

JUSTINA COSIPE SIGAYA, ROMEO, FELY, TOMAS, BERNARDO, LEDA, ANASTACIO, ERLINDA, ROSA, TERESITA, EDWIN AND HELEN, ALL SURNAMED SIGAYA, PETITIONERS, VS. DIOMER MAYUGA, JOSE VIVA AN...

G.R. NO. 143254. August 18, 2005

Ponente: AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.

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AUSTRIA-MARTINEZ, J.:

The question of whether or not a person is a purchaser in good faith is a factual matter that will generally be not delved into by this Court especially when the findings of the trial court on the matter were affirmed by the Court of Appeals (CA). Settled as this rule may be, petitioners now come before this Court seeking an exception to the general rule.

The facts are as follows:

Dionisia Alorsabes owned a three hectare land in Dao, Capiz, denominated as Lot 3603. In 1934, she sold a portion of the lot to Juanito Fuentes while the remainder was inherited by her children Paz Dela Cruz, Rosela Dela Cruz, and Consorcia Arroja (an adopted child), and a grandson, Francisco Abas, in representation of his deceased mother Margarita Dela Cruz. These four heirs executed an Extra-Judicial Settlement with Sale dated February 4, 1964 wherein Consorcia sold her share with an area of 6,694 square meters to spouses Balleriano Mayuga. On April 1, 1977, Paz also sold her share to Honorato de los Santos. Later, another document entitled Extra-Judicial Partition with Deed of Sale dated November 2, 1972 was uncovered wherein the heirs of Dionisia purportedly adjudicated Lot 3603 among themselves and sold their shares to Francisco. On January 9, 1978, Francisco executed a Deed of Sale over Lot 3603 in favor of Teodulfo Sigaya. Thus, the title over Lot 3603 was cancelled and a new one was issued in the name of Teodulfo, predecessor-in-interest of the petitioners herein.[1]

On October 14, 1986, the petitioners, who are the widow and children of Teodulfo, filed Civil Case Nos. V-5325, V-5326, V-5327 and V-5328 for recovery of possession and damages against Diomer Mayuga, Honorato de los Santos, Sps. Jose Viva and Rosela Dela Cruz-Viva, and Renato Distor,[2] respectively, before the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Roxas City, Branch 16, praying that respondents be ordered to vacate Lot 3603, and turn over the same to petitioners; that petitioners' right of ownership and possession over the property be confirmed and that respondents be ordered to pay damages in the form of unrealized income starting 1980, plus attorney's fees and costs.[3]

Respondents in their answers with counterclaim averred that: the Deed of Sale executed by Francisco in favor of Teodulfo and the title thereon are null and void for being based on a fictitious Extra-Judicial Settlement with Sale; Rosela Dela Cruz-Viva and Paz Dela Cruz, who are illiterates, were fraudulently made to sign as vendees in the Extra-Judicial Settlement with Sale dated 1972, when Francisco represented that they were merely signing as witnesses to the sale of Francisco of his share to Teodulfo. As counterclaim, they asked for attorney's fees and damages. [4]

Respondent Mayuga further asserted that he possesses his portion of the property by virtue of the sale by Consorcio Arroja of her share to his parents, Sps. Balleriano Mayuga. Respondent de los Santos meanwhile averred that Paz Dela Cruz sold her share to him in 1957. Respondents Rosela Dela Cruz-Viva and her husband Jose Viva claimed that the portion of land occupied by them pertains to Rosela's share which she inherited from Dionisia, while respondent Renato Distor claimed that his wife inherited said property from her father Juanito Fuentes, who in turn bought the same from Dionisia during her lifetime.[5]

The four cases were consolidated and on February 14, 1992, the trial court rendered its decision, the dispositive portion of which reads:

WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered as follows:

- Declaring the defendants Geomer (sic) Mayuga as the real and absolute owner of the portion of land, containing an area of Six Thousand Six Hundred Ninety Four (6,694) square meters, more [or] less, portion of Lot No. 3603, Dao Cadastre and subject matter in Civil Case No. 5325 indicated in the Commissioner's Report (Exh. "4") as Exh. "4-B";
- Declaring the defendant Honorato de los Santos as the absolute owner of the portion of land containing an area of Six Thousand Six Hundred Ninety Five (6,695) square meters more or less, portion of lot No. 3603 Dao Cadastre, and subject matter in Civil Case No. 5326 indicated in the Commissioner's Report (Exh. "4") as Exh. "4-D";
- Declaring the defendants spouses Jose Viva and Rosela dela Cruz as the absolute owners of the portion of land containing an area of Six Thousand Six Hundred Ninety Four (6,694) square meters, more or less, portion of Lot No. 3603, Dao Cadastre, and subject matter in Civil Case No. 5327 indicated in the Commissioner's Report (Exh. "4") as Exh. "4-C";
- Declaring the defendant, Renato Distor, as the absolute owner of the portion of land containing an area of Six Thousand Three Hundred Forty Four (6,344) square meters, more or less, portion of Lot No. 3603, Dao Cadastre, and subject matter in Civil Case No. 5328 indicated in the Commissioner's Report (Exh. "4") as Exh. "4-E";
- Declaring the plaintiffs as the absolute owners of the portion of land containing an area of Seven Thousand Forty-Six (7,046) square meters, more or less, portion of Lot No. 3603, Dao Cadastre, indicated in the Commissioner's Report (Exh. "4") as Exh. "4-F";
- Declaring Transfer Certificate of Title No. T-15630 of the Register of Deeds of Capiz as null and void and should be cancelled;
- Declaring that Deed of Sale, Exh. "C" as null and void except as affecting the portion with an area of Seven Thousand Forty Six (7,046) square [meters] of Lot 3603 which portion had been sold by Francisco Abas to the spouses Teodulfo Sigaya and Justina Cosipe;
- Declaring that Extra-Judicial Partition with Deed of Sale as having been procured through fraud and therefore not valid in so far as the sale of the shares of Paz de la Cruz and Priscilla de la Cruz were concerned;
- Condemning the plaintiffs to severally and jointly pay the following:
 - a) Unto Diomar Mayuga, defendant in Civil Case No. V-5325, P10,000.00 as attorney's fees and litigation expenses;
 - b) Unto Honorato de los [Santos], defendant, in Civil Case No. V-5326, P10,000.00 as [attorney's] fees and litigation expenses;

- c) Unto the (sic) Jose Viva and Rosela de la Cruz, defendants in Civil Case No. V-5327, P10,000.00 as [attorney's] fees and litigation expenses; and
- d) Unto Renato Distor, defendant in Civil Case No. V-5328, P10,000.00 as [attorney's] fees and litigation expenses; and
- e) Dismissing Civil Case Nos. V-5325, V-5326, V-5327 and V-5328 with costs in each case against the plaintiffs.

SO ORDERED.[6]

The trial court explained that:

There is no question that the deed of sale of the portion bought by Jacinto Fuentes from Dionisia Alorsabes and now possessed by defendants Renato Distor was a public instrument executed in 1934; and the portion occupied by defendant Diomer Mayuga is the portion bought by spouses Florentina Viva and Balleriano Mayuga from Consorcio Mayuga as her share in lot 3603; defendant Honorato de los Santos is in possession of the portion which he bought from Paz de la Cruz, in 1977, although he had been possessing this portion since May 15, 1957 by virtue of a private document of mortgage. (citations omitted)

...

In these cases, the court believes and so holds that the evidence of actual occupation and possession of the defendants of the portions of Lot 3603, to each of them appertaining had been satisfactorily proven. The defendants were not able to file any opposition to the reconstitution of title solely because they were not notified actually. They could not also be considered to have constructive notice because there was no publication of the Notice of Hearing of the petition.

From the evidence taken together by its totality of evidence tilts more in favor of the defendants and against the plaintiffs.[7]

Not satisfied with the decision, petitioners went to the CA which affirmed, in its Decision promulgated on April 19, 2000, the ruling of the RTC except as to the award of attorney's fees and expenses of litigation.[8] It then disposed of the appeal as follows:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the decision of the court a quo is hereby AFFIRMED, with the modification that the awards of attorney's fees and expenses of litigation to the defendants-appellants are hereby eliminated.

SO ORDERED.[9]

The CA found:

Looking at the evidence presented, the trial court considered the defendants-appellees as having proven the actual possession and validity of the possession of the lots in question. Against that, the plaintiffs-appellants put forward the TCT held by Teodulfo Sigaya, whose validity rests upon the ability of Francisco Abas to sell Lot 3603, which the TCT now covers, and that the sale to Teodulfo Sigaya was registered. Prior registration would protect an innocent purchaser in good faith and for value. But the plaintiffs-appellants cannot now claim the (sic) Teodulfo Sigaya was an innocent purchaser for value. The trial court gave more credence to the testimony of defendants-appellees and their witnesses that they had been in possession for a longer period of time, even before the sale to Teodulfo Sigaya in 1978. This issue of credibility requires a determination that is concededly best left to the trial court with its unique position of having been enabled to observe that elusive and incommunicable evidence of the deportment of witnesses on the stand. Findings of the trial court, following that assessment, must be given the highest degree of respect absent compelling reasons to conclude

otherwise. Teodolfo (sic) Sigaya examined the land in question, and did so as a reasonably prudent man buying real property should. As the defendants-appellees were in possession before him, he should have questioned such and delved deeper into the title and right of Francisco Abas to sell the lot. Not having done so, he is not an innocent purchaser in good faith, and not entitled to protection under the Torrens system.

It is clear that the title of Francisco Abas was obtained through fraud, thus further damaging the case of the plaintiffs-appellants, whose predecessor-in-interest should have probed beyond the title after examining the lot to be sold him. As held by the Supreme Court:

"xxx Having bought the land registered under the Torrens system from their vendors who procured title thereto by means of fraud, petitioners cannot invoke the indefeasibility of a certificate of title against the private respondent to the extent of her interest. The Torrens system of land registration should not be used as a means to perpetuate fraud against the rightful owner of real property. Registration to be effective, must be made in good faith. (Palanca vs. Registry of Lands, 43 Phil. 149 [1922]). Thus, it is a settled rule that the defense of indefeasibility of a certificate of title does not extend to a transferee who takes it with notice of the flaws in his transferor's title. If at all, the petitioners only acquire the right which their vendors then had. (Ramos et al. vs. Direno, et al., 50 Phil. 786 [1927]).

The plaintiffs-appellants' contentions as to their ownership of the lot in question must then fail in the face of the principles laid down in jurisprudence.[10]

Petitioners now come before this Court on a petition for review under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, raising the sole issue of: WHETHER A PERSON DEALING WITH A REGISTERED LAND CAN SAFELY RELY ON THE CORRECTNESS OF THE CERTIFICATE OF TITLE ISSUED THEREFOR.[11]

Petitioners argue that: Teodulfo, their predecessor-in-interest, purchased the subject property from Francisco, who was in possession of the Original Certificate of Title (OCT) No. RO-5841 (17205), a reconstituted copy of the original, in the name of Dionisia and of the Extra-Judicial Partition with Deed of Sale, dated November 2, 1972; relying on these instruments and after inspecting the land and seeing that nobody occupied the same, Teodulfo bought the land and had the title subsequently issued in his name; the fact that Teodulfo examined the lot does not give rise to the conclusion that he is not an innocent purchaser in good faith as adverted to by the CA; if indeed Abas committed fraud in acquiring said lot, Teodulfo is also a victim of misrepresentation; there was no evidence that Teodulfo and Francisco connived to defraud respondents; Teodulfo did not have actual knowledge of facts and circumstances that would impel him to make further inquiry; and as purchaser in good faith, Teodulfo enjoys the protection of the Torrens system.[12]

Respondents in their Comment meanwhile contend that: the petition failed to comply with the requirements of Rule 45 of the Rules of Court as respondents were not served a copy of the motion for extension of time; the issue in the present petition does not involve a question of law but entails only a review of the facts which cannot be done by this Court; in any case, Teodulfo relied on a title that is not in the name of his transferor, Francisco, but on its registered owner, Dionisia, who was already deceased at the time of the supposed sale to Teodulfo; since the right of the supposed transferor was not shown in the title but merely on a Deed of Extra-Judicial Settlement with Sale, which turned out irregular, it was incumbent upon Teodulfo to examine further the extent of the right of the supposed transferor and why there were a lot of occupants in the land in dispute; his failure to do so operates against his favor and those of his successors-in-interest.[13]

The parties filed their respective memoranda.

Petitioners, in their Memorandum, further aver that: Teodulfo is a purchaser in good faith having relied on OCT No. RO-5841 (17205) in the name of Dionisia and the Extra-Judicial Partition with Deed of Sale dated November 2, 1972 which shows that Francisco is the absolute owner of the lot; four years had elapsed from the date that the

OCT was reconstituted and the time Teodulfo bought the property from Francisco and yet none of the respondents had registered their right in the property; the Extra-Judicial Settlement of Lot 3603 of the Cadastral Survey of Dao, Capiz with Sale dated February 4, 1964, on which respondents base their claims, was never registered with the Registry of Deeds; not having been registered, this will not affect the right of third persons who had no knowledge thereof; there was no circumstance that would put Teodulfo on his guard and in cases of double sales of real property, the ownership shall be awarded to the vendee who first registers the sale in good faith; Teodulfo is a resident of Zarraga, Capiz which is more than 50 kilometers from Dao, Capiz, thus Teodulfo could not have actual knowledge of facts and circumstances that would impel him to make further inquiry; the land was merely pointed to him by Francisco and from what he had seen, there was nothing that would arouse his suspicion.[14]

Meanwhile, respondents, in their Memorandum, contend that they were in possession of the property before Teodulfo; that Teodulfo should have probed deeper into the right of Francisco to sell said lot, and not having done so, he cannot be considered as a purchaser in good faith; and that the issue of credibility requires a determination that is best left to the trial court with its unique position of being able to observe the elusive and incommunicable evidence of the deportment of witnesses on the stand.[15]

Petitioners claim that they are raising before this Court the legal issue of: Whether a person dealing with a registered land can safely rely on the correctness of the Certificate of Title issued therefor.[16]

Contrary to what petitioners would like this Court to believe, the resolution of the present petition hinges principally on the determination of a question of fact and not one of law.

Both parties concede that a purchaser in good faith can safely rely on the four corners of a Torrens Title. The disagreement lies, however, as to whether or not Teodulfo should be considered as a purchaser in good faith and thus enjoy the protection of the Torrens system. Indeed, this question is one of fact and not one of law. There is a question of fact when the doubt or difference arises as to the truth or the falsity of the statement of facts while a question of law exists when there is doubt or controversy as to what the law is on a certain state of facts.[17]

The determination of whether Teodulfo is a buyer in good faith is a factual issue which is generally outside the province of this Court to determine in a petition for review.[18] If for this matter alone, the petition should be dismissed because the remedy of appeal by certiorari under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court contemplates only questions of law.[19] Indeed, this Court is not a trier of facts,[20] and the factual findings of the CA are binding and conclusive upon this Court, unless:

- (1) the conclusion is a finding grounded entirely on speculation, surmise and conjecture; (2) the inference made is manifestly mistaken; (3) there is grave abuse of discretion; (4) the judgment is based on a misapprehension of facts; (5) the findings of fact are conflicting; (6) the Court of Appeals went beyond the issues of the case and its findings are contrary to the admissions of both appellant and appellees; (7) the findings of fact of the Court of Appeals are contrary to those of the trial court; (8) said findings of fact are conclusions without citation of specific evidence on which they are based; (9) the facts set forth in the petition as well as in the petitioner's main and reply briefs are not disputed by the respondents; and (10) the findings of fact of the Court of Appeals are premised on the supposed absence of evidence and contradicted by the evidence on record.[21]

The binding effect of the CA's factual findings on this Court applies with greater force when both the trial court and the CA are in complete agreement on their factual findings.[22] It is also settled that absent any circumstance requiring the overturning of the factual conclusion made by the trial court, particularly if affirmed by the CA, the Court necessarily upholds such findings of fact.[23]

In this case, petitioners failed to show that they fall under any of the exceptional circumstances.

In reaching its conclusion, the trial court gave weight to the testimonies of Engineer Jesus Pimentel, a geodetic engineer commissioned by the court to conduct a survey of the land, who found that respondents acquired their respective lots through sale or inheritance;[24] of Rolly Daniel, a barangay official who lived 50 meters from said lot, who said that respondents had been in possession of their respective lots even before 1960 and that Teodulfo and Francisco asked him to accompany them sometime between 1976 to 1978 as they went to the different houses of respondents because Teodulfo was going to buy Francisco's share;[25] of Ursula Abas, wife of Francisco, who said that Francisco committed suicide after it was discovered that he fraudulently sold the portion belonging to his aunts to Teodulfo by making them sign a prepared document on the pretext that they were only signing as witnesses to the sale of his share, when in fact said document also sold their aunts' shares;[26] as well as the testimonies of Prudencio Fuentes, son of Jacinto and brother-in-law of respondent Renato Distor; Lourdes Distor, wife of Renato; Florentina Mayuga, mother of Diomer; and respondents Renato Distor, Honorato de los Santos, Rosela Dela Cruz-Viva who asserted that they have been in possession of said lots before the purported sale to Teodulfo.[27]

Petitioners, meanwhile, could only present Fely Sigaya and Cesar de los Santos. Fely testified that: the land was acquired by her father from Francisco by virtue of a Deed of Sale dated January 9, 1978 and that Francisco became the owner of the property by virtue of an Extra-Judicial Partition with Deed of Sale; when her father bought the property, he showed the documents to a lawyer who said that the same were in order; when her father visited the property, he found no occupants thereat; her father also filed a petition in 1974 for reconstitution of title of Lot 3603 thus a reconstituted title was issued in the name of Dionisia Alorsabes.[28] Cesar, petitioners' caretaker meanwhile, merely corroborated Fely's testimony.[29]

This Court has held that the burden of proving the status of a purchaser in good faith lies upon one who asserts that status and this onus probandi cannot be discharged by mere invocation of the legal presumption of good faith.[30]

In this case, the Court finds that petitioners have failed to discharge such burden.

A purchaser in good faith is one who buys property without notice that some other person has a right to or interest in such property and pays its fair price before he has notice of the adverse claims and interest of another person in the same property. The honesty of intention which constitutes good faith implies a freedom from knowledge of circumstances which ought to put a person on inquiry.[31] As enunciated in *Lim vs. Chuatoco*[32]

... good faith consists in the possessor's belief that the person from whom he received the thing was the owner of the same and could convey his title. Good faith, while it is always to be presumed in the absence of proof to the contrary, requires a well founded belief that the person from whom title was received was himself the owner of the land, with the right to convey it. There is good faith where there is an honest intention to abstain from taking any unconscientious advantage from another. Otherwise stated, good faith is the opposite of fraud and it refers to the state of mind which is manifested by the acts of the individual concerned.[33]

Indeed, it is a well-settled rule that every person dealing with registered land may safely rely on the correctness of the certificate of title issued therefor and the law will in no way oblige him to go beyond the certificate to determine the condition of the property. Where there is nothing in the certificate of title to indicate any cloud or vice in the ownership of the property, or any encumbrance thereon, the purchaser is not required to explore further than what the Torrens Title upon its face indicates in quest for any hidden defects or inchoate right that may subsequently defeat his right thereto.[34]

However, this rule shall not apply when the party has actual knowledge of facts and circumstances that would impel a reasonably cautious man to make such inquiry or when the purchaser has knowledge of a defect or the

lack of title in his vendor or of sufficient facts to induce a reasonably prudent man to inquire into the status of the title of the property in litigation.[35]

In this case, preponderance of evidence shows that respondents had been in actual possession of their respective portions even prior to 1960. Rolly Daniel, which the trial court considered as a credible witness, testified that not only were respondents in actual possession of their respective portions prior to 1960, he even accompanied Francisco and Teodulfo to the different houses of respondents sometime between 1976 to 1978 as Teodulfo was going to buy the portion of Francisco.[36] This Court cannot give credence therefore to the claim of petitioners that Teodulfo found no occupants in the property.

There being occupants of the property, the Court cannot ascribe good faith to Teodulfo who has not shown any diligence in protecting his rights.

As the Court has stated:

A purchaser cannot simply close his eyes to facts which should put a reasonable man on his guard and then claim that he acted in good faith under the belief that there was no defect in the title of his vendor. His mere refusal to believe that such defect exists or his willful closing of his eyes to the possibility of the existence of a defect in his vendor's title will not make him an innocent purchaser for value if it later develops that the title was in fact defective, and it appears that he would have notice of the defect had he acted with that measure of precaution which may reasonably be required of a prudent man in a similar situation.[37] (Emphasis supplied)

Petitioners also argue that the rule on double sale of real property should apply in this case, and since they are the first to register the sale in good faith, they are entitled to be awarded ownership thereof.

The Court disagrees. Apart from the fact that Teodulfo is not a purchaser in good faith, the law on double sales as provided in Art. 1544 of the Civil Code[38] contemplates a situation where a single vendor sold one and the same immovable property to two or more buyers. For the rule to apply, it is necessary that the conveyance must have been made by a party who has an existing right in the thing and the power to dispose it. The rule cannot be invoked where the two different contracts of sale are made by two different persons, one of them not being the owner of the property sold.[39] In this case, respondents derive their right over their respective portions either through inheritance or sale from Dionisia while petitioners' invoke their right from the sale of the land from Francisco. Clearly, the law on double sales does not apply here.

WHEREFORE, the petition is DENIED for lack of merit and the decision of the Court of Appeals is AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, (Chairman), Callejo, Sr., Tinga, and Chico-Nazario, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 34-35; Records, p. 194.

[2] Also known as Honorato Destor/Distor, Rollo, p. 63.

[3] Id., pp. 31-34.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Rollo, pp. 76-79.

[7] Rollo, pp. 75-76.

- [8] Id., pp. 30-42, penned by Justice Presbitero J. Velasco, Jr. (now Court Administrator), concurred in by Presiding Justice Salome A. Montoya (now retired) and Justice Bernardo Ll. Salas (now retired).
- [9] Id., p. 42.
- [10] Rollo, pp. 40-41.
- [11] Id., p. 21.
- [12] Rollo, pp. 21-24.
- [13] Id., pp. 91-93.
- [14] Id., pp. 110-117.
- [15] Id., pp. 124-126.
- [16] Id., p. 21.
- [17] Potenciano vs. Reynoso, G.R. No. 140707, April 22, 2003, 401 SCRA 391, 397.
- [18] Orquiola vs. CA, G.R. No. 141463, August 6, 2002, 386 SCRA 301, 309; Sps. Uy vs. CA, G.R. No. 109197, June 21, 2001, 359 SCRA 262.
- [19] Potenciano vs. Reynoso, supra; Sps. Alfredo vs. Sps. Borrás, G.R. No. 144225, June 17, 2003, 404 SCRA 145, 156.
- [20] Baricuato vs. CA, G.R. No. 105902, February 9, 2000, 325 SCRA 137, 145.
- [21] Id., pp. 145-146.
- [22] Sps. Alfredo vs. Sps. Borrás, supra, p. 157.
- [23] Sandoval vs. CA, G.R. No. 106657, August 1, 1996, 260 SCRA 283, 299.
- [24] Rollo, pp. 66-67.
- [25] Id., pp. 68-69.
- [26] Id., pp. 64-66.
- [27] Id., pp. 63-72.
- [28] Id., pp. 62-63, 72.
- [29] Id., p. 63.
- [30] Potenciano vs. Reynoso, supra, p. 401; Uy vs. CA, supra, p. 271.
- [31] Sps. Occeña vs. Esponilla, G.R. No. 156973, June 4, 2004, 431 SCRA 116, 124.
- [32] G.R. No. 161861, March 11, 2005.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Sps. Lim vs. Chuatoco, supra.
- [35] Sps. Occeña vs. Esponilla, supra.
- [36] RTC Decision, Rollo, p. 68.

[37] Sps. Occeña vs. Esponilla, *supra*.

[38] Art. 1544. If the same thing should have been sold to different vendees, the ownership shall be transferred to the person who may have first taken possession thereof in good faith, if it should be movable property.

Should it be immovable property, the ownership shall belong to the person acquiring it who in good faith first recorded it in the Registry of Property.

Should there be no inscription, the ownership shall pertain to the person who in good faith was first in possession; and, in the absence thereof, to the person who presents in the oldest title, provided there is good faith.

[39] Consolidated Rural Bank vs. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 132161, January 17, 2005.

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