of this incidence, which must be regarded as one of the most publicized events of the 20th century, reveals that not one, but many factors were at work which culminated in the King's final decision to abdicate. To understand how the Press became involved, it must first be understood how the Government became involved. When Edward VIII inherited the throne, he also inherited the conservattve, "old-fashioned" court of George V, which was comprised of men who "mistrusted and disapproved" of the new King. <38> This distrust was not only based on Edward's relationship with Mrs. Simpson. which had been going on since 1934, but It was also based on the fact that Edward was a youthful and energetic man who came to the throne "filled with reforming intentions." <39> However, as the new King, Edward VIII had the option of setting up a new Court. Many who had expected a "clean sweep" were surprised to learn that the King, for the most part, kept things as they were. <40> Perhaps the greatest surprise was Edward's choice of Alexander Hardinge, who had been the

Assistant Private Secretary under George V, for Private Secretary. Hardinge been a sharp critic of Edward as the Prince of Wales, and Edward's decision to retain such a character in his Court gave rise to the notion that Edward's lack of caution to protect his throne, politically, reflected his lack of desire to be King. <41>

In the King's memoirs, published in 1951, he writes of Hardinge and the role he played in bringing the romance into the public spectrum. While those in high social and official circles had known of Mrs. Simpson since 1934, her impending divorce and the appearances of her name in the Court Circular gave credence to the talk of her relationship with the Prince. In 1935 the foreign press, and the United States press in particular, were ablaze with rumors surrounding the romantic nature of their involvement. By the time the Prince became King, the situation had grown problematic. Prime Minister Baldwin suddenly found himself receiving a steady stream of mail from British citizens in America and in the Dominion of Canada who were growing increasingly concerned with the manner in which the American press was discussing their King. <42> On October 20, 1936, Baldwin decided to confront the King on the issue by asking Hardinge to arrange a meeting. During this first meeting, according to Edward VIII, it was the Prime Minister who brought up the issue by stating, "People are talking about you and this American woman, Mrs. Simpson." <43> Baldwin went on to warn the King of the mounting criticism regarding his relationship with the divorcee and that the British Press, now aware of the situation, could not be held for much longer. Baldwin urged the King to merely consider what had been said and pressed him for no immediate answer.

However, it was a letter from Hardinge received by the King on November 13th which provided the turning point needed to make the situation public knowledge throughout the Empire. This letter informed the King of two "facts," the accuracy of which Hardinge claims to have "known." <44> First, he informed the King that "The silence of the British Press is not going to be maintained." <45> Second, he stated that the Prime Minister and senior members of the Government were preparing to meet to discuss what action should be taken with regards to this "serious situation." <46> Although this did not come as news to the King, he later stated in his memoirs that he did not know whether to interpret the letter as a "warning or an ultimatum." <47> Furthermore this letter gave Edward VIII reason to believe that Hardinge had contacts with the Prime Minister about the matter, of which he had not informed the King.

It was this letter that finally forced the King to confront the Government on the subject of his marriage. On November 16th this confrontation occurred between the King and Baldwin in which the King confessed his desire to marry Mrs. Simpson "as soon as she is free to marry." <48> Despite Baldwin's assurances to Parliament that no pressure was being placed on the King for a decision, the King states in his memoirs that he was given very little choice in the matter. "Almost pedantically, he [Baldwin] summed up for me the three choices that had faced me from the outset: 1. I could give up the idea of marriage. 2. I could marry contrary to the advice of my Ministers. 3. I could abdicate." Faced with this information the King then informed Baldwin "If I could marry her as King, well and good." but if not, "then I was prepared to go" <49> However, in Baldwin's account given before Parliament of the same conversation he only states that

the King said "I am going to marry Mrs. Simpson, and I am prepared to go." <50> The difference here is important, for Baldwin's account implies to Parliament and those who read this account in *The Times* that the King had already made up his mind on his own and thus revoked the idea that the Government had put pressure on the King or influenced his decision in any way.

The truth, however, is that, unbeknownst to Baldwin, the King probably had already made up his mind to abdicate. This view is supported by two facts. First, when the idea of morganatic marriage was suggested to the King by Mrs. Simpson as a possible solution, the King, secretly finding the idea distasteful, grudgingly went along with it. A morganatic marriage, as previously stated, would have to be granted by an Act of Parliament and this Act would have to be approved by all the Dominions. Thus, at his next meeting with Baldwin the King proposed this "solution" and instructed Baldwin to communicate with the Dominions so as to feel out their responses, although it was the King's right, to communicate with the Dominions himself. <51> By allowing Baldwin to assume his right of consultation, the King allowed Baldwin to influence the response of the Dominions, which he did by insinuating that the London Parliament was unwilling to introduce morganatic legislation. Second, the King refused to allow his allies in the Press to make any public appeals in his favor. <52>

It was the proposal of contracting a morganatic marriage which made the King's relationship a Parliamentary matter and thus a matter of public concern. The Press in England had known of the King's relationship with Mrs. Simpson for some time. However, according to the King's wishes the Press had remained silent on the issue. Once the King's marriage became an issue in Parliament there was no way to keep it quiet any longer. By not allowing his allies in the Press to make public appeals for his position Edward VIII committed political suicide. This was because, as Lord Beaverbrook, Conservative M.P. and ally of the King, recounts in his book about the abdication, Geoffrey Dawson, editor of *The Times*, was in the pocket of Prime Minister Baldwin. Beaverbrook goes on to say, "He [Dawson] was Baldwin's intimate advisor and he did much to make the Abdication a certainty." <53> In 1936, it was said of *The Times* that, "it is not read by many, but it is read by those who form the opinion of the masses." <54> Thus, by running the aforementioned articles, which so clearly stated the support for the Cabinet and diminished any opposition as being a threat to the stability of the Empire, *The Times*, and thus Baldwin, was able to galvanize public opinion in a way that would provide for the smooth transition of the Crown into more conservative hands.

While paying lip service to the Crown, in the form of expressing sympathy felt throughout the Empire for the King's position, it seems that the true goal of *The Times's* coverage of the Abdication "crisis" was to ensure that the situation ended in Edward VIII's abdication and to guarantee that popular support was behind the Government. Of course the fact that the King was content to go and thus did not put up a fight by invoking the resources available to him, having no taste for the constraints of the Monarchy, made Baldwin's job easier. The supreme irony of the entire ordeal, however, is the fact that although *The Times* kept insisting that no pressure was being placed on the King for a decision, it was precisely this manner of press coverage that was placing pressure on the

King and demeaning the prestige of the Crown in general. The purpose of this paper is not to insinuate that there was a conspiracy against the King, although there were many who were glad to see him go. The simple fact is that the American Press induced this "crisis," and *The Times* used this "crisis" to increase support for the Government and the stability of the Empire. Baldwin merely took advantage of the fact that the King had made up his mind to abdicate a month before the "crisis." In terms of public perception, the Abdication and *The Times's* coverage thereof, had the effect of reemphasizing the political weakness of the monarchy, while Parliament, using *The Times* as a political tool, was able to capture public support and thereby insure the stability of the Empire during a time of transition.

Notes

1 Michael Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII* (London, England: Transworld Publishers Ltd., 1990). p. 1.

2 *The Times*, Friday, December 4, 1936, p. 18.

3 Walter L Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today: 1830 to the Present* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), p. 228.

4 Ibid

5 Bloch, p. 4.

6 Ibid

7 Bloch, p. 8.

8 Bloch, p. 8.

9 Edward, Duke of York, *A King's Story: Memoirs of the Duke of Windsor* (New York, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1947). p. 280.

10 Lord Beaverbrook, *The Abdication of King Edward VIII* (London, England: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1966). p. 13.

11 *The Times*, Thursday, December 3, 1936. p. 16.

12 *The Times*, Thursday, December 3, 1936, p. 16.

13 *The Times*, Friday, December 4, 1936, p. 16.

14 *The Times*, Friday, December 4, 1936, p. 16.

15 Bloch, p. 102.

- 16 *The Times*, Saturday, December 5, 1936, p. 7.
- 17 *The Times*, Saturday, December 5 1 1936, p. 12.
- 18 *The Times*, Saturday, December 5, 1936, p. 12.
- 19 *The Times*, Friday. December 4, 1936, p. 18.
- 20 *The Times*, Monday, December 7, 1936, p. 8.
- 21 Bloch, p. 115.
- 22 Bloch, p. 115.
- 23 *The Times*, Saturday, December 12, 1936, p. 9.
- 24 *The Times*, Saturday, December 12, 1936, p. 9.
- 25 *The Times*, Tuesday. December 8, 1936, p. 16.
- 26 *The Times*, Wednesday, December 9, 1936, p. 14.
- 27 *The Times*, Wednesday, December 9, 1936, p. 14.
- 28 *The Times*, Monday, December 7, 1936, p. 8.
- 29 *The Times*, Monday, December 7, 1936, p. 8.
- 30 *The Times*, Monday, December 7, 1936, p. 8.
- 31 *The Times*, Monday, December 7, 1936, p. 8.
- 32 *The Times*, Tuesday, December 8, 1936, p. 7.
- 33 *The Times*, Tuesday, December 8, 1936, p. 7.
- 34 *The Times*, Tuesday, December 8, 1936, p. 7.
- 35 *The Times*, Tuesday, December 8, 1936, p. 7.
- 36 *The Times*, Thursday, December 10, 1936, p. 14.
- 37 *The Times*, Thursday, December 10, 1936, p. 14.
- 38 Bloch, p. 32.

39 Bloch, p. 33.

40 Bloch, p. 34.

41 Bloch, p. 35.

42 Bloch, p. 49.

43 Bloch, p. 52.

44 Bloch, p. 70.

45 Bloch, p. 70.

46 Bloch, p. 71.

47 Edward, Duke of Windsor, p. 351.

48 Edward, Duke of Windsor, p. 355.

49 Ibid

50 Bloch, p. 82.

51 Bloch, p. 82

52 Bloch, p. 115.

53 Beaverbrook, p. 95.

54 Beaverbrook, p. 98.

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