

# A Full Member of the Club

by

**Bob Shaw**

It was a trivial thing—a cigarette lighter—which finally wrecked Philip Connor's peace of mind.

Angela and he had been sitting at the edge of her pool for more than an hour. She had said very little during that time, but every word, every impatient gesture of her slim hands, had conveyed the message that it was all over between them.

Connor was sitting upright on a canvas chair, manifestly ill at ease, trying to understand what had brought about the change in their relationship. He studied Angela carefully, but her face was rendered inscrutable, inhuman, by the huge insect eyes of her sunglasses. His gaze strayed to a lone white butterfly as it made a hazardous flight across the pool and passed, twinkling like a star, into the shade of the birches.

He touched his forehead and found it buttery with sweat. "This heat is murderous."

"It suits me," Angela said, another reminder that they were no longer as one. She moved slightly on the lounge, altering the brown curvatures of her semi-nakedness.

Connor stared nostalgically at the miniature landscape of flesh, the territory from which he was being evicted, and reviewed the situation. The death of an uncle had made Angela rich, *very* rich, but he was unable to accept that as sufficient reason for her change in attitude. His own business interests brought him more than two hundred thousand a year, so she knew he wasn't a fortune hunter.

"I have an appointment in a little while," Angela said with a patently insincere little smile.

Connor decided to try making her feel guilty. "You want me to leave?"

He was rewarded by a look of concern, but it was quickly gone, leaving the beautiful face as calm and immobile as before.

Angela sat up, took a cigarette from a pack on the low table, opened her purse, and brought out the gold cigarette lighter. It slipped from her fingers, whirred across the tiles, and went into the shallow end of the pool. With a little cry of concern, she reached down into the water and retrieved the lighter, wetting her face and tawny hair in the process. She clicked the dripping lighter once, and it lit. Angela gave Connor a strangely wary glance, dropped the lighter back into her purse, and stood up.

"I'm sorry, Phil," she said. "I have to go now."

It was an abrupt dismissal, but Connor, emotionally bruised as he was, scarcely noticed. He was a gypsy entrepreneur, a wheeler-dealer, one of the very best—and his professional instincts were aroused. The lighter had ignited the first time while soaking wet, which meant it was the best he had ever seen, and yet its superb styling was unfamiliar to him. This fact bothered Connor. It was his business to know all there was to know about the world's supply of sleek, shiny, expensive goodies, and obviously he had let something important slip through his net.

"All right, Angie." He got to his feet. "That's a nice lighter—mind if I have a look?"

She clutched her purse as though he had moved to snatch it. "Why don't you leave me alone? Go away, Phil." She turned and strode off toward the house.

"I'll stop by for a while tomorrow."

"Do that," she called without looking back. "I won't be here."

Connor walked back to his Lincoln, lowered himself gingerly onto the baking upholstery, and drove into Long Beach. It was late in the afternoon, but he went back to his office and began telephoning various trade contacts, making sure they too were unaware of something new and radical in cigarette lighters. Both his secretary and telephonist were on vacation, so he did all the work himself. The activity helped to ease the throbbing hurt of having lost Angela, and—in a way he was unable to explain—gave him a comforting sense that he was doing something toward getting her back or at least finding out what had gone wrong between them.

He had an illogical conviction that the little gold artifact was somehow connected with their breaking up. The idea was utterly ridiculous, of course, but in thinking back over the interlude by the pool with Angela, it struck him that, amazingly for her, she had gone without smoking. Although it probably meant she was cutting down, another possibility was that she had not wanted to produce the lighter in his presence.

Realizing his inquiries were getting him nowhere, he closed up the office and drove across town to his apartment. The evening was well advanced yet seemingly hotter than ever—the sun had descended to a vantage point from which it could attack more efficiently, slanting its rays through the car windows. He let himself into his apartment, showered, changed his clothes, and prowled unhappily through the spacious rooms, wishing Angela was with him. A lack of appetite robbed him of even the solace of food. At midnight he brewed coffee with his most expensive Kenyan blend, deriving a spare satisfaction from the aroma, but took only a few disappointed sips. *If only*, he thought for the thousandth time, *they could make it taste the way it smells*.

He went to bed, consciously lonely, and yearned for Angela until he fell asleep.

Next morning Connor awoke feeling hungry and, while eating a substantial breakfast, was relieved to find he had regained his usual buoyant outlook on life. It was perfectly natural for Angela to be affected by the sudden change in her circumstances, but when the novelty of being rich, instead of merely well off, had faded, he would win her back. And in the meanwhile he—the man who had been first in the country with Japanese liquid display watches—was not going to give up on a simple thing like a new type of cigarette lighter.

Deciding against going to his office, he got on the phone and set up further chains of business inquiries, spreading his net as far as Europe and the Far East. By midmorning the urge to see Angela again had become very strong. He ordered his car to be brought round to the main entrance of the building, and he drove south on the coast road to Asbury Park. It looked like another day of unrelieved sunshine, but a fresh breeze from the Atlantic was fluttering in the car windows and further elevating his spirits.

When he got to Angela's house there was an unfamiliar car in the U-shaped driveway. A middle-aged man wearing a tan suit and steel-rimmed glasses was on the steps, ostentatiously locking the front door. Connor parked close to the steps and got out.

The stranger turned to face him, jingling a set of keys. "Can I help you?"

"I don't think so," Connor said, resenting the unexpected presence. "I called to see Miss Lomond."

"Was it a business matter? I'm Millett of Millett and Fiesler."

"No—I'm a friend." Connor moved impatiently toward the doorbell.

"Then you should know Miss Lomond doesn't live here any more. The house is going up for sale."

Connor froze, remembering Angela had said she wouldn't be around, and shocked that she had not told him about selling out. "She did tell me, but I hadn't realized she was leaving so soon," he improvised. "When's her furniture being collected?"

"It isn't. The property is being sold fully furnished."

"She's taking nothing?"

"Not a stick. I guess Miss Lomond can afford new furniture without too much difficulty," Millett said drily, walking toward his car. "Good morning."

"Wait a minute." Connor ran down the steps. "Where can I get in touch with Angela?"

Millett ran a speculative eye over Connor's car and clothing before he answered. "Miss Lomond has bought Avalon—but I don't know if she has moved in yet."

"Avalon? You mean ...?" Lost for words, Connor pointed south in the direction of Point Pleasant.

"That's right." Millett nodded and drove away. Connor got into his own car, lit his pipe, and tried to enjoy a smoke while he absorbed the impact of what he had heard. Angela and he had never discussed finance—she simply had no interest in the subject—and it was only through oblique references that he guesstimated the size of her inheritance as in the region of a million, perhaps two. But Avalon was a rich man's folly in the old Randolph Hearst tradition. Surrounded by a dozen square miles of the choicest land in Philadelphia, it was the nearest thing to a royal palace that existed outside Europe.

Real estate was not one of Connor's specialties, but he knew that anybody buying Avalon would have had to open the bidding at ten million or more. In other words, Angela was not merely rich—she had graduated into the millionaires' super-league, and it was hardly surprising that her emotional life had been affected.

Connor was puzzled, nevertheless, over the fact that she was selling all her furniture. There was, among several cherished pieces, a Gaudreau writing desk for which she had always shown an exaggerated possessiveness. Suddenly aware that he could neither taste nor smell the imported tobacco which had seemed so good in his pouch, Connor extinguished his pipe and drove out onto the highway.

He had traveled south for some five miles before admitting to himself that he was going to Avalon.

The house itself was invisible, screened from the road by a high redbrick wall. Age had mellowed the brickwork, but the coping stones on top had a fresh appearance and were surmounted by a climb-proof wire fence. Connor drove along beside the wall until it curved inwards to a set of massive gates which were closed. At the sound of his horn, a thickset man with a gun on his hip, wearing a uniform of *café-au-lait* gabardine, emerged from a lodge. He looked out through the gate without speaking.

Connor lowered a car window and put his head out. "Is Miss Lomond at home?"

"What's your name?" the guard said.

"I'm Philip Connor."

"Your name isn't on my list."

"Look, I only asked if Miss Lomond was at home."

"I don't give out information."

"But I'm a personal friend. You're obliged to tell me whether she's at home or not."

"Is that a fact?" The guard turned and sauntered back into the lodge, ignoring Connor's shouts and repeated blasts on the horn. Angered by the incident, Connor decided not to slink away. He began sounding the car horn in a steady bludgeoning rhythm—five seconds on, five seconds off. The guard did not reappear. Five minutes later, a police cruiser pulled alongside with two state troopers in it, and Connor was moved on with an injunction to calm down.

For lack of anything better to do, he went to his office.

A week went by, during which time Connor drew a complete blank on the cigarette lighter and was almost forced to the conclusion that it had been custom-built by a modern Faberge. He spent hours trying to get a telephone number for Angela, without success. Sleep began to elude him, and he felt himself nearing the boundary separating rationality from obsession. Finally, he saw a society column picture of Angela in a New York nightspot with Bobby Janke, playboy son of an oil billionaire. Apart from making Connor feel ill with jealousy, the newspaper item provided him with the information that Angela was taking up residence at her newly acquired home sometime the following weekend.

*Who cares?* he demanded of his shaving mirror. *Who cares?*

He began drinking vodka tonics at lunchtime on Saturday, veered onto white rum during the afternoon, and by nightfall was suffused with a kind of alcoholic dharma which told him that he was entitled to see Angela and to employ any means necessary to achieve that end. There was the problem of the high brick wall, but, with a flash of enlightenment, Connor realized that walls are mainly psychological barriers. To a person who understood their nature as well as he did, walls became doorways. Taking a mouthful of neat rum to strengthen his sense of purpose, Connor sent for his car.

Avalon's main entrance, scene of earlier defeat, was in darkness when he reached it, but lights were showing in the gate lodge. Connor drove on by, following the line of the wall, parked on a deserted stretch of second-class road. He switched off all lights, opened the trunk, took out a heavy hammer and chisel, crossed the verge and—without any preliminaries—attacked the wall. Ten minutes later, although the mortar was soft with age, he had not succeeded in removing one brick and was beginning to experience doubts. Then a brick came free and another virtually tumbled out after it. He enlarged the hole to an appropriate size and crawled through onto dry turf.

A dwarfish half-moon was perched near zenith, casting a wan radiance on the turrets and gables of a mansion which sat on the crest of a gentle rise. The building was dark and forbidding, and as he looked at it Connor felt the warm glow in his stomach fade away. He hesitated, swore at himself, and set off up the slope, leaving his hammer and chisel behind. By bearing to the left he brought the front elevation of the building into view and was encouraged to see one illuminated window on the first floor. He reached a paved approach road, followed it to the Gothic-style front entrance, and rang for admission. A full minute later the door was opened by an archetypal and startled-looking butler, and Connor sensed immediately that Angela was not at home.

He cleared his throat. "Miss Lomond ..."

"Miss Lomond is not expected until mid ..."

"Midnight," Connor put in, expertly taking his cue. "I know that—I was with her this afternoon in New York. We arranged that I would stop by for a late drink."

"I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Lomond didn't tell me to expect visitors."

Connor looked surprised. "She didn't? Well, the main thing is she remembered to let them know at the gate lodge." He squeezed the butler's arm democratically. "You know, you couldn't get through that gate in a Sherman tank if your name wasn't on the list."

The butler looked relieved. "One can't be too careful these days, sir."

"Quite right. I'm Mr. Connor, by the way—here's my card. Now show me where I can wait for Miss Lomond. And, if it isn't imposing too much, I'd like a Daiquiri. Just one to toy with while I'm waiting."

"Of course, Mr. Connor."

Exhilarated by his success, Connor was installed in an enormous green-and-silver room and supplied with a frosty glass. He sat in a very comfortable armchair and sipped his Daiquiri. It was the best he had ever tasted.

The sense of relaxation prompted him to reach for his pipe, but he discovered it must have been left at home. He prowled around the room, found a box of cigars on a sideboard, and took one from it. He then glanced around for a lighter. His gaze fell on a transparent ruby-colored ovoid sitting upright on an occasional table. In no way did it resemble any table lighter he had ever seen, but he had become morbidly sensitive on the subject, and the ovoid was positioned where he would have expected a lighter to be.

Connor picked it up, held it to the light and found it was perfectly clear, without visible works. That meant it could not be a lighter. As he was setting it down, he allowed his thumb to slide into a seductively shaped depression on the side.

A pea-sized ball of radiance—like a bead fashioned from sunlight—appeared at the top of the egg. It shone with absolute steadiness until he removed his thumb from the dimple.

Fascinated by his find, he made the tiny globe of brilliance appear and disappear over and over again, proved its hotness with a fingertip. He took out the pocket magnifier he always carried for evaluating trinkets and examined the tip of the egg. The glass revealed a minute silver plug set flush with the surface, but nothing more. Following a hunch, Connor carefully guided one drop of liquid from his drink onto the egg and made sure it was covering the nearly invisible plug. When he operated the lighter it worked perfectly, the golden bead burning without wavering until the liquid had boiled off into the air.

He set the lighter down and noticed yet another strange property—the ruby egg was smoothly rounded at the bottom, yet it sat upright, with no tendency to topple over. His magnifier showed an ornate letter P engraved in the base, but provided no clue as to how the balancing act was achieved.

Connor gulped the remainder of his drink and, with eyes suddenly sober and watchful, took a fresh look around the room. He discovered a beautiful clock, apparently carved from solid onyx. As he had half-expected, there was no way to open it, and the same elaborate P was engraved on the underside.

There was also a television set which had a superficial resemblance to an expensive commercial model but which bore no maker's name plaque. He checked it over and found the now-familiar P inscribed on one side where it would never be noticed except by a person making a purposeful search. When he switched the set on, the image of a newscaster which appeared was so perfect that he might have been looking through a plate glass window into the man's face. Connor studied the picture from a distance of only a few inches and could not resolve it into lines or dots. His magnifier achieved no better results.

He switched the television off and returned to the armchair, filled with a strange and powerful emotion. Although it was in his nature to be sharp and acquisitive—those were attributes without which he could never have entered his chosen profession—it had always remained uppermost in his mind that the world's supply of money was unlimited, whereas his own allocation of years was hopelessly inadequate. He could have trebled his income by working longer and pushing harder but had always chosen another course simply because his desire for possessions had never taken control.

That, however, had been before he discovered the sort of possessions real money could buy. He knew he was particularly susceptible to gadgets and toys, but the knowledge did nothing to lessen the harsh raw hunger he now felt.

There was no way that anybody was going to stop him from joining the ranks of those who could afford future-technology artifacts. He would prefer to do it by marrying Angela, because he loved her and would enjoy sharing the experiences, but if she refused to have him back, he would do it by making the necessary millions himself.

A phrase which had been part of his train of thought isolated itself in his mind. *Future technology*. He weighed the implications for a moment, then shrugged them off—he had lost enough mental equilibrium without entertaining fantasies about time travel.

The idea, though, was an intriguing one. And it answered certain questions. The lighters he coveted, partly for their perfection and partly because they could earn him a fortune, were technically far in advance of anything on the world's markets, yet it was within the realm of possibility that a furtive genius was producing them in a back room somewhere. But that impossibly good television set could not have been manufactured without the R&D facilities of a powerful electronics concern. The notion that they were being made in the future and shipped back in time was only slightly less ridiculous than the idea of a secret industry catering exclusively for the superrich . . .

Connor picked up the cigar and lit it, childishly pleased at having a reason to put the ruby egg to work. His first draw on the cool smoke gave him the feeling that he had been searching for something all his life and suddenly had found it. Cautiously at first and then with intense pleasure he filled his lungs with the unexpected fragrance.

He luxuriated. This was smoking as portrayed by tobacco company commercials—not the shallow, disappointing experience commonly known to smokers everywhere. He had often wondered why the leaf which smelled so beguiling before it was lit, or when someone nearby was smoking, promising sensual delights and heart's ease, never yielded anything more than virtually tasteless smoke.

*They promise you "a long cool smoke to soothe a troubled world,"* Connor thought, *and this is it.* He took the cigar from his mouth and examined the band. It was of unembellished gold and bore a single ornate P.

"I might have known," he announced to the empty room. He looked around through a filigree of smoke, wondering if everything in the room was different from the norm, superior, better than the best. Perhaps the ultra-rich scorned to use *anything* that was available to the man in the street or advertised on television or . . .

"Philip!" Angela stood in the doorway, pale of face, shocked and angry. "What are you doing here?"

"Enjoying the best cigar I've ever had." Connor got to his feet, smiling. "I presume you keep them for the benefit of guests—I mean, a cigar is hardly your style."

"Where's Gilbert?" she snapped. "You're leaving right now."

"Not a chance."

"That's what you think." Angela turned with an angry flail of blonde hair and cerise skirts.

Connor realized he had to find inspiration and get in fast. "It's too late, Angela. I've smoked your cigar; I lit it with your lighter; I have checked the time with your clock; and I've watched your television."

He had been hoping for a noticeable reaction and was not disappointed—Angela burst into tears. "You bastard! You had no *right!*"

She ran to the table, picked up the lighter, and tried to make it work. Nothing happened. She went to the clock, which had stopped; and to the television set, which remained lifeless when she switched it on. Connor followed her circuit of the room, feeling guilty and baffled. Angela dropped into a chair and sat with her face in her hands, huddled and trembling like a sick bird. The sight of her distress produced a painful churning in his chest. He knelt in front of Angela.

"Listen, Angie," he said. "Don't cry like that. I only wanted to see you again—I haven't done anything."

"You touched my stuff and made it change. They told me it would change if anybody but a client used it ... and it has."

"This doesn't make sense. Who said what would change?"

"The suppliers." She looked at him with tear-brimmed eyes, and all at once he became aware of a perfume so exquisite that he wanted to fall toward its source like a suffocating man striving toward air.

"What did you ...? I don't ..."

"They said it would all be spoiled."

Connor tried to fight off the effects of the witch-magic he had breathed. "Nothing has been spoiled, Angie. There's been a power failure ... or something ..." His words trailed away uncertainly. The clock and the television set were cordless. He took a nervous drag on the half-smoked cigar and almost gagged on the flat, acrid taste of it. The sharp sense of loss he experienced while stubbing it out seemed to obliterate all traces of his scepticism.

He returned to Angela's chair and knelt again. "They said this stuff would stop working if anybody but you touched it?"

"Yes."

"But how could that be arranged?"

She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. "How would I know? When Mr. Smith came over from Trenton, he said something about all his goods having an ... essence field, and he said I had a molecular thumbprint. Does that make sense?"

"It almost does," Connor whispered. "A perfect security system. Even if you lost your lighter at the theatre, when somebody else picked it up it would cease to be what it was."

"Or when somebody breaks into your home."

"Believe me, it was only because I had to see you again, Angie. You know that I love you."

"Do you, Philip?"

"Yes, darling." He was thrilled to hear the special softness return to her voice. "Look, you have to let me pay for a new lighter and television and ..."

Angela was shaking her head. "You couldn't do it, Philip."

"Why not?" He took her hand and was further encouraged when she allowed it to remain in his.

She gave him a tremulous smile. "You just couldn't. The installments are too high."

"Installments? For God's sake, Angie, *you* don't buy stuff on time."

"You can't buy these things—you pay for a service. I pay in installments of eight hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars."

"A year?"

"Once every forty-three days. I shouldn't be telling you all this, but ..."

Connor gave an incredulous laugh. "That comes to about six million a year—nobody would pay that much!"

"Some people would. If you even have to think about the cost Mr. Smith doesn't do business with you."

"But ..." Connor incautiously leaned within range of Angela's perfume and it took his mind. "You realize," he said in a weak voice, "that all your new toys come from the future? There's something fantastically wrong about the whole set-up."

"I've missed you, Philip."

"That perfume you're wearing—did it come from Mr. Smith, too?"

"I tried not to miss you, but I did." Angela pressed her face against his, and he felt the coolness of tears on her cheek. He kissed her hungrily as she moved down from the chair to kneel against him. Connor spun towards the center of a whirlpool of ecstasy.

"Life's going to be so good when we're married," he heard himself saying after a time. "Better than we could ever have dreamed. There's so much for us to share and ..."

Angela's body stiffened, and she thrust herself away from him. "You'd better go now, Philip."

"What is it? What did I say?"

"You gave yourself away, that's all."

Connor thought back. "Was it what I said about sharing? I didn't mean your money—I was talking about life ... the years ... the experiences."

"Did you?"

"I loved you before you even knew you would inherit a cent."

"You never mentioned marriage before."

"I thought that was understood," he said desperately. "I thought you ..." He stopped speaking as he saw the look in Angela's eyes. Cool, suspicious, disdainful. The look that the very rich had always given to outsiders who tried to get into their club without the vital qualification of wealth.



She touched a bellpush and continued standing with her back to him until he was shown out of the room.

The ensuing days were bad ones for Connor. He drank a lot, realized that alcohol was no answer, and went on drinking. For a while he tried getting in touch with Angela and once even drove down to Avalon. The brickwork had been repaired at the point where he had made his entry, and a close inspection revealed that the entire wall was now covered with a fine mesh. He had no doubt that tampering with it in any way would trigger off an alarm system.

When he awoke during the night, he was kept awake by hammering questions. What was it all about? Why did Angela have to make such odd payments, and at such odd intervals? What would men from the future want with Twentieth Century currency?

On several occasions the thought occurred that, instead of concentrating on Angela, he would do better to find the mysterious Mr. Smith of Trenton. The flicker of optimism the idea produced was quenched almost immediately by the realization that he simply did not have enough information to provide a lead. It was a certainty that the man was not even known as Smith to anybody but his clients. If only Angela had revealed something more—like Smith's business address . . .

Connor returned each time to brooding and drinking, aware but uncaring that his behavior was becoming completely obsessive. Then he awoke one morning to the discovery that he already knew Smith's business address, had known it for a long time, almost from childhood.

Undecided as to whether his intake of white rum had hastened or delayed the revelation, he breakfasted on strong coffee and was too busy with his thoughts to fret about the black liquid being more tasteless than ever. He formulated a plan of action during the next hour, twice lighting his pipe—out of sheer habit—before remembering he was finished with ordinary tobacco forever. As a first step in the plan, he went out, bought a five-inch cube of ruby-colored plastic, and paid the owner of a jobbing shop an exorbitant sum to have the block machined down to a polished ovoid. It was late in the afternoon before the work was finished, but the end product sufficiently resembled a P-brand table lighter to fool anyone who was not looking too closely at it.

Pleased with his progress thus far, Connor went back to his apartment and dug out the .38 pistol he had bought a few years earlier following an attempted burglary. Common sense told him it was rather late to leave for Trenton and that he would be better waiting until morning, but he was in a warmly reckless mood. With the plastic egg bumping on one hip and the gun on the other, he drove westward out of town.

Connor reached the center of Trenton just as the stores were showing signs of closing for the day. His sudden fear of being too late and of having to wait another day after all was strengthened by the discovery that he was no longer so certain about locating Mr. Smith.

In the freshness of the morning, with an alcoholic incense lingering in his head, it had all seemed simple and straightforward. For much of his life he had been peripherally aware that in almost every big city there are stores which have no right to be in existence. They were always small and discreet, positioned some way off the main shopping thoroughfares, and their signs usually bore legends—like "Johnston Bros." or "H&L"—which seemed designed to convey a minimum of information. If they had a window display at all it tended to be nothing more than an undistinguished and slightly out-of-style sport jacket priced three times above what it had any chance of fetching. Connor knew the stores were not viable propositions in the ordinary way because, not surprisingly, nobody ever went into them. Yet in his mind they were in some indefinable way associated with money.

Setting out for Trenton he had been quite sure of the city block he wanted—now at least three locations

and images of three unremarkable store fronts were merging and blurring in his memory. *That's how they avoid attention*, he thought, refusing to be disheartened, and began cruising the general area he had selected. The rush of home-going traffic hampered every movement, and finally he decided he would do better on foot. He parked in a sidestreet and began hurrying from corner to corner, each time convincing himself he was about to look along a remembered block and see the place he so desperately wanted to find, each time being disappointed. Virtually all the stores were closed by now, the crowds had thinned away, and the reddish evening sunlight made the quiet, dusty facades look unreal. Connor ran out of steam, physical and mental.

He swore dejectedly, shrugged, and started limping back to his car, choosing—as a token act of defiance—a route which took him a block further south than he had originally intended going. His feet were hot and so painful that he was unable to think of anything but his own discomfort. Consequently he did a genuine doubletake when he reached an intersection, glanced sideways and saw a half-familiar, half-forgotten vista of commonplace stores, wholesalers' depots, and anonymous doorways. His heart began a slow pounding as he picked out, midway on the block, a plain storefront whose complete lack of character would have rendered it invisible to eyes other than his own.

He walked towards it, suddenly nervous, until he could read the sign which said GENERAL AGENCIES in tarnished gold lettering. The window contained three pieces of glazed earthenware sewer pipe, beyond which were screens to prevent anyone seeing the store's interior. Connor expected to find the door locked, but it opened at his touch and he was inside without even having had time to prepare himself. He blinked at a tall gaunt man who was standing motionless behind a counter. The man had a down-curving mouth, ice-smooth gray hair, and something about him gave Connor the impression that he had been standing there, unmoving, for hours. He was dressed in funeral director black, with a silver tie, and the collar of his white shirt was perfect as the petals of a newly opened flower.

The man leaned forward slightly and said, "Was there something, sir?"

Connor was taken aback by the quaintness of the greeting, but he strode to the counter, brought the ruby egg from his pocket and banged it down.

"Tell Mr. Smith I'm not satisfied with this thing," he said in an angry voice. "And tell him I demand a repayment."

The tall man's composure seemed to shatter. He picked up the egg, half-turned toward an inner door, then paused and examined the egg more closely.

"Just a minute," he said. "This isn't . . ."

"Isn't what?"

The man looked accusingly at Connor. "I've no idea what this object is, and we haven't got a Mr. Smith."

"Know what *this object* is?" Connor produced his revolver. He had seen and heard enough.

"You wouldn't dare."

"No?" Connor aimed the revolver at the other man's face and, aware that the safety catch was on, gave the trigger an obvious squeeze. The tall man shrank against the wall. Connor muttered furiously, clicked the safety off, and raised the gun again.

"Don't!" The man shook his head. "I beseech you."

Connor had never been beseeched in his life, but he did not allow the curious turn of speech to distract him. He said, "I want to see Mr. Smith."

"I'll take you to him. If you will follow me ..."

They went through to the rear of the premises and down a flight of stairs which had inconveniently high risers and narrow treads. Noting that his guide was descending with ease, Connor glanced down and saw that the tall man had abnormally small feet. There was another peculiarity about his gait, but it was not until they had reached the basement floor and were moving along a corridor that Connor realized what it was. Within the chalk-stripe trousers, the tall man's knees appeared to be a good two-thirds of the way down his legs. Cool fingers of unease touched Connor's brow.

"Here we are, sir." The black-clad figure before him pushed open a door.

Beyond it was a large, brightly lit room, and at one side was another tall, cadaverous man dressed like a funeral director. He too had ice-smooth gray hair, and he was carefully putting an antique oil painting into the dark rectangular opening of a wall safe.

Without turning his head, he said, "What is it, Toynbee?"

Connor slammed the door shut behind himself. "I want to talk to you, Smith."

Smith gave a violent start but continued gently sliding the gold-framed painting into the wall. When it had disappeared, he turned to face Connor. He had a down-curved mouth and—even more disturbingly—his knees, also, seemed to be in the wrong place. *If these people come from the future*, Connor thought, *why are they made differently from us?* His mind shied away from the new thought and plunged into irrelevant speculations about the kind of chairs Smith and Toynbee must use ... if any. He realized he had seen no seats or stools about the place. With a growing coldness in his veins, Connor recalled his earlier impression that Toynbee had been standing behind the counter for hours, without moving.

"... welcome to what money we have," Smith was saying, "but there's nothing else here worth taking."

"I don't think he's a thief." Toynbee went and stood beside him.

"Not a thief! Then what does he want? What is ...?"

"Just for starters," Connor put in, "I want an explanation."

"Of what?"

"Of your entire operation here."

Smith looked mildly exasperated. He gestured at the wooden crates which filled much of the room. "It's a perfectly normal agency set-up handling various industrial products on a ..."

"I mean the operation whereby you supply rich people with cigarette lighters that nobody on this Earth could manufacture."

"Cigarette lighters—"

"The red, egg-shaped ones which have no works but light when they're wet and stand upright without support."

Smith shook his head. "I wish I *could* get into something like that."

"And the television sets which are too good. And the clocks and cigars and all the other things which are so perfect that people who can afford it are willing to pay eight hundred sixty-four thousand dollars every forty-three days for them—even though the goodies are charged with an essence field which fades out and converts them to junk if they fall into the hands of anybody who isn't in the club."

"I don't understand a word of this."

"It's no use, Mr. Smith," Toynbee said. "Somebody has talked."

Smith gave him a venomous stare. "*You* just did, you fool!" In his anger, Smith moved closer to Toynbee, so that his body was no longer shielding the wall safe. Connor noticed for the first time that it was exceptionally large, and it occurred to him that a basement storeroom was an odd place for that particular type of safe. He looked at it more closely. The darkness of the interior revealed no trace of the oil painting he had just seen loaded into it. And, far into the tunnel-like blackness, a bright green star was throwing off expanding rings of light, rings which faded as they grew.

Connor made a new effort to retain his grasp of the situation. He pointed to the safe and said, casually, "I assume that's a two-way transporter."

Smith was visibly shaken. "All right," he said, after a tense silence, "who talked to you?"

"Nobody." Connor felt he could get Angela into trouble of some kind by mentioning her name.

Toynbee cleared his throat. "I'll bet it was that Miss Lomond. I've always said you can't trust the *nouveau riche*—the proper instincts aren't sufficiently ingrained."

Smith nodded agreement. "You are right. She got a replacement table lighter, television and clock—the things this ... person has just mentioned. She said they had been detuned by someone who broke into her house."

"She must have told him everything she knew."

"And broken her contract—make a note of that, Mr. Toynbee."

"Hold on a minute," Connor said loudly, brandishing the revolver to remind them he was in control. "Nobody's going to make a note of anything till I get the answers I want. These products you deal in—do they come from the future or—somewhere?"

"From somewhere," Smith told him. "Actually, they come from a short distance in the future as well, but—as far as you are concerned—the important thing is that they are transported over many light years. The time difference is incidental, and quite difficult to prove."

"They're from another planet?"

"Yes."

"You, too?"

"Of course."

"You bring advanced products to Earth in secret and sell or rent them to rich people?"

"Yes. Only smaller stuff comes here, of course—larger items, like the television sets, come in at main receivers in other cities. The details of the operation may be surprising, but surely the general principles of commerce are well known to you."

"That's exactly what's bothering me," Connor said. "I don't give a damn about other worlds and matter transmitters, but I can't see why you go to all this trouble. Earth currency would be of no value on ... wherever you come from. You're ahead on technology, so there is nothing ..." Connor stopped talking as he remembered what Smith had been feeding into the black rectangle. An old oil painting.

Smith nodded, looking more relaxed. "You are right about your currency being useless on another world. We spend it here. Humanity is primitive in many respects, but the race's artistic genius is quite remarkable. Our organization makes a good trading surplus by exporting paintings and sculptures. You see, the goods we import are comparatively worthless."

"They seem valuable to me."

"They *would seem* that way to you—that's the whole point. We don't bother bringing in the things that Earth can produce reasonably well. Your wines and other drinks aren't too bad, so we don't touch them. But your coffee!" Smith's mouth curved even further downward.

"That means you're spending millions. Somebody should have noticed one outfit buying up so much stuff."

"Not really. We do quite a bit of direct buying at auctions and galleries, but often our clients buy on our behalf and we credit their accounts."

"Oh, no," Connor breathed as the ramifications of what Smith was saying unfolded new vistas in his mind. Was this why millionaires, even the most unlikely types of men, so often became art collectors? Was this the *raison d'être* for that curious phenomenon, the private collection? In a society where the rich derived so much pleasure from showing off their possessions, why did so many art treasures disappear from the public view? Was it because their owners were trading them in against P-brand products? If that was the case, the organization concerned must be huge, and it must have been around for a long time. Connor's legs suddenly felt tired.

He said, "Let's sit down and talk about this."

Smith looked slightly uncomfortable. "We don't sit. Why don't you use one of those crates if you aren't feeling well?"

"There's nothing wrong with me, so don't try anything," Connor said sharply, but he sat on the edge of a box while his brain worked to assimilate shocking new concepts. "What does the P stand for on your products?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Perfect?"

"That is correct."

The readiness with which Smith was now giving information made Connor a little wary, but he pressed on with other questions which had been gnawing at him. "Miss Lomond told me her installments were eight hundred and sixty-four thousand dollars—why that particular figure? Why not a million?"

"That *is* a million—in our money. A rough equivalent, of course."

"I see. And the forty-three days."

"One revolution of our primary moon. It's a natural accounting period."

Connor almost began to wish the flow of information would slow down. "I still don't see the need for all this secrecy. Why not come out in the open, reduce your unit prices and multiply the volume? You could make a hundred times as much."

"We have to work underground for a number of reasons. In all probability the various Earth governments would object to the loss of art treasures, and there are certain difficulties at the other end."

"Such as?"

"There's a law against influencing events on worlds which are at a sensitive stage of their development. This limits our supply of trade goods very sharply."

"In other words, you are crooks on your own world and crooks on this one."

"I don't agree. What harm do we do on Earth?"

"You've already named it—you are depriving the people of this planet of ..."

"Of their artistic heritage?" Smith gave a thin sneer. "How many people do you know who would give up a Perfect television set to keep a da Vinci cartoon in a public art gallery five or ten thousand miles away?"

"You've got a point there," Connor admitted. "What have you got up your sleeve, Smith?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't play innocent. You would not have talked so freely unless you were certain I wouldn't get out of here with the information. What are you planning to do about me?"

Smith glanced at Toynbee and sighed. "I keep forgetting how parochial the natives of a single-planet culture can be. You have been told that we are from another world, and yet to you we are just slightly unusual Earth people. I don't suppose it has occurred to you that other races could have a stronger instinct toward honesty, that deviousness and lies would come less easily to them than to humans?"

"That's where we are most vulnerable," Toynbee put in. "I see now that I was too inexperienced to be up front."

"All right, then—be honest with me," Connor said. "You are planning to keep me quiet, aren't you?"

"As a matter of fact, we do have a little device ..."

"You don't need it," Connor said. He thought back carefully over all he had been told, then stood up and handed his revolver to Smith.

The good life was all that he had expected it to be, and—as he drove south to Avalon—Connor could feel it getting better by the minute.

His business sense had always been sharp, but whereas he had once reckoned a month's profits in thousands, he now thought in terms of six figures. Introductions, opportunities, and deals came thick and fast, and always it was the P-brand artifacts which magically paved the way. During important first contacts he had only to use his gold lighter to ignite a pipeful of P-brand tobacco—the incredible leaf which fulfilled all the promise of its "nose," or glance at his P-brand watch, or write with the pen which produced any color at the touch of a spectrum ring, and all doors were opened wide. The various beautiful trinkets were individually styled, but he quickly learned to recognize them when they were

displayed by others, and to make the appropriate responses.

Within a few weeks, although he was scarcely aware of it, his outlook on life had undergone a profound change. At first he was merely uneasy or suspicious when approached by people who failed to show the talisman. Then he became hostile, preferring to associate only with those who could prove they were safe.

Satisfying though his new life was, Connor had decided it would not be perfect until Angela and he were reunited. It was through her that he had achieved awareness, and only through her would he achieve completeness. He would have made the journey to Avalon much sooner but for the fact that there had been certain initial difficulties with Smith and Toynbee. Handing over the revolver had been a dangerous gambit which had almost resulted in his being bundled through their matter transmitter to an unknown fate on another world. Luckily, however, it had also convinced them that he had something important to say.

He had talked quickly and well that evening in the basement of the undistinguished little store. Smith, who was the senior of the pair, had been hard to convince; but his interest had quickened as Connor enumerated all the weaknesses in the organization's procurement methods. And it had grown feverish when he heard how Connor's worldly knowhow would eliminate much of the wasteful financial competition of auctions, would streamline the system of purchasing through rich clients, would institute foolproof controls and effective new techniques for diverting art treasures into the organization's hands. It had been the best improvisation of his life, sketchy in places because of his unfamiliarity with the art world, but filled with an inspired professionalism which carried his audience along with it.

Early results had been so good that Smith had become possessive, voicing objections to Connor's profitable side dealings. Connor smoothed things over by going on to a seven-day work schedule in which he also worked most evenings. This had made it difficult to find the time to visit Angela, but finally his need to see her had become so great that he had pushed everything else aside and made the time ...

The guard at the gate lodge was the same man as before, but he gave no sign of remembering his earlier brush with Connor. He waved the car on through with a minimum of delay, and a few minutes later Connor was walking up the broad front steps of the house. The place looked much less awesome to Connor, but while ringing for admission he decided that he and Angela would probably keep it, for sentimental reasons as much as anything else. The butler who answered the door was a new man, who looked rather like a retired seaman, and there was a certain lack of smoothness in his manner as he showed Connor to the large room where Angela was waiting. She was standing at the fireplace with her back to the door, just as he had last seen her.

"Angie," he said, "it's good to see you again."

She turned and ran to him. "I've missed you so much, Phil."

As they clung together in the center of the green-and-silver room, Connor experienced a moment of exquisite happiness. He buried his face in her hair and began whispering the things he had been unable to say for what seemed a long, long time. Angela answered him feverishly all the while he spoke, responding to the emotion rather than the words.

It was during the first kiss that he became aware of a disturbing fact. She was wearing expensive yet ordinary perfume—not one of the P-brand distillations of magic to which he had become accustomed on the golden creatures he had dated casually during the past few weeks. Still holding Angela close to him, he glanced around the big room. A leaden coldness began to spread through his body. Everything in the room was, like her perfume, excellent—but not Perfect.

"Angela," he said quietly, "why did you ask me to come here?"

"What kind of a question is that, darling?"

"It's a perfectly normal question." Connor disengaged from her and stepped back suspiciously. "I merely asked what your motives were."

"*Motives!*" Angela stared at him, color fleeing from her cheeks. Then her gaze darted to his wristwatch. "My God, Philip, you're *in!* You made it, just like you said you would."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't try that with me—remember, I was the one who told it all to you."

"You should have learned not to talk by this time."

"I know I should, but I didn't." Angela advanced on him. "I'm out now. I'm on the outside."

"It isn't all that bad, is it? Where's Bobby Janke and the rest of his crowd?"

"None of them come near me now. And you know why."

"At least you're not broke." Small solace.

She shook her head. "I've got plenty of money, but what good is it when I can't buy the things I want? I'm shut out, and it's all because I couldn't keep myself from blabbing to you, and because I didn't report the way you were getting on to them. But you didn't mind informing on me, did you?"

Connor opened his mouth to protest his innocence, then realized it would make no difference. "It's been nice seeing you again, Angela," he said. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but things are stacking up on me back at the office. You know how it is."

"I know exactly how it is. Go on, Philip—get out of here."

Connor crossed to the door, but hesitated as Angela made a faint sound.

She said, "Stay with me, Phil. Please stay."

He stood with his back to her, experiencing a pain which slowly faded. Then he walked out.

.....

Late that afternoon, Connor was sitting in his new office when his secretary put through a call. It was Smith, anxious to discuss the acquisition of a collection of antique silver.

"I called you earlier, but your girl told me you were out," he said with a hint of reproach.

"It's true," Connor assured him. "I was out of town—Angela Lomond asked me down to her place."

"Oh?"

"You didn't tell me she was no longer a client."



"You should have known without being told." Smith was silent for a few seconds. "Is she going to try making trouble?"

"No."

"What did she want?"

Connor leaned back in his chair and gazed out through the window, toward the Atlantic. "Who knows? I didn't stay long enough to find out."

"Very wise," Smith said complacently.

When the call had ended, Connor brewed some P-brand coffee, using the supply he kept locked in the drinks cabinet. The Perfection of it soothed from his mind the last lingering traces of remorse.

*How on Earth*, he wondered idly, *do they manage to make it taste exactly the way it smells?*

The End

### Author Biography and Bibliography

Bob Shaw was born in Northern Ireland in 1931; by the end of the decade he'd fallen in love with sf as, he said, an escape from the dullness of suburban Belfast.

In 1950 he discovered fandom and fanzines, and was soon famous in these inner circles—the Wheels of IF or Irish Fandom—as "BoSh." As every fanzine fan knows, he and Walt Willis wrote *The Enchanted Duplicator* (1954), which is the *Pilgrim's Progress* of fandom; its Profan, the kindly pro author who also remains a fan, was modelled on Eric Frank Russell but might just as well have been Bob himself at any time after about 1970.

His own 1950s fanzine column (a staple of *Hyphen* from its first issue) was called "The Glass Bushel" because, belying his genuine modesty, Bob claimed this was the only kind of bushel he was prepared to hide his light under. These are still good funny columns, all the funnier because they're not afraid to be serious ... it was Bob who advised aspiring fanwriters that if they wished to raise a laugh they should write in merciless detail about the most horrible, ghastly experience of their lives, whereupon fandom would fall about in appreciative hysterics.

Also in the 50s, Bob made some early fiction sales to sf magazines—and maturely decided that these early pieces weren't good enough, that he needed more real-life experience. Off he went to work in Canada and see the world. So the true beginning of Bob's professional career was the strong 1965 story "... And Isles Where Good Men Lie" in *New Worlds*, followed next year by "Light of Other Days" in *Analog*—rather astonishingly shortlisted for both Hugo and Nebula despite being only the third published story by the new Bob Shaw. 1967 saw his first novel *Night Walk*, a fast-moving sf thriller powered by a personal phobia which plenty of us share: the fear of losing one's sight and ability to read. The hero is blinded and discovers an eerie way to see through others' eyes by electronically reading the activity of their optic nerves ....

I conducted a fanzine interview with Bob in the mid-1970s, and questioned him rather ineptly about the special emotional charge attaching to eyes and vision in his work. It wasn't just that he once suffered a sight-threatening eye disease (which occasionally flared up again; he would appear in some hotel bar wearing dark glasses and observe, puzzling fans until the penny dropped, "I take a dim view of this convention."). The nasty incident in his novel *Ground Zero Man* alias *The Peace Machine*, where a chap's eye is taken out by a steel reinforcing bar and he cradles it pathetically in his hand, actually happened to a boyhood friend and stuck painfully in Bob's imagination all his life. The migraine-induced visual disturbances which I'd found so fascinating in *The Two-Timers* were part of routine existence for Bob, who went through this subjective light-show (hemisrania sine dolore) about twice a year. I've never

been so grateful to Bob Shaw and to sf in general as when in the late 1980s I started getting it myself, and was saved from abject panic by realizing this was the harmless phenomenon about which he'd been writing.

Further fine books followed, and the *SF Encyclopaedia* will give you all the facts; the inventor of "slow glass" and author of (to pick some more favourites) *The Palace of Eternity*, *Vertigo* and *A Wreath of Stars* would be a notable sf figure even if he'd been a recluse living in a cave. But Bob still moved happily between sf's professional and fan circles, in a way that denied the canard that they are really different circles or that one somehow outranks the other.

I unknowingly saw the birth of a legend at my own first Eastercon, Tynecon in 1974, where Bob was guest of honour and spoke hilariously on "The Need for Bad Science Fiction." This led to his famed "Serious Scientific Talks" at convention after convention. Newcomers would be bewildered as the bars emptied and the entire membership crowded to hear a presentation called, say, "The Bermondsey Triangle Mystery," replete with demented science, excruciating puns, and gags kept mercilessly running until they coughed up blood. All this was delivered in that mournful Irish voice ... which somehow conveyed mild surprise that these peculiar listeners should be laughing so hard that it hurt. The speeches have since been published in various editions, but you have to imagine the voice; indeed, if you've ever been to Bob's performances, it's impossible to "hear" the words on the page other than in his voice.

With slightly poisoned irony, it was these transcribed talks and other fanzine writing that brought Bob the acclaim deserved for his fiction: the 1979 and 1980 Hugo awards, but for Best Fan Writer rather than Best Novel. (*Orbitsville*, however, had deservedly won the 1976 British SF Association Award.)

Privately he sometimes wearied of the famous speeches, which conventions tended to take for granted, and for which of course he asked no payment. There were times, he said wryly, when he dreaded registering for a con because by return of post the committee would send their draft programme with "Bob Shaw's Serious Scientific Talk" in a prime slot. Fandom can be thoughtlessly cruel to those it loves; we loved Bob a little too much. Some of the "serious scientific" humour also surfaced in less frenetic form in his funny 1977 sf novel *Who Goes Here?*, which remains pleasantly rereadable.

After a period of professional quiet in the early 1980s, Bob made a popular come-back with his biggest sf project: the trilogy of *The Ragged Astronauts* (1986; British SF Award winner; Hugo shortlist), *The Wooden Spaceships* (1988) and *The Fugitive Worlds* (1989), set in a universe of audaciously daft physics where pi has an unfamiliar value, twin planets can share an atmosphere, interplanetary balloon flight is feasible, and the gravitational constant is "whatever it needs to be to make my solar system work." Things looked good as the 1990s began. There seemed every reason to expect sf gatherings to be gladdened for the foreseeable future by Bob's familiar bearded, heavy-eyed face: "Cartoons of me look like Ming the Merciless," he would complain without rancour.

But then came the run of evil luck. Bob's wife of many years, Sarah ("Sadie"—herself a legendary figure of Irish Fandom), died with shocking unexpectedness in 1991. For a while Bob tried, as he put it, to drink the world dry. In late 1993 he suffered a grim cancer operation which left him unwell for a solid year. "At one stage of the surgery," he told me cheerfully, "they must have been able, literally, to look right through me and out the other side." There were gleams of better cheer: Bob was on good conversational form at the 1995 Eastercon and declared himself to be writing again at last (he'd delivered part of a second sequel to *Who Goes Here* in 1994, but had abandoned it owing to poor health). True to his own maxim about extracting humour from bad experiences, he published a funny article about smuggling dope in the colostomy bag which he had once anticipated with particular dread. His "serious scientific talk" at Intersection downplayed the traditional puns in favour of a moving appreciation of his 50-year association with sf and fandom; even before the dismal clarity of hindsight, many of the listeners felt that Bob was saying goodbye.

December saw his second marriage, to Nancy Tucker in the USA; but illness persisted. After returning to England this February, enjoying dinner with his son's family and Nancy, and paying a last visit to the Red Lion pub, Bob died peacefully in his sleep that night. The funeral took place on 19 February 1996.

Adapted from David Langford's *Ansible* website.

## **Author Biography and Bibliography**

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#### **Land and Overland**

*The Ragged Astronauts* (1986)  
*The Wooden Spaceships* (1987)  
*The Fugitive Worlds* (1989)

#### **Orbitsville**

*Orbitsville* (1975)

*Orbitsville Departure* (1983)  
*Orbitsville Judgement* (1990)

### **Warren Peace**

*Warren Peace* (1993)

### **Novels**

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*Night Walk* (1967)

*The Two-timers* (1968)

*Shadow of Heaven* (1969)

*One Million Tomorrows* (1970)

*The Palace of Eternity* (1970)

*Ground Zero Man* (1971)

*Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972)

*A Wreath of Stars* (1976)

*Medusa's Children* (1977)

*Vertigo* (1978)

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"...And Isles where Good Men Lie" (1965)

"And Isles Where Good Men Lie" (1965)

"Call Me Dumbo" (1966)

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"Telemart Three" (1970)

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"Repeat Performance" (1971)

"The Weapons of Isher II" (1971)

"What Time Do You Call This?" (1971)

"The Brink" (1972)

"Deflation 2001" (1972)

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"Retroactive" (1972)

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"Dark Icarus" (1974)

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"A Little Night Flying" (1974)

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"Unfaithful Recording" (1975)

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"Skirmish on a Summer Morning" (1976)

"Waltz of the Bodysnatchers" (1976)

"Crossing the Line" (1977)

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"Amphitheater" (1978)

"Small World" (1978)

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"Well-Wisher" (1979)

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"In the Hereafter Hilton" (1980)

"The Kingdom of O'Ryan" (1980)

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