

The Mysterious Murder

The following strange events occurred in an English country town in the year 1805. They have been carefully abridged and connected from the newspaper accounts of that day, and may therefore be considered matter of history.

For many years, Sir James Fanshawe, a baronet of ancient family and large estates, had resided at —Abby. He was a widower, and had but one child, a beautiful and accomplished daughter, who, upon his decease, (she then being just twenty-one years of age) became sole possessor of his property, and also continued to dwell at the same place. Shortly after her father's death Miss Fanshawe benevolently adopted as her companion a distant relative—a high born young Irish lady, named Eveleen O'Neil, who had been left, not merely portionless, but a totally friendless orphan. These two ladies conceived the strongest friendship and attachment to each other—so much so, that Miss Fanshawe made her will, conferring all her property on her youthful cousin. This mark of preference eventually proved a curse to the unfortunate Eveleen, as will be seen in the sequel.

On the morning of the 25th of July, 1805, the inmates of Fanshawe Abby were horrified by the most piercing screams of agony proceeding from the sleeping apartments of the mistress of the mansion. In great alarm the butler, Thomas Cooper, hastily threw on part of his clothes, and rushed to the scene of the outcry. The door of his mistress' bedroom stood slightly ajar, and pushing it slightly open, he crossed the threshold, and was horrified by what he immediately saw. On the carpet, by the side of the bed, lay the body of Miss Fanshawe, in her night dress, bathed in blood. Kneeling close by her was Eveleen O'Neil, with her left hand resting on her mistress' bosom, and her right uplifted with a small drawn dagger, which was apparently about to be plunged into his mistress' body. Both the dagger and the hand that held it were dripping with blood. On the appearance of the butler, Eveleen started to her feet, dropped the dagger on the carpet, and uttered a scream. Then, ere he had time to speak, she stepped nearer, and falling upon her knees, clasped her hands and looked up to him exclaiming wildly, 'Have mercy upon me.' Soon afterwards some of the servants came rushing into the room, and also Lord G—(a visitor at the Abby,) came in, having also been alarmed by the screams. The body was quite warm, and life, apparently, had been extinct only a few minutes. It was thought at once that Eveleen O'Neil had thus brutally murdered her benefactress and friend in order to possess herself of the property, as everybody about the Abby was aware of the existence of the will, and of the strong friendship existing between the two ladies. This monstrous suspicion being communicated to the young Eveleen, she denied it with the most vehement and solemn assertions of her entire innocence, which however, so far from being believed, only induced the parties present to express their still firmer conviction that she had murdered her benefactress, and was thus detected in the act. Eventually, overcome by the damning nature of appearances against her, the wretched girl fell down on her knees once more, and with sobs and screams, incoherently prayed for mercy, alternately addressing God and them—yet still protesting her innocence with frantic gesticulations. Nobody believed her.

On the body of the unfortunate murdered lady being examined, it was found that she was stabbed in nine different parts, and her hands and arms were also gashed in many places, in a way that showed how desperately she must have fought for life. On the bed was found a very large lock of

hair torn up by the roots. This hair was at first thought to be Miss Fanshawe's own, but, on examination, none was found torn from her head, neither did the lock correspond in the least with hers, either in color or length. This was also the case with Eveleen, and, after a most patient investigation at the inquest, all concerned unanimously admitted the inexplicable fact that the lock of women's hair was neither the murdered lady's nor that of the accused. Consequently, and no less evidently, there must have been an accomplice in the crime, and this female accomplice, it was conjectured, had been deprived of the lock of hair from her head by Miss Fanshawe grasping it in the agony of the death struggle, for great violence must have been exerted to tear it up by the roots.

No time was lost in making a strict and well conducted examination of the apartment, and the result was that several most extraordinary matters were brought to light. The bed in which the ill-fated lady had slept was completely saturated with blood, and the sheets tumbled and twisted in a way that clearly evinced that she must have fought hard with the murderer. By pushing the curtains aside, Miss Fanshawe could reach the pull of a bell, hanging in her own maid's room, and so summon her at any moment she required. The bell-pull was found carefully tied round the adjoining bed-post, completely out of the sleeper's reach. This apparently indicated two important facts;—first, that the murder must have been a deliberately planned affair; secondly, that it must have been committed by some one intimately acquainted with the apartment.—Thus were the suspicions against Eveleen further confirmed. The dagger by which the deed was committed, no witness even pretended to have previously seen in the possession of Eveleen. This, indeed, was not a great stumbling block, as she might have fifty daggers, and nobody been the wiser. But the single circumstance of the existence of the lock of hair, which could not, by any stretch of conscience, be affirmed to be either the murdered lady's or that of the accused, was admitted to be a signal proof that another had aided the latter to effect the deed. No one imagined that another could have done the murder alone, and thus the miserable girl was committed to prison to take her trial for Murder.

On the coroner's inquest, Eveleen herself gave the following voluntary explanation of the position in which she was found:

'I was aroused,' said she, 'from my sleep, by hearing what I conceived to be a struggle, mingled with smothered screams, going on in the sleeping apartment of Miss Fanshawe. I listened, and hearing a scream still more distinctly, and also what I thought to be a cry for help, I hesitated not a moment in hurrying towards the room. As I approached the door, which was at the end of a long corridor, and at a considerable distance from the sleeping room of any one else, my own chamber being the nearest to it, *I heard what I thought to be the voices of individuals hurriedly conversing*; but when I reached the door, which Miss Fanshawe never locked, I found it slightly open; and on entering, discovered her lifeless body on the floor, in a pool of blood. There were no persons visible in the room. I screamed repeatedly at the sight, and in dreadful agitation, sank on my knees, and then fell across the body, by which I became besmeared with the blood of my dear, murdered friend, whom I loved as myself. On arising, I happened to see a dagger, and lifted it up by the end of the blade, hardly knowing what I did. At this moment the butler entered the room.'

No one believed this very reasonable story. The public mind had, by some frenzy, attached guilt to this unfortunate girl, and such was the prejudice against her that when she repeated her story to a certain functionary who visited her in prison, he sternly rebuked her, and bade her heap no more lies on her soul.

The trial of Eveleen O'Neil at length came on at the Assizes. A powerful posse of officers of justice and special constables were drawn up in front of the county hall, and at eight o'clock the great doors were opened and the public admitted. A tremendous rush ensued, and in ten minutes the immense building was crammed to suffocation. The galleries were thickly thronged with elegantly dressed ladies and numbers of the nobility and gentry. In fact, nearly all the rank and fashion of the country were present. The people in the streets had fully anticipated that the accused would be brought to the court-house by the front-entrance and therefore they should have at least a chance of obtaining a glimpse of her person; but in this they were disappointed, as she had been quietly introduced into the back part of the building, some hours previously, in consequence of a prudent arrangement of the authorities.

In another hour, the judge was seated, the accused placed at the bar, the jury sworn, and all formal preliminaries preparatory to the opening of the trial duly got through. When the prisoner was brought into court, all noise merged into one deep drawn murmuring aspiration, which seemed involuntarily to break from an immense assemblage, as though from one single breast. Every frame was raised on tiptoe—every neck stretched forward to the utmost—every thought absorbed in the one desire to obtain a position ensuring a full view of the 'observed of all observers.'

Eveleen was a beautiful young girl scarcely twenty years of age. She was tall, and notwithstanding the situation in which she was placed, the elegance and grace of her form and demeanor were conspicuous. Her auburn hair, upon which, as if in mockery of woe, the golden sunbeams played with mellowed radiance, was partly gathered in massive folds upon the top of her head and partly hung down in rich tresses. Her eyes were those large, dark, all-expressive blue orbs, and her forehead was one of the lofty, ample proportions, which we so often find characteristic of her intellectual countrywomen. It was very easy to conceive that in her happier days she was a fine type of Erin's daughters—a warm-hearted, open-souled, merry, happy, bewitching, loveable young creature, who irresistibly attracted you by her transparent goodness, and, who would, were you at all a kindred spirit, become your familiar friend ere you had sat an hour by her side from your first introduction. But alas! We have only to describe her as she now is. Her features are deadly pale, her eyes unnaturally luminous and enlarged, her lips quivering, and her hands tightly pressed before her. On her entrance, her features were composed, and she walked with a steady step to the dock, and when placed there, lifted her head and gave a rapid glance round at the agitated sea of human countenances; but almost instantly shrank, as it seemed, within herself, clasped her hands convulsively together, and uttered a prayer to God, while a flush of scarlet shame marked her flesh. This passed away quickly as it came, and in its stead a marble whiteness permanently ensued. One, two, three drops slowly rolled down her pallid cheeks but she wiped them away, and shed no more. Near to her were her counsel, a middle aged gentleman, well known as a gifted and most successful pleader. He was anxiously pouring over his brief and glancing at his notes.

We will not go into the details of this affecting trial—so different from what a similar scene would now present in an English court. There was scarcely a person present who had not made up his mind beforehand as to her guilt, and consequently there seemed few chances in the poor girl's favor, beautiful and interesting as she appeared in her sad affliction. The evidence was quickly gone through with all the witness at the Abbey having made up their minds that Eveleen was the murderess. Little could be offered in defence, against the damning circumstances under which she had been found on the morning of the murder.

The venerable judge ably summed up. He dwelt particularly upon the danger of convicting on merely circumstantial evidence. It was generally considered that his charge to the jury, on the whole, manifested a decided leaning toward the prisoner. But it obviously mattered little what everybody's opinion might be, if the jury themselves thought differently, and they had manifested little emotion throughout the trial. Life and death were in their hands, and not in the breath of the public. As they filed from the box to consider their verdict, poor Eveleen raised her head, and threw towards them an appealing look of such concentrated anguish—so pathetic, so wildly imploring—that one would have imagined it would have moved hearts of stone. In half an hour they returned into court. Hushed was the faintest whisper or rustle—suspended was every breath—strained was every ear—as the foreman prepared to deliver the verdict. Amid a boding silence, his deep, but somewhat tremulous voice uttered a word which made the warm blood rebound in the veins of every hearer. The word was—“GUILTY!”

A buzz succeeded this announcement—people were canvassing the truthfulness of the verdict, and of sympathy with the prisoner, were freely bandied. Order, with some difficulty, was restored; and Eveleen was directed to stand up to receive her sentence. She slowly drew up to her full height, and grasping the bar for support, upturned her face, the sight of which made the venerable judge's heart beat as it had not done for many a year. It was mortally pale, and her eyes were prominent and bloodshot with awful emotion and despair. That young creature clung to life.

An elemental storm had for some time been gathering in the outer air, and at this time more and more somber grew the atmosphere—nearer drew the threatening tempest—deeper and deeper became the awe which filled the hearts of the vast assemblage.

When the formal question was put, ‘What had she to say why sentence of death should not be passed?’ a voice was heard in reply—so volumed, that although neither loud nor strong it reached the most distant ear, startled the most abstracted, and thrilled the hardest heart. These were the words:

‘I have told you I am innocent; but ye believe me not. The Almighty knows that I have not lied; and at the great judgment day, when we shall all stand in his presence, then will ye know that innocent blood is upon your heads. May God forgive you as I do now, your taking my life without just cause.’

Impressive enough was this of itself, but the effect was marvelously enhanced, for hardly had these last words been delivered, ere three distinct, successive, tremendous peals of thunder broke directly over the building, shaking it to its very foundation. Women screamed and fainted; and

men trembled and uttered ejaculations of terror: and there was hardly one present who did not, in the depths of his soul, whatever his lips might avow, feel at the time a sort of consciousness that the dread artillery of Heaven was playing in sublime replication to the appeal of the condemned, from the fallibility of fellow beings to the unerring omniscience of the Most High upraised in stern rebuke of the blind judgments of man. Yet more so, when the voice of the prisoner herself, with head erect, eyes flashing with unearthly lustre, and hands clasped vehemently together, and raised on high exclaimed:

‘The cry of innocence has reached heaven; and ye have heard it answered even now!’

The judge wept as he passed the awful sentence of the law on the prisoner.

Most extraordinary was the interest manifested to obtain a pardon for Eveleen, or remission of the sentence. A petition, praying for at least a reprieve on certain grounds, was signed by the judge, and numbers of the first people of the county, and forwarded to the Home Secretary of State. No answer was vouchsafed.

Suffice it that Eveleen O’Neil, at the appointed hour,
“Hung and swung in the sight of men,
That the law of blood might be satisfied.”

She behaved with heroic, Christian resignation; and, with her dying breath, she protested her entire innocence. Reader—she spoke the truth.

Shortly after the execution of the young and beautiful Eveleen O’Neil, an event occurred which threw the whole town into a state of excitement and horror. The supposed real murderer of Miss Fanshawe was discovered and arrested, and the fair and youthful victim of circumstantial evidence was declared innocent of the crime for which she had suffered death. The following singular facts were disclosed to the magistrates of the town by the landlord of an obscure public house in the suburbs:

Very early on the morning of Miss Fanshawe’s murder, a man stopped at his house and asked for refreshment in a private room. He appeared exceedingly exhausted, his clothes being torn and bloody, his demeanor excited and agitated, and his hands had several small gashes upon them. He said his name was Roderick Madden, and he was shown by the landlord into a private room, and water was brought him to wash with, &c., and, on asking Madden how it was that a gentleman as he appeared to be got into such a state, he replied that he (Madden) was a commercial traveler, staying at a hotel in the town, and that he had been out all the previous night in a house of ill-fame, where he had been ill-treated in the way in which he then appeared; that liquor had been forced down his throat, so as to throw him into an insensible state until about 8 o’clock in the morning, and that, when he then recovered, he was permitted to leave the house without further molestation. He said, as he had not been robbed he would take no measures against the people who had ill-treated him, on account of the exposure any proceedings would subject him to; and added that the reason of his calling at the landlord’s house was, that he

was ashamed to go back to the hotel in such a state, for he was well known there, and to many parties in the town, and if his conduct got to the ears of the firm for whom he traveled, he should be dismissed in consequence; and that if the landlord would get his clothes cleaned, mended, &c., and keep the affair secret, he would liberally reward him. The unsuspecting landlord fully believed this plausible story, and in a few hours got Madden's apparel cleaned and repaired; and the latter paid his expenses, and gave him a couple of guineas for his trouble and kindness, and as he did so, laughed, and observed that if he got in a similar scrape again he should know to whom to apply for friendly aid. Madden then departed.

In the gossip about the hanging of poor Eveleen, it had been mentioned that a strange man had been seen lurking about the Abby just previous to the murder, and had even made idle inquiries of the servants about the habits of Miss Fanshawe, and in what part of the building she slept. This gossip coming to the ears of the landlord in question, the suspicion dawned upon his mind that Madden was the real murderer, and hence the disclosures to the magistrates before detailed. On further inquiries being instituted, the bloody dirk with which the murder had been perpetrated was fully identified by credible witnesses as belonging to Madden, and a warrant was accordingly issued for his arrest. He had left the town on the morning of the murder, and gone—no one knew whither; but yet in a short time his retreat was discovered in London, and he was brought up for examination. Other and damning proofs were now brought against him; for among his effects were found a golden locket, which up to that time had not been missed, but which was proved to be a trinket on which the murdered lady set much value, and which she constantly wore upon her neck. Indeed the circumstantial evidence against Roderick Madden (as he called his name) was much stronger than it had been against poor Eveleen, and public opinion now mourned her legal murder with an earnest enthusiasm, while it condemned Madden as an unnatural monster.

In course of time the frightful charge against this new prisoner came to trial. Both judge and jury made short work of it, and Madden was placed in the condemned cell, preparatory to his execution, which had been decreed according to the laws of England. There was no petition for pardon on this occasion. The prisoner did not seem to expect it, or even ask to be deemed innocent; and yet he was not the murderer of Miss Fanshawe!

Soon after being placed in the condemned cell, Madden said he had but a single favor to ask of his jailor, which was permission for one friend of his to visit him ere his execution.—The authorities assented, and pen and paper being given him, he addressed a note to a female residing at a town some twenty miles distant, urgently requesting her immediately to come to him. The note he signed 'James May,' and he explained this by saying that she knew him by no other name, and that he believed she was quite unaware of Roderick Madden, the condemned being the same person as her friend. The note was sent by express to the party, who proved to be a fashionable prostitute, who had been staying a few months at the town. She expressed extreme surprise at the intelligence, and set off forthwith to visit her quondam companion. On meeting, little emotion was expressed on either side; and after a very brief interview, in the presence of the turnkey, the woman departed, but not before Madden had obtained permission for her to see him once more at an early hour on the morning of the execution. Accordingly, at 4 A.M., of the appointed day, she punctually applied for admission to his cell, and was at once conducted

thither, where were already assembled the governor, chaplain, and sheriff all anxiously begging him to make a confession.

‘After she has been here, I will,’ significantly replied he.

To the astonishment of all, the only words which passed between the pair, were—

‘Well, Emily,’ cried Madden, in a cool easy way, ‘you are faithful to your promise. I’ve nothing to say to you, but am glad you are come, just to bid me farewell. We shall never meet again on earth; and all I have to ask is one last kiss, and good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ said the female, who was quite unmoved.

So saying, she flung her arms round his neck, and joined her lips to his in a long, clinging kiss. This done, she at once departed, without having exhibited the slightest trace of feeling. When she was gone, Madden called for pen and paper, saying he would write his confession.—They were supplied, and he began to write rapidly. In a short time he was observed to change color, while his hand trembled very much. This agitation, in a couple of minutes, increased to such a degree that the pen fell from his nerveless grasp, and himself would have sunk on the floor had not those around supported him. His face became quite black, and a greenish foam issued from his lips; his eyes distended fearfully, and his frame writhed in agonizing convulsions. In the midst of this, however, he was able to gasp with a final effort—

‘My father lied, for I have cheated the gallows at last!’

Then his struggles gradually subsided, and he lay a revolting corpse, having died from the effects of poison.

The unfinished confession was found to be as follows:

‘In a few moments I shall be dead, and I now write all I wish to say; and whatever my life has been, and whatever my religious notions are, all men may believe every word I here write to be the solemn truth.

‘I am innocent of the murder of Miss Fanshawe; I have not the remotest idea who murdered her. The night she was murdered I was many miles distant; and this I could have proved on my trial, but I could not have done so without confessing that I was engaged that night in committing another murder; but where and on whom will never be known.—My hands were cut in the death grapple, and my clothes smeared with blood. As to the witnesses who asserted they saw me lurking about the Abby grounds, they either willfully lied, or were mistaken by my resemblance to another. The dagger with which Miss Fanshawe was murdered really was mine, although I denied it on my trial, being desirous to make the best of my chance of acquittal. As deposed on my trial I was in the habit of carrying it about me—but I lost it a week before the murder was committed, near to the Abbey, and I have no doubt the real murderer had picked it up, and used it as the instrument of the deed. The locket, of which so much has been said, I found in the road near the Abbey.

‘What my real name, rank, or country is—who I am, or what I have been, I will not tell. That secret, and many others, perish with me.’

[At this place the handwriting began to waver, and became illegible, in consequence of the poison having attacked his vitals. We subjoin the fragmentary portion that could be deciphered:]

‘I defy him... Lady Helena burned them and my mistress... She it was who visited me in the cell and gave me poison.’

Thoroughly detestable a villain as the suicide avowed himself to be, the authorities saw too much reason to believe the confession. No time was lost in taking measures for the apprehension of the woman who had conveyed the poison to him, for, independently of the suspicion attaching to her as his accomplice and mistress, a very intense curiosity was felt as to ascertain in what ingenious fashion she had managed to convey the poison to him, for it seemed almost incredible that she could have done it unobserved by all present, as they stood within a few feet of the booth, and watched every motion during the brief interview.

It was found that she had decamped from the town immediately after leaving the prison; and a whole month elapsed ere she was apprehended at Chester, by an officer who recognized her from the ‘Hue and Cry.’ On being interrogated, she stoutly denied any participation in the crime of Madden, but freely admitted that she it was who gave him the poison on their final interview on the morning of the execution; and the following was the explanation she gave of the manner of its being conveyed.

She said that she did not know the name of the poison, but it was red liquid, given into her keeping by the prisoner some months before his arrest, with an injunction carefully to preserve it for him, for some day he expected it would be useful. She continued, that she placed the small flat bottle containing it under her tongue and that when she kissed him at parting, while their lips clung together, they partially opened their mouths and so passed the bottle from one to the other, without the least difficulty or risk of discovery. This plan, she said, had been arranged by him, and whispered to her at their first interview, without being overheard by the turnkey in the cell. Once in his mouth, he easily drew the cork with his teeth, swallowed the liquid, and retained the bottle until the moment when his death convulsions began.

She declared that she did not know any thing whatever of his real name, profession, or connections; but said that he had always command of considerable wealth.

As the reader has seen two trials for the murder of Miss Fanshawe had resulted in the legal murder of Eveleen O’Neil, and in the suicide of the condemned sio-disant Madden; yet both of them were perfectly innocent of the crime of which they had been found guilty by an English jury. The confession of Madden—instead of giving an indice to the real culprit—only seemed to enwrap the deed in the blacker obscurity. People who had first very stoutly maintained the unquestionable guilt of poor Eveleen, and next that of Roderick Madden, had received a frightful

lesson of the utter fallibility of human judgment when resting on merely circumstantial evidence; and now, after there had been a double trial, the question still was—only more intricate, mysterious, and inexplicable than ever—“*Who did the deed?*”

No fewer than forty-and-four years swelled the sum of time past, and still did that thrilling problem remain unsolved. The judges, the juries, the witnesses, and a vast majority of the spectators were gone to their account—the old Abbey itself was pulled down, and a modern mansion reared on its site; and the whole of the marvelous circumstances connected with the ‘Double Trial’ were now fast becoming matter of local tradition, only being occasionally related by hoary-headed grandsires to a listening circle around the Christmas fire, as a fearful mystery which happened when they were young, and which they now could safely say, would never be cleared up on earth.

One fine summer morning in 18—, the minister of one of the churches in the county town received an urgent summons to attend the death bed of an old beggar woman, who had arrived there a few days previously and now lay dying in a miserable lodging. He complied with the request; and on seeing her, was astounded by learning from her own feeble lips that he was called to become the repository of most awful revelations. She appeared to be a woman of nearly seventy years of age; and moreover who was emaciated by disease and want, until she looked more like a resuscitated mummy than any thing else. She lay coiled in a heap of filthy rags, and was evidently in the last stage of existence. Startling, indeed, were the very first words she uttered.

‘More than forty years,’ said she, ‘I have been a child of Hell! I don’t want you to talk to me about my soul’s salvation, for that is out of the question; but—’

‘Oh,’ interrupted the clergyman, deeply shocked, ‘I implore you not say so; you have, perhaps, only a few fleeting minutes to love, and—’

‘I know; and that’s why I wish you to hear me, and to write down my dying words.’

The substance of those dying words were as follows: she said that forty-four years by gone, she had lived as a lady’s maid with Miss Fanshawe, of ——Abbey; and that lady having several times scolded and threatened to discharge her for gross neglect of her duties, an awful spirit of revenge took possession of her, and she determined to murder her mistress.—While pondering the matter over, she happened to find a dagger (that lost by Roderick Madden) near to the park palings. About a week afterwards, she murdered her mistress with this very dagger, and being disturbed by the approaching footsteps of Eveleen O’Neil, who had heard the death struggle, she hurried back to her chamber, leaving the dagger behind her. She had on at the time only a thin night dress, which being sprinkled with blood, she hid, and, hastily washing her hands and face, put on a clean one. Then, when the alarm was given by the butler, she joined the rest of the family in rushing to the apartment of the murdered lady; and was loudest of any in her outcries and lamentations. She said that when she saw the turn the affair had taken, by shifting all suspicion from herself to poor Eveleen, she no longer felt any fear of detection. She availed herself of an early opportunity to burn her gory night dress, which she easily effected at the kitchen fire during the confusion of the morning. She actually had the hardihood to attend the

trial of Eveleen; and when the counsel for the latter uttered the remarkable expression that perhaps the real murderer was then present, she felt ready to die away, but soon recovered and afterwards beheld the execution of Eveleen without experiencing an atom of remorse, either for her death or that of the first victim. From that time forward, she, in her own words, became and continued emphatically 'a child of Hell!' Very soon after Eveleen's execution, she married a soldier, and accompanied him to India. Subsequently she traveled over various parts of the world, and committed sin upon sin and wicked deed upon wicked deed, beyond the capability of her memory to sum up. At length she felt an irresistible prompting to drag her worn out frame to the locality of her first fearful crime; and here finding herself nigh unto death, she determined to unburden herself of a relation of that deed, and accordingly did so as related.

Her confession was read to her by the clergyman, in the presence of two hastily summoned neighboring magistrates, and she declared that it was true in every respect. A few minutes afterwards her soul fled to its dread account.

Reader! Not one word of comment do we presume to make on the 'strange, eventful history' we have, however unworthily related. We feel that to append a 'moral,' after the approved fable book fashion, were an insult to your intelligence.

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