

John Hay's Revenge: Anti-Labor Novels, 1880-1905

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John Hay, remembered by history primarily as a statesman, was actually something of a Renaissance man. It is true that he served as Abraham Lincoln's private secretary during the Civil War, and later as Ambassador to England, and Secretary of State. Most students of history associate Hay's name with his proposed "open-door" policy toward China. Fewer, however, know that during the 1870s Hay made something of a name for himself as a popular poet. Fewer still know that in 1883 Hay penned an anonymous, highly popular, and rather scandalous business novel—and in many ways, that may be the most interesting story of all.

Hay's foray into novel-writing actually stemmed from yet another of his many careers, that of businessman. After the Civil War, Hay had married the daughter of Amasa Stone, a Cleveland railroad magnate remembered chiefly for his role as developer of a bridge in Ashtabula, Ohio, which in 1876 collapsed under the weight of a passenger train. As a wedding present, Stone had given his new son-in-law a well-appointed house on Cleveland's fashionable Euclid Avenue, along with a position in his business.¹ "I am here in a nice little shop," Hay boasted to a friend, "where I do nothing but read and yawn in the long intervals of work, an occupation that fits me like a glove" [Clymer, 1975, pp. 39-44].

During the summer of 1877, however, a group of laborers in Martinsburg, West Virginia set in motion a chain of events that would forever change Hay's perspective on business. The men worked for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which, facing investor pressure not to reduce its dividend, had recently decided to decrease labor wages by ten percent. It wasn't the first such decrease for B&O employees, but the Martinsburg workers were determined to make it the last. Frustrated crews began to abandon their own trains, then to physically block the departure of others. Their counterparts in Pittsburgh, Louisville, Cleveland, Buffalo and elsewhere followed suit. Soon the strike had effectively crippled the nation's railway system. With state militia volunteers unable (and often unwilling) to subdue the strikers, President Hayes, determined to restore railroad service, called upon federal troops to end the strike. They soon did so, but at the terrible cost of more than a hundred civilian lives [Bruce, 1959].

The 1877 railroad strikes deeply affected many observers on both sides of the labor-capital dispute. Not surprisingly, organized labor blamed capital and government forces for the bloodshed, while proponents of capital expressed

¹ A newspaper story alleged that Hay also received a \$1 million dowry. Hay clipped the story and wrote in the margin: "untrue" [Clymer, 1975, pp. 39-44].

outrage at the strikers. Reverend Henry Ward Beecher blamed the labor troubles on misguided ideology from overseas: "We look upon the importation of the communistic and like European notions as abominations," Beecher told his Plymouth Church parishioners. "Their notions and theories that the government should be paternal and take care of the welfare of its subjects and provide them with labor, is un-American" [Beecher, 1877]. Union-buster Allan Pinkerton likewise blamed Europeans for fueling a "pernicious communistic spirit" which demoralized workingmen and sparked harmful, unnecessary labor-capital disputes [Pinkerton, 1878].

For John Hay, the 1877 railroad strikes were much more than an academic matter. With his father-in-law in Europe, Hay had been left in charge of the Lake Shore and Michigan Railway during the summer of 1877. As his employees joined in the strikes, Hay felt helpless and outraged. The experience affected him deeply. "I feel that a profound misfortune and disgrace has fallen on the country," he wrote to Amasa Stone, "which no amount of energy or severity can now wholly remedy." Hay saw the strikes as "mere insanity" and "a very painful experience of human folly and weakness, as well as crime" [Clymer, 1975, p. 45].

In response, Hay proceeded to write an indictment of organized labor so scathing, so vehement, that he dared not attach his name to it.²

***The Bread-Winners* and its Critics**

In 1883, the popular *Century* magazine serialized a new novel called *The Bread-Winners*, by an anonymous author. From the beginning, the story attracted wide notice, but when Harper & Brothers first published the novel in book form in the Spring of 1884, it became something of a phenomenon. One newspaper claimed it received "more attention from the American newspapers than has been bestowed upon any other work published during the last five years."³ Part of the novel's appeal sprung from the mystery over its authorship. Curious members of the public suggested a number of possible authors of the anonymous novel, with guesses ranging from the perfectly reasonable (Henry Adams) to the utterly improbable (Grover Cleveland).

Much of the book's appeal, however, likely had more to do with the provocative nature of the subject matter. For *The Bread-Winners* addresses the "labor question" with a decidedly critical eye, portraying organized labor as little more than an excuse for surliness, mayhem, and attempted murder. Although Thomas Bailey Aldrich's novel *The Stillwater Tragedy* had expressed

² It is no coincidence that although he wrote the novel more than five years later, Hay explicitly set *The Bread-Winners* in 1877. (The original *Century* magazine version set the story in 1877; later Harper & Brothers editions used "187-")

³ *New York Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1884. See David E.E. Sloane, "John Hay," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* III (Spring 1970) for further information on the novel's popularity, as well as a useful bibliography. Back in 1883 Thomas Bailey Aldrich, then editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, had offered to serialize *The Bread-Winners* if Hay would attach his name to it. Hay insisted on anonymity, however, and accepted an offer from the *Century* magazine, which first serialized the novel.

similar views almost four years earlier, Hay's more vitriolic novel certainly commanded more interest and sparked much greater controversy. Indeed, critic V.L. Parrington later credited *The Bread-Winners* as the "first girding of the loins of polite letters to put down the menace that looked out from the underworld of the proletariat" [Parrington, 1930, p. 173].⁴ An examination of the novel's plot reveals the reasoning behind such a statement.

Unlike most of his counterparts in contemporary business novels, Arthur Farnham, the dashing hero of *The Bread-Winners*, is definitely not a rugged self-made man. Indeed, his handsome face shows "the refinement and gentleness of one delicately bred," while his hands sport "the bronze tinge which is the imprint wherewith sky and air mark their lovers." He dresses impeccably, and boasts "one of those fortunate natures, who, however born, are always bred well, and come by prescription to most of the good things the world can give" [Hay, 1907, p. 65]. Farnham lives off the large estate left by his father, presumably worth millions. He spends as much time serving on library boards and growing roses as he does managing money. But Hay believes that the mere possession of great wealth exercises a "sobering and educating influence" upon the right type of man [Hay, 1907, p. 91], and Farnham enjoys such spontaneous education. Although "comparatively inexperienced in money matters," he ably advises a neighbor on the merits of her railroad stocks and other investments. "Draw your dividends," he counsels, "with a mind conscious of rectitude" [Hay, 1907, p. 93].⁵

Into Farnham's comfortable world steps The Brotherhood of Bread-winners, a newly-formed labor association that consists of "the laziest and most incapable workmen in the town." The organization's goal, a representative explains, is "to get our rights—peaceably, if we can't get them any other way" [Hay, 1973, p. 118]. Farnham seems less threatened than annoyed by the Bread-winners. He first encounters its members while riding on a public road. A man named Bowersox brandishes a pistol, which Farnham bravely strikes from his hand. "You don't seem to be murderers," Farnham tells his motley band of captors. "Are you horse-thieves?"

"Nothing of the kind," said the man. "We are Reformers." Farnham gazed at him in amazement. . . . They seemed of the lower class of laboring men. Their appearance was so grotesque, in connection with the lofty title their chief had given them, that Farnham could not help smiling, in spite of his anger. "What is

⁴ Never one to mince words, Parrington also deemed the book "dishonest" and Hay's mind "mediocre."

⁵ Philip Yates of Edward Fuller's *The Complaining Millions of Men* (1893) resembles Arthur Farnham in many ways. Like Farnham, Yates sports a dashing figure. In both books, a significantly less statuesque laboring man (Sleeny/Baretta) openly envies the ample gifts of the plutocrat (Farnham/Yates). Both laborers view their enemies as rivals in love. Both also wish to kill the plutocrats (Baretta actually shoots Yates, while Sleeny merely seems to have committed a similar crime). And in both novels the hero pairs off with a fair, well spoken upper class woman, while the acceptable mate for the laborer is a voluptuous, dark-haired working class girl named Maud.

your special line of reform," he asked,—"spelling, or civil service?" "We are Labor Reformers," said the spokesman. "We represent the toiling millions against the bloated capitalists and grinding monopolies . . ." [Hay, 1907, p. 175].

In the serialized *Century* magazine version of the story, before darting away Farnham again whips the pistol from Bowersox's hand in a final act of contempt. Hay excised this gratuitous incident from the Harper & Brothers edition of the novel; his good friend Henry Adams had humorously pointed out its failure by suggesting "How would it do to insert that he turned a double-back-somerset over somebody's head?"⁶

Tensions escalate between members of the Brotherhood and their less well-defined employers, until a sort of riot breaks out in which Bread-winners begin to ransack their otherwise peaceful town. During the novel's climax one of the rioters attempts to kill Farnham, but the hero survives and the rioters are ultimately subdued. In the end, Farnham wins the heart of his beautiful neighbor Alice Belding, and the criminals meet with their just reward. Most of the erstwhile union men return to work. In *The Bread-Winners*, the brunt of Hay's ire seems aimed less toward these workingmen themselves than toward troublesome union organizers. Left to their own devices, Hay believes, most laborers are reasonable creatures; the enlightened worker is represented by docile Saul Matchin, a "sober, industrious, and unambitious" man utterly "contented with his daily work and wage" [Hay, 1973, p. 75]. Written with less vitriol, in fact, *The Bread-Winners* might not have caused much of a stir. Indeed, Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Stillwater Tragedy*, published back in 1880, had explored similar themes without a great deal of notice. Hay's novel, however, makes its points much more aggressively, portraying laborers as at best easily-led simpletons, and at worst outright murderers.

There was bound to be fallout from such an ideological stance, and Hay knew it. Ostensibly he kept his name from the story because, as he explained in an anonymous letter to the *Century* magazine in March 1884, "I am engaged in business in which my standing would be seriously compromised if it were known that I had written a novel." He claimed that he would "never recover from the injury" if his authorship became known among his colleagues. It seems likely, however, that the real reason for Hay's silence was a realization that his anti-labor political stance would prove unpopular with many readers—acceptable perhaps for Hay the businessman, but inconvenient for Hay the politician. To attack labor overtly, in print, would not have been politically prudent.

Hay's caution proved well-placed. Although a few contemporary reviewers praised the novel for what were seen as keen political insights, many others condemned it. From November 1883 through the following Spring, the *Century's* "Open Letters" section printed a number of animated reactions. Typical was reader Edward J. Shriver's feeling that the novel represented "a bit of snobbish-

⁶ See editor's note in Hay, 1973, p. 176.

ness imported from England." Mr. Shriver predicted "the author of 'The Bread-winners' will never turn out permanently valuable work, so long as he misrepresents a legitimate force in the interests of a false political economy and an antiquated spirit of caste" [*Century*, 1883, pp. 157-8]. One contemporary critic labeled the book "greasy, slangy, malodorous," and "repulsive" [*The Literary World*, 1884, p. 27]. Another called it "deliberately insulting" toward labor, as well as "dull, vicious, and disgusting" [*The Dial*, 1884, p. 259]. Despite his efforts toward anonymity, many contemporary reviewers had little doubt that Hay had written the story. The January 10, 1884 issue of *Life* included a tongue-in-cheek review of "The Muffin-Getters," ostensibly a new book by an anonymous author, with characters named Barnum (for Farnham), Batchin (Matchin), Leeny (Sleeny) and Unit (Offitt). The "reviewer" announces his knowledge of the real novel's author by writing (capitalization and italics not added): "It is wise indeed to make *Hay* while the sun shines" [*Life*, 1884, pp. 20-1].⁷

The most hostile reaction of all, however, was yet to come. A handful of readers became so incensed by Hay's book that they penned entire novels specifically in response to it. Indeed, a small rash of novels appeared as direct responses to *The Bread-Winners*. Of these, perhaps the most violent was *The Money-Makers*, a vehement, slanderous attack on Hay and his family by Henry Francis Keenan, a former colleague of Hay's at the *New York Tribune*.

Many readers have recognized the more obvious targets of Keenan's attack. His slimy character Aaron Grimstone, like Amasa Stone, builds a public structure that later collapses and kills a number of people. A shamed Grimstone also commits suicide with a pistol in his bathroom—precisely as Stone had.⁸ Archibald Hilliard, a hypocritical, snooty "moral octopus" of a man, clearly represents Hay. Newspaper editor Horatio Blackdaw is a thinly disguised Whitelaw Reid, Hay's and Keenan's boss at the *Tribune*. The unflattering characterizations of Grimstone and Hilliard certainly might have been sufficient to incite Hay, who in an effort to suppress the novel allegedly rushed to New York and bought as many copies of *The Money-Makers* as possible [Bender, 1926, pp. 319-22; Blake, 1921, pp. 77-8].⁹

Yet what must truly have enraged Hay was Keenan's portrait of Grimstone's daughter, Eleanor, who seems clearly modeled on Hay's wife Clara. By all accounts, the most striking feature of Clara Stone was her size. While not entirely unattractive, she was, to use a modern euphemism, big-boned. Hay himself once described her as "large, handsome, and good" [Dennett, 1933, p. 97]. Imagine him, then, reading Carew's initial description of Eleanor Grimstone:

⁷The negative response continued long after the book's publication. As late as 1897, suspicion of Hay's authorship caused labor leaders to oppose his appointment as ambassador to England [Clymer, 1975, p. 42].

⁸Perhaps to defuse the potential charge of slander, the second edition of *The Money-Makers* moved the suicide from the bathroom to Grimstone's studio, where he dies from gas fumes.

⁹Although one can understand why Hay would have wanted the book suppressed, as Charles Vandersee has pointed out in his introduction to the 1973 edition of *The Bread-Winners*, proof of Hay's active suppression remains scant [Hay, 1973, pp. 35-6].

No, she is not pretty. Her figure is awkward, her arms long. I was going to say her feet are large, but I didn't see them; however, as her hands are large and honest, her feet must follow the rule in anatomy. But her eyes—well, I never saw a gazelle, so I can't say they are like a gazelle's; but I can say they are like a cow's [Keenan, 1969, p. 50].

After Carew discovers Eleanor's generous kindness, he becomes less cruel, and even secretly aspires to her love. But Hay certainly could not have liked this any better:

The shimmer of her shining white gown, under the exquisite fabrics, gave her the effect of an *odalisque*, transplanted from the harem, to figure as a fine lady for an hour! It would not have been surprising, at any moment, to see the encumbering lace slip off, and the voluptuous figure, poised in the middle of the room, moving to the sensuous strain of the dulcimer [Keenan, 1969, p. 64].

Hay had always expected a negative response to *The Bread-Winners* from certain circles, or else he would have attached his name to the story in the first place. But nothing could have prepared him for Keenan's vicious attack, which seems more the product of a personal vendetta than an ideological disagreement. Hay's critics did not go unanswered. In March of 1884 Hay wrote a letter to the *Century* signed "The Author of '*The Bread-Winners*'" in which he responded to early critics of the novel. "The hero of the tale is Offitt, not Farnham" the letter proclaims; "the heroine is Maud, and not Alice." The tongue-in-cheek defense continues:

I care little about Farnham. It is true I gave him a large house and a lot of money—which cost me nothing—but that was only because Miss Matchin would never have looked at him otherwise. He is a commonplace soldier, with a large property; he pretends to be nothing else. . . . I find that in Ohio the book has given deep offense because of a supposed unfairness to the laboring class. . . . I am told my picture is one-sided. Of course it is—most pictures are. If I paint your face well, you do not complain that I have not done justice to your back. . . . I attempted to describe certain types of moral perversion which I have found among our working people, and I am denounced for not having filled my book with praises of the virtues which also abound among them. This is certainly a new canon of literature. May I not speak of Nero without writing the life of Brutus? . . . I have expressed no opinions about labor unions [*Century*, March 1884, p. 795].

Hay's facetious response displays how contemptuously he regarded his critics, who failed to merit a serious defense. The author of *The Bread-Winners* harbored few regrets about his portrayal of organized labor.

Although Hay responded scornfully to his early critics, his son Clarence Hay, in the preface to a later edition, claimed without irony that his late father had been misunderstood. "*The Bread-Winners* is not directed against organized labor," he instructs. "It is rather a protest against disorganization and demoralization of labor by unscrupulous leaders and politicians who, in the guise of helping the workingman, use his earnings to enrich themselves" [Hay, 1916]. A review in the May 1884 *Century*, commonly attributed to William Dean Howells, had attempted a similar form of exoneration by clarifying "it is the idle poor whom our author does not like" rather than the labor class in general.

Hay himself, however, never seriously claimed to be misunderstood. His attack on organized labor—fueled by his own personal experiences—was direct, angry, and completely unapologetic.

Common Themes

Although Hay's novel remains perhaps the best-known anti-labor novel in the American literary tradition, it is by no means the only such book. In fact, from 1880 to 1905 there appeared a number of novels exposing the evils of organized labor. In the pages of these books, labor associations are at best corrupt and incompetent. The Marble Workers' Association in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Stillwater Tragedy* (1880) does little more than protect the jobs of drunkards and limit the number of apprentices that businesses may employ. "I am the master of each man individually," one manager laments, "but collectively they are my master" [Aldrich, 1907, p. 64]. The Stevedore's Union in F. Hopkinson Smith's *Tom Grogan* (1896) strives to monopolize freight transportation through deceptive business practices, intimidation, and criminal activity. The largely undefined union in Edward Fuller's *The Complaining Millions of Men* (1893) seems little more than an excuse for men to frequent smoky barrooms, while the Miner's Union in Mary Hallock Foote's *Coeur D'Alene* (1894) apparently exists solely to perpetrate cowardly acts of violence on moonless nights. Even in Octave Thanet's *The Man of the Hour* (1905), where the treatment of organized labor is much more even-handed, the ultimate enemy is a group of violent strikers. Almost without exception, unions attract a nucleus of shirks, tramps, and criminals.

The honest and capable workingman has no need for labor organizations; they will only drag him down to a common level of mediocrity. All of the authors of this small genre attempt, with various degrees of success, to direct blame less toward the average laborer than toward the union organizer. Most workers remain content until agitated. Aldrich's generally reasonable workers do not feel exploited until someone tells them that they have been badly treated. In *The Man of the Hour*, Billy Bates finds fault not with the average working man, but with "the radicals and the kids. The radicals always want the earth and the kids are always ready for a row just for the fun of it" [Thanet, 1905, p.

177].¹⁰ *The Bread-Winners'* Sleeney, when approached by agitator Offitt, replies "Old Saul Matchin and me come to an agreement about time and pay, and both of us was suited. If he's got his heel onto me, I don't feel it" [Hay, 1973, p. 116]. The noble worker remains reasonably happy with his station in life, respectful of those in power, and highly suspicious of union activity.

The professional labor reformer, called by Aldrich "a ghoul that lives upon subscriptions and sucks the sense out of innocent human beings," invokes the true wrath of the anti-labor authors [Aldrich, 1907, p. 171]. The stereotype of the "walking delegate"—fast-talking but stupid, dishonest, usually Irish—became a staple of economically conservative fiction. The villain in Smith's *Tom Grogan* is union leader Dan McGaw, a "short, big-boned, square-shouldered Irishman" with a "low, flat forehead," frayed clothes "covered with grease-spots," a "lump of a mustache dyed dark brown," bushy eyebrows that shade "treacherous" eyes, and a coarse mouth containing "teeth half worn off, like those of an old horse" [Smith, 1896, p. 20]. This description sounds almost identical to that of *The Bread-Winners'* Offitt, with his "low and shining forehead," greased and dyed mustache, "imperfect" tobacco-stained teeth, and "sly and furtive" green eyes [Hay, 1973, pp. 113-14]. Hay expands his portrait further, calling Offitt (among other things) "sallow," "wheedling and excoriating," "unwholesome-looking," "disreputable," and perhaps most poetically a "greasy apostle of labor" with a "scoundrel heart."¹¹ Lacking Hay's descriptive vigor but sharing his disgust, Edward Fuller describes Stephen Luck, the labor agitator in *The Complaining Millions of Men*, as simply "fat, red-faced, red-haired, and indescribably vulgar" [Fuller, 1893, p. 43]. Indeed by the early 1890s, when Fuller's story appeared, audiences had become so familiar with the character type that merely labeling a character a walking delegate sufficed to create the desired emotional effect.¹²

Not content to portray union men as physically repulsive, dishonest, sub-literate and generally stupid, the authors make them criminals as well. Although in actuality most nineteenth century strikes remained utterly peaceful, fictional strikes always result in violence [Blake, 1972, p. 40]. Union crimes of choice are theft, extortion, arson, and attempted murder by a blunt instrument to the head. With uncanny similarity, *The Bread-Winners* and *Tom Grogan* both contain an attempted murder by a hammer blow to the head of a capitalist; in *The Stillwater Tragedy*, a chisel to the head does the job. Apparently the most complicated murder plot within the average worker's limited powers of comprehension is to clock someone over the head with the nearest hand tool.

¹⁰ Octave Thanet was the pseudonym of Alice French. The ideology of her 1898 short story collection *The Heart of Toil* closely resembles that of *The Man of the Hour*.

¹¹ The preceding quotes are all from chapters 5 and 6. In case we missed the significance of the green eyes, Offitt claims to be writing a piece for the *Irish Harp*.

¹² The unscrupulous labor leader appears repeatedly, even in novels sympathetic to organized labor. See Taylor, 1964, p. 110.

The Beginnings of a Capitalist Literary Tradition

Of the novels mentioned here, *Tom Grogan* was by far the most favorably received by contemporary critics. Reviewers applauded the characterization of Tom—actually a strong-willed woman doing business under the name of her late husband—calling her “remarkable,” “strongly conceived,” even “splendid, indefatigable, unconquerable” [*The Chautauquan*, 1896, p. 783; *The Dial*, 1896, p. 36; *The Literary World*, 1896, p. 172]. Another publication found the book “a picturesquely truthful romance as distinctly American as it is superbly human” [*The Independent*, 1896, p. 943]. The only significant negative response came from a British reviewer who marveled that anyone could possibly read or write such “feeble trash” [*The Athenaeum*, 1896, p. 804]. Most anti-labor novels received a less animated reception. While *The Stillwater Tragedy* received praise as a well-plotted mystery, it invoked no spirited reaction. Critics generally panned Foote’s *Coeur D’Alene*, which was not widely reviewed; one reader found the story “marred by its bitterness” [*The Nation*, 1895, p. 33]. *The Man of the Hour* prompted mixed reviews, with one critic calling the novel “stuffed with not very enlightening discussions of labor problems,” and another actually chiding Thanet for going too easy on organized labor [*The Independent*, 1905, p. 581; *The Dial*, 1905, pp. 307-8].

One hundred years later, the anti-labor novels fail to hold up particularly well. None is a masterpiece of language, plotting, or characterization. Ideologically, all seem quite heavy-handed, choosing to make their points with a nearly complete lack of subtlety. As a group, these novels share a palpably bitter, angry, partisan tone; rather than champion capitalism, they defend property interests against the perceived threat of the underclass—a very different aim. Consequently, it does not seem fair to label these novels “capitalist” in the true sense of the word. In many ways, however—in tone, pro-business ideology, and their deep suspicion of organized labor—the anti-labor novels paved the way for a new, more significant brand of capitalist novel.¹³ By the late 1890s, a new fictional approach was emerging, one that would develop the capitalist tradition in a much more intriguing, positive light. Walter Fuller Taylor labeled this new genre “the novel of economic struggle.” Here businessmen become romantic heroes working toward some capitalistic goal, surviving a panic or defeating a Wall Street rival or racing the clock to build a grain elevator. While many of the anti-labor novels had been Eastern fictions, the novels of economic struggle frequently take place in Chicago, symbolic of the vibrant, growing turn-of-the-century American economy. V.L. Parrington dismissed the authors of these later books, most notably Will Payne, Samuel Merwin, and Henry Kitchell Webster, as “a group of clever journalists” from whom little in

¹³ For perhaps the best example of the bridge between the anti-labor novels and the emerging genre of more overtly “capitalist” novels, see Samuel Merwin and Henry Kitchell Webster’s *Calumet “K”* (New York, 1901). Here the romance of business achievement becomes the primary theme—but only if organized labor can be overcome. The novel’s characterization of union activity clearly recalls that of the earlier anti-labor novels.

the way of serious work could be expected. For the most part posterity has agreed; like John Hay and company, their novels remain largely out of print and out of mind. However, the literary vein that began with the anti-labor novels and continued in books like Merwin and Webster's *Calumet K*—which Ayn Rand once called her favorite book of all time—would later evolve into much more popular and influential capitalist novels, most notably Rand's 1957 *Atlas Shrugged*.

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