



## **Mrs. Jordan's Profession: The Actress and the Prince**

*Claire Tomalin*

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In a brilliant piece of detective work, Tomalin--whose book about Nelly Ternan, Charles Dickens's secret mistress, won prizes as the best biography of 1991--has retrieved Dora, her story and her world, from the obscurity of lost letters and unexamined documents. As social history, the tale is irresistible; as a love story with a painful and brutal ending, it is unforgettable.

## **Mrs. Jordan's Profession: The Actress and the Prince Details**

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## From Reader Review Mrs. Jordan's Profession: The Actress and the Prince for online ebook

### BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Typical Tomalin

Dry rote

By the last few chapters I was ready for the book to end

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### Jack Bates says

I love Claire Tomalin - best living biographer? and this is a good one.

Mrs Jordan has appeared as a bit-part player in lots of other stuff I've read, and it was fascinating to learn more about an extraordinary woman. If you're interested in the history of the theatre, women's roles in society, the way George III screwed up all his children's relationships... the power of satire and the changing (or not changing) way the media deals with people who don't fit the current definition of 'moral behaviour' this is a cracker.

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### Girl with her Head in a Book says

For my full review: <http://girlwithherheadinabook.co.uk/2...>

I finished this book on the bus on my way home from work, then sat quietly for a few minutes in reflection, got off at my stop, walked up to the house, got in the door, then turned to my significant other and said, "I am so disappointed in William IV right now." Despite him being one of our lesser-celebrated monarchs - and I have always known that he had precious little political achievements which one could celebrate - I had always kind of liked him. I knew that he was not a clever man, or a practical one, or even tactful - in fact, I knew he had few talents but I had always thought he was 'nice'. As a child, I picked up from my reading somewhere - possibly Horrible Histories but more likely Plantagenet Somerset Fry - that he had hated Queen Victoria's mother so much that he had been determined to thwart her chances of being appointed Regent by not dying while Victoria was a minor. When he did finally succumb to one of his many ailments, Victoria was eighteen years and three weeks old. That is some serious will power. What I had not quite realised though was quite how cold-bloodedly selfish and cruel he had been in his domestic conduct and it was that which aroused my disgust. I was completely wrong about him. The man was a louse and the woman he betrayed was one of the most truly remarkable figures of her age.

Dorothy Jordan styled herself as Mrs Jordan for most of her life, but as certain parties pointed out after her death, not only was she never officially married, there was never any Mr Jordan figure in her life at all. She was born Dora Bland, but even that name was only held on a technicality since her parents had not gotten round to getting married. Both working in the theatre, Dora's parents had fled respectable homes for a life around the stage but when Dora was around thirteen, her father repented of his wicked life and abandoned his common law wife and the nine children she had borne him to go and marry someone officially. Contact afterwards was sporadic at best and suddenly Dora was the main wage-earner. This was a pattern that would

repeat itself throughout her life.

Claire Tomalin clearly developed a very warm feeling towards her subject but it is not hard to see why. Through her letters, Dora does come across as an intelligent and witty woman - circumstances prevented her from being a lady, meaning that she had to be surprisingly modern in her outlook. Throughout her life, no matter the peaks or troughs of her personal fortunes, Mrs Jordan was forever having to bail her siblings, offspring and finally and most disastrously sons-in-law out financially and no matter how difficult she found it, she always did her best to help them out. She was generous to all, hugely talented and ambitious for her own career, celebrated as the finest comic actress of her generation, acclaimed as having the best legs to ever grace a stage - it feels incredibly unjust that she is best known for being the Duke of Clarence's discarded mistress.

While still a teenager, Dora was seduced by her married theatre manager and left pregnant. Fleeing to England, she was able via contacts to get a job with a northern theatre company but due to her visible pregnancy, was advised to style herself as Mrs, and her theatre manager suggested the name 'Jordan' since Dora had crossed water to arrive in England. This would later cause her trouble since the word was also synonymous with chamber pot. In the company of her mother and dragging her siblings along with her (none of the younger Broads ever seemed to master the art of earning their own living), Dora climbed the theatrical ladder and tried to do the best for her young daughter Fanny. She even managed to garner a few shreds of respectability, since it was observed that although there was no Mr Jordan, there was no obvious sign of a lover either - Mrs Jordan was an honest woman trying to earn a living.

All this changed though when she met Richard Ford, a police magistrate who promised to marry her once his father gave consent. The two settled into a domestic arrangement which produced three children, although the middle child, Dora's first son, seems to have died shortly after birth. The years passed though with no wedding and as Dora's fame grew, she caught the eye of the Duke of Clarence. Growing frustrated with Ford and recognising that he was not going to commit, she seems to have given him an ultimatum - either he propose, or she would leave him for the prince. Tomalin hastens to Dora's defence here, worrying lest the reader think her mercenary or that she did not love either of the men in question. More than anything though, Dora comes across as a practical woman who realised that she had to look out for her own best interests and those of her children because nobody else was going to do so.

Dora Jordan was mistress to the Duke of Clarence for nigh on two decades. She bore him ten children. She wrote him letters full of warmth and affection, which Tomalin quotes extensively. The writer and diarist Fanny Burney recalls a friend's embarrassment on being introduced to Mrs Jordan and taking her to be the duke's wife and thus being mortified afterwards at having given precedence to a kept woman. Of course, Dora was never really kept - she continued to work, often bailing the duke out of his debts, although over time he grew insecure about her fame and demanded that she stop performing in London. She was no Alice Perrers. Even King George III, generally so despairing of his sons' inability to form conventional marriages, funded Clarence's purchase of Bushey, appearing to recognise that one decent mistress was better than a troublesome wife - Caroline of Brunswick caused more bother than Dora ever did.

It was so easy to see the warmth of the Bushey home - William wrote fretful notes of how Dora had been 'complaining' for several hours in her labour for their latest infant, when his brothers might suggest that he marry someone rich, he solemnly responded that he was quite content with Mrs Jordan. As pseudo-duchess, Dora seems to have set up a local school and been heavily involved in local charity work, having firsthand experience of poverty. The Prince of Wales and his brothers visited their home and afforded Dora ever precedence as hostess. Yet still, the cracks were always there. Every so often, bishops would be dispatched to Bushey to remonstrate with Clarence on his way of life. And Clarence's mother and sisters were never able

to speak to Dora - they could only watch her performing on stage from the Royal box. I was really caught by this image - of how this little cluster of unhappy spinsters must have looked down on the mother of their nieces and nephews, the woman who had helped their awkward brother find contentment and thought - what? Did they hope to meet her? Did they believe her to be a fallen woman? Given that Princess Sophia herself had a child out of wedlock and that they all longed for liberty, could they have truly condemned her, their almost-sister-in-law?

The tragedy while reading this though is the knowledge that all this contentment, the affectionate letters, the love of these two people, it all has to come to an end. I had always harboured the impression that William parted ways from Dora following the death of Princess Charlotte, when pressure intensified to produce a legitimate heir. I was wrong. It was several years before. Earlier biographers excused him tiring of Dora, claiming that she had gotten fat (she had borne ten of his children and he was none so slim himself) and wheezy. Tomalin is far more critical, her indignation simmers from the page. Eldest daughter Sophia seems to have realised quickly which side her bread was buttered on, but second son Henry wrote a heartbreakingly honest letter to his elder brother, catching the pain of a child realising that his family is disintegrating and proclaiming his mother 'a most injured woman'. He never seems to have quite forgiven his father and died young. William set about courting younger women, but without success - he was old, fat and had no money. Who would ever have loved him but Dora?

It is not just the cruelty of Clarence though but also that of those around him - whenever he was disposed to be clement, they urged him to be harsh. It was advisers who stated that Dora could not retain custody of her daughters by Clarence and continue her stage career. It was they who lowered the age at which the children should move to their father. When problems around the settlement arose, Dora wrote to the Prince of Wales, who had always appeared her friend. He thought it a very inappropriate move and refused to respond. The petty dishonesty of this, the lack of common decency in terms of interactions, it is that which turns the stomach. There was nobody to speak for Dora, to stand up for what was right - she was a discarded mistress and given her fame, she was a nuisance in her refusal to fade into the background. Rumours spread that Mrs Jordan planned to publish Clarence's letters to her - Princess Charlotte thought it would have served him right - but Dora returned them for fear that the gossip would injure the children in his eyes. Indeed, the parable of King Solomon and the mothers comes to mind - Dora wanted to keep her daughters with her, but she seems to have recognised that the best path for their lives lay with what their father's family could offer and, having heard disturbing reports that Clarence was being urged to disown his daughters, she gave up custody. As Tomalin points out, this decision served her girls well, as they all made good marriages but it was devastating for their mother.

It is hard not to have contempt for William in his behaviour towards the woman who had essentially been his wife for twenty years. After they parted, he went about gathering up every image of her he could find - he could revere the portrait as he was never able to do for the flesh and blood woman. Unable to attract a wife, he lived on in Bushey, still burdened by debt. Tomalin refers to this 'Micawber-like' existence, surrounded by his children and all of them longing for a note from Dora, which tended to include a pound note from her theatrical wages, meaning that food could be put on the table. Yet for all his disastrous decision-making, William was not the only villain of this particular piece. Dora had long been plagued by her daughter Fanny's poor behaviour, and then that of Fanny's husband. Her second daughter's husband appeared a more pleasant fellow and in one of her customary feats of generosity, she allowed him access to her bank accounts. This was fatal - he bankrupted her. While he could sit comfortably, with none of the debt in his name, Dora was forced to flee to France to escape his creditors. Nobody offered to help. Death came quickly and, one would suspect, was welcomed. Her rise had been meteoric, but her fall had been equally so.

In death, William could love Dora again. Once he was King, he commissioned a statue of her, which

subsequently had a long and chequered history, with nobody willing to take responsibility for it. He married Adelaide who proved an adept stepmother, but still kept all his Dora portraits and commented on her worthiness to observers. His children were given titles after he acceded to the throne and the eldest George seems to have hoped that he might manoeuvre his way to the throne, finally committing suicide in middle age. Dora herself faded, becoming a paragraph in a biography - Victorians acknowledged that William IV had once lived with an actress but proclaimed that the less said about it, the better. My King and Queens book kept everything to a four line maximum - I knew her name and nothing else and dimly put her on a par with Mrs Fitzherbert, when in fact Dora came far closer to acting as a wife than the former ever did.

This was a book that made me so sad - like Tomalin, I really took to Dora. Her letters make her seem very approachable, she had experiences and understanding of all walks of life, formidable intelligence and an incredible work ethic. She got to the top of her profession through hard graft and perseverance but also through a determination to do right by those who depended upon her - her tragedy was that she never seems to have truly had anyone in her life that she could rely on. I have read biographies of Dora's contemporaries - Emma Hamilton, Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire, Princess Charlotte, but I have never liked any of the subjects as much as I liked Dora. I can well imagine why Clarence fell in love with her - he seems to have been the best possible version of himself while he was her partner but he could not live up to his commitment - certainly not to her and clearly she did not trust him to do so for their children. What came across forcefully within Mrs Jordan's Profession was that George III's sons were a group of spoilt and immature children who could only stick with something while it suited them and that they were content to abandon their toys the second they stopped being amusing, and that they could do so without guilt. By virtue of being royal, they lost their consciences.

Mrs Jordan's Profession may have lost me a 'king I quite liked', but it has given me a new heroine - Dorothy Bland. Tomalin makes her here so much more than the scandalous woman who acted as companion to a king - we see Dora for the remarkable person she truly was, a woman ahead of her time, someone of magnificent heart and passionately loyal to those she cared about. If fate had been kinder, she could have been a truly spectacular queen. One could argue, and William IV most certainly did, that the final author of Dora's downfall was her son-in-law, but William did not lift a finger to assist her in her distress. I think of John of Gaunt, forced to part from Katherine Swynford due to the pressure of public opinion and in a far more brutal age, but he still managed to act with honour and dignity and he made sure that it was known what would happen to those who injured the mother of his children - she was no longer kept but she had not lost his protection. The history of Mrs Jordan does not paint the male race or indeed the monarchy as a whole in a good light - I finished it feeling genuinely teary and full of sadness for this tough woman who was trampled by those who may have been her social betters but who were certainly her inferiors in every other respect.

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## **John says**

I've needed time to think about this one..and I'm in danger of running out of superlatives.

Dora Jordan was an immense super star in her day, deservedly so. Hugely talented as a comic actress with an immense range of roles from Shakespeare to slapstick (18/19 century equivalent). Astutely aware of her wide ranging public, musically talented and commercially shrewd she was also a very decent human being. Her stamina was super human, touring widely, often with a newish born baby in tow (13 survived and she miscarried at least twice). A working mother and a very good one as Claire Tomalin shows, particularly in her wide use of Dora's correspondence (she was a prolific letter writer). She bore 10 children to her royal

lover, the future William IV and in many ways it seems to have been a love match. Even after she was "dumped" and had restricted access to her "royal" children she remained loyal to Wm and encouraged the children to be so too (it was in their best interests, admittedly).

Dora was a victim of a morally bankrupt Establishment but this was almost 200 years before Diana Princess of Wales who played by a very different set of rules.

Claire Tomalin has tears in her eyes at times when writing this but the book is none the worse for that. I thoroughly recommend it.

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### **JFN says**

I had no plans to read this book. In fact, I didn't know it existed until Claire Tomalin's name jumped out at me from a shelf in the excellent used bookstore in my neighborhood, Dove & Hudson Books. I've read two other works by Tomalin -- her biographies of Jane Austen and Samuel Pepys -- so I snatched this one up to squirrel it away for another day, after I knocked a few other books off my growing to-read list. I had no particular interest in Dora Jordan or the London stage during the Regency Era, but because I'm interested in other aspects of the time and because Tomalin has proven herself such a fantastic writer, I figured the book was worth the 5 bucks and precious shelf space it would occupy at home. I was right.

When I got home I cracked the book to read the first page, and that was it. I was in, no waiting to get to other books. This is, like Tomalin's others, a beautifully written book. Full of detail, but effortless to read. Pure enjoyment. Dora Jordan is a fascinating subject; the book provides a singular perspective of the Regency period and the super fucked up dynamic of the royal family and social expectations and conventions.

I'd read anything Tomalin writes. Gimme her grocery list. I'll take it.

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### **Dorothy says**

Just loved this book!!

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### **Pam Lindholm-levy says**

Someone needs to make a movie about this remarkable British actress. In her prime she was as popular as any rock star is today. She had lots of children, so we're grateful the term baby bump hadn't yet been foisted on the world.

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### **Sara G says**

Mrs. Dora Jordan is one of those fascinating historical figures. Her life is almost anachronistic, but not quite - she managed to break the rules in many ways, although they got her in the end. I read Jean Plaidy's excellent HF novel about Dora and the Duke of Clarence earlier this year, Goddess of the Green Room, and

it made me want to learn more.

Dora was widely considered to be one of the greatest actors of her generation, managed to raise 13 children to adulthood, and balanced all of this while being the main breadwinner and dealing with social drama (mistress of a royal duke!) and her unemployed domestic partner. I ended the book feeling rather sad for her. She was a goodhearted soul from beginning to end, but so many people failed her, especially the men in her life. The historical sources used in this biography are fascinating in and of themselves, too. The author shares many portraits of Dora at the end, and they're remarkable.

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### **Ruth says**

The author said she did not have much information to draw upon to write this book. Possible because many around her burnt her letters.

She spent many years as consort to the Duke of Clarence, a title the king bestowed upon his childish and silly 4th (?) son. Neither the child nor the man appeared to have any talents. He WAS, however besotted with Mrs. Jordon, who by all accounts, was an excellent actress. Why the feeling was reciprocated is a mystery to me. And why Mrs. Jordan bore ten of his children is another mystery. Mrs. Jordan was in France often and should have picked up some tricks as to how to forego pregnancy.

It is clear that both parents were lovers of children, but I can't get past the idea that Mrs. Jordan especially with the noble circles she ran in, could not have learned something. I can only conclude that she wanted to have all these children, and it is maybe unfair to judge her by the standards of today.

But here's another thing: it should have been clear that women were routinely dumped by their noble benefactors, leaving them with barely a crust of bread. It seemed to me that Mrs. Jordan routinely turned a blind eye to the future. This makes me scorn her a bit. She ignores reality left and right. And eventually (it says so in the book jacket) she is left penurious to die alone.

I never felt I got to know this character or why she behaved as she did. Coming from a poor background, you would think she would be even more alert as to what happens to good actresses who stray from the rules of the time.

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### **Patricia says**

This is a biography of Dora Jordan, 'mistress' of William Duke of Clarence before he became King William the Fourth. Today she would be called his wife. She was the leading comic actress of the day but this was no stage door affair. They set up house and had ten children together. And she was the main provider. The Duke of Clarence was one of King George the Third's improvident younger sons and Mrs Jordan's hard work both on stage and as a theatre impresario paid his gambling bills and constant debts. She was a steady influence on him as well as keeping him solvent. She was loving and generous but his family refused to meet her or acknowledge her.

When it appeared that he was to be next in line to the throne he was pressured to abandon her. This he did and he married a minor European Royal person who became Queen Adelaide to his King William. Queen Adelaide had the grace to arrange for the acceptance of the children of Dora and William by the Royal family but Dora herself moved to France to avoid embarrassing William and she died there in poverty after only a few months. Shabby treatment for a decent person.

Dora Jordan was a famous and respectable comic actress and was adored by her public. She was a loyal and loving common law wife to a man who was not able to match her in loyalty and dignity.

This is a lovely insight into so much of the late 18thC and early 19thC . I enjoyed the world of theatre and travelling players as well.

One of the enduring images for me is of the cartoon by Gillray published in 1797 of The Duke and Mrs Jordan walking in the park. Mrs Jordan is walking apart and studying a script and the Duke in the foreground has a doll hanging out of his pocket and is pulling a pram with three of their children in it. It was a satirical poke at the Duke and what was considered his irregular lifestyle but I found it quite a touching domestic scene and an acknowledgment of Mrs Jordan's professional life.

I found this book on a stall at a country market, that is completely accidentally, and I can't stress enough how much pleasure it gave me and what a revelation it was. I followed it up with *Princesses: The Six Daughters of George the Third* by Flora Fraser. Another wonderful read and an insight into the family of George Duke of Clarence.

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### **Sarah Wagner says**

Dora Jordan's story is a surprisingly modern one for a woman whose life straddled the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. The child of broken family, she became a successful actress and never married, despite having children with three different men. She is most well-known for her last lover, a royal prince who later became King William IV. This biography does a good job of presenting what is known about Dora Jordan and offering educated speculation for the gaps in her life. The most frustrating part is unpacking the motivation of William when he left Dora after twenty years, but some things might never be known about this relationship. Overall, this was a great read, even if I was saddened by Dora's eventual fate.

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### **Gill says**

Excellent! A fascinating glimpse into the theatre and royal family in the reign of George III; not forgetting the unusual FitzClarence family. Well written and very readable - prepare to be charmed by, and for the sad demise, of an icon of her age.

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### **Lucie says**

Another well-written gem by the talented biographer Claire Tomalin. Though MRS. JORDAN has a tad more personal interjection by the author than needed in a biography, it is easily forgiven. Tomalin started out with a massive study of actresses during Jordan's time period before refocusing on solely the life & times of Mrs. Jordan. Tomalin's passion for Jordan's life & the common issues of the time bubbles over into personal conjecture; in a lesser biographer's hand this would be cloying & overbearing, but luckily it is infrequent & thankfully bearable. All in all an entertaining, inspiring & fascinating read about a fascinating woman that could have easily been lost in the annals of history.

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## Rachel Knowles says

Claire Tomalin's biography of the great Georgian comic actress Mrs Jordan is both readable and comprehensive. It tells of her rise to fame on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and how she became the longstanding mistress of the Duke of Clarence, the future William IV.

I was particularly struck by the number of men in Dora's life who let her down: her father, who abandoned her mother to marry an heiress; her first theatre manager, Richard Daly, who seduced her and made her pregnant; her lover Richard Ford, who did not care enough for her to marry her and prevent her from becoming the Duke of Clarence's mistress; the Duke of Clarence, who, after living with her happily for years, abandoned her so he could make an advantageous marriage; and finally, John Barton, one of the Duke's advisors, who failed to sort out her debts, leaving her to die in poverty abroad, away from her beloved children.

One of the things that I learned from this book was just how uncertain Dora's position in society was. Although she was famous in her own right as an actress, her relationship with the Duke closed doors to her that were open to her contemporary, Mrs Siddons. Dora had ten children with the Duke; the children went into society with their father, but she was not invited.

Despite his royal position, I believe that the Duke was the gainer in the relationship. As Tomalin explains, Dora preached good sense to the Duke and supported him with her earnings rather than the other way round. I found Dora's abandonment by the Duke quite heartless and his attempt to appease his conscience by commissioning an elaborate memorial to her when he became King rather pathetic.

My favourite anecdote in the book—which I had not heard before—was the story of how Mrs Jordan acquired her stage name. After escaping from her Irish stage manager, Daly, Dora started to work for Tate Wilkinson's Yorkshire company. As she was pregnant, it was imperative that she was billed as 'Mrs'—but Mrs what? Wilkinson made a biblical allusion, comparing Dora's crossing of the Irish Sea to safety with his company to the Israelites crossing the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Dora liked the illusion and so the famous Mrs Jordan was born.

I borrowed this book from the library, but I would be happy to add it to my bookshelves as a detailed account of the life of an important figure in late Georgian England.

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## Caroline says

Mistresses are practically as established a tradition in the Royal Family as Trooping the Colour or the Opening of Parliament. From Rosamund Clifford to Jane Shore, Nell Gwynn to Alice Keppell, there has been a long list of them, and Dora Jordan fits comfortably into that list. Like many of them too, she was discarded when her royal paramour tired of her, swept under the rug and effectively whitewashed from history. One previous historian dismissed the Duke of Clarence's, later King William IV, relationship with Dora as 'a connection with a well-known actress' and left it at that.

But such a dismissal does a grave disservice to both Dora and her relationship with Clarence. It wasn't a brief affair or a fling, a casual relationship that served both parties and flickered out of its own accord. Dora and the Duke of Clarence were married in all but name, living together for twenty years and producing ten children together. They were devoted to one another, and the Duke was an attentive and loving father to his own brood and a kind stepfather to Dora's earlier children. Dora did not rely on the Duke financially - indeed, her successful career on the stage and his tendency to accumulate debt meant that more often than not she was the one supporting the family. Her presence was grudgingly accepted by the Royal Family and whilst she herself was never acknowledged by the King and Queen, her children eventually were.

The story of Dora Jordan is a truly remarkable one, rising from poverty and deprivation to the position of acclaimed actress and royal mistress, bearing grandchild and children to kings. She fought her way up on her own merits and abilities, taking control of her own career and proving herself a shrewd manager. In Claire Tomalin's wonderful book, she comes across as an immensely likeable and sympathetic character, and I ended these pages enraged at the way she was treated at the end of her life.

This is the best kind of biography, bringing a long-lost and forgotten personality back to life, giving her a chance to shine on a public stage once again. I have thoroughly enjoyed every one of Tomalin's biographies and she has rapidly become one of my favourite authors, a writer whose every new work I look forward to immensely. I cannot rate this highly enough.

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