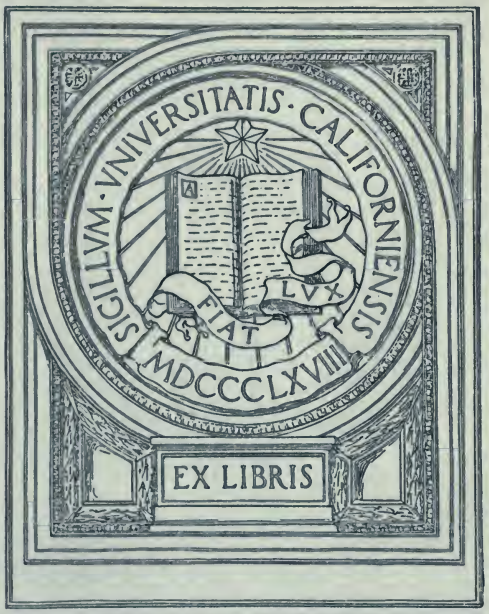

THE LITTLE RUSSIAN SERVANT

By HENRI GREVILLE

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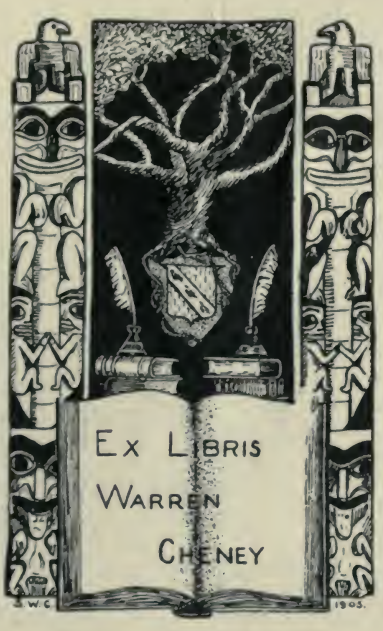
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BY

HENRI GREVILLE.

Neely's Booklet Series. No. 24, June 12, 1899. Issued weekly. $5.00 a year. Entered as second-class matter at New York Post Office.

F. TENNYSON NEELY,
PUBLISHER,
LONDON. NEW YORK. CHICAGO.

THE

LITTLE RUSSIAN SERVANT.

"Who's that?" said the countess, stopping in front of a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, bent over an embroidery frame. The young girl rose, prostrated herself thrice before her mistress, then, getting up, remained standing,

her hands hanging by her side, her head slightly bent forward under the investigating gaze of the countess, who through her eyeglass closely scrutinized her.

"It is the new girl, your highness," answered the head lady's maid, coming forward with the air of importance that thirty years' employment gives to no matter what functionary. "She is

the daughter of Foma, of the village of Ikonine. She is come in her turn to pay her father's *obrok*—he is in Moscow."

"These peasant girls can do nothing," said the countess, with a wearied air: "what do you expect to get out of this one?"

"She doesn't embroider badly, your highness; pray look yourself. She can be put to the em-

broideries—not to the ground, but to the trimmings. This is for the toilet table of Madame la Comtesse."

The noble lady, who could hardly see, being short-sighted from her birth, examined the embroidery frame so closely that the tip of her nose grazed the cloth.

"That's not bad," she said. "Come here, little girl."

The little girl advanced, and the countess inspected her as minutely as she had done the embroidery.

"How pretty she is! What's your name?"

"Mavra."

The word came like a breath from the rosy lips.

"You must speak louder if you want us to hear you," said the head lady's maid angrily.

Mavra turned her large, blue, startled eyes toward her, let them drop, and said nothing.

"Sit down to your work," said the countess, amused at her new toy. With a quick, graceful movement, the young girl resumed her seat on the wooden chair, and the needle, firmly held between her agile fingers, went in and out of the stuff with that

short, sharp noise that stimulates the action of the hand.

"That's right, you may go on," said the countess, her nerves irritated by the regularity of the movement.

Then, turning her back upon the young girl and trailing the heavy, sumptuous folds of her dressing-gown along the carefully-washed pine-wood floor, she

disappeared through the door, which was respectfully closed after her by the head lady's maid. The countess, an accomplished house-mistress, made a practice of paying a daily visit to this room, which was reserved for the women of her service. Mavra was left alone in the workroom, a large, well-lighted chamber, furnished simply with tables and

chairs for the use of the innumerable women and girls invariably attached to the service of those noble ladies who knew so well how to maintain their rank in that blessed time of serfdom. At this hour the workroom was empty. Some of the women were washing, others ironing, some cleaning and turning upside down everything in the private apartment

the countess had just left. The young peasant girl, with her needle uplifted, rested her ruddy hand upon the edge of the frame and looked around her.

What multitudes of embroidered gowns with their rich lace trimmings hung there on the wall, waiting some slight repairs!—what endless petticoats with their ornamented flounces all freshly ironed

on cords along the huge room!—what countless lace caps, worn hardly an hour, pinned to a pincushion as large as a pillow, used only for this purpose! and there, in a basket on the corner of the table, what piles of cambric chemises, delicately piped and pleated, trimmed with Valenciennes lace and ornamented with bright ribbons! And all this for

one person! without counting the silk stockings in that other basket, and the rings by dozens worn by the countess on her thin fingers. In this world of living beings under God's heaven, what importance given to one person, who needed so many other persons to serve her! And how the nothingness of these was made more emphatic by the domi-

nance of that! Mavra sat wonder-stricken. The head lady's maid coming into the room found her still in a state of stupefaction, stupefied above all at having made these reflections.

"Well, you are lucky!" she said to her, with a pleased look. "Our countess took a fancy to you at the first glance; you are now on the list of embroiderers!

You may thank God for it. It is not often the countess takes a fancy like that at first sight."

"Is she, then, unkind?" innocently inquired the girl.

"Unkind! Oh, no; capricious, like all mistresses, but the kindest lady in the world, and generous! Besides, this is a rich house; nothing is counted—nothing at all. This is better than your

village," continued Dacka, proud of belonging to such noble masters, and desirous to impress on the mind of the simple peasant girl the importance and dignity of the functions she was promoted to.

"It is more beautiful," replied Mavra, bending intently over her work.

"It was lucky they taught you

to embroider, else you would have been sent to the poultry-yard to feed the cocks and hens and look after the calves. How did you learn?"

"My mother taught me; she was formerly in service; she was a *dvorovaia* in the time of the late countess. She married a peasant."

"Ah!" said Dacka, "I thought

your manners were not quite those of a peasant girl; if your mother was in service, that's another thing. Come, take a cup of coffee with me. Prepare the coffee-pot and make haste before the others come; I can't ask every one, you understand."

To Mavra there was but little difference between the *isba* of her father and the workroom of the

seignorial mansion. Here, as there, her life was spent in assiduous work from sunrise to sunset. There, her mother, an austere, somber woman, like most village matrons to whom life had proved no light matter; here, the lady's maid, often grumbling, but at times kind and even condescending. The chief difference between the two modes of life con-

sisted in the daily visits of the countess, who generally said nothing, but passed with a solemn air through this roomful of silent, awe-stricken women. But one thing was lacking to Mavra, and this nothing could replace—the evening hour of rest which she used to spend by the fountain when sent to draw water for her mother, or on the threshold of

their cabin, watching the spring rain falling soft and warm, melting the snow so quickly that its thickness might be seen visibly diminishing; or, again, in the month of May, standing at the edge of the forest, listening to the nightingales singing on the delicate golden branches of the perfumed birch tree.

Winter passed fairly well, but

when the first breath of warm air set the melted snow streaming down the roofs, which again the night's frost transformed into long stalactites of ice, Mavra felt a strange, vague aching in her heart. The house was overheated, and the close, nauseous air made her sick. What would she not give to run as of old over the moors, to see if the moss were

beginning to appear under the crystallized, transparent carpet of snow!

"What's the matter with this little girl?" asked the countess one day, as she stopped before the frame at which the young peasant girl was diligently working. "She was as fresh as a rose, and now she has grown yellow. Do you feel pain anywhere, Mavra?"

Mavra raised her blue eyes to the noble lady who, for the second time in her life, deigned to address her, and replied in her low voice:

"Nowhere, your highness."

"Then why are you so yellow?"

"I don't know, your highness."

The countess dropped her eye-glass and looked kindly at the young girl.

"I know," said she after a moment's pause; "the child wants air. She came here from her village, and has passed the whole winter stooping over her frame. Henceforth, little girl, you must get out into the fresh air twice a day, and must learn the service of my bedroom; this will give you exercise."

Thereupon the countess quitted

the room, followed by Mavra's grateful eyes, now filled with tears. From that day Mavra worshipped the countess; to approach her, to touch what she had worn, to serve her, to receive her orders and execute them with the utmost speed and dexterity, was the great joy of this humble girl. Her mistress, wrapped in all this gorgeous luxury, the elements of

which had been so long under her eyes in the workroom, appeared to her as some august being nearer her Creator than any other of her fellow-creatures. Not only did Mavra pray to God for her, but at times she inwardly prayed to her as to a saint, thinking the pleadings of a being so superior must have equal weight with the powers of heaven as with those of earth.

Summer was already on the wane when the noble mansion, habitually so tranquil, was suddenly filled with noise and gayety. The young Count Serge had sent his carriages on before him; saddle-horses and hounds were stamping and neighing in their stalls and barking in their kennels as though the one aim of life was to make all the noise possible.

"How handsome he is, our young count!" Dacka kept on saying the livelong day, to while away the tedious hours in the silent workroom. "It was I who received him in my arms when he was born."

And she repeated again and again, with inexhaustible complacency, the history of Serge's birth, and the legend of his boy-

hood up to the moment when this dear treasure of her heart had gone to join the corps of pages, his trunks laden with cakes, jams, and all that could possibly be eaten under heaven.

The workgirls gave listless heed to these hundred times repeated narrations, but Mavra was never tired of hearing them; it was like receiving a sort of gospel into

her heart. Her good and revered protectress made all things dear and venerated that touched her nearly; and this only son, loved, adored, longed for, became a supernatural being, a kind of Messiah to her.

One morning at the end of August, as Mavra, who had risen early, was crossing the courtyard to go waken up the laundress,

who had overslept herself, she saw, galloping along the inclosure a *troika* of black horses, with their heads covered with bells. "It's the young master!" thought the little servant; and without giving herself time for reflection, she ran to the ponderous gate and threw it wide open. At the same moment the brilliant equipage arrived; the coachman pulled

together his noble beasts, and without slackening their gallop they shot like an arrow past Mavra, and ten steps further on stood stock-still at the foot of the steps. Dazed, her heart thrilled by she knew not what impression of fear and joy, she received full in the face the gaze of two large, black, amazed and amused eyes.

"How like his mother!" thought Mavra, as she closed the huge gate, that shut with a heavy bang.

She turned slowly toward the steps as Serge, jumping down from the carriage, looked around at her again; he smiled when he met her blue eyes full of simple admiration, and, giving her a friendly nod, entered the house

of his fathers. A minute after he was by the countess' bedside, pressed lovingly in her arms.

When they had chatted two whole hours, as they finished their tea, Serge, recollecting himself, suddenly said to his mother:

"What is this new acquisition you have made, mother? A little fair-haired Raphael opened the gate for me this morning."

The countess thought for a moment.

"Ah! I know," said she; "it's Mavra—a virtue—my dear child. A strange little creature, who adores me."

"She is quite right," replied the son respectfully. "What do you do with her?"

"She embroiders in the afternoon, and in the morning she at-

tends on me; but, Serge, you must be prudent. My house is strictly kept; don't you go and amuse yourself making gallant speeches to my girls."

"Oh, mother! what do you take me for?" carelessly replied the young man. "I think of a woman only when she is in a casket suited to her style of beauty. Now here you may have

pearls, but the casket is totally wanting."

They burst out laughing together. Only those who thoroughly understood these two beings could have guessed beneath this light talk the strict propriety of the mother and the son's respect for the maternal home. But Russians of the *grande monde* are so constituted that

when they have no vice, they take all imaginable trouble to affect it.

On leaving the dining room the countess and her son directed their steps toward the garden. In front of the house, in the court-yard, they met Mavra stooping under the weight of an enormous pile of linen, which she was carrying from the laundry. The

sheets held in under her crossed hands reached so high that she had to raise her chin and turn her head sideways in order to see before her.

"See, there she is," said the countess in French, stopping to look at her.

"It is hard to say whether she is a Raphael or a Greuze," said Serge. "This morning she had

more the look of a Raphael, with a Russian nose; it is a hybrid style of beauty, but it has a certain charm."

They continued their walk, while Mavra entered the workroom with her pile of linen; when her hands were free, she stood trembling and silent, as though she had been guilty of a crime.

"Well, what are you waiting

for?" said one of the girls, pulling her by the apron.

'I don't know," replied Mavra. "I feel as if I had received a blow, and my hands keep on trembling."

"You carried too heavy a load for your strength. Sit down, and you will see it will pass off."

And in fact it did pass away in a few minutes, but from that

moment Mavra was haunted by a pair of black eyes, whose owner little suspected her infatuation.

Her veneration for the countess was in nowise diminished by this. On the contrary, she loved her more, if possible. But in place of one idol, she had two. By little innocent tactics that surprised herself, she succeeded in having the service of the young count's room

assigned to her, and thenceforth her happiness was complete. The care of the wardrobe was in the hands of the valet-de-chamber, who scrupulously avoided doing anything else.

Serge was the most breakneck rider in the world; not from bravado, since for the most part he was alone when he performed his wild exploits, but from in-

stinctive contempt for danger. One fine morning, clearing a hedge six feet high—there were none lower—the count's horse stumbled and fell on its side. A touch of the spur made it spring up, but when Serge tried to spur the other side, that on which it had fallen, he suffered excruciating pain. Fortunately it was the last hedge, else he would have had

some difficulty in getting home. He pushed on, however, and reached the entrance; but when he endeavored to rest his foot on the stirrup to alight, he found it absolutely impossible, and amid the lamentations of the servants who had gathered around, he had to let himself be taken down from his horse and be dragged, as he said, like a bundle to his bed.

When he was duly unbooted and examined, the supreme indifference with which he allowed himself to be handled and moved about, in spite of the paleness of his face, did not lessen the fact that he had seriously fractured his tibia.

The bone-setter was sent for, in conformity with a precept of the countess, who preferred a

bone-setter at hand to the first surgeon in the world three hundred miles off. A horribly-complicated dressing, bristling with splints and bandages, was applied to the leg, with very respectful but formal injunctions not to move, and to remain in bed for six weeks.

Six weeks! and the sporting season good, and flights of partridges

started every minute by the count's dogs, hunting now for their own pleasure, the door of the kennel being seldom closed; the horses neighing from sheer weariness, and the grooms giving themselves lumbago brightening up trappings that were now to lie unused.

The countess was a good reader, in spite of her eyeglass; she read

untiringly, the result of which was to send the patient to sleep —infallible result; simply an affair of time; often in ten minutes, sometimes an hour Serge's breathing would become regular, the fever that colored his cheek bones would gradually disappear, and then the good mother, closing the book, would go about her duties as mistress of the house,

leaving Mavra in charge of her son.

Gradually the needle of Mavra's embroidery work would slacken its motion, and for long hours her eyes remain fixed on the face of the sleeping young count. Daylight would decline, and no candles be brought, lest the healing rest should be disturbed.

Seated near the window in the

deepening shadow, the outlines of her figure relieved against the pale blue autumn sky in which her dear stars were fast gathering, Mavra would lose herself in a vague infinite ecstasy as she sat gazing at her sleeping young master, whom her heart only could now see. At the first sign of his awaking she was on her feet with her hand upon the bell.

On the arrival of the lamp Mavra would withdraw to the work-room. At night in her dreams she would continue her spiritual, almost mystical, contemplation of the beautiful fair head asleep on its pillow.

When Serge got well, she was the prey of an implacable, unconscious, immortal love. Henceforth she belonged to her idol. Present

or absent, he was her adored master; for him alone she breathed. She would have almost hated the convalescence that day by day was taking him from her, had not the young man's weakness obliged him frequently to seek her aid. Supporting himself with a stick in one hand, and resting the other on Mavra's shoulder, he would walk round his room. She was happy

and proud the day when, to give the countess a surprise, she led him thus into the little *salon*, where the countess, thinking he was asleep, was reading a devotional book. The agitated joy of the mother and the nervous gayety of the son brought tears to the eyes of the young peasant girl; but stoical, like all her race, she drove her tears back.

Serge walked alone with a stick, then without a stick, limping a little: by and by his firm elastic tread was heard again on the waxed oak floor. The northern early winter was come, snow already blocking up from time to time the seignorial mansion, then melting under the breath of a warmer wind, till the great winter blockade finally set in. One

day a sledge, lined with fur, drawn by spirited horses, clinking the bells that studded the harness, drew up before the door. Serge and his mother stepped into it, waving a friendly farewell to the household that crowded around with noisy benedictions. The countess was to pass the winter at St. Petersburg, where her son was to resume his

service in the hussars of Grodno. When they were gone, when the heavy gate which Mavra had opened one beautiful August day was shut, and the snow fell slowly in large flakes, reflecting the colors of the prism, it shut out all the outer world from the inmates of the seignorial mansion.

Mavra returned to her embroidery frame, no longer under the

orders of the good Dacka, but under the capricious, fitful superintendence of a housekeeper charged in the interval with the workroom department. Life was not so easy, but what mattered it to Mavra that there should be more harshness or less kindness? She did not live in the present. Her waking hours were passed in an innocent ecstasy that wore

her away without suffering. She did not know that this was love. Had she known it, no amount of prayers or tears would have been enough to expiate her unpardonable sin. She loved just as flowers blossom; her ideal was exalted, her dream pure, and she lived upon them. One less chaste would have died. As for the young count, he had no idea of all this.

The countess came back in the spring, and the house resumed its grand, hospitable ways. Mavra was profoundly touched to find that her mistress, far from having forgotten, inquired kindly after her. She returned to her personal attendance upon the countess with more devoted fervor than ever. Later on, the young master was to come back.

Dacka conveyed in a mysterious manner that he had something better to do than to bury himself in the country. In the evening she confided to the laundress, in interminable whispers, secrets that were no doubt interesting, but which Mavra made no attempt to overhear, being by nature and taste discreet and reserved.

On the eve of St. John, when

young girls plait crowns of flowers, which they throw into the river to see if they are to be married within the year, Mavra went, like the others, to consult fate after this graceful fashion. She never dreamed of marriage; it was a closed world to her, into which she had no desire to penetrate; but she would plait a crown and watch it through the

eddies of the capricious stream. The girls had thrown in their garlands. Mavra's got entangled in flowers that a young lad of twenty had just flung in. He was a carpenter. The two crowns whirled round in company, and vanished together from view at the bend of the river.

"We are engaged, Mavra," said he. "Let it be once for all."

"No," she replied calmly, without blushing.

"Why? Do you dislike me?" he asked.

"No, not more than other people. I don't wish to marry."

This was enough to make the carpenter persist in his wish. He tried every means — went the length of begging the countess to intercede for him. Mavra, sent

for by her mistress, gave the same explanation.

"Well, if the child does not wish to marry, leave her alone," said the lady philosophically, who would have scrupled to force a fly to drink a drop of milk.

And Mavra, by her own desire, was devoted to celibacy.

In the month of September Serge returned, but only for eight

days. He brought no dogs nor equipages with him this time. When he saw Mavra he gave her a friendly smile, and then thought no more about her. When he went away his mother accompanied him, and the house was again plunged into solitude long before the usual time. Six weeks later the news arrived that the young count was married.

This announcement was the signal for great rejoicing. According to ancient usage, barrels of sweet beer and hydromel were brewed; white bread and meat were distributed to the whole village. The poor had abundant alms, and the whole retinue of servants had new dresses. Mavra had a handsome blue woolen dress and a silk handkerchief. No one was

forgotten; debts in arrear were remitted, and the young girl was suddenly told she might return for the winter to her family, till her father could make new arrangements for the payment in kind of what he owed.

This was no joyful news for the young peasant girl, but resignation is an inherent Russian virtue; she packed up her clothes

in a basket, and one fine morning courageously set out on foot for her native village. She was received coolly by her mother. One mouth more to feed! besides which, peasants are sparing of their demonstrations of affection. After a few days Mavra relapsed into her old habits; bent all day over her embroidery frame by the narrow window, in the even-

ing standing leaning against the door, gazing, as was her wont, at the stars. More than ever she loved them; behind these marvelous lights, that she likened to tears—for she was often sad now—she saw the black eyes and handsome, indifferent face that had taken possession of her soul. As long as she was staying in the grand seignorial mansion

where the image of her idol met her at ever step in familiar attitude, where she had only to close her eyes to see Serge before her, Mavra was happy; she was of those for whom the innocent and daily presence of the beloved makes the whole happiness of life. Here, where nothing spoke of him, she felt for the first time the pain of separation.

Uneasy, she asked herself what it was that was torturing her to this degree, and the truth nearly dawned upon her. But she stopped the thought, not daring to sound it further, saying to herself that there must be at the root of all this suffering some great sin she herself was ignorant of. Morning and evening she knelt long before the sacred

images, imploring God to deliver her from her pain; and feeling herself soothed by this effusion of mystic tenderness, she kept her sadness to herself, still refusing to fathom it. But she was visibly wasting away: the smoky atmosphere of her home had now the same painful influence upon her that the want of fresh air had formerly when she first left her

village. She passed the winter suffering, uncomplaining, unrelaxing in her work. Gradually she gave up looking at the stars. Not only did they more than ever look like tears, but no sooner did she turn her eyes toward the night sky than they filled with tears, so she hardly knew whether it was the fires of heaven or her own tears sparkling beneath her eyelids.

Spring came, though more tardily than usual; then summer with its field labors. The countess seemed to have forgotten Mavra, who thought with ever more and more resigned sadness of this much-loved mistress.

Her indulgence concerning the service-dues of her family appeared to the young girl not a favor, but a punishment. At hay-

making as at harvest young lads seek out the girls. Had Mavra wished it, she might have found ten husbands. She was no longer quite young according to the notion of peasants, who marry their daughters at sixteen and their boys at twenty. She was getting on to twenty, and her mother at times reproached her, treating her as a "useless mouth,"

although Mavra's embroidery was readily bought by the traders from the large towns, who came to the village twice a year.

In the beginning of September, Serge said to his young wife, who was about to make him a father:

"If you follow my advice, you will yourself nurse our child."

"I should like to do so, but then I must have a trained, devoted

servant, one endowed with all the virtues," answered the young wife, "and mamma says this is more difficult to find than a suitable nurse."

"It is quite true," said the countess, present at this family council, which had taken place on an average thrice a week for the last four or five months; "but, Serge, now that I think of

it, we have Mavra! the sweetest, quietest, most devoted of nurse-tenders!"

"Mavra! the very thing. How is it we never thought of her before? She is not trained, for she is unmarried, but she is very active and intelligent!"

The manager was written to, ordering him to send on Mavra by the convoy which every year

about this period brought to St. Petersburg fruits, preserves, salt, provisions, linen, and, in short, all the products of the earth. The young girl once more packed her clothes up in her little basket, and took her seat on one of the long file of heavy wagons that slowly rolled along the roads for eight or nine days, sleeping at night under the linen awning

drawn over the chests of preserves, while the horses were in the stables, and the wagoners by their sides. Sometimes on awaking she saw the stars, but they no longer brought tears to her eyes.

When the convoy of provisions arrived, and Mavra, still dizzy, had made the necessary change in her dress, she was led into

the room of the young countess, where the whole family was assembled, augmented within the last two days by a superb newborn baby, which none of the servants knew how to manage.

"Here you are, Mavra. Good-morning!" said the triumphant father, taking up his son in his awkward arms, at the risk of making him roar still louder.

"You have a light hand and a gentle voice. I give you my son to take care of."

"I humbly thank you," said the young girl, pale with joy. "I shall do my best."

She carried the infant into an adjoining room, where she soon learned the special care to be given to a child of noble race, which was as different from its

cradle from that of little peasants, his brothers in God's sight, as he would be the rest of his life. Toward evening the young mother, surprised at no longer hearing the music her first-born had already had time to accustom her to, sent Serge out to find the reason of this unusual silence. The young master entered the large dark room where Mavra was

slowly pacing up and down, the child's cheek pressed against hers, warming it with her warm breath and the love of a heart henceforth happy.

She was singing a peasant lullaby in a low voice, inventing words to the tune. "Dear child of my master, sleep on your servant's heart, that loves you; treasure more precious than all things, my

joy, my share of happiness in this world—my little star——"

Serge returned on tiptoe to his wife.

"I think our minds may be quite at ease," said he.

Mavra is now old. She declares that she has always been perfectly happy.

THE END.

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