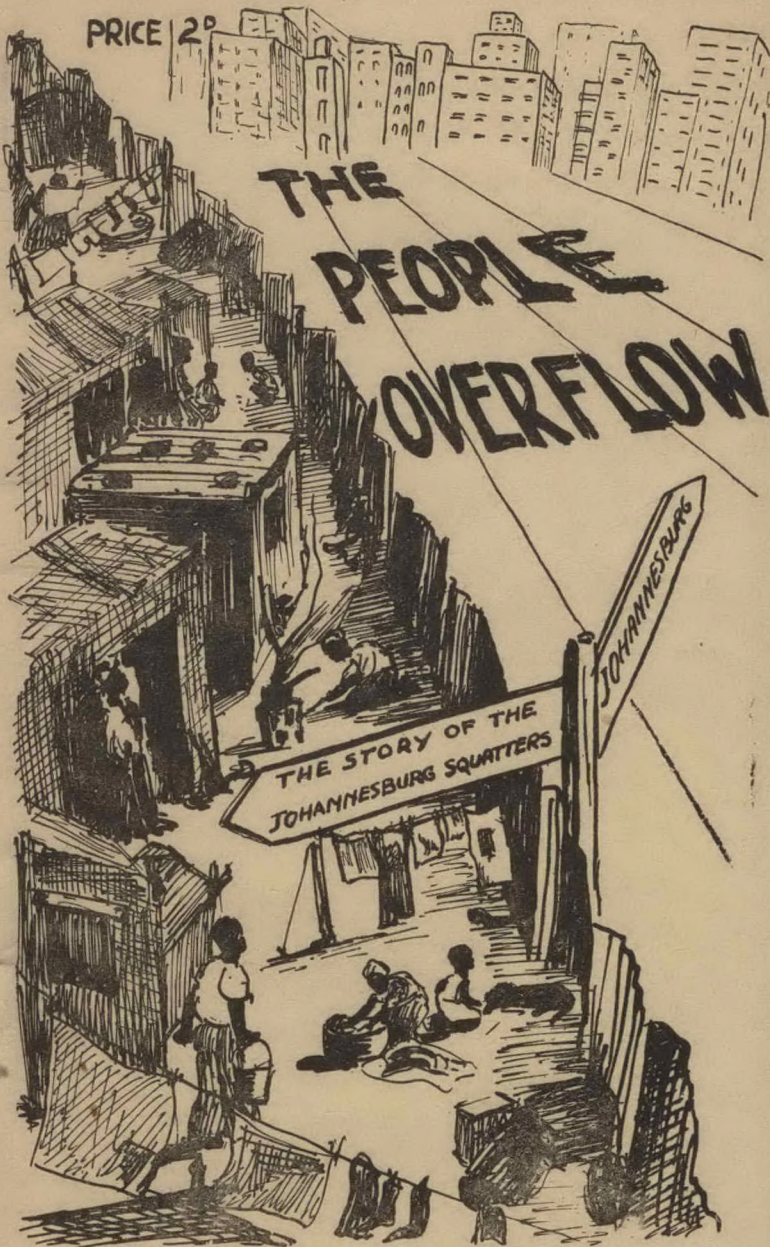


PRICE 2<sup>d</sup>

# THE PEOPLE OVERFLOW

THE STORY OF THE  
JOHANNESBURG SQUATTERS

JOHANNESBURG



# THE STORY OF JOHANNESBURG'S SHANTY TOWNS

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By

At the beginning of January 1947 over 70,000 Africans, men, women and children — one in six of the African population of Johannesburg — had taken part in the huge squatting movement. On the outskirts of "the Golden City" — "the richest city in the world" — huddled together in tiny shacks, made of poles and sacking, strips of hessian, cardboard boxes, or Council breeze-blocks, dwell 70,000 souls — as many as the total population of all races, of Bloemfontein.

Daily, early in the mornings, the menfolk go out to work to swell the riches of the Golden City's bosses. While it is yet dark they plod across the rocky veld, sometimes miles, to the nearest bus or train. In these pitiful collections of shanties, pitched on bare ground people live, eat their scanty meals, sing, make love, give birth to children. There they die.

Rain pours through the roof and walls. Stormwater washes in muddy floods across the floors, carrying refuse and ashes with it. Wind whistles through a million crevices, leaving coats of fine mine dust on everyone and everything. Fires, made in rusty paraffin tins, send their smoke through the narrow passages between the shanties, and sparks fly in the wind. Everyone coughs — babies in arms, ragged children, men and women.

These are the Shanty Towns.

A stray spark here, and a wild and uncontrollable fire may sweep through the thousands of flimsy shanties, trapping the people in the flames. A stray germ here, and an epidemic of meningitis, smallpox or plague, can storm through the squatters' camps, decimating its inhabitants and the people of Johannesburg as well.

For the squatters may live and die in the Shanty Towns; and wealthy Johannesburg, comfortable in Parktown, Houghton or Westcliffe homes may not care. But the shanty town folk work in the city's homes and factories, cooking meals, tending children, washing clothes, making and bringing bread, driving lorries, minding machines, delivering milk. What happens to the people of the shanty towns, happens to the people of Johannesburg, black and white, rich and poor.



The shanty town is Johannesburg's No. 1 problem. It is more than a problem of the comfort, warmth, happiness and health of the squatters themselves.

It is the problem of the health and the future, the life and death of the half million people gathered in South Africa's largest city — indeed of South Africa itself.

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Way back, thirty seven years ago, at the time of Union, the Randlords, the great gold mining magnates, had a headache. They needed more cheap labour for their mines: more cheap labour. They could, of course, attract more men to work the mines by offering a living wage and decent working conditions. But higher wages meant less profits, and they were greedy men, greedy to get rich quick from the mighty treasure trove nature had hidden beneath the koppies and the rocky surface of the Rand. They had tried importing Chinese coolies, indentured as semi-slaves, from the other side of the globe. But it did not work. They turned greedy eyes towards the millions of black people in the Union.

But the Africans were not willing to come and work on the mines. It is a gruelling, dangerous job. It meant leaving their homes and families in the countryside. It meant living in hellish and cramped quarters, breathing in the fine poisonous dust that rots the lungs and makes men die. And the wages were bad, not worth while. They preferred to remain on the land where, though dispossessed by the white man who now owned it, they could eke out an existence as sharecroppers, giving part of their crops as rent to the white man who allowed them to grow their mealies and graze their beasts on the fields where they and their fathers and their grandfathers had lived.

Life was hard. But a man could call his life his own; he was nobody's servant.

Mighty and all powerful, however, were the bosses of the gold mines. Their word was law in the new Union of South Africa, established by Act of the British Parliament in 1910. They hungered for the labour of the black men on the farms. They spoke to their men, Smuts and Botha.

So, in the year 1913, the Native Land Act was passed.

It said that no Native could rent, own or hire land

outside of the tiny reserves. Protests and objections from African leaders who said they were being enslaved as hewers of wood and drawers of water for evermore, were ignored. In the cruel winter of 1913, after the law was passed, hundreds of thousands of African families, old, old men and tiny babies were turned off their ancestral homes, set pitifully roaming the roads of the Transvaal and the Free State seeking, with their cattle, a place where they could live. Hard-working and honest farmers, driven from their farms. A nation set adrift. This was the first Ghetto Act against the Africans.

Their independence gone, to feed their families and to pay their taxes they had to hire themselves out to work for others. Some stayed on the farms as servants and as exploited labourers, where once they had been tenants. Others flocked in their thousands to the offices of the Native Recruiting Corporation to sign on for the mines. The Randlords had their way.

Many thousands, driven by hunger, and drawn by the hope of jobs in rapidly expanding industries, came to the cities. They came to Johannesburg.

And on their backs the broad paved streets, the towering skyscrapers, the thriving industries, the luxurious homes of Johannesburg were built.

### **CONTROL THE NATIVE!**

The coming of thousands of Africans to the cities with their families, meant new problems to the rulers of white South Africa. The man of the town, living with his family, working regularly in a factory, develops the new standards, new horizons, new aspirations.

"Civilisation" means the culture of people living in cities. It means, today, that a man needs a decent home to come to from the grinding discipline of the factory. To be well-clothed. To be well-fed. To have schools for his children. To have his health looked after. To have some pleasantness in his leisure. To have a voice in the running of his city and his country. But "civilisation" in South Africa has come to mean keeping the black man in a state of barbarism. If he got the things that go to make up true civilisation, it would become expensive. His labour would no longer be so cheap. And so, his civilised aspirations must be thwarted, and he must be prevented by all means from organising and combining to secure the things which working men in all countries have longed for and strug-



gle to attain. He must not be allowed effectively to organise a trade union to get him better wages and safeguard his interests. Pass laws must be made to hamper his freedom of movement and prevent him selling his labour power freely in the best market. He must not be allowed a freehold plot of land where he can build a home of his own. He must live in a fenced location, tenant of the City Council for which he may not vote, subjected to the constant raids, interference and intimidation of the police. We must "keep the native in his place." We must "control the native!". These became the slogans and the mottoes of White South Africa.

Parliament passed a string of laws, fencing, "controlling" Africans in urban areas. Africans may not enter urban areas without a pass. Immediately on entry they must go to the Pass Office, obtain a permit to seek work. There are curfew laws, "special passes" to be carried at night. Council-appointed "Superintendents" are set as warders over the gaols they call locations.

In a few densely overcrowded slum areas, left over from a preceding era — Sophiatown, Martindale, Alexandra Township — Africans remained in rather precarious tenure of homes some of them could call their own; even then subject to constant threats of uprooting by the Johannesburg City Council, obsessed by the ideas of "control," and "segregation." But outside these places, the African was dependent entirely upon the City Council for his home. He has no alternative but to become the tenant of the Council in one of the ghettos they call municipal locations which are set up far from the City, so that the man who earns least must pay most in transport to and from work. That is the effect of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act.

But the Act has another side to it. It places on the municipal authority the obligation of housing the African workers who are employed within the city.

One part of this act has been rigidly enforced in Johannesburg. Africans have been ruthlessly removed, in countless police raids, from one residential area after another; from Vrededorp, Malay Camp, Doornfontein City and Suburban.

But on the other hand the Johannesburg City Council, with an annual budget of over ten million pounds, has continually, shabbily, criminally neglected to fulfil its side of the obligation. The City Council is elected

by Europeans only. Practically every City Council for the past fifty years has been dominated by vested interests, whose chief objective was to keep the rates low. Not only for Africans, but even for Europeans, this City Council has a shockingly poor record so far as housing and other civic amenities are concerned. Even when the Labour Party won a majority on the Council, its housing efforts were for European workers, not for Africans.

That this is nothing new in the city's history is well borne out by the painful and sordid story of Pimville.

## THE STORY OF PIMVILLE

Once upon a time, there was an epidemic of plague at Vrededorp, amongst the Africans who were living there.

As a "temporary measure," the City Council of the time moved the African population of the area lock, stock and barrel to a sewage farm twelve miles out on the Western side of the city. There, for the time being they were housed in corrugated iron tanks which had been cut in half.

That was in the year 1904. Today the farm to which these people were moved, is the municipal location of Pimville. People are still living in the iron half-cylinders where the Council put them forty-three years ago. Children, born in these tanks, have grown up, married, begot their own children, still in the tanks.

Pimville has been condemned as a slum area, time after time. Yet it remains: a monument to the callous indifference of the City Council.

Thus it went on. The same old story year after year. From the Council, promises, talk of grandiose housing schemes. But never any real determined action to fulfil the rapidly growing housing needs of the population.

These housing needs never stood still. Johannesburg is the wonder city of Africa. During its brief sixty years of existence its growth has been terrific, phenomenal. It is commonplace talk how this lusty young giant has in a brief sixty years developed from a rude mining camp to a bustling, modern city of half a million inhabitants. Industries are born, flourish and expand. It has never stopped growing. And, making these industries possible, more and more workers are needed: more and more Africans are drawn and driven here.



By 1936 already the housing position among Africans was desperate. Sophiatown, Alexandra and the other few areas where Africans might seek accommodation for themselves, were full to overflowing. Every backyard had outdwelling containing two, three or four families. People lived and paid excessive rents for sleeping in somebody's else's living room, kitchen, stoep. Even lavatories were transformed into dwelling rooms where people were charged as much as £2 rent a month.

On the waiting lists for the houses which the Council was supposed, on paper, to be building in Orlando there were thousands and thousands of names.

That was in 1936.

Since 1936, there has been a war. Once again Johannesburg boomed. More and more factories and new industries. More and more workers on the Rand. But no houses from the Council.

Between 1936 and 1946, according to Census figures, the African population of this city had increased by over 100,000.

During the same period the Council had built less than 4,000 houses for Africans.

## THE PEOPLE OVERFLOWED

Recently Mr. Schreiner Bhaduzza, leader of the Alexandra Squatters' Camp, and Chairman of the Joint Shanty Towns Co-ordinating Committee, addressed a public meeting, explaining how the shanty towns came to exist. He told the meeting of the laws which hedge Africans around, make them compulsory tenants of the Council. He spoke of the low wages which together with exorbitant rents form two claws of a pincers which throttle the African working man seeking a home for his family. He spoke of the growing pressure on the scanty accommodation which Johannesburg affords its dark-skinned workers. He told how the shanty town movement had, almost spontaneously, grown to huge dimensions.

Then he summed it all up in an unforgettable phrase. "The people overflowed," he said.

That indeed, is what happened. The African areas had become like a bath into which water flows. The flow of workers into the city went on and on, as the expanding needs of industry and trade provided jobs for more and more. The sea of discontent at housing

conditions mounted higher and higher in the face of the inactivity and unwillingness of the City Council to tackle the problem energetically and realistically. At last the bath overflowed.

Even in municipal locations, such as Orlando, the Council had waived its rule preventing sub-tenants in Council houses. Two, sometimes three families occupied houses built for one. And families, too, have a habit of growing.

Faced with unbearable living conditions, paying excessive rents as sub-tenants for intolerably cramped quarters, the African people at last found their patience exhausted. They could no longer wait for the Council to fulfil promises of housing which never materialised, which did not seem as if they ever would materialise. The people took their future into their own hands. At last they sought their own way, the peoples' way out of an impossible situation not of their making and not their fault.

The African people spilled out of their slum quarters into the veld, into the shanty towns, driven by the over-riding need to find a space to live.

## THE FIRST SHANTY TOWN

In 1944 a man named Mpanza — James Sofasonke Mpanza — a member of the Orlando Advisory Board, hit on what he thought was a novel way of putting pressure on the City Council to get a move on with housing. For years the Orlando Advisory Board had humbly petitioned, respectfully asked, and stridently demanded more houses. To no avail.

In April, 1944, Mr. Mpanza called upon a number of Orlando sub-tenants to leave their cramped quarters and put up shanties in an open space in the location. The City Council was taken completely at a loss. They told the squatters to go back but they would not move. Threats, they found would not work. Stung into some sort of action, and after much delay, the Council put up several thousand "breeze-block shelters" into which they moved the squatters. These are made of blocks of coke ash and cement, laid without mortar in the joints; without doors or windows, their iron roofs held down by rocks.

Airless, hot in summer, admitting the damp when it rains, when the walls become a soggy mess, bitterly cold in winter, these shelters are standing today. Over



25,000 live in them, probably worse off than others in the shanty towns themselves. If it is left to the City Council they will remain as long as the Pimville half-tanks.

There were no more shanty towns in 1944. But Africans everywhere heard about what had happened. It set them thinking hard and deep, and not only in Johannesburg.

In 1945, at Albertsville, near Germiston, a new shanty town was started of people working in Germiston. This time the Government stepped in. With the help of the Defence Department, Piet van der Byl's Department of Native Affairs swooped in force down on the Germiston shanty town. They razed it to the ground. The people living there, men, women and children, were transported in a body sixty miles way, to Hammanskraal, near Pretoria. There they were dumped and left to fend for themselves. And there they are to-day.

At the beginning of 1946, again in Orlando another group of sub-tenants came out to squat. They were chased from one end of the location to the other. Encamped around the communal hall at Orlando, they were chased out of its grounds and squatted across the road under the blue-gum trees.

Had these people been Europeans their plight would have excited pity and sympathy. The Council and all manner of other bodies would have stepped in with relief. But these people, respectable working men with their families, had black skins. The Council called them "lawbreakers." It threatened them with deportation. Labour Councillor Colin Legum, Chairman of the General Purposes Committee of the Council, warned them not to erect any sacking shelters where they lay exposed beneath the trees. He surrounded the camp with municipal police to see that this edict was not infringed.

Then one night, it started raining. Beneath the trees the men began to put their miserable sacks over branches, to keep the rain off their babies and their womenfolk. The municipal police, acting on instructions, moved in. They tore down one sacking shelter, then another.

But there is a point beyond which the temper of the most long-suffering and sorely oppressed people may not be tried. The squatters resisted the police,

and fighting broke out. A policeman was killed and several squatters wounded. Then the police broke and ran to the Orlando Communal Hall where they locked themselves in until morning. The squatters erected their shelters, and after that, none tried to pull them down again.

At length, the Council provided land and sanitary services the other side of Orlando for this group of squatters, where they moved their shacks. The Council put a fence round it, and a Superintendent in charge, and called it "Jabavu Township."

But that was not the end of the squatters' movement.

In September 1946, the Pimville Sub-tenants' Association, led by Mr. O. Monongoaha, set up a shanty town at Pimville. This time the Council went to Court. They got a Court order stating that these sub-tenants were illegally occupying the Council land. The Council enforced this order by getting the Sheriff to evict the Pimville squatters. The Sheriff's men removed the shanties and piled them up on a lorry, where subsequently they caught fire and were destroyed. These squatters then picked up their belongings and trekked a mile away to Orlando West where they set up another camp. Evicting them had proved rather expensive and the camp remained. To-day it is still there, swollen to many times its original size. Adjoining it is another huge camp started by Pimville ex-servicemen under the auspices of the local branch of the Springbok Legion.

It is remarkable how rapidly these camps grow. The Council claims that they are started by agitators. But every camp has started with a few hundred people only. Thousands of families seeking space to live flock there as soon as word is spread that the camp has been started. No agitator but necessity drives people to these camps.

Some miles away on a privately-owned farm called Albertynsville, there is yet another camp, 1,000 strong, whose chairman, Mr. Edward Kumalo, claims his people were sold the land.

In December, 1946, a few hundred sub-tenants at Alexandra Township decided to squat on an adjoining farm. They were members of the Alexandra Sub-Tenants' Association who for years had been paying



exorbitant rent for hopelessly inadequate living space. Under pressure from the police they moved from the farm and made a long trek to Orlando West where on open ground they pitched their shacks.

As workers in the city of Johannesburg, these people were as much entitled to the consideration and help of the Johannesburg City Council as any other group of squatters. But the City Council thought otherwise. One morning at dawn, these squatters found themselves surrounded by members of the South African Police, the municipal Police and the Union Defence Force. There and then they were packed into military trucks and taken back to Alexandra Township, dumped on two of the three open squares in what the Alexandra Health Committee has described as "the most densely populated area in Africa." They called this operation "disgracefully irresponsible." Mr. Bhaduzza, the squatters' leader, said it was "Hitler-like." Sir George Albu, leading United Party City Councillor and mining magnate, said it was "a great success." Today the Alexandra camp swollen to 30,000 inhabitants, overflows the squares into the streets of the township.

### **THE SQUATTERS UNITE**

When the squatters' movement started, it could not be described as a conscious political movement. The people wanted somewhere to live. They were brave and determined. Their solidarity and unity have been remarkable since the first camp was formed.

Truly remarkable is the ingenuity and talent displayed by these Africans in erecting their shelters. These are the people whom our European trade unionists say are not suitable to be taught skilled work in the building trade. Yet, untrained in building—machinists, labourers, workers in a hundred different industries — with no materials beyond what they could manage to lay their hands on — poles and sacks and earth and cardboard — working hurriedly in their spare time, their rude homes show extraordinary talent and craftsmanship.

Inside the camps there are no Superintendents, no municipal police. In spite of — perhaps because of — this, order is maintained. Camp "police" appointed by the camp committees, are there to protect peoples' property and prevent disorder, not to raid for beer and passes. Little shops in the camps sell what small supplies of foodstuffs they can obtain; small handicraftsmen, shoemakers, tailors, ply their trades.

This, perhaps, more than anything else, annoys people like Mr. Venables, Non-European Affairs Manager of the City Council. He has no Superintendent there! The Africans are running their own affairs! No municipal beer hall No fence, with guards at the gate! No control!

And the squatters are becoming more and more conscious of what they want and need. They are demanding land. Land with security of tenure where they can build their own homes. And they are uniting to get it.

In January, 1947, leaders of the most important shanty towns from Alexandra Township, from Orlando West, from Albertynsville, met together in Johannesburg. After a serious and level-headed discussion, they decided to form the Johannesburg Joint Shanty Towns' Co-ordinating Committee.

It has adopted as its slogan: "Give us land to build our Homes."

As it has grown in size, so the squatters' movement has matured in wisdom and political consciousness. The demand for land is the most profound national aspiration of the dispossessed African people. The squatters' movement finds a sympathetic echo amongst all the nine million non-European people of our land. It deserves their support as well as that of every progressive and democratic European who had enough sense to understand that repression and suppression of the majority is leading our country towards a gloomy future of immortal hatreds and mounting reaction.

In a resolution passed early in January 1947, the Johannesburg District Committee of the Communist Party declared that the shanty town movement constitutes an "important contribution towards the struggle for the national liberation of the African people."

Expressing its wholehearted support for the squatters' demand for land where they could build their own homes, the Committee demanded that the national and local authorities should accept responsibility for the position of the squatters.

It demanded that these authorities subsidise and assist the Africans in erecting their own homes; that civic, educational and other amenities, transport and health services be provided.



## THE AUTHORITIES REACT

Ever since the beginning of the Squatters' movement the authorities, particularly the Johannesburg City Council, have utterly failed to understand that the movement arose as the profound protest of a voiceless people against intolerable conditions.

So far from this understanding, so far from an appreciation that the Shanty Towns were merely a reflection of its own neglect and failure, and a corresponding sympathy and assistance for the unfortunate squatters, the City Council seems to have had but one idea in its mind: How to suppress the movement.

They have used police and force. They have repeatedly pressed the Government to take more stringent measures against these poor people and their leaders. They urged the Government, successfully, to deport Mr. Mpanza under the Nazi-like Native Administration Act, and he was only saved by a technical appeal to the Supreme Court.

The growing political consciousness of the movement, and its increasing extent, have had the effect of making both Council and Government decide upon far reaching measures.

Something is to be done, at last.

However, what is to be done reveals merely an intensification of the same repressive and vindictive attitude with which the thousands homeless workers and their families have been faced all along.

No attempt was made to consult the squatters themselves or their leaders as to what might be done to meet the problem.

Meeting secretly in Cape Town, representatives of the City Council together with Native Affairs Minister Van der Byl and other Cabinet representatives, the authorities have evolved a gruesome plan to "deal with" the Shanty Towns.

The City Council is to set aside a plot of land at Klipspruit and Klipriviersoog to which the squatters are to be moved from all the Shanty Towns. There they will be given tiny plots 20 x 20 feet where they will be

allowed to re-erect their shanties. They will be charged 15/- a month rent (a two-roomed brick house in Orlando costs 17/6 a month rent). The Council's new giant Shanty Town will be fenced like a Zoo and hedged around with the most undemocratic, irksome and humiliating restrictions. Those who do not pay the fantastic rent of 15/- within a month will be liable to imprisonment. No permanent dwellings may be built.

For callousness and inhumanity, in the face of the great human problem which they themselves have created, it would be difficult to surpass the well-fed, well-housed, comfortable gentlemen of the Johannesburg City Council and the Union Government.

## THE GREATER PROBLEM

The squatters' problem has become a mighty one.

But it is only a reflection of the greater problem facing South Africa. Land and homes, food and better wages; these are but a part of the basic struggle facing the people of South Africa today.

South Africa has become one of the major battle grounds in the world-wide battle for democracy. For, as long as basic human rights are denied the great majority of our people, the African, Coloured and Indian sections of the population, so long will our country be the prey of ruthless and selfish big business interests, seeking to squeeze every drop out of the land and the people. So long will we face more and more manifestations of homelessness and poverty, such as the shanty towns, more disease, more racialism and a mounting tide of Fascism.

Yesterday the battlefields of democracy were in Europe, on the Western and Eastern fronts of Hitler's Reich. Today, they have moved. UNO has shown that one of the most important of democracy's battlefields of today is right here at home.

Which side are you on?

If you believe in all that the war against Nazism was fought for, you must carry forward the war today by joining the side that fights for democracy in South Africa; by giving all aid to the squatters in their demand for land and homes; by joining the Party that fights in the front ranks of the struggle for a free and united South Africa: the Communist Party.











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