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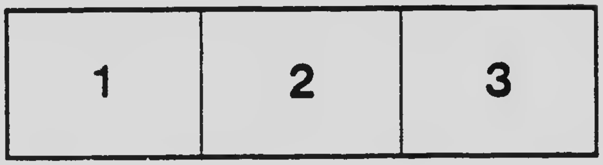

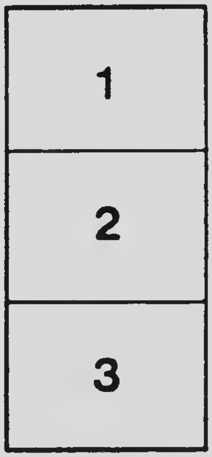

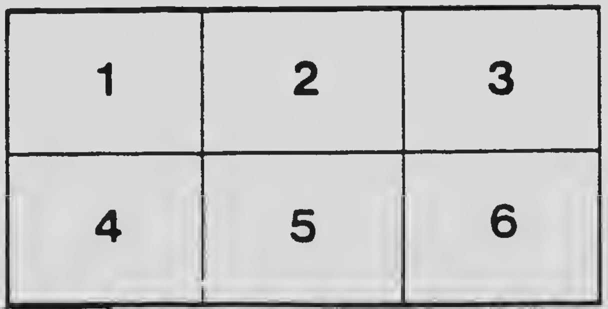

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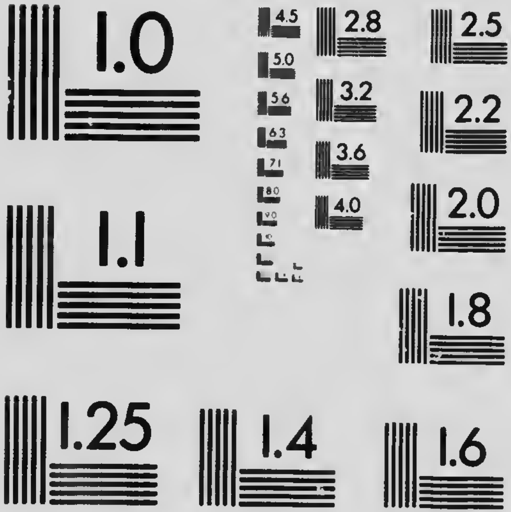
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THE

Advantages and Disadvantages of Blindness

A LECTURE

ADDRESSED TO THE BLIND

BY

E. B F. ROBINSON, B.A.

Author of 'the True Sphere of the Blind."

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The Advantages and Disadvantages

OF

Blindness.

THE disadvantages of blindness, many will imagine they understand perfectly, and many will err; many, too, will smile and wonder incredulously at the notion of our having advantages. It is, and has always been, the portion of the many to imagine, to wonder, and to err. You laugh, you who know how this may be specifically applied, but remember, in every jest there is a tragic element; out of this very conceit springs one of our greatest disadvantages. Fixed ideas, ideas of which people are so sure that they will not inquire further, but which are nevertheless based upon a fundamental misconception, are of all obstacles to progress the most difficult to remove. A great many people are absolutely certain that they understand our position when they have, as a matter of fact, only vague notions of the nature of our limitation. A recent experience of mine will serve to show how such misapprehensions may affect us.

Those personally acquainted with me know how fond I am of an argument. A short time ago, I came upon a group of men discussing politics. I listened long enough, the subject interested me, and, of course, I must needs express my view, supporting it by citing some newspaper comments. Usually my opinions are received with as much grace of assent and dissent as those of ordinary men, but on that occasion I was brought up sharply with "poor fellow! I suppose somebody told him that trash was in the papers." And it is by him, and his kind, that our disadvantages are understood perfectly!

Such an experience is of no great consequence, to be sure, nor do I mean to say that many persons are guilty of misjudging us exactly so, but in one way or another similar mistakes are constantly being made. Some people shout at us, absurdly confusing the loss of one sense with that of another, a curious psychological phenomenon perhaps, but of too frequent occurrence with us to excite even passing amusement. Others make merry over our using the verb, to see, forgetting that in the common speech of men that verb is not so restricted as to prevent a blind person's employing it, without any such glaring contradiction as that so facetiously discovered. Of course, these are the mistakes of the vulgar, and that is a comfort. It is one of the blessings of refinement, this feeling of being able to look down on the vulgar, this considering where it comes from; still, the mules kick hard, and there are so many of them in this world. Where is the line to be drawn between the refined and the vulgar? Generally speaking, the vulgar includes all those who do or say disagreeable things to us. This definition is so pre-eminently satisfactory in general that it would be folly in us to attempt another, even if it should lead us to class as vulgar some people who ordinarily rank among the refined.

Many of you remember the Rev. Dr. G. L. Howie, at one time vice-president of our association, when we were known as the Self-help Club. Dr. Howie is a native of Syria, and was educated in Edinburgh for the ministry of the Church of Scotland. While pursuing his studies at the university he became blind. Though overwhelmed for a time he soon resolved to continue his work, and did so to such good purpose that he was finally graduated M.A., Ph.D. He was employed in Edinburgh by the Edinburgh Home-teaching Society for the Blind as one of their distributors of embossed books, a labour in which he found great pleasure as well as some profit. Coming to Canada he engaged in missionary work, and at one time was the regular pastor of the Presbyterian Church, at Brussels, Ont., if I remember rightly. I first met him towards the end of my school-days at the Ont. Inst. for the Blind, Brantford, where he came as a guest.

I did not, however, become well acquainted with him until I began to meet him in Toronto at the monthly meetings of the Self-help Club. When we were exchanging experiences after one of those meetings, the Doctor told the incident, the recollection of which led me to mention him here. I may say that it was always difficult to induce Dr. Howie to talk of himself in this way, or in any way directly personal. He would talk of his beloved Syria at any length, but of his own affairs he was most uncommunicative ; consequently, I never knew a great deal about him. He returned to Syria in 1894. His story that evening was short, but very much to the point. A lady of quality on a visit to the School for Blind in Edinburgh expressed great astonishment at the marvellous facility with which the pupils at dinner found their mouths, each his own, quite unassisted, all alone, quite by himself! Milder manifestations of like misunderstanding are of almost daily occurrence in the lives of most of us.

Naturally the question suggests itself why do so many people misapprehend the nature of our limitation? How do so many, not only persons lacking in general culture, but even those of superior education and attainments, come to fall into error in this regard? The causes are not far to seek: in the first place, there is the indifference of the average individual toward blindness; to him, glorying in his strength, blindness seems as remote from him as the poles. It will never touch his life. Why should he study it? and, secondly, our own natural reticence upon the subject, intensified a hundredfold by the hothouse character of our education. It is now generally agreed among moral philosophers that every man is in part the maker, and in part the product, of his time, circumstances, and environment, and nowhere, to my mind, is the truth of this better illustrated than with us. Before we, as a class, can hope to escape we must do own part. We must speak out and tell the world what it is we lack. We must explain the nature of our limitation, and keep on explaining it until a better understanding of our position prevails. The gain many not be ours, but it will help to make it easier for the blind of future generations.

Of course, many of our more obvious disadvantages are understood by everybody. In blindness, all the pleasures of the eyes are lost, the language of smiles and glances, the spectacles of panorama and of drama, the sculptor's and painter's art, the wonders of the firmament, and the greater part of nature's stupendous grandeur and magnificence. These pleasures are completely lost ; there may be compensation, but there is no restitution. I am aware that many persons hold mistaken notions of their powers of vision, conceiving it to be, as Bishop Berkely puts it, "like the Irishman's gun, which was so constructed, he said, that it would shoot around a corner." I am aware, too, that much of what ordinary people see with their eyes reaches us through other channels. Still, in spite of such facts, there is a loss and a great loss, a loss which it is of the utmost importance that we should neither belittle, nor ignore, nor forget. We can, it is true, read about such pleasures, but what we receive is not the actual image, any more than a statute lives and breathes.

The glad smile, the kindly glance, the friendly nod, and the beaming countenance play no small part in the affairs of life, small in themselves they nevertheless contribute largely to greaten the sum of human happiness. It is not life's romances alone that make it what it is, between the great events there is always a multitude of uninteresting details and then a grain of dust in the eye assumes the dimensions of a cobblestone. Brave men, calm and strong in the presence of disaster, often lose heart and temper at a mishap By the very nature of our limitation we are apt to be rendered more careless about the amenities of life. Missing both the effect and the responses we sometimes become forgetful of visible manners. We would be wiser if, instead of allowing ourselves to grow more careless, we were to cultivate the visibly amiable with greater assiduity. The value of fine manners and a good address can hardly be overestimated. A bright smile and a pleased expression help to gain friends. There are no better passports in this world.

However, this visible language has aspects other than:

"If you love me darling,
Tell me with your eyes."

A sighted friend once congratulated me upon this loss. "You," he said, "don't have to close your eyes to shut out this distressing spectacle. The sight of these streets and people hurts my eyes and wearies me." Evidently, he failed to find pleasure in the beaming countenance, and looked upon the glad smile as an illusion or a snare. He was rather a pessimistic sort of chap, mistrustful of his fellows, and may have altogether missed seeing anything of that kind. Again; some years ago, I had the doubtful honour of being presented to the renowned James Mace, proclaimed by his advertisers "retired undefeated heavyweight champion of the world." He gave an exhibiton of his "art" one evening and was so unfortunate as to strike what showmen call a "frost," consequently, when I met him next morning, he was not in the best of humour. "Robinson," he observed, "you're a lucky beggar! if you could see how miserable these people look you would have to leave by the next train as I shall." I need hardly say that such frostbites bias the judgment. I mention these instances, not because I imagine they illustrate any general tendency, but simply to show that the point of view may make a vast difference. In this visible language there are frowns as well as smiles, countenances dark and forbidding as well as beaming, glances hostile as well as friendly; we lose the pleasures, indeed, but we escape the pains, black looks often hurt more than kicks and cuffs, neither are we exposed to "the lust of the eyes," that temptation against which St. John so earnestly inveighs. The truth is that every condition brings with it its own advantages and disadvantages, and may prove a gain or a loss, a blessing or a curse, according to circumstances, depending partly upon environment, and partly upon the mental and moral fibre of the man himself; with every considerable change in age, rank, station, attainment, or condition of life, a new set of temptations and opportunities arises.

In architecture, sculpture, and painting our loss is total; to us, their forms are as though they were not, and their materials hard and unyielding, especially when met with too suddenly. These arts have, indeed, done much for civilization, but they are, as arts, altogether lost upon us. Still, we have music, the sweetest, and poetry, the noblest, of all the arts. We can well afford to do without art's baser forms, and perhaps, our very limitation helps many of us to an appreciation of poetry and music to which we could never have attained had not blindness intervened. The response to melody and verse thus quickened in us, to my mind, more than compensates for any loss the dumb arts may entail. To be convinced of the reality of this advantage we have only to compare ourselves with those whose circumstances resemble ours in other respects ; not that our relatives, friends, and neighbors are one whit less emotional, or less intelligent, but they are hampered by the visible, encompassed by a sea of contingent distractions.

Chief among such distractions are outdoor sports and pastimes, and from most of these our limitation cuts us off entirely. I regret this loss exceedingly, and at times resent not being able to participate in, or even witness, certain outdoor sports, lacrosse, baseball, football, tennis, bowls, etc. ; but when I remember my advantages, I am content. I go to a match, by listening attentively I obtain a general idea of what goes on, but the details escape me, and I am tempted to envy both players and spectators. I begin to feel sorry for myself, and, to rebuke the waves of self-pity surging up to overwhelm me, I say to myself, "you are acquainted with Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Scott, Byron, Tennyson, and a host of others

> "On Fame's eternall Beadroll worthie to
> be fyled;"

many of these people have only their games !" Were I as fortunate as some of you I might add Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Handel, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, --but, alas, I have only a bowing acquaintance with those gentlemen.

However the pleasures of field-sports are not entirely lost, our quick ear, which is one of our advantages, may be put to good use at places of public amusement not usually frequented by us. I find that I can get some enjoyment out of lacrosse matches, a little out of football, but most of all out of baseball, especially when the umpire has good lungs. I have attended horse-races, too, it may be wicked but it is very exciting. I will not say that at horse-races, lacrosse matches, and the like, I can follow the events in detail, or even with any degree of accuracy, yet from the shouts and comments of the crowd, of the small boys especially, I can obtain a correct general notion of the proceedings. Intermittent shouting, nothing doing; some applause, visitors doing well; faint shouts with cries of protest, visitors doing too well; odd shouts, a sudden pause, breath caught, suspense silence, groans, the visitors score––or great applause, the goal is saved––loud shouts, we are doing well: louder shouts, we are doing very well, indeed; great excitement, cries of "shoot, shoot!" there!" tremendous shouting long continued––that's us!

"The grammar's bad, but, oh my son,
I wish I 'd did what Dewey done !"
John Kendrick Bangs.

The visitors, however, sometimes bring a crowd with them, which, while it is doubtless good for the game, makes it bad for us; one cannot be so certain as to who is doing well. Nevertheless, such resorts at all times afford grand opportunities for the study of human nature. The general excitement causes calm dignified men to throw aside reserve and behave like boys ; gentle maidens lose their shyness, voice surprising sentiments, and advise measures drastic to the point of sudden death, "kill him !" We may miss much of the game, but the people, their humours and remarks, make good entertainment. Many of you are, I know, patrons of the threatre, try the arena of sports, induce, if possible, a sighted friend to accompany you, one who knows the game, or one who thinks he knows, no matter, the important thing is to be put in touch with the events.

Speaking of our quick ear reminds me of a certain acquaintance of mine who never fails to go into ecstasies of wonder and admiration at my being able to name him the moment I hear his voice. I am willing to admit that it is just a little remarkable how quickly and how unerringly many of us can distinguish voices, even when we have not heard them for years, still it is no more remarkable than the memory for faces under normal conditions, the recognition of features at sight, even after years of absence. However, in this instance, my recognition of the man by his voice is very very wonderful. He's a man I meet often, his voice is like, like, like—well, it is a voice, unique, midly suggestive of distant thunder, and about as unmistakable as the voice of the fog-horn.

Our loss in the pleasures of spectacular arts and performances pales into insignificance in the contemplation of the lost splendors of nature, mountain, lake and river scenery, sunrise, sunset, moonlight, starlight, twilight dawn—all the glories of the heavens and the earth. I mourn the lost wonders of the firmament, those wonders of the firmament that caused Napoleon "looking up into the stars," to inquire of the atheists, "but who made all that?" that forced even John Stuart Mill to admit that for a creator the argument from design was very strong. To the words of Addison's *Cato* "if there's a power above us (and that there is all nature cries aloud through all her works,)" we must add, but not through all to us. Then, too, there are the lost beauties of man's form and features, of the flight and plumage of birds, of the gambols and fur of beasts ; of flowers, bud, blossom, bloom, of the whole color scheme of nature in light, hue, tint, and shade. Purple, blue, and scarlet,white and crimson, violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red--all names of colors, tints and shades are now empty sounds to me, agreeable as sounds perchance, but meaningless as signs of thought. White snow dumb or beautiful, leaves fresh and green or gorgeous autumn--tinted silks cream or brown, satins black or cream, all such expressions are worse than Greek to me, for the little Greek I know, I know wholly, but I can only half understand these phrases descriptive of the finery with which Dame Nature and her daughters are wont to bedeck themselves.

However, no good can come of dwelling long upon the inevitable. Our loss of the visible world, as well as our more serious personal inconveniences at table and in motion, had best be accepted with equanimity, moreover, there are many circumstances to mitigate the harshness of such limitations. True, I can no longer move about with ease, freedom, and certainty, as I did before I lost my sight, still I am not tied, like a plant, to one spot; I can no longer see the beauties of the landscape, still sunshine is warm—there is all the difference in the world between submitting to, and being paralyzed by, the inevitable. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that no difficulty is overcome by simply ignoring it. Disclaim a disadvantage, run from it, protest that you have it not, and it conquers you, but recognize it, face it, resign yourself to it, and you conquer it; defeat, disease, even the fear of death itself, have been so overcome. Let any wise man become convinced that any event or condition is unavoidable, and he will cheerfully submit. One man, to whom I presented this view, startled me by replying, "doubtless, doubtless, that is the way of it; and that is why marriage is not a failure." Think over it, my friends, I am not a married man as you know, pathos or humor, which was it ?

Every one should be careful to ascertain that a condition is inevitable before submitting to it ; we should be doubly careful ; we should leave no stone unturned. Let us be determined to resist paralysis of hope and of effort in other directions as we are loath to give up the idea of sight restored, and the results will be far more satisfactory. Sight restored or received is a blessing indeed, but there are other drawbacks. With us our limitation narrows, with others other limitations do the same, it is the common lot of all humanity. Let us not forget Aristotle's principle, observation of the due mean in action; we must neither sit down under our misfortune, declaring it to be insurmountable, nor loudly proclaim that we labour under no disadvantage whatever. No doubt, our relative mean lies, like courage, much nearer to rashness than to cowardice, and much nearer to activity than inactivity, yet how can we hope to have our position better understood if we persist in ignoring, suppressing, and denying our limitations ? We are partly to blame for the prevailing misconception : and, to remove it, we must begin among ourselves. We must strive to understand and appreciate our advantages and disadvantages, our aptitudes and disabilities. We should never forget that the popular misconception is twofold. people both suppose us unable to do simple acts we can do with ease, and imagine us able to perform feats utterly beyond us, distinguishing colors, for instance, yet in this respect we are no worse off than some sighted, colour-blind. Let us always aim at being and behaving as much as possible like the salt of the earth, and I know of no better illustration of the wisdom of so striving than that to be found in the life of Henry Fawcett. His story may not be new to many of you, but you may not have examined it in this light, perhaps.

Henry Fawcett was born at Salisbury in the year 1833. He was educated at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, graduated as seventh wrangler in 1856, and elected, in the same year, a fellow of his Hall. He became ambitious of entering parliament, and, as a step on his way, went to London to study for the bar, and soon after, his misfortune fell upon him. While out partridge-shooting a stray shot from his father's gun pierced both his eyes and his sight in a moment was completely destroyed, Sept. 17th, 1858. For a time he lay prostrate and hopeless, but a wise word from a friend aroused him, and, by degrees, he gained strength and resolution to work on, as he had planned, toward the goal of his ambition, determined to allow his blindness to interfere as little as possible with his aims and manner of life.

Aided by a reader, he resumed his studies at Cambridge, applying himself especially to political economy. At a meeting of the British Association at Aberdeen in 1859 he delivered an address on the economic effects of the recent gold discoveries, and thenceforward he frequently spoke in public on economic questions. After publishing his famous "Manual," he was called to the chair of political economy in Cambridge, 1863. My friend, the Rev. Oswald Rigby, in my time Dean of Trinity College, Toronto, but now Headmaster of Trinity College School, Port Hope, a Cambridge man himself, once told me that Fawcett was often to be seen on the river pulling an oar along with other professors in the boat of "the Ancient Mariners." Fawcett was also a great walker, and a hard rider, a skillful angler, and an enthusiastic skater.

Fawcett was at first an ardent disciple of John Stuart Mill, and, in 1861, was an unsuccessful candidate in Southwark, contesting the seat on Mill's principle, without paid agents. In 1863, he failed both at Brighton and at Cambridge, but, two years later, he entered Parliament as Liberal member for Brighton, being returned by a handsome majority. He was re-elected in 1868, but lost his seat in the Liberal collapse in 1874. In the same year, however, he was returned for the borough of Hackney, and this seat he held till his death in 1884. In 1880, he was made an honorary L.L.D. of Oxford, a privy councillor, and Postmaster-General under Gladstone, in which office he introduced many important reforms, establishing P O. Savings-banks and parcels-post. He was not a great orator, though a singularly clear and convincing speaker. He was most active in seeking to promote popular education, and took a prominent part in procuring the abolition of religious tests in the universities. Fawcett was held in honour by men of all classes and all parties for his honesty and independence, which enabled him to vote for his convictions, even against his party.

Even in this brief outline of Fawcett's life we may find many valuable lessons. Note particularly that he was held in high honour by men of all classes and all parties ; such honour is hard to win, but their respect is within the reach of all. Few among us can hope to emulate Fawcett's parliamentary career, but his recreations at least may be essayed ; and of any one who says to you, "you can't skate, ride, fish, or row; you may ask, "why *can't I*? Fawcett did." Although I have no passion for, and rarely indulge in, such exercises, I can skate, I can fish, and I can row; but my favorite outdoor sport is swimming, in season, and every Summer I do a good deal of it. I have taught some of you to play cards, and it may interest you to know that I now play checkers, though as yet I have not devised a wholly satisfactory plan for our use on the ordinary board. If any blind person, wishing to learn either checkers or cards, will come, or write, to me, I shall be pleased to explain my methods in detail.

However, most of us can find amusement enough; with us, as with most people, employment is the question. Beyond all doubt here lies our greatest disadvantage; the women are especially handicapped. Without the aid of the eyes, the work of the hands is slow and unremunerative, the work of the brain is hindered and hampered, yet, were it not for people imagining us helpless and incapable, this field might prove far more fertile. Disadvantages may be divided into two classes, those which can, and those which can not, be helped; our having to make our way in the world without sight is, and must ever be, our greatest disadvantage, our having to do this in the face of a general misconception is also a great disadvantage, but there is no necessity of its always being so. Independence, to be come by honestly if possible, but independence at any price, is the state most sought after in this world. Under normal conditions, skill and ability are at first usually taken for granted, but let the notion once get abroad that a man is incompetent and his business soon takes wings. How much more difficult then it is for us to achieve independence when we must begin by explaining that we are fit and proper persons to be entrusted with business.

However, when we compare our condition with that of the blind of Valentin Hauy's time, the last half of the eighteenth century, we may congratulate ourselves upon our better fortune. Then, the public generally looked upon blindness with fear and loathing, and upon the blind as cumbering the ground, objects of pity, scorn, and ridicule. Now, we can certainly not complain of any lack of public sympathy. Institutions have been founded for us, institutions both educational and industrial, imposing buildings surrounded by extensive, and sometimes beautiful, grounds, equipped with expensive books and appliances, and provided with staffs numerically strong enough at all events. We have, indeed, much to be thankful for, and I trust we are, yet still there is room for improvement.

In his work on "the Education and Employment of the Blind," Armitage tells us that the greatest difficulty with which he and the other members of the British and Foreign Blind Association had to contend was the persistence with which the sighted philanthropists clung to the idea that the blind were absolutely incapable of self-help. The Heads of the Homes maintained that it was of no use to educate the blind, to do so would simply increase their capacity for suffering, the best that could be done for them was to keep them in ease and comfort, free from care and responsibility, for a time, as a green spot to be looked back upon with mingled feelings of pleasure and regret from the desert of after years. In France, Louis Braille and Claude Montal had to contend against similar erroneous impressions; verily, our troubles are not new.

It is distressing to note in passing how some benevolent persons in Scotland, entering thoroughly into the spirit of their work, once caused to be erected as a home for the blind a building which when it was finished, stood a perfect marvel of architectual economy and efficiency--it was without windows! "What was the use of having windows?" they asked! a peculiarly Scottish notion of the eternal fitness of things, surely! Why should the building be in any better case than its inmates? This is no idle tale, but a sober fact, or at any rate narrated as such by Levy in his book on "Blindness and the Blind."

As an appropriate conclusion to these remarks permit me to direct your attention to our greatest advantage—I hesitate to name it to you—public sympathy. Confusing it with pity and charity, you may not desire public sympathy, but, as a matter of fact, it attaches to our estate, we, as a class, cannot escape it, any more than we can help our limitation. Public sympathy is necessary to the success of everything and everybody in business. Why should we murmur at obtaining easily that which is usually so difficult to obtain? The hothouse character of our education is to blame. I am not referring to forcing for show. Principal Allen's "see what we can do!" spirit' too often dominant at schools for the blind, but to that mistaken kindness of instructors permitting pupils to insist on no direct reference being made to blindness. Such kindness is well meant, no doubt, and is, too, appreciated at the time, but the mistake of it is bound to be keenly felt in after years. We must overcome this morbid sensitiveness. Public sympathy is ours, but, to benefit by it to the fullest extent possible, we must educate it, we must answer personal questions, overlook petty annoyances, even satisfy the idly curious, to the end that a better understanding of our position may at length prevail.

THE END.

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