

ANGELIC STUDIES**NO. 933**

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*“To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might
be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.”
Ephesians 3:10.*

THE “principalities and powers in heavenly places” to whom the Apostle here refers, are, no doubt, the angels. These bright and glorious spirits, never having fallen into sin, did not need to be redeemed, and therefore, in the sense of being cleansed from guilt, they have no share in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Yet it is interesting to notice how our Lord did, as it were, pass and pass again their shining ranks when He sped His way down to the regions of death, and when He came back triumphant to the realms of Glory.

Thus in one place “we see Jesus made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death,” and in another place we learn, “that the Father raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might and dominion.” It is possible that the mediation of Christ has a bearing upon them, and has from now on confirmed them in their holiness, so that by no means shall they ever be tempted or led into sin in the future. It may be so, but this much seems to be evident, that though they had no direct share in redemption, they feel, nevertheless, an interest in it, and are to be instructed by its results.

The sublime plan of the Gospel of the Grace of God, which is so entirely beyond the compass of our natural faculties that we could never, by searching, have found it out, appears to have been equally beyond the grasp of angelic intelligence. It was a mystery that excited their wistful enquiry—until by the Church (that is to say, by the Divine Counsel and conduct in forming and perfecting the Church) there is made known unto them the manifold wisdom of God as they have never learned it before. They have kept their first estate, and have been obedient to God's behests. They delight to be known as the servants of God, doing His commandments, and hearkening unto the voice of His Word.

They are appointed to exercise some sort of power over various parts of God's creation, therefore they are called “principalities and powers.” Certainly they are engaged in singing Jehovah's praise. Much of the music that rises up before His Throne comes from the harps of spirits, pure and immaculate, who have never known sin. Yet, though they are thus pure, thus engaged in worship, of such eminent rank in the universe of God, they are never represented as indifferent spectators of anything which our mortal race can do or suffer, but their sympathy with men is constant.

Do they not watch over the saints? Is it not written, that they “encamp round about them that fear the Lord”? Are they not charged to take care of the saints, to bear them up in their hands, lest they dash their feet against the stones? Angels, we know, have often been messengers of God's will to the sons of men. They have never shown any reluctance—on the contrary, great has been their joy to bear God's tidings down from Heaven to earth. And their sympathy even with fallen men, with men who have grievously sinned and gone astray, is shown by the fact that they “rejoice over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance.”

They are, as it were, in yonder gilded vessel, untossed of tempest. But they have sympathy with us in this poor heavily-laden boat, tossed with tempest and not comforted. I see them there on yonder sea of glass mingled with fire. I hear their harps, as incessantly their joy goes up in music to the Throne of the Most High. But they do not look down with scorn on us poor denizens of this dusky planet. On the contrary, they delight to think of us as their Brethren, as their fellow servants, as it will be the consummation of their happiness when we shall all be gathered to the Church of the First-Born, that they shall make up the innumerable company of angels that surround the blood-washed throng.

I. The subject of our meditation, which will be brief, resolves itself into a question, **HOW EXCLUSIVELY THROUGH THE CHURCH DO ANGELS COME TO SEE THE MANIFOLD WISDOM OF GOD?** Some other matters in connection with this we shall have to speak of afterwards.

Who can doubt that the angels had seen much of the wisdom of God in creation? With faculties keener and more elevated than ours, faculties that have never been blunted by sin, they can perceive the various contrivances of God's skill both in the animate and the inanimate world. Doubtless as each new star has been minted by God, as each planet has been struck off like a spark from the everlasting anvil, angels, those sons of the morning, have lifted up their songs, and have poured forth their paeans of joy and gladness.

They have seen the wisdom of God in the greatness of creation—in every sphere they have been able to perceive it, for their vision is far more comprehensive than ours. And they have also, no doubt, seen that wisdom in all its minuteness as manifest in the delicate structure of organized beings, and the skillful economy of the operations of creative power. For there again they are able with the singleness and certainty of superior optics to perceive what only after long years we have been able to discover—and that by reasoning from the ingenuity of the works to the excellence of the design.

What a scale of survey must a seraph have! How readily can we imagine an eye that takes in at once the landscape of the world! He need not confine himself to one single spot in God's universe, but with rapid wings he can steer far and wide over the infinity of space. May he not pause here a moment and there a moment, and with a glance peer into the multiform wisdom of God in all the ten thousand thousand worlds that stud the realms of space? Yet with all that facility of observation, it seems that the angels have some parts of the wisdom of God to learn. They have some lessons of heavenly science to study which creation cannot unfold to their view—to be ascertained and certified by them only through the transcendent work of Redemption which the Lord has carried on in His Church.

Fix your attention for a moment on the word "now" as it is used in the text. On that word, it seems to me, much of the meaning hangs. Long before our Lord came into the world God had been pleased to reveal somewhat of the wisdom of His Grace in the types of the old Law. These were full of significance, but at the same time not free from perplexity to the minds of most men. They appear not to have been very intelligible, even to the angels, for they are pictured as standing over the Mercy Seat, with wings outspread, looking down upon its golden lid, anxiously enquiring, but not clearly discovering the secret of the old Covenant dispensation.

Peter says, I suppose in allusion to this, "which things the angels desire to look into." But Paul here vehemently sets forth the yearnings of his heart in the exercise of his ministry, "to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world has been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places, might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God."

May we not infer from this that though angels saw Moses and Aaron, and the long succession of priests that followed them. Though they doubtless mingled invisibly in the solemn gatherings that went up to Mount Zion, and heard the chants of the glorious Psalms. Though they saw the streams of blood that flowed at the altar of burnt offering, and marked the rising clouds of smoke that went up from the altar of incense that was in the Holy Place before the Lord, they had not as yet discovered the wisdom of God in its fullness and clearness, the spotless mirror of His power, the reflex image of His glorious perfection?

But it must have remained for them to learn it from the Church! Since Christ has come, angels are to be students of the manifold wisdom of God as revealed in His work towards His people, preparing them for that grand climax—the espousal of the Church and the marriage of the Lamb. To come closer to the matter we must trace it progressively, as though it were step by step that the angels pursued their study, and acquired an insight into this manifold wisdom. It may be they do so. Certainly among the children of men there is much pleasure in the getting of knowledge. The merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold.

As we gradually break up fresh ground, decipher that which is obscure, sift out analogies, solve difficulties, and follow out the tracks of history in one continuous line, our enjoyment of study rises to enthusiasm. Do you not think that the angels perceived the manifold wisdom of God now that they began to understand what man was and what man is? They must have already seen that God had created an order of pure spirits who served Him faithfully and never sinned. There was one form of wisdom displayed in that. Other spirits, equally pure, went astray, and in the wisdom of God—for there is wisdom in it—these were suffered to continue astray, reserved in chains until the judgment.

Soon the angels perceived that God was about to make another intelligent creature, not altogether spiritual, but a spiritual creature that should be linked with materialism, a creature that should abide in a body of clay. And that God intended to make this creature a mixture of earth and Heaven—such a one that he should occupy the place which fallen

angels had left vacant. They discerned in this at once the wisdom of God. He had formed a pure spirit. He had fashioned material substances. Now He was about to make a creature in which the two should be combined, a creature that should be spiritual, and yet should be material.

But before this creature should be permitted to take his place forever at the right hand of God, he was to be permitted to pass the test of temptation. Being tempted, he was to fall into sin. Out of the condemnation into which he should sink he was to be elevated by an act of Divine Grace. From the guilt of that sin he was to be cleansed by a matchless system of substitutionary sacrifice. And then, after having been alienated in heart, he should nevertheless become as pure as if he had never been conscious of evil! And contaminated with it, he should be redeemed from it and stand in allegiance to the Most High, to serve Him with as absolute a perfection as if he had never transgressed or lost his first estate.

Herein is manifold wisdom, that the Lord God should make so strange a creature, that He should be formed of the dust of the ground, and yet created in the image of God. A creature that should know sin, and whatever of pleasure there might be in it, and yet be restored to purity and holiness. A creature who though awhile estranged in heart, and guilty of rebelling with a high hand against his Creator, should return to its allegiance through the infinitely wise workings of God's Spirit, and from now on should remain forever the liege servant of God! And, something more, the child of God would be lifted up and exalted into a nearness of connection and intimacy of communion with the Great Father of Spirits into which no creature had ever been brought before! In that grand design, the angels must have seen much of the sublime wisdom of God, and that conspicuously through the Church.

But, Brethren, may not the admiration of angels at the unfolding of this wisdom have been increased by the mystery in which it had long been shrouded from their apprehension? Observe that Paul was exulting in a revelation "which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men as it is now revealed unto His holy Apostles and Prophets by the Spirit." What use will he make of it? First he looks round among the saints and sounds the note of welcome. Then he looks out among his fellow men and proclaims it to the Gentile world. And at length he looks up and descries among the angelic throng, creatures of noble mind and exalted rank, who could sympathize the joy and hail the solution of so grand a problem.

Be it remembered that the decree had previously been proclaimed from the throne of the Most High, for, "when He brings the First-Begotten into the world, He says, "Let all the angels of God worship Him." Yet the means by which the counsels of God concerning Christ and the Church should be brought to pass had not thus far been shown. With what pleasing wonderment, therefore, would the principalities and powers in heavenly places regard the plan as it was unsealed! How well might the Apostle look forward to those ages to come which have yet to prove the reality of all that has been foreshadowed!

The Truth of all that has been prophesied. And (the work now in progress being completed) the actual form and fashion of all that from the beginning was predestinated. Even while the mystery was unexplained, it was not for pure angelic minds to doubt. Still their thoughts must have been full of marvel, and startling questions must have occurred to them. Shall the Only-Begotten Son of the Father take the nature of man into union with the Godhead? Can it be safe to put such a creature as man into so sublime a relationship with the Creator? Will pride never inflame his breast and provoke his soul to transgress? By what strange process shall he be made meet to partake of the inheritance of the saints in light?

While the details are concealed, the destiny seems incomprehensible. It is therefore that the Church becomes as a museum which angels may visit with ever-expanding interest and ever-increasing delight. Over the minutest particulars of the Divine workmanship in the saints they may pore with pleasure. For there they have open to their observation by the Church the manifold wisdom of God. And all this redounds to the glory of the Savior. That creature, man, when thus elevated, can never be proud, for he remembers what he was. If ever the feeling of exultation crosses his mind, he transfers the honor to Christ, who can receive it as his rightful due.

There is not in Heaven, of all the creatures, a humbler creature, though none more elevated—made to have dominion over all the works of God's hands, with all things put under his feet. He is made to be akin to Deity itself by virtue of union with the Son of God, and yet safe to stand there, without cause to fear that he should pervert his high prerogative or usurp any adoration or prerogative which does not belong to him. The process through which he has passed—his anealing, as it were, in the fire of his fall and of his repentance—his deep obligations to Sovereign Grace, shall make it

safe to grant that he shall sit with Christ on His Throne. Even as Christ also overcame, and is set down with his Father on His Throne.

I talk of these things feebly and superficially, but I am persuaded that this is a subject which angels can think of with enchantment, and as they think it over they see transparent proofs of the manifold wisdom of God. But to come down to more familiar topics. Probably you will be more impressed with the excellence of this wisdom as you look at the first principles of Christianity, than if you would arrest your attention in any refinements of reasoning. The wisdom of God is clearly seen by angels in this—that though God was dishonored in this world by sin—that sin has redounded to His greater honor.

Satan, when he led men astray and tempted them to rebel, thought he had marred the Glory of God, but he never did more palpably outwit God. As Augustine ventured to say of the Fall, “Happy thought,” so, when we see how God’s mercy and His love have shone resplendent through that dreadful breach, we can only admire the wisdom of God which has thus outmatched the subtlety of Hell. The serpent was exceedingly wise, but God was far wiser. Satan’s craft was dexterous, but God’s wisdom was infinite in its prescience. Wisdom has outmatched craft. Is it not glorious to think that this world where God was dishonored most is the world where He shall be most revered?

There is no such display of the attributes and perfections of Godhead in the whole universe beside as there is here. On our blighted soil God has stood foot to foot with moral evil. God incarnate, the Son of God, has sustained the conflict, and won the victory! While the heel of Christ was bruised, the head of the dragon has been most effectually broken! A triumph that God would have us commemorate in time and in eternity has come through the *sin* that threatened the destruction of the world.

This wisdom of God is to be seen in the way that our redemption was worked. The doctrine of Substitution is a marvel which, if God had never revealed, none of us could by any possibility have discovered. You remember how it was. We had sinned and were condemned. How could God be gracious and yet be just? How could He keep His Law and yet at the same time show His mercy towards us? Of old that problem was solved by the Suretyship of Christ. He who had determined to be Man put Himself from before the foundation of the world into our place, and offered Himself to God as the Head of the race in Covenant that He might make recompense to the broken Law.

Angels could not have conjectured this, but when it was made known to them, how could they refrain to chant fresh songs to the praise of Him who could undertake so loving a responsibility? It became necessary when Christ was our Surety, that He should afterwards take upon Himself our nature. Oh, how it must have surprised the angels when they heard that the Son of God was coming down to earth to be born of a virgin! What marvel must there have been when the announcement was made through the courts of Paradise that He was going down to Bethlehem!

One of the angelic number who had been sent to attend Him proclaimed His advent, but while he was making the announcement, “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,” who now came in to swell the song, “Glory to God in the highest! On earth peace, good will toward men.” The swell of that music—how grand! The cadence of those simple words—how charming! Yes, the angels must have discovered something of the wisdom of God when they saw that God thus tabernacled among men, that the Word was made flesh in order to be capable of carrying out His surety-engagements, and really become a Substitute for those who had offended.

I think His whole life must have struck them with wonder. They must often have observed wisdom in His actions and in His prayers, in His speech and in His silence. But, when at last He came to die, methinks even cherubim and seraphim were wrapt in amazement. That He should stoop from Heaven and become a friend to the fallen race might surprise them much. But that He should stoop to *die* must have appeared utterly incomprehensible! Something more of the love and wisdom of God should yet be revealed to them. I think our hymn must fitly describe how they gathered round that Cross—

*“And could their eyes have known a tear,
They must have wept it there.”*

When they beheld the griefs and torments of the dying Son of God, the Lamb of God’s Passover—when they heard Him say, “It is finished!”—what a door must have been opened to them! They saw, then, that He had finished transgression, made an end of sin, and brought in an everlasting righteousness. And then, perhaps, they saw more clearly than before how Christ, by suffering, put an end to our sufferings. And by being made a curse for us had made us the right-

eousness of God in Him. If they marvelled during the three days of His slumber in the tomb, His Resurrection must have opened up another door to them. And, when after His forty days' sojourn, they came to meet Him with glad acclaim.

When they joined Him, and with Him rode up to the gates of Heaven, singing, "Lift up your heads, O you gates, and be you lift up, you everlasting doors, that the King of Glory may come in." When they came in triumph with "the Lord mighty in battle, the King of Glory," in that procession to His Throne, they must still have been more and more amazed, and said one to another, "What thing is this? What mighty marvel! He that became Man to suffer, is the very One that now rises to reign. He who was born to die now lives forevermore. Behold, He is now the Head over all things, and made to have dominion over all the works of God's hands, for it has pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell!"

Thus, Brethren, though time and voice fail me, permit me to say the whole history of our blessed Lord, who is the Head of the Church, is making known to the principalities and powers in heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God in such a way as they never could have otherwise seen it.

The wisdom of God is seen through the Church in the Holy Spirit's work as well as in the work of Christ. It is "manifold wisdom." You know the children's toy, the kaleidoscope. Every time you turn it there is some fresh form of beauty. You seldom see the same form twice. So it is with nature, each time and season has its special beauty. There is always variety in its scenery—diversities of form and color are strewn throughout the world. You never saw two hills molded in the same pattern, or two rivers that wound after the same fashion from their source down to the sea. Nature is full of variety. So is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In calling sinners to Christ, there is singleness of purpose but no uniformity of means. Your conversion, my dear Friend, in the main outline, is very much like mine—yet your conversion has its distinctive incidents. God's wisdom is displayed equally in bringing you in that way, and in bringing me in another way. I believe there will be found evidence at the last of the wisdom of God in the very date, the very place, the very means in and by which every soul is brought to believe in Jesus. And angels will, no doubt, be able to perceive in every conversion some singular marks of beautiful originality proceeding from the inexhaustible Artist of Grace, the Holy Spirit.

That same wisdom will be seen in the biography of every convert—how the Lord afflicts, or how He comforts. How He upholds us, how He keeps back that which cannot yet be endured. How He gently leads us, how He makes us to lie down. We find fault, sometimes, with the way of Providence because we do not understand it. When we shall get a clearer sight of it we shall see that every mark and line was dictated by His love, and ordered by His Infinite Counsel. As each Christian shall be conformed to the likeness of Christ, angels will see in the products of Grace fresh displays of the manifold wisdom of God.

I could suppose that the death of a martyr must be such a spectacle as those holy watchers regard with extraordinary interest. Would they not have gathered around such a woman as Blandina, for instance, who was made to sit in a red-hot chair, after having been tossed upon the horns of a wild bull? Yet constant to the last, she maintained her faith in Christ while passing through the torture! Pure spirits as they were, they must have commiserated the physical anguish and admired the spiritual triumph of this feeble woman thus devoted in her love to their Lord and Master.

Yes, you ministering spirits, you who live to serve our Eternal King, surely you must rejoice at the loyalty of those servants of His who die for His Truth. In late years, since this House of Prayer was built, when the martyrs of Madagascar were burned at their stakes for Christ—as they stood erect in the fire, and began to sing—the angels, celestial vocalists as they are, must have been ravished with a music that they could not emulate. And when they breathed the prayer, "Into your hands we commend our spirits," the angels must almost have envied them the ability of serving God in that sphere of suffering, and the possibility of bearing in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus.

Yes, and when they have seen your boldness and your constancy, your self-denial, and your patience. And when they have heard your importunate prayers and groans, as you have pleaded for the souls of others, seeking with tears to bring others to Jesus, I do not doubt that they have ascribed to the manifold wisdom of God the production of such luscious fruits from such inferior creatures! Fruits that bring to His name so much of Glory, and so much of renown to His Grace. In all the saints, through the history of their vocation and the development of their sanctification, angels can discern the manifold wisdom of God.

The subject is far too large for me. I shall leave you to think it out, after thus introducing you to but a few aspects of it. There is much room for meditation as to how these bright and happy spirits do and shall see the wisdom of God in the salvation of the Church.

II. But do you now ask, DO ANGELS GAIN ANYTHING BY THE CHURCH OF GOD? I think they do. Certainly they acquire increased knowledge. With us knowledge is sometimes sorrow. To know is often to mourn. What the eye does not see the heart does not rue. “Where ignorance is bliss”—and it sometimes is—there are those who think, “it is folly to be wise.” But ignorance is not bliss in Heaven. Knowledge increases the joy of the angels, and I will tell you why—because it makes them take a greater delight in God when they see how wise and gracious He is. If it is possible for the angels to be happier than natural innocence and honorable service can render them, they must be happier through knowing and seeing more of God, as His attributes are reflected and His perfections mirrored forth in the Church.

Angels, methinks, will be enriched by the society of the saints in Heaven. Commerce always enriches, and commerce between angelic and human natures will be enriching to them both. They love in Heaven—they show their love by rejoicing over repenting men. They will be glad to see us there. I do believe they will make much of us, as we do if we have seen some poor child reclaimed, and afterwards grow up to honor. We like to think of such an one. It brings the tears into our eyes that our Father did so good a deed for the orphan, the pauper, or the outcast. And will not the angels rejoice over those in whom the Father’s mercy has worked such wonderful happiness?

Again, to my imagining (can it be illusive?) angels are gainers by the Church because they get nearer to the Throne of God than they were before. Another order of beings, our own to wit, is advanced. Surely when one creature gets near to God, all unfallen creatures are promoted. God, in vital union with the creature, was not to be conceived of until Christ came down to earth, and clothed Himself in manhood, thus raising creatureship nearer to God by just that length. So angels, by inference, seem to me interested in the honor that Jehovah has put on His works—the endowed works of His own formation.

Do you not think, too, that perhaps they can see God better in Christ than even they did before? Is it not possible that even they who first did veil their faces with their wings in the presence of the Almighty, because the brightness of glory was excessive, may now stand with unveiled faces and worship God in Christ? I think it is so. They never saw much of God before until they saw God veiled in human flesh. There was too dazzling a splendor for them till the interposing medium of the manhood of Christ came in between them and the absolute Deity. It may be so.

And may not there be a reflex sense of gratitude in the very heart of angels when they see us in Heaven, or while they see us wending our way there? They perceive what it would have cost to have restored them had they been beguiled by sin, and therefore what debtors they are to God that they were never suffered to fall. Does it not make their state and standing more and more joyful to them when they see in us how the righteous scarcely are saved, and at what an expense men were lifted up from the ruins of death and the dread doom of the damned?

Why, methinks they say not one to another, with Phariseism—“We thank You, great God, that we are not as men are.” No, they say, with lowliness of mind—“We bless You, O God, that we were permitted to stand in our fidelity, and were not left to the natural weakness which might have succumbed to temptation, for You charged even Your angels with folly, but You have held us, and here we are to bless Your name.” It may be so. It may be so.

III. Let me detain you one minute more while we meet the question, WHAT IS ALL THIS TO US? Ought it not to make us prize the Gospel? If the angels think so much of it, oh, what should we think? If they who have only seen it, esteem it so, how ought we to value it who have tasted it? If they admire the veins that filled the Fountain, what shall we say who have washed in that Fountain? If they wonder at Christ, who took not on Him the nature of angels, how shall we admire Him who espoused the house of Abraham and the seed of Adam? Let us appreciate the Gospel beyond all price, emolument, or honor.

How, too, should we study it, if it is the research of angelic intellects! Is the Church their schoolbook from where they learn lessons of the Divine wisdom, because no science is equal to that of the wisdom of God in Christ revealed in His Church? O be not, you converts, ignorant of the Word of God! Be not oblivious of the operations of God in your own souls! The angels desire to look into these things. Do you look into them? Blessed shall you be if you abide in the study of the Word of God! You shall be like trees planted by the rivers of water that bring forth their fruit in their season. O do apply every faculty you have to acquire increasing knowledge of that which angels love to study.

And now take courage, you feeble-minded ones, and never fear again the sneer of the man who calls the Gospel folly. Account him to be the victim of folly who despises this manifold wisdom. Shall I set the judgment of a poor puny mortal against the judgment of an angel? I suppose that even Newton, and Kepler, and Locke, and those mighty master spirits, would be mere infants compared with seraphs. Those great men loved to study the Scriptures, and when your modern pretenders to a little smack of philosophy come in and sneer at our holy Gospel, we can well afford to sneer at them. What are their sneers to us?

In proportion to a man's ignorance is generally his impudence when he meddles with the Gospel. I think it was Hume who confessed that he had never read the New Testament and said he never would. Yet he was one of the most glib in caviling at that of which he knew nothing. Ah, you skeptics, pretenders, and scoffers—we can well afford to let you rail. But you can ill afford to rail when angels are awed into wonder, and so would you be if there were anything angelic about your temper, or anything of right wisdom in your attainments.

Last of all. If this is so, how we ought to love Christ, we who has a saving interest in it, and how they ought to tremble who have it not! Unsaved Men! Unsaved Women! If it needs manifold wisdom to save men, then men's ruin must be very great, and your peril must be very imminent. If it amazes angels to see how God saves, it must be a terrible destruction from which He saves them. That destruction is coming upon you—its dark shadows have already begun to gather round you. How great your folly to refuse a salvation so wise, to reject a Savior so attractive as Jesus!

Think of His loving gentleness and consider the simple way in which He saves—believe and live! The supplies necessary for your salvation are all waiting. There is nothing to be done. It is all complete. There is nothing to be found. It is all ready. Salvation is finished. What a fool must he be that will not have it! O stretch out your withered hand and take it! God give you power. If you say "How?" "I answer thus—Trust, trust, trust! Come and confide in Christ. Rely upon Christ, and He will save you. God grant you Grace to do it at once, and He shall have the praise. Amen.

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