IN SEARCH OF THAT WHICH WAS LOST:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF W.L. WILMSHURST ON THE ESSENCE OF THE CRAFT

Jeffrey P. Modzelewski

Member, Texas Lodge of Research
Past Master, Harmony Lodge No. 6 (Texas)
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The typical man who petitions for admission into Freemasonry does so for a variety of reasons but with little or no detailed concept of the essence of the Craft.

“Essence,” as defined by *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, is “… the inward nature of anything, underlying its manifestations; true substance…,”¹ and the fact that the average petitioner is not cognizant of the Craft’s “true substance” is, perhaps, not surprising.
It is a fact, of course, that Masonry has been the focus of numerous exposés, both accurate and not, throughout its history. Many non-Masons have, in recent years, even viewed its degree rituals broadcast on television.

Most frequently, however, such publicity has concentrated on what the dictionary definition cited above terms “manifestations” – the external forms and ceremonies of the brotherhood – rather than its “inward nature,” because it is the mystique and exotica of the former that are most alluring to the profane. But the renown of the organization’s secretiveness did not arise without reason, and, given this characteristic, one should not wonder that most prospective candidates are ignorant of the true purpose for which the Fraternity exists.

What may indeed be surprising, however, is that the majority of long-time Masons are likewise unable to articulate an opinion on the essence of the Order. We hear and echo discrete catchphrases such as: “Masonry proclaims the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God”; “Masonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols”; and “The principal tenets of Freemasonry are brotherly love, relief and truth.” We may sense – and if so, we believe implicitly – that Freemasonry was developed for a great purpose, one that is pure and of great import, but we find ourselves at a loss for words to describe this purpose in an integrated, comprehensive fashion.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, English Freemason Walter Leslie Wilmshurst wrote of this matter thusly:

The meaning of Masonry… is a subject usually left entirely unexpounded and that accordingly remains largely unrealized by its members save such few as make it their private study…. It seems taken for granted that reception into the Order will automatically be accompanied by an ability to appreciate forthwith and at its full value all that one there finds. The contrary is the case.²
Wilmshurst continues, “Even after his [a candidate’s] admission he usually remains quite at a loss to explain satisfactorily what Masonry is and for what purpose his Order exists.”\textsuperscript{3}

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst was born 22 June 1867 in Chichester, Sussex, seventy miles from London on the southern coast of England. He began his Masonic journey in 1889, and for the next half-century he labored effectively in the quarries, holding stations in local, provincial and national lodges, presenting Masonic lectures, and contributing erudite writings to the body of Craft literature.

Wilmshurst was first drawn to Masonry at about age seven, when his interest was attracted by the Masonic paraphernalia exhibited in the window of a shop which he passed on his way to and from school. A good student, he participated as well in extracurricular activities, including theater, debate, and oratory. It was determined that law would be his profession, and when Wilmshurst was fifteen he was apprenticed to a solicitor in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, in north-central England.\textsuperscript{4}

On 11 December 1889 Wilmshurst was initiated in Huddersfield Lodge No. 290; he was there made a Master Mason less than two months afterward, on 5 February 1890. Subsequent Masonic memberships included those in Lodge of Harmony No. 275, Royal Arch Chapter of Prosperity No. 290, and Lodge of Living Stones No. 4957. Wilmshurst occupied officer positions in at least three of these four aforementioned lodges. He also served the Province of West Yorkshire as its Provincial Grand Registrar in 1913 and Past Provincial Senior Grand Warden in 1926, and the United Grand Lodge of England as its Past Assistant Grand Director of Ceremonies in 1929.\textsuperscript{5}

Wilmshurst married Emma Hanson in 1892, and their union produced two offspring, daughter Hilda Mary in 1894 and son Thomas Leslie in 1899.\textsuperscript{6}
In addition to family, career, and Freemasonry, Wilmshurst devoted himself to other interests, and prominent among these were the intangible matters of the mind and the soul. It was said that “Wilmshurst was first and foremost a mystic [“… one who professes… to comprehend intuitively truths beyond human understanding”7] and deeply concerned with spiritual matters.”8

Included in this spiritual arena of interests was the study of the occult, a word derived from the Latin *occultus*, meaning “concealed.”9 However,

When he talked of ‘the occult’ he meant none of the connotations that have now become associated with the word. He merely meant that which is hidden from ordinary perception by our five commonly recognised [sic] senses.10

One personal characteristic that greatly facilitated Wilmshurst’s contributions to Masonry was a marked talent for writing. It was noted that “He was a great master of the written word…. He was very particular about the act of writing…. He chose his words carefully….“11

And so it was that an active intellect, combined with this talent for narrative, resulted in the production by the prolific Wilmshurst of a substantial body of written work:

- In the period 1894 through 1908 he presented ten papers to the Huddersfield Union Discussion Society,12 an organization founded in 1864 to debate topics in a variety of fields such as art, politics, science, and philosophy.

- From 1905 through 1914, some twenty of his book reviews, letters and papers – the latter including one titled “The Mystical Basis of Masonry” – were published in the *Occult Review*,13 an illustrated monthly concerned with supernormal phenomena. The *Occult Review* was in existence for approximately the first half of the twentieth century, and its contributors included well-known occultists and authors of the day such as Algernon
From 1906 through 1920, Wilmshurst published more than twenty papers and 125 book reviews in *The Seeker*, a quarterly magazine of Christian mysticism of which he eventually assumed editorship.

During the period 1925 through 1939, the Masonic Study Society published four of Wilmshurst’s papers in its *Transactions*, including one titled “The Fundamental Philosophical Secrets Within Masonry.”

He presented more than twenty private papers to the Lodge of Living Stones 4957.

And, finally, Walter Leslie Wilmshurst published nearly twenty books, most dealing with Freemasonry or mysticism but some with drama, music, and poetry. Among those concerned with the Craft are *History of the Huddersfield Lodge No. 290 1793-1893* (1893), *History of the Chapter of Prosperity – No. 290* (1898), *The Masonic Initiation* (1924), *The Ceremony of Initiation* (1932), and *The Ceremony of Passing* (1932).

Wilmshurst felt much concern about Masons’ lack of knowledge of the meaning of their own Fraternity and the scarcity of materials available to help impart this knowledge to them. He believed that Freemasonry was developed for a divine, spiritual purpose, but that most Masons erroneously considered its essence to reside in its ritual and its elemental teachings. He said

> We meet in our Lodges regularly; we perform our ceremonial work and repeat our catechetical instruction-lectures night after night with a less or greater degree of intelligence and verbal perfection, and there our work ends, as though the ability to perform this work creditably were the be-all and the end-all of Masonic work.

Those who enter it [the Order], as the majority do, entirely ignorant of what they will find there, usually because they have friends there or know Masonry to be an institution devoted to high ideals and benevolence and with which it may be socially desirable to be connected, may or may not be attracted and profit by what is disclosed to them, and may
or may not see anything beyond the bare form of the symbol or hear anything beyond the mere letter of the word.  

And thus, to the extent that members remained ignorant of Freemasonry’s profound purpose, Wilmshurst believed that that purpose went unfulfilled. He stated

The work of the Order is to initiate into certain secrets and mysteries, and obviously if the Order fails to expound its own secrets and mysteries and so to confer real initiations as distinguished from passing candidates through certain formal ceremonies, it is not fulfilling its original purpose whatever other incidental good it may be doing.…

To expound the Order’s secrets and mysteries, and thereby facilitate the fulfillment of its original purpose as he viewed it, Wilmshurst, in a writing style both lucid and elegant, penned a series of papers containing his perspective on the essence of the Craft. In 1922 he published several of these papers as a single volume which became his most widely known work, *The Meaning of Masonry*.

When a man becomes a Master Mason, it is logical that his enthusiasm for his new endeavor may cause him to immerse himself in all things Masonic. Often he is overwhelmed by all of that to which he has recently been exposed – the degrees, the explanatory lectures, the legend of the events that occurred during the erection of King Solomon’s Temple, the lodge opening and closing rituals, the memorization of the esoteric work, the opportunity to fill an officer’s station or place.

Too frequently, however, time passes and that once-newly-made Mason no longer ponders whether a deeper meaning underlies the lodge administration and ritual. As Wilmshurst explains, the brother remains at that

… stage of knowledge… in which he takes a literal, superficial and historic view of the subject-matter of the doctrine; in which ability to perform the ceremonial work with dignity and effectiveness and to know the instruction catechisms by heart, so that not a syllable is wrongly rendered, is deemed the height of Masonic proficiency.…
And yet, after some reflection, one might reasonably come to question whether our brethren of centuries past would have devoted such great effort to develop the complex Masonic infrastructure which we perpetuate to this day did not the underpinnings of a more profound purpose exist. Wilmshurst writes,

> It is absurd to think that a vast organization like Masonry was ordained merely to teach to grown-up men of the world the symbolical meaning of a few simple builders' tools, or to impress upon us such elementary virtues as temperance and justice:—the children in every village school are taught such things; or to enforce such simple principles of morals as brotherly love, which every church and every religion teaches; or as relief, which is practised [sic] quite as much by non-Masons as by us; or of truth, which every infant learns upon its mother's knee... The Craft... has surely some larger end in view than merely inculcating the practice of social virtues common to all the world and by no means the monopoly of Freemasons.  

Wilmshurst believes that this “larger end in view” is nothing less than that of the Wisdom Tradition of antiquity which developed subsequent to an estrangement of mankind from its Creator and which is “… a great doctrine that forms the philosophic basis of all systems of religion, and all the great systems of the Mysteries and of Initiation of antiquity, viz., that which is popularly known as the Fall of Man.”

The representation of this “great doctrine” of estrangement that is likely the most familiar to western civilization is that in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament: the allegory of humankind’s proto-parents, Adam and Eve, eating of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life, and who, as a consequence, God banished from Paradise:

> And to Adam he said, “Because you have... eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you.... therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden....

This same concept of the “Fall of Man” is present in belief systems encountered throughout the vast expanses of the globe. Wilmshurst tells us that:
The tradition is... universal of the collective soul of the human race having sustained a "fall," a moral declension from its true path of life and evolution, which has severed it almost entirely from its creative source.\footnote{26}

[Wilmshurst] saw the same theme of the fall of man and his quest for regeneration underlying many of the great myths of civilization including many of the Bible stories: The Prodigal Son, The Legend of Osiris, Homer’s Odyssey, The Quest for the Holy Graal [sic], [etc.].\footnote{27}

For example, with regard to the aforementioned Legend of Osiris, and despite the existence of a number of variations thereof, in its fundamental aspects this Egyptian myth is as follows.

Isis and Osiris are both, respectively, sister and brother and wife and husband. Osiris

... arouses the jealousy and enmity of his brother Seth at whose hands he suffers death. The corpse (as Plutarch tells the story) is thrown into the Nile and is carried out into the Mediterranean across the waters of which it goes to Phoenician Byblos. There, after patient search, the sorrowing widow at last finds it. She bears it back to Egypt and hides it in the swamps at Buto, where afterwards she rears the young child Horus.

When Seth lights upon the body, dismembers it and scatters the fragments far and wide, Isis again starts off to regain them and with one exception does so. Then, having pieced them together with the magical skill which is peculiarly hers, she raises Osiris from the dead and bestows upon him eternal life.\footnote{28}

In the context of the Symbolic Lodge, it is this “fall” which is represented in the third degree by the violence which befell a Masonic Grand Master during the erection of King Solomon’s Temple and the resultant loss of the true secrets of a Master Mason – a tableau which Wilmshurst advises us not to understand in a literal sense:

The tragedy of Hiram Abiff... is not the record of any vulgar, brutal murder of an individual man. It is a parable of cosmic and universal loss; an allegory of the breakdown of a divine scheme. We are dealing with no calamity that occurred during the erection of a building in an eastern city, but with a moral disaster to universal humanity.\footnote{29}

The contemplation of a permanent alienation of one’s species from its God is something from which a person of spiritual bent instinctively recoils. Indeed, this is the concept some theologians have of hell: not a physical place of raging and unquenchable fire, but the knowledge that one will remain distanced for all eternity from his loving Creator. But Wilmshurst believes
that, to our good fortune, it was not the intent of the benevolent Great Architect of the Universe
that His creation remain forever apart from Him subsequent to the fall, nor was the path of return
to the once perfect state of concord between the Deity and humankind to be left to the latter to
ascertain by chance or through trial and error:

From that "fall"… it was necessary and within the Divine counsels and providence that
humanity should be redeemed and restored to its pristine state; that it should be brought
back once more into vital association with the Divine Principle… This restoration in turn
required vast time-cycles for its achievement. And it required something further…. it
required skilled scientific assistance from other sources to bring about its restoration.30

Wilmshurst relates that this “skilled scientific assistance from other sources” – what we
might envision as a metaphysical blueprint, map or instruction manual comprising all of the
information necessary to enable men to repair their relationship with the Deity – was accessible,
or communicated, to our ancestors in the long-ago mists of time:

… at one time, long back in the world's past, there existed or was implanted in the minds
of the whole human family – which was doubtless much smaller and more concentrated
then than now – a Proto-Evangelium or Root-Doctrine in regard to the nature and destiny
of the soul of man and its relation to the Deity.31

This “Proto-Evangelium” or “Root-Doctrine,” Wilmshurst tells us, is that concept which we
know in the present age by the more familiar noun of “religion,” “… a word implying a ‘binding
back’ (re-ligare).”32

He goes on to say of this “Proto-Evangelium” or “Root-Doctrine,“

This was the one Holy Catholic (or universal) Religion “throughout all the world”; at
once a theoretic doctrine and a practical science intended to reunite man to his Maker…. though, owing to the perverse distortive tendencies of humanity itself, it was susceptible
of becoming (as has so happened) debased and sectarianized into as many forms as there
are peoples.33

Man, in his innate imperfection and arrogance, innumerable times over the course of the
passing millennia, has believed himself to possess an acuity which would permit him to improve
upon the divine ideal. Thus the universal religion, the original single path to light, was made
many, and these subdivided again into many others, and thence into yet more still, fracture upon fracture producing offshoot upon offshoot, so that in our present age exists a plethora of spiritual guides which we call variously religions, sects, cults, creeds, theosopies, mysteries, faiths, philosophies of life, wisdom traditions, belief systems, etc. However, despite the differing aspects of these myriad descendants of the “Root-Doctrine,” Wilmshurst assures us that

… its main principles could never be susceptible of alteration, though they might be (as they have been) exoterically understood by some and esoterically by others, and their full import would not all at once be apparent, but develop with increasing fidelity to and understanding of them.\(^{34}\)

Despite the passage of eons, “… these great schools of the Mysteries… have never ceased to exist… their initiates have never been absent from the world…”\(^{35}\)

And so we arrive now at the very pith of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst’s perspective on the essence of the Craft, to wit: Freemasonry is one among those countless descendants of the “Proto-Religion” communicated to man to assist him to regain “that which was lost” – i.e., his once-perfect relationship with his God. It is one of the points on that continuum of endeavor of humankind begun in times primeval to heal the schism between Deity and humanity. Wilmshurst says:

… among the witnesses to the Ancient Wisdom and Mysteries is the system of Masonry; a faint and feeble flicker, perhaps, but nevertheless a true light and in the true line of succession of the primitive doctrine, and one still able to guide our feet into the way of peace and perfection.\(^{36}\)

You must not imply from this that modern Masonry is by any means a full or adequate presentation of these older and larger systems. It is but their pale and elementary shadow. But such as they are, and so far as they do go, our rituals and doctrine are an authentic embodiment of a secret doctrine and a secret process that have always existed….\(^{37}\)

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst believed that there exist two types of Masons. Of the first type is he who is oblivious to Freemasonry’s place in the true line of succession of the primitive
doctrine – he who sees ritual and a general attitude of benevolence as the essence of the Craft – he who does the Fraternity no harm, but who does not actively advance its purpose, either – one of those Masons of whom Wilmshurst said, “For many members of the Craft to be a Mason implies merely connection with a body which seems to be something combining the natures of a club and a benefit society….”

Elsewhere in his book, he elaborates thusly:

“… their Initiation too often remains but a formality, not an actual awakening into an order and quality of life previously unexperienced; their membership, unless such an awakening eventually ensues from the careful study and faithful practice of the Order's teaching, has little, if any, greater influence upon them than would ensue from their joining a purely social club.”

The second type of Mason, in Wilmshurst’s view, is he who “… is conscious, if he be honest with himself, of the sense of moral imperfection, of ignorance, of restricted knowledge about himself and his surroundings….” “… [– who] becomes conscious of a sense of loss and deprivation and feels an imperative need of learning how to repair that loss.”

It is upon this second category of Mason that the Craft’s tenets exert the most influence, because, Wilmshurst tells us,

The very essence of the Masonic doctrine is that all men in this world are in search of something in their own nature which they have lost, but that with proper instruction and by their own patience and industry they may hope to find…

Nearly a century ago W.L. Wilmshurst invited the brethren, as he would doubtless continue to invite us today despite the ever-widening gulf of years, to strive to be of this latter type of Mason. He would wish that we exert effort to ensure that our Fraternity not degenerate into merely one more social club that operates under the guise of an arcane purpose but of which, in reality, the principal activities consist of convening required meetings framed by perfunctory
ritual, gathering afterward to drink a beer, smoke, and play poker or dominos, and making an annual contribution or two to worthy charities. Wilmshurst admonishes us that

The future development and the value of the Order as a moral force in society depend… upon the view its members take of their system. If they do not spiritualize it they will but increasingly materialize it. If they fail to interpret its veiled purport, to enter into the understanding of its underlying philosophy, and to translate its symbolism into what is signified thereby, they will be mistaking shadow for substance, a husk for the kernel, and secularizing what was designed as a means of spiritual instruction and grace.43

… [Masonry] proclaims the fact that there exists a higher and more secret path of life than that which we normally tread, and that when the outer world and its pursuits and rewards lose their attractiveness for us and prove insufficient to our deeper needs, as sooner or later they will, we are compelled to turn back upon ourselves, to seek and knock at the door of a world within; and it is upon this inner world, and the path to and through it, that Masonry promises light, charts the way, and indicates the qualifications and conditions of progress. This is the sole aim and intention of Masonry.44

No one is obliged to agree with the perspective of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst on the essence of the Craft. Although our Entered Apprentice Mason’s charge counsels us to converse with well-informed brethren that we may receive instruction and thus improve in Masonic knowledge, we are also encouraged to seek our own meanings in the Order as we find them relevant to our particular stations and places along the pathway of life.

Nonetheless, it may prove of interest to hear something of the opinions of others regarding The Meaning of Masonry – to learn of its positive reception upon publication; of its worth in the eyes of its readers; to see that it struck a chord in others in their pursuit of further light.

We are told that the

… book was praised in both the Times and the Yorkshire Post and was so well received by the Masonic fraternity that a second impression was required seven months later, followed by three further printings over the next five years.45

Foreign editions in both English and in translation appeared, and The Meaning of Masonry was called Wilmshurst’s best-known work, the one which “rightly gave him a worldwide reputation.”46 A laudatory review in the Masonic press read as follows:
An extremely interesting and suggestive contribution to the elucidation of the inner meaning of our Masonic system has been made recently by Bro. W.L. Wilmshurst in a book entitled The Meaning of Masonry. This book is one which ought to be in the hands of all those who wish to study the esoteric side of the Craft working. Wilmshurst is a writer whom it is easy to understand. Most of the mystical writers… are often very difficult. But Wilmshurst can be recommended as giving a very clear and stimulating introduction to the whole study of the Masonic symbolism.37

A second review, this by A.H.E. Lee in The Co-Mason, said:

Bro. Wilmshurst has given us a noble treasure house of genuine secrets with a courage and candour that cannot be too highly prized among masons. His book is indeed a profound experiment upon the Masonic mind of to-day; and though some Brn. may pass it by as too abstruse or speculative, we feel convinced that to many it will go far to satisfy the predominant wish of their hearts…. No-one with any true perception can read the chapter… on the Holy Royal Arch without feeling that its author might justly claim (though he would be the last person to do so personally) to be regarded as one of the Golden Succession of the true Mystery-teachers.48

This second reviewer “… anticipated a wide demand for the book and felt it to be a ‘high privilege’ to be able to bring it to the attention of his readers.”49

The Meaning of Masonry was appreciated as well in the United States. At a symposium in Illinois in 1938, a Masonic survey asked a group of Masonic editors, students, writers, historians and librarians to list the twelve most important books in Freemasonry. Of twenty respondents, three included Wilmshurst’s magnum opus.50

Also on this side of the Atlantic, Freemason Joseph Fort Newton included The Meaning of Masonry in the list of five books he considered “… those of the mystical kind nearest to my heart…” Newton was a Baptist minister, the Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Iowa in 1911-1913, and himself a Masonic author of much merit, perhaps best remembered today for his The Builders (1914) and The Men’s House (1923).51

Walter Leslie Wilmshurst died in London in July 1939, nearly three-quarters of a century ago, but the passage of the intervening years has not diminished the importance of The Meaning of Masonry to some of the traveling men of the subsequent generations sufficiently fortunate to
have made its acquaintance. And their number is growing, thanks to the efforts of Brother and Masonic writer Dr. Robert Lomas of the School of Management at the University of Bradford in West Yorkshire, England, himself a Wilmshurst admirer.

Dr. Lomas, author of such Masonic works as *The Secrets of Freemasonry* and *Turning the Hiram Key*, has digitized a number of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst’s out-of-copyright works, including *The Meaning of Masonry* in its entirety, and made them freely accessible on the Internet. He expresses his esteem for the writings of Bro. Wilmshurst on his web site, saying:

One of the greatest thinkers about Freemasonry in the last century was a Huddersfield Solicitor by the name of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst…. In 1922, thirty-three years after being made a Mason in Huddersfield Lodge, No. 290, he wrote a book expressing his thoughts and reflections on the Craft as he understood it. That book, *The Meaning of Masonry*, was 58,000 words trying to explain the inexplicable. He knew there was something deep at the centre of Masonic ritual which give [sic] Masonry meaning….

Dr. Lomas continues:

I have found Wilmshurst to be a great inspiration to my own Freemasonry…. John Hammill, when in charge of the library of UGLE [United Grand Lodge of England], memorably accused Wilmshurst as ‘having his feet planted firmly in the clouds.’ Fortunately such an elevated position gives his writing a great breadth of vision, which will not now be lost to the present generation of Masons.

In conclusion, some Masons will not care to ponder the purpose for which their Order was instituted. Others, as said the reviewer cited previously, may pass W.L. Wilmshurst’s opinion by as too abstruse or speculative; still others will have their own distinct views, incompatible with his. But those who belong to none of the foregoing groups can assuredly do worse than to keep in mind and heart Wilmshurst’s perspective on the essence of the Craft. And if so doing influences them to actively pursue forging a closer relationship with their Deity, Freemasonry has, indeed, taken good men and made them better.
NOTES


3. Ibid., 19.


5. Ibid., 62-63.

6. Ibid., 3.

7. Agnes, Webster’s, 954.


9. Agnes, Webster’s, 997.


11. Ibid., 5.

12. Ibid., 55.

13. Ibid., 55.


16. Ibid., 59.

17. Ibid., 60.

18. Ibid., 61-62.


20. Ibid., 10.

21. Ibid., 55.

22. Ibid., 56-57.

23. Ibid., 21-22.

24. Ibid., 61.


30. Ibid., 174-75.

31. Ibid., 172.

32. Ibid., 175.

33. Ibid., 176.

34. Ibid., 176.

35. Ibid., 65.

36. Ibid., 178.

37. Ibid., 65.

38. Ibid., 19.

39. Ibid., 10.

40. Ibid., 61.

41. Ibid., 64.

42. Ibid., 47.

43. Ibid., 17.

44. Ibid., 13.


46. Ibid., 33.

47. Ibid., 33-34.
48. Ibid., 34.
49. Ibid., 34.
50. Ibid., 34.
54. Ibid.

The photograph of Walter Leslie Wilmshurst on page 1 was obtained from the “Web of Hiram” of Dr. Robert Lomas in conjunction with the University of Bradford in West Yorkshire, England; available at http://www.bradford.ac.uk/webofhiram/?section=walter_leslie_wilmshurst; Internet; accessed 30 September 2010.

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