

# VARIOUS

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# Various

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### THE HAPPY JACKS

'On Saturday, then, at two—humble hours, humble fare; but plenty, and good of its kind; with a talk over old fellows and old times.'

Such was the pith of an invitation to dinner, to accept which I started on a pleasant summer Saturday on the top of a Kentish-town omnibus. My host was Happy Jack. Everybody called him 'Happy Jack:' he called himself 'Happy Jack.' He believed he was an intensely 'Happy' Jack. Yet his friends shook their heads, and the grandest shook theirs the longest, as they added the ominous addendum of 'Poor Devil' to 'Happy Jack.'

'Seen that unhappy wretch, Happy Jack, lately?'

'Seen him! of course, yesterday: he came to borrow a half-sovereign, as two of his children had the measles. He was in the highest spirits, for the pawnbroker lent him more on his watch than he had expected, and so Jack considered the extra shilling or two pure gain. I don't know how the wretch lives, but he seems happier than ever.'

On another occasion, the dialogue would be quite different.

'Who do you think I saw last night in the first tier at the Opera?—who but Happy Jack, and Mrs Happy Jack, and the two eldest Happy Jack girls! Jack himself resplendent in diamond studs, and tremendously laced shirt-front; and as for the women—actually queens of Sheba. A really respectable carriage, too, at the door; for I followed them out in amazement: and off they went like so many lords and ladies. Oh, the sun has been shining somehow on the Happy Jacks!'

In due time I stood before the Terrace honoured by the residence of the Happy Jacks—one of those white, stuccoed rows of houses, with bright green doors and bright brass-plates thereon, which suburban builders so greatly affect. As I entered the square patch of front-garden, I perceived straw lying about, as though there had been recent packing; and looking at the drawing-room window, I missed the muslin curtain and the canary's brass cage swathed all over in gauze. The door opened before I knocked, and Happy Jack was the opener. He was clad in an old shooting-coat and slippers, had a long clay-pipe in his mouth, and was in a state of intense general *déshabille*. Looking beyond him, I saw that the house was in *déshabille* as well as the master. There were stairs certainly, but where was the stair-carpet? Happy Jack, however, was clearly as happy as usual. He had a round, red face; and, I will add, a red nose. But the usual sprightly smile stirred the red round face, the usual big guffaw came leaping from the largely opening mouth, the usual gleam of mingled sharpness and *bonhomie* shone from the large blue eyes. Happy Jack closed the door, and, taking my arm, walked me backwards and forwards on the gravel.

'My boy,' he said, 'we've had a little domestic affair inside; but you being, like myself, a man of the world, we were not of course going to give up our dinner for that. The fact is,' said Jack, attempting to assume a heroic and sentimental tone and attitude, 'that, for the present at least, my household gods are shattered!'

'You mean that'—

'As I said, my household gods are shattered, even in the shrine!'

It was obvious that the twang of this fine phrase gave Jack uncommon pleasure. He repeated it again and again under his breath, flourishing his pipe, so as, allegorically and metaphorically, to set forth the extent of his desolation.

'In other words,' I went on, 'there has been an—an execution'—

'And the brokers have not left a stick. But what of that? These, are accidents which will occur in the best'—

'And Mrs'—

'Oh! She, you know, is apt to be a little downhearted at times; and empty rooms somehow act on her idiosyncrasy. A good woman, but weak. So she's gone for the present to her sisters; and as for the girls, why, Emily is with her mother, and Jane is at the Joneses. Very decent people the Joneses. I put Jones up to a thing which would have made his fortune the week before last; but he wouldn't have it. Jones is slow, and—well— And Clara is with the Hopkinses: I believe so, at least; and Maria is— Confound me if I know where Maria is; but I suppose she's somewhere. Her mother managed it all: I didn't interfere. And so now, as you know the best and the worst, let's come to dinner.'

An empty house is a dismal thing—almost as dismal as a dead body. The echo, as you walk, is dismal; the blank, stripped walls, shewing the places where the pictures and the mirrors have been, are dismal; the bits of straw and the odds and ends of cord are dismal; the coldness, the stillness, the blankness, are dismal. It is no longer a habitation, but a shell.

In the dining-room stood a small deal-table, covered with a scanty cloth, like an enlarged towel; and a baked joint, with the potatoes under it, smoked before us. The foaming pewter-can stood beside it, with a couple of plates, and knives and steel forks. Two Windsor chairs, of evident public-house mould, completed the festive preparations and the furniture of the room. The whole thing looked very dreary; and as I gazed, I felt my appetite fade under the sense of desolation. Not so Happy Jack. 'Come, sit down, sit down. I don't admire baked meat as a rule, but you know, as somebody says—

"When spits and jacks are gone and spent,  
Then ovens are most excellent,"  
And also most con-ven-i-ent.

The people at the Chequers managed it all. Excellent people they are. I owe them some money, which I shall have great pleasure in paying as soon as possible. No man can pay it sooner.'

The dinner, however, went off with the greatest success. Happy Jack was happier than ever, and consequently irresistible. Every two or three minutes he lugged in something about his household gods and the desolation of his hearth, evidently enjoying the sentiment highly. Then he talked of his plans of taking a new and more expensive house, in a fashionable locality, and furnishing it on a far handsomer scale than the old one. In fact, he seemed rather obliged to the brokers than otherwise for taking the quondam furniture off his hands. It was quite behind the present taste—much of it positively ugly. He had been ashamed to see his wife sitting in that atrocious old easy-chair, but he hoped that he had taken a step which would change all for the better. Warming with his dinner and the liquor, Happy Jack got more and more eloquent and sentimental. He declaimed upon the virtues of Mrs J., and the beauties of the girls. He proposed all their healths *seriatim*. He regretted the little incident which had prevented their appearance at the festive board; but though absent in person, he was sure that they were present in spirit; and with this impression, he would beg permission to favour them with a song—a song of the social affections—a song of hearth and home—a song which had cheered, and warmed, and softened many a kindly and honest heart: and with this Happy Jack sang—and exceedingly well too, but with a sort of dreadfully ludicrous sentiment—the highly appropriate ditty of *My Ain Fireside*.

Happy Jack was of no particular profession: he was a bit of a *littérateur*, a bit of a journalist, a bit of a man of business, a bit of an agent, a bit of a projector, a bit of a City man, and a bit of a West-end man. His business, he said, was of a general nature. He was usually to be heard of in connection with apocryphal companies and misty speculations. He was always great as an agitator. As soon as a League was formed, Happy Jack flew to its head-quarters as a vulture to a battle-

field. Was it a league for the promotion of vegetarianism?—or a league for the lowering of the price of meat?—a league for reforming the national costume?—or a league for repealing the laws still existing upon the Statute-book against witches?—Happy Jack was ever in the thickest of the fray, lecturing, expounding, arguing, getting up extempore meetings of the frequenters of public-houses, of which he sent reports to the morning papers, announcing the 'numerous, highly respectable, and influential' nature of the assembly, and modestly hinting, that Mr Happy Jack, 'who was received with enthusiastic applause, moved, in a long and argumentative address, a series of resolutions pledging the meeting to,' &c. Jack, in fact, fully believed that he had done rather more for free-trade than Cobden. Not, he said, that he was jealous of the Manchester champion; circumstances had made the latter better known—that he admitted; still he could not but know—and knowing, feel—in his own heart of hearts, his own merits, and his own exertions.

The railway mania was, as may be judged, a grand time for Happy Jack. The number of lines of which he was a provisional director, the number of schemes which came out—and often at good premiums too—under his auspices; the number of railway journals which he founded, and the number of academies which he established for the instruction of youthful engineers—are they not written in the annals of the period? Jack himself started as an engineer without any previous educational ceremony whatever. His manner of laying out a 'direct line' was happy and expeditious. He took a map and a ruler, and drew upon the one, by the help of the other, a straight stroke in red ink—which looked professional—from terminus to terminus. Afterwards, he stated distinctly in writing, so that there could be no mistake about the matter, that there were no engineering difficulties—that the landed proprietors along the line were quite enthusiastic in their promotion of the scheme—and that the probable profits, as deduced from carefully drawn-up traffic-tables, would be about 35 per cent. At this time, Happy Jack was quite a minor Hudson. He lived in an atmosphere of shares, scrip, and prospectuses. Money poured in from every quarter. A scrap of paper with an application for shares was worth the bright tissue of the Bank—and Jack lost no time in changing the one for the other. Amid the mass of railway newspapers, he started *The Railway Sleeper Awakened*, *The Railway Whistle*, *The Railway Turntable*, and *The Railway Timetable*; and it was in the first number of the last famous organ—it lived for three weeks—in which appeared a letter signed 'A Constant Reader.' After the bursting of the bubble, Happy Jack appeared to have burst too; for his whereabouts for a long time was unknown, and there were no traditions of his being seen. Then he began to be heard of from distant and constantly varying quarters of the town. Now you had a note from Shepherd's Bush, and next day from Bermondsey. On Tuesday, Jack dated Little King Street, Clapham Road; on Thursday, the communication reached you from Little Queen Street, Victoria Villas, Hackney; and next week perhaps you were favoured with a note from some of the minor little Inns of Court, where the writer would be found getting up a company on the fourth floor in a grimy room, furnished with a high deal-desk, two three-legged stools, and illimitable foolscap, pens, and ink.

Where Mrs Happy Jack and the young-lady Happy Jacks went to at these times, the boldest speculator has failed to discover: they vanished, as it were, into thin air, and were seen no more till the sunshine came, when they returned with the swallows. The lady herself was a meek, mild creature, skilful in the art of living on nothing, and making up dresses without material. She adored her husband, and believed him the greatest man in the world. On the occurrence of such little household incidents as an execution, or Jack making a rapid act of cabmanship from his own hearth to the cheerful residence of Mr Levi in Cursitor Street, the poor little woman, after having indulged herself in the small luxury of a 'good cry,' would go to work to pack up shirts and socks manfully, and with great foresight, would always bring Jack's daily food in a basket, seeing that Mr Levi's bills are constructed upon a scale of uncommon dimensions; after which, she would eat the dinner with him in the coffee-room, drink to better days, play cribbage, and at last get very nearly as joyous in that greasy, grimy, sorrow-laden room, with bars on the outside of the windows, as if it were the happy home she possessed a few weeks ago, and which she always hoped to possess again. As for the girls,

they were trained by too good a master and mistress not to become apt scholars. They knew what a bill of sale was from their tenderest years; the broker's was no unfamiliar face; and they quite understood how to treat a man in possession. Their management of duns was consummate. Happy Jack used to listen to the comedy of excuses and coaxings; and when the importunate had departed, grumblingly and unpaid, he used solemnly to kiss his daughters on the forehead, and invoke all sorts of blessings upon his preservers, his good angels, his little girls, who were so clever, and so faithful, and so true.

And in many respects they were good girls. The style in which they turned frocks, put a new appearance upon hoods, and cloaks, and bonnets, and came forth in what seemed the very lustre of novelty—the whole got up by a skilful mutual adaptation of garments and parts of garments—was wonderful to all lady beholders. In cookery, they beat the famous *chef* who sent up five courses and a dessert, made out of a greasy pair of jack-boots and the grass from the ramparts of the besieged town. Their wonderful little made-dishes were mere scraps and fragments, which in any other house would have been flung away, but which were so artistically and scientifically handled by the young ladies, and so tossed up, and titivated, and eked out with gravies, and sauces, and strange devices of nondescript pasty, that Happy Jack, feasting upon these wonderful creations of ingenuity, used to vow that he never dined so well as when there was nothing in the house for dinner. To their wandering, predatory life the whole family were perfectly accustomed. A sudden turn out of quarters they cared no more for than hardened old dragoons. They never lost pluck. One speculation down, another came on. Sometimes the little household was united. A bit of luck in the City or the West had been achieved, and Happy Jack issued cards for 'At Homes,' and behaved, and looked, and spoke like an alderman, or the member of a house of fifty years' standing. When strangers saw his white waistcoat, and blue coat with brass buttons, and heard him talk of a glut of gold, and money being a mere drug, they speculated as to whether he was the governor or the vice-governor of the Bank of England, or only the man who signs the five-pound notes. That day six weeks, Jack had probably 'come through the court;' a process which he always used somehow to achieve with flying colours, behaving in such a plausible and fascinating way to the commissioner, that that functionary regularly made a speech, in which he congratulated Happy Jack on his candour, and evident desire to deal fairly with his creditors, and told him he left that court without the shadow of a stain upon his character. In the Bench, in dreary suburban lodgings, or in the comfortable houses which they sometimes occupied, the Happy Jacks were always the Happy Jacks. Their constitution triumphed over everything. If anything could ruffle their serenity, it was the refusal of a tradesman to give credit. But *uno avulso non deficit alter*, as Jack was accustomed, on such occasions, classically to say to his wife—presently deviating into the corresponding vernacular of—'Well, my dear, if one cock fights shy, try another.'

A list of Jack's speculations would be instructive. He once took a theatre without a penny to carry it on; and having announced *Hamlet* without anybody to play, boldly studied and performed the part himself, to the unextinguishable delight of the audience. Soon after this, he formed a company for supplying the metropolis with Punches of a better class, and enacting a more moral drama than the old legitimate one—making Punch, in fact, a virtuous and domestic character; and he drew the attention of government to the moral benefits likely to be derived to society from this dramatic reform. Soon after, he departed for Spain in the gallant Legion; but not finding the speculation profitable, turned newspaper correspondent, and was thrice in imminent danger of being shot as a spy. Flung back somehow to England, he suddenly turned up as a lecturer on chemistry, and then established a dancing institution and Terpsichorean Athenæum. Of late, Jack has found a good friend in animal magnetism, and his *séances* have been reasonably successful. When performing in the country districts, Jack varied the entertainments by a lecture on the properties of guano, which he threw in for nothing, and which was highly appreciated by the agricultural interest. Jack's books were principally works of travel. His *Journey to the Fountains of the Niger* is generally esteemed highly amusing, if not instructive: it was knocked off at Highbury; and his *Wanderings in the Mountains of the Moon*, written in Little Chelsea, has been favourably reviewed by many well-informed and discriminating organs

of literary intelligence, as the work of a man evidently well acquainted with the regions he professes to describe.

Where the Happy Jacks are at this moment no one can tell. They have become invisible since the last clean out. A deprecatory legend has indeed been in circulation, which professed that Jack was dead, and that this was the manner in which, on his deathbed, he provided for his family:—

'Mrs Happy Jack,' said the departing man, 'I'm not afraid of you. You have got on some way or other for nearly forty years, and I don't see why you shouldn't get on some way or other for forty more. Therefore, so far as you are concerned, my mind is easy. But, then, you girls—you poor little inexperienced poppets, who know nothing of the world. There's Jane; but then she's pretty—really beautiful. Why, her face is a fortune: she will of course captivate a rich man; and what more can a father wish? As for Emily—I fear Emily, my dear, you're rather plain than otherwise; but what, I would ask, is beauty?—fleeting, transitory, skin-deep. The happiest marriages are those of mutual affection—not one-sided admiration: so, on the whole, I should say that my mind is easier about Emily than Jane. As for Maria, she's so clever, she can't but get on. As a musician, an artist, an authoress, what bright careers are open for her! While as for you, stupid little Clara, who never could be taught anything—I very much doubt whether the dunces of this world are not the very happiest people in it—Yes, Clara; leave to others the vain and empty distinctions of literary renown, which is but a bubble, and be happy in the homely path of obscure but virtuous duty!'

Happy Jack ceased. There was a pause. 'And now,' he said, 'having provided for my family, I will go to sleep, with a clear conscience and a tranquil mind.'

I said that I always distrusted this legend. I am happy to say, that even as I write I have proof positive that it is purely a fiction. I have just had a card put into my hand requesting my presence at a private exhibition of the celebrated Bloomer Family, while an accompanying private note from Jack himself informs me that the 'celebrated and charming Bloomer group—universally allowed to be the most perfect and interesting representatives of the new *régime* in costume'—are no other than the Happy Jacks *redivivi*—Mrs J. and the girls donning the transatlantic attire, and Happy Jack himself delivering a lecture upon the vagaries of fashion and the inconsistencies of dress, in a new garment invented by himself, and combining the Roman toga with the Highland kilt.

## THE DESERT HOME. <sup>1</sup>

Robinson Crusoe is the parent of a line of fictions, all more or less entertaining; but those of our own day, as might be expected, share largely in the practical spirit of the time, making amusement in some degree the mere menstruum of information. Following the Swiss Family Robinson, we have here an English Family Robinson, which might as well be called an American Family Robinson; and although ostensibly meant for the holiday recreation of youth, it proves to be a production equally well suited for children of six feet and upwards. The author is personally familiar with the scenes he describes, and is thus able to give them a verisimilitude which in other circumstances can be attained only by the rarest genius; and notwithstanding the associations, of his last book, the *Scalp-hunters*, there is only one bloody conflict in the present one fought by animals of the genus Homo.

The local habitation of the lost family is a nook in the Great American Desert—a nook in a desert twenty-five times the size of England! But this wilderness of about a million square miles is not all sand or all barren earth: it contains numerous other features of interest besides mountains and oases; it includes the country of New Mexico, with its towns and cities; the country round the Great Salt and Utah Lakes, where the germ of a Mormon nation is expanding on all sides; and it is traversed in its whole breadth by the Rocky Mountains. An English family, after being ruined in St Louis, and reduced to their last hundred pounds, are persuaded by a Scottish miner to accompany him across this desert to New Mexico. 'They are a wonderful people,' says the story-teller, 'these same Scotch. They are but a small nation, yet their influence is felt everywhere upon the globe. Go where you will, you will find them in positions of trust and importance—always prospering, yet, in the midst of prosperity, still remembering, with strong feelings of attachment, the land of their birth. They manage the marts of London, the commerce of India, the fur-trade of America, and the mines of Mexico. Over all the American wilderness you will meet them, side by side with the backwoods-pioneer himself, and even pushing him from his own ground. From the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Sea, they have impressed with their Gaelic names rock, river, and mountain; and many an Indian tribe owns a Scotchman for its chief.'

The adventurers join a caravan, which is attacked by Indians, and the family of the destined Robinson find themselves alone in the wilderness, 800 miles from the American frontier on the east, 1000 miles from any civilised settlement on either the north or south, and 200 miles from the farthest advanced lines of New Mexico in the desert. They are, in short, lost; but in due time they are found again by other explorers. These strangers are standing on the edge of a cliff several hundred feet sheer down. 'Away below—far below where we were—lay a lovely valley, smiling in all the luxuriance of bright vegetation. It was of nearly an oval shape, bounded upon all sides by a frowning precipice, that rose around it like a wall. Its length could not have been less than ten miles, and its greatest breadth about half of its length. We were at its upper end, and of course viewed it lengthwise. Along the face of the precipice there were trees hanging out horizontally, and some of them even growing with their tops downward. These trees were cedars and pines; and we could perceive also the knotted limbs of huge cacti protruding from the crevices of the rocks. We could see the wild mezcal, or maguey-plant, growing against the cliff—its scarlet leaves contrasting finely with the dark foliage of the cedars and cacti. Some of these plants stood out on the very brow of the overhanging precipice, and their long curving blades gave a singular character to the landscape. Along the face of the dark cliffs all was rough, and gloomy, and picturesque. How different was the scene below! Here everything looked soft, and smiling, and beautiful. There were broad stretches of woodland, where the thick foliage of the trees met and clustered together, so that it looked like the surface of the earth itself; but we knew it was only the green leaves, for here and there were spots of brighter green, that we saw were glades

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<sup>1</sup> Or the Adventures of a Lost Family in the Wilderness. By Captain Mayne Reid. London: Bogue. 1852.

covered with grassy turf. The leaves of the trees were of different colours, for it was now late in the autumn. Some were yellow, and some of a deep claret colour: some were bright-red, and some of a beautiful maroon; and there were green, and brighter green, and others of a silvery-whitish hue. All these colours were mingled together, and blended into each other, like the flowers upon a rich carpet. Near the centre of the valley was a large shining object, which we knew to be water. It was evidently a lake of crystal purity, and smooth as a mirror. The sun was now up to meridian height, and his yellow beams falling upon its surface caused it to gleam like a sheet of gold. We could not trace the outlines of the water, for the trees partially hid it from our view, but we saw that the smoke that had at first attracted us rose up somewhere from the western shore of the lake.' In this strange oasis they found what appeared to be a snug farm-house, with stables and outhouses, garden and fields, horses and cattle. Here they were hospitably entertained by the proprietor, his wife, and two sons, and served by a faithful negro; and of course it is the history of the settlers, and their struggles, expedients, and contrivances which form the staple of the work.

In this history we have the process of building a log-house, and the usual modes of assembling round the squatter such of the comforts of life as may be obtained in the desert; but our family Robinson appears to have been the most ingenious as well as the most fortunate of adventurers, for there are very few, even of the luxuries of civilised society, which are beyond his reach. The natural history of the book, however, is its main feature; and the adventures of the lost family with the unreasoning denizens of the desert remind us not unfrequently of the pictures of Audubon. This is among the earliest:—'There were high cliffs fronting us, and along the face of these five large reddish objects were moving, so fast that I at first thought they were birds upon the wing. After watching them a moment, however, I saw that they were quadrupeds; but so nimbly did they go, leaping from ledge to ledge, that it was impossible to see their limbs. They appeared to be animals of the deer species, somewhat larger than sheep or goats; but we could see that, in place of antlers, each of them had a pair of huge curving horns. As they leaped downward, from one platform of the cliffs to another, we fancied that they whirled about in the air, as though they were "turning somersaults," and seemed at times to come down heads foremost! There was a spur of the cliff that sloped down to within less than a hundred yards of the place where we sat. It ended in an abrupt precipice, of some sixty or seventy feet in height above the plain. The animals, on reaching the level of this spur, ran along it until they had arrived at its end. Seeing the precipice, they suddenly stopped, as if to reconnoitre it; and we had now a full view of them, as they stood outlined against the sky, with their graceful limbs and great curved horns, almost as large as their bodies. We thought, of course, they could get no farther for the precipice, and I was calculating whether my rifle, which I had laid hold of, would reach them at that distance. All at once, to our astonishment, the foremost sprang out from the cliff, and whirling through the air, lit upon his head on the hard plain below! We could see that he came down upon his horns, and rebounding up again to the height of several feet, he turned a second somersault, and then dropped upon his legs, and stood still! Nothing daunted, the rest followed, one after the other, in quick succession, like so many street-tumblers; and, like them, after the feat had been performed, the animals stood for a moment, as if waiting for applause!' These were the *argali*, or wild sheep, popularly termed bighorns, and resembling an immense yellow goat or deer furnished with a pair of ram's horns.

Such are the anecdotes which the reader will find thickly scattered throughout this volume; but perhaps the most interesting are a series of conflicts witnessed by the father and one of the sons, and in the course of which they are themselves exposed to some danger. They had gone out to gather from the live oaks a kind of moss, which they found to be quite equal to curled hair for stuffing mattresses; and while perched upon one of the trees, the drama opened by the violent scolding of a pair of orioles, or Baltimore birds—so called from their colour, a mixture of black and orange, being the same as that in the coat-of-arms of Lord Baltimore. The cause of the disturbance appeared to be a nondescript animal close to the edge of the thicket, with a variety of little legs, tails, heads,

ears, and eyes stuck over its body. 'All at once the numerous heads seemed to separate from the main body, becoming little bodies of themselves, with long tails upon them, and looking just like a squad of white rats! The large body to which they had all been attached we now saw was an old female opossum, and evidently the mother of the whole troop. She was about the size of a cat, and covered with woolly hair of a light gray colour.... The little 'possums were exact pictures of their mother—all having the same sharp snouts and long naked tails. We counted no less than thirteen of them, playing and tumbling about among the leaves.' The old 'possum looked wistfully up at the nest of the orioles, hanging like a distended stocking from the topmost twigs of the tree. After a little consideration she uttered a sharp note, which brought the little ones about her in a twinkling. 'Several of them ran into the pouch which she had caused to open for them; two of them took a turn of their little tails around the root of hers, and climbed up on her rump, almost burying themselves in her long wool; while two or three others fastened themselves about her neck and shoulders. It was a most singular sight to see the little creatures holding on with "tails, teeth, and toe-nails," while some peeped comically out of the great breast-pocket.' Burdened in this way, she climbed the tree, and then taking hold of the young 'possums, one by one, with her mouth, she made them twist their tails round a branch, and hang with their heads downwards. 'Five or six of the "kittens" were still upon the ground. For these she returned, and taking them up as before, again climbed the tree. She disposed of the second load precisely as she had done the others, until the thirteen little possums hung head downwards along the branch like a string of candles!'

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