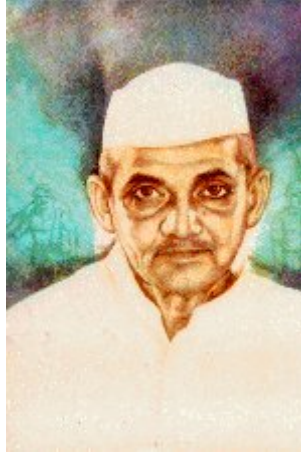


Lal Bahadur Shastri



The 27th of May 1964 is an unforgettable day in the history of India.

On that day the citizens of Delhi woke and attended to their routine work.

During the day came shocking news from Teen Moorti Bhavan. The first Prime Minister of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru, lived in Teen Moorti Bhavan; the citizens learnt that he had a heart attack.

A few months before Nehru had suffered a mild heart attack. But he had recovered from it quickly. He was certain that he would live for some more years.

But he passed away on May 27, 1964.

Nehru was no more. It was unbelievable but true. One question echoed from Kashmir to Kanyakumari: 'After Nehru, who?'

The leaders of the ruling party, the Congress Party, thought deeply over the question. They counted a few suitable names on their fingers. Which of them was the best choice? Who could be the Prime Minister?

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Finally all the leaders came to the decision that Lal Bahadur Shastri was the only person to pilot the nation at such critical times.

A short man, a lean body, Eyes wide as the wheels of a cart. His clothes were simple, his voice soft and almost inaudible. But there was always a smile, which overarched his words. There was not the slightest sign of pride or authority in his bearing. Could he administer a nation of five hundred million people, doubted some.

Lal Bahadur never praised himself. On the contrary he used to say: "I am an ordinary man and not a very bright man." He never aspired to power. He never worked for it.

And yet power and authority came in search of him. Fame set a crown on his head. The short man grew into a colossus. He showed by his work that, though he was tender like a flower, he could be hard as diamond, too. He filled the Four Corners of the world with the fame of India. At a time when the world sang his praises as a hero, an incomparable patriot-hero and as the architect of peace, and just as he touched the peak of his life, Lal Bahadur passed away all too suddenly. He came to power unexpectedly, and he left the world equally suddenly.

Lal Bahadur was a star of great brightness in the history of India, After his death the President of India conferred on him, on behalf of the nation, the award of ' Bharat Ratna'; it was a most fitting.

A small bodies but mighty man-so runs a kannada proverb. It applies to several great men. Shivaji was not tall. But like a magnet he attracted people, and organized and built a great empire.

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Napoleon was short. But he shook the whole world. Lal Bahadur Shastri was not taller than those two; but he was not second to them in greatness. Firmness, love of adventure, patience and skill in administration cannot be acquired in a day or a year. Only when we study his growth from childhood can we understand how he acquired all these qualities.

Lal Bahadur was born on October 2nd, 1904 at Mughalsarai, seven miles from Kashi. His parents were Sharada Prasad and Ramdulari Devi. They were agriculturists. Srivastava was part of Lal Bahadur's name. He dropped that part indicating his caste when he grew up. He did not like such indications of caste.

Lal Bahadur's father was a poor teacher at first. Then he became a clerk in the Revenue Office at Allahabad. Here, too, he earned very little. But, even though he was poor, he never accepted bribes. He lived a life of honesty and integrity.

Sharada Prasad died when Lal Bahadur was only a year old. Ramdulari Devi felt as though the skies had come down on her.

Her father gave shelter to her and her three children, a boy and two girls.

Lal Bahadur's grandfather Hazari Lai's family was very large. His brothers, their wives and children, besides his own children and grand children, lived under the same roof. It was a small world in itself and Hazari Lai was the fountain of love and affection to all of them. He looked after every one in the family with love. He was especially

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fond of little Lal Bahadur. He always affectionately called him 'Nanhe' which means 'tiny'.

An interesting incident took place when Lal Bahadur was only three months old. The mother went to bathe in the holy Ganga with her child. In the milling crowd at the bathing ghat she lost her child. The child had slipped from his mother's arms into a cowherd's basket. The cowherd had no children, so he took the child as a gift from God and celebrated the event with great joy.

The mother was lost in grief. A complaint was lodged with the police. They traced the child. The foster parents wept bitterly to give back the child. Lal Bahadur, who was destined to govern the country, narrowly missed the 'good fortune' of becoming a cowherd.

Lal Bahadur stayed at his grandfather's house till he was ten. By that time he had passed the sixth standard examination. There was no high school in that place. They sent him to Kashi for further education.

Courage and self-respect were two virtues, which took deep root in him from his childhood. While in Kashi, he went with his friends to see a fair on the other bank of the Ganga. On the way back he had no money for the boat fare. His self-respect did not allow him to ask his friends for money. He slipped from their company without their knowledge. His friends forgot him in their talk and boarded the boat. When the boat had moved away, Lal Bahadur jumped into the river; as his friends watched breathlessly he swam to the other bank safely.

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Though Lal Bahadur was, a man of small build, he was unusually strong. His moral strength was even greater. As in water so in life he swam quite successfully. Twice he was about to be drowned but was saved. It is said that when he was saved the second time, he had his teacher's three-year-old baby on his shoulders.

Lal Bahadur acquired virtues like boldness, love of adventure, patience, self-control, courtesy and selflessness in his childhood.

Even as a boy he loved to read books. He read whatever books he came across, whether he understood them or not. He was fond of Guru Nanak's verses.

He used to repeat the following lines often:

"O Nanak! Be tiny like grass,

For other plants will wither away, but grass will remain ever green."

An incident, which took place when he was six years old, seems to have left a deep mark on his mind. Once he went to an orchard with his friends. He was standing below while his friends climbed the trees. He plucked a flower from a bush.

The gardener came in the meantime and saw Lal Bahadur. The boys on the trees climbed down and ran away. The gardener caught Lal Bahadur. He beat him severely.

Lal Bahadur wept and said, "I am orphan. Do not beat me."

The gardener smiled with pity and said, "Because you are an orphan, you must learn better behavior, my boy."

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The words of the gardener had a great effect on him. He swore to him, "I shall behave better in future. Because I am an orphan I must learn good behavior."

Though short he was not timid at school. All boys were friendly with him. Like the grass he always looked fresh and smiling. Not only during his school days but also in his later life he did not hate anyone. It seems he used to act in plays at school. He played the role of Kripacharya in the play 'Mahabharatha'. Kripacharya was in the court of Duryodhana and yet was loved by the Pandavas. Lal Bahadur Shastri had acquired the same worth.

Even when Lal Bahadur was a student of Harischandra. High School at Varanasi a whirlwind had disturbed India.

Everywhere there was the cry of 'Freedom!' "Swaraj is our birth right" - Bala Gangadhara Tilak had declared. This had become the nation's battle-cry.

Lal Bahadur revered Tilak. He longed to see him and hear his speech. Once Tilak visited Varanasi, Lal Bahadur was away in a village fifty miles from Varanasi. He borrowed money and traveled in a train to see and hear Tilak. He saw him and heard his speech. It reverberated in his ears like Krishna's conch, the Panchajanya. Like Bharata, carrying Rama's sandals on his head, Lal Bahadur carried Tilak's message in his heart. This message guided him all through his life. The greatest influence on Lal Bahadur was that of Mahatma Gandhi. Lal Bahadur was electrified when he heard a speech of Gandhi at Varanasi in 1915. Then and there he dedicated his life to the service of the country.

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In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi launched the non-cooperation movement against British Government and declared that the country would not cooperate with the Government in its unjust rule. Lal Bahadur was then only seventeen years. When Mahatma Gandhi gave a call to the youth to come out of Government schools and colleges, offices and courts and to sacrifice everything for the sake of freedom, Lal Bahadur came out of his school.

His mother and other relatives advised him not to give up his studies. But Lal Bahadur was firm in his decision -Lal Bahadur joined the procession, which disobeyed the prohibitory order. The police arrested him. But as he was too young, he was let off.

Lal Bahadur did not go back to his school. He became a student of Kashi Vidya Peeth. During his four years' stay there, he made excellent progress. Dr.Bhagawandas's lectures on philosophy went straight to his heart. In later life Lal Bahadur displayed surprising poise in the midst of conflict and confusion. This he learnt from his teacher, Bhagawandas.

It was in 1926 that Lal Bahadur got the degree of 'Shastri' and left the Kashi Vidya Peeth. The whole country became the arena of his activity. He became the life-member of The Servants of the People Society, which Lala Lajpat Rai had started in 1921. The aim of the Society was to train youths that were prepared to dedicate their lives to the service of the country.

One of the rules of the Society required the members to take an oath to serve the Society at least for twenty years and to lead a simple and honest life till the end. Lal Bahadur earned the love and

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affection of Lajpat Rai by his earnestness and hard work. Later he became the President of the Society.

Shastriji married in 1927. Lalitha Devi, his bride, came from Mirzalyur. The wedding was celebrated in the simplest way. All that the bridegroom took as a gift from father-in-law was a charaka and a few yards of Khadi.

The struggle for freedom was intensified all over the country in 1930. Mahatma Gandhi started the 'Salt Satyagraha'. Lal Bahadur took a leading role in it.

At the age of seventeen Lal Bahadur had participated in a procession against the British Government. The government had arrested him and then freed him. But this time it did not let him off easily. He had been calling on people not to pay land revenue and taxes to the government and the government had been keeping a wary eye on him. Now he was sent to prison for two and a half years.

From this time onwards prison became his second home. He was sent to prison seven times and was forced to spend nine long years in various prisons on different occasions.

His going to prison was a blessing in disguise. He had time to read a number of good books. He became familiar with the works of western philosophers, revolutionaries and social reformers. He translated the autobiography of Madam Curie (a French scientist who discovered radium) into Hindi.

Lal Bahadur's virtues shone even in the prison. He was an ideal prisoner. 'He was a model to others in discipline and restraint. Many

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political prisoners used to quarrel among themselves for small things. They used to cringe for small favors before the officials of the prison. But Lal Bahadur used to give up his comforts for others.

The greatness of Lal Bahadur was that he maintained his self-respect 'even in prison. Once when he was in prison, one of his daughters fell seriously ill. The officers agreed to let him out for a short time but on condition that he should agree in writing not to take part in the freedom 'movement during this period. Lal Bahadur did not wish to participate in the freedom movement during his temporary release from prison; but he said that he would not give it in writing. He thought that it was against his self-respect to give it in writing. The officers knew that he was truthful. Therefore they did not insist. Lal Bahadur was released for fifteen days.

But his daughter died before he, reached home. After performing the obsequies he returned to his prison even before the expiry of the period.

A year passed. His son was laid up with influenza this time. Lal Bahadur was permitted unconditionally to go home for a week. But the fever did not come down in a week. Lal Bahadur got ready to go back to prison. The boy pleaded dumbly with his tearful eyes.

In a weak voice he urged his father to stay.

For a moment the father's mind was shaken. Tears rolled down from his eyes.

But the next moment his decision was made. He bade good bye to all and left his home for prison. His son survived.

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Two qualities, which the leader of any nation must have, are devotion and efficiency. Lal Bahadur had both the qualities in a large measure. He would not swerve from his aim, come what may. When the people of India were fighting for freedom he brushed aside all thought of personal happiness and plunged into the freedom struggle. His daughter's death, his son's illness, and poverty, none of these made him swerve from his selection path. Even when he became a minister and, later, the Prime Minister he was never attracted to a life of luxury and comfort.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the leaders of our country were in a dilemma. When the people of India were slaves how could they support the cause of Britain?

In the end they decided to launch a 'Satyagraha' against the British Government for the freedom of the country (1940). Satyagraha means opposition based on Truth. Lal Bahadur was one of those who offered individual Satyagraha. He was sent to prison for one year for this.

The freedom struggle became more widespread and intense. The prisons were bursting with political prisoners.

On 8th August 1942, the Indian National Congress which led the fight for freedom decided at its historic meeting in Bombay to sound the trumpet for the final struggle against the British in India. It called on the British to 'Quit India'. The people were determined to 'do or die'.

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The government reacted sharply to these calls and arrested many leaders. Prisons became over-crowded. The government used all cruel methods of suppression to nip the movement in the bud.

Lal Bahadur, who had just then come out after a year in prison, traveled from Bombay to Allahabad by train. He got off at a station, unknown to the police. For a whole week he used to send instructions to the freedom fighters from Anand Bhavan, Jawaharlal Nehru's home in Allahabad.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the sister of Nehru, lived in Anand Bhavan at the time. The police came there to arrest her and to take possession of the house. Lal Bahadur destroyed all-important documents. Luckily, the police arrested only Vijayalakshmi Pandit and went away.

A few days later Lal Bahadur who was underground came out and shouted slogans against the government. The police arrested him then.

India got freedom in 1947. Lal Bahadur's administrative ability and skill in organization came to light in the days following India's freedom. He was an expert in the art of bringing together people and winning their hearts. Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant, the leader of Uttar Pradesh, was the first to recognize this talent of Shastriji and to encourage him. He earned the love of Pant by his hard work during the elections of 1946 in the provinces. The Congress Office had become Shastriji's home during that period. The Congress won a resounding victory in the elections.

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When Govind Vallabh Pant became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, he wished to train able young men to run the government. But it was not easy to please him. Lal Bahadur did not want any office; yet he was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary to Pant. Pant praised him as 'likable, hard-working, devoted, trustworthy and non-controversial'.

Later, in 1947, Lal Bahadur became the Minister of Police and Transport in Pant's Ministry. He took many steps to bring discipline into the administration. As Transport Minister he subjected government buses to discipline. He was the first to appoint women conductors. Usually the minister in charge of the Police Department will not remain popular for long. But Lal Bahadur Shastri never allowed the police to resort to lathi charge and firing. He ordered that using jets of water instead of lathis should disperse unruly crowds. Though there were many strikes in Uttar Pradesh when he was in office, there was not a single occasion when people shouted slogans against him.

Lal Bahadur was a lover of cricket. Once he was watching a match at Kanpur. Trouble broke out among the spectators. The Police and young men came to blows. Since Shastriji was on the spot the situation did not go out of control. The young men demanded that the red turbans' (the police) should not be found on the cricket ground and Lal Bahadur agreed. But the police were there the next day. The young men became angry with Shastriji and protested. Lal Bahadur laughed and said, "I fulfilled my promise to you faithfully. You did not

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want red turbans to be here. You see the police are now wearing khaki turbans." The spectators laughed and dropped the matter.

In the first General Elections after India became a Republic, the Congress Party returned to power with a huge majority. Lal Bahadur Shastri worked hard for this success. He was the General Secretary of the Congress at the time. The selection of candidates and the direction of publicity and electioneering were under the direct guidance of Shastriji. But he did not contest the elections. However, Nehru did not wish to leave such an able and honest man outside the government. He persuaded him to seek election to the Rajya Sabha. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha. He was appointed as the Railways and Transport Minister in the Central Cabinet (1952).

The railways are among the biggest Central Government undertakings, transport plays a vital role in the progress of any country. The railways in India had been badly disrupted after the division of the country. Lal Bahadur strove hard to set right and regulate the railways. It is not easy to organize movement of passengers and goods from place to place without waste of time and without inconvenience. Lal Bahadur succeeded in this to a large extent. There were four classes- first, second, intermediate and third in the railways then. First class compartments offered extreme luxury and were almost heavenly. But the discomfort of passengers in the third class compartments was beyond description. They did not have even minimum comforts. Lal Bahadur's efforts to reduce the vast disparity between the first and the last classes cannot be forgotten.

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The first class that offered royal comfort was abolished. The old second came to be known as the first class and the intermediate class as the second class. His idea was to have only two classes of compartments in course of time - the first and the second. It was he who provided more facilities to travelers in third class compartments. It was during his time that fans were provided in the third class compartments. He also worked hard to improve the administration of Railways and to eliminate thefts in the trains.

Lal Bahadur identified himself with the Railways so much that he felt he was responsible if anything went wrong in his department. When he was the Railway Minister in 1956, 144 passengers died in an accident that took place near Ariyalur in Tamil Nadu. Just three months before this, an accident that took place near Ariyalur in Tamil Nadu. Just three months before this, an accident had occurred at Mehboob Nagar in which 112 people died. Lal Bahadur was in no way responsible for these accidents. Yet he was very much pained. He felt he could not escape the moral responsibility for them. He had submitted his resignation letter to Pandit Nehru when the Mehboob Nagar accident took place. But Nehru had not accepted it. But when the Ariyalur accident took place Shastriji said, 'I must do penance for this. Let me go.' So strong was his sense of responsibility.

Lal Bahadur Shastri's exit from the Central Cabinet was a blessing for the ruling party. He worked for the party during the General Elections next year. Then he became the Minister for Transport and Communications and later the Minister for Commerce

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and Industry. He became the Home Minister in 1961, after the death of Govind Vallabh Pant.

People used to call him the homeless Home Minister because he did not have a house of his own. He had rented a small house in Allahabad. Even when he was a minister, he used to stay in that house when he went to Allahabad. After a few days the owner of the house let it out to another family. When Shastriji resigned as minister he vacated the government quarters and he did not have a place to live in!

The greatest danger that India had to face at the time was China's aggression (1962). The Chinese army crossed the Himalayan border and moved forward in wave after wave and occupied Indian territory in the north. But India stood up like one man against China. The Chinese moved back. But they did not return the areas they had occupied. China stabbed India in the back and lost the friendship of India.

This was the time when China in the north and Pakistan both in the east and the west started giving trouble to India. It was absolutely necessary that the people of India should forget internal quarrels and that they should unite like brothers and sisters. Lal Bahadur Shastri strove hard to make the people feel that they were all one.

People who clung to power sometimes showed their pettiness. To some people clinging to the minister's seat, rather than uniting the people, is the aim of life. At this time a plan was carried out to purify the ruling party. The Chief Ministers of all states and the senior Ministers at the Centre had to handover their resignations to the

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Prime Minister Nehru he was to decide who should come out of office and work for the party and who should remain in office. Accordingly they all tendered resignations.

Nehru died suddenly on May 27, 1964.

The ruling Congress Party elected Lal Bahadur unanimously as its leader. He did not show any interest in the discussions before the election of the leader. He remained aloof as if it had nothing to do with him. The detachment he showed then was surprising.

Lal Bahadur Shastri was the Prime Minister of India at a crucial time in India's history. He was physically weak, but he faced the problems confronting the nation like a hero. The first problem that he had to face after he became the Prime Minister was one caused by Pakistan. Pakistan took shape by eroding India's land, and was instigating Indian Muslims. After the Chinese aggression, when India's confidence in her strength had been shaken, Pakistan was creating trouble along the borders.

But Shastriji would not yield to the wickedness of Pakistan. He first tried to earn the goodwill and support of other nations for India. He visited Russia, Egypt, Canada and Britain and explained to the leaders of those nations India's stand. He attended a meeting of the non-aligned nations (nations which were neutral) and explained India's position. He even tried to reason with President Ayub Khan of Pakistan.

It had become Pakistan's habit to provoke India somehow and jump to arms.

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Pakistan had been waiting to swallow Kashmir somehow. She pushed her forces across the eastern border into the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat State in April-May of 1965. Lal Bahadur was not unnerved by this unexpected attack. He faced the problem with great tact at that critical moment. The Indian Army forced the attackers to retreat. Then both countries agreed to stop fighting.

Even before the ink with which they had signed the Kutch agreement dried up, Pakistan raised its hood to strike again. Pakistani soldiers entered Kashmir in disguise. In September 1965 there was a large-scale invasion of the territory by Pakistani soldiers in the Chhamb area. War broke out all along the Cease-fire Line on the Kashmir border.

The enemies who had managed to enter Kashmir were cunning and mischievous. Pakistan also tried to incite Indian Muslims. The Pakistan army was engaged in forcibly occupying areas, which belonged to India. There was the danger of the fighting spreading to the eastern border also. In addition to this, there was the threat posed by the Chinese on the northern borders of India. Lal Bahadur Shastri faced all these problems with a will of iron. It was at this time that the country understood the greatness of Lal Bahadur Shastri. He decided that was the time to teach Pakistan a lesson. He gave full freedom to the Commander of the Army. 'Go forward and strike' was Shastriji's command to the generals.

Addressing the nation on 13th August 1965 Shastriji referred to Pakistan's threats and said, "Force will be met with force." Two days later, during the celebration of Independence day, he declared from

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the ramparts of the Red Fort: "It does not matter if we are destroyed. We will fight to the last to maintain the high honor of the Indian nation and its flag."

Just at this time another danger threatened India. China sent a letter, which said, "The Indian army has set up army equipment in Chinese territory. India should pull down this equipment. Otherwise it will have to face the wrath of China."

At that moment India was fighting against the Pakistani army equipped with the latest weapons supplied in plenty by the United States of America. And, at this very moment how was India to resist China?

China's allegations were a bundle of lies. If India removed the military equipment she would be admitting that China's charges were true. Also, that would mean India was afraid of China.

Even the big nations waited breathlessly to see what Lal Bahadur would say and what India would do.

Lal Bahadur did not take long to give a reply. The letter from China was received on the morning of 17th September 1965. He made a statement in the Parliament the same afternoon. He declared: "China's allegation is untrue. If China attacks India it is our firm resolve to fight for our freedom. The might of China will not deter us from defending our territorial integrity."

China kept quiet.

India's soldiers had no fear of death and fought most splendidly and heroically. The army and the air force functioned like the two

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arms of a single body. The invaders were beaten. The Pakistani army could not stand against the Indian army. It was then that, for the first time, the world came to realize the supremacy of the Indian army.

Some big nations feared that, if India won a total victory over Pakistan, it would lower their prestige. The Security Council of the United Nations Organization called on India and Pakistan to stop fighting.

On the invitation of Kosygin, the Premier of Soviet Russia, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Ayub Khan met in Tashkent on January 4, 1966. The leaders agreed that their armies should withdraw to the old Cease-fire Line in Kashmir and that the two countries should live in peace and friendship.

Many people in India felt that we should not return the territory taken from Pakistan- occupied Kashmir. They argued that the entire Kashmir belonged to India. But Shastriji wished to give one more chance to Pakistan to live in peace and friendship with India. So he signed the treaty of friendship.

Shastriji had suffered heart attacks twice before. And during the period of the Pakistan war and the following days, his body, already battered, had to bear a very heavy strain. He signed the joint Declaration on 10th January 1966. He died the same night.

The news of Lal Bahadur Shastri's death struck India like a bolt from the blue. The entire nation was plunged in grief. Some people suspected foulplay also. Gone was the war hero and the messenger of peace, gone was the great statesman who restored to India her

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honor and self- respect in the assembly of nations. A tiny, tidy figure. A soul that had lived in perfect purity of thought, word and deed. The very embodiment of selflessness, detachment and simplicity. Such was this man who had lived in our midst. He belongs to the race of the heroes of India.

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