

LIVE TALES OF THE DIAMOND

By ZANE GREY

Author of "The Lone Star Ranger," "The Light of Western Stars," Etc.

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IT was about the sixth inning that I suspected the Rube of weakening. For that matter he had not pitched anything resembling his usual brand of baseball. But the Rube had developed into such a wonder in the box that it took time for his let-down to dawn upon me. Also it took a tip from Raddy, who sat with me on the bench.

"Con, the Rube isn't himself today," said Radbourne. "His mind's not on the game. He seems hurried and flustered, too. If he doesn't explode presently, I'm a dub at callin' the turn."

Raddy was the best judge of a pitcher's condition, physical or mental, in the Eastern League. It was a Saturday and we were on the road and finishing up a series with the Rochesterers. Each team had won and lost a game, and, as I was climbing close to the leaders in the pennant race, I wanted the third and deciding game of that Rochester series. The usual big Saturday crowd was in attendance, noisy, demonstrative and exacting.

In this sixth inning the first man up for Rochester had flied to McCall. Then had come the two plays significant of the Rube's weakening. He had hit one batter and walked another. This was sufficient, considering the score was three to one in our favor, to bring the audience to its feet with a howling, stamping demand for runs.

"Spears is wise all right," said Raddy.

I watched the foxy old captain walk over to the Rube and talk to him while he rested—a reassuring hand on the pitcher's shoulder. The crowd yelled its disapproval and Umpire Bates called out sharply:

"Spears, get back to the bag."

"Now, Mister Umpire, ain't I hurryin' all I can?" queried Spears as he leisurely ambled back to first.

The Rube tossed a long, damp, wet of hair back from his big brow and nervously toed the rubber. I noted that he seemed to forget the ball without glancing at either bag. Of course this resulted in a double steal. The ball went wild—almost a wild pitch.

"Steady up, old man," called Gregg between the yells of the bleachers. He held his mitt square over the plate for the Rube to pitch to. Again the long twirler took his swing, and again the ball went wide. Clancy had the Rube in the hole now and the situation began to grow serious. The Rube did not take half his usual deliberation, and of the next two pitches one of them was a ball and the other a strike by grace of the umpire's generosity. Clancy rapped the next one, an absurdly slow pitch for the Rube to use, and both runners scored to the shrill tune of the happy bleachers.

I saw Spears shake his head and look toward the bench. It was plain what that meant.

"Raddy, I ought to take the Rube out," I said, "but whom can I put in? You worked yesterday—Cairns' arm is sore. It's got to be nursed. And Henderson, that ladies' man I just signed, is not in uniform."

"I'll go in," replied Raddy, instantly.

"Not on your life," I had as hard a time keeping Radbourne from overworking as I had in getting enough work out of some other players. "I guess I'll let the Rube take his medicine. I hate to lose this game, but if we have to, we can stand it. I'm curious, anyway, to see what's the matter with the Rube. Maybe he'll settle down presently."

I made no sign that I had noticed Spears' appeal to the bench. And my aggressive players, no doubt seeing the situation as I saw it, sang out their various calls of cheer to the Rube and of defiance to their antagonists. Clancy stole off first base, so far that the Rube, catching somebody's warning too late, made a balk and the umpire sent the runner on to second. The Rube now showed painful evidences of being rattled.

He could not locate the plate without slowing up and when he did that a Rochester player walloped the ball. Pretty soon he pitched as if he did not care, and but for the fast fielding of the team behind him the Rochesterers would have scored more than the eight runs it got. When the Rube came in to the bench I asked him if he was sick and at first he said he was and then that he was not. So I let him pitch the remaining innings, as the game was lost anyhow, and we walked off the field a badly beaten team.

That night we had to hurry from the hotel to catch a train for Worcester and we had dinner in the dining-car. Several of my players' wives had come over from Worcester to meet us, and were in the dining-car when I entered. I observed a pretty

girl sitting at one of the tables with my new pitcher, Henderson.

"Say, Mac," I said to McCall, who was with me, "is Henderson married?"

"Now, but he looks like he wanted to be. He was in the grand stand today with that girl."

"Who is she? Oh! a little peach?"

A second glance at Henderson's companion brought this compliment from me involuntarily.

"Con, you'll get it as bad as the rest of this mushy bunch of ball players. We're all stuck on that kid. But since Henderson came she's been a frost to all of us. An' it's put the Rube in the dumps."

"Who's the girl?"

"That's Nan Brown. She lives in Worcester an' is the craziest girl fan I ever seen. Flirt! Well, she's got them all beat. Somebody introduced the Rube to her. He has been mooning ever since."

That was enough to whet my curiosity and I favored Miss Brown with more than one glance during dinner. When we returned to the parlor car I took advantage of the opportunity and remarked to Henderson that he might introduce his manager. He complied, but not with amiable grace.

So I chatted with Nan Brown, and studied her. She was a pretty, laughing, coquettish little mix and quite baseball mad. I had met many girl fans, but none so enthusiastic as Nan. But she was wholesome and sincere, and I liked her.

Before turning in I sat down beside the Rube. He was very quiet and his face did not encourage company. But that did not stop me.

"Hello, Whit; have a smoke before you go to bed?" I asked cheerfully.

He scarcely heard me and made no move to take the proffered cigar. All at once it struck me that the rustic simplicity which had characterized him had vanished.

"Whit, old fellow, what was wrong today?" I asked, quietly, with my hand on his arm.

"Mr. Connelly, I want my release. I want to go back to Rickettsville," he replied hurriedly.

For the space of a few seconds I did some tall thinking. The situation suddenly became grave. I saw the pennant for the Worcesterers fading, dimming.

"You want to go home?" I began slowly. "Why, Whit, I can't keep you. I wouldn't try if you didn't want to stay. But I'll tell you confidentially, if you leave me at this stage I'm ruined."

"How's that?" he inquired, keenly looking at me.

"Well, I can't win the pennant without you. If I do win it there's a big bonus for me. I can buy the house I want and get married this fall if I capture the flag. You've met Milly. You can imagine what your pitching means to me this year. That's all."

He averted his face and looked out of the window. His big jaw quivered.

"If it's that—why, I'll stay, I reckon," he said huskily.

That moment found Whit Hurtle and Frank Connelly into a far closer relation than the one between player and manager. I sat silent for a while, listening to the drowsy talk of the other players and the rush and roar of the train as it sped on into the night.

"Thank you, old chap," I replied. "It wouldn't have been like you to throw me down at this stage. Whit, you're in trouble?"

"Yes."

"Can I help you—in any way?"

"I reckon not."

"Don't be too sure of that. I'm a pretty wise guy, if I do say it myself. I might be able to do as much for you as you're going to do for me."

The sight of his face convinced me that I had taken a wrong tack. It also showed me how deep Whit's trouble really was. I had him good and went to my berth, where sleep did not soon visit me. A saucy, sparkling-eyed woman barred Whit Hurtle's baseball career at its threshold.

Women are just as fatal to ball players as to men in any other walk of life. I had seen a strong athlete grow palsied just at a scornful slight. It's a great world, and the women run it. So I lay awake racking my brains to outfit a pretty dressmaker; and I plotted for her sake. Married, she would be out of mischief. For Whit's sake, for Milly's, for mine, all of which collectively meant for the sake of the pennant, this would be the solution of the problem.

I decided to take Milly into my confidence, and finally on the strength of that I got to sleep. In the morning I went to my hotel, had breakfast, attended to my mail, and then boarded a car to go out to Milly's house. She was waiting for me on the porch, dressed as I liked to see her, in blue and white, and

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she wore violets that matched the color of her eyes.

"Hello, Connie. I haven't seen a morning paper, but I know from your face that you lost the Rochester series," said Milly, with a gay laugh.

"I guess yes. The Rube blew up, and if we don't play a pretty smooth game, young lady, he'll never come down."

Then I told her.

"Why, Connie, I knew long ago. Haven't you seen the change in him before this?"

"What change?" I asked blankly.

"You are a man. Well, he was a gawky, slouchy, shy farmer boy when he came to us. Of course the city life and popularity began to influence him. Then he met Nan. She made the Rube a worshipper. I first noticed a change in his clothes. He blossomed out in a new suit, white negligee, neat tie and a stylish straw hat. Then it was evident he was

he got drunk. But he did not leave town, and I heard that he was negotiating with Providence for a place on that team.

Radbourne pitched one of his gilded games that afternoon against Hartford and we won. And Milly sat in the grand stand, having contrived with cleverness to get a seat next to Nan Brown. Milly and I were playing a vastly deeper game than baseball—a game with hearts.

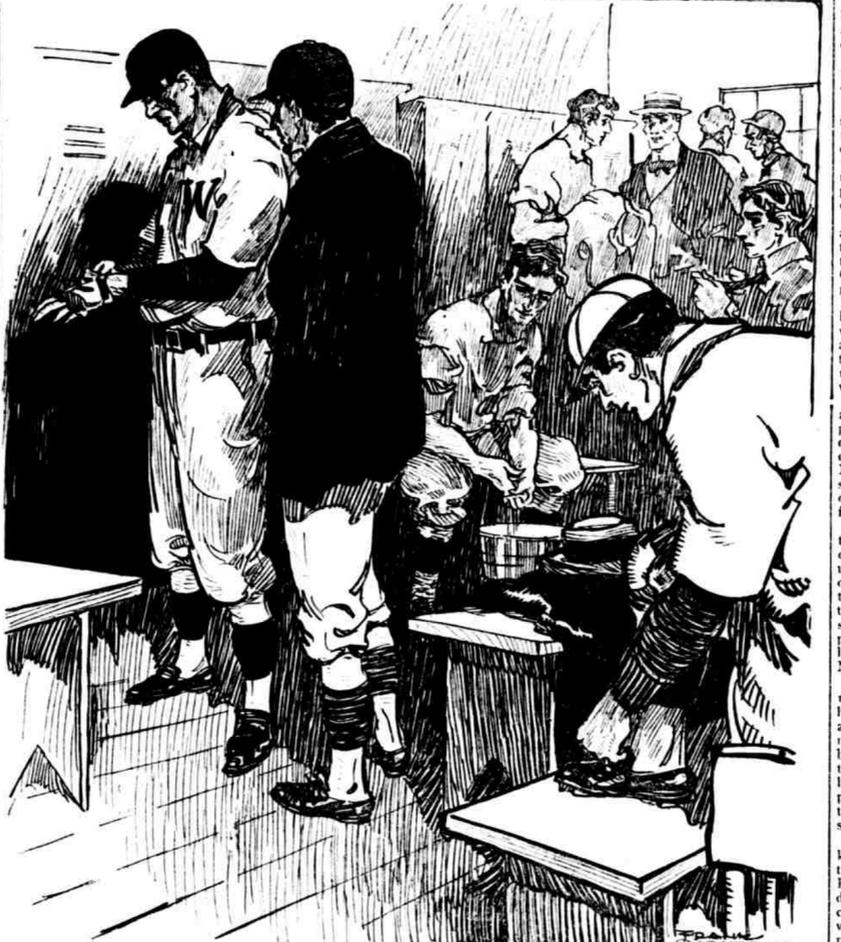
But we were playing it with honest motive, for the good of all concerned, we believed, and on the square. I sneaked a look now and then up into the grand stand. Milly and Nan appeared to be getting on famously. It was certain that Nan was flushed and excited, no doubt consciously proud of being seen with my affianced. After the game I chanced to meet them on their way out. Milly winked at me, which was her sign that all was working beautifully.

It was about dark when we arrived at the house.

"Hello, Connie. You're late. Good evening, Mr. Hurtle. Come right in. You've met Miss Nan Brown? Oh, of course; how stupid of me!"

It was a trying moment for Milly and me. A little pallor showed under the Rube's tan, but he was more composed than I had expected. Nan got up from the piano. She was all in white and deliciously pretty. She gave a quick, glad start of surprise. What a relief that was to my troubled mind! Everything had depended upon a real honest liking for Whit, and she had it.

More than once I had been proud of Milly's cleverness, but this night as a hostess, and accomplice she won my everlasting admiration. She contrived to give the impression that Whit was a frequent visitor at her home and very welcome. She brought out his best points, and in her skillful hands he lost embarrassment and



He looked like a man who had lost the one thing worth while in his life.

making heroic struggles to overcome his awkwardness. It was plain he was studying and copying the other boys. He's wonderfully improved, but still shy. He'll always be shy. Connie, Whit's a fine fellow, too good for Nan Brown."

"But, Milly, I interrupted, 'the Rube's hard hit. Why is he too good for her?'"

"Nan is a natural-born flirt," Milly replied. "She can't help it. I'm afraid Whit has a slim chance. Nan may not see deep enough to learn his fine qualities. I fancy Nan tired quickly of him, though the one time I saw them together she appeared to like him very well. This new pitcher of yours, Henderson, is a handsome fellow and smooth. Whit is losing to him. Nan likes flash, flattery, excitement."

"McCall told me the Rube had been down in the mouth ever since Henderson joined the team. Milly I don't like Henderson a whole lot. He's not in the Rube's class as a pitcher. What am I going to do? Lose the pennant and a big slice of purse money just for a pretty little flirt?"

"Oh, Connie, it's not so bad as that. Whit will come round all right. He won't unless we can pull some wires. I've got to help him win Nan Brown. What do you think of that for a manager's job? I guess maybe winning pennants doesn't call for diplomatic genius and cunning! But I'll hand them a few tricks before I lose. My first move will be to give Henderson his release."

I left Milly, as always, once more able to make light of discouragements and difficulties.

Monday I gave Henderson his unconditional release. He celebrated the occasion by verifying certain rumors I had heard from other managers.

I hunted up the Rube and bundled him off to the hotel to take dinner with me. At first he was glum, but after a while he brightened up somewhat to my persistent cheer and friendliness. Then we went out upon the hotel balcony to smoke, and there I made my play.

"What, I'm pulling a stroke for you. Now listen and don't be offended. I know what's put you off your feed, because I was the same way when Milly had me guessing. You've lost your head over Nan Brown. That's not so terrible, though. I daresay you think it's a catastrophe. Because you've quit. You've shown a yellow streak. You've lain down."

"My boy, that isn't the way to win a girl. You've got to scrap. Milly told me yesterday how she had watched your love affairs with Nan, and how she thought you had given up just when things might have come your way. Nan is a little flirt, but she's all right. What's more, she was getting fond of you. Nan is meant to be the man she likes best. The way to handle her, Whit, is to master her. Play high and mighty. Get tragical. Then grab her up in your arms. I tell you, Whit, it'll come your way if you only keep your nerve. I'm your friend and so is Milly. We're going out to her house presently—and Nan will be there."

The Rube drew a long, deep breath and held out his hand. I sensed another stage in the evolution of Whit Hurtle.

"I reckon I've taken baseball coachin'," he said, presently, "an' I don't see why I can't take some other kind. I'm only a rube an' things come hard for me, but I'm a learnin'."

awkwardness. Before the evening was over Nan regarded Whit with different eyes, and she never dreamed that everything had come about naturally. Then Milly somehow got me out on the porch, leaving Nan and Whit together.

"Milly, you're a marvel, the best and sweetest ever," I whispered. "We're going to win. It's a cinch." "Well, Connie, not that—exactly," she whispered back demurely. "But it looks hopeful."

"I could not help hearing what was said in the parlor."

"Now I can roast you," Nan was saying, archly. She had switched back to her favorite baseball vernacular. "You pitched a swell game last Saturday in Rochester, didn't you? Not! You had no steam, no control, and you couldn't have curved a saucer."

"Nan, what could you expect?" was the cool reply. "You sat up in the stand with your handsome friend. I reckon I couldn't pitch. I just gave the game away."

"Why!—Whit!"

Then I whispered to Milly that it might be discreet for us to move a little way from the vicinity.

It was on the second day afterward that I got a chance to talk to Nan. She reached the grounds early, before Milly arrived, and I found her in the grand stand. The Rube was down on the card to pitch and when he started to warm up Nan said confidently that he would shut out Hartford that afternoon.

"I'm sorry, Nan, but you're way off. We'd do well to win at all, let alone get a shutout."

"Stop calling him that horrid name."

"Whit's not in shape. He's not right. He's ill or something like that. I'm worried sick about him."

"Why—Mr. Connelly!" exclaimed Nan. She turned quickly toward me. I crowded on full canvas of gloom to my already long face.

"I'm serious, Nan. The lad's off somehow. He's in magnificent physical trim, but he can't keep his mind on the game. He has lost his head. I've talked with him, reasoned with him, all to no good. He only goes down deeper in the dumps. Something is terribly wrong with him, and of course if he doesn't brace I'll have to release—"

Miss Nan Brown suddenly lost a little of her rich bloom. "Oh! you wouldn't—you couldn't release him!"

"I'll have to if he doesn't brace. It means a lot to me, Nan, for of course you win the pennant this year without Whit being in shape. But I believe I wouldn't mind the loss of that any more than to see him fall down. The boy is a magnificent pitcher. If he can only be brought around he'll go to the big league next year and develop into one of the greatest pitchers the game has ever produced. But somehow or other he has lost heart. He's quit. And I've done my best for him. He's beyond me now. What a shame it is! For he's the making of such a splendid man outside of baseball. Milly thinks the world of him. Well, there are disappointments—we can't help them. There goes the gong. I must leave you. Nan, I'll bet you a box of candy Whit loses today. Is it a go?"

"It is," replied Nan, with fire in her eyes. "You go to Whit Hurtle and tell him I said if he wins today's game I'll kiss him!"

I nearly broke my neck over benches and bats getting to Whit with that message. He gulped once. Then he tightened his belt and shot out Hartford with two scratch singles. It was a great exhibition of pitching. I had no means to tell whether or not the Rube got his reward that night, but I was so happy that I hugged Milly within an inch of her life.

But it turned out that I had been a little premature in my elation. In two days the Rube went down into the depths again, this time clear to China, and Nan was sitting in the grand stand with Henderson. The Rube lost his next game, pitching like a schoolboy scared out of his wits. Henderson followed Nan like a shadow, so that I had no chance to talk to her. The Rube lost his next game and then another. We were pushed out of second place.

If we kept up that losing streak a little longer, our hopes for the pennant were gone. I had begun to despair of the Rube. For some occult reason he scarcely spoke to me. Nan flirted worse than ever. It seemed to me she flaunted her conquest of Henderson in poor Whit's face.

The Providence ball team came to town and promptly signed Henderson and announced him for Saturday's game. Cairns won the first of the series and Radbourne lost the second. It was the Rube's turn to pitch the Saturday game and I resolved to make one more effort to put the love-sick swain in something like his old fettle. So I called upon Nan.

She was surprised to see me, but received me graciously. I fancied her face was not quite so glowing as usual. I came bluntly out with my mission. She tried to freeze me but I would not freeze. I was out to win or lose and not to be lightly laughed aside or coldly denied. I played to make her angry, knowing the real truth of her feelings would show under stress.

For once in my life I became a knocker and said some unpleasant things—albeit they were true—about Henderson. She championed Henderson royally, and when, as a last card, I compared Whit's fine record with Henderson's, not only as a ball player, but as a man, particularly in his reverence for women, she flashed at me like a little lioness.

"What do you know about it? Mr. Henderson asked me to marry him. Can a man do more to show his respect? Your friend never so much as hinted such honorable intentions. What's more, he consulted me! The blaze in Nan's black eyes softened with a film of tears. She looked hurt. Her pride had encountered a fall.

"Oh, no, Nan, Whit couldn't insult a lady," I protested.

"Couldn't he? That's all you know about him. You know I—I promised to kiss him if he beat Hartford that day. So when he came I I did. Then the big savage began to rave and he grabbed me up in his arms. He smothered me; almost crushed the life out of me. He frightened me terribly. When I got away from him—the monster stood there and coolly said I belonged to him. I ran out of the room and wouldn't see him any more. At first I might have forgiven him if he had apologized—said he was sorry, but never a word. Now I never will forgive him."

I had to make a strenuous effort to conceal my agitation. The Rube had most carefully taken my fool advice in the matter of wooing a woman.

When I had got a hold upon myself, I turned to Nan white-hot with eloquence. Now I was talking not wholly for myself or the pennant, but for this boy and girl who were at odds in that strangest game of life—love.

What I said I never knew, but Nan lost her resentment, and then her scorn and indifference. Slowly she thawed and warmed to my reason, praise, whatever it was, and when I stopped she was as good as the radiant, bewitching Nan of old.

"Take another message to Whit for me," she said, audaciously. "Tell him I adore ball players, especially

pitchers. Tell him I'm going to the game today to choose the best one. If he loses the game—"

She let the sentence unfinished. In my state of mind I doubted not in the least that she meant to marry the pitcher who won the game, and so I told the Rube. He made one wild upheaval of his arms and shoulders, like an erupting volcano, which proved to me that he believed it, too.

When I got to the bench that afternoon I was tired. There was a big crowd to see the game; the weather was perfect; Milly sat up in the box and waved her score card at me; Raddy and Spears declared we had the game; the Rube stalked to and fro like an implacable Indian chief—but I was not happy in mind. Calamity breathed in the very air.

The game began. McCall beat out a bunt; Ashwell sacrificed and Stringer laced one of his beautiful triples against the fence. Then he scored on a high fly. Two in the field. The Rube was white with determination; he had the speed of a bullet and perfect control of his jump ball and drop. But Providence hit and had the luck. Ashwell fumbled. Gregg threw wild. Providence tied the score.

The game progressed, growing more and more of a nightmare to me. It was not Worcester's day. The boys grumbled and fought among themselves, and were sent to the pen and was sent to the pen; a gart tripped, hurting his sore ankle, and had to be taken out. Henderson's slow, easy ball baffled my players, and when he used speed they lined it straight at a Providence fielder.

In the sixth, after a desperate rally, we crowded the bases with only one out. Then Mullaney's hard rap to left. Seemingly good for three bases, was pulled down by Stone with one hand. It was a wonderful catch and he doubled up a runner at second. Again in the seventh we had a chance to score, only to fail on another double play, this time by the infield.

When the Providence players were at bat their luck not only held good but trebled and quadrupled. The little Texas-league hits dropped safely just out of reach of the infielders. What boys had an off day in fielding. What horror that of all days in a season this should be the one for them to make errors!

But they were game, and the Rube was the gamest of all. He did not seem to know what hard luck or discouragement, or poor support, he kept everlastingly hammering the ball at those lucky Providence hitters.

What speed he had! The ball streaked in and somebody would shut his eyes and make a safety. But the Rube pitched on, tireless, irresistibly hopeful, not forgetting to call a word of cheer to his fielders.

It was one of those strange games that could not be bettered by any labor or daring or skill. I saw it was lost from the second inning, yet so deeply was I concerned, so tantalizingly did the plays reel themselves off, that I groveled there on the bench unable to abide by my baseball sense.

The ninth inning proved beyond a shadow of doubt how baseball fate, in common with other fates, loved to balance the chances, to lift up one, then the other, to lend a deceitful hope only to dash it away.

Providence had almost three times enough to win. The team let up in that inning or grew over-confident or careless, and before we knew what had happened some scratch hits, and bases on balls, and errors, gave us three runs and left two runners on bases. The disgraced bleachers came out of their gloom and began to whistle and thump. The Rube hit safely, sending another runner over the plate. McCall worked his old trick, beating out a slow bunt.

Bases full, three runs to tie! With Ashwell up and one out, the noise in the bleachers mounted to a high pitched, shrill, continuous sound. I got up and yelled with all my might and could not hear my voice. Ashwell was a dangerous man in a pinch. The game was not lost yet. A hit, anything to get Ash to first—and then Stringer!

Ash laughed at Henderson, taunted him, shook his bat at him and dared him to put one over. Henderson did not stand under fire. The ball he pitched had no steam. Ash cracked it—square on the line into the shortstop's hands. The bleachers ceased yelling.

Then, Stringer strode grimly to the plate. It was a hundred to one, in that instance, that he would lose the ball. The bleachers let out one deafening roar, then hushed. I would rather have had Stringer at the bat than any other player in the world, and Milly—and hope would not die.

Stringer swung mightily on the first pitch and struck the ball with a sharp, solid bang. It shot toward center, low, level, exceedingly swift, and like a dark streak went straight into the fielder's hands. A rod to right or left would have made it a home run. The crowd strangled a victorious yell. I came out of my trance, for the game was over and lost. It was the Rube's Waterloo.

I hurried him into the dressing room and kept close to him. He looked like a man who had lost the one thing worth while in his life, I turned a deaf ear to my players, to everybody, and hustled the Rube out to the hotel. I wanted to be near him that night.

To my amazement we met Milly and Nan as we entered the lobby. Milly wore a sweet, sympathetic smile. She shone more radiant than ever. I simply stared. It was Milly who got us all through the corridor into the parlor. I heard Nan talking.

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