



BY

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Prayer and the prayer gauge

P R A Y E R,
AND THE
P R A Y E R G A U G E.

BY

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PRAYER.

BUT for the invitation of several pastors, and of others whose opinion I respect, and whose wishes I regard, I should not have thought of entering into the discussion on the subject of prayer that is now going on. I come now in no spirit of controversy. My simple wish is to aid candid minds on a subject of vital interest, and certainly not without its difficulties.

Let us then, first, look at the subject itself; and afterward at the special difficulties, not new, but made prominent at the present time.

The term "prayer," as it is ordinarily

used, includes worship—adoration, praise, confession, thanksgiving. These may be acceptable to God, and useful to ourselves in their reflex influence, but they, together with all considerations of reflex influence, are to be excluded from the present discussion. I propose, as we are asked to do, to consider prayer solely as petition, and petition as a means of obtaining that for which we ask. If it be not that, I have no plea to make for it.

In prayer regarded as petition, we hope for some change that would not have been without the prayer. We find that we can change events and their issues in other ways. Despite any difficulties that may be raised about the unchangeable laws of nature, or the immutability of God, we all know that it lies with us to use means that will

cause events and their issues to be different from what they would have been if we had not used those means. If not, there is an end to all rational activity. The only question is, whether prayer is one of those means at all; and if so, to what extent.

To decide this, we naturally inquire how it is that changes are produced. If we notice, we shall observe that the changes around us come in two ways. They come either by what we call immutable law, or by the action of free will. Immutable law belongs to matter. There, with the exception of a miracle, we not only acknowledge that it is, but claim that it is. The law of matter, called the first law of motion, or sometimes the law of inertia, that is, that a body will continue at rest, or in a state of uniform

motion, until it is caused to change its state by some external force, is an immutable law. If I lay my watch on the desk before me, it will lie there forever unless removed by some external force. If this and other laws of matter were not immutable, there would be no basis for physical science. Without this, experience would lose its value.

Free-will, on the other hand, belongs to mind, and when we come to that, we come into a different region. In matter, as subject to law, there is necessity, and only that. There is no room for an alternative. The stone cannot roll half-way down the hill and then turn round and roll back. But in freedom there is no necessity. The very term precludes it. There is room for an alternative. Accordingly science, in the sense of the

physicist, can never come into this region. The phenomena are wholly different, and I must beg you to keep these regions distinct, for the discussion will turn very much upon the relation of one of them to the other—the relation of free-will to physical law.

What the ultimate relation of will is to what we call immutable law, but which we know only as uniformity within a limited period, we do not now stop to inquire. There are those, and I am of the number, who believe that these uniformities of nature, called laws, may be ultimately resolved into will; but for the purpose of this discussion they are to be accepted as uniformities, as given quantities, and, except by miracle, immutable while the present system stands.

Changes, then, may be wrought, I

will not say *by* law, for I cannot conceive of law as an agent, or by force, which is equally an abstraction, but by some agent possessing force and acting uniformly. The river runs, and the ice-berg floats downward from the pole by the law of gravitation. On the other hand, changes are produced by will. The will of man comes between these laws and their results as they would be without that will. Without his will the stream would flow on uniformly. By the interposition of that will it is made to set back and pour over a dam, and turn his water-wheel. He stands at the sluiceway, and by a slight movement directs the flood at his will. This you will observe he does, and knows that he can do, through the very immutability of the laws of gravitation and fluidity. It is by

this only that he halts them, and breaks them into his service. Inflexible laws in their relation to will are like inflexible sticks of timber, and are all the more serviceable for their inflexibility provided they admit of a varying adjustment among themselves. This they do admit. By the interposition of will, inflexible sticks of timber may be arranged into very different shapes, and in the same way inflexible laws may be so adjusted among themselves as to work out very different results.

But, in speaking of the inter-action of will with fixed law in producing changes and results, we have need to clear the ground by defining our terms. For want of this men have talked and written at cross purposes. There are three terms especially, the meaning of

which, at least as we shall use them, we need to fix. These are nature, or natural, supernatural and miraculous.

And first, of nature. By this we mean that region of fixed law of which I have spoken, the region of necessity, the region where nothing begins to be in any thing that is not caused by something external to itself. There is in it no power of originating any thing: no choice, no will, no freedom. This, as I have said, is the region of physical science.

By the supernatural we mean, not, as some say, what God only can do; nor, as others say, what beings superior to man only can do, but we mean just what the name implies, a region above nature. We mean a region in which action can be originated, a region of

will, of choice, of personality, one from which nature can be looked down upon, and comprehended and controlled. This, of course, makes the actions of man supernatural so far as they are free. There are those who object to this, but they do not seem to see that it is only thus that we can find a distinction in *kind*, and so really separate the natural from the supernatural, and the supernatural from the miraculous. When I raise this book I overcome a law of nature, a law that was holding it down. I do what nature never could have done, and therefore, as originating the action, what is above nature or supernatural. As originating in free-will that act is just as supernatural, just as much out of and beyond any power of nature, as it would be for an angel to descend and

appear on this platform. That would be supernatural, but not miraculous. Unless we make a miracle merely a wonder, the appearance of the angels to the shepherds was not a miracle.

What, then, would be miraculous? What is a miracle? In the Bible the supernatural and the miraculous are not carefully distinguished. Indeed, the word supernatural is not in the Bible at all. The two are grouped as "signs," "wonders," and miracles," but we need to find a distinction in kind. In itself a miracle is not different from any other event. That an event should become a miracle requires two things: First, there must be laws of nature previously established, and those laws must be transcended. In the beginning, before the laws of nature were

established, a miracle was impossible. The creation of the world was not a miracle. And, second, the laws of nature must be transcended by a direct act of will. If I toss this book into the air it will fall by the law of gravitation. That is natural. If I suspend it from the ceiling by a cord, I counteract the law of gravitation by the stronger law of cohesion, and so change the result. This is not a miracle, because I use one law of nature to counteract another. It is all natural, except that act of intervention by which the counteraction is brought about. That is supernatural, but not miraculous. But if now I were to toss the book into the air, and, by a direct act of my will, with no means intervening, it were to remain suspended, that would

be a miracle. There would be no violation or suspension of any law of nature, as some suppose there must be, in a miracle. Gravitation would act as before, as it did when the book was suspended by a cord, but would, as in that case, be overcome by a stronger force. In both cases there is an intervention of will. The difference is, that in the one case the law is overcome by a stronger law, through an adjustment made by intelligence and will; in the other case will acts directly. A miracle, then, will be a physical effect in which a law of nature is overcome, or the elements of nature are controlled by a direct act of will. This reveals a personal power *above* nature, which a uniform law, that *is*, nature, could not do. Such was the feeding of the five

thousand by Christ, and his walking on the water. According to this, so far as the dividing of the Red Sea was due to the east wind, it was not a miracle. It was a wonder, a marvel like the effects of fire and of tornadoes, which are such that but for the evidence of our senses we could not believe them. It was supernatural, and, under the circumstances, as signally an interposition of God as if it had been a miracle, but that it was not.

But is it possible that will can act thus? The physicist says no. Why? For no other reason apparently but that his own will cannot do it. Certainly it is not given us to control nature, except through her laws. We conquer her by obeying them. But, so far as we can see, our wills must have direct

power over some of the matter in our bodies; and as the essence of a miracle consists in a revelation of the direct power of a personal will as a force superior in the control of matter to the laws of nature, we have only to suppose the will of God to have a relation to nature, like that of our wills to this matter in our bodies, and the power of miracles would follow of course. Who shall say that this is not so? What do we know of the relation of the will of God to his universe?

With the views now stated all will not agree. I give them as my own, and pass on to consider how it is that we are trained up from the first, and need to abide permanently, in connection with these two great and only methods of producing changes—immutable law, and

will. The measure of a man's power is his ability to produce changes. How does nature teach us to produce them?

From our earliest recollection our wants have been supplied and our wishes met in two ways; either by our own exertions, or by our asking others to exert themselves for us. Of these, dependence on a person, which is virtually asking, comes first, and was the more prominent in our earlier years, but as we grew up, they were inseparably blended in our training. If our parents were wise they did not do for us what we could do for ourselves. They knew that the muscles and mental faculties are developed only as they are exercised, and for our sakes, even though we asked them, they refused to help us when we could help ourselves.

That was the principle, or should have been, never to help us so as to encourage indolence or inefficiency. But when we could not help ourselves, when the plaything was too high, or the stick too heavy, or the knot too hard, and especially in falls and bruises and sickness, they would help us if we asked. If we were hungry, and asked for bread, they did not give us a stone. And so, helping ourselves, and getting help by asking it—sometimes getting it, and sometimes not, we grew up, our wants being supplied in these two methods. Can any thing better be conceived for the training of the whole man—for awakening intellect, for arousing energy, for calling out the affections?

Now observe that, when we helped ourselves, we brought about changes

through the fixed laws of nature. We were trained under them. We wished to be warmed. We went to the fire, and by a fixed law of nature, we were warmed. We wished to slide down hill, and, when we had made the adjustment, by an immutable law, the sled went. Here, doing our part, we invariably got what we wanted. We knew we should. We got it ourselves, and we thanked nobody. We were in the region of invariable and impersonal law, and we could not thank that. But when we asked, all this was changed; we were in the region of will, and looked for the changes desired directly or indirectly from that. We did not suppose a miracle would be wrought, but we knew our parents had a wider range of control over the immutable forces than we had, and we hoped for aid through

that. We did not appeal to "physical energy," or to any "equivalent of such energy," but to affection and will. We could never be sure that our requests would be granted. For our own sakes some of them ought not to have been; but, if they were granted, there was room, and a call for gratitude and love. So much for our training under law in childhood.

But now we have reached manhood. Parents have passed away; but the laws of nature abide. The ground and process of our training under them continue. As we become more acquainted with these laws the more admirable do they seem, and the training under them becomes richer in its fruits, and more beneficent. And is the other great side and element of our training to drop entirely away?

Is there nothing in this universe that can sustain that also, and make it more broad and more blessed? Here comes the man of science, and says: "No, that is all passed; you are a man now. Henceforth only law remains to you. If there be a God, as perhaps there is, he must always be unknown. He is, in fact, unknowable. His plans are too vast; he is too high to regard you or your wishes." But if the man of science says this, not so says the instinct of humanity in the hour of its trouble. Not so say "they that go down to the sea in ships when they mount up to the heaven and go down again to the depths, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble." Not so says the heart of the mother when the balances tremble between the life and death

of her child. If the man of science says that, not so says the Bible. Speaking through the voice of Him who spoke as never man spoke, that says, "Ask, and ye shall receive." It says, "Pray without ceasing." It says, "Praying always with all prayer." It says, "In every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." It does just what we should expect a true system would do. It continues, and makes provision for our discipline on the side of the affections. It enlarges the sphere of that discipline and brings it out into grander proportions. It says, "Our Father which art in heaven." That is enough. We are not now turned over to immutable and unsympathizing law. We have a Father in heaven. While one part of our

nature is trained up and permanently provided for, the other is not left to pine and wither in hopeless emaciation. Once more, if the man of science says that, not so says the broader-minded philosopher, who comprehends all the aspects and needs of our manifold humanity. The spirit of a true philosophy, its very beginning, as is well known, is a child-like spirit. It is also comprehensive, looking on all sides. The true philosopher combines in himself the philosopher and the child—the breadth of the one and the docility of the other. That aspect of life and form of culture, therefore, which belongs to science he does not neglect. He gives it its place. Looking at the constitution and the laws of nature, its balancings and adjustments, its extent and its ongoing, the

philosopher that is in him, and that he is, says intelligently, "Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty." Looking at the constitution and laws of the moral world, more marvelous still, and at God's dealings with him in that, the child that is in him and that he is, says, "Just and true are Thy ways, thou King of Saints." And so the circle is complete. Trained under law to work, and under parents to ask, all the wants of our nature are met; and there is provision for their being met while God remains a Father, and His universe stands.

Thus do we reach the great positive point that I wished to make. It is, that as our training up to manhood is under persons by asking, and under law by working, so the full growth and perfec-

tion of our nature require that it should continue to be. This I fully believe; and I cannot express my sense of the unwisdom of mere scientists who place themselves under the training of impersonal law to the exclusion of that higher and better training which is under personality.

I have now presented the ground on which, as I suppose, we may consistently pray; and not for spiritual blessings only, for I seek no shelter under them, but also for temporal blessings—for relief from sickness, and for rain. The question, as I said, turns upon the relation of the power of will to the laws of nature. If that relation be what I have stated, I see no difficulty about it. As I have stated in the chapter on prayer in "The Law of Love," it is

clearly competent to any will, by what the Duke of Argyle calls "a variable combination of invariable forces," to change the order of events without deranging or in any way interfering with the order of nature. Man can do it; I can do it; you can do it; it is represented in the Scriptures that angels can do it; and yet we are called upon to believe that God cannot do it. Prof. Tyndall, while repelling the charge of denying that God can answer such prayers at all, yet does deny that he can answer them without a miracle. He says expressly, "that without a disturbance of natural law quite as serious as the stoppage of an eclipse, or the rolling of the St. Lawrence up the Falls of Niagara, no act of humiliation, individual or national, could call one shower

from heaven, or deflect toward us a single beam of the sun."*

We now proceed, as was proposed, to look at the special difficulties made prominent at the present time.

In doing this, as my invitation referred particularly to the views of Prof. Tyndall, I shall be expected to notice them. And in looking into those views we are led, first, to inquire how far the professor is consistent with himself. In his latest communication on the subject he says: "The theory that the system of nature is under the control of a being who changes phenomena in compliance with the prayers of men is, in my opinion, a perfectly legitimate one. * * * It is a matter of experience that an earthly father, who is at the same time

* Fragments of Science, I-39.

both wise and tender, listens to the requests of his children and, if they do not ask amiss, takes pleasure in granting their requests. We know also that this compliance extends to the alteration, within certain limits, of the current events of earth. With this suggestion offered by experience, it is no departure from scientific method to place behind natural phenomena a Universal Father who, in answer to the prayers of his children, alters the currents of those phenomena. Thus far theology and science go hand in hand." Now I put it to you whether this language fairly interpreted, interpreted so as to mean anything at all, does not cover the whole ground I have claimed. According to this it is not irrational, not even unscientific, "to place behind natural phe-

nomena a Universal Father, who, in answer to the prayers of his children, alters the currents of those phenomena"—phenomena, observe, not what passes within the mind, but physical events. I ask nothing more, but I do ask on what ground he, as a philosopher, can say this and at the same time deny, as he does in this same connection, that phenomena are thus changed? Has he applied any test? He does not claim that he has. On what ground does he say here that God can change the currents of phenomena, as an earthly father can, in answer to prayer, and say elsewhere that he can do it only by doing what is equivalent to "the rolling of the St. Lawrence up the Falls of Niagara"? That question I cannot answer.

But leaving the point of consistency as of little moment, we turn to his denial of the fact of physical changes through prayer. And here, that I may not misrepresent him, I will state the case at length as he gives it. "The bone of contention," he says, "is *the physical value of prayer*. It is not my wish to excite surprise, much less to draw forth protest by the employment of this phrase. I would simply ask any intelligent person to look the problem honestly and steadily in the face, and then to say whether, in the estimation of the great body of those who sincerely resort to it, prayer does not, at all events, upon special occasions, invoke a power which checks and augments the descent of rain, which changes the force and direction of winds, which af-

fects the growth of corn, and the health of men and cattle—a power, in short, which, when appealed to under pressing circumstances, produces the precise effects caused by physical energy in the ordinary course of things. To any person who deals sincerely with the subject, and refuses to blur his moral vision by intellectual subtleties”—I should like to know what moral vision has to do with it—“this, I think, will appear a true statement of the case. It is under this aspect alone that the scientific student, so far as I represent him, has any wish to meddle with prayer. Forced upon his attention as a form of physical energy, or as the equivalent of such energy, he claims the right of subjecting it to those methods of examination from which all our present

knowledge of the physical universe is derived.”

This is defiantly, and I doubt not, sincerely put, but I hope to show you that it involves an entire misapprehension, and therefore misrepresentation of the case. For what, I ask, does he mean by speaking of prayer as “a physical energy, or an equivalent of that energy”? Let me illustrate: a man comes to me, and, to take examples given by himself, asks me to make his corn grow. I say to him, I will, and I sprinkle over it a certain fine powder called plaster, and, by immutable law, the plaster draws the ammonia from the atmosphere, and he gets two bushels where he would have got one. Again he asks me to change the force and direction of the wind. I say I will, and I set fire to Troy, and raise

a breeze directly, and the wind comes rushing in from all directions. And what I do here is far-reaching. Not only do I change the relative position, but, according to the physicist, I change the actual position of every particle of the ocean of atmosphere that surrounds this globe. For aught I know, I may cause it to rain in China. At any rate it only needs that Troy should be large enough, and I should cause it to rain here. Did the man then, in appealing to me, appeal to any form of physical energy, or to any equivalent of that energy? No, he appealed to intelligence and will, to a person who might or might not, as we should choose, turn that energy in the direction desired. That is all there is to it. There is no appeal to any physical energy, or any thing like it. The pro-

fessor seems to think that religious persons suppose that prayer can be applied to corn in some such way as plaster can. No, they only suppose that there may be more ways than one of getting down the ammonia, and that "the universal Father," to use his own words, "can change phenomena in compliance with the prayers of men," and without a miracle, quite as easily as man can.

This failure on the part of Prof. Tyndall to apprehend the question rightly, and still more his failure to find the distinction between the supernatural and the miraculous, sufficiently account for the difficulty he finds in connecting prayer in any way with physical results. He could not admit a miracle; he ought not. He could not see how such results could come without that. That he failed to

draw the line between the supernatural and the miraculous should hardly be set down to his discredit, since theologians are not agreed about it.

We now pass to the next point, and that is the prayer *gauge*, as it has been called, or the scientific test of the value of prayer. In respect to this, Prof. Tyndall agrees with his friend who proposed it, and complains that "it seems impossible to propose a verification of their theory which does not arouse resentment in theological minds." But it is just at this point that Prof. Tyndall, together with his friend, shows most fully that he fails to comprehend the elements with which he is dealing. Such a proposal could not be made by any one comprehending those elements, because, in its very nature, the test is

not applicable to the thing to be tested by it. Let me illustrate again. Some discourses are weighty, and some are heavy, but you would not think of testing either the weight or the heaviness by a pair of scales. We hear of great thoughts, but no one would think of measuring them by a square and compass. No one would think of selling wheat by the yard. Just as preposterous is it to think of a scientific test of the value of prayer in any of its forms. A scientific test implies necessity, and absolute uniformity. Without these it would not be a scientific test. But these can have no application to any thing into which free-will comes, as it always does and must, into answers to prayer. They belong to different regions, and if the subject were not a serious one, the

attempt to transfer the tests fitted to one over into the other would be simply ludicrous. Without uniformity and necessity there can be no scientific test. With these there can be no spiritual world, no choice, no asking even, and no room for gratitude and love. All that need be said is that the test proposed has no relation to the conditions of the problem. The value of prayer can be tested by us just as the value of asking can be tested by children, and in no other way.

It may also be said, as it has been, that the application of the proposed test is impossible. It is so clearly so that the proposal of it seems like mere trifling. Who can so isolate any set of human beings from their Maker and from human sympathy as to be sure that no prayer shall go up from themselves, or

from others, that God will accept? The application of the test is as impossible as the test itself is inapplicable. But for the indorsement of Prof. Tyndall, the proposal of such a test would probably have been attributed to a wag with a long face, and have excited no serious notice.

But it is not by science alone that Prof. Tyndall would disprove any connection between prayer and physical results, but also by that saying of our Saviour that God "maketh his sun to shine on the evil and on the good, and sendeth his rain on the just and on the unjust." Can the professor really believe that in this passage our Saviour means to teach a doctrine of prayer identical with his own? So it would seem. But the passage has nothing to do with prayer, and in quoting it he simply makes a false

issue, evidently without intending it, by confounding character with asking, as a means of good. Christ says that God does not give certain things on the ground of character. Prof. Tyndall says, and claims that Christ says, that he does not give them on the ground of asking, which is a wholly different thing. How this is we may see by what Christ himself did. He turned none away. He wrought miracles for the evil and the good equally, just as God makes his sun to shine; but with scarcely an exception, he wrought them only for those who asked. And may not God, in the same way, hear the prayers of those who come to Him for special favors—really come whether they are good or evil? If not, it is sad for us. That he will is just what Christ taught, if we

look at his teachings as a whole. In the same discourse, comparing God to an earthly father, he said, and without restriction, "Ask, and it shall be given you." He said that God would give "*good things* to them that ask him." He taught us, in the Lord's prayer, to pray for daily bread, and that we might be delivered from evil, both of which imply interposition in regard to physical events. Fairly interpreted, the whole teachings, as well as the examples of Christ, are in direct opposition to the view in question.

There is one point more. Both Prof. Tyndall and his friend seem anxious to know what men may pray for, and what not. They are troubled at the spectacles of weakness and folly that are seen in human prayer, and talk

about a "purification"—a narrowing of the field of prayer as we come to apprehend more fully the universality and the immutability of law. It is doubtless true that prayer is modified as men become better informed. Why? Not from any apprehended incompatibility of law with prayer, but for the same reason that a well-informed child does not ask for the moon as a plaything. If what has been said be correct, there is nothing in reason or in science to prevent our taking the Bible as our guide in this. That opens a wide domain to prayer; it makes it the breath of Christian life. It says, as I have said before, "In *every thing*, by prayer and supplication;" *supplication*, you see—*asking*—the apostle was not, as some seem to be now, afraid of that, as if it

were less disinterested and dignified than worship—"in every thing by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your *requests* be made known unto God." But, doing this, it guards against any thing fanatical, or foolish, or weak, by inculcating the spirit of children. It is easy, indeed, to bring examples of weakness and folly in connection with prayer, and to hold them up to ridicule or to pity. Such examples there have always been, and not only of these, but of hypocrisy and wickedness. There were such in our Saviour's time, and he rebuked them. There are such now, especially in countries where the Bible is not known, or is withheld from the people. But give a man the Bible and the spirit of a child, and there is no danger that he will go far amiss in his petitions.

To these there will be two limitations. First. Except under special direction, such a man could not ask God for a miracle, for the same reason that a child could not ask his father to burn the house down. The regular order of nature is the house we live in. It could not be disturbed by frequent miracles, and be fit for the training of rational beings.

Second. Neither could he ask for any thing, under the laws of nature, that would contravene the object of those laws. Whatever we can do for ourselves under those laws God expects us to do; it is for our own good that we should do it. We were put under them that we might do it; it is precisely here as with the parent and child. Is the child cold? Let him get up and go to the fire. If he will not do that, let him suffer; and, beg as he may, the

wise parent will let him suffer, and, perhaps, punish him too, before he will take him up and carry him. Let the man do what he can under natural law. Recognizing God in that, his work will be prayer. Let him do what he can and then pray, and God will hear him. "God helps those who help themselves," but we cannot expect him to do any thing that would encourage needless ignorance, or shiftlessness, or inefficiency. All other things such a man might ask, but he would ask for nothing absolutely except the Holy Spirit and His fruits. Other things he would ask in subserviency to the will of his Heavenly Father. And such a man would have, not only the precepts of the Bible for his guide, and the example of good men, but also the example of Him who prayed so earnestly that "His sweat was as it were great

drops of blood falling to the ground," and at the same time with a submission so absolute as to say, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." Under such guidance, together with the promised aid of the Holy Spirit, we may hope that prayer will be as free from imperfection as human infirmity will permit any thing to be.

I have thus taken up, point by point, the difficulties presented by Prof. Tyndall, and as he presented them. The result I leave with you. I have no fear of science. I believe in it and welcome it. I have no fear of immutable law. Rightly understood—understood so that I can control it and turn it to my purpose—I believe in and welcome that; but I do not believe in that conception of physical law that puts it above God, or that makes it, in any way, other than

an instrument flexible in his hands. I do not believe in any mode of conceiving, as is constantly done, of the attributes of God in such a way that we give infinity in one direction only to impose limits in another. This is the mistake of pantheism. Especially do I not believe in any mode of conceiving of his natural attributes, as his greatness and his immutability, in such a way as to impose limits upon those attributes of a Father by which He can hear the cry of his children, and enter with the fullest sympathy into all their wants, and supply them. "Behold the fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns, yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?"

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