

**AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF AUSTRALIA
(NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER)**

**REMEMBERED NOT FOR THEIR
GREATNESS BUT FOR THEIR FLAWS**

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In this paper, Paul Kensey chronicles the lives of three Civil War generals, who have gained lasting recognition, not for their leadership or command qualities or for their tactical or strategic brilliance, but for the flaws in their character that rendered them less than effective as commanders in the Civil War.

If this paper had been a film, it would be an 'R' rated one, since the personal peccadillos of two of the generals discussed, Hugh Judson Kilpatrick and Earl Van Dorn, were each regarded widely as "ladies men", having sexual appetites that were not readily satisfied. The third general, George Edward Pickett, appears to be a somewhat immature serial romantic, falling madly in love with a succession of women throughout his career.

The paper is commended to all interested in the personal lives of those on both sides of the conflict who had significant roles to play in command of troops during the four years of America's Civil War or the conditions under which the extended campaigns of the War were waged.

INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact that America's Civil War provided the opportunity for the world to see greatness in leadership and command on both sides of the conflict. There were men who were unique in the annals of American history: Robert E Lee, Ulysses S Grant, James Longstreet, Nathan Bedford Forrest to name but a few. There were others, also, who are considered unique, not because of their greatness but for the flaws in their character and their personal weaknesses. This paper provides a profile on three such men, each who rose to general rank and who ultimately stumbled because they did not possess the qualities that set the great leaders apart from others - George Pickett, Judson Kilpatrick and Earl Van Dorn.

GEORGE EDWARD PICKETT

General George Edward Pickett is best known for the Civil War action, which bears his name, "Pickett's Charge." When on July 3, 1863 at Gettysburg his Division charged Cemetery Ridge and was repulsed with heavy losses.

Born in Richmond on January 25 1825, George Pickett was from an old Virginia family, the first of three children to Robert and Mary Johnston Pickett. George secured his appointment to the United States Military Academy West Point in 1842. A myth persists, created after his death by his wife La Salle, that an obscure lawyer by the name of Abraham Lincoln appointed him to the Academy. In fact, he received his appointment through Illinois Congressman John T. Stuart, who was a friend of George's uncle Andrew Johnston, a lawyer in Quincy Illinois. It is probable that Lincoln was familiar with both men in the local legal fraternity, but that was the only connection between Pickett and Lincoln.

George had a difficult time at West Point. He struggled to complete his course work and bristled under the numerous rules and regulations demanded by the Academy and was unable to keep up with the class consisting of George B. McClellan, Thomas Jackson and Jesse L Reno. Graduating last in his class of 1846 (59/59), a class, which was to produce no less than 20 general officers on both sides of the Civil War.

Appointed a Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Infantry, he fought well during the Mexican War. At Chapultepec he carried the Regimental Colours over the walls, placing them atop the Citadel. After the Mexican War he served in the West, in Texas and the Washington Territories.

While in Washington Territory in 1861, word arrived of Virginia's secession from the Union. Pickett's home ties to Virginia were strong and his course was clear. He resigned his commission in June of 1861 and offered his services to the new Confederate States of America.

Promoted to Brigadier General he was assigned command of one of the six brigades of Longstreet's 2nd Division where he fought during the Peninsular Campaign and was wounded in the left shoulder. In September 1862, he was promoted to major general and given command of a Division of Virginians attached to Longstreet's Corps.

His division arrived at Gettysburg late on the afternoon of July 2, in time for Robert E Lee's bold assault on Cemetery Ridge the next day. Leading the assault would be Pickett's fresh Division of Virginians. Following a massive artillery bombardment of the Union lines, Pickett awaited the order to advance from General Longstreet:

"General, Shall I advance?"

Pickett asked of Longstreet. But Longstreet turned away.

"Then I shall lead my division forward!"

Pickett rode up and down the front of his lines shouting emotionally

“Up men, and to your posts! Don’t forget today that you are from old Virginia!”

Thus started one of the most famous and ill-fated charges in the history of America. Approximately half of all the men who started the assault were killed, wounded or captured. Back on Seminary Ridge, as Pickett attempted to comfort his battered men he choked up and sobbed:

“My Men, My Brave Men, Oh My Brave Men!”

He encountered General Lee who was trying to rally his broken troops. Lee told Pickett:

“Place your Division to the rear of this hill!”

To which Pickett replied,

“General Lee I have no division now!”

George Pickett would never forgive Robert E Lee for the loss of his proud division on Day 3 of the Gettysburg battle.

At Five Forks on April 1 1865, Sheridan’s army outnumbered the Confederates commanded by General Pickett and overran his force. Pickett had left the front line with cavalry commander Fitz-Hugh Lee to partake in a “shad bake” with cavalryman Brigadier General Tom Rosser who was celebrating the birth of his daughter. Neither Pickett nor Fitzhugh Lee had told any subordinate where they were going and when the attack began no one knew where to find them. Pickett was relieved of command by General Lee and sent home awaiting orders. Pickett surrendered with the army, however, the following day.

After the War Confederate raider John Singleton Mosby accompanied Pickett to see General Lee in Richmond after the War. According to Mosby, Lee treated Pickett with icy civility, inferring disapproval of his absence at Five Forks. After leaving Lee’s presence, Pickett spoke bitterly of Lee to Mosby saying:

“That old man had my division massacred at Gettysburg.”

to which Mosby replied,

“Well it made you immortal.”

The personal life of George Edward Pickett provides an interesting but sad insight into the man. While at West Point he met and fell in love with Sally Harrison Ming, daughter of Dr John Ming of Weyanoke Plantation, near Richmond and intended to marry her after his West point graduation. Unfortunately for the couple the war with Mexico intervened and George was shipped off to war. Returning from Mexico and to be with Sally, he resigned from the Army in 1850, bought a farm in Virginia and married Sally on January 28, 1851, at Attakapas, Louisiana. Said to be madly in love and anxious to have children, they were excited to find in February 1851 that Sally was pregnant but both Sally and the child died during the birth later that year. George was devastated and became quite morose, but stayed in Virginia for six months before returning to the Army where he asked to be posted to the frontier.

It was during this time in Virginia that he met La Salle Corbell, daughter of Dr John Corbell. Pickett was 23 years her senior but on seeing him in his uniform, she fell in love and swore she would never love another man. La Salle asked if she could correspond with him and would dictate letters to her grandmother to write them for her.

Pickett was posted to the Northwest Territories on “peacekeeping” duties between the Americans and the Indians. There he met and fell in love with an Indian “Princess”, her name was said to be Sakkis Tiigang, meaning “Morning Mist.” It appears that they married twice: first, in the traditional

Haida ceremony and afterward they were married in a more traditional ceremony in the home of a local businessman and Pickett built a house for his new bride in Bellingham, Washington. On December 31, 1857, a son, James Tilton Pickett was born, named in honour of his good friend Major James Tilton. The young mother never fully recovered from a difficult delivery and died shortly after. Pickett was inconsolable with grief; he had loved her deeply and she had given him his first son. Four years passed, during which he cared for young Jimmie. When he was assigned elsewhere the child was apparently cared for by his Indian grandmother. Then in April 1861, came the fall of Fort Sumter and Pickett felt compelled to return to defend his State. Knowing that the conservative Virginians would not accept a child of mixed race, Pickett took the only course open to him and sent the boy to Catherine and William Collins who agreed to take care of Jimmie under the supervision of Pickett's friend, James Tilton. His son's welfare assured, Pickett left for Virginia and would never see Jimmie again.

While serving in "Russian America," Pickett had been corresponding with La Salle Corbell. This continued throughout his early war service and shortly after his crushing defeat at Gettysburg he sought leave from General Longstreet to marry the sixteen-year-old beauty. George and La Salle returned to his farm only to find it destroyed. He tried his hand at each of Real Estate, Railroading and Insurance without much success. They had two sons, George Junior and Corbell, however, on Easter Sunday 1874, Corbell aged 7, died during the measles epidemic, which swept through Richmond.

General George Edward Pickett died ten years after the war at Norfolk, Virginia, on July 30 1875, aged 50. He is buried in Hollywood Cemetery Richmond, on top of the hill overlooking the James River. His magnificent headstone reflected the admiration of the people of Richmond.

La Salle, or Sally, as George liked to call her, was a prolific writer and like General George Armstrong Custer's wife, Elizabeth Custer, she was forever promoting the perception of the military heroics of her husband and published her book, "The Heart of a Soldier" in 1913. Sally outlived many of her critics and died in Richmond on March 13, 1931. It was her dying wish to be buried with her husband, but the authorities refused, as Hollywood is a military cemetery. Consequently her body was cremated and her ashes kept at the Arlington Mausoleum. It took another 123 years but on March 21, 1998, her ashes were removed from Arlington and laid to rest in Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond beside her husband's grave. She finally joined her husband, the only man she ever loved.

HUGH JUDSON KILPATRICK

Major General William T. Sherman had a gift for being brutally apt. In summing up Judson Kilpatrick in 1864, he said:

"I know that Kilpatrick is a hell of a damned fool, but I want just that sort of man to command my cavalry".

Physically, Kilpatrick was a candidate for the least heroic looking of any general in the army. At 27 years of age, he was described as, a wiry, restless, undersized man with black eyes and a lantern jaw. He had stringy sand-coloured sideburns, bandy legs that gave him a rolling gate, and he spoke with a shrill voice. The combined effect was comical. A member of Meade's staff wrote that it was difficult to look at Kilpatrick without laughing. Relentlessly ambitious, he predicted from graduation, that he would be a general, and if he survived the war he would become Governor of New Jersey, his native state and then President of The United States.

Kilpatrick was a most controversial figure throughout his life. As a tactician he was utterly reckless sending so many of his men to their doom that the survivors called him "*Kill-Cavalry*". Early in the Civil War he served time in jail for a so-called "financial indiscretion." Described as "*a lady's man*," he was caught, literally, with his pants down by Confederate General Wade Hampton's troops late in the War. His character did nothing to redeem him, adultery, lying,

thieving, it seemed there was no end to his moral failings. His sexual appetite was as insatiable as his thirst for power. Twice married, it is said:

“...he went through mistresses and prostitutes like they were junk food and made no effort to conceal his affairs.”

After the War, he twice served as the United States Ambassador to Chile during which his open affairs with a married woman nearly cost him his job.

Early Life

Hugh Judson Kilpatrick¹ was the fourth child born to Colonel Simon Kilpatrick and Julia Wickham on their farm at Wantage Township, New Jersey, on January 14, 1836. He graduated into Artillery from The United States Military Academy, West Point in the class of May 1861 (17/45). Ardently pro-Union and anti-slavery, he waded into fistfights with Southern cadets but it was said that throughout his cadetship he received few demerits. In his fourth year, Judson met a girl in New York City, Alice Shailer, the niece of an important politician. With few demerits he was able to spend the weekends with his new sweetheart. They planned to marry in August after his graduation but national events overtook their plans. Judson “... *went wild with excitement*” over the fall of Fort Sumter. Alice had come West Point to see the bars pinned to Judson’s shoulders and when the ceremony was over they went to a reception at a local hotel. A friend said:

“Kil is going to the field and may not return! Better get married now!”

Judson thought this a great idea and as Alice was willing, Reverend J.W. French was summoned to the hotel to conduct the wedding rites. All ten cadets attended the hurried ceremony and after a honeymoon of one night, he left Alice for Washington and the War.

Realising the quickest way to promotion was with the volunteers, Kilpatrick joined the “flashy” 54th New York Regiment as a captain. Within one month he made headlines. At the action at Big Bethel in June 1861 he became the first Union officer to be wounded in action, when struck in the buttocks by some grapeshot. While recuperating, he traded on his notoriety and secured a commission in the cavalry as a lieutenant colonel in the 5th New York Cavalry.

War Service

Kilpatrick saw service at the Second Battle of Bull Run where he seized the opportunity for self-promotion and made a successful charge on the Confederate railroad. Later in the day he ordered another charge at twilight, which succeeded only in annihilating a squadron under his command. It did draw to the attention of his superiors, however, that he was a fighter and he was promoted to the rank of colonel in December 1862. After some months on recruiting duties he returned to active service in the Rappahannock Campaign. Kilpatrick was conspicuous in some of the largest cavalry fights in the Eastern theatre, but his record was chequered with both success and failure.

Given command of the Third Division as a brigadier general, two of Pleasanton’s “boy generals,” George Custer and Elon Farnsworth were among his brigade commanders. Kilpatrick was 27. Farnsworth, 25, and Custer, 23. On 3 July 1863, at Gettysburg, he ordered Farnsworth into a foolhardy charge causing the death of the young brigade commander just days after his appointment and promotion. The young Custer, an officer whose daredevil courage and sounder tactical instincts, made him the darling of the cavalry corps and a favourite of General George Meade, soon eclipsed Kilpatrick. Desperate for attention, Kilpatrick went over the heads of his superiors to enlist the support of President Abraham Lincoln for an ill-conceived and ill-executed raid to rescue Union prisoners confined at Richmond, Virginia. The failure of the raid on Richmond made Kilpatrick, *persona non grata*, in the Army of the Potomac. He was subsequently transferred to lead a cavalry division in “Sherman’s March to the Sea” and was severely wounded

¹ Kilpatrick dropped the name ‘Hugh’ whilst at West Point.

in the thigh at the Battle of Resaca with his injuries keeping him out of the fighting until late July. Kilpatrick continued with Sherman north through the Carolinas where he delighted in destroying Southern property.

His Private Life

Kilpatrick's friends (and there were many) were shocked to learn that he had been unable to summon the courage to carry out his assault on Richmond. Kilpatrick's enemies (and there were many) had anticipated failure to attack Richmond. They were convinced he was a coward – an egotistical, lying, sadistic, philandering, thieving, and miscreant, whose lofty reputation had been gained by words not deeds. The South agreed. Had they won independence and captured him they probably would have hanged him as a war criminal.

There were questions about his honesty with him being gaoled for six weeks in 1862 under suspicion that he sold confiscated Confederate livestock and provisions for personal gain. Furthermore, while professing temperance, he was again gaoled for defaming government officials while on a drunken spree in Washington and he had even been implicated in a graft scheme whereby certain horse brokers paid him off in order to get contracts to sell horses to his brigade. His preoccupation with sex was almost his undoing. Twice Confederate cavalry managed to surprise his camp while he was in bed with prostitutes, and he was forced to flee for his life in something less than full uniform:

Annie Jones: Following Gettysburg, Kil was preoccupied with Miss Annie Jones a teenage prostitute who had come to his bivouac. She boasted of having slept with all the key officers in the Union army (including Custer). Kil was so thrilled with Annie; he forgot his wife and baby son and invited Annie to share his tent. She accepted and when not entertaining Kil spent her time dressed in a major's uniform and galloping about the grounds on a mare that he gave her. Following a debacle at Port Conway, where most of his hard fought for prisoners escaped, Kil had driven his men, allowing them only nine hours sleep in three days in a hurry to be back with Annie Jones. Upon his arrival, he was appalled to find that while he had been away Annie had left the bivouac to visit the Rebels. Even worse, when she came back, Annie had moved all her belongings into Custer's tent, saying she preferred his company to Kilpatrick's. Kil was so angered that he arrested her for being a spy and sent her north to Washington.

Marie Boozer: was according to John S Preston, *"the most beautiful piece of flesh I had ever beheld."* The daughter of a Northern sympathiser in North Carolina she and her mother were heading north when Sherman burned Columbia and they found refuge with Kilpatrick. Kil found a French chef to prepare her meals and confiscated a carriage for her personal use. He showed a decorum unusual for him. Each had their own rooms on the second floor of Daniel W. Brown's home in Lancaster. They went outside in the afternoons to listen to his band serenade them. His wounds troubling him, he travelled in Marie's fine carriage lying with his head in her lap, *"... for greater consolation in troubled times."* This was his position when he rode into North Carolina on March 2, 1865

"Kilpatrick's Shirt-tail Skedaddle". On March 9, 1865, at Monroe's Cross Roads, his cavalry arrived at about nine o'clock at night. Kilpatrick and Marie Boozer went to bed in a tiny cabin. At first light, Wade Hampton's rebel cavalry galloped into Kilpatrick's camp. When Kilpatrick heard the enemy charging into his camp he leapt from his bed and rushed outside in his nightshirt. A rebel demanded to know who was their leader. *"There he goes!"* Kilpatrick cried, *"on the black horse."* The rebel trooper galloped after the rider. Kilpatrick frantically mounted a horse and road off in his underwear for his life. Marie still in the cabin hurriedly put on her clothes (Kilpatrick's battle flag hiding under her full skirt.) raced out and hid in a ditch. The rout was extremely embarrassing to Kilpatrick, and for once, he had the courage to admit it

"I had been working hard for a major generalship, but when I heard the rebel yell in my camp I knew after all these years all was lost."

War's End

At War's end Kilpatrick found himself a brevet major general in both the regular and volunteer service, but he was not big enough to win political office even though he changed his political allegiance repeatedly whenever he felt the need. In the end, he settled for two appointments Ambassador to Chile, where he died of Bright's disease on December 2, 1881. In forty-six years, he had involved himself in more trouble, adventure and controversy than most men twice his age.

In October 1887 his remains were returned from Chile for burial at The United States Military Academy, West Point.

EARL VAN DORN

Major General Earl Van Dorn, Confederate States Army, is remembered because of the way he died. He was killed by Dr George B. Peters for violating the sanctity of the doctor's marriage. It occurred in Spring Hill, Tennessee, on May 7, 1863

Earl (Buck) Van Dorn was the son of wealthy landholders Peter A. Van Dorn and Sophie Donelson Caffery. He was born in Port Gibson, Mississippi, on September 20, 1820. He received appointment to The United States Military Academy, West Point from his cousin, President Andrew Jackson.

Van Dorn was one of the Confederacy's most promising general officers early in the Civil War. Few men of his age had more military experience and prestige, but proved to be a disappointment and died not in battle, but at the hands of a jealous husband.

Early Days

Generally a poor student at West Point and often cited for misconduct, he showed skill in horsemanship, field soldiering and drawing. He graduated with the class of 1842 (52/56) and appointed to the Infantry Corps. His classmates at West Point included James Longstreet and William Rosecrans. The following year he married Caroline Godbold, the daughter of a prominent Alabama plantation owner, and later produced a son and a daughter.

During the Mexican War, Van Dorn distinguished himself for raising the flag under heavy fire and was the first to storm the walls of Chapultepec and the Belen Gate at Mexico City and was rewarded for his bravery with brevet promotions. Returning from the War he was completely dedicated to the army life.

"I never could be happy out of the army. I have no other home, could make none that would be congenial to my feelings."

During the 1850's he transferred to the cavalry and served with the famous 2nd U.S. Cavalry which boasted Robert E Lee as the colonel and Albert Sidney Johnston as a lieutenant colonel. Serving in the Indian wars he was wounded three times and promoted to the rank of major.

The Civil War

As the Southern States moved towards secession, Van Dorn was one of the strong voices for action and when Mississippi left the Union, he resigned his army commission offering his services to the Confederacy. Initially appointed a brigadier general as second in command of Mississippi State troops he served under Major General Jefferson Davis until Davis's election as President of the Confederacy. Van Dorn was then appointed to command the state troops in the rank of major general.

Tired of staff work Van Dorn accepted the reduced rank of colonel to command field troops. Davis immediately sent him to Texas where his capture of three Union ships won him promotion to brigadier general. Commanding a division at the battle of First Manassas gained him promotion to major general. Transferred to Arkansas, his division was repulsed after two days of fighting at Pea Ridge. He later unsuccessfully defended the fortified city of Corinth, Mississippi. In the summer of 1862, he successfully defended Vicksburg but failed in his designs on Baton Rouge when the attack under John C. Breckenridge failed. Another failure occurred in October 1862, when he attempted to retake Corinth held by his old West Point classmate Major General William Rosecrans while General Bragg, Van Dorn's commander was invading Kentucky. A court of inquiry was convened to determine if General Van Dorn negligently conducted the battle and the court ruled negligence on his part. By this time many Southerners were disenchanted with him and he was replaced by General Pemberton with Van Dorn given command of Pemberton's cavalry. Here he found his niche. His aggressive, sometimes reckless nature seemed well suited for cavalry. He led a raid on Grant's supply depot at Holly Springs, Mississippi which delayed Grant's Vicksburg campaign. Once again he was the hero of the day. As a result of the Holly Springs raid Van Dorn moved his division to Middle Tennessee setting up his headquarters at Spring Hill.

The End

Van Dorn was a fine example of the romantic cavalier, with his slim-waisted, broad-shouldered physique, his handsome face, light chestnut hair and moustache were much admired by the ladies. Added to his physical characteristics, he was also an accomplished painter, amateur poet, a dedicated romantic and considered one of the finest horseman in the cavalry of the old United States Army

General Earl Van Dorn's reputation as a ladies' man had preceded him at Spring Hill. Cautioned by a young widow to

"... Let the women alone until the War is over."

Van Dorn replied:

"I cannot do that, for it is all that I am fighting for."

His company was well sought-after among the ladies of the town, one more ardently than the others. Jessie Helen McKissack Peters was the third wife of Dr George B. Peters, a wealthy property owner in Tennessee and Arkansas. Jessie was twenty-four years younger than her husband. Described "... as an incredibly beautiful woman" and "...a beguiling temptress.", her unsupervised visits to the General's office at the Dr White's home caused such a stir that Van Dorn was asked to relocate his headquarters. This he promptly did, moving into Martin Cheers mansion at the end of April.

Dr Peters, no longer a practising physician, was serving as a member of the state legislature and had been away from Spring Hill for nearly a year. Some local citizens described the vivacious Jessie as being "... just plain lonesome" but nonetheless were less forgiving of Van Dorn's late night visits to the Peter's home and unchaperoned long carriage rides. It was inevitable that the general's un-gentlemanly conduct would be found out by the man whose wife he was enjoying a dalliance with.

On April 4, 1863 Dr Peters obtained a pass to move through Union lines and return home. In his own words, Peters stated:

"...I arrived at home on the 12th of April and was alarmed at the distressing rumours which prevailed in the neighbourhood in relation to the attentions paid by General Van Dorn to my wife"

and to Van Dorn's servant who he caught delivering a note to Jessie:

"... tell his whisky-headed master, General Van Dorn, that I would blow his brains out, or any of his staff that stepped their foot inside of the lawn."

Determined to catch the general in the act, Peters pretended a trip to Shelbyville but never left the area, doubling back to Spring Hill instead. Peters claims he:

"... came upon the creature, about half past two o'clock at night, where I expected to find him..."

On a early spring morning, May 7, 1863, Dr Peters rode up to the generals headquarters at the Cheers Mansion, not long after he walked out mounted his horse and rode off. Not more than two minutes later there was a scream. The owner's daughter was crying out:

"The doctor has shot the general!"

His staff found the General at his writing desk a small bullet wound to the back of his head. According to Peters' later statement to the Nashville police, when he threatened to kill the General, Van Dorn begged for his life and then promised to write out a public statement exonerating Mrs Peters from any guilt if the doctor would spare his life. This was the doctor's explanation for why Van Dorn's was at his writing desk when he shot him from behind.

Much controversy still surrounds the murder, Dr Peters contended that Van Dorn had violated the sanctity of his marriage; others say that the doctor had political reasons, involving the support of the Federal forces in Tennessee. The mystery is further complicated by conflicting reports of the activities of Dr and Mrs Peters after the incident. The couple soon divorced but later reunited in Arkansas, where Dr Peters had mysteriously received a grant of land.

How ironic were his words to his wife at the beginning of the War:

"Who knows, but that yet out of the storm of revolution – the dark clouds of war - I may not be able to catch a spark of lightning and shine through all time to come, a burning name! I feel greatness in my soul – and if I can make it take shape and walk forth, it may be seen and felt."

Even more ironic that his death should be summed up by the words of a fellow Confederate, General John R. Liddell, who expressed what he referred to as the "common opinion" of the army.

"clearly expressive of condemnation, mingled with little or no regret for a man whose wilful violation of social rights led him to such an inglorious end,"

After lying in state in Columbia, Tennessee, Van Dorn's body was moved to the home of his father-in-law Colonel Godbold and buried on their estate. Thirty-six years later his body was removed to the City Cemetery, Port Gibson. The modest headstone simply reads: **Earl Van Dorn.**

FINALLY...

Each of these general officers showed early promise of being an effective commander but failed in their not having the personal qualities needed to be leaders of men in wartime. Indeed, one could easily imagine each of these generals as young boys whilst taking a bath pointing to their testicles and asking their respective mothers

"... Mummy², are these my brains?"

to which each mother could have replied:

"Not yet!"

² Actually, they probably would have said "Mommy"

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