



*The Enchanted Peafowl - The
Story of the Golden Apples,
the Wicked Dragon, and the
Magic Horse*

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Intermediate

32 min read

Have you ever heard the story of the Peafowl who became a Queen and of the Tsar's Youngest Son who married her? Well, here it is:

There was once a Tsar who took great delight in his garden. Every morning you could see him bending over his flowers or picking the fruit of his favorite tree. This was an apple-tree that had the magic property of bearing buds, blossoms, and golden fruit every twenty-four hours. It was known as the golden apple-tree. In the morning the first thing when he woke up the Tsar would look out his bedroom window to see that all was well with his beloved tree.

One morning when as usual he looked out he was grieved to see that the tree had been stripped of all the golden fruit which had ripened during the night.

“Who has stolen my golden apples?” he cried.

The palace guards looked everywhere for some trace of the thief but found nothing.

The next morning the same thing had happened and every morning thereafter when the Tsar looked out of his bedroom window he saw that the tree had again been stripped of its golden fruit.

He called his three sons to him and said:

“Is it seemly that a Tsar who has three able-bodied sons should be robbed night after night of his golden apples? Are you willing that this should happen and you do nothing about it?”

The eldest son who was a braggart said:

“My father, you need say no more. I myself will watch to-night and when the thief appears I will overpower him and bring him to you.”

So the eldest son watched that night, standing on guard under the apple-tree and leaning against its trunk.

As midnight approached his eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep. While he slept the golden apples ripened and were stolen and the next morning, as usual, the branches were bare.

The second son who was a crafty youth laughed at his brother and said:

“To-night I will watch. I will pretend to be asleep and when the thief appears I will jump upon him and overpower him.”

So when night came the second son went on guard under the tree and in order to deceive the thief he lay down on the ground and closed his eyes. At first he stayed wide awake but as the hours dragged by he grew tired and then, because he was in such a comfortable position, he too fell soundly asleep. Midnight came and the apples ripened but the next morning, when the second prince awoke, the tree had again been stripped of its golden fruit.

The Tsar's Youngest Son now said:

"Father, let me go on guard to-night."

His brothers jeered and the Tsar shook his head.

"Nay, nay, my boy, why should you succeed where your older brothers have failed? It is God's will that my golden apples should be stolen and I must submit."

But the Youngest Son insisted that he, too, be given a chance to capture the thief and at last the Tsar consented.

"I will sleep soundly the first part of the night," the Youngest Prince thought to himself, "and with God's help wake up at midnight."

As soon as it was dark he had his bed carried outdoors and placed under the apple-tree. Then after commending his undertaking to God he lay down and fell soundly to sleep. Just before midnight he awoke. The apples had ripened and were shining among the leaves like golden lanterns.

On the stroke of midnight there was a whirr of wings and nine beautiful peafowl came flying down from the sky. Eight of them settled on the branches of the apple-tree and began eating the golden fruit. The ninth alighted beside the Young Prince and as she touched the ground changed into a lovely maiden.

She was so beautiful and gentle that the Young Prince fell madly in love with her and at once began wooing her with kisses and caresses. She responded to his love and they spent the night together in great happiness.

At the first streak of dawn she jumped up, saying:

"My dear one, I must leave you now!"

"But you will come again, won't you?" the Prince asked.

"Yes," she promised him. "To-night."

Suddenly the Prince remembered the golden apples. The peafowl in the tree were about to eat the last of them.

"Can't you make them leave just one apple for my father?" the Prince begged.

The maiden spoke to the birds and they flew down with two of the golden apples, one for the Tsar and one for

the Prince himself.

Then the maiden lifted her arms above her head, changed into a peafowl, and with the other eight flew off into the morning sky.

The Prince carried the two apples to his father and the Tsar was so delighted that he forgot to ask the Prince the particulars of his adventure.

The next night the Prince again slept under the apple-tree and awoke just before midnight to hear the whirr of wings and see the nine peafowl come flying down from the sky. Eight of them settled on the branches of the apple-tree and the ninth, as before, alighted beside him and as she touched the earth changed into the lovely maiden of his heart. Again they passed the night together in great happiness and in the early dawn before she flew away the maiden gave him the last two of the golden apples.

This went on night after night until the Prince's two elder brothers were mad with jealousy and consumed with curiosity to know what happened every night under the apple-tree. At last they went to an evil old woman and bribed her to spy on the Young Prince.

"Find out what happens every night at the apple-tree," they told her, "and we will reward you richly."

So the evil old woman hid herself near the apple-tree and that night when the prince fell asleep she crept under his bed. Midnight came and she heard the whirr of wings and presently she saw the white feet of a lovely maiden touch the ground and she heard the prince say: "My love, is it you?"

Then as the Prince and the maiden began kissing each other and exchanging vows of love very slowly and cautiously she reached up her hand from under the bed and groped around until she felt the maiden's hair. Then with a scissors she snipped off a lock.

"Oh!" the maiden cried in terror. She jumped up, lifted her arms above her head, changed into a peafowl, and without another word flew off with the other eight and vanished in the sky.

In a fury the Prince searched about to see what had frightened his loved one. He found the old woman under the bed and dragging her out by the hair he struck her dead with his sword. And good riddance it was, too, for she was an evil old thing and only caused mischief in the world.

But putting the evil old woman out of the way did not, alas, bring back the lovely maiden. The Prince waited for

her the next night and the next and many following nights but she nevermore returned.

The magic apple-tree of course was no longer robbed of its golden fruit, so the Tsar was happy once again and never tired of praising the valor of his youngest son. But as for the prince, in spite of his father's praise he grew sadder and sadder.

Finally he went to the Tsar and said:

“Father, I have lost the maiden whom I love and life without her is not worth the living. Unless I go out in the world and find her I shall die.”

The Tsar tried to dissuade him but when he could not he mounted him on a fine horse, gave him a serving man to accompany him, and sent him off with his blessing.

The Prince and his man wandered hither and thither over the world inquiring everywhere for news of nine peafowl one of whom was a lovely maiden. They came at last to a lake on the shore of which lived an ugly old woman with an only daughter.

“Nine peafowl,” she repeated, “and one of them a lovely maiden! You must mean the nine sisters, the enchanted princesses, who fly about as peafowl. They come here every morning to bathe in the lake. What can you want with them?”

The Prince told the old woman that one of them was his love and that unless he married her he would die.

“Die, indeed!” scoffed the old woman. “That’s no way for a handsome young man to talk! I’ll tell you what you ought to do: give up thought of this peafowl princess and marry my daughter. Then I’ll make you heir to all my riches.”

She called out her daughter who was as ugly as herself and cross and ill-natured in the bargain. Just one look at her and the Prince said firmly:

“No! If I can’t marry my own dear love I won’t marry any one!”

“Very well!” said the old woman shortly.

When the Prince’s back was turned she called the serving man aside and whispered:

“Will you do what I tell you if I pay you well?”

The serving man who was a mean greedy fellow nodded his head and the old woman handed him a small bellows.

“Hide this in your shirt,” she told him, “and don’t let your master see it. Then to-morrow morning when you go down to the lake with him to see the nine peafowl slip it out and blow it on the back of his neck. Do this and I’ll give you a golden ducat.”

The serving man took the bellows and did as the old woman directed. The next morning down at the lake just as the nine peafowl came flying into sight he crept up behind the Prince and blew the bellows on the back of his neck. Instantly sleep overcame the Prince. His eyes closed, his head drooped, and the reins fell from his hands.

Eight of the peafowl alighted on the water’s edge, changed into lovely maidens and went bathing in the lake, but the ninth flew straight down to the Prince, fluttered her wings in his face and uttering sad cries tried hard to arouse him.

The eight finished their baths, changed back into birds, and calling their sister they all flew off together. Then and not till then did the Prince awaken.

“Ah!” he cried, “how could I have fallen asleep just when the peafowl appeared? Where are they now? Are they gone?”

“Yes,” his man told him, “they’re gone. Eight of them changed into lovely maidens and went bathing in the lake but the ninth fluttered about your head and tried in every way to arouse you. I tried to arouse you, too, but you kept on sleeping.”

“Strange!” thought the Prince. “How could I have fallen asleep at such a time? I’ll have to try again to-morrow morning.”

The next morning the same thing happened. The treacherous serving man again blew the bellows on the back of the Prince’s neck and instantly the Prince sank into a deep sleep from which the ninth peafowl was unable to arouse him.

As she rose to join her sisters she said to the serving man:

“When your master awakens tell him that to-morrow is the last day we shall come here to bathe in the lake.”

The peafowl were no sooner gone than the Prince rubbed his eyes and looked about.

“What! Where are they? Have I been asleep again?”

The serving man pretended to be deeply grieved.

“I tried hard to awaken you, master, but I couldn’t. The ninth peafowl as she flew away said to tell you that to-morrow is the last day they’ll come to the lake.”

The next day as the Prince waited for the appearance of the nine peafowl he galloped madly along the shore of the lake hoping in this way to ward off the strange sleep. But the moment the nine peafowl appeared in the sky he was so delighted that he drew rein and the treacherous serving man was able to slip up behind him and blow the magic bellows on his neck. So again he slept soundly while the ninth peafowl fluttered about his head and tried vainly to arouse him.

As she was flying away she said to the serving man:

“Tell your master that now he will never find me unless he strikes off the head from the nail.”

When the Prince awoke the serving man delivered this message.

“What can she mean?” the Prince said.

He looked hard at the serving man and something in the fellow’s appearance made him suspect treachery.

“You know more than you’re telling me!” the Prince cried, and taking the cowardly fellow by the throat he shook him and choked him until he had got the truth out of him.

“Ha!” cried the Prince. “Now I understand! You are the nail of which my dear love warns me!”

The fellow whined and begged for mercy but the Prince with one blow of his sword struck off his head. Then, leaving the body where it fell for the old woman to bury, he mounted his horse and again set forth on his quest.

Everywhere he went he made inquiries about the nine enchanted peafowl and everywhere people shook their

heads and said they had never heard of them. At last high up in a wild mountain he found an old hermit who knew all about them.

“Ah,” he said, “you mean the nine princesses. Eight of them have broken the enchantment that held them and are now happily married. The ninth awaits you. She is living in the royal palace of a beautiful city that lies three days’ journey to the north of this mountain. When you find her, if you do just as she says she, too, will soon be free of all enchantment. Then she will be made queen.”

The Prince thanked the hermit and rode on. After three days he came to the city of which the hermit had told him. He made his way to the palace and into the Princess’s presence. Sure enough the Princess was his own dear love. She received him with joy, promised soon to marry him, and gave over to him the keys of the palace.

“You shall now be master here,” she told him, “to go where you like and do as you like. There is only one thing that you must not do, only one place where you must not go. Under the palace are twelve cellars. Here are the keys to them all. Go into eleven of them whenever you will but you must never open the door of the twelfth one. If you do a heavy misfortune may fall upon both of us.”

One day while the Princess was walking in the garden, the young Prince thought he would go through the cellars. So, taking the keys, he unlocked the cellars one after another until he had seen eleven of them. Then he stood before the door of the twelfth wondering why the Princess had warned him not to open it.

“I’ll open it just a little,” he thought to himself. “If there’s something inside that tries to get out, I’ll close it quickly.”

So he took the twelfth key, unlocked the twelfth door, and peeped inside the twelfth cellar. It was empty except for one huge cask with an open bunghole.

“I don’t see anything in here to be afraid of,” he said.

Just then he heard a groan from inside the cask and a voice called out in a begging, whining tone:

“A cup of water, brother! A cup of water! I am dying of thirst!”

Now the Prince thought to himself that it was a terrible thing for any living creature to be dying of thirst. So he hurried out, got a cup of water, and poured it into the open bunghole. Instantly one of the three iron hoops that bound the cask burst asunder and the voice inside the cask said:

“Thank you, brother! Thank you! Now give me another cup! I am dying of thirst!”

So the Prince poured in a second cup and the second iron hoop snapped apart and when the voice still begged for more water he poured in a third cup. The third hoop broke, the staves of the cask fell in, and a horrid dragon sprang out. Before the Prince could move, he had flown through the door of the twelfth cellar into the eleventh cellar, then into the tenth cellar, the ninth cellar, the eighth cellar, the seventh cellar, the sixth, the fifth, the fourth, the third, the second, the first, and so out into the garden. The Prince reached the garden just in time to see the monster overpower the Princess.

“Alas, my dear one, what have you done?” cried the poor Princess as the dragon carried her off. “The enchantment would soon have been broken and I could have married you if only you had not gone into the twelfth cellar!”

Heartbroken at what had happened, the Prince mounted his horse and started off in pursuit of the dragon.

“I must do what I can to rescue my loved one,” he said, “even if it costs me my life.”

He rode many days until he came to the castle of the dragon. The dragon was out and the Princess received him with tears of joy.

“Come,” he said to her, “let us escape before the dragon returns.”

The Princess sighed and shook her head.

“How, my loved one, can we escape? The dragon rides a magic horse and however fast we go he will be able to overtake us.”

But the Prince insisted that they make the attempt. So she mounted with him and off they went.

When the dragon arrived home and found her gone, he laughed a brutal laugh and said to his horse:

“I suppose that foolish young Prince has been here and is trying to carry her off. Shall we start after them now

or wait till we've had our supper?"

"We might as well eat," the horse said, "for we'll overtake them anyway."

So they both ate and then the dragon mounted the magic horse and in no time at all they had overtaken the fugitives.

"I ought to tear you to pieces," the dragon said to the Prince, "but I won't this time because you gave me a cup of water. However, I warn you not to try this foolishness again!"

With that he clutched the poor weeping Princess in his scaly arms and carried her back to the castle.

What was the Prince to do now? He tried to plan some other way of rescuing the Princess but he could think of none. In spite of the dragon's threat he went back the next day and tried the same thing again. Again the dragon overtook him and snatched back the Princess.

"I have spared you one time," he said to the Prince, "and I will spare you this one time more for the sake of the water you gave me. But I warn you if you come again I will tear you to pieces."

But what man worthy the name will accept such a warning when the safety and happiness of his loved one is concerned? The next day while the dragon was out the Prince again returned to the castle.

"It is plain," he said to the Princess, "that we can never escape until we, too, get a magic horse. We must find out where the dragon got his. To-night when he comes home, speak him fair and caress his head and when he is in fine humor ask him about his horse—what kind of a horse it is and where he got it. Then I will come back to-morrow at this same hour and you can tell me."

So that night when the dragon came home the Princess allowed him to put his head in her lap and she scratched him softly behind the ears and petted him until he was purring like a giant cat.

"Urrh! Urrh! Urrh!" purred the dragon. "How happy we are here, just you and I! What a foolish young man that Prince of yours is to think I'd let him carry you off! Urrh! Urrh! Urrh!"

"Yes," the Princess agreed, "he is foolish or he would never suppose his horse could outrace yours."

"Urrh! Urrh!" the dragon purred. "You're right! He seems to think my horse is an ordinary horse. Why, I got my horse from the Old Woman of the Mountain and the only other horse in the world that can outstrip him is

another horse that the Old Woman still has. The Prince would have a hard time getting him!”

The Princess still scratching the dragon behind his ears, just where he loved it most, asked softly:

“Why?”

“Urrh! Urrh! Urrh! Because the Old Woman will never give that horse away until a man comes along who is able to guard for three nights in succession the Old Woman’s mare and foal. Any one who attempts this and fails she kills. But even if a man were to succeed he would never get the right horse for the old witch would palm off another on him. Urrh! Urrh! Urrh! Oh, that feels good, my dear!”

“How would she do that?” the Princess asked.

“Urrh! Urrh! Urrh! You see she says to every man who undertakes to guard the mare: ‘If you succeed you may have any horse in my stable.’ Then she shows him twelve beautiful stallions with shiny coats, but she doesn’t show him a scrawny miserable looking beast that lies neglected on the dung heap. Yet this is the magic horse and brother to mine.”

Now the Princess knew all she needed to know and the next day when the Prince came she told him what the dragon had said. So the Prince at once set out to find the Old Woman of the Mountain.

He traveled three days over waste places and through strange lands. On the first day as he was riding along the shores of a lake he heard a little voice crying out:

“Help me, brother, help me and—who knows?—some day I may help you!”

The Prince looked down and saw a fish that was floundering on the sand. He dismounted to get the fish and throw it back into the water.

“Take one of my scales,” the fish said. “Then if ever you need my help just rub the scale.”

So the Prince, before he threw the fish into the lake, scraped off a scale and tied it in a corner of his handkerchief. Then he rode on.

The second day a fox that had been caught in a trap called out to him:

“Help me, brother, help me and—who knows?—some day I may help you!”

The Prince opened the trap and the fox, before it limped away, gave the Prince one of its hairs and said:

“If ever you need me, rub this hair.”

The third day he met a raven that had fallen on a thorn and was pinned to the ground.

“Help me, brother, help me!” the raven begged, “and—who knows?—some day I may help you!”

The Prince lifted the raven off the thorn and the raven, before it flew away, gave the Prince one of its feathers saying:

“If ever you need me, rub this feather.”

So the Prince reached the house of the Old Woman of the Mountain with the fish’s scale, the fox’s hair, and the raven’s feather each safely tied in a corner of his handkerchief.

The Old Woman of the Mountain was an ugly old witch with a long nose that hooked down and a long chin that hooked up.

“Ha! Ha!” she cackled when she saw the Prince. “Another one that wants service with the Old Woman, eh?”

“Yes,” said the Prince.

“You know the conditions?” the Old Woman said. “Guard my mare and her foal for three nights in succession and you may have any horse in my stable. But if she escapes you, then your head is mine and I’ll stick it up there as a warning to other rash young men.”

The Old Woman pointed to a high picket fence that surrounded the courtyard. On every picket but one there was a grinning human skull. The Prince looked and the only picket that had no skull called out:

“I want my skull, granny! I want my skull!”

The Old Woman gave a wicked laugh.

“You see,” she said, “we were expecting you!”

When night fell the Prince led out the mare and her foal to a grassy meadow. To make sure that she would not escape him, he mounted her. Midnight came and he must have fallen asleep for suddenly he awoke to find himself astride a rail with an empty bridle in his hand. In despair he looked in all directions. At one end of the meadow was a pond.

“She may have gone there to drink,” he said to himself.

At the pond he saw a hoofprint.

“Ah,” he thought, “if my fish were here, it could tell me.”

He untied the corner of the handkerchief that had the fish scale, rubbed the scale gently, and at once a little voice called out from the water:

“What is it, brother? Can I help you?”

“Can you tell me what has become of the Old Woman’s mare and foal?”

“Aye, brother, that I can! She and the foal are turned into fish and are down here in the water hiding amongst us. Strike the water three times with the bridle and say: ‘Mare of the Old Woman, come out!’ That will bring her!”

The Prince did this. There was a commotion in the water, a big fish and a little fish leaped high in the air, fell on shore, and instantly changed to mare and foal. When morning came the Prince drove them back to the Old Woman.

She grinned and pretended to be pleased but, when she had the mare alone in the stable, the Prince heard her beating the poor creature and saying:

“Why didn’t you do as I told you and hide among the fishes?”

“I did,” whinnied the mare, “but the fishes are his friends and he found me!”

“To-night,” the Old Woman snarled, “hide among the foxes and this time don’t let him find you! Do you hear me? The foxes!”

The Prince remembered this and the second night when he awoke to find himself again sitting astride a rail

and holding an empty bridle in his hand, he untied the second corner of his handkerchief, took out the fox's hair, and rubbed it gently.

Instantly he heard a little bark and the fox's voice said:

"What is it, brother? Can I help you?"

"Can you tell me," the Prince asked, "what has become of the Old Woman's mare and foal?"

"Aye, brother, that I can! She and the foal are turned into foxes and are over in yonder woods now hiding among my people. Strike the earth three times with the bridle and say: 'Mare of the Old Woman, come back!' That will bring her!"

The Prince did this and instantly two foxes, a vixen and a cub, came trotting out of the woods and when they reached the Prince they changed back to mare and foal.

In the morning the Prince drove them home to the Old Woman. As before she grinned and pretended to be pleased but when she had the mare alone in the stable the Prince heard her giving the poor creature another beating and saying:

"Why didn't you do as I told you and hide among the foxes?"

"I did," whinnied the mare, "but the foxes are his friends, too, and he found me!"

"To-night," the Old Woman ordered, "hide among the ravens and this time don't let him find you!"

The third night the Prince tried hard to stay awake but sleep again overcame him and when he woke he found himself for the third time sitting astride a rail and holding the empty bridle in his hand. But he remembered the Old Woman's words and at once opened the third corner of his handkerchief and taking out the raven's feather rubbed it gently.

There was a flutter of wings and a raven's hoarse voice said:

"Caw! Caw! What is it, brother? Can I help you?"

"Can you tell me what has become of the Old Woman's mare and foal?"

"Aye, brother, that I can! She and the foal are turned into ravens and are perched in yonder tall fir tree hiding

among my folk. Strike the trunk of the tree three times with your bridle and say: 'Mare of the Old Woman, come down!' That will bring her!"

The Prince went over to the fir tree, struck it three times with the bridle and said:

"Mare of the Old Woman, come down!"

Instantly two ravens, a big one and a fledgling, fluttered to earth and changed to mare and foal. So when morning came the Prince was able to drive them back to the Old Woman and claim his reward.

The Old Woman was angry enough to kill him but she pretended to be pleased and she smiled and grinned and she patted the Prince on the arm and said:

"Aye, my son, but you are a hero! You have won the reward and you are worthy of it. Choose now the finest horse in my stable. It is yours."

She drove the twelve handsome stallions out into the courtyard and urged them on the Prince one after the other. But at each the Prince shook his head.

"I am only a poor adventurer," he said. "Such horses as these are too fine for me. Give me rather that poor mangy creature that lies over yonder on the dung heap. That is the one I choose."

Then the Old Woman fell into an awful rage and shook and chattered and begged the Prince not to take that horse.

"It would shame me," she said, "to have you ride off on that poor beast which is half dead already! No, no, my son, you mustn't take him!"

"But that's the one I'm going to take," the Prince said firmly, "that and none other!" He drew his sword and lifted it threateningly. "I have won whatever horse I choose and now, Old Woman, if you do not keep your bargain I shall strike you dead with this sword and stick up your grinning skull on that empty picket!"

At that the empty picket began to shout:

"I want my skull! I want my skull!"

When the Old Woman of the Mountain saw that the Prince knew what he was about, she gave up trying to

deceive him and let him lead off the horse he wanted. So the Prince walked away dragging the poor mangy creature after him. When he was out of sight of the Old Woman's house, he turned to the horse and began rubbing down his rough coat and patting his wobbly legs.

"Now, my beauty," he said, "we'll see what you're made of!"

Under his hand the mangy beast changed to a glorious animal—one of those wonder horses of the olden days that rise on the wind and gallop with the clouds. Soon his coat shone like burnished gold and his tail and mane streamed out like flames of fire.

"Ah, my master," the horse said, "I have been waiting for you this many a day! We shall have glorious adventures together!"

Then the Prince mounted him and he rose on the wind and went so swiftly that he covered in three minutes all the distance that it had taken the Prince three days to go on an ordinary horse. Whiff! and there they were at the dragon's castle and there was the Princess running out to welcome them.

"Now, my dear one," the Prince said, lifting the Princess up in front of him, "this time the dragon will not overtake us!"

The wonder horse rose on the wind and off they went.

When the dragon got home and found that the Princess had fled again, he said to his horse:

"Shall we follow her at once or shall we eat supper first?"

"It's all one what we do," the horse said, "for we shall never overtake her."

At that the dragon leaped upon his horse and, mounting on the wind, started off in hot pursuit. Presently they caught sight of the other horse carrying the Prince and the Princess but, try as he would, the dragon's horse could not overtake the other. The dragon beat his horse unmercifully and dug his sharp claws into the horse's tender flanks until the horse in agony called out to the Prince's horse:

"Hold, brother, hold! Let me overtake you or this monster will kill me with his cruelty!"

“Why do you carry such a monster?” the Prince’s horse called back. “Throw him from you and be rid of him forever!”

At that the dragon’s horse reared suddenly and the dragon, losing his balance, fell and was dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

And that was the end of that dragon!

Then the Princess wept but her tears were tears of joy for she knew now that the enchantment that had bound her was broken forever. Never again would she be changed into a peafowl at the whim of a wicked dragon, never again be separated from her loved one. Presently she mounted the dragon’s horse and together she and the Prince returned to the beautiful city. The people came out to meet them and when they heard of the dragon’s death a holiday was proclaimed and amidst music and dancing and merrymaking the Princess married the Prince. Then she was made Queen of that beautiful city and the Prince was made King. They ruled long and wisely and better than that they lived happily for they loved each other.

So now you know the story of the Peafowl who became a Queen and of the Tsar’s Youngest Son who married her.

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