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WHOLE NO 1893

HANGMAN'S DAY

DEATH OF JOHN C. WEBB.

A Written Statement from Him.

The Scene at the Gallows.

Letters from Ayers to Webb.

Execution of Berry, the Wife Murderer, at Rogersville.

He Protests His Innocence to the Last.

6,000 People Witness the Hanging at Tazewell.

Honeycutt's Confession a Denial of the Charge of Murder.

(From Knoxville Chronicle, Aug. 14, 1875.)

Yesterday afternoon, about 20 minutes past one o'clock, John C. Webb died on the gallows, erected on the railroad lot near the Clinton Pike, to execute the crime of murder, committed on the 5th of March, 1874, when Richard Reynolds died at the hands of two assassins, a full detail of which was given in the CHRONICLE at the time.

Early yesterday crowds of people could be seen passing in from every direction, and every country road or turnpike, leading into the city, was thronged with men, women, boys and girls, some riding in wagons, some on horseback and others walking, and we venture the assertion that among the latter were thousands who came many miles to satisfy that morbid appetite to see a man hanging in mid-air at the end of a rope, dying. Thus it was that ere nine o'clock in the morning the streets of Knoxville were crowded with strangers. The jail was surrounded by a dense crowd, and it was with difficulty that the

NINETY GUARDS, which had been summoned by Sheriff Swan, could persuade the people to keep out of the jail yard. The hill-side adjoining the Turner Hall lot was filled with a living mass of humanity, and Prince street, beyond Main was perfectly blocked with human beings, all anxious to see what a fellow creature suffer and die.

FRESH ARRIVALS. About ten o'clock the Maryville train arrived with six coaches and a box car filled with representatives of Blount county and "South America," while the ferry boat was kept busy bringing others over from that side of the river, swelling the crowd considerably.

Shortly after this the train on the Knoxville and Ohio Railroad arrived with 18 cars, crowded to their utmost capacity with men, women, and children, making a large crowd of itself, say from 1,500 to 2,000, the largest majority of whom at once repaired to the place of execution.

TO GET GOOD SEATS. As we heard some of them express it, and by 10:30 o'clock the hillside, the railroad track and open ground near the gallows, was crowded with people, so much so that the train in passing had to go very slow and blow the alarm usually given when anything obstructs the track. Wagons with families in them were on the ground as early as 8 o'clock in the morning, remaining there in the hot sun all day, merely in order to have a good seat, and a place close to the gallows.

The trains on the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railroad, brought more recruits and by the time the hour for the execution had arrived the crowd was being estimated all the way from

TEN TO TWENTY THOUSAND. Yet the majority of those expressing an opinion in regard to the number of witnesses of the last struggle of Webb, gave the number at about fifteen thousand.

This is truly a sad commentary on the state of the morals of East Tennessee, to be compelled to state that ten thousand people witnessed a hanging, when but five thousand attended the funeral of such a man as Ex-President Johnson.

THE LAST NIGHT. Webb's wife remained with him until about midnight, and sometime after she left him to retire to rest, requesting to be awakened in the morning, which was done. He ate a hearty breakfast, remarking that this was the last opportunity to enjoy a meal.

After breakfast Webb was visited by Father Walsh, his confessor, and some old rye whiskey having been given him, his spiritual adviser asked him not to drink, but he finally drank.

Among the visitors who called upon him in the morning were Gen. Cooper and Justice Ochs. He conversed with the General in regard to his war record, and with Justice Ochs in regard to his first trial. He bid Mr. Ochs farewell and said he did not think hard of him, as he had only done his duty in binding him over to Court.

About ten o'clock the prisoner was furnished a new suit of clothes provided by his brother, and it is said that he used some very bitter language when a razor was refused him. Father Walsh remained with him all morning, and Father Marron hastened down to the jail as soon as he arrived on the 11 o'clock train.

IN THE CELL. About 15 minutes of 12 o'clock, m.,

Sheriff Swan, accompanied by one-half dozen deputies, and the Age, CHRONICLE, and Chicago Times reporters, proceeded to the cell of the condemned man for the purpose of reading to him the Death Warrant, preparatory to his journey to the scaffold. Webb was on his knees in prayer with Fathers Marron and Welsh, when the Sheriff entered, and was permitted to finish his devotions. One of the reporters, who carefully took up the piece of rug on which he had been kneeling and placed it in its proper place at the foot of his mattress, as coolly as though he had not a thought of death.

Indeed he was the coolest man of the party, judging from his manner. Sheriff Swan himself seemed somewhat agitated, so much so as to interfere with his reading distinctly. After he had finished the reading, Webb desired to read the document himself, and taking it from the sheriff read it deliberately from beginning to end; after which, he lifted his hand containing a crucifix, which had been given him by Father Marron, and said, "I swear before God that I am to be hung unjustly," and other assertions of like nature, then kissed the crucifix as if to seal the oath. Just before the reading, he had shaken hands with the sheriff and disavowed any hard feelings toward him. He was then led out into the hall, handcuffed, and having expressed a desire to speak to Ayers, his supposed accomplice, was led to the door of his cell. He called Ayers up to door and said, "Joe, you will have to pray mighty hard, old fellow, to get forgiveness for all the men you have killed—you will, old fellow." This was all his parting to his fellow prisoners.

Being led to the door, he was joined by his weeping wife, who never left his side from that moment until the fatal noose was adjusted preparatory to his passing into eternity. He was driven to the place of execution in a large baggage wagon, seated between his wife and the Sheriff, with some six deputies on the front and rear seats, and about fifty more armed with double barreled shot guns following the wagon. The route of the lugubrious cavalcade lay up Prince street, to Union, down Union to Walnut, down Walnut to Asylum and down Asylum to the place of execution, out on the Clinton turnpike, between files of galling, curious sight-seers, who lined the walks, perched on the fences and filled the doors and windows.

AT THE SCAFFOLD. The arrangements were all complete for the reception of the sad cortege. A rope had been stretched some 100 feet from the scaffold as a center, forming a barrier against which surged the crowd, by this time swelled to not less than eighteen or twenty thousand. The scaffold was a plain structure of scantling, made in the old fashioned way—two uprights with a cross-beam overhead, the uprights braced, and midway of the cross-beam a staple put to receive the rope, while near by was the coffin.

THE O'CONNOR ZOUAVES. Were drawn up to the south of the scaffold at rest, while on the hillside overlooking the place of execution from the north and west, were stationed the Dickinson Guards, surrounded by an immense throng, which covered the entire hillside, and looked on at the (to them) rare show.

THE DEATH OF HIS SISTER, and her burial today, and that his father was expecting his (John's) body that night. Webb seemed somewhat affected by this, but soon recovered his cool bravado of demeanor. To a question of Mayor Stanb, he stated that he had put all the statements he had to make in the hands of G. Washington, Esq., who would give it to the world.

HIS WIFE seemed to bear up very well until it came to the final parting just before the adjusting of the noose when she gave way to bitter sobs and moans of anguish, which were heard all over the grounds. Just before the noose was adjusted Webb stood up and shook hands with the sheriff and said, "You've got hold of the best old soldier you ever had hold of; you have," he then bid the sheriff good bye—the last prayers were said by the spiritual attendants, and Webb stood up on the seat of the wagon with the rope dangling just over his head, game to the last.

HIS LAST WORDS were "Well I thank you all for coming out to see me hung, I forgive all, and hope God will forgive me. Good bye. Good bless you!" to his wife; "I'll try and meet you in heaven," and finally, "I'm the best piece of furniture that ever stood up here; I am." The black cap was then drawn over his face, and the noose adjusted, his legs tied, his hands handcuffed behind him, and without a tremor, or perceptible giving way of that tremendous physical or brute courage characteristic of the man, John Webb stood ready to step into eternity. The deputies, clergymen, his wife, and all others stepped down from the wagon. The horses were started, and in a moment more a shapeless bundle of clothes, dangled under the beam—and Webb was HUNG.

FINALE. The body swung back and forth two or three times, and turned around with the twisting of the rope, until Sheriff Swan stepped forward and took hold of the legs and stopped the motion. Drs. Alexander, Drake and McKenry, promptly stepped forward and took note of the action of the pulse and heart. The following is the

RECORD OF DEATH: Swung off well and hearty at 27 minutes past one, pulse 80, or thereabouts; at each minute the record showed the following changes: pulse—28, 37, 27, 32, 27; fluttering and intermittent, 18, 20, 23 and intermittent, 22 and feeble. At the end of 9 minutes the pulse ceased entirely. The action of the heart was perceptible for a minute and a half afterwards, when it ceased also, and at the end of

15 minutes he was pronounced dead; and at 49 minutes past one, after hanging just 22 minutes, the body was taken down and placed in the coffin, the limbs composed and cap removed.

The features were not distorted in the least, and only a slight discoloration perceptible about the neck from the action of the rope. The coffin was a neat affair, lined with white, and was with the remains enclosed, turned over to the friends who took them to Anderson county on the 4 o'clock train for interment.

And so was the law vindicated (2) and vengeance taken for the murder of Richard Reynolds—and the end is not yet.

INCIDENTS.

Quite an excitement was raised at one point in the proceedings by the inauguration of a fist fight, outside the ropes. The guard brought their shot guns to a present—some of them cocked ready for destruction; women screamed, men shouted, boys howled and whistled, and things looked ominous for a riot. It was soon quieted, however, and the hanging proceeded. A short time after the gallows seat was over, and the multitude had dispersed, a man came in a great hurry to the office of one of our leading physicians, and requested his services immediately for his daughter, who had been encircling, and under the excitement and fatigue of the day an abortion had resulted. He lived several miles away from the city, and he, with his daughter and other members of the family, had, notwithstanding her condition, come to see the hanging. This was one of the sickening features of the day, from which humanity naturally recoils.

WEBB'S WRITTEN STATEMENT.

The following is the statement written by Webb and placed in the hands of George Washington, Esq., as above referred to:

"The first beginning of the case for which now I am under sentence of death was on the first Monday in March, 1874. I received a letter from Foster Brown and Joseph Ayers which informed me that something was on the board. I knew Brown very well, and he wanted me to meet him and Ayers at the head of Poplar creek on the 3d of March, 1874, as they had some particular business. I went to the place to see what was on hand, and about 10 or 12 o'clock that night they came to the gate and hallowed. I told them to come in, when Brown came in and said he had a friend with him that had come a long way to see me. I asked him who he was, but he did not say for some time; at last he asked me if I had got a letter from him and somebody else. I told him that I had, when he said that it was the man who is with me. He then said it was Joseph Ayers. I went out to where Ayers was, and Brown gave me an introduction to him, and Ayers said that he had come a long way to see me, and that Brown had told him all about me. Then he told me his business. He said he was getting up a crowd of K. K. K's, to go and whip an old rebel and make him leave the country, and that he would give me a good horse, saddle and bridle if I would go with him and help him give him thirty-nine lashes. I told him that I would go up, and asked him when we would go. He said for me to the same place the next night, and he would have a man there that would show me the way to where the crowd would meet. He said that he would be there with a large crowd, when I asked him where was the horse that he was going to give me, and he says I will give you this blue horse which I am riding, and he lighted a match and showed me the horse. On the next night I went to the same place, and a man came up and called my name and shook hands with me. I told him that I did not know him. He told me his name, and then pulled a letter out of his pocket and said this will make you no me. The letter was from Joseph Ayers, telling me to come with Dave Duncan, and he would show me the way to the meeting ground, where he would be, and would tell me all the names and particulars. On the morning of the 5th me and Duncan started and went on to the upper end of Clinton, and he said that he had some particular business to see to, and for me to meet him at the bridge in two hours. I went down in Clinton to John Martin's and got my dinner and then went down into town to the grocery and got some whiskey, then I went up to the bridge and Duncan was there, and we went on to Bull Run, and about one mile from there we came to the crowd on top of the Sebon point, this side of Bull Run creek. There was Joseph Ayers and Lum Ayers and Foster Brown and one more man. We all set down on a log and I asked them if that was all of their crowd, and they said it was all that they wanted. Ayers pulled out a roll of money and counted out three piles and gave Duncan one pile and the other man one of the other piles, and offered me one pile. I told him that I must know all about what they were going to do. His answer was this: "We are going to kill an old rebel to-night and burn him in the house, for he killed my father," and he told me all about what they were going to do. I told him that if they were going to kill him that I was going back, for I had never done such a thing in my

life, and I was going back. They all begged me very hard to go on with them, but I told them no, I was going back if life lasted. When they found out that I was going sure, they all stopped me and said that if I would not tell on them that they would go on and kill him. I told them that I should not tell nothing, and for them to do just what they pleased, but I thought they had better let that part of it alone. I started back, and I went just as fast as I could. I run a part of the way so as that I could get back to Clinton. I got to Clinton a few minutes before the sun set; I went to John Martin's and they asked me where I had been gone so long, that they had been down in town hunting for me. I told them that I had been just straying around; and supper was ready by that time, then John B. White and Joseph K. Webb came in and we all sat down to supper, and all of us eat supper, and eat together, and stayed there all night, and eat breakfast together next morning. I staid there till about 8 or 9 o'clock on the 6th. I told my sister that I thought that I would go out to Samuel Henderson's and I might come back and take the train that night; but as I was on my way out to Henderson's, about half past 11 I was stopped by Dave Duncan, and he asked me where I was going; I told him where I had started, and I asked him what—"

[Webb's manuscript ends abruptly here, but he continued with a verbal statement to Mr. Washington, to the effect that Duncan had told him that Ayers wanted Duncan to kill him (Webb), and that Ayers had agreed to pay Duncan one hundred dollars to commit the deed.—Eds.]

SOMETHING ABOUT THE PLOT.

When Webb's wife first arrived she called on Ayers and asked him if he hired John to kill Reynolds, when Ayers replied that he knew nothing about it whatever. Sheriff Swan in relating the incident to us, stated that he felt satisfied that he did, having the documents in his pocket to prove his guilt. We asked to see the documents, and were shown the two letters given below. We understand, however, that the counsel for the defense pronounce these letters as a forgery, and that they will call for them to-day. But here are the letters:

"MR. JOHN WEBB.

"DEAR SIR—I have been informed by Mr. Brown that you are one of the old war boys and will do to depend on. I write you this in order have an interview with you and if you will give me your own price in money or land. My land lays in Hickory county Mo. he is a rebel and he (killed my) father and if you will meet me and Brown where Brown has said I will satisfy you for all trouble and more too I have got plenty of money and plenty of property and a full store and I will give you your own price. We will be here by 10 or 11 o'clock that night.

"Yours truly

JOSEPH AYERS.

"You will find me one of the truest K K K."

"In the original these words are erased.

"MARCH THE 3 1874

"MR. JOHN WEBB you come with Dave Duncan and he will show you the way to where we will meet. I will give you all the proceedings I have plenty of whiskey and I will have one hundred dollars in money for you and I will give you a bill of sale for that blue horse that I showed you the other night be sure and bring two good pistols with you and if you have got a rig it don't matter if I have got plenty of black muslin be sure and come and we will have good times and I will satisfy you for all more too

"Please tear this up

"You will find me one of the truest K K K

"JOSEPH AYERS"

Hanging of Berry at Rogersville.

Rogersville was alive yesterday with people to witness the execution of William Nicholas Berry, the wife murderer, the particulars of whose crime, trial and conviction our readers are familiar.

The crowd began to gather as early as Thursday morning, and last night all the inns and boarding houses were crowded to their fullest extent, but this morning began to swell in earnest, and the public roads and byways leading into town from all directions were thronged with people of all ages, colors and conditions, and at an early hour every nook and corner seemed to be jammed with an impatient multitude anxious to see the "sight."

Good judges estimated the crowd at five thousand people, which was perhaps one of the largest ever assembled in Rogersville on any occasion. All the counties around were largely represented, and many from Lee and Scott counties in Virginia, and from "over on Clinch" they came en masse.

In company with one of his counsel we visited Berry's cell late Thursday evening, and found there Father Marron of Knoxville, speaking with the doomed man about his spiritual condition, and advising him, if he were really guilty of the crime for which he was condemned to die, to make a full confession of the same, and not die clinging to a falsehood, and thus be unprepared to meet in peace that Being who knows the secrets of all hearts, and from whose unerring judgement there is no appeal.

ASSERTS INNOCENCE.

Berry positively asserted his inno-

cence, and declared he was in no way guilty of taking the life of his wife. The priest told him that the proof and public opinion was very strong against him. Berry replied by saying, "I know it is for they have sworn lies against me, but never mind let the world have the whole matter as it will, God has it right and in that great day it will be seen that an innocent man has been put to death." After a few words with Berry about his youngest daughter to whom he (Berry) seemed much attached the priest bid him an affectionate farewell saying that he had done all he could for him and would return to Knoxville early this morning to pray with and comfort Webb in his last hours. Berry seemed

GREATLY AFFECTED.

so much so that we took our leave, but before parting with him he requested us to return this morning as he wished to make his last statement, which he desired to be published in the newspapers of the country. We then bid him good night promising him to call in the morning which we did, and with him had the following

INTERVIEW.

Reporter—Good morning Mr. Berry, how are you feeling to-day?

Berry—I am feeling very badly. Had such pains in my head and side that I could not rest at all through the night, in fact, my health has not been good for several months.

Reporter—How have you been passing away your time in your cell?

Berry—Most all of my time has been consumed in reading my Bible and in earnest prayer to Almighty God that He might pardon me and lead me to that bright and happy world above. I have now found peace with my Lord, and have no fears of dying, for the troubles of this world are many, and I feel willing and ready to leave my prison cell.

Reporter—Mr. Berry, do you really murder your wife, or were you in any way connected with the same?

Berry—I positively did not kill my wife or have anything to do with it in any shape or form. I always loved her, and never spoke but two cross words to her in all my life, although she being very high tempered, often said harsh things to me, but I would go on paying no attention to her.

Reporter—Then Mr. Berry, since you declare your innocence so positively, can you tell me who you think perpetrated the fiendish deed?

Berry—My skirts are clear so help me God, in this my dying hour, but I have always believed the crime was committed by my father, Patsey Dotson, James McFerin, Hannah Berry, my cousin, and Henderson Berry, my half brother, as my father and others of the party named had threatened to kill her on various occasions.

Reporter—How about the recent statement of your daughter, who declares you murdered your wife with your own hands?

Berry—She was scared into such a statement by my father and other enemies of myself and family. They also promised if she would turn against me they would get up a petition for the pardon of her husband, who was sent to the State prison some time ago for stealing a hog. May the Lord have mercy on the poor child and pardon her for a falsehood so great. I have tried to raise my children right but they have all turned out very badly, except my youngest daughter who was always quick to mind whatever myself or her mother told her to do.

Reporter—"Mr. Berry, do you realize the fact that you are to die on the gallows before the setting of the sun, and that it is of the utmost importance to your soul's eternal welfare that you tell nothing save the truth?"

Berry—"Yes sir, I do. I know this body of mine will soon be cold and lifeless, and I look for no pardon from human hands whatever, and my Maker has already pardoned me for the many sins I have committed against His holy law. I give you a true statement of the unfortunate affair, knowing that grim death now looks me in the face and that nothing unclean shall enter the house of God, and that all liars shall burn everlastingly in that lake of fire and brimstone."

Reporter—"Tell us something about your past life, where you were born, your age, occupation, and so forth?"

Berry—"I was born in this county, and was forty-five years old the 10th of last December. I went to school but little while young, and the most of my education I received by hard and faithful study after I was full grown."

I was conscripted into the Confederate army during the war and put in Col. Rucker's regiment, Gen. Pegram's brigade, which I deserted in July, 1863, when Bird and Sanders made their raid thro' East Tennessee, and went home to my wife who was then very sick. Since the war I have tried to live a peaceable and quiet citizen, attending to my own business and letting the affairs of others alone.

LEAVING THE CELL.

The hour for the execution having arrived, we left the cell, but before leaving he thanked us for the interest manifested in his behalf, and said he wanted us to have everything published he had given in his conversation, and that he should make no remarks at the gallows, for the people were so prejudiced against him that his words would probably do him more harm than good.

STARTING FOR THE GALLOWS.

At 10 o'clock Sheriff Spears took the prisoner from his cell and placed him in a wagon, which contained a plain, though neat walnut coffin, and with a heavy guard on each side, started off for the gallows one mile southeast of town, followed by a dense crowd, containing about 5,000 persons, and upon coming to the designated spot, we found at least 2,000 more awaiting the arrival of the doomed man, which made in all, about 7,000 people on the ground; more than one-half of the whole number were women and children.

THE GALLOWS

was a rude structure consisting of two

upright pine poles, joined together at the top by a third of the same material. The wagon containing the prisoner was driven under the cross beam at fifteen minutes past eleven.

REMARKS BY THE MINISTER.

At Berry's request the Rev. Mr. Harden, of the Second Presbyterian Church, of Rogersville, made a few very appropriate remarks, and offered up a fervent prayer in the prisoner's behalf.

HE MADE NO SPEECH.

But spent about fifteen minutes in bidding farewell to his kindred and acquaintances, assuring all that he was fully prepared, willing and even anxious to leave the wicked, unfriendly world, and hoped that all would meet him in that heavenly rest.

THE MURDERED WIFE'S BROTHER.

Among the persons with whom he shook hands was his murdered wife's brother, who seemed deeply affected. Berry manifested a great deal of feeling, and the tears rolled freely down his thin cheeks while conversing with his friends, but as soon as he was through talking with them his tears ceased to flow, and without assistance he deliberately stepped upon the wagon seat with as happy a countenance as we ever saw, and while the Sheriff was adjusting the noose around his neck he rolled his large blue eyes up in the Sheriff's face, and said, "How do you feel about this?" To which the Sheriff replied, "Very badly, Nick."

THE KNOT TIED.

The fatal knot was tied, the black cap drawn on and all things made ready when the doomed man quietly signified his willingness to the Sheriff to die, the whip cracked, the horses moved forward, and at precisely 6 minutes to 12 his body was dangling in the air.

HIS LAST AUDIBLE WORDS.

were "I now bid this world farewell and hope to meet you in that better world above where parting is not known."

He struggled very little but seemed a long time in dying, in fact the physicians did not pronounce him dead until 7 minutes past 12. The body remained hanging in all 32 minutes, when it was taken down and delivered to friends who had promised the unfortunate man at his earnest request to bury it along side of his murdered wife.

Nearly everybody was of the opinion that he would acknowledge his guilt under the gallows, but in this they were disappointed, and we heard a number say, after seeing that he had held out to the last, that he was not guilty, that he may have been innocent after all, but be this as it may, the proof was all against him, and a very large majority believe that he undoubtedly perpetrated the crime for which he was sentenced to die.

OPINIONS OF THE PUBLIC.

Many believed that the reason why Berry did not confess was through pure malice towards his father, brother and the others whom he implicated as above stated, as the murderers of his wife, while others thought that he had told so many falsehoods about the affair that he really believed he was then telling the truth.

Take it all in all this is one of the most extraordinary cases in many respects which ever came to our notice. While we are a strong believer in capital punishment, for certain high crimes, at the same time not expressing our opinion as to his guilt or innocence, we do think the proof should be most positive from witnesses of undoubted veracity, before any should be condemned to death, for it is better that many guilty should go unpunished than one innocent man die such an ignominious death.

Berry seemed to be a quiet, delicate, unassuming kind of a man, with no traces of the brutal and vicious whatever to be found in his composition, but from what his neighbors tell us, it would seem he was only human in his nature. For it is claimed, some time before murdering his wife, whom he had sworn to protect, that he killed his own son, and then declared he was killed to death by a mule; and more than all, if possible, it is said he became so depraved and lost to every humane sense, that he regularly co-habited with his own daughter.

Hanging of Honeycutt at Tazewell.

The quiet and rural little town of Tazewell, early Friday morning, became alive with human beings to witness the execution of Ananias Honeycutt, the murderer of Thomas Ausmus in January, 1874. Many had come from "miles away" to see the prisoner launch his frail bark on uncertain waters, and to look at the living man for the last time.

GUARDS FORM A LINE.

At 11 o'clock the guard, consisting of fifty men, fell into line in front of the Mayers' House, and was marched to the jail, a block distant, and took charge of the prisoner.

MOVING TOWARD THE GALLOWS.

At 12 o'clock the procession moved, in the following order: A two-horse wagon, preceded by a portion of the guard, containing Honeycutt, his coffin, etc., and the Revs. Crutchfield and Greer, followed by Sheriff Mayers and deputies, encircled by a guard, and close in the rear was a large concourse of people; also to the right, left and in front did the citizens cling in great numbers. At 12:30 o'clock the procession gathered within the enclosure allotted them, a rope encircling the gallows.

THE GALLOWS

Had been erected, last Saturday, in Academy Hollow, north of the town, and upon both sides the ground rose

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