

THE CRADLE OF CATHOLICITY IN GEORGIA

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Far away from the sight and sound of men, in the shadowy stillness of a southern forest lies a little country graveyard. Rough rock walls enclose the consecrated acre seamed with innumerable hillocks half hidden by russet leaves from the hoary oaks and by the creeping myrtle and ivy filling each nook and crevice. A tall cross fashioned of rude timbers, stands sentinel just within the heavy gates, while without the walls, a few yards away, a clear stream, sparkling and dimpling over shining white rocks, ever murmuring a gentle requiem for the quiet sleepers. Their silence is seldom broken by any other sound, as many years have passed since the last grave opened to receive an occupant, and, probably, never again will the sods be turned to give a man his six feet of earth. The tottering, discolored gravestones bear names loved and honored throughout the land; and the silent slumberers beneath them earned well their peaceful rest. For here lie men and women who, to preserve their birthright of the Faith, abandoned their native land and sought homes among strangers in a strange land; and here those sturdy pioneers, 100 years ago, felled the trees, hewed the logs, and reared the first Catholic Church ever built on Georgia soil. Here close beside their last resting-place,

separated only by the rippling stream, is the sacred spot, hallowed as the birth-place of Catholicity in the Empire State of the South.

The builders chose for their little log structure (the Cradle of faith) a site as beautiful as nature could afford in a lavish of her charms, a spot where she could supply the grandeur and magnificence they desired, but could not give, to their humble little temple.

In an opening of the forest, a deep strong spring empties its cool waters over great flat rocks into a tiny stream which broadens and circles prettily around an elevated grassy slope separating it from the forest paths. Upon this slope, within this sanctuary of nature's forming, they placed their little church, as if their thought was to make it the tabernacle in Nature's Temple. Its lowly roof and rude walls were to shelter the King of Kings, and if within there were no rare tapestries, no fluted columns nor groined arches, without a velvety carpet of rich green stretched from its threshold to the water's edge; huge oaks and stalwart pines upheld a canopied roof of intermingled branches and the arching limbs cast soft shadows athwart the "dim religious light" of the leaf strewn aisles. Golden-hearted Cherokee roses climbed with the dainty sweet-briar, the wild pink honey-suckle, and white-robed dog-wood, and peeped through the dark foliage of oak and pine like the changing tints of cathedral windows. Fragrant forest flowers incensed the air and wooed the honey bees from distant hives to lend their soft humming accompaniment to the joyous choir of feathered songsters and the sweet solemn music of the wind among the pines.

On every side the fair locusts were in flower, heavy with their milky, sweet-scented blossoms, and the new-comers named this favored spot "Locust Grove." The dear old name, the name by which the great Bishop England knew it, will go down with it into history, notwithstanding that the monarchs of the age, steel and steam, now call it by another name.

It is Right Rev. Dr. England who first tells us about the settlement. After speaking of the consecration of Right Rev. John Carroll in 1790 as Bishop of Baltimore, which diocese then comprehended the whole United States of America, he says:

"About this period a few Catholics from Maryland removed to the State of Georgia, to the vicinity of where the Church of Locust Grove was subsequently built. Previous to their removal, they applied to the bishop for a clergyman to accompany them, but were unable to obtain this blessing; yet was the spot on which they settled destined to be that from which the Catholic Church in that state should date its origin."

"At the time of the Revolution," he says on another occasion, "Maryland was no longer a Catholic settlement. The descendants of Lord Baltimore had abandoned their religion, and very few of the Catholic families had preserved their faith, or their property from confiscation."

Such was the situation of what began as the Catholic Colony in the state. As many as could of those who remained faithful to their religion emigrated to other states, thereby spreading the faith which their enemies were seeking to crush.

One-hundred years have passed since the band of Maryland Colonists, fleeing from persecution and robbery, found peaceful homes on Georgia soil and freedom to worship God as their hearts desired. Settling as they did, in the interior of the state, 62 miles north of Augusta and more than double that distance from Savannah, now the Cathedral City of the diocese, it seems

somewhat remarkable that here should have been the spot chosen by God to cradle the infant church, which has attained so strong and vigorous a growth throughout the state. These Maryland Catholics, forced to quit their native state, were mostly families of wealth and culture. They were, more-over, large slave-holders, and doubtless came into the interior to avoid the fever which devastated many sections, and also to purchase extensive tracts of land in the fertile counties of Wilkes and Warren. Among the colonists was a branch of the "Stonestreets of Maryland," to which belonged Father Stonestreet S. J. of Georgetown.

There were also the Lucketts, Scotts, Hargraves, Thompsons, Brooks and many others yet remembered and revered.

They were prosperous and well content in their new homes. The lands gave abundant yield, and the owners found ample protection in the liberal constitution of their adopted state; for though when Georgia was a British Colony the spirit of the British Code of persecution domineered in full vigor over the land, after the Revolution, Georgia was one of the first states to establish religious freedom and continued to be most strenuous in its defense.

Their many neighbors, mostly Virginians, with many French Huguenots and English Presbyterians, received them in friendly spirit and showed no bigotry or hostility.

There came, however, for a long time, no improvement in their spiritual needs. While they were free to worship, there was no priest to offer the sacrament. Mention is made of a Rev. M. O'Reilly, who visited the state in 1794 and remained a short while there; then, in 1797, a Rev. M. LeMercier; but it was not until 1800 or thereabout, that they had a priest to remain any length of time. This was a Rev. Mr. Souze of Sujet, who came with some exiled French families from San Domingo.

The French Revolution, which drove from their shores some of the best of the French clergy who could escape the guillotine and the pike, furnished laborers for the church in the northern part of the United State; but it was only when the effects were felt in the French colony of San Domingo that the Southern States profited by it. When the revolted Negroes caused the colonists to fly to the United States, many of them settled in Charleston, Savannah, and Augusta, and some found their way, with one of their priests to the little Maryland colony. With the authority of Bishop Carroll he began to discharge the duties of his ministry. Then was the little log church built and the cemetery enclosed nearby. It was at a much later period that a small frame church was erected in Savannah, and later still (1810) the church in Augusta. These places being nearer to Charleston and more accessible than the Maryland Colony, fared better, in after times, for spiritual attention; and finally when the Rev. Souze quitted the state, Locust Grove was again left desolate and was visited only at long interval by a priest who attended Augusta.

Notwithstanding this long privation of the ministration of religion, very few fell away from the church, and, more remarkable, fewer still contracted mixed marriages.

After 40 years from the time of their advent in Georgia, Right Rev. Dr. England, at a convention of the church held in Augusta, spoke these words in praise to their fidelity: "About 40 years ago, a small body of the remnant that was in Maryland still faithful to the altars of their fathers and their God, and having, with the illustrious Carroll, hazarded their lives and fortunes and

sustained their sacred honor in the struggle for independence, removed into that part of Georgia where their children are now found. There in the woods, they practiced as well as they could a church, without a priest, without an altar, the duties of their religion. There was our first church in this state subsequently erected, where they also had occasionally the offices of religion; but there, also, for years they beheld the gates of their temple closed, but still cherished in their bosom the hope that one day it would be reopened.

"Upward of 14 years have elapsed since I first stood among them, with a heart filled with emotions of admiration for their fidelity and of deep interest of their welfare. I found only one priest in the State of Georgia. He then ministered at this Altar (Augusta). Upon his departure for another state, Savannah having been deserted, I was asked to provide a ministry. I was charged with more than the care of Georgia. On every side children cried to me for bread, and I had no one to assist me in breaking it to them."

On the arrival of Bishop England in 1821, immediately after his consecration, he found only two priests doing duty, one at Charleston and one in Augusta. He visited Locust Grove and remained several days. The zealous Bishop encouraged the congregation to repair their church and promised them a pastor. The original colony had been greatly increased by a number of Irish families; and in 1821, shortly after the Bishop's visit, the log church was torn down and replaced by a neat frame building, erected within the walls of the burial ground, and not on the site of the first church. It was dedicated to the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Bishop sent them a pastor the next year, as is shown by an old book now in possession of Rev. A. J. Semmes (since dead) Sharon, Ga., in which it is recorded in Bishop England's own business like hand-writing over his official signature the appointment of Rev. Francis O'Donoghue to the charge of the counties of Wilkes and Warren, and a brief account of the church, also written by the Bishop. Below we give the extract copied from this old book, the first registry of Locust Grove Church:

"The counties of Warren and Wilkes, were by me placed under the special charge of Rev. Francis O'Donoghue, on the first day of December, 1822."

"John, Bishop of Charleston."

In the year of 1790, Right Rev. Doctor Carroll was appointed and consecrated first Bishop of Baltimore, with jurisdiction over the United States of America, in which Union the State of Georgia was represented.

In the year 1794, Rev. Mr. O'Reilly visited the state and remained for a short time in the vicinity of Warren, Wilkes and Columbia. In the year 1797, Rev. Le Mercier visited the same place. Rev. Mr. Souze arrived about the end of the year 1800 or the beginning of 1801. A log church was then built and a cemetery laid out and enclosed. In about 17 months' time, he departed from the state.

In the year 1818, Baltimore was raised to an archdiocese of which Georgia still continued a part. The duties of Warren and Wilkes, etc., were performed by the priests of Augusta.

In the year 1820, the Diocese of Charleston was created, and Right Rev. Dr. John England was appointed and consecrated first Bishop there. Georgia was part of this diocese. In the latter part of January, 1821, the Bishop first visited Warren and Wilkes, etc. In that year, the old church was taken down and a frame building erected. Rev. Francis O'Donoghue continued until the end of 1823.

On the 8th of December, 1823, Rev. Patrick O'Sullivan was appointed to take charge.

We find from this registry that Bishop England visited Locust Grove 13 times from 1821 to 1839, which shows the marvelous zeal and activity of the holy Bishop, and that he was indeed interested in this little colony, when we consider the great difficulty of travel in those ante-railroad days and the extensive territory he had to overlook, the two Carolinas, Georgia and Florida.

These visits of the Bishop were occasions of great rejoicing and were looked forward to with eagerness and pleasure.

Each family desired the honor of entertaining the beloved Bishop and so important an event it was considered that a record was duly kept, along with the church affairs, of where the Bishop dined, and of the guests present at the dining, after this fashion:

"Rt. Rev. Dr. John England arrived on Thursday, 10th. He was met at "Double Wells" (Barnett) by the vestrymen, Sylvester Luckett, Bradford Thompson, Ignatius Semmes, and Hugh Ward. Mrs. Cratin's carriage was sent to convey the Bishop. The Rt. Rev. Bishop dined at the hospitality board of Dr. Ignatius Semmes, in company with the following guests, etc. In the afternoon Mrs. Cratin's carriage came to convey the Bishop to her home, where he partook of her hospitality. Many guests were present to meet the distinguished prelate."

Far and wide, into all the neighboring counties, the word went abroad when the Catholic Bishop was to preach and so large were the crowds of all denominations who came to see and to hear the eloquent divine, the little church could not hold the half of them. The Bishop, therefore, spoke from the church door. A brush arbor was built outside, logs rolled under, planks laid across for seats; and in this primitive style, in the open air, the varied audience listened for two or three hours, unwearied and even regretful when the golden-tongued orator brought his discourse to a close.

The length of the sermon and the unflagging interest of the hearers, which were duly recorded in the old book, in comparison with these days when people scarce sit patiently through a five minute sermon, evoked the silent comment;

"They must certainly have been hungry for the Word of God." His children were, indeed, hungry for bread after their long spiritual starvation; and their Bishop, true Father, wearied not in breaking it to them. He labored incessantly among them, preaching, teaching, baptizing, confirming, marrying and remarrying, or witnessing marriages which had been previously contracted before a magistrate, when no priest could be had.

The pages of the old registry contain many curious records. There are whole pages devoted to the baptisms and marriages of slaves, showing that these Catholic masters were not neglectful of the spiritual welfare of these poor souls. The number of Easter and Christmas communions includes black as well as whites. The names of the vestrymen and church wardens are recorded. Therein also are found the autographs of four bishops besides that of the illustrious Dr. England; namely Rt. Rev. William Clancy, Coadjutor Bishop, who made two visitations in 1836 and 1837 in the absence of Dr. England; Rt. Rev. Ignatius A. Reynolds, who made his first visitation in 1844 as successor of Bishop England and second Bishop of Charleston; Rev. John Barry and Rev. Andrew Byrne, afterwards Bishops, the former being

the second Bishop of Georgia, after the division of the diocese, and the latter the first Bishop of Little Rock, Arkansas. Both of these priests were ordained by Bishop England. Rev. A. Byrne was the first student in the Bishop's College in Charleston.

It is interesting to note the many French names in the old registry here in the heart of Georgia. Victorine and Emilia Menard, James Rossignold Belliance, Paul Rossignol, James DePerry, Frances Ville Printeare, Paul Delancy; also names of the slaves owned by these French families, Jean Baptist, Melicitas, Marie Claire, Marie Sainte, Juliette, Marie Anne, alongside the George Washingtons, Solomons, Nancys and Marthas, slaves of the English speaking settlers.

The registrations from the several counties visited by the mission priests show that many French families were also scattered through the state.

The first convention of the Catholic church in Georgia was held in Augusta, April 2nd, 1826. There were only three churches in the State; Holy Trinity (St. Patrick) Augusta, Ga., St. John the Baptist, Savannah, and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Locust Grove. In the convention each church was represented by two lay delegates. One of the delegates from the church of Locust Grove was made President. The first action of these lay delegates was the choice of a patron saint for the State, as it appears in the minutes:

The house of Lay delegates, by ballot, selected St. Peter, the Apostle as patron saint of the State of Georgia.

Robert Dellow, President.

Francis Shiels, Secretary.

Admitted by the Clergy:

Rev. Edward Swiney, President.

Rev. Godfrey Sheehan, Secretary.

The Rt. Rev. Bishop was present at the convention and with him two priests from Charleston and three from Georgia. Rev. Patrick O'Sullivan was at that time pastor of Locust Grove. He remained until 1829, when Rev. M. C. O'Reilly was placed in charge and devoted himself exclusively to that church for eight years. Revs. Andrew Byrne, Gregory Duggan, and John Barry, ordained by Bishop England, were on the missions and frequently at Locust Grove.

In 1837, Rev. Peter Whelan began his ministrations here and occupied the little log parsonage for 18 years. He was called the "farmer priest," and he did not disdain to follow the plow and handle the spade himself. His farming operations, which he always made successful, did not, however, interfere with the laborious duties of his ministry, and it is said of him that during his priesthood he never, by his fault, lost a patient unprepared, omitted an office, or missed a Mass.

It is this remarkable man and devoted priest to whose memory Dr. O'Connell pays a beautiful tribute in the "History of Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia." Father Peter Whelan was called to Savannah in 1855 and afterwards made vicar-general of the diocese under Bishop Barry. His removal from Locust Grove was a loss and sorrow from which the congregation never wholly recovered.

Under the care of such faithful clergy — "Bishop England's priests" as they were affectionately and proudly designated — the colony and congregation grew and flourished. The fame of the beautiful old mission

spread to distant parts; and no priest or prelate visiting the state failed to spend a day or more at Locust Grove. The grand apostle of temperance, Father Theobald Mathew, found his way to the Maryland colony, and William Smith O'Brien, the Irish patriot exile. Excellent schools were in operation, well attended by all denominations, although established by the Catholics.

It was at Locust Grove Academy that many of Georgia's most prominent men received their early training, among them Alexander H. Stephens; his brother, Linton Stephens; and Herschel V. Johnson.

Many of the sons and daughters of the Marylanders were sent to Georgetown, Columbia, and Charleston, and the culture and the refinement of the first settlers descended to their children's children.

The comfortable circumstances of the planters, their simple, fervent faith, the genuine and generous hospitality given and partaken in true Christian spirit made this spot a Georgian Arcadia.

But there came invaders to this inland "Grand Pre" -- marvelous tales of the wonderful fertility and fabulous yields of the lands in the Mississippi Valley. A fever of immigration, like unto the gold fever which peopled California, disturbed the peaceful serenity of Locust Grove. The spirit of unrest took possession of the younger generation, and soon many of the wealthiest families sold their lands and moved to Mississippi, leaving only those who had not the wherewith to go "farther and fare worse," or so it proved for the emigrants to the river valley. Hardly were they settled in their homes when yellow fever swept many of the youngest and most vigorous; and, in a few years, the final blow came when the Civil War freed the slaves, rendered their lands worthless without labor to cultivate them, and left their homes desolate.

Locust Grove, being out of the range of Yellow Jack, firebrand and shell, suffered little or nothing from those causes; but events were taking place which in time wrought sad changes in the weakened colony. Their first keen sorrow was the death of their beloved bishop, the peerless Dr. England, whose interest in the Locust Grove congregation had never lessened.

The stricken diocese was widowed for two years before a successor was named. The choice finally fell on Rt. Rev. Ignatious Aloysius Reynolds. Bishop Reynold soon craved a division of the diocese; and in 1850, the See of Savannah was elected, embracing Georgia and Florida.

Very Rev. F. X. Garland, V. C., of Philadelphia, was created the first Bishop of Savannah. Bishop Garland entered his work with such earnest, tireless zeal the people hailed him a second Dr. England. His visits to Locust Grove are to this day spoken of with enthusiasm and his picture cherished and venerated. In the yellow fever epidemic of 1854, he fell a victim to this pestilence and gave his life for his sheep.

The See, again bereft, was without a chief shepherd until 1857, when Rev. John Barry was consecrated second Bishop of Savannah. Falling health made him an exile; and in 1859, he died in Paris.

The third Bishop of Savannah, Rt. Rev. Augustine Verot, D. D., governed the diocese for three years. His administration embraced the dark period of the Civil War, and the years immediately following, when the country was impoverished and the people disheartened and unsettled. He bore every fatigue and inconvenience to visit all parts of his diocese; and even in these troublesome times was often with the distant Locust Grove community. He

invited the Redemptorist Fathers to give missions in the diocese and Locust Grove was one of the chief missions.

In 1807, Rt. Rev. Bishop Verot was transferred to St. Augustine, Florida, when it was made an independent See; and Rt. Rev. Ignatius Perseco succeeded him to the See of Savannah. Bishop Perseco visited Locust Grove twice before his short administration closed.

In view of these frequent changes among the chief shepherds of the fold, the ravages of war and pestilence, we can understand and appreciate the trials of the faithful flock left at Locust Grove.

The broad lands and splendid homes left by the emigrants to Mississippi were bought by rich Protestant planters, who would not sell an acre, and so shut out the Irish Catholics from settling near the church. In 1852, the railroad was built and all new comers gravitated toward that, leaving the church three or four miles away. Distance made little difference to Irish piety; and for these good people we can reverse the old proverb and make it read, "The farther from the church, the nearer to God," but their hearts were torn and their spirits broken when their beloved Father Whelan was taken away. Rev. Edward Zeigley, who was placed in charge, remained only a year or two; and after that Locust Grove had no resident pastor, but was visited occasionally from Augusta. The parsonage was rented to a Protestant family and the dear old church was in the midst of aliens.

Visited by a priest but once in two or three months, it seemed only natural that the great fervor should grow cold; but on the contrary, the fidelity of the people was edifying. For years young and old would come, fasting, distances of eight, ten and fifteen miles to receive Holy Communion at the ten o'clock Mass on Sunday.

But all odds were against them; many families moved away and Protestants came in. The children had only "old Field Schools" and little chance to learn their religion. Year by year the situation grew worse. The visiting priests and each mission priest knew that Catholic schools and teachers to aid in the work were necessary, for education and religion must go hand in hand.

God did not mean to abandon this chosen spot nor to allow the flickering flame to be extinguished, where it had first been kindled and had burned as brightly. In his own way He sent His servants to revive the dying embers and gather together the scattered brands.

When, in 1869, the Redemptorist Father, at the solicitation of Bishop Verot, visited Locust Grove, one of these missionaries was Rev. Father William H. Gross (now Archbishop of Oregon). Little did he think that his next visit to Locust Grove would be as its bishop (for a few years later he succeeded Bishop Perseco as See of Savannah), or that he would be the means, directly and indirectly, of perpetuating the work begun by the great Dr. England in this historic spot. No doubt, however, the interest awakened in the place and people by his sojourn among them as a missionary, the great faith and fever he saw in their hearts caused him to consider their welfare when he became Bishop. The first priest ordained by Bishop Gross, shortly after his consecration, was Rev. J. M. O'Brien, (now pastor in Augusta, Ga.) in whom the Bishop saw promise of a zealous worker, a true shepherd of souls.

Father O'Brien was, therefore, sent on the mission, which included Locust Grove and embraced a dozen or more places besides. The young priest set to

work with the zeal and earnestness which to this day characterizes all his undertakings, but Locust Grove naturally claimed a special attention on account of the great disadvantages under which the faithful and long-suffering people were laboring. Many a time he would "double" on Sundays, i. e., say Mass in Washington, Wilkes County, then ride 18 miles in a rickety conveyance to say another Mass to Locust Grove, that they might have that blessing oftener than before.

He determined that the "church in the wilderness" should be brought nearer to the people; and in a few months he had it torn down, transported three miles, and re-erected it in the midst of the Catholic settlement now called Sharon. (1877).

His next move was to solicit the aid of the Sisters of St. Joseph, whom Rt. Rev. Bishop Cross had lately transferred from Savannah to Washington, Ga. These noble women responded promptly (1878). Without hesitation they spared three from their small community, who bravely began work in a poor little house destitute of every comfort and convenience. They gathered the children around them and labored uncomplainingly until, in time, a better home was provided for them. They came "without scrip or purse," but in union with the zealous pastor, made rapid progress. When the need of a suitable school building became evident, Father O'Brien challenged the congregation, now so much encouraged, for a new church, which was soon built. The old one was then fitted up for a school. The Sisters enlarged their house and opened a boarding school for small boys. A pretty group of buildings one sees today within spacious grounds, with a back-ground of oak and pine forest, convent, school, and parsonage, and across the way "God's Acre."

Rt. Rev. Thos. A. Becket, present Bishop of Savannah has given great encouragement and impetus to the work by his interest in the school and frequent visitations. Bishop Becket also grants them the blessing of a resident pastor; and in God's wise providence this holy priest is Rev. A. J. Semmes, a near relative of the pioneer Semmes family who came to Locust Grove 100 years ago and brought the faith from Maryland to Georgia. After many years it is like unto the days of yore, only a hundred fold more blessed. For now they not only have a beloved bishop full of zeal for the progress of education and religion, a holy priest devoted and untiring in his labors, but they also have the patient, self-forgetting religious sisters to assist the generous pastor in breaking the "Bread of Life," to his children. There daily, they teach the truths that Bishop England gave his life to spread, within the very walls which so often resounded with the eloquence of the learned prelate, and illustrate them by their own lives, by the edifying example which is stronger than precept.

How often hard-working priests hesitate to ask the aid of religious women in their labors, for fear these might become an added burden rather than help; but how nobly they work, how unselfishly they lend themselves to the advancement of religion and the good of souls is amply proven in this instance, only in a thousand such. Wherever they are, there is a blessing with them and the town or city giving them a home is incalculably richer for their presence, not only in spiritual riches but even in temporal, and the pastor with such help-mates will have an abundant harvest for the master. No one knew and appreciated this better than Rt. Rev. Dr. England, who always eager for the assistance and co-operation of religious women, obtained it

whenever possible, and in his writings pays them a tribute of praise and gratitude, for their great work in the cause.

Of old Locust Grove nothing remains save the peaceful burial grounds and all the tender memories unfaded and undying. No one has been buried therein since the removal of the church, so the Maryland pioneers and their co-workers for the faith sleep undisturbed beside the spot they loved and cherished, where bravely and hopefully they cradled the infant church, watched over it, clung to it and lay down for their last sleep beside it to await the Resurrection morn when God will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, You have fought the good fight, you have kept the faith. There is laid up for you a crown of justice. Enter into the joy of the Lord."

The occasional visitor, some one from afar, perhaps with a loved one resting there -- for in many states there are hearts tenderly bound to Old Locust Grove -- treads softly on this sacred ground, far from the bustle and turmoil of the world; reads reverently the honored names on the time-blackened stones, pausing involuntarily beside a simple shaft to the memory of a young priest, Father Jerry L'Neil; breathes a "De Profundis" at the foot of the great mission cross; then on the mossy bank of the circling stream rests in the cool shade, near the ever-flowing spring, to dream of the days when the noble Bishop England stood beneath those very trees and awakened the echoes with the masterful voice whose tones had rung in thrilling oratory in Cathedral, Church, and Senate Hall, in the presence of prelates, Lords and Statesmen, but never with more fervid eloquence, more grand sublimity than here in the heart of a Georgia forest, in the church of the Maryland colonists -- the church of Locust Grove.

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