

BAUDELAIRE



PARIS SPLEEN

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CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

PARIS SPLEEN

1869

**TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
LOUISE VARÈSE**

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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EPILOGUE

PARIS SPLEEN

TO ARSENE HOUSSAYE

MY DEAR FRIEND, I send you a little work of which no one can say, without doing it an injustice, that has neither head nor tail, since, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally. I beg you to consider how admirably convenient this combination is for all of us, for you, for me, and for the reader. We can cut wherever we please, I my dreaming, you your manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not keep the reader's restive mind hanging in suspense on the threads of an interminable and superfluous plot. Take away one vertebra and the two ends of this tortuous fantasy come together again without pain. Chop it into numerous pieces and you will see that each one can go along alone. In the hope that there is enough life in some of these segments to please and to amuse you, I take the liberty of dedicating the whole serpent to you.

I have a little confession to make. It was while running through, for the twentieth time at least, the pages of the famous *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Aloysius Bertrand (has not a book known to you, to me, and to a few of our friends the right to be called famous?) that the idea came to me of attempting something in the same vein, and of applying to the description of our more abstract modern life the same method he used in depicting the old days, so strangely picturesque.

Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?

It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born. You yourself, dear friend, have you not tried to translate in a song the *Glazier's* strident cry, and to express in lyric prose all the dismal suggestions of this cry sends up through the fog of the street to the highest garrets?

To tell the truth, however, I am afraid that my envy has not been propitious. From the very beginning I perceived that I was not only far from my mysterious and brilliant model, but was, indeed, doing something (if it can be called *something*) singularly different, an accident which any one else would glory in, no doubt, but which can only deeply humiliate a mind convinced that the greatest honor for a poet is to succeed in doing exactly what he set out to do.

Yours most affectionately,

C.B.

THE STRANGER

TELL ME, enigmatical man, whom do you love best, your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?

I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.

Your friends?

Now you use a word whose meaning I have never known.

Your country?

I do not know in what latitude it lies.

Beauty?

I could indeed love her, Goddess and Immortal.

Gold?

I hate it as you hate God.

Then, what do you love, extraordinary stranger?

I love the cloud ... the clouds that pass ... up there ... up there ... the wonderful clouds!

THE OLD WOMAN'S DESPAIR

A WIZENED little old woman felt gladdened and gay at the sight of the pretty baby that every one was making such a fuss over, and that every one wanted to please: such a pretty little creature, as frail as the old woman herself, and toothless and hairless like her.

She went up to him all nods and smiles.

But the infant, terrified, struggled to get away from her caresses, filling the house with his howls.

Then the old woman went back into her eternal solitude and wept alone, saying: "Ah, for all miserable old females the age of pleasing is past. Even innocent babes cannot endure us, and we are scarecrows to little children whom we long to love."

ARTIST'S CONFITEOR

HOW POIGNANT the late afternoons of autumn! Ah! poignant to the verge of pain, for there are certain delicious sensations which are no less intense for being vague; and there is no sharper point than that of Infinity.

What bliss to plunge the eyes into the immensity of sky and sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chastity of the blue! a tiny sail shivering on the horizon, imitating by its littleness and loneliness the irremediable existence, monotonous melody of the waves, all these things think through me or through them (for in the grandeur of reverie the ego is quickly lost!); I say they *think*, but musical and picturesquely, without quibblings, without syllogisms, without deductions.

These thoughts, whether they come from me or spring from things, soon, at all events, grow to intense. Energy in voluptuousness creates uneasiness and actual pain. My nerves are strung to such a pitch that they can no longer give out anything but shrill and painful vibrations.

And now the profound depth of the sky dismays me; its purity irritates me. The insensibility of the sea, the immutability of the whole spectacle revolt me... Ah! must one eternally suffer, or eternally flee beauty? Nature, pitiless sorceress, ever victorious rival, do let me be! Stop tempting my desires and my pride! The study of beauty is a duel in which the artist shrieks with terror before being overcome.

IV

A WAG

PANDEMONIUM of New Year's Eve: chaos of snow and mud churned up by a thousand carriages glittering with toys and bonbons, swarming with cupidity and despair; official frenzy of a big city designed to trouble the mind of the most impervious solitary.

In the midst of this deafening hubbub, a donkey was trotting briskly along, belabored by a long fellow armed with a whip.

Just as the donkey was about to turn a corner, a resplendent gentleman, all groomed, gloves cruelly cravated and imprisoned in brand new clothes, made a ceremonious bow to the humble beast, saying as he took off his hat: "A very happy and prosperous New Year to you!" Then he turned with a fatuous air toward some vague companions, as though to beg them to make his satisfaction complete by their applause.

The donkey paid no attention to this elegant wag, and continued to trot zealously along where duty called.

As for me, I was suddenly seized by an incomprehensible rage against this bedizened imbecile, for it seemed to me that in him was concentrated all the wit of France.

THE DOUBLE ROOM

A ROOM that is like a dream, a truly *spiritual* room, where the stagnant atmosphere is nebulous, tinted pink and blue.

Here the soul takes a bath of indolence, scented with all the aromatic perfumes of desire and regret. There is about it something crepuscular, bluish shot with rose; a voluptuous dream in a eclipse.

Every piece of furniture is of an elongated form, languid and prostrate, and seems to be dreaming; endowed, one would say, with a somnambular existence like minerals and vegetables. The hangings speak a silent language like flowers, skies and setting suns.

No artistic abominations on the walls. Definite, positive art is blasphemy compared to dream and the unanalyzed impression. Here all is bathed in harmony's own adequate and delicious obscurity.

An infinitesimal scent of the most exquisite choosing, mingled with the merest breath of humidity, floats through this atmosphere where hot-house sensations cradle the drowsy spirit.

Muslin in diaphanous masses rains over the window and over the bed, spreads in snowy cataracts. And on this bed lies the Idol, the sovereign queen of my dreams. But why is she here? Who has brought her? What magic power has installed her on this throne of revery and of pleasure? No matter. She is here. I recognize her.

Yes, those are her eyes whose flame pierces the gloaming; those subtle and terrible eyes that I recognize by their dread mockery! They attract, they subjugate, they devour the imprudent gaze. Often I have studied them — black stars compelling curiosity and wonder.

To what good demon am I indebted for this encompassing atmosphere of mystery, silence, perfume and peace? O bliss! What we are wont to call life, even in its happiest moments of expansion, has nothing in common with this supreme life which I am now experiencing, and which I rely on minute by minute, second by second.

No! there are no more minutes, there are no more seconds! Time has disappeared; it is Eternity that reigns, an eternity of bliss!

But a knock falls on the door, an awful, a resounding knock, and I feel, as in my dreams of hell, a pitchfork being stuck into my stomach.

Then a Spectre enters. It is a bailiff come to torture me in the name of the law; it is an infamous concubine come with her complaints to add the trivialities of her life to the sorrows of mine; it is a messenger boy from a newspaper editor clamoring for the last installment of a manuscript.

The paradisiac room and the idol, the sovereign of dreams, the *Sylphid*, as the great René used to say, the whole enchantment has vanished at the Spectre's brutal knock.

Horrors! I remember! Yes, I remember! this filthy hole, this abode of eternal boredom is truly mine. Look at the stupid, dusty, dilapidated furniture; the hearth without fire, without embers, disgusting with spittle; the sad windows where rain has traced furrows through the dust; manuscript covered with erasures or unfinished, the calendar where a pencil has marked all the direst dates!

And that perfume out of another world which in my state of exquisite sensibility was so intoxicating? Alas, another odor has taken its place, of stale tobacco mixed with nauseating mustiness. The rancid smell of desolation.

In this narrow world, but with plenty of room for disgust, there is one object alone that delights me: the vial of opium: an old and dreadful love; and like all mistresses, alas! prolific in caresses and betrayals.

Oh! yes! Time has reappeared; Time is sovereign ruler now, and with that hideout old man the entire retinue of Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears, Agonies, Nightmares, Nerves, and Rages have returned.

I can assure you that the seconds are now strongly accented, and rush out of the clock crying: "I am Life, unbearable and implacable Life!"

There is only one Second in human life whose mission it is to bring good news, *the good news*, that causes every one such inexplicable terror.

Yes, Time reigns; he has resumed his brutal tyranny. And he pokes me with his double goad as if I were an ox. "Then hot, donkey! Sweat, slave! Man, be damned and live!"

TO EVERY MAN HIS CHIMERA

UNDER a vast gray sky, on a vast and dusty plain without paths, without grass, without a nettle or thistle, I came upon several men bent double as they walked.

Each one carried on his back an enormous Chimera as heavy as a sack of flour, as a sack of coal, as the accoutrement of a Roman foot-soldier.

But the monstrous beast was no inanimate weight; on the contrary, it hugged and bore down heavily on the man with its elastic and powerful muscles; it clutched at the breast of its mount with enormous claws; and its fabulous head overhung the man's forehead like those horrible helmets with which ancient warriors tried to strike terror into their enemies.

I questioned one of these men and asked him where they were going like that. He replied that he did not know and that none of them knew; but that obviously they must be going somewhere since they were impelled by an irresistible urge to go on.

A curious thing to note: not one of these travelers seemed to resent the ferocious beast hanging around his neck and glued to his back; apparently they considered it a part of themselves. All those worn and serious faces showed not the least sign of despair; under the depressing dome of the sky with their feet deep in the dust of the earth as desolate as the sky, they went along with the resigned look of men who are condemned to hope forever.

And the procession passed by me and disappeared in the haze of the horizon just where the rounded surface of the planet prevents man's gaze from following.

And for a few moments I persisted in trying to understand this mystery; but soon irresistibly Indifference descended upon me, and I was more cruelly oppressed by its weight than those men had been by their crushing Chimeras.

VENUS AND THE MOTLEY FOOL

WHAT a wonderful day! The vast park lies swooning under the sun's burning eye, like youth under Love's dominion.

Not a sound gives voice to the universal ecstasy of things; even the waters seem to be asleep. Quite unlike human holidays, this is an orgy of silence.

It is as though an ever more luminous light kept making each object glitter with an ever more dazzling splendor; as though the frenzied flowers were trying to rival the azure of the sky by the intensity of their colors, as though the heat, making the perfumes visible, were drawing them up to the sun like smoke.

Yet, in the midst of all this universal joy I caught sight of a grief-stricken soul.

At the feet of a colossal Venus, all of a heap against the pedestal, one of those so-called fools—those voluntary buffoons who, with cap and bells and tricked out in a ridiculous and gaudy costume—are called upon to make kings laugh when they are beset by Boredom or Remorse, raises his tear-filled eyes toward the immortal Goddess.

And his eyes say: "I am the least and the loneliest of men, deprived of love and friendship wherein I am inferior even to the lowest animals. Yet I, too, am made to understand and to feel immortal Beauty! Ah! Goddess! take pity on my fever and my pain!"

But the implacable Goddess with her marble eyes continues to gaze into the distance, at I know not what.

THE DOG AND THE SCENT-BOTTLE

COME HERE, my dear, good, beautiful doggie, and smell this excellent perfume which comes from the best perfumer of Paris.

And the dog, wagging his tail, which, I believe, is that poor creature's way of laughing and smiling, came up and put his curious nose on the uncorked bottle. Then, suddenly, he backed away in terror, barking at me reproachfully.

“Ah miserable dog, if I had offered you a package of excrement you would have sniffed at it with delight and perhaps gobbled it up. In this you resemble the public, which should never be offered delicate perfumes that infuriate them, but only carefully selected garbage.”

THE BAD GLAZIER

THERE are certain natures, purely contemplative and totally unfit for action, which nevertheless moved by some mysterious and unaccountable impulse, act at times with a rapidity of which they would never have dreamed themselves capable.

Like the man who, dreading some painful news, instead of going for his mail as usual, cravenly prowls around his concierge's door without daring to go in; or the one who keeps a letter for two weeks without opening it; or the man who only makes up his mind at the end of six months to do something that has urgently needed doing for a year; then, all of a sudden, they feel themselves hurled into action by an irresistible force, like an arrow out of a bow. The moralist and the doctor, who pretend to know everything, are unable to explain how these voluptuous, indolent souls suddenly acquire such a mad energy, or how it is that, although incapable of doing the simplest and most necessary things, they yet discover in themselves at a given moment a lavish courage for performing the most absurd and the most dangerous acts.

One of my friends, the most inoffensive dreamer that ever lived, once set fire to a forest to see if he explained, if it were really as easy to start a fire as people said. Ten times in succession the experiment failed; but the eleventh time it succeeded only too well.

Another will light a cigar standing beside a keg of gunpowder, just *to see, to find out, to test his luck*, to prove to himself he has enough energy to play the gambler, to taste the pleasures of fear, or for no reason at all, through caprice, through idleness.

It is the kind of energy that springs from boredom and daydreaming; and those who display it so unexpectedly are, in general, as I have said, the most indolent and dreamiest of mortals.

And another man I know, who is so shy that he lowers his eyes even when *men* look at him, so shy that it takes all the poor courage he can muster to enter a café or, at the theatre, to approach the ticket *contrôleurs* who seem to him invested with all the majesty of Minos, Iacchus and Radamanthus, will suddenly throw his arms around an old man in the street and kiss him impetuously before the astonished eyes of the passers-by.

Why? Because... because suddenly that particular physiognomy seemed irresistibly appealing. Perhaps; but it would probably be nearer the truth to suppose that he himself has no idea why.

I, too, have more than once been the victim of these outbursts of energy which justify only by concluding that some malicious Demon gets into us, forcing us, in spite of ourselves, to carry out his most absurd whims.

One morning I got up feeling out of sorts, sad, and worn out with idleness, and with what seemed to me a compelling urge to do something extraordinary, to perform some brilliant deed. And I opened the window — alas!

(I should like to point out that with certain persons playing practical jokes is not the result of planning or scheming, but a fortuitous inspiration akin, if only because of the compelling force of the impulse, to that humor called hysterical by doctors, satanic by those with more insight than doctors.)

that drives us toward a multitude of dangerous or improper actions.)

~~The first person I noticed in the street was a glazier whose piercing and discordant cry floated up to me through the heavy, filthy Paris air. It would be impossible for me to say why I was suddenly seized by an arbitrary loathing for this poor man.~~

“Hey! Hey!” I shouted, motioning him to come up. And the thought that my room was up several flights of stairs, and that the man must be having a terrible time getting up them with his fragile wares, added not a little to my hilarity.

Finally he appeared. After looking curiously over his panes of glass one by one, I exclaimed, “What! You have no colored glass, no pink, no red, no blue! No magic panes, no panes of Paradise! Scoundrel, what do you mean by going into poor neighborhoods without a single glass to make life beautiful!” And I pushed him, stumbling and grumbling, toward the stairs.

Going out on my balcony I picked up a little flower pot, and when the glazier appeared at the entrance below, I let my engine of war fall down perpendicularly on the edge of his pack. The shock knocked him over and, falling on his back, he succeeded in breaking the rest of his poor ambulatory stock with a shattering noise as of lightning striking a crystal palace.

And drunk with my madness, I shouted down at him furiously: “Make life beautiful! Make life beautiful!”

Such erratic pranks are not without danger and one often has to pay dearly for them. But what an eternity of damnation compared to an infinity of pleasure in a single second?

ONE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

AT LAST! I am alone! Nothing can be heard but the rumbling of a few belated and weary cabs. For a few hours at least silence will be ours, if not sleep. At last! the tyranny of the human face has disappeared, and now there will be no one but myself to make me suffer.

At last! I am allowed to relax in a bath of darkness! First a double turn of the key in the lock. This turn of the key will, it seems to me, increase my solitude and strengthen the barricades that, for the moment, separate me from the world.

Horrible life! Horrible city! Let us glance back over the events of the day: saw several writers; one of them asking me if you could go to Russia by land (he thought Russia was an island, I suppose); disagreed liberally with the editor of a review who to all my objections kept saying: "Here we are on the side of respectability," implying that all the other periodicals were run by rascals; bowed to twenty or more persons of whom fifteen were unknown to me; distributed hand shakes in about the same proportion without having first taken the precaution of buying gloves; to kill time during a shower dropped in on a dancer who asked me to design her a costume for *Venustre*; went to pay court to the theatrical director who in dismissing me said: "Perhaps you would do well to see Z....; he is the dullest, stupidest and most celebrated of our authors; with him you might get somewhere. Consult him and then we'll see": boasted (why?) of several ugly things I never did, and cravenly denied some other misdeeds that I had accomplished with the greatest delight; offense of fanfaronnade, crime against human dignity; refused a slight favor to a friend and gave a written recommendation to a perfect rogue; Lord! let's hope that's all!

Dissatisfied with everything, dissatisfied with myself, I long to redeem myself and to restore my pride in the silence and solitude of the night. Souls of those whom I have loved, souls of those whom I have sung, strengthen me, sustain me, keep me from the vanities of the world and its contaminating fumes; and You, dear God! grant me grace to produce a few beautiful verses to prove to myself that I am not the lowest of men, that I am not inferior to those whom I despise.

THE WILD WOMAN AND THE FASHIONABLE COQUETTE

“REALLY, my dear, you weary me beyond endurance and I have no pity for you; to hear you sighing one would think you were as miserable as those aged women who toil in the fields, or the old beggar women who pick up crusts at tavern doors.

“If at least your sighs indicated remorse they would be some credit to you; but they mean nothing more than the satiety of gratification and the despondency of too much leisure. And you never cease your useless babble: ‘You must love me! I need so to be loved! Comfort me here, caress me there! But I have an idea which may cure you. For two *sous* and without going very far, there may be a way right in the midst of the fair.

“Now just observe, if you please, this solid iron cage, and see that hairy monster howling like one of the damned, shaking the bars like an orang-utan maddened by exile, imitating to perfection both the circular spring of the tiger, and the stupid posturing of a white bear, and kindly notice that it has a form very vaguely resembling yours.

“This monster is one of those animals generally called ‘my angel!’ — that is, a woman. The other monster, the one yelling his head off and brandishing a stick, is a husband. He has chained his legitimate spouse as though she were an animal, and displays her at all the street fairs with, of course, the permission of the authorities.

“Now watch carefully! See with what voracity (and not shammed either, perhaps) she tears apart those living rabbits and squalling chickens that her keeper has thrown to her. ‘Come, come!’ he says, ‘one must always keep something for a rainy day!’ and with these words of wisdom he cruelly snatches away her prey, the entrails still clinging to the teeth of the ferocious beast — woman, I mean.

“That’s it! A good blow of your stick to calm her! For she is darting the most terrific and greedy glances at the pilfered food. Good God! that stick is no stage prop! Did you hear how that whack resounded, in spite of her artificial coat of hair? Moreover, her eyes are starting from her head, and she yells *more naturally now*. The sparks fairly fly from her as from iron on an anvil.

“Such are the conjugal customs of these descendants of Adam and Eve, these works of thy hand, O my God! This woman has certainly the right to complain, although after all, the titillating delights of fame are perhaps not unknown to her. There are other irremediable misfortunes without such compensations. But in the world into which she has been thrown, it has never occurred to her that women deserve a better fate.

“Now what of us, my precious? Seeing the hells with which the world abounds, what do you expect me to think of your pretty little hell, you who lie on stuffs as soft as your own skin, who eat only cooked meat carefully cut for you by a skilled servant?

“And what can they matter to me, all those little sighs swelling your perfumed breast, my haughty and hearty coquette? And all those affectations you have learned from books, or that indefatigable

melancholy which inspires anything but pity in a spectator. In truth, sometimes I am seized with
desire to teach you what real misfortune is.

“Seeing you like this, my dainty beauty, your feet in the mire and your eyes turned swooning
toward the sky as though waiting for a king, I cannot help thinking of a frog invoking the Ideal. If you
despise ‘King Log’ (that’s what I am now, as you very well know), beware of the crane who will
crunch you up, and *gobble you up*, and *kill you at his pleasure!*”

“Although I may be a poet, I am not such a dupe as you would like to believe, and if you wear
me too often with your *precious* whinings, I am going to treat you like the *wild woman*, or else throw
you out of the window like an empty bottle.”

CROWDS

IT IS NOT given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy had bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming.

Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd.

The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or some one else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man's personality. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.

The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of. He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers.

What men call love is a very small, restricted, feeble thing compared with this ineffable orgiastic this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes.

It is a good thing sometimes to teach the fortunate of this world, if only to humble for an instant their foolish pride, that there are higher joys than theirs, finer and more uncircumscribed. The founders of colonies, shepherds of peoples, missionary priests exiled to the ends of the earth doubtlessly know something of this mysterious drunkenness; and in the midst of the vast families created by their genius, they must often laugh at those who pity them because of their troubled fortunes and chaste lives.

WIDOWS

VAUVENARGUES says that certain avenues in the public parks are haunted almost exclusively by disappointed ambitions, frustrated inventors, abortive glories, and broken hearts, by all those tumultuous and secret souls still agitated by the last rumblings of the storm, who withdraw as far as possible from the insolent eyes of the gay and the idle. These shady retreats are the meeting places of all those whom life has maimed.

And toward these places poets and philosophers love to direct their avid speculations. There they are sure to find rich pasture. For, as I have said before, they scornfully avoid, above all other places, the ones where the rich and joyous congregate; that trepidation in a void has nothing to attract them. On the contrary, they feel themselves irresistibly drawn toward everything that is feeble, destitute, orphaned, and forlorn.

An experienced eye is never mistaken. It can at once decipher in those set or dejected faces, in those eyes, dull and hollow or still shining with the last sparks of struggle, in those deep and numerous wrinkles, in that slow or dislocated gait, the innumerable stories of love deceived, of devotion unrecognized, of effort unrecompensed, of hunger and cold silently endured.

Have you ever noticed widows, poverty-stricken widows, sitting on lonely benches? Whether they are wearing mourning or not they are not difficult to recognize. Moreover, in the mourning of the poor there is invariably something wanting, an absence of consistency that makes it so heartbreaking. The poor are forced to be niggardly with their sorrow. The rich flaunt theirs in all its consummate perfection.

Which is sadder, and more saddening, the widow holding by the hand a little child with whom she cannot share her thought, or the one who is completely alone? I do not know.... I once followed for many hours one of those solitary widows; she held herself stiff and straight in her little threadbare shawl, a stoic pride apparent in her whole bearing.

She was seemingly condemned by her absolute solitude to lead the life of an old bachelor, and this masculine character of her habits added a mysterious piquancy to their austerity. I know not what miserable eating-place she had lunched, nor how. I followed her into a reading-room and watched her for a long time as she looked through the newspapers with eager eyes — eyes once scalded by bitter tears — searching for something of a passionate and a personal interest.

Finally, in the afternoon, under a lovely autumn sky, one of those skies out of which such a multitude of memories and regrets rain down, she sat on a bench some distance from the crowd, and listen to one of those concerts offered the Parisian public by military bands.

This is probably the little debauch of the innocent old lady (or purified old lady), the well-earned consolation for one of those dull days without a friend, without conversation, without joy, without a soul to confide in, which God, perhaps for many years now, has allowed to descend upon her three hundred and sixty-five times a year.

And another:

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