

Nesbit Edith

Lays and Legends (Second Series)



Edith Nesbit
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Nesbit E. Edith

Lays and Legends

(Second Series)

BRIDAL BALLAD

"Come, fill me flagons full and fair
Of red wine and of white,
And, maidens mine, my bower prepare —
It is my wedding night.

"And braid my hair with jewels bright,
And make me fair and fine —
This is the day that brings the night
When my desire is mine."

They decked her bower with roses blown,
With rushes strewed the floor,
And sewed more jewels on her gown
Than ever she wore before.

She wore two roses in her face,
Two jewels in her e'en,
Her hair was crowned with sunset rays,

Her brows shone white between.

"Tapers at the bed's foot," she saith,
"Two tapers at the head!"
It seemed more like the bed of death
Than like a bridal bed.

He came; he took her hands in his,
He kissed her on the face;
"There is more heaven in thy kiss
Than in our Lady's grace".

He kissed her once, he kissed her twice,
He kissed her three times o'er;
He kissed her brow, he kissed her eyes,
He kissed her mouth's red flower.

"O Love, what is it ails thy knight?
I sicken and I pine;
Is it the red wine or the white,
Or that sweet kiss of thine?"

"No kiss, no wine or white or red,
Can make such sickness be,
Lie down and die on thy bride-bed
For I have poisoned thee.

"And though the curse of saints and men
Upon me for it be,

I would it were to do again
Since thou wert false to me.

"Thou shouldst have loved or one or none,
Nor she nor I loved twain,
But we are twain thou hast undone,
And therefore art thou slain.

"And when before my God I stand
With no base flesh between,
I shall hold up this guilty hand
And He shall judge it clean."

He fell across the bridal bed
Between the tapers pale:
"I first shall see our God," he said,
"And I will tell thy tale.

"And if God judge thee as I do,
Then art thou justified.
I loved thee and I was not true,
And that was why I died.

"If I could judge thee, thou shouldst be
First of the saints on high;
But ah, I fear God loveth thee
Not half so dear as I!"

THE GHOST

The year fades, as the west wind sighs,
And droops in many-coloured ways,
But your soft presence never dies
From out the pathway of my days.

The spring is where you are, but still
You from your heaven to me can bring
Sweet dreams and flowers enough to fill
A thousand empty worlds with Spring.

I walk the wet and leafless woods;
Your shadow ever goes before
And paints the russet solitudes
With colours Summer never wore.

I sit beside my lonely fire;
The ghostly twilight brings your face
And lights with memory and desire
My desolated dwelling-place.

Among my books I feel your hand
That turns the page just past my sight,
Sometimes behind my chair you stand
And read the foolish rhymes I write.

The old piano's keys I press
In random chords until I hear
Your voice, your rustling silken dress,
And smell the violets that you wear.

I do not weep now any more,
I think I hardly even sigh;
I would not have you think I bore
The kind of wound of which men die.

Believe that smooth content has grown
Over the ghastly grave of pain —
"Content!" ... O lips, that were my own,
That I shall never kiss again!

THE MODERN JUDAS

For what wilt thou sell thy Lord?

"For certain pieces of silver, since wealth buys the world's good word."

But the world's word, how canst thou hear it, while thy brothers cry scorn on thy name?

And how shall thy bargain content thee, when thy brothers shall clothe thee with shame?

For what shall thy brother be sold?

"For the rosy garland of pleasure, and the coveted crown of gold."

But thy soul will turn them to thorns, and to heaviness binding thy head,

While women are dying of shame, and children are crying for bread.

For what wilt thou sell thy soul?

"For the world." And what shall it profit, when thou shalt have gained the whole?

What profit the things thou hast, if the thing thou art be so mean?

Wilt thou fill, with the husks of having, the void of the might-have-been?

"But, when my soul shall be gone,
No more shall I fail to profit by all the deeds I have done!
And wealth and the world and pleasure shall sing sweet songs
in my ear
When the stupid soul is silenced, which never would let me
hear.

"And if a void there should be
I shall not feel it or know it; it will be nothing to me!"
It will be nothing to thee, and thou shalt be nothing to men
But a ghost whose treasure is lost, and who shall not find it
again.

"But I shall have pleasure and praise!"
Praise shall not pleasure thee then, nor pleasure laugh in thy
days:
For as colour is not, without light, so happiness is not, without
Thy Brother, the Lord whom thou soldest – and the soul that
thou hast cast out!

THE SOUL TO THE IDEAL

I will not hear thy music sweet!
If I should listen, then I know
I should no more know friend from foe,
But follow thy capricious feet —
Thy wings, than mine so much more fleet —
I will not go!

I will not go away! Away
From reeds and pool why should I go
To where sun burns, and hot winds blow?
Here sleeps cool twilight all the day;
Do I not love thy tune? No, no!
I will not say!

I will not say I love thy tune;
I do not know if so it be;
It surely is enough for me
To know I love cool rest at noon,
Spread thy bright wings – ah, go – go soon!
I will not see!

I will not see thy gleaming wings,
I will not hear thy music clear.
It is not love I feel, but fear;

I love the song the marsh-frog sings,
But thine, which after-sorrow brings,
I will not hear!

A DEATH-BED

A man of like passions with ourselves

It is too late, too late!
The wine is spilled, the altar violate;
Now all the foolish virtues of the past —
Its joys that could not last,
Its flowers that had to fade,
Its bliss so long delayed,
Its sun so soon o'ercast,
Its faith so soon betrayed,
Its prayers so madly prayed,
Its wildly-fought-for right,
Its dear renounced delight,
Its passions and its pain —
All these stand gray about
My bed, like ghosts from Paradise shut out,
And I, in torment, lying here alone,
See what myself have done —
How all good things were butchered, one by one.
Not one of these but life has fouled its name,
Blotted it out with sin and loss and shame —
Until my whole life's striving is made vain.
It is too late, too late!

My house is left unto me desolate.

Yet what if here,
Through this despair too dark for dreams of fear,
Through the last bitterness of the last vain tear,
One saw a face —
Human — not turned away from man's disgrace —
A face divinely dear —
A head that had a crown of thorns to wear;
If there should come a hand
Drawing this tired head to a place of rest
On a most loving breast;
And as one felt that one could almost bear
To tell the whole long sickening trivial tale
Of how one came so utterly to fail
Of all one once knew that one might attain —
If one should feel consoling arms about,
Shutting one in, shutting the black past out —
Should feel the tears that washed one clean again,
And turn, made dumb with love and shame, to hear:
"My child, my child, do I not understand?"

THE LOST SOUL AND THE SAVED

I

Oh, rapture of infinite peace!
Many are weeping without;
From the lost crowd of these,
God, Thou hast lifted me out!

Though strong be the devil's net,
Thy grace, O God, is more strong;
I never was tempted yet
To even the edge of wrong.

The world never fired my brain,
The flesh never moved my heart —
Thou hast spared me the strife and strain,
The struggle and sorrow and smart.

The dreams that never were deeds,
The thought that shines not in word,
The struggle that never succeeds —
Thou hast saved me from these, O Lord!

I stood in my humble place

While those who aimed high fell low;
Oh the glorious gift of Thy grace
The souls of Thy saved ones know!

And yet if in heaven at last,
When all is won and is well,
Dear hands stretch out from the past,
Dear voices call me from hell —

My love whom I long for yet,
My little one gone astray! —
No; God will make me forget
In His own wise wonderful way.

Oh the infinite marvels of grace,
Oh the great atonement's cost!
Lifting my soul above
Those other souls that are lost!

Mine are the harp and throne,
Theirs is the outer night.
This, my God, Thou has done,
And all that Thou dost is right!

II

Lost as I am – degraded, foul, polluted,
Sunk in deep sloughs of failure and of sin,
Yet is my hell by God's great grace commuted,
For what I lose the others yet may win.

I – sport of flesh and fate – in all my living
Met the world's laughter and the Christian's frown,
Ever the spirit fiercely vainly striving,
Ever the flesh, triumphant, laughed it down.

Down, lower still, but ever battling vainly,
Dying to win, yet living to be lost,
My soul through depths where all its guilt showed plainly
Into the chaos of despair was tossed.

Yet not despair. I see far off a splendour;
Here from my hell I see a heaven on high
For those brave men whom earth could never render
Cowards as foul and beasts as base as I!

Hell is not hell lit by such consolation,
Heaven were not heaven that lacked a thought like this —
That, though my soul may never see salvation,
God yet saves all these other souls of His!

The waves of death come faster, faster, faster;
Christ, ere I perish, hear my heart's last word —
It was not I denied my Lord and Master;
The flesh denied Thee, not the spirit, Lord.

And God be praised that other men are wearing
The white, white flower I trampled as I trod;
That all fail not, that all are not despairing,
That all are not as I, I thank Thee, God!

AT THE PRISON GATE

And underneath us are the everlasting arms

Once by a foreign prison gate,
Deep in the gloom of frowning stone,
I saw a woman, desolate,
Sitting alone;
Immeasurable pain enwound
Infinite anguish lapped her round,
As the sea laps some sunken shore
Where flowers will blossom never more.

Despair sat shrined in her dry eyes —
Her heart, I thought, in blood must weep
For hopes that never more can rise
From their death-sleep;
And round her hovered phantoms gray —
Ghosts of delight dead many a day;
And all the thorns of life seemed wed
In one sharp crown about her head.

And all the poor world's aching heart
Beat there, I thought, and could not break.
Oh! to be strong to bear the smart —

The vast heart-ache!

Then through my soul a clear light shone;

What I would do, my Lord has done;

He bore the whole world's crown of thorn —

For her sake, too, that crown was worn!

THE DEVIL'S DUE

A priest tells how, in his youth, a church was built by the free labour of love – as was men's wont in those days; and how the stone and wood were paid for by one who had grown rich on usury and the pillage of the poor – and of what chanced thereafter.

Arsenius, priest of God, I tell,
For warning in your younger ears,
Humbly and plainly what befel
That year – gone by a many years —
When Veraignes church was built. Ah! then
Brave churches grew 'neath hands of men:
We see not now their like again.

We built it on the green hill-side
That leans its bosom o'er the town,
So that its presence, sanctified,
Might ever on our lives look down.
We built; and those who built not, they
Brought us their blessing day by day,
And lingered to rejoice and pray.

For years the masons toiled, for years
The craftsmen wrought till they had made
A church we scarce could see for tears —

Its fairness made our love afraid.
Its clear-cut cream-white tracery
Stood out against the deep bright sky
Like good deeds 'gainst eternity.

In the deep roof each separate beam
Had its own garland – ivy, vine, —
Giving to man the carver's dream,
In sight of men a certain sign —
And all day long the workers plied.
"The church shall finished be," we cried,
"And consecrate by Easter-tide."

Our church! It was so fair, so dear,
So fit a church to praise God in!
It had such show of carven gear,
Such chiselled work, without, within!
Such marble for the steps and floor,
Such window-jewels and such store
Of gold and gems the altar bore!

Each stone by loving hands was hewn,
By loving hands each beam was sawn;
The hammers made a merry tune
In winter dusk and summer dawn.
Love built the house, but gold had paid
For that wherewith the house was made.
"Would love had given all!" we said.

But poor in all save love were we,
And he was poor in all save gold
Who gave the gold. By usury
Were gained his riches manifold.
We knew that? If we knew, we thought
'Tis good if men do good in aught,
And by good works may heaven be bought!

At last the echo died in air
Of the last stroke. The silence then
Passed in to fill the church, left bare
Of the loving voice of Christian men.
The silence saddened all the sun,
So gladly was our work begun.
Now all that happy work was done.

Did any voices in the night
Call through those arches? Were there wings
That swept between the pillars white —
Wide pinions of unvisioned things?
The priests who watched the relics heard
Wing-whispers – not of bat or bird —
And moan of inarticulate word.

Then sunlight, morning, and sweet air
Adorned our church, and there were borne
Great sheaves of boughs of blossoms fair
To grace the consecration morn.
Then round our church trooped knight and dame;

Within, alone, the bishop came,
And the twelve candles leaped to flame.

Then round our church the bishop went
With all his priests – a brave array.
There was no sign nor portent sent
As, glad at heart, he went his way,
Sprinkling the holy water round
Three times on walls and crowd and ground
Within the churchyard's sacred bound.

Then – but ye know the function's scope
At consecration – all the show
Of torch and incense, stole and cope;
And how the acolytes do go
Before the bishop – how they bear
The lighted tapers, flaming fair,
Blown back by the sweet wavering air.

The bishop, knocking at the door,
The deacon answering from within,
"Lift up your heads, ye gates, be sure
The King of Glory shall come in" —
The bishop passed in with the choir.
Thank God for this – our soul's desire,
Our altar, meet for heaven's fire!

The bishop, kneeling in his place
Where our bright windows made day dim,

With all heaven's glory in his face,
Began the consecration hymn:
"Veni," he sang, in clear strong tone.
Then – on the instant – song was done,
Its very echo scattered – gone!

For, as the bishop's voice rang clear,
Another voice rang clearer still —
A voice wherein the soul could hear
The discord of unmeasured ill —
And sudden breathless silence fell
On all the church. And I wot well
There are such silences in hell.

Taper and torch died down – went out —
And all our church grew dark and cold,
And deathly odours crept about,
And chill, as of the churchyard mould;
And every flower drooped its head,
And all the rose's leaves were shed,
And all the lilies dropped down dead.

There, in the bishop's chair, we saw —
How can I tell you? Memories shrink
To mix anew the cup of awe
We shuddering mortals had to drink.
What was it? There! The shape that stood
Before the altar and the rood —
It was not human flesh and blood!

A light more bright than any sun,
A shade more dark than any night,
A shape that human shape was none,
A cloud, a sense of winged might,
And, like an infernal trumpet sound,
Rang through the church's hush profound
A voice. We listened horror-bound.

"*Venio!* Cease, cease to consecrate!
Love built the church, but it is mine!
'Tis built of stone hewn out by hate,
Cemented by man's blood divine.
Whence came the gold that paid for this?
From pillage of the poor, I wis —
That gold was mine, and mine this is!

"Your King has cursed the usurer's gold,
He gives it to me for my fee!
Your church is builded, but behold
Your church is fair for me – for me!
Who robs the poor to me is given;
Impenitent and unforgiven,
His church is built for hell, not heaven!"

Then, as we gazed, the face grew clear,
And all men stood as turned to stone;
Each man beheld through dews of fear
A face – his own – yet not his own;

His own face, darkened, lost, debased,
With hell's own signet stamped and traced,
And all the God in it effaced.

A crash like thunder shook the walls,
A flame like lightning shot them through:
"Fly, fly before the judgment falls,
And all the stones be fallen on you!"
And as we fled we saw bright gleams
Of fire leap out 'mid joists and beams.
Our church! Oh, love – oh, hopes – oh, dreams!

We stood without – a pallid throng —
And as the flame leaped high and higher,
Shrill winds we heard that rushed along
And fanned the transports of the fire.
The sky grew black; against the sky
The blue and scarlet flames leaped high,
And cries as of lost souls wailed by.

The church in glowing vesture stood,
The lead ran down as it were wax,
The great stones cracked and burned like wood,
The wood caught fire and flamed like flax:
A horrid chequered light and shade,
By smoke and flame alternate made,
Upon men's upturned faces played.

Down crashed the walls. Our lovely spire —

A blackened ruin – fell and lay.
The very earth about caught fire,
And flame-tongues licked along the clay.
The fire did neither stay nor spare
Till the foundations were laid bare
To the hot, sickened, smoke-filled air.

There in the sight of men it lay,
Our church that we had made so fair!
A heap of ashes white and gray,
With sparks still gleaming here and there.
The sun came out again, and shone
On all our loving work undone —
Our church destroyed, our labour gone!

Gone? Is it gone? God knows it, no!
The hands that builded built aright:
The men who loved and laboured so,
Their church is built in heaven's height!
In every stone a glittering gem,
Gold in the gold Jerusalem —
The church their love built waits for them.

LOVE IN JUNE

Through the glowing meadows aflame
With buttercup gold I came
To the green, still heart of the wood.
A wood-pigeon cooed and cooed,
The hazel-stems grew close,
Like leaves round the heart of a rose,
Round the still, green nest that I chose.

Then I gathered the bracken that grew
In a fairy forest all round,
And I laid it in heaps on the ground
With grass and blossoms and leaves.
I gathered the summer in sheaves,
And pale, rare roses a few,
And spread out a carpet meet
For the touch of my lady's feet.

I waited; the wood was still;
Only one little brown bird
On a hazel swayed and stirred
With the impulse of his song;
And I waited, and time was long.

Then I heard a step on the grass

In the path where the others pass,
And a voice like a voice in a dream;
And I saw a glory, a gleam,
A flash of white through the green
(Her arms and her gown are white);
And the summer sighed her name
As she and the sunshine came:
O sun and blue sky and delight!
O eyes and lips of my queen!

What was done there or said
No one will ever know,
For nobody saw or heard
Save one little, brown, bright bird
Who swayed on a twig overhead,
And he will never betray;
But all who pass by that way,
As they near the spot where we lay
Among the blossoms and grass
Where the leaves and the ferns lay thick
(Though it lies out of reach, out of sight
Of the path where the world may pass),
Feel their heart and their pulse beat quick
In a measure that rhymes with the leaves and flowers,
That rhymes with the summer and sun,
With the lover to win or won,
With the wild-flower crown of delight,
The crown of love that was ours.

THE GARDEN

My garden was lovely to see,
For all things fair,
Sweet flowers and blossoms rare,
I had planted there.
There were pinks and lilies and stocks,
Sweet gray and white stocks, and rose and rue,
And clematis white and blue,
And pansies and daisies and phlox.
And the lawn was trim, and the trees were shady,
And all things were ready to greet my lady
On the Life's-love-crowning day
When she should come
To her lover's home,
To give herself to me.

I saw the red of the roses —
The royal roses that bloomed for her sake.
"They shall lie," I said, "where my heart's hopes lie:
They shall droop on her heart and die."
I dreamed in the orchard-closes:
"'Tis here we will walk in the July days,
When the paths and the lawn are ablaze;
We will walk here, and look at our life's great bliss:
And thank God for this".

I leaned where the jasmine white
Wreathed all my window round:
"Here we will lean,
I and my queen,
And look out on the broad moonlight.
For there shall be moonlight – bright —
On my wedding-night."

She never saw the flowers
That were hers from their first sweet hours.
The roses, the pinks, and the dark heartsease
Died in my garden, ungathered, forlorn.
Only the jasmine, the lilies, the white, white rose,
They were gathered – to honour and sorrow born.
They lay round her, touched her close.
The jasmine stars – white stars, that about our window
their faint light shed,
Lay round her head.
And the white, white roses lay on her breast,
And a long, white lily lay in her hand.

They lie by her – rest with her rest;
But I, unhonoured, unblest —
I stand outside,
In the ruined garden solitude —
Where she never stood —
On the trim green sod
Which she never trod;

And the red, red roses grow and blow, —
As if any one cared
How they fared!

And the gate of Eden is shut; and I stand
And see the Angel with flaming sword —
Life's pitiless Lord —
And I know I never may pass.

Alas! alas!

O Rose! my rose!

I never may reach the place where she grows,
A rose in the garden of God.

PRAYER UNDER GRAY SKIES

O God, let there be rain!
Rain, till this sky of gray
That covers us every day
Be utterly wept away,
Let there be rain, we pray,
Till the sky be washed blue again
Let there be rain!

O God, let there be rain,
For the sky hangs heavy with pain,
And we, who walk upon earth,
We find our days not of worth;
None blesses the day of our birth,
We question of death's day in vain, —
Let there be rain!

O God, let there be rain
Till the full-fed earth complain.
Yea, though it sweep away
The seeds sown yesterday
And beat down the blossoms of May
And ruin the border gay:
In storm let this gray noon wane,
Let there be rain!

O God, let there be rain
Till the rivers rise a-main!
Though the waters go over us quite
And cover us up from the light
And whelm us away in the night
And the flowers of our life be slain,
O God, let there be rain!

O God, let there be rain,
Out of the gray sky, rain!
To wash the earth and to wash the sky
And the sick, sad souls of the folk who sigh
In the gray of a sordid satiety.
Open Thy flood-gates, O God most High,
And some day send us the sun again.
O God, let there be rain!

A GREAT INDUSTRIAL CENTRE

Squalid street after squalid street,
Endless rows of them, each the same,
Black dust under your weary feet,
Dust upon every face you meet,
Dust in their hearts, too, – or so it seems —
Dust in the place of dreams.

Spring in her beauty thrills and thrives,
Here men hardly have heard her name.
Work is the end and aim of their lives —
Work, work, work! for their children and wives;
Work for a life which, when it is won,
Is the saddest thing 'neath the sun!

Work – one dark and incessant round
In black dull workshops, out of the light;
Work that others' ease may abound,
Work that delight for them may be found,
Work without hope, without pause, without peace,
That only in death can cease.

Brothers, who live glad lives in the sun,
What of these men, at work in the night?
God will ask you what you have done;

Their lives be required of you – every one —
Ye, who were glad and who liked life well,
While they did your work – in hell!

LONDON'S VOICES

SPEAK TO TWO SOULS – WHO THUS REPLY:

I

In all my work, in all the children's play,
I hear the ceaseless hum of London near;
It cries to me, I cannot choose but hear
Its never-ending wail, by night and day.
So many millions – is it vain to pray
That all may win such peace as I have here,
With books, and work, and little children dear? —
That flowers like mine may grow along their way?

Through all my happy life I hear the cry,
The exceeding bitter cry of human pain,
And shudder as the deathless wail sweeps by.
I can do nothing – even hope is vain
That the bright light of peace and purity
In those lost souls may ever shine again!

II

'Mid pine woods' whisper and the hum of bees
I heard a voice that was not bee nor wood:
Here, in the city, Gold has trampled Good.
Come thou, do battle till this strife shall cease!"
I left the mill, the meadows and the trees,
And came to do the little best I could
For these, God's poor; and, oh, my God, I would
I had a thousand lives to give for these!

What can one hand do 'gainst a world of wrong?
Yet, when the voice said, "Come!" how could I stay?
The foe is mighty, and the battle long
(And love is sweet, and there are flowers in May),
And Good seems weak, and Gold is very strong;
But, while these fight, I dare not turn away.

THE SICK JOURNALIST

Throb, throb, throb, weariness, ache, and pain!
One's heart and one's eyes on fire,
And never a spark in one's brain.
The stupid paper and ink,
That might be turned into gold,
Lie here unused
Since one's brain refused
To do its tricks – as of old.
One can suffer still, indeed,
But one cannot think any more.
There's no fire in the grate,
No food on the plate,
And the East-wind shrieks through the door.
The sunshine grins in the street:
It used to cheer me like wine,
Now it only quickens my brain's sick beat;
And the children are crying for bread to eat
And I cannot write a line!

Molly, my pet – don't cry,
Father can't write if you do —
And anyhow, if you only knew,
It's hard enough as it is.
There, give old daddy a kiss,

And cuddle down on the floor;
We'll have some dinner by-and-by.
Now, fool, try! Try once more!
Hold your head tight in your hands,
Bring your will to bear!
The children are starving – your little ones —
While you sit fooling there.
Beth, with her golden hair;
Moll, with her rough, brown head —
Here they are – see!
Against your knee,
Waiting there to be fed! —
I cannot bear their eyes.
Their soft little kisses burn —
They will cry again
In vain, in vain,
For the food that I cannot earn.

If I could only write
Just a dozen pages or so
On "The Prospects of Trade,"
or "The Irish Question,"
or "Why are Wages so Low?" —
The printers are waiting for copy now,
I've had my next week's screw,
There'll be nothing more till I've written something,
Oh, God! what am I to do?
If I could only write!
The paper glares up white

Like the cursed white of the heavy stone
Under which *she* lies alone;
And the ink is black like death,
And the room and the window are black.
Molly, Molly – the sun's gone out,
Cannot you fetch it back?
Did I frighten my little ones?
Never mind, daddy dropped asleep —
Cuddle down closely, creep
Close to his knee
And daddy will see
If he can't do his writing. Vain!
I shall never write again!
Oh, God! was it like a love divine
To make their lives hang on my pen
When I cannot write a line?

TWO LULLABIES

I

Sleep, sleep, my little baby dear,
Thee shall no want or pain come near;
Sleep softly on thy downy nest,
Or on this lace-veiled mother-breast.

Thy cradle is all silken lined,
Wrought roses on thy curtains twined,
Warm woolly blankets o'er thee spread,
With soft white pillows for thy head.

Much gold those little hands shall hold,
And wealth about thy life shall fold,
And thou shalt see nor pain nor strife,
Nor the low ills of common life.

These little feet shall never tread
Except on paths soft-carpeted,
And all life's flowers in wreaths shall twine
To deck that darling head of thine.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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