

Challenge to the Lord: Folk Songs About the “Unsinkable” Titanic

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A sad-eyed old polar bear walked into a pub in Liverpool in 1912 just after the loss of *Titanic* and asked:

Have you got any news of the iceberg?
My family were on it you see.
Have you got any news of the iceberg?
They mean the whole world to me. (Mrs. Ackroyd Band 1999)

This is only one example among the scores of popular culture items about *Titanic*, the White Star passenger liner that sank after hitting an iceberg on her maiden voyage in 1912. Even after nearly a century, cultural representations and references to *Titanic* continue to be produced: the latest song not related to the most recent movie came out in 2010 and the latest book, Steve Turner’s *The Band That Played On*, which is a story of *Titanic*’s musicians, was published in May 2011. *Titanic* may have sunk in 1912 but she lives on.

The story of the polar bear is of course fantasy, and many other folk songs about *Titanic* are either generic or could apply to any incident where persons lost their lives at sea. But some of the songs purport to tell what really happened and it is mainly those songs that are examined in this article. Those who study human and organizational behaviour before, during, and after untoward incidents have concluded that while the media, novels, and movies distort what happens in such incidents, folk songs tend to get it right. This is significant because it is through popular culture that we “know” what happened in such incidents and it is through popular culture that we acquire beliefs about how people behave in such incidents. Although the theory that folk songs are accurate in how they portray human behaviour has been accepted, there are in fact few studies which have tested it. It is not possible to be certain about some aspects of what happened when *Titanic* sank, but there is sufficient data to see whether the over 40 folk songs about *Titanic* provide a reasonably accurate picture of what happened.

Literature Review

In the face of a disaster, ordinary people respond well. They rarely panic. Even in crowd crushes, they tend to assist others. Victims are not dazed and con-

fused or in shock, waiting to be assisted or rescued by emergency personnel. Instead, survivors usually do the initial rescue work and help the injured reach medical facilities (Quarantelli and Dynes 1972:66-70; Scanlon 1997:583-585). Despite this, myths persist. There are myths that victims are dazed, confused, and in shock, that people panic and that anti-social behaviour such as looting is common. Scholars say one reason these myths exist is that they are perpetuated by radio, television and print and that these media are so pervasive even persons with recent disaster experience believe them. Wenger, James and Faupel say that is because media focus on the most impacted: “Such stories detail the plight of the individual who has been ‘wiped out’ by the disaster, who has lost their family, or suffered great misfortune... However, these atypical cases are often presented as...typical...” (1980: 40).

The mass media are not the only purveyors of myths. Quarantelli found that in movies: “Women ...are characterized as, if not hysterical, generally deferring to men’s physical strength or coolness in the face of crisis” (Quarantelli 1985:10). Scanlon found similar gender distortions in novels about the 1917 Halifax explosion (1,963 killed, 9,000 injured when a munitions ship exploded). Though women did most of the initial search and rescue while the military was preoccupied with its own casualties, he found that novels ignored or downplayed the role of women and played up the importance of the military (Scanlon 1999).

However, while disaster scholars agree that the media, movies, and novels distort what happens, some say there is an exception – folk songs. When Rogers examined a single ballad on the loss of a sealing ship, *Southern Cross*, he found that it was historically accurate (Rogers 1982). When Wachten-dorf compared folk songs to other forms of literature, she found they tended to be accurate. “Most of the songs,” she reported, “concentrated on people coming to help – the disaster myths of panic and disorganization were not prevalent” (1999: 4). Not everyone agrees. Lyle reported that songs about American railroad disasters were factually inaccurate (Lyle 1983).

While the subject has not been entirely neglected, Quarantelli and Davis stated there is an absence of study of “popular songs” and that folk songs on dis-

asters need to be examined (2011). Using the 2010 Haitian earthquake as a framework, they ask:

Is there something about Haitian culture or the nature of this particular catastrophe that precluded the emergence of spontaneous local songs? At the very least, and more broadly, we think it suggests content analyses ought to be made of the nature of all songs that are sung in all major disasters and catastrophes, and is something that ought to be specifically examined (2011:111).

They are not alone in this view. Accuracy in folksong has been studied by several scholars including Sharp (1907), Halpert (1964), and Green (1970; 1971). Basing his work on these scholars, Ashton discerned a difference regarding what is claimed to be true about a folksong and what is actually true. He agrees with Halpert and Green, stating that “truth” in folksongs has multiple meanings and that a song need not be factually accurate to be considered “true” by a singer or audience, as a song that accurately represents the singer’s and audience’s life experience or culture can seem to be as true as a song that is factually accurate (1977:13).

As a first try at examining truth in folk songs – truth as it is seen by disaster scholars – Scanlon, Johnston, Vandervalk, and Sparling did a study of 101 years of folk songs about mine disasters in Nova Scotia. They found the songs, like the movies, had limited scope and focused on particular aspects of the disasters, primarily the incident and rescue efforts, while most – though not all – excluded events before and after (2011). Although a few songs had minor factual errors, most portrayed the bravery of those who risked their own lives to rescue trapped miners and the calm way that those trapped waited for rescue. Would the same be true for *Titanic*?

The “Unsinkable” Ship

Although there are some songs about *Titanic* that are generic and general to the point that they could be about any similar incident, most of the songs tie specifically to *Titanic* even if some elements in her story are largely passed over. For example, *Titanic* has two links to Ireland: she was built in Belfast and she stopped for passengers in Queenstown, but only one song mentions the Irish immigrants who boarded at Queenstown:

She stopped at Queenstown on her trip, for our Irish girls and boys.
They were leaving dear old Ireland, in a strange land to employ.

The last time these poor emigrants gazed on their native shore
Sure, they nobly died, God rest their souls; we'll never see them more. (Tinneney 1978)

The focus is persistently not on the details such as where she was built or where she sailed from (though several songs mention Southampton), but on larger themes such as the idea that she was unsinkable. This shows up, for example, in several of the songs on the compilation album *People Take Warning: Murder Ballads & Disaster Songs, 1913-1938*. One song connects the behaviour of the passengers to the perceived “unsinkable” nature of the ship:

There was not much confusion, for, no one thought the ship would fail.
The band was playing sweet on board, there was no storm nor gale,
When, suddenly the boats were launched; in rushed the waters wild,
The husbands torn from their wives and the mothers from her child. (Tinneney 1978).

“Unsinkable” is also used in a religious context: an “unsinkable” ship was a challenge to God:

This great ship was built by man
That is why she could not stand
She could not sink was the cry from one and all
But an iceberg ripped her side
And He cut down all her pride,
They found the Hand of God was in it all. (The Dixon Brothers 1938)

Another song states Captain Edward John Smith, confident his ship was unsinkable, insisted that she go full steam ahead despite warnings of fog and icebergs:

Captain Smith got the message; it’s foggy on the sea,
Couldn’t see how to travel, all boats are tied up
Otherwise there’s an iceberg at the North Pole....
Captain Smith says don’t mind the fog on the sea.
We got the strongest dynamite headlight ever known.
Otherwise the ship is unsinkable.
Plow through all the icebergs. (Hutchison 1927)

The Role of Captain Smith

However, songs about *Titanic* have conflicting accounts of her captain. Two (including one in Finnish, which was published in 1913) suggest he personally saw the iceberg coming:

Captain Smith took his glasses and walked out to the front,
And he spied that 'berg a comin' full ahead to bump (Brown and Jordan 1932).

On Sunday of April
At ten o'clock in the evening,
Even though the captain was standing,
It is told,
on the ship's bridge.

So too late it was noticed
An iceberg ahead,
That was swimming freely
In the Atlantic's water. (Located and translated from Finnish by Antti Silvast)

Another suggests he had gone to bed and was awakened by shots being fired:

Captain Smith was a-lyin' down,
Was asleep of he was tired,
Well, he woke up in a great fright,
As many gun shots were fired. (Washington 1933, quoted in Biel 1998:81-82)

That verse stating Smith himself issued the order that women and children be given priority in the lifeboats appears in several English songs, though only one mentions the shortage of lifeboats:

The Titanic strikes an iceberg.
The ship stops...
The life boats are lowered.
The Captain orders: "Women and children first."
Confusion reigns aboard.
"The ship is sinking."
There are no more lifeboats. (Baltzell 1912)

Men as Heroes

Except for one song in Yiddish about Ida Strauss who declined to leave her husband, songs about *Titanic* agree men stood back so women and children could be saved:

Now at last they called out all the passengers, told them to hurry to the deck,
Then they realized that the mighty Titanic was going to be a wreck,
They lowered the life boats one by one, taking women and children from the store,
The poor men are left to care for themselves but they sure played a hero's part (Brown 1927)

My sweetheart went down with the ship,
Down to an ocean grave,
One of the heroes who gave his life,
The women and children to save,
Gone but not forgotten,
As the big ship rolled and dipped,
He went to sleep in the mighty deep,
My sweetheart went down with the ship. (Lewis and Klickmann 1912)

Amid the horror they ne'er forgot,
They cried save children and women,
I'm the strongest of the race.
I'm a man.

God place our heroes of the sea,
Nearer to thee, nearer to thee,
Never shall we forget their bravery,
Their sacrifice has immortalized their mem'ry,
We honor them all the humble and the high,
Like bravest soldiers they died,
For the women and also for the child. (Thibaut and Jerreld 1912, quoted in Biel 1998:85-86)

One praised by name one of the millionaires who died:

A man, John Jacob Astor,
A man with pluck and brains,
When that great ship went down,
All the women he tried to save. (Anon. 1931, quoted in Biel 1998:85)

Astor did help his young pregnant wife into a life boat but stayed on board himself:

For he kissed his wife for the last time
As the boiler did explode,
He put her in a lifeboat
Saying I won't see you no more. (The Johnson Girls 2008)

One song suggests the disaster struck all passengers:

On the ship that will never return,
The ship that will never return...
When rich man and poor man went down side by side,
When rank made no difference for death levelled all. (F. V. St. Clair 1912)

Only two mention a division between first class and other passengers:

As the humble closed their eyes
In the darkness of the hold,
The rich upstairs were playing cards for gold
And they laughed when a sailor said,
“There’s an iceberg close ahead.” (Anon. n.d.,
“The Titanic”)

The rich did decide they would not ride with the
poor,
So they went the poor below,
They were the first that had to go,
It was sad when the great ship went down.
(Stoneman 1924)

Only one mentions a woman’s bravery. The following is a translation from the Yiddish:

Then the cry, “Save yourselves
Into the boats quickly, women
No man dare take a place there”
But listen to one woman-soul
Who can say, “I won’t stir from the spot
I’ll die here with my husband.”
Let small and large honour,
The name of IDA STRAUSS! (Small and Rus-
sotto 1912, quoted in Biel 1998:88)

It is notable, incidentally, that with one exception – a Norwegian song (see Aakre) that mentions a second class tinsmith from Oslo – all the passengers named are prominent individuals, probably reflecting media attention on prominent persons who died. The focus, however, fits in with what Thrush and Paulus identified as the concentration on early deaths of celebrities (1979: 224).

Nearer my God to Thee

Perhaps what captured the public imagination more than anything was the story of musicians playing as the ship went down. More than half the songs, including some in languages other than English, state that they were playing “Nearer my God to Thee:”

You know it must have been awful with those
people on the sea,
They say that they were singing, “Nearer my God
to Thee!”
(Anon. 1915, quoted in Biel 1998:84)

The music played as they went down,
On that dark blue sea,
And you could hear the sound
Of that familiar hymn singin’,
“Nearer oh my God to Thee.” (Brown 1927)

There the brave men stood,
As true heroes should,
With their hearts in faith sublime,
And their names shall be fond memory,
Until the end of time,
And the band was bravely playing,
The song of cross and crown,
“Nearer, My God to Thee”,
As the ship went down. (Bean and Jones 1912)

Just two English language songs mention that *Carpathia* recovered the survivors:

Captain Smith called for help from the Carpathia
and it was many miles away...
The Carpathia received the wireless SOS re dis-
tress,
Come at once, we are sinking, do your best.
(Brown 1927)

The Captain orders: “Women and children first.”
Confusion reigns aboard.
“The ship is sinking.” There are no more life-
boats.
The band: knee deep in water. Play their last
prayer.
The Titanic slowly sinks beneath the waves.
The freezing survivors in the life boats scan the
ocean for assistance.
The Carpathia arrives on the horizon. (Baltzell
1912)

Some Similarities, Some Differences

Many of the songs in languages other than English had the same themes as those in English, but there were also differences. One Dutch song states clearly that the reason *Titanic* is remembered is because of the shortage of lifeboats:

The world would never have heard of so many
dead,
If there had but been forty lifeboats on board.
(Located by Jelle Groenendaal, translated from
Dutch by Mattea Chadwick-Shubat)

This also comes up in one of the Finnish songs, which was published in 1913:

All the passengers did not fit
Into the ship’s lifeboats,
Instead they had to stay in the ship
And die in the depths (Located and translated
from Finnish by Antti Silvast)

Two Finnish songs (both located and translated by Antti Silvast) clearly place responsibility not on Captain Smith but on Bruce Ismay of the White Star Line. The first was published in 1936:

Captain Smith he peacefully steered the ship with
its load,
He had two thousand people to take over the wa-
ter.
Manager Ismay sat in his saloon, thinking:
“A victory in the contest we must have, I swear!”
He rushed to meet the captain, said: “Full steam
ahead,
Do not fear a record, full steam ahead!”
“Slow down, for God’s sake”, the telegraph yells,
“We have gotten a wire, telling: ices are loose.”
Ismay laughed: “Childish is this talk, this ship,
Full ahead, it will last, this ship is the Titanic!”

The other song – published in 1959 – even sug-
gests all White Star owner Bruce Ismay could think
about when *Titanic* started sinking was that the re-
cord for a trans-Atlantic crossing would not be bro-
ken:

Their goal was the ship’s record,
That abolished their fears and dimmed their mind.
Ismay he with glad mind sits in his cabin
Has strong trust for the big skill.
But the big amazement now reached him,
When he heard that the ship is sinking.
He in amazement now rose to the deck
And said in anger: “The record is going down!”

That same song states clearly that there was panic
and that the crew used force:

They husbands from their wives separated cruelly
And with their revolvers many lives took.
There was no sense of pity with that ship’s crew,
When the panicking you shot with your revolver.

Panic also shows up in another Finnish song, this
one published in 1967:

A massive panic was born, many men got furious.
Others pushed each other, others already swam in
the sea.
The boats there are too few, everyone does not fit
into them.
Pain, distress, and panic already took the patience
of many.
(Located and translated from Finnish by Antti
Silvast)

Those were the only songs which state clearly that
the crew acted forcefully to prevent passengers from
getting into the life boats.

Titanic as Told by Song

Stephen L. Suffett revised a song about *Titanic* with
the assistance of Norma McCarthy for the sake of
historical and technological accuracy:

Towards Compartment Number 5 came the madly
rushing sea,
And the laws of Archimedes with respect to
buoyancy,
Would not be violated, the whole damn ship was
inundated,
It was sad when the great ship went down.
Now the force of gravitation had been balanced
up to now,
By the transverse inclination of the slowly sinking
bow,
But its good was now expended, equilibrium thus
ended,
It was sad when the great ship went down. (n.d.)

This song is an entertaining exception in terms of
the themes present within most *Titanic* songs for
what emerges from the majority of songs is *Titanic*,
deemed unsinkable, headed at high speed into iceberg
filled waters and that this was a challenge to the
Lord. One states the captain was asleep, another im-
plies he was on the bridge. He is given credit for call-
ing for assistance from *Carpathia* and for ordering
women and children priority in the lifeboats. Only the
two Finnish songs blame the owner, Bruce Ismay,
instead of the captain for allowing the ship to head at
high speed into iceberg filled waters.

In the wake of the collision, the songs paint a por-
trait of men, mainly very wealthy, standing aside
while women and children were loaded into the life-
boats. Only one woman, Ida Strauss, is mentioned,
there is only one suggestion that it was the rich who
survived while the poor remained on board to die,
and two vague mentions in English of shots being
fired or crowd crush, though this is a theme in two
Finnish songs. The songs in all languages agree that
the musicians remained on board as the ship was
sinking and that the final song was “Nearer my God
to Thee!”. There are two mentions of *Carpathia*, one
that refers to *Titanic*’s call for help, one that mentions
those in the lifeboats awaiting rescue. Several songs
mention the shortage of life boats, but only one is
explicit that this was the other main cause of the dis-
aster.

While the mention of fog in one song is not sup-
ported by testimony – there was calm water and

starry skies – much of what the songs say is accurate. *Titanic* was perceived as unsinkable and Captain Smith did order her into iceberg-filled waters. The British inquiry concluded:

The Court, having carefully inquired into the circumstances of the above mentioned shipping casualty, finds, for the reasons appearing in the annex hereto, that the loss of the said ship was due to collision with an iceberg, brought about by the excessive speed at which the ship was being navigated. (Mersey 1912)

However, the songs, like the inquiry, leave out the Captain's less than impressive history. In 1899, when he was captain of *Germanic*, she capsized at her New York pier from ice accumulations in her rigging and superstructure. In June 1911, he damaged a tugboat in New York harbour while manoeuvring *Olympic* into a pier. Three months later, in September 1911, he collided with *H.M.S. Hawke*.

It is also true, as the songs state, that many men stood aside so women and children could be saved. Some notable figures (Astor, Strauss) went down with the ship, but among the survivors were Bruce Ismay, Sir Cosmo Edward Duff Gordon, Colonel Archibald Gracie, and Mr. Colonel (Oberst) Simoni-Blumer. Further, there were 324 first class passengers on *Titanic* and 201 (62 percent) survived. This compares to 284 second class passengers, of which 118 (41.5 percent) survived, and 709 third class passengers, of whom 181 (25.5 percent) survived. Overall, there were 2,201 on board and 711 survivors, a 32 per cent survival rate (Lord 1986:82).

There were several reasons why so few survived. One is, as mentioned, that the ship did not carry enough lifeboats. Another is that many boats were launched half empty or more than half empty. A third is that these partly filled boats did not try to pick up persons floating in icy water. Those in the boats claimed later they were frightened of being pulled down by the suction from the ship sinking and that their own boat might have been swamped. Nevertheless, the behaviour is atypical. When *Empress of Ireland* sank in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1914, all the lifeboats searched for survivors in the water. However, the songs ignore this unhappy part of the story of *Titanic*.

Several songs do mention that the life boats were launched half empty, but do not provide an explanation for it. One explanation is that people were not convinced *Titanic* would sink. Another explanation is that there was a plan to open a lower port and have the boats pulled up alongside. The port was never opened and boats, instead of pulling alongside, tried

to get away from the ship as they were worried about the suction. None of these details are included in any songs.

A few songs mention that there was a difference between upper and lower class passengers but none go into detail. Even today, some who write about *Titanic* argue that steerage passengers were responsible for their own fate. Butler claims that the lower class passengers lacked leadership, arguing that a few managed to make their way to a boat deck, but “as for the rest, they fell back on old habits, and simply waited in vain for someone ‘in charge’ to come along and lead them to safety” (Butler 2009:127). He does not mention that there is no evidence the crew tried to help lower class passengers find their way up to the boat deck, a part of the ship with which they would not have been familiar.

Shots Fired?

Though only one English song mentions shots being fired (and provides no detail) and only two Finnish songs used the word “panic”, there are numerous accounts that mention shots being fired to stop persons from rushing the lifeboats. All but one suggest the persons being fired at were Italians or, as one account calls them, “Dagos”. The accounts vary in that some suggest people were killed, others that people were injured and others (alternatively), that the shots were fired as a warning and did not hit anyone. The most thorough account, though inconsistent, comes from testimony given by Fifth Officer Harold Lowe at two separate inquiries. When he testified before the Senate inquiry, Lowe testified he had fired shots as Lifeboat No. 14 was being lowered:

I saw a lot of Italians, Latin people, all along the ship's rails—understand, it was open—and they were all glaring, more or less like wild beasts, ready to spring. That is why I yelled out to look out, and let go, bang, right along the ship's side. (Chapman 2001)

At the British Inquiry Lowe responded to questions by S.A.T. Rowlatt:

15855. There is just another thing I want to ask you. Did you use a revolver at all?—I did.

15856. How was that?—It was because while I was on the boat deck just as they had started to lower, two men jumped into my boat. I chased one out and to avoid another occurrence of that sort I fired my revolver as I was going down each deck, because the boat would not stand a sudden jerk. She was loaded already I suppose with about 64 people on her, and she would not stand

any more. (“British Wreck Commissioner’s Inquiry: Day 13” 1912)

If shots were fired – and it seems clear this did happen – they were few in number. Whatever the reason, these songs almost completely ignore this aspect of what happened.

Last Tune on *Titanic*

While it is accepted musicians on *Titanic* kept playing as the ship sank, none of the musicians survived to confirm that. While the songs agree it was “Nearer My God to Thee”, one authoritative witness states that it was a waltz, “Autumn”, a tune in the band’s repertoire, and a song more in tune with the desire to keep up the spirits of the passengers. Just one song, by Lennie Gallant, mentions the role the band played in keeping people calm:

Steady as she goes,
On the *Titanic*,
It can’t be too bad,
The band plays on. (Gallant 1997)

In an interview published only days after the incident, the ship’s junior wireless operator, Harold Bride, described how he spent the final hours of *Titanic* carrying messages between the wireless cabin and the bridge. Just before the ship sank, he saw some passengers trying to push a collapsible over the side. When waves started to wash over the deck he grabbed an oarlock and held on. He went over the side and into the ocean and, with his life belt as support, swam away from the sinking ship:

From aft came the tunes of the band. It was a rag-time tune. I don’t know what. Then there was “Autumn”.... The ship was gradually turning on her nose – just like a duck that goes down for a dive. I had only one thing on my mind – to get away from the suction. The band was still playing... They were playing, “Autumn”.... The way the band kept playing was a noble thing. I heard it first when we were still working wireless, when there was a rag-timer tune for us, and the last I saw of the band, when I was floating out in the sea, with my life belt on, it was still on deck playing, “Autumn.” How they ever did it I cannot imagine. (Bride, *New York Times*, April 19 1912)

“Autumn” does not sound anything like “Nearer my God to Thee” and Bride was the only one to state that this is what the band played. According to the report of an interview with *Titanic* survivor Thomas Patrick “Paddy” Dillon, as the ship went down “there

was one musician left. He was the violinist and was playing the air of the hymn, ‘Nearer my God to Thee’. The notes of this music were the last thing I heard...” (quoted in Turner 2011:151). Perhaps the band played both “Autumn” and “Nearer my God to Thee”. The latter, however, seems particularly appropriate, as it was a hymn frequently played at the funerals of musicians.

Conclusion

Like the songs about mine disasters in Nova Scotia, the many songs about *Titanic* tend to be limited in scope. Some, of course, are ballads appropriate for any event in which families were separated and lost loved ones. They are certainly morally accurate, to use the term from folk scholars. While some mention that *Titanic* was supposedly unsinkable, many tie her loss to fatalism – she was a challenge to the Lord – and to lessons about salvation. While several mention the ship’s excessive speed, they have little to say about what preceded it, such as the captain’s earlier career, and little to say about the rescue: only two English-language songs mention *Carpathia*. In short, as was true of songs about the mine disasters, the songs about *Titanic* largely exclude events prior to the final hours before impact and largely ignore the response after *Titanic* sank. None, for example, mention the failure of those in the life boats to rescue those in the water.

Except for two songs in Finnish, the songs do not for the most part portray most myths about disaster – that people panic or become dazed and confused – but most portray another stereotype: that men are heroic in such situations (though for *Titanic* it has some basis in fact). Most songs ignore the fact that the death toll was much higher among lower class passengers.

As the songs were composed nearly a century ago, it is impossible to find the origins of the Finnish songs; there were certainly some clashes between passengers and crew and there were certainly some shots fired. The United States media focused on the prominent passengers, so it is possible that the Finnish media and the Finnish songwriters heard a different version from the 38 Finnish passengers who survived, most of whom were in third class.

On the whole, the songs about *Titanic* agree that it was largely true that it was “women and children first” (but omit that some prominent men did make it into the lifeboats). They describe the captain as a grand heroic figure, though they do indicate that his reckless behaviour contributed to the collision. They put forth that as the ship sank the band played “Nearer My God to Thee”. Only a few songs suggest confusion and only two in English even imply anti-

social behaviour. Overall the impression left is that most people behaved quite well even when death was not far away, which is very much what disaster research shows is normal behaviour in such circumstances. The songs are, in short, both factually and morally accurate. In general the songs about *Titanic*, like the songs about mine disasters, inject some fatalism into their accounts, but overall – the Finnish songs being the exception – tend to support the theory that folk songs, unlike other forms of popular culture, tend to give an accurate impression of human behaviour in disaster.

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