Running the Blockade

A Confederate Reminiscence

by

Emma Henry Ferguson

Note: This eyewitness account of running the Wilmington Blockade is printed with the permission of the Goochland County Historical Society, Mrs. Royal E. Cabell, Jr., President. It appeared in The Goochland County Historical Society Magazine, Vol. 28, 1996 (Cecilia E.M. Bullard, Editor) and the complete magazine is available from the Goochland County Historical Society, Box 602, Goochland, Virginia 23063 for $10 plus $2.50 handling and postage.

After reading the observant and articulate Mrs. Ferguson’s account of her harrowing voyage aboard the Lynx, Bulletin readers might wish to turn to Louis T. Moore’s Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region to read “An Infant Tossed Into the Ocean,” the story of the Lynx’s last run when Mrs. Gabrielle deRosset Waddell threw her child to safety after the ship went aground. After reading both reminiscences it will become quite obvious that in the last century the South could boast more than one intrepid lady.

I have added a few numbered footnotes to identify some of the persons, ships, and businesses cited in the Ferguson account. All of this information was obtained from Stephen R. Wisc’s Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War published by the University of South Carolina Press in 1988.

In her letter of permission, Mrs. Cabell noted that a few months before Emma Ferguson’s voyage, 400 Union cavalry troops raidied Goochland County creating havoc wherever they went so the author already had already proved her mettle before she embarked from Wilmington.

-Diane Cashman for the Bulletin editorial committee, Susan T. Block, editor

Emma Henry Ferguson was the wife of Major James B. Ferguson, CSA, with whom she resided at La Vallee in Goochland.

As a lady of considerable distinction, she was the grand-daughter of the great orator and Virginia’s first governor, Patrick Henry, and a concert pianist, reported to have studied with Paderewski, the Polish pianist and statesman. Mrs. Ferguson is buried at Byrd Presbyterian Church in Goochland.

At the time this memoir was written, Major Ferguson had been stationed in England for two years where he served as purchasing agent for the Confederacy. A close friend of General Robert E. Lee, Ferguson sent Lee the uniform which he wore to the surrender at Appomattox.

We are grateful to Mrs. Rosalie Ferguson Fulwilder of Ashland, Virginia, Mrs. Ferguson’s great grand-daughter for providing us with this manuscript. Editor [Goochland County Historical Society Magazine].

It was on the 15th of May, 1864, that I found myself in Wilmington, North Carolina, for the purpose of escape to the Bermuda Islands. My husband had been stationed in Great Britain for two years previous. Hence I was provided with an order from the War Department at Richmond for free passage on any vessel wholly or partly owned by the government, while Alexander Collie & Company of Manchester, had sent
me a free-passage order on any of their ships.¹

On my arrival at Wilmington from Richmond, I found all the
trade-off runners on which I had free passage out of port; and I took
lodging with a private family to await the moon's dark period that would
bring them in again. In ten days two of the Collie's the Edith and the
Annie, and one of the government's the Coquette, ran in safely through the
United States fleet off Fort Fisher. By the time the vessels were unladen of
their foreign stores, and again laden with cotton, gold, and outward-bound
dispatches and orders, the light moon period had set in, and they were
necessarily detained in port until it was ended.

Meanwhile the three captains of the respective ships had called on
me, and reported the orders received from their heads regarding a free
passage for myself, two children and nurse.

Captain Walters, of the Annie, reported his vessel as fast as a bird, but
very small, and devoid of accommodation for a lady and children. Captain
Gregory of the Edith, reported his as large, fast and strong carrying more
valuable cargo than most of the runners- therefore an especial target for
the enemy.² Captain [Robert] Carter, reported his ship as being nearly
unseaworthy. He had reported her to the Navy Department at Richmond
three times as being unfit for service, but each time had received orders to
go out.³ This gentleman was a personal friend of my husband, and a man of
high integrity and unusual judgment. Upon his opinion, I relied implicitly.
He advised me to choose the Edith. Upon his advice, I acted and embarked
with Captain Gregory.

At the time appointed for attempting flight, the three ships steamed
down the Cape Fear River and lay inside the bar on the Fort Caswell side,
which commanded the left-hand entrance to Wilmington from the sea. At
five p.m. the pilot came aboard. With glasses, we could see the steam well
up on the Coquette and Annie for crossing the bar before the shades of
evening set in, and running under the protection of the fort's guns, to await
the nightfall for their enterprise. Our ship, however, remained anchored,
motionless; and Captain Gregory sat on a cotton bale on deck with an
expression of face disheartening to note in the leader of a daring
expedition that required iron nerve to attempt at all. He was an English-
merchant captain, evidently accustomed to sail the ocean under more
favorable circumstances than these.

The pilot came up on deck and spoke a few earnest words to him in
an undertone. Captain Gregory responded by a nervous shake of the head.
The old coast-man turned promptly away without another word, went to
the side of the ship, swung himself down the ropes, dropped into the pilot

¹ Alexander Collie & Company of London and Manchester was a British company who owned a fleet of
steamers that ran the Blockade. Among them was the Condor of Rose O'Neale Greenhow fame. After
the war the company went bankrupt.

² Neither Waters or Gregory can be identified. The Annie went aground at New Inlet in Nov. 1864 and
was purchased by the USN and placed into service as the Preston. Collie & Co. sold the Edith to the CSN
in Sept. 1864. Recommissioned the Chickamauga she was destroyed at Indian Wells, NC in an attempt to
blockade the Cape Fear River after the fall of Wilmington in Feb. 1865.

³ Despite Carter's unfavorable opinion, the Coquette was still afloat in 1873.
boat, and in the next few moments we saw him rowed rapidly away.

"What do you mean to do, captain?" inquired the signal officer.

"Go back to Wilmington," was the reply. "Three ships going out the same night make the risk too great."

"Yet if they run close together?"

"That's impossible. The Coquette is too slow to run with us. She is a heavy old craft, calculated to attract notice to the other ships."

"Why did you start with her then?" I inquired.

"I had hoped Captain Carter might decide in the last hour not to go out, in which case I was on hand."

"A forlorn hope for blockade-running, if you know the man," the signal officer replied; "for Robert Carter is not afraid of the devil either on land or sea."

I looked toward the low sand-hills of Fort Caswell, saw the two blockade-runners lying snug under her guns, and realized that the long ripple separating the river from the ocean as an impassable barrier between them and myself as Niagara Falls might be in its place.

That night our ship steamed back to Wilmington, and the other two went safely out, and landed their valuable cargoes into the hands of the government's commissioners stationed at St. George's, Bermuda. My own position was now isolated, hazardous. The Confederate lines between Wilmington and Virginia had become broken at Weldon. A large army lay in front of Petersburg; therefore my return to Richmond was impossible. Neither could I remain in Wilmington, as my Confederate Treasury notes were exhausted, and no communication existed between that point and from any from which I could obtain financial aid. I determined to go out at all risks.

When we steamed into port the next morning at eight o'clock, I went up on deck and keenly scanned the varied specimens of craft lying around in the waters. There was nothing encouraging to a female passenger, no matter how courageous, in the outward-bound, ugly, crazy vessels, with rough-looking, dirty crews swarming their decks.

A friend came on board to confer with me. He had just arrived in Wilmington from Richmond, making his way through the lines on foot at all hazards and with many hardships. He was a government shipper of cotton, and owned interest also in a blockade-runner the City of Petersburg.

"You will have to pay your way out now," he said. "It is madness to think that remaining here to await the return of the vessels from the islands. The blockade has become so stringent that there is no longer a probability of ships returning to port,—only a bare possibility."

"Where is the City of Petersburg?"

"Gone to Nassau; went out last night. It was uncertain when I would get here. The ship's lading was complete; so the captain found out just a few hours before I arrived with important dispatches,—some for Mr. Mason, some for Mr. Slidell, and some business of utmost importance."

*President Jefferson Davis appointed James Mason and John Slidell as commissioners to England and France. Mason arranged the blockade running contract with Alexander Collie and Slidell negotiated a loan to the Confederacy from the Paris banking house of Erlanger & Co.*
"If you will use your influence with some one of these captains to take me out, I will carry your dispatches and orders," I promptly replied.

He thought a moment or two, with a frown of perplexity between his eyes, then suddenly said, "Do you see that little steamer lying yonder?" He handed me a pair of glasses. I looked and saw a slender, foam-colored ship with inverted smokestacks, painted white, around which was a collected a group of weather-beaten, desperate-looking men all clothed in white.

"Well, what will be the chances there?"

"Very slight, I fear; but if you are a brave woman it may be managed."

"What quality of bravery is required that most women do not possess?"

"Hardihood beyond the nature of most, and a great love of adventure." Then, after a pause, "I will explain, and then you shall decide. The captain of that ship was a pirate on the high seas before the war. He claims to be a Confederate; but in reality the reckless life of blockade-running attracts his desperate taste, and he has become in one year's service the most valuable man that runs the seas. The ship he commands belongs to Frazier [sic], Trenholm and Co. She is recently built, and, he says not yet thoroughly tested in speed. He believes he can put her up to eighteen knots per hour; but I do not believe him because that is beyond nautical computation. Her name is the Lynx. His name is Reid. He is the hardiest man I ever knew and his men are all picked from his late piratical crew. Now decide, and I will go over and interview him."

"Go at once," I replied. "I am disgusted with the merchant service. I'll try a pirate with a feeling of security. According to my observation such a one is the man for the hour."

Major Ficklen descended the bulwarks of the Edith and hand rowed himself to the Lynx. With the glasses still fixed upon him, I watched his advent among the motley assortment of humanity around the smokestacks, and noted the scowling fierce faces of the men as the purport of his interview was made known to the one who appeared to be the chief among them,- noted, too, the shake of that one's head, and saw Major Ficklen take him a little apart, where they conferred earnestly. Then, with a breath of relief, I saw the two descend into the skiff and row over towards the Edith. When they came up on my deck, I rose and advanced to meet Captain Reid, holding hard to my courage as my eyes fell well upon him. He was the worst looking man I had ever seen. But one word fully expresses him, as he stood there on that June morning in the fierce sunshine, with his white hat pushed back from his forehead. He was ferocious. His physique was powerful and thick-set like a bulldog's; his face broad, flat, furrowed by storm-winds, and burnt brown by the scorching rays of the Indian Ocean. His eyes were keen and cruel; his speech curt, almost broken English; his words, toned with a kind of guttural growl. Such was the man with whom I had offered to shake hands.

"You are not afraid?" he bluntly inquired, his horny hand closing over mine.

"No, I am not afraid."

"I don't surrender my ship for a woman- know that!" knitting his
shaggy brows together. "If the enemy runs me down, or cripples me, I burn the ship, and you take it out with the crew in the lifeboats."

"They will certainly capture us then, Captain Reid."
"No matter, they gets not prize out of my ship."
"How about your men? They don’t want a woman and children on board, do they?"
"My crew belongs to me. The passage money belongs to me too. I divide the money with them; then the first one who grumbles I hangs."
Inwardly, I shuddered. Outwardly, I acted the heroic.
"I will go with you," I said. "What will the run to Bermuda cost us?"
"I takes you for one hundred pound gold."
I had no choice and I said so.
"Then come aboard with me at once," he ordered. "It’s a small amount, compared with the value of cotton I can pack in my state-room."
"Why do you take me then?"
"Because you are a friend of Major Ficklen’s and Major Ferguson is a friend of my ship’s owners in Liverpool. Besides you look and talk game, and I can put up with a plucky woman."
Without more said, we were all lowered into the skiff.
The motley crew huddled amidships received us with a marked disfavor. They were ugly looking men, truly, on closer inspection of different nationalities, speaking a broken jargon of many languages, but all seemingly united in the sailor’s grounded prejudice against women and children being mixed with their perilous enterprises.
The captain stopped on the deck and made them a short address. It was in Spanish, and I did not understand its wording; but the purport of it was to divide equally the hundred pounds, and to pledge himself not to surrender the ship in case of accident.
"Why does he give them all the money?" I inquired of Major Ficklen when we had descended to the captain’s cabin.
"Oh, I did Reid a favor some months ago—he considered a great favor—and he takes this occasion as his way to return the obligation. Nothing would tempt him to take a dollar of the money for himself."
"There is something heroic about this man, then?"
"Yes, you will be perfectly safe with him personally, and he will carry you through to Bermuda if it can be done. He will be the last man to run the blockade in the Confederate service, whether the government lives or dies."
Captain Reid here entered, and Major Ficklen paid him my passage money in gold, and delivered to me the dispatches; then a silent hurried hand-shake, for he was a man of but a few words, and he was gone. The swish of oars outside a few minutes afterward fell upon my ears, and on my heart the first sense of utter loneliness and dependence I had felt in my many trials.
The ship lay quiet until three p.m. and then slowly steamed down the river, turned into the left hand channel at its mouth, took on her pilot,
crossed the bar, and fell under the perpendicular walls of Fort Fisher. At
seven o'clock Captain Reid signaled to Colonel [William] Lamb, of the fort.
In response, three long range guns swept the sea from different points to
clear the vicinity of any cruiser that might be hovering close about under
the mists that already covered the sea.

Immediately after this, Captain Reid left his position of safety and
boldly steamed in a straight line from the fort towards the line-of battle
ship that bore a light and remained ever anchored in the center of the
crescent formed by the nine ships of war that blockaded Fort Fisher. This
crescent of deadly marine artillery lay outside the six-mile range Blakely
gun that defended the fort from its center height and as the slender
blockade-runner glided towards the central light of the enemy, the
excitement began.

The captain had ordered the children, the nurse, and myself on deck
ere starting out, and wrapped about with sheets we reclined or sat on the
cotton bales that lined the sides of the ship's deck. The men were all
dressed in white; the smoke-stacks were painted white and inverted, giving
forth no sound, and consuming their own smoke. No word was spoken on
the ship.

Thus without sound, and seemingly without visible motion, she glided
through the waters, like a bird on the wing. She was an illusion to the
material senses—a phantom; we on board seemed but specters, silently but
recklessly laughing in the face of death! Faster, faster glided the toy
ship; nearer, nearer grew the great red light. It seemed to me that we must
run into it! I sat motionless beside Captain Reid on a bale of cotton,
watching the glowing ball of fire that loomed through the shroud of mist in
front, and realized that impending death was on either side, the visible
risk of it ahead. Suddenly, and without a verbal order from the captain, the
man at the wheel turned the little craft with the alertness of hand of the
magician, and she shot to the left, just outside the radius made by the
beacon-light of the flag-ship, and between it and a great lumbering cruiser
rolling about in the waters about a half mile off. As we noiselessly ran thus
between the very jaws of death, Captain Reid touched my arm and pointed
right and left. Following his directions, I saw on one side, within the
radius, a magnificent man-of-war, its deep-mouthed cannon near the
surface of the water, its towering masts majestically reared against the
clouds, its deck swarming with a powerful marine force, all bathed in red
and yellow light that made a minute, distinctive picture against a dark sea
ground.

On the other side, in shadowy outline, lay the dark hulk of the other,
oisily puffing her steam, but quiet like a monster held in leash against its
will; while between the two, with the nicest kind of calculation, our little
craft ran her gauntlet boldly, defiantly. Once well through, I could feel the
speed being gradually strengthened, until in two hours, a fine distance lay
between her and the fleet.

At the end of that time, Captain Reid advised me to go below and get
all the rest I could before daybreak.

"Why before daybreak?" I asked. "Isn't the danger of the blockade-
running over?"

He smiled grimly. "It has not fairly commenced. What we have done seems something to you, but it is not difficult. My ship makes no noise or shows herself at night. With a little management of guiding her by the flagship's light, it is easy to run through the fleet. The enemy knows that. Ah! They are very clever at Washington. They've put their two fastest men-of-war into the high seas to pay us for this, and by the light of day."

"Are those two ships fast runners?"

"I should say they are - the Rhode Island and the Connecticut, the fastest belonging to the United States Navy - perhaps the finest ships of any navy in the world. They are doing terrible damage to the Southern trade."

Under these compact, comprehensive words, a foreboding of danger ahead settled down upon my spirit. But I retired below, and lying down dressed, endeavored to compose myself to rest. I heard Captain Reid give an order to the steward to take up his position at the cabin door and to arouse me at the first premonition of danger. Beside me was my satchel containing the valuable dispatches and orders, which in the darkness I kept close to my hand. The slow muffled step of the steward outside my door, the restless breathing of my children, an occasional appeal to the "sweet Mother of heaven" from Irish Mary, my nurse, to whom the blockade-running was fast assuming the form of a hideous nightmare to the waking sense - these were my music on that dread night at sea. With the first glimmering rays of the rising sun this dread was forcibly realized. Across the waters to my left a dull heavy boom came, succeeded by a splash near the ship that sent the waves in billows surging against her side, and athwart the port-hole window of my cabin. There were quick, alert steps on the deck above me, an exclamation from the steward, and the next moment he and Captain Reid entered the cabin, took the children hurriedly from their beds, and beckoned me to follow. Mary preferred remaining below in prayer to the Holy Virgin, who the captain told her, with his hideous, grim humor, as he left her at her devotions, had never been known to steer a ship.

As we ascended to the deck, another cannon-ball ploughed up the waves close beside us, and then another just glanced from the waters which it scarcely touched, ricocheted obliquely upward, and passed over the little craft, heaving up the billows as high as the deck on the other side.

The captain uttered an ugly oath, and cast an uglier look leeward. There lay the black-muzzled monster, not farther off than three miles, breathing annihilation from deck and port-hole. It was in this moment that my admiration for the discipline and cool bravery of the Lynx's crew became fully aroused. There was no helter-skelter, no obvious hurry - in fact, no asking orders or receiving any. As though impelled by some invisible power of machinery that acted in exact unison, the men fell to their posts with faces of demoniac recklessness and hands of hard, tense nerve.

A slight quiver passed over the deck from below, and in a few minutes the little steamer shot straight away from her enemy like an
arrow from a bow.

Captain Reid came and sat beside me on a bale of cotton and a lighted a cigar with a steady hand, smoking with kind of condensed fury that bespoke the excitement of the inner man. The cannon now began to boom across the waters with quick successive strokes, and the sea soon became a bed of white, impetuous foam between the ships as the big one quickened speed and bore down on the little one with fierce determination. The man at the wheel spoke at this juncture of affairs— the first order asked on ship.

"The Rhode Island hovers the track, captain; she is sending me out of my course. Must I keep straight ahead or cross her?"

"Get well ahead first, then cross her track and keep straight in the Bermuda course. Cross her-damned quick, too, when you do, or she'll send you to hell."

Then to the deck hands—

"Lighten the ship. Throw sixty bales of cotton overboard."

The order was obey with lightening like rapidity. The little ship rose slightly out of the water and her speed became something marvelous, leaving a track behind her that furrowed the ocean like a plowshare ere the angry foam obliterated it.

"The admiral shoots d----d badly." remarked Captain Reid. "With his guns I could put a ball into a flock of gulls at four miles."

He was scanning the enemy through his long glass, and the shots were now falling shorter, though the formidable machine was cleaving the waters in as quick a pursuit as a gradual rise of steam will permit a man-of-war.

He waved his hand in sidewise sweep without removing his glass as he spoke, and the man at the wheel instantly turned the Lynx direct to the left.

"Now we'll get it, if we are to have it at all," our grim captain remarked with his worst frown on and his lower jaw savagely set.

Then he went to the stern gangway and spoke a few soft foreign words below. There came no verbal response, but immediately the combined odor of resin and grease rose to the deck, and the ship made a fresh bound over the waters, graceful as a swan and rapid as a swallow.

It was an intense moment.

The foam rose in hillocks, catching the sun's rays upon their crests as they broke in iridescent flakes against the stern of the gallant little ship.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the captain with his peculiar guttural savagery of tone. The shots aimed at her sides had fallen to the rear of the Lynx and ere the guns fired another round she was well ahead.

After this a few desultory shots came over the waters, sullenly, at long intervals, and then the firing ceased. The captain took a survey of the enemy, which lasted many minutes, as if to acquaint himself with the old admiral's exact intentions. Then he lay aside his glass and went down the stern gangway. When he came up again, two foreign-looking brown men, with gentle eyes and oval faces, were with him. They were naked to the waist and looked totally exhausted. The steward came up from the cabin
with two bottles of champagne, and poured wine down their throats as they fell upon the cotton-bales; then two sailors fell to work on them with soft flesh-brushes. They crooned forth a pathetic lingo, as they lay in inert heaps in the hands of their benefactors, and Captain Reid stood by in evident solicitude. "Those are my fire-dogs," he explained, in answer to my inquiring gaze."They are Hindoos."

"Poor creatures!" I exclaimed.

"They are the finest firemen in the world," he replied exultantly."I have four of them. When we take two away, we put in the other two; and it's hot work down there between the fan and the fires, feeding on turpentine and bacon." Then scanning the sea again,"They are going to have tough work, too, today: the admiral is giving me chase; he's getting up to his top speed, and the stars and stripes are flying in my very face from the mizzen-head."

"But can a heavy man-of-war run even with the Lynx?"

"I don't know yet. We've got ahead in the start because we are a light craft. We carry only six hundred tons burden, and some of that is in the sea. So we've put six miles between, out of gun-range. And now comes the mettle of the race."

It was the beginning of a breathless, terrible race- a day never to be blotted from memory.

It was mid-June weather, and the sun's heat in the Gulf Stream as the day advanced to its meridian became something appalling. Awnings were put up on deck, and rush mats spread down to protect the feet somewhat from the scorching boards.

There were no orders asked.

Everything was in shape for flight, and save for an occasional oath from our ship's head as he scanned his enemy fast following in his rear, no words were spoken. The Lynx was at her best, and we all knew that the loosening of the screw, the wavering of one hand at his post, one moment's failing of a fireman, and all was lost! The children had been carried below when the firing ceased. I sat by the captain on the deck, and with him silently watched the enemy.

As we neared the tropics the sea lay beneath the sun like molten glass. Not a breath of air stirred the waves, and the atmosphere of the ship's deck became that of a heated furnace. No ice was allowed during those interminable hours for fear of cramp or congestion and the nauseous odors from below destroyed all desire for food.

Onward fled the little ship like a bird- indeed, now scarce touching the waters; but the sun seemed to stand still, even as the time passed. At four o'clock the glare was as intense as at twelve. At that hour the firemen were relieved and brought up, receiving the same attentions as their mates before them; this time Captain Reid assisted in the flesh rubbing.

"How long do you think this chase will continue? I asked when he returned to me.

"Until dusk. As soon as the evening mist gathers I'll be lost to sight."

"The admiral of the Rhode Island knows that: why does he risk so much and at such fearful odds?"
“Oh, he knows what he’s about. He’ll be in the track to catch outcoming craft from Bermuda. That’s his business- to cruise the high seas chasing Confederate prizes. And he’s able to do it. The old fellow navigates better than he shoots.”

At five o’clock a slight haze sprang up and lay upon the atmosphere like a thin gray veil.

At half past six Captain Reid came up to me and took off his hat with something of the air of a grand gentleman.

“Madam,” he said, I’ll land you safe at St. George’s tomorrow morning.” Then he called down to the steward to bring up ice and champagne. “We’ll all drink your health,” he continued. “You have given us no trouble. You have endured in silence, and you are the pluckiest woman I ever met. May you live long and prosper.” Then a cheer went up from the throats of the Lynx’s crew that floated out upon the soft evening breeze, hovering and echoing about the ship like pretty music.

Worn out with the exhaustion that follows intense physical and mental excitement, I lay down that night with the wonderful soft breeze fanning me from my round, open window and slept the deep, breathless sleep of utter rest.

With the first rays of sun I awoke next morning.

The ship lay motionless.

“The captain desires your presence on deck,” sounded the steward’s voice outside my cabin door. I dressed and hastened above. A sense of enchantment lay around and before me.

We were in St. George’s harbor, a round, basin-shaped body of water shut in from the sea by towering black shafts of rock through which nature had cleft wide enough to admit ships to pass. The water of the harbor was as clear and blue as the waters of the Mediterranean, and upon its bosom the ships of every nation lay moored together in picturesque groupings. In front of us the island of St. George’s rose from the tiny white village at its base to mountain height, crowned from base to summit with the gorgeous growth and blossoming of a tropical clime. Amid the dense foliage of the orange, the magnolia, the oleander, and the myrtle, lovely villas and cottages sat jauntily; while gay-plummaged birds flitted about in the rosy morning light among the flowers. The hum of joyous, peaceful life floated out from the gay pinioned village below, while far above on the mountain summit stood in splendid relief against the sky the grand observatory, from which proudly waved the flag of Great Britain.
Chart of the Cape Fear approaches to Wilmington.
Civil War Naval Chronology, Archives Library

Crew exercising a Dahlgren gun on board Union gunboat.
Civil War Naval Chronology, Archives Library

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