

Mark Twain's Image of the Moor: How Innocent were the "Innocents"?

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Abstract

In a landmark in travel literature documenting an excursion from the United States to the Holy Land entitled *The Innocents Abroad* or *The New Pilgrims' Progress*, Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) records his impressions, attitudes, and perceptions of the people and the culture of North African in his first instance of contact with the East. Twain's account of the Moor in Tangier encompasses a description of the town and its layout, the houses, the people, the dresses, mosques, coins, rulers, women, landmarks, jails, marriage, slavery, pilgrimage, and foreign relations. The writer argues in this paper that this account, though possibly objective in the description of the place physically and serves as a documented portrait of the city of Tangier in 1867 as seen by the observant eyes of a reputable major American writer, it seems to reinforce an earlier image of the north African Muslim Arab reflected in Western literature and the literature of Orientalism.

Back in 1867 and in a chartered steamship capable of accommodating one hundred and fifty cabin passengers and provided with "every necessary comfort including a library and musical instruments, a printing press and an experienced physician", a highly selected party of excursionists embarked on what was claimed to be a "pleasure excursion"¹ to the Holy Land, Egypt, the Crimea, Greece and intermediate points of interest. The party consisted of about sixty five excursionists including ministers of the gospels, doctors, naval and military officers "with sounding titles", and an "ample crop of Professors' of various kinds". They were selected by a "pitiless Committee on Applications". A detailed program of the voyage was

¹ The trip was claimed by Twain in his preface to *The Innocents Abroad* to be a "pleasure trip". He says: "This book is a record of a pleasure trip. If it were a record of a solemn scientific expedition, it would have about it that gravity, that profundity, and that impressive incomprehensibility which are so proper to works of that kind, and withal so attractive" However, at the end of the book, Twain appends a letter he sent to the editor of the *New York Herald* evaluating and summarizing the excursion and in which he gives so many reasons of why it was not a pleasure excursion. "The pleasure ship was a synagogue, and the pleasure trip was a funeral excursion without a corpse.". Fiedler (1980: 477) asserts that the "Plymouth Church was the moving spirit behind the whole enterprise". Twain states that "a supplementary program was issued which set forth that the Plymouth Collection of Hymns would be used on board the ship. In his notes on the text, Cardwell (1984:1002) gives the full citation of the Collection as the *Plymouth Collection of Hymns for the Use of Christian Congregations* compiled by Henry Ward Beecher, New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1855).

prepared, well advertised and "chatted about in the newspapers every where in America and discussed at countless firesides". The idea was indeed "the offspring of an ingenious brain" and the program was irresistible for the Quaker City will cross the Atlantic to take its select company to places where "nothing that any finite mind can discover. Paris, England, Scotland, Switzerland, Italy — Garibaldi!, The Grecian Archipelago! Vesivius! Constantinople! Smyrna! The Holy Land! Egypt and 'our friends the Bermudians".

At a fee of \$1250 paid by the Daily *Alta California* of San Francisco, Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) joined the voyage and his observations, descriptions, comments and notes sent in his letters to the *Alta*, the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald* became a land mark in American literature and travel literature in general. In his best known and most widely read work documenting the voyage entitled *The Innocents Abroad or The New Pilgrims Progress: Being Some Account of the Steamship Quaker City's Pleasure Excursion to Europe and the Holy Land; With Descriptions of Countries, Nations, Incidents and Adventures as they Appeared to the Author*, Twain records his impressions of, attitudes towards and perceptions of the people and the culture of North Africa, and particularly of Morocco and of the "Moor". Twain treats Morocco and the Moor in his first instance of contact with the East when the voyagers disembark in Gibraltar for a short stop on the way to the second oldest 'town' in the world, Tangier, that he has been earnestly longing to see.

In Gibraltar, Twain encounters the Moor for the first instance in the voyage. The Moor in Gibraltar is not only a part of the history of the straits, "the Moors held the place twelve hundred years ago and a staunch old castle of theirs of that date still frowns from the middle of the town, with moss grown battlements and sides well scarred by shots fired in battles and sieges that are forgotten now". They are also there in person. However, Twain repeats what he must have read in travel books about the area about the traditional image of the Moor in western literature. In describing the people of Gibraltar, Twain starts with the English garrison, then the soft eyed Spanish girls from San Roque and then the "veiled Moorish beauties (I suppose they are beauties) from Tarifa, the turbaned, sashed and trousered Moorish

merchants from Fez, and long robed, bare legged, ragged Mohammedan² vagabonds from Tetouan and Tangier". Then he describes the Jews "in gaberdine, skull-cap and slippers, just as they are in pictures and theatres, and just as they were three thousand years ago, no doubt". In his description, neither the Spanish nor the Jews are vagabonds; only Mohammedans were.

Half a dozen of the party took a small steamer on a private pleasure excursion bound for the "venerable Moorish town of Tangier". On the way to Tangier, they steam by "the frowning fortress of Malabat, a stronghold of the emperroor of Morocco". The garrison of the of Malabat turned out under arms. Twain inquires about the name of the garrison of fortress and he was told it was Mehmet Ali Ben Sancom and he had a reputation of competence. . At the end of the part on Gibraltar, Twain expresses his longing for Tangier again: "Tangier! A tribe of stalwart Moors are wading into the sea to carry us ashore on their backs from the small boats".

In Tangier, Twain was apparently looking for the "exotic" East with whatever the concept of "exoticism" is associated with. An East which is far fetched, drastically different from the west, and full of interesting though strange and unusual. Twain's longing for Tangier is repeatedly stated because nowhere else is there what he called "novelty" of the situation. In fact , the novelty of the situation lost a "a deal of its force" because "elsewhere we have found foreign-looking people, but always with things and people intermixed that we were familiar with before." If that is the case what was Twain anticipating in Tangier which is not anywhere else? He was looking for the exotic defined by its essential "foreignness" in its absolute sense.

We wanted something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign – foreign from top to bottom - foreign from center to circumference-foreign inside and outside and all around - nothing anywhere around it to dilute its foreignness - nothing to remind us of any other people or any other land under the sun.

² In the Cardwell's edition, the name of the Prophet is correctly spelt as Muhammad and the word for followers of the prophet is spelt as Muhammadans. In the Fiedler edition, the name of the Prophet is spelt as Mohammed and the word for the followers of the prophet is written as Mohammedans. The way the name of the Prophet is spelt by an English author is significant and indicative of attitudes because the distortion of the name of the prophet has been a recurrent theme in Western literature since the Battle of Poitiers in 732 when the French victory was raised to "legendary proportion", as Smith 1939 maintains, in the Romances. Smith (1939:xii-xiii) reports that Oxford English Dictionary has a total of 73 ways for the spelling of Muhammad and its distorted forms.

It is apparently the romantic image of the East, "the delight in Oriental glamour ... in spite of hostility to Islam" as Daniel (1979:325) put it. Where did Twain get this kind of image for the East as represented by Tangier? Twain makes no qualms about it. It is the kind of image that was established through the translation and dissemination of the *Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights*. *The Arabian Nights* colored the image of the Arab, the Muslim and the East in the West. Twain has not seen anything like Tangier save in pictures which used to seem exaggerations "they seemed too weird and fanciful for reality". But after being in Tangier, Twain affirms the pictures were not wild enough and were not fanciful enough - "they have not told half the story". "The true spirit of Tangier", Twain reiterates "can never be found in any book save *The Arabian Nights*".³

In his description of the city of Tangier, Twain stressed what Said in his chapter on orientalist structures and restructures in *Orientalism* calls the "exotic spatial configurations" as one of the "eccentricities of Oriental life". Tangier is jammed, crowded, enclosed in massive stone wall, has very narrow streets ("And the streets are oriental", writes Twain), houses made of thick walls of stones, arched doors with the "peculiar arch we see in Moorish pictures", floors laid in porcelain squares "wrought in the furnaces of Fez". In the Jewish dwellings, the furniture consists of divans, but in the Moorish homes no one can tell because "within their sacred walls no Christian dog can enter".

Another feature of orientalist structures and restructures as Said (1978:164) pointed them out are the odd calendars as part of the eccentricities of oriental life. In the Orient, Said maintains, one confronts "unimaginable antiquity". Tangier, according to Twain, is a "funny old town". How old? Almost older than time. He is asking the Western reader about the oldest thing he can think of and then comparing that with how old Tangier is. The crumbling wall, Twain maintains, was old when Columbus discovered America, when Peter the Hermit roused people to arm the first Crusade, when Christ and his disciples walked on earth and was old when ancient Thebes thrived. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, English, Moors and Romans have battled for Tangier. The ruins include a bridge built by Julius Caesar, a dockyard where

³ For a detailed discussion of how tales in *The Arabian Nights* colored the Western visions of the East and particularly of the Arabs, see Nasir (1979) and specifically his third chapter on "The Arabian Nights" and his fourth chapter on "The Romantic Image".

Caesar repaired his ships, a monument commemorating the Canaanites who were driven by "the Jewish robber Joshua". Tangier was a town, "though a queer town", when Hercules landed there four thousand years ago. Near Tangier is the celebrated cave of Hercules in which he took refuge when he was driven out of Tangier. It is full of inscriptions in "the dead languages". Two hundred miles from Tangier are the ruins of a city built by an "enlightened race".⁴

A place which is expectedly crowded and jammed is the marketplace in Tangier. It is a lively and "picturesque" scene which "smells like a police court". It has several exotic elements into it. The stores in Tangier are very small in size to the extent that the store is the size "of an ordinary shower bath in a civilized land" . A whole block of these "pigeonholes" can be rented for no more than fifty dollars. People crowd the marketplace with their baskets of figs, dates, melons, apricots etc and among them a train of asses very small in size "not much larger, if any than a Newfoundland dog". In the marketplace, the "Mohammedan merchant, tinman, shoemaker or vender of trifles" sits on the floor cross legged and reaches after the goods you may want to buy. The Jewish money changers spend the whole day counting bronze coins and moving them from one bushel basket to another. These coins are no more than four to five hundred years old and they are not very valuable. For a nopleon, one of the company got eleven quarts of coin and for a shilling Twain bought nearly half a pint of the Moroccan money. Beside these Bronze coins, there are small silver coins and some "silver slugs" worth a dollar each. The slugs are so scarce that "when poor ragged Arabs see one they beg to be allowed to kiss it". The small gold coin is worth two dollars. Twain relates how this piece was swallowed by Arab couriers when they fall into the hands of marauding bands and get robbed.

Describing the people of Tangier, Twain identifies seven groups of people "foreign and curious to look upon" based, it seems, on their dresses which are "strange beyond all descriptions. He stratifies these groups on his own impressions without showing that these

⁴ In his notes, Cardwell (1984:1003) claims that Twain meant the city of Volubilis, a main inland city of the Roman province, near Meknes, 125 miles south of Tangier. During Twain's time, the ruins were called Kasr Faraon (Citadel of the Pharaoh).

divisions do overlap. In fact, other than the Jews who are distinct ethnically and culturally, all the other groups cannot be markedly separated. In fact they have all for a very long time been integrated into one identity. He identifies the "stalwart" Bedouins of the desert, the "stately" Moors, the Jews, the "swarthy" Riffians from the mountains, "genuine" Negroes, "howling dervishes and a hundred breeds of Arabs". I wonder how Twain distinguished the breeds of Arabs from the Moors. In fact he has not included any distinctive features for the Arabs. Of all these groups, he has selected the Moors for the most detail followed by the Jews. The young Moor is in prodigious white turban, embroidered jacket, gold and crimson sash, trousers that come a little below the knee, ornamented scimitar, stockingless feet, yellow slippers and a gun. The aged Moors are in flowing white beards and long white robes with vast cowls. Bedouins wear long cowed striped cloaks. Negroes and Riffians have their heads clean shaven except a lock back of the ear or upon the aftercorner of the skull. The Jews who number five thousand according to Twain are in blue gaberdines, sashes about their waists, slippers upon their feet and skullcaps on the backs of their heads. In addition to these groups, there were all sorts of barbarians in weird and ragged costumes. It is interesting to note that Twain took special interest in the Jewish sector of the population in Tangier and took some care in telling the reader how the Jews there look, where they came from, what they work and how they differ from others. It is also interesting to note that he was much more respectful of the Jews in his description than of any other group. Rarely ever did he use any of the Jewish negative stereotypes known and well established in English literature and the Western culture save their work as money exchangers in Tangier when he talks about the marketplace.

Twain writes the Moorish women off by saying in passing that they are "enveloped from head to foot in coarse white robes". Their sex can be determined by the fact that they leave one eye visible. They do not look at men of their race and are not looked at in public. He says that he caught a glimpse of the faces of several Moorish women, and cynically adds that he is "full of veneration for the wisdom that leads them to cover up such atrocious ugliness". This is a flat show of Twain's bigotry and hatred covered by what others term as "humor". The Jewish women, on the other hand, are "plump and pretty and do smile upon a Christian in a way which in the last degree comforting".

The image of the East in oriental literature has always reflected the Eastern lands under the rule of despots and the subjects to be submissive and unconcerned for liberty. Said (1978:205) captures this image as follows:

On several occasions I have alluded to the connections between Orientalism as a body of ideas, beliefs, cliches, or learning about the East, and other schools of thought at large in the culture. Now one of the important developments in nineteenth century Orientalism was the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its awkwardness – into separate and unchallenged coherence; thus for a writer to use the word Oriental was a reference for the reader sufficient to identify a specific body of information about the Orient. This information seemed to be morally neutral and objectively valid; it seemed to have an epistemological status equal to that of historical chronology or geographical location.

"Tendency to despotism" is exactly the theme Twain treats when he talks about the Emperor of Morocco, who was, according to Cardwell's notes (1984:1004), Muhammad XVII who ruled from 1859-1873. Twain says

The emperor of Morocco is a soulless despot, and the great officers under him are despots on a smaller scale. There is no regular system of taxation, but when the emperor or the Bashaw want money, they levy on some rich man, and he has to furnish the cash or go to prison. Therefore, few men in Morocco dare to be rich. It is a dangerous luxury.

Twain continues to say that there are many rich people in the empire, but their money is always buried. He goes further to say that rich Moors and Jews sometimes seek the protection of foreign consuls in order to "flout their riches in the emperor's face with impunity".

The guide, "the stately, the princely, the magnificent Hadji Muhammad Lamarty (may his tribe increase!)"⁵, takes the group by a Moorish mosque. The mosque has a "tall tower" and it

⁵ (May his tribe increase!) is taken from Abou Ben Adhem or Abou Ben Adhem and the Angel by Leigh Hunt. Abou Ben Adham (the father of the son of Adham) is, according to Smith (1939:205) the only poem by Hunt that is widely known today. It is to be pointed out here that Twain must have depended in drawing the image of the Moor on readings about the East. In the supplementary program of the excursion, the excursionists were instructed to provide themselves with a number of items chief among which "a few guide books, a bible and

is "rich with checkerwork of many colored porcelain, and every part and portion of the edifice adorned with the quaint architecture of the Alhambra". One of the company tries to adventure into the mosque, but he was checked and they were informed that "so dire a profanation is it for a Christian dog to set foot upon the sacred threshold of a Moorish mosque that no amount of purification can ever make it fit for the faithful to pray in again". Twain adds that had Blucher succeeded in entering the mosque he would have been stoned. It was not long ago, he adds, when a Christian would be ruthlessly slaughtered if captured in a mosque.

Twain relates the story of repairing the clock of the tower when it went out of order. We came to learn first of all that "the Moors of Tangier have so degenerated that it has been long since there was an artificer among them capable of curing so delicate a patient as a debilitated clock". The great men of the city met and discussed the matter but failed to reach a solution. Finally, a patriarch of the city suggested that a Portugese clock mender of Christian origin be allowed into the mosque on all fours and barefoot in the same way asses crossed the threshold carrying stones and cement for the building. Twain uses the word "dog" again and again with "Christian" to the point they become collocates. He concludes by stating the of the parable as if somebody wants to see the inside of a mosque, he will have to "cast aside his humanity and go in his natural character".

Twain then visits the jail and talks about the penal code of the Moors. He found Moorish prisoners making mats and baskets. Murder is punished with death, but neither Moorish guns nor marksmen are good because they set the criminal at long range and practice on them. For theft, they cut off the right hand and left leg and nail them up in the marketplace as a warning for every body⁶. Their surgery is not artistic. Twain admires the bravery of the Moor but, unfortunately, he spoke about it in association with how the criminals undergo the fearful

some standard works of travel. A list was appended which consisted chiefly of books relating to the Holly Land, since the Holly Land was part of the excursion and seemed to be its main feature". Cadwell (1984:1004) attributes many of the inaccuracies in Twain's account on such books because 'observations were freely made in guide and travel books". Cadwell identifies two main books Twain may have relied on. The first is Harper's Handbook for Travelers in Europe and the East (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866). The second is the Reverend David A. Randall's The Handwriting of God in Egypt, Sainai and the Holy Land (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Co., 1862).

⁶ The writer thinks that this is inaccurate because in Islamic Shari'a the punishment for stealing is cutting the right hand. If committed again, the punishment is cutting the left leg.

operation of cutting off the hand "without a wince, without a tremor of any kind, without a groan". "No amount of suffering", Twain concludes on the bravery of the Moor, "can bring down the pride of the Moor or make him shame his dignity with a cry."

Marriage in Tangier is contracted by parents. "There are no valentines , no stolen interviews, no riding out, no courting in dim parlors, no lovers' quarrels and reconciliation –no nothing that is proper to approach matrimony". Mohammedans who can afford it keep many wives and concubines. The emperor has about five hundred wives. Even Jews in Morocco have a plurality of wives.

Many Negroes are held in slavery by the Moors but if a female becomes her master's concubine or if a male can read the first chapter of the Koran their bonds are broken.

There are three "Sundays" in Tangier; the Mohammedans' comes on Friday, the Jews' comes on Saturday and The Christian Consuls' comes on Sunday. The Jews are the "most radical" The moor goes to his mosque, "performs his ablution, makes his salaams, pressing his forehead to the pavement time and again, says his prayers and goes back to his work". Twain does not talk as disrespectfully about the Jews. The Jew "shuts up shop, will not touch copper or bronze money at all, soils his fingers with nothing meaner than silver or gold; attends the synagogue devoutly; will not cook or have anything to do with fire; and religiously refrains from embarking in any enterprise".

A Hadji, the Moor who has performed pilgrimage to Mecca is held in High esteem. Hundreds of Moors come to Tangier every year and go to Mecca. The trip costs 10-12 dollars by an English steamer, and they take their food with them . The trip hardly costs anything other than the passage money. Twain talks cynically about the pilgrims and their lack of cleanliness. He also asserts that a pilgrims who have to "rake and scrape a long time to gather together the ten dollars their steamer passage costs", will become bankrupt forever when they get back. .The emperor decreed that pilgrimage is restricted to those having a hundred dollars, but they circumvented this decree by borrowing the money, "for a consideration" from Jewish money changers who get it back before the steamer sails.

In describing the foreign relations of the Moors, Twain stresses the idea that Spain is the only country the Moors fear. Because Spain sends her heaviest war ships and loudest guns to "astonish these Muslims".⁷ Because "the Moors, like other savages, learn by what they see, not what they hear or read, they have a small opinion of England, France, and America". Consequently, the representatives of England, France and America go through red tape circumlocution before they are granted their rights the demand of the Spanish minister is acceded to at once "whether it be just or not". In connection with the Moors foreign relations, Twain brings up the issue of the city of Tetuan. He says that Spain punished the Moors five or six years ago 'about a disputed piece of property opposite Gibraltar' and captured the city of Tetuan. He claims in his account that Spain paid twenty million dollars indemnity for the augmentation of the territory. Then Spain gave it up after the Spanish soldiers ate all the cats in the city. Twain claims that because cats are sacred for the Moors, this matter was the cause of an enmity between the Spaniards and the Moors forever. This story provoked another story of cat killing by a French minister in Tangier who made a carpet of their hides. His memory is still cursed in Tangier.

Mark Twain concludes his trip to Tangier by a visit to the lonesome American Consul General. Twain abruptly and unexpectedly since it does not follow from previous accounts of his earlier in the chapter about the city takes this opportunity to show how boring the city of Tangier is. He maintains that

Tangier is full of interest for one day, but after that it is a weary prison. ...His (the Consul's) family seize upon their letters and papers when the mail arrives, read them over and over again for two days or three more till they wear them out, and after that for days together they eat and drink and sleep, and ride out the same old road, and see the same old tiresome things that even decades of centuries have scarcely changed, and say never a single word!...It is the completest exile that I can conceive of. I would seriously recommend to the government of the United States that when a man commits a crime so heinous that the law provides no adequate punishment for it, they make him Consul General to Tangier.

⁷ This the first time Twain uses the word "Muslims"; he has always opted for the misnomer and inferior name Mohammedans or Muhammadans for Muslims.

Finally, Twain expresses his happiness to have seen the second oldest "town" in the world announcing that he was ready to bid it good bye.

Mark Twain was expected for various reasons to diverge from the path taken earlier by European travelers, eccentric Englishmen, adventurers, scholars and would be scholars, religious zealots and the traditional orientalist. Chief among these reasons is the fact that Twain is an American and he has not had the kinds of pre misconceptions his European counterpart had. In fact, some critics echo the fact that Twain's literature represents the literature that, according to El-Bettar (1974) "broke away with Europe, that looked inward ... Twain represents the voice of democracy in literature." Another major reason is the fact that Twain had not had any contact with the Arabs and Muslims prior to his excursion to the area. A third reason is that Twain is well traveled, well read and he is supposed as a journalist and public lecturer to manifest objectivity and exercise well thought out evaluative judgements. More importantly is that Mark Twain is considered by some critics as a staunch enemy of imperialism and was so well known for his liberal anti-imperialist thinking A case in point is his opposition to the Philippine-American war and his service as vice president for the Anti – Imperialist league (for further details, see Zwick 2003)

Unfortunately, in his perceptions and portrayal of the Moor, Twain converged with other travelers and orientalists in flatly showing misconceptions, inaccurate information, and bias. Every single aspect of the Moor he treated shows some bias and misrepresentation which definitely comes from pre-conceived ideas about the Moor. and his city. When he arrived in Tangier, he said it was 'royal" and ended showing it one of the most boring places on earth. He depicted the Moors as backward, savages, strangely and raggedly dressed, victimized by despots, degenerated, xenophobic, hateful for others, unskilled, improper in their ways, polygamous, poor, dirty, smelly, savage. Their women are licentious, ugly and carry their children at their backs "like other savages the world over". The Moors are Mohammedans rather than Muslims; Mohammedans being the European designation of Muslims and it is an inferior name compared to the true name "Muslim" derived from the proper name of the religion "Islam" (No Muslim calls himself a Mohammedan or Muhammadan). Instead of performing the Islamic prayer, the Moor "makes his salaams, pressing his forehead to the

pavement time and again". The Moors, though brave (their bravery was pointed out when Twain was talking about the endurance of Moorish criminals) are frightened by the Spanish because of their heavy war ships and loud guns. Tangier is very old but very crowded, jammed, funny, and boring. This is the "stereotyped" portrait of the East and of the Arab Muslims. The Jews living in Tangier were not portrayed the same way by Twain. In fact, he was careful not to offend the Jews. Twain fell victim to his own biases and prejudices nourished by his readings about the East in drawing the image of the Moor. The *Saturday Review* (Oct. 8, 1870) (In Zwick 2003b) a British weekly flatly states that "Mr. Twain is a very offensive specimen of the vulgarest kind of Yankee."

In a daring critical essay published in the London Daily Chronicle back in 1899, Harland (reprinted in Budd 1982) talks about Twain's "peculiar popularity". He maintains that Twain is popular with the masses and his works are enjoyed by people of taste and cultivation despite the faults and vices which normally would render any work "utterly abhorrent". He concludes that vulgarity, narrowness, provincialism and irreverence are in the very texture of Twain's work. They are bound together and they make the spirit of Twain's work. *The Innocents Abroad* is further marred by illiteracy, ignorance and inaccuracy. Harland had all this to say without considering one single reference to the Moor where these references show more irreverence, bias and bigotry. Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* is apparently mainstream Orientalism.

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the *Journal of American Studies in Turkey* (vol. 11) and another is to appear shortly in the forthcoming issue of the same journal.

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