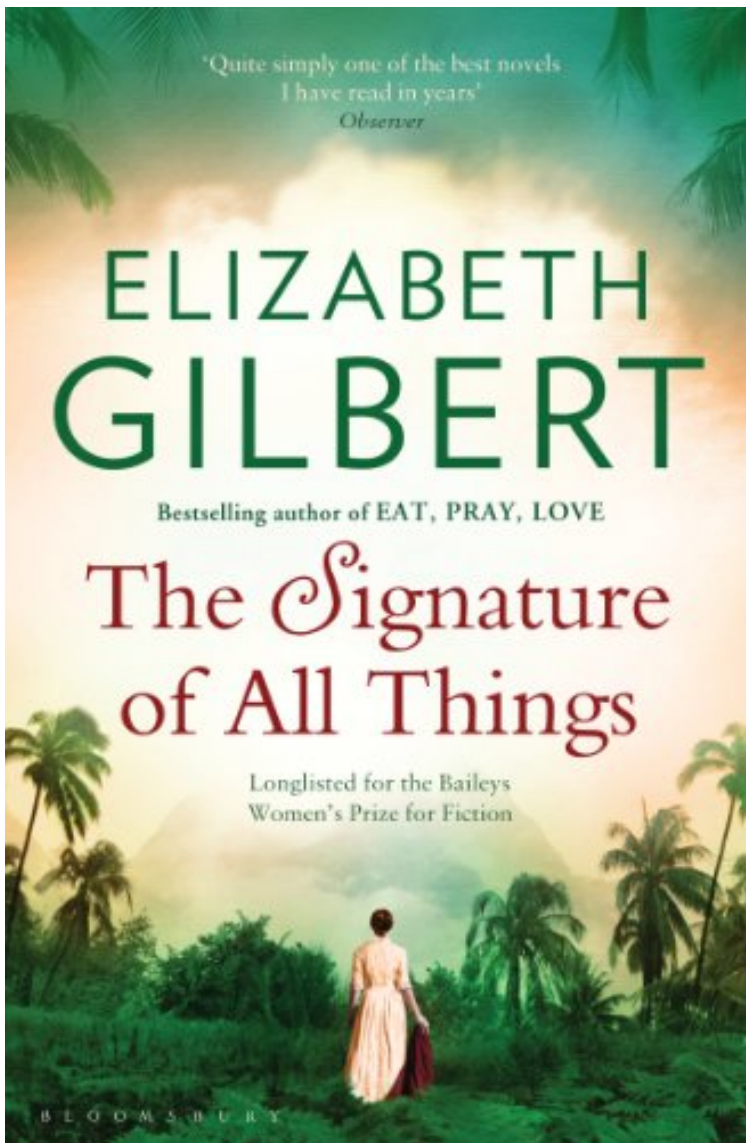


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The Signature of All Things



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Description :

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LONGLISTED FOR THE BAILEYS WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTIONS
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From the moment Alma Whittaker steps into the world, everything about life intrigues her. Instilled with an unquenchable sense of wonder by her father, a botanical explorer and the richest man in the New World, Alma is raised in a house of luxury and curiosity. It is not long before she becomes a gifted botanist in her own right. But as she flourishes and her research takes her deeper into the mysteries of evolution, the man she comes to love draws her in the opposite direction into the realm of the spiritual, the divine and the magical. The Signature of All Things soars across the globe of the nineteenth century, from London and Peru, to Philadelphia, Tahiti and beyond. Peopled with extraordinary characters along the way, most of all it has an unforgettable heroine in Alma

Whittaker. Extrait Prologue Alma Whittaker, born with the century, slid into our world on the fifth of January, 1800. Swiftly nearly immediately opinions began to form around her. Almas mother, upon viewing the infant for the first time, felt quite satisfied with the outcome. Beatrix Whittaker had suffered poor luck thus far generating an heir. Her first three attempts at conception had vanished in sad rivulets before theyd ever quickened. Her most recent attempt a perfectly formed son had come right to the brink of life, but had then changed his mind about it on the very morning he was meant to be born, and arrived already departed. After such losses, any child who survives is a satisfactory child. Holding her robust infant, Beatrix murmured a prayer in her native Dutch. She prayed that her daughter would grow up to be healthy and sensible and intelligent, and would never form associations with overly powdered girls, or laugh at vulgar stories, or sit at gaming tables with careless men, or read French novels, or behave in a manner suited only to a savage Indian, or in any way whatsoever become the worst sort of discredit to a good family; namely, that she not grow up to be een onnozelaar, a simpleton. Thus concluded her blessing or what constitutes a blessing, from so austere a woman as Beatrix Whittaker. The midwife, a German-born local woman, was of the opinion that this had been a decent birth in a decent house, and thus Alma Whittaker was a decent baby. The bedroom had been warm, soup and beer had been freely offered, and the mother had been stalwart just as one would expect from the Dutch. Moreover, the midwife knew that she would be paid, and paid handsomely. Any baby who brings money is an acceptable baby. Therefore, the midwife offered a blessing to Alma as well, although without excessive passion. Hanneke de Groot, the head housekeeper of the estate, was less impressed. The baby was neither a boy nor was it pretty. It had a face like a bowl of porridge, and was pale as a painted floor. Like all children, it would bring work. Like all work, it would probably fall on her shoulders. But she blessed the child anyway, because the blessing of a new baby is a responsibility, and Hanneke de Groot always met her responsibilities. Hanneke paid off the midwife and changed the bedsheets. She was helped in her efforts, although not ably, by a young maida talkative country girl and recent addition to the household who was more interested in looking at the baby than in tidying up the bedroom. The maids name does not bear recording here, because Hanneke de Groot would dismiss the girl as useless the next day, and send her off without references. Nonetheless, for that one night, the useless and doomed maid fussed over the new baby, and longed for a baby herself, and imparted a rather sweet and sincere blessing upon young Alma. Dick Yancey a tall, intimidating Yorkshireman, who worked for the gentleman of the house as the iron-handed enforcer of all his international trade concerns (and who happened to be residing at the estate that January, waiting for the Philadelphia ports to thaw so he could proceed on to the Dutch East Indies) had few words to say about the new infant. To be fair, he was not much given to excessive conversation under any circumstances. When told that Mrs. Whittaker had given birth to a healthy baby girl, Mr. Yancey merely frowned and pronounced, with characteristic economy of speech, Hard trade, living. Was that a blessing? Difficult to say. Let us give him the benefit of the doubt and take it as one. Surely he did not intend it as a curse. As for Almas father Henry Whittaker, the gentleman of the estate he was pleased with his child. Most pleased. He did not mind that the infant was not a boy, nor that it was not pretty. He did not bless Alma, but only because he was not the blessing type. (Gods business is none of my business, he frequently said.) Without reservation, though, Henry admired his child. Then again, he had made his child, and Henry Whittakers tendency in life was to admire without reservation everything he made. To mark the occasion, Henry harvested a pineapple from his largest greenhouse and divided it in equal shares with everyone in the household. Outside it was snowing, a perfect Pennsylvania winter, but this man possessed several coal-fired greenhouses of his own design structures that made him not only the envy of every plantsman and botanist in the Americas, but also blisteringly rich and if he wanted a pineapple in January, by God he could have a pineapple in January. Cherries in March, as well. He then retired to his study and opened up his ledger, where, as he did every night, he recorded all manner of estate transactions, both official and intimate. He began: A new nobbel and entresting pasennger has joyned us, and continued with the details, the timing, and the expenses of Alma Whittakers birth. His penmanship was shamefully crabbed. Each sentence was a crowded village of capital letters and small letters, living side by side in tight misery, crawling up on one another as though trying to escape the page. His spelling was several degrees beyond arbitrary, and his punctuation brought reason to sigh with unhappiness. But Henry wrote up his account, nonetheless. It was important for him to keep track of things. While he knew that these pages would look appalling to any educated man, he also knew that nobody would ever see his writing except his wife. When Beatrix recovered her strength, she would transcribe his notes into her own ledgers, as she always did, and her elegantly penned translation of Henrys scrawls would become the official household record. The partner

of his days, was Beatrix and a good value, at that. She would do this task for him, and a hundred other tasks besides. God willing, she would be back at it shortly. Paperwork was already piling up. Part One

The Tree of Fevers

Chapter One

For the first five years of her life, Alma Whittaker was indeed a mere passenger in the world as we all are passengers in such early youth and so her story was not yet noble, nor was it particularly interesting, beyond the fact that this homely toddler passed her days without illness or incident, surrounded by a degree of wealth nearly unknown in the America of that time, even within elegant Philadelphia. How her father came to be in possession of such great wealth is a story worth telling here, while we wait for the girl to grow up and catch our interest again. For it was no more common in 1800 than it has ever been for a poor-born and nearly illiterate man to become the richest inhabitant of his city, and so the means by which Henry Whittaker prospered are indeed interesting although perhaps not noble, as he himself would have been the first to confess. Henry Whittaker was born in 1760 in the village of Richmond, just up the Thames from London. He was the youngest son of poor parents who had a few too many children already. He was raised in two small rooms with a floor of beaten earth, with an almost adequate roof, with a meal on the hearth nearly every day, with a mother who did not drink and a father who did not beat his family by comparison to many families of the day, in other words, a nearly genteel existence. His mother even had a private spot of dirt behind the house in which to grow larkspurs and lupines, decoratively, like a lady. But Henry was not fooled by larkspurs and lupines. He grew up sleeping one wall away from the pigs, and there was not a moment in his life when poverty did not humiliate him. Perhaps Henry would have taken less offense at his destiny had he never seen wealth around him against which to compare his own poor circumstances but the boy grew up witnessing not only wealth, but royalty. There was a palace at Richmond, and there were pleasure gardens there, too, called Kew, cultivated with expertise by Princess Augusta, who had brought with her from Germany a retinue of gardeners eager to make a false and regal landscape out of real and humble English meadows. Her son, the future King George III, spent his childhood summers there. When he became king, George sought to turn Kew into a botanical garden worthy of any Continental rival. The English, on their cold, wet, isolated island, were far behind the rest of Europe on botanizing, and George III was eager to catch up. Henry's father was an orchardman at Kew a humble man, respected by his masters, as much as anyone could respect a humble orchardman. Mr. Whittaker had a gift for fruiting trees, and a reverence for them. (They pay the land for its trouble, he would say, unlike all the others.) He had once saved the king's favorite apple tree by whip-grafting a scion of the ailing specimen onto sturdier rootstock and claying it secure. The tree had fruited off the new graft that very year, and soon produced bushels. For this miracle, Mr. Whittaker had been nicknamed the Apple Magus by the king himself. The Apple Magus, for all his talents, was a simple man, with a timid wife, but they somehow turned out six rough and violent sons (including one boy called the Terror of Richmond and two others who would end up dead in tavern brawls). Henry, the youngest, was in some ways the roughest of them all, and perhaps needed to be, to survive his brothers. He was a stubborn and enduring little whippet, a thin and exploding contrivance, who could be trusted to receive his brothers' beatings stoically, and whose fearlessness was frequently put to the test by others, who liked to dare him into taking risks. Even apart from his brothers, Henry was a dangerous experimentalist, a lighter of illicit fires, a roof-scampering taunter of housewives, a menace to smaller children; a boy who one would not have been surprised to learn had fallen from a church steeple or drowned in the Thames though by sheer happenstance these scenarios never came to pass. But unlike his brothers, Henry had a redeeming attribute. Two of them, to be exact: he was intelligent, and he was interested in trees. It would be exaggeration to claim that Henry revered trees, as his father did, but he was interested in trees because they were one of the few things in his impoverished world that could readily be learned, and experience had already instructed Henry that learning things gave a person advantage over other people. If one wanted to continue living (and Henry did) and if one wanted to ultimately prosper (and Henry did), then anything that could be learned, should be learned. Latin, penmanship, archery, riding, dancing all of these were out of reach to Henry. But he had trees, and he had his father, the Apple Magus, who patiently took the trouble to teach him. So Henry learned all about the grafters' tools of clay and wax and knives, and about the tricks of budding, booting, clefting, planting, and pruning with a judicious hand. He learned how to transplant trees in the springtime, if the soil was retentive and dense, or how to do it in the autumn, if the soil was loose and dry. He learned how to stake and drape the apricots in order to save them from wind, how to cultivate citruses in the Orangery, how to smoke the mildew off the gooseberries, how to amputate diseased limbs from the figs, and when not to bother. He learned how to strip the tattered bark from an old tree and take the thing right down to the ground, without sentimentality or remorse, in order to demand life back out

of it for a dozen more seasons to come. Henry learned much from his father, though he was ashamed of the man, who he felt was weak. If Mr. Whittaker truly was the Apple Magus, Henry reasoned, then why had the

kings admiration not been parlayed into wealth? Stupid men were rich many of them. Why did the Whittakers still live with pigs, when just nearby were the great wide green lawns of the palace, and the pleasant houses on Maid of Honor Row, where the queens servants slept on French linens? Henry, climbing to the top of an elaborate garden wall one day, had spied a lady, dressed in an ivory gown, practicing mane on her immaculate white horse while a servant played the violin to entertain her. People were living like this, right there in Richmond, while the Whittakers did not even have a floor. But Henrys father never fought for anything fine. He earned the same paltry wage for thirty years, and had never once disputed it, nor had he ever complained about working outdoors in the foulest of weather for so long that his health had been ruined

by it. Henrys father had chosen the carefulest steps through life, particularly when interacting with his betters and he regarded everyone as his better. Mr. Whittaker made a point never to offend, and never to take advantage, even when advantages may have been ripe for plucking. He told his son, Henry, do not be bold.

You can butcher the sheep only once. But if you are careful, you can shear the sheep every year. With a father so forceless and complacent, what could Henry expect to receive out of life, aside from whatever he could clutch at with his own hands? A man should profit, Henry started telling himself when he was only thirteen years old. A man should butcher a sheep every day. But where to find the sheep? That was when

Henry Whittaker started stealing. By the mid-1770s, the gardens at Kew had become a botanical Noahs Ark, with thousands of specimens already in the collection, and new consignments arriving weekly: hydrangeas from the Far East, magnolias from China, ferns from the West Indies. Whats more, Kew had a new and ambitious superintendent: Sir Joseph Banks, fresh from his triumphant voyage around the world as chief

botanist for Captain Cooks HMS Endeavour. Banks, who worked without salary (he was interested only in the glory of the British Empire, he said, although others suggested he might be just the slightest bit interested in the glory of Sir Joseph Banks), was now collecting plants with furious passion, committed to creating a truly spectacular national garden. Oh, Sir Joseph Banks! That beautiful, whoring, ambitious, competitive

adventurer! The man was everything Henrys father was not. By the age of twenty-three, a drenching inheritance of six thousand pounds a year had made Banks one of the richest men in England. Arguably, he was also the handsomest. Banks could easily have spent his life in idle luxury, but instead he sought to become the boldest of botanical explorers: a vocation he took up without sacrificing a bit of flash or glamour.

Banks had paid for a good deal of Captain Cooks first expedition out of his own pocket, which had afforded him the right to bring along on that cramped ship two black man-servants, two white manservants, a spare

botanist, a scientific secretary, two artists, a draftsman, and a pair of Italian greyhounds. During his adventure, Banks had seduced Tahitian queens, danced naked with savages on beaches, and watched young heathen girls having their buttocks tattooed in the moonlight. He had brought home with him to England a

Tahitian man named Omai, to be kept as a pet, and he had also brought home nearly four thousand plant specimens: almost half of which the world of science had never before seen. Sir Joseph Banks was the most famous and dashing man in England, and Henry admired him enormously. But he stole from him anyway. It

was merely that the opportunity was there, and that the opportunity was so obvious. Banks was known in scientific circles not merely as a great botanical collector, but also as a great botanical hoarder. Gentlemen of botany, in those polite days, generally shared their discoveries with each other freely, but Banks shared

nothing. Professors, dignitaries, and collectors came to Kew from all over the world with the reasonable hope of obtaining seeds and cuttings, as well as samples from Banks vast herbarium: but Banks turned them all away. Young Henry admired Banks for a hoarder (he would not have shared his own treasure, either, had he possessed any) but he soon saw opportunity in the angered faces of these thwarted international visitors.

He would wait for them just outside the grounds of Kew, catching the men as they were leaving the gardens, sometimes catching them cursing Sir Joseph Banks in French, German, Dutch, or Italian. Henry would

approach, ask the men what samples they desired, and promise to procure those samples by weeks end. He always carried a paper tablet and a carpenters pencil with him; if the men did not speak English, Henry had them draw pictures of what they needed. They were all excellent botanical artists, so their needs were easily

made clear. Late in the evenings, Henry would sneak into the greenhouses, dart past the workers who kept the giant stoves going through the cold nights, and steal plants for profit. He was just the boy for the task. He was good at plant identification, expert at keeping cuttings alive, a familiar enough face around the gardens

not to arouse suspicion, and adept at covering his tracks. Best of all, he did not seem to require sleep. He worked all day with his father in the orchards, and then stole all night: rare plants, precious plants, lady's

slippers, tropical orchids, carnivorous marvels from the New World. He kept all the botanical drawings that the distinguished gentlemen made for him, too, and studied those drawings until he knew every stamen and petal of every plant the world desired. Like all good thieves, Henry was scrupulous about his own security. He trusted nobody with his secret, and buried his earnings in several caches throughout the gardens at Kew. He never spent a farthing of it. He let his silver rest dormant in the soil, like good rootstock. He wanted that silver to accumulate, until it could burst forth hugely, and buy him the right to become a rich man. Within a year Henry had several regular clients. One of them, an old orchid cultivator from the Paris Botanical Gardens, gave the boy perhaps the first pleasing compliment of his life: You're a useful little fingerstink, aren't you? Within two years, Henry was driving a vigorous trade, selling plants not only to serious men of botany, but also to a circle of wealthy London gentry, who longed for exotic specimens for their own collections. Within three years, he was illicitly shipping plant samples to France and Italy, expertly packing the cuttings in moss and wax to ensure they survived the journey. At the end, however, after three years of this felonious enterprise, Henry Whittaker was caught and by his own father. Mr. Whittaker, normally a deep sleeper, had noticed his son leaving the house one night after midnight and, heartsick with a father's instinctive suspicion, had followed the boy to the greenhouse and seen the selecting, the thieving, the expert packing. He recognized immediately the illicit care of a robber. Henry's father was not a man who had ever beat his sons, even when they deserved it (and they frequently did deserve it), and he didn't beat Henry that night, either. Nor did he confront the boy directly. Henry didn't even realize he'd been caught. No, Mr. Whittaker did something far worse. First thing the next morning, he asked for a personal audience with Sir Joseph Banks. It was not often that a poor fellow like Whittaker could request a word with a gentleman like Banks, but Henry's father had earned just enough respect around Kew in thirty years of tireless labor to warrant the intrusion, if only just this once. He was an old and poor man, indeed, but he was also the Apple Magus, the savior of the king's favorite tree, and that title bought him entrance. Mr. Whittaker came at Banks almost upon his knees, head bowed, penitent as a saint. He confessed the shaming story about his son, along with his suspicion that Henry had probably been stealing for years. He offered his resignation from Kew as punishment, if the boy would only be spared arrest or harm. The Apple Magus promised to take his family far away from Richmond, and see to it that Kew, and Banks, would never again be sullied by the Whittaker name. Banks, impressed by the orchardman's heightened sense of honor, refused the resignation, and sent for young Henry personally. Again, this was an unusual occurrence. If it was rare for Sir Joseph Banks to meet with an illiterate plantsman in his study, it was exceedingly rare for him to meet with an illiterate plantsman's thieving sixteen-year-old son. Probably, he ought to have simply had the boy arrested. But theft was a hanging crime, and children far younger than Henry got the rope and for far less serious infractions. While the attack on his collection was galling, Banks felt sympathy enough for the father to investigate the problem himself before summoning the bailiff. The problem, when it walked into Sir Joseph Banks's study, turned out to be a spindly, ginger-haired, tight-lipped, milky-eyed, broad-shouldered, sunken-chested youth, with pale skin already rubbed raw by too much exposure to wind, rain, and sun. The boy was underfed but tall, and his hands were large; Banks saw that he might grow into a big man someday, if he could get a proper meal. Henry did not know precisely why he had been summoned to Banks's offices but he had sufficient brains to suspect the worst, and he was much alarmed. Only through sheer thick-sided stubbornness could he enter Banks's study without visibly trembling. God's love, though, what a beautiful study it was! And how splendidly Joseph Banks was dressed, in his glossy wig and gleaming black velvet suit, polished shoe buckles and white stockings. Henry had no sooner passed through the door than he had already priced out the delicate mahogany writing desk, covetously scanned the fine collection boxes stacked on every shelf, and glanced with admiration at the handsome portrait of Captain Cook on the wall. Mother of dead dogs, the mere frame for that portrait must have cost ninety pounds! Unlike his father, Henry did not bow in Banks's presence, but stood before the great man, looking him straight in the eye. Banks, who was seated, permitted Henry to stand in silence, perhaps waiting for a confession or a plea. But Henry neither confessed nor pleaded, nor hung his head in shame, and if Sir Joseph Banks thought Henry Whittaker was fool enough to speak first under such hot circumstances, then he did not know Henry Whittaker. Therefore, after a long silence, Banks commanded, Tell me, then why should I not see you hang at Tyburn? So that's it, Henry thought. I'm snapped. Nonetheless, the boy grappled for a plan. He needed to find a tactic, and he needed to find it in one quick and slender moment. He had not spent his life being beaten senseless by his older brothers to have learned nothing about fighting. When a bigger and stronger opponent has landed the first blow, you have but one chance to swing back before you will be pummeled into clay, and your best come

back with something unexpected. Because I'm a useful little fingerstink, Henry said. Banks, who enjoyed unusual incidents, barked with surprised laughter. I confess that I don't see the use of you, young man. All you have done for me is to rob me of my hard-won treasure. It wasn't a question, but Henry answered it nonetheless. I might've trimmed a bit, he said. You don't deny this? All the braying in the world won't change it, do it? Again, Banks laughed. He may have thought the boy was putting on a show of false courage, but Henry's courage was real. As was his fear. As was his lack of penitence. For the whole of his life, Henry would always find penitence weak. Banks changed tack. I must say, young man, that you are a crowning distress to your father. And him to me, sir, Henry fired back. Once more, the surprised bark of laughter from Banks. Is he, then? What harm has that good man ever done to you? Made me poor, sir, Henry said. Then, suddenly realizing everything, Henry added, It were him, weren't it? Who peached me over to you? Indeed it was. He's an honorable soul, your father. Henry shrugged. Not to me, eh? Banks took this in and nodded, generously conceding the point. Then he asked, To whom have you been selling my plants? Henry ticked off the names on his fingers: Mancini, Flood, Willink, LeFavour, Miles, Sather, Evashevski, Feuerle, Lord Lessig, Lord Garner. Banks cut him off with a wave. He stared at the boy with open astonishment. Oddly, if the list had been more modest, Banks might have been angrier. But these were the most esteemed botanical names of the day. A few of them Banks called friends. How had the boy found them? Some of these men hadn't been to England in years. The child must be exporting. What kind of campaign had this creature been running under his nose? How do you even know how to handle plants? Banks asked. I always knowed plants, sir, for my whole life. It's like I knowed it all beforehand. And these men, do they pay you? Or they don't get their plants, do they? Henry said. You must be earning well. Indeed, you must have accumulated quite a pile of money in the past years. Henry was too cunning to answer this. What have you done with the money you've earned, young man? Banks pushed on. I can't say you've invested it in your wardrobe. Without a doubt, your earnings belong to Kew. So where is it all? Gone, sir. Gone where? Dice, sir. I have a weakness of the gambling, see. That may or may not have been true, Banks thought. But the boy certainly had as much nerve as any two-footed beast he had ever encountered. Banks was intrigued. He was a man, after all, who kept a heathen for a pet, and who to be honest enjoyed the reputation of being half heathen himself. His station in life required that he at least purport to admire gentility, but secretly he preferred a bit of wildness. And what a little wild cockerel was Henry Whittaker! Banks was growing less inclined by the moment to hand over this curious item of humanity to the constables. Henry, who saw everything, saw something happening in Banks's face: a softening of countenance, a blooming curiosity, a sliver of a chance for his life to be saved. Intoxicated with a compulsion for self-preservation, the boy vaulted into that sliver of hope, one last time. Don't put me to hang, sir, Henry said. You'll regret it that you did. What do you propose I do with you, instead? Put me to use. Why should I? asked Banks. Because I'm better than anyone.

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