

Mr. Rucker shook a chubby fist at Wayne. "You hillbillies . . . You haven't heard the last/of this!

Fox in the Bag

Any young squirt with a platinum fox and tin-can manners would do well to look up Wayne McCloud in the Dabbit Run social register. The entry: "Poacher first class; free, white, and a bad man to tangle with"

LD man Rucker had had ideas to match his pocketbook when he had built his log house back in the days when the Dabbit Run hills had been covered with mighty pine and hemlock forests. The house was as big as two ordinary houses plus a barn.

The pine and hemlock had long passed on, and old man Rucker with them; but the house still stood on a low ridge overlooking a three-hundred-acre tangle of laurel and brambles that

By JIM KJELGAARD

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was known as Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

When the house had been built, the three hundred acres was a stand of majestic pines. But lumber barons had not sacrificed practical values to esthetic ones.

The descendants of old man Rucker had gone to the cities to spend the

money he had wrested from the Dabbit Run hills, but they kept the cabin in good repair. Every year it was opened for a week or so to a party of hunters.

The house, except for the hunting season, had been vacant for years. Consequently, on a torpid day in mid-August, when Rucker's Rabbit Patch bristled with activity, Wayne McCloud, who was passing on the Dabbit Run road, turned aside to see what all the fuss was about.

Four trucks stood in front of the house, and a gang of overalled men swarmed about them removing tarpaulin-covered loads. Two men on the roof of the house were ripping away the mossy shingles, and three following them were putting on a roof of bright new composition sheeting. Inside the cabin hammers pounded and saws whined.

Wayne accosted a blase young workman who was pecking away with a grubhoe at the stone-littered drive.

"Young Rucker's fixin' to make hisself a summer home."

"He's sure goin' to a heap of trouble about it," Wayne observed, noting that the roof alone would probably cost more than any house in Dabbit Run.

The workman fixed Wayne with a supercilious eye. "Buddy," he said profoundly, "that guy's got more thousand-dollar bills than any two hound dogs you ever saw've got hair."

Suddenly, as if he had been injected with new and very stimulating currents of energy, the young man fell to digging furiously with the grubhoe.

Wayne sat comfortably beside the road watching him. The Dabbit Run farmers were always working, but it was inspiring to see any outlander fling himself into toil with such grand abandon.

Wayne reached into his pocket and took out his knife. He cut a poplar shoot that grew handy and fell to whittling. He whittled the head of a rattle-snake on the end of it, and was just rounding it off nicely when the man who had inspired the sudden burst of toil in the workman arrived.

Wayne looked up.

THE man was about twenty years old. He had a soft pink cheek and brown hair that was combed high on his head. The whipcord breeches, silk shirt, and polished leather boots he wore had cost him as much as a Dabbit Run farmer earned in a good summer.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Wayne.

It wasn't everybody, or it was hardly anybody, who could talk like that to Wayne without making instant apology or more drastic amends. But everyone had to make allowance for youth and inexperience.

"Right now I'm whittlin' on a snake," Wayne said easily. "Got its head nigh shaped."

"Do you know you're on private property?"

Wayne drew his feet out of the road onto the grassy bank. "No I ain't. The south border of Rucker's Rabbit Patch is this here road. North she runs to that runty little hemlock, the top of which you can see. West she borders the Dabbit Run road, an' east she runs three chains an' ten links beyond the shanty. It's bordered all around by state land, an' this is state land."

The young man's voice had the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed. "I'll give you thirty seconds to leave."

"Sho'," Wayne said. "Never could bring myself to do nothin' in thutty seconds. So, seein' as I ain't goin', suppose you leave." 86 ARGOSY

The young man's cheek reddened. "What's your name?"

Wayne stood up. He was getting a little mad now, but there was no point in slapping this fresh kid down.

"I'm Wayne McCloud," he said. "Anythin' else you want to know about me, look in the Dabbit Run social register."

"You better be careful," the workman warned. "That's Mr. Rucker."

"When your horn's wanted in this ruckus, it will be tooted," Wayne said.

Goaded by mounting fury, young Mr. Rucker lost his dignity. He shook a chubby fist at Wayne.

"I was told about you hillbillies! You need a lesson, and I'll make an example of you! You haven't heard the last of this!"

But Wayne, shrugging, had already started back down to the Dabbit Run road. There were times to fight and times not to, and a man wouldn't feel exactly right if he slammed that kid one.

Wayne was halfway to his house when young Rucker's car, with a swirling cloud of dust in tow, soared past him.

THE incident at Rucker's was all but forgotten when Wayne reached home. This was August, and Wayne had large plans for the hunting season that opened in October.

He could, for the sum of one hundred and ten dollars, buy as good a coon dog as had ever run the Dabbit Run hills. Coons were high this year, would average four dollars, and any enterprising hunter with a good hound could take at least sixty or seventy. The legal limit was twenty-five, but Wayne never had troubled himself about technicalities.

The only obstacle now was the lack

of ninety of the hundred and ten dollars necessary to purchase the dog.

That obstacle wasn't insurmountable. To get the money Wayne had done what for him was an unprecedented thing: gone to work. They were building a road over Loft way, and any able-bodied Dabbit Run male who wanted it could have a job. It paid three dollars a day, and there, were thirty-three working days before coon season. Wayne started work tomorrow.

He was up with daylight. He ate a heavy breakfast, packed three sandwiches in a brown paper sack, and started up the road. The trucks were gone from the Rucker house, but there were four cars parked there.

Wayne crossed the hill at the head of Dabbit Run and walked down to where the power graders had ripped a great scar that was to be the road leading into the Loft. Wayne sat down on the seat of a grader to wait for operations to begin.

A half hour later Ike Thomas, the road boss, drove his little sedan to the head of the new road. Wayne called languidly from the grader.

"I'd like a job sittin' in the shade, Ike."

Ike Thomas, a huge man dressed in leather pants and a cotton shirt, both badly in need of washing, got out of the car. He walked to the grader and looked up at Wayne.

"Look here," he said bluntly, "you -ain't workin' on this road."

Wayne sat up, startled. "Why?"

"I ain't supposed to say," Ike rumbled. "But that young Rucker was chasin' around yesterday. He found out ever'thing he could about you in Bradby, and as soon as he found out you was goin' to work here, he hiked to the superintendent's office and spiked it.

His old man's got a wallop, and the kid telephoned him. I wouldn't be tell-in' you this if I didn't know you could keep your mouth buttoned."

"I see," Wayne said soberly. "Well, it ain't your fault. Thanks for tellin' me. I did have a little run-in with young Rucker yesterday."

"You pick the darndest people to run in with," Ike said. "You made that soapy-eared young squirt madder'n a wet hornet. Not that he don't need it from what I saw of him. If it wasn't for my five kids and my needin' this job, I'd put you on anyway. You watch that kid, 'Wayne. He aims to run you out of Dabbit Run."

"Some people run easy an' some don't," Wayne observed. "So long, Ike."

Wayne walked back to Dabbit Run, his face crimson with anger. A baby-faced nitwit twenty years old was going to run him out of Dabbit Run and had already cost him a good road job!

That young squirt needed a hickory switch laid across the seat of those whipcord breeches; and he would get it just as soon as Wayne got back to Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

But, by the time he had walked almost back, Wayne had cooled off some. A switching or a good right to the jaw was a fine thing, but there was much he might do to create a more enduring impression.

Wayne frowned thoughtfully. The armor of the heir to the Rucker fortune couldn't be impregnable. And, when Wayne found the weak spot, he could make up for all insults.

INSTEAD of entering by the road that led to the log house overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch, Wayne slipped into the woods a quarter-mile to one side. Slipping from tree to tree, he

stalked down the ridge. As they had been yesterday, a gang of workmen were busy about the lodge.

Five big trucks, piled high with mesh fencing, stood in front of the lodge. Wayne crouched in the brush.

He had been there an hour when a station wagon whirled up the Dabbit Run road, turned into the road leading to the lodge, and spewed another crowd of workmen forth. Then, accompanied by a middle-aged man in black leather leggings and smart brown clothes, Wayne saw young Rucker coming down the ridge.

Wayne lay motionless.

The pair continued on down the ridge and stopped thirty feet away from where Wayne lay hidden.

"You want the whole thing fenced in, Mr. Rucker?" the middle-aged man in the brown uniform asked.

Young Rucker waved a languid hand, the gesture of one who is undeniably monarch of all he surveys or expects to survey.

"All of it. The fence will be ten feethigh with two feet underground. It's going to be a private shooting ground. The first of November we're going to initiate the season with a fox hunt. After that I'll import some pheasants, and I suppose some rabbits. Of course, there'll be a gamekeeper stationed at the lodge."

Wayne waited until they had gone on, then sneaked through the brush back to the road. The more ideas some people got, the sillier they came. What was the use of fencing three hundred acres to hunt on when there was three million around all unfenced?

A fox hunt: probably they were going to turn a couple of foxes loose inside the fence after it was built, then go in and shoot them. Wayne shook his head.

Then a spontaneous grin spread over his face and he felt lighter as he walked on down the road towards his house.

WAYNE' was still light-hearted and happy when he got to his house. Even the sight of Lem Knowles sitting on his front door step didn't darken the day.

Lem was the Patten County game warden, and patrolled Dabbit Run. Wayne was the most notorious outlaw in Lem's district, and Lem's burning ambition was to put Wayne in jail. On more than one occasion Lem had come close to fulfilling that ambition.

But right now Lem appeared to be occupied with other things. He grunted a reply to Wayne's cheerful greeting.

"You look like you might be wearin' red flannel underwear, Lem," Wayne observed sympathetically. "Or did your wife beat you up again or somethin'? You're lower'n a lily root."

Lem Knowles sprang to his feet and stood with his back against the porch rail. "Wayne, in the first place, get this. I know that if you ever got a jail sentence for every fish an' game law you ever broke, you'd be in jail for the next hundred an' sixty years. You know it too. Some day, when the luck turns my way, I'm gonna soak you."

"How you talk!" Wayne said virtuously. "You know darn well you'd have to hunt the breadth an' width of Dabbit Run to find an honester man than me."

"In spite of everything I kind of like some things about you," Lem confessed. "I've darn near had you fifty times, an' you allus got away. It's my fault, an' nobody else's, I never got you. I ain't kickin'. An' I'm just hopin', Wayne, that you ain't goin' to think I had anything to do with such lowdown tricks as this. I—"

"Such tricks as what?" Wayne de-

Lem turned a troubled face to Wayne's. "Both your huntin' an' fishin' licenses are goin' to be revoked for three months."

"My what!"

Lem shook his head. "It ain't my doin's, an' I hope you believe that. They wanted to make it six months. I had to fight like hell to get it down. When I take you in, it'll be for somethin' I catch you doin', an' it'll be on the level."

Wayne stood stock still, the shock he felt showing in his face. He lived by hunting, fishing, the few dollars he could pick up trapping, and the vegetables he raised in his garden. Taking away his hunting and fishing licenses meant that he would have to risk jail for at least half his meals.

Slowly he reached up with his left hand to unpin the license button on his shirt. He handed it to Lem Knowles, and saw it dropped into Lem's pocket.

"Darn it," Lem said miserably, "I dunno when I've hated to do anything as much as this. But I got orders straight from headquarters an' can't do nothin' else. If the loan of ten dollars will help—"

"Thanks, but never mind, Lem." Wayne's jaw snapped shut. "I know how it is, an' I'll take care of everything."

Wayne watched Lem out of sight. Again he felt a leaping rage, and again he fought to control it. That young squirt with the whipcord pants and baby face—

When it came time for him to pay for all this, he'd pay hard and plenty. A mere sock on the jaw couldn't begin to cover all of it now.

But, if he couldn't hunt and fish legally, it didn't make any difference

whether he waited for hunting season or not. Wayne grabbed a .25-20 from among his several guns and started up Duck Mountain.

Halfway up five deer jumped from a hemlock thicket, and with white tails waving, went bounding up the mountain. Wayne shot. A fat young buck fell.

Wayne dressed the buck and quartered it. He waited until twilight, then shouldered the four quarters of the deer and started back down to his house.

Twilight was nearly night when he got there, but it wasn't too dark for Wayne to detect a slight motion near his unused hog pen. Wayne stared at it, and after a bit made out a big skunk with a very broad white stripe down its back.

Wayne carried the deer inside his house and cut the flank meat from it. Thoughtfully he carried the flank meat, useless for human consumption, back outside and dumped it beside the hog pen.

Skunks are a lot easier to tame than most people think. Wayne had once known a man with a pet skunk that rode in the big inside pocket of his hunting coat when the man went hunting.

THE fifteenth of October brought with it both a spell of cold weather and the completion of work at the Rucker house.

The drive leading to the big house had been filled with crushed oyster shells. The log building had been completely remodeled, and hovered under its new roof as if guaranteeing shelter and warmth to those who would make merry there.

But the distinguishing characteristic of the changed Rucker place, the one

that caused much wonder and more merriment in Dabbit Run, was the fence around Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

Of galvanized two-inch mesh, the fence was sunk into the ground and topped with three strands of barbed wire so that nothing on the inside could get out and nothing on the outside could get in except through the triply padlocked gate.

Why anybody should want to fence in Rucker's Rabbit Patch was beyond Dabbit Run's understanding. After pondering every possible reason, Dabbit Run arrived at a general conclusion: young Rucker had more bats in his belfry than he had brush stalks in his rabbit patch.

During the period between the revocation of his licenses and the middle of October, Wayne had fared pretty well. By using the twenty dollars he had saved toward the coon hound to buy food in those lean times when Lem Knowles was watching him and he couldn't poach his meals, he had even managed to eat regularly.

But the twenty dollars was gone now, and the hunting season was gathering momentum that would shortly bring it into full swing. Wayne wouldn't get his license back for another month. If he only had that coon hound . . .

But he didn't have it and couldn't get it. And he had eaten only a skimpy breakfast and would have even a skimpier dinner because Lem Knowles and two deputies had been working in Dabbit Run for three days now, and might show up at any minute.

Wayne sat on his back porch whittling on another stick. Almost savagely he slashed the stick in half and threw the two parts from him. Inaction was hardly to be borne. First thing he knew, he'd be doing something he shouldn't. 90 ARGOSY

Then the two-car train that daily struggled up the tracks by Dabbit Run came along, whistled, and stopped at the Dabbit Run station.

Wayne leaped up, ran down to the track, and crossed behind the last car to the station. The baggage compartment on the mail car stood open. Two men were unloading a square box two and a half feet wide by four long.

"What ya got there?" Wayne asked. Lew Manners, who had worked on the Dabbit Run train since the tracks had been laid, scratched his gray head and spat a quid of tobacco.

"It's some kind of an animal for, le's see"-he read the address again-"Mr. Edwin Anthony Rucker, Chateau Rucker, Dabbit Run Station. Must be that new dump up the holler ain't it, Wavne?"

"Yeah," Wayne said. "You gonna leave this thing here?"

Lew Manners scratched his head again and looked at his watch. "I hate to. It's insured for fifteen hundred dollars. But we're fifteen minutes behind time now. Rucker's gamekeeper lift," the gamekeeper said. was supposed to pick it up."

"I'll watch it," Wayne offered.

"Will ye?" Lew Manners brightened and thrust a paper at Wayne. "Tha's the receipt. Have the gamekeeper sign it an' leave it in the mail box. An' thanks a lot."

MAYNE knelt beside the crate and lifted a corner of the cloth that covered it. There was a fox inside, a small animal with a sharp pointed nose and beady little eyes that looked eraftily up from the chaff-littered floor of the crate.

It was the size of an ordinary silver fox, but it wasn't a silver. Its sides were creamy, almost white, and it shaded to a rich gray back.

Wayne gasped. No wonder it was insured for fifteen hundred dollars. It was a platinum fox!

The gamekeeper of Chateau Rucker came fifteen minutes later in a rattling pickup truck. He rushed over to the platform and stood with watch in hand. Wayne sat comfortably near the crate. Finally the gamekeeper approached

"Pardon me. But what time does the train get here?"

"It's been here," Wayne told him.

The gamekeeper gasped.

"If you're from Rucker's," Wayne said, "this here crate is for you."

The gamekeeper lifted the cloth covering and looked in. A sigh broke from him.

"That's it," he said. "And will I be glad to get rid of it!"

Wayne shoved the receipt at him. "Sign this an' I'll help you load the thing."

The two lifted the crate onto the truck and tied it down.

"If you're going up, I'll give you a

Wayne climbed into the seat beside him. "Whāt's young Rucker aimin' to do?" he asked sociably. "Start a fur farm?"

"Oh no. That's a platinum fox. It's for the opening hunt at Chateau Rucker, scheduled for November first. Mr. Edwin Anthony has invited fifteen gentlemen and fifteen ladies to be his guests. The fox will be cast loose in the shooting grounds. The gentlemen, each carrying a .22 rifle with a single. cartridge, will hunt it. The one who brings it down will present it to his

"You mean," Wayne asked, "he's gonna let that fox go in the fence, then they're gonna go shoot it?"

"That's it."

"Sounds screwy to me," Wayne murmured. "When they gonna let the fox go?"

"Mr. Edwin Anthony will personally attend to loosing the fox some time during the night before the hunt. Even I am not to be permitted access to the shooting grounds until the hunt it over. The fox is very valuable."

Wayne shrugged. "Hope they have a good time. Well, this is where I get off. Thanks for the ride."

AT NINE o'clock in the evening of the thirty-first of October, a bright moon rose over Dabbit Run. It illuminated the Dabbit Run hills in black relief. It made bright pictures of itself in the eight shiny cars huddled in front of the Chateau Rucker. It sported with the countless frost crystals gathered on the new roof of the big lodge.

And it shone over Rucker's Rabbit Patch to light up both that and the man who, inside the fence, was carrying a sack and making a cautious way through the brush.

It didn't shine on Wayne McCloud because he had thoughtfully crawled under a laurel bush overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch a half-hour before the moon rose.

Wayne kept his eyes on the figure inside the fence. There could be no doubt that it was Edwin Anthony Rucker, and there wasn't much doubt that the sack he carried contained the platinum fox.

He made a careful way to the farthest corner of the fence and laid the sack down. He broke off a few laurel branches and covered the sack. Then he started back toward the lodge.

And that fitted exactly Wayne's already well-formed opinion of the character of young Rucker.

His fifteen guests and he were each supposed to have an equal chance at the fox. But young Rucker was taking no chances on anyone but himself getting a fox he had paid fifteen hundred dollars for. Tomorrow he could hunt to the corner, kneel down in the brush, take the fox out of the bag, and shoot it

Wayne shook his head. If that was the way young Rucker hunted, he'd take his hunting with the meanest and lowest Dabbit Runner

Then the bright moon, for a part of a second at a time, shone on the flitting shadow that was Wayne McCloud going from bush to bush. A half hour later it revealed him fully as he walked back to the road and, making no attempt at concealment, down it.

The last the moon shone on Wayne that night was when it glanced through the window of his house and lighted Wayne's face, calm in sleep.

There was no reason for Wayne to get up early. The guests of Chateau Rucker would raise cain all night and wouldn't roll out much before nine in the morning. At half past eight Wayne was walking back up the road.

At a quarter to nine Lem Knowles, whizzing up the road in his little coupe, picked him up.

"I'll give you a lift, Wayne."

Lem frowned thoughtfully. Details of the Rucker hunt had been communicated to him along with a special request that he be present to see that no Dabbit Runner messed things up.

He glanced sideways at Wayne. Lem had been holding his breath since he'd revoked Wayne's licenses: it never had been exactly a healthy pastime to tread on Wayne's toes. Not that Lem thought too much of young Rucker; but orders to see that the hunt progressed as it should had come from headquarters.

Lem set his jaw. Wayne wouldn't interfere. He'd keep him in sight until the hunt was over.

"I suppose you're goin' to the Rucker hunt?" Lem said finally.

Wayne shrugged. "I should worry about their hunt. I got a couple of snares set on the ridge beyond Rucker's Rabbit Patch. Thought I might tie on to a fox or bobcat. Things ain't been too good since you took my licenses."

"I knew they wouldn't be," Lem admitted. "You'll have it back in a couple of weeks. Your snares ain't by no chance set close to Rucker's, are they?"

"There's one on the ridge, maybe seventy feet beyond their fence. I saw the tracks of a big 'ol fox there, an' thought I might take him. But the snare's set on state land. Mighty lucky thing for me foxes are vermin, an' I don't need no license to take 'em. Dunno how I'd live the next two weeks if it wasn't for that."

"That's right," Lem Knowles conceded. "Any fox anybody catches on state land belongs to him. I think I'll just stroll along with you when you look at that snare, though."

"Glad to have you," Wayne agreed cheerfully. "With you along I'll be sure not to get in trouble."

EM parked his car a quarter-mile beyond the drive leading to Chateau Rucker, that was just coming alive, and the two set out.

Wayne plunged into the brush and, when they were out of sight of the road, waited for Lem to catch up. Side by side they climbed the ridge overlooking Rucker's Rabbit Patch.

Wayne kept his eyes on the gray, steel-braced fence below them. Lem looked ahead. Then:

"You got one," Lem announced.

Wayne looked up, surprised. "Did I? Holy gee! Look at that!"

The snare had been set on a springpole formed by a bent sapling. Dangling two feet from the ground where it had been jerked when the snare had been tripped and the sapling sprang back into place, was a beautiful platinum fox.

Wayne picked it up. Delightedly he stroked the soft fur..

"Holy jeeminy! A platinum fox! That pelt's with upwards of a thousand dollars!"

"I suppose you didn't have the least idea that you was goin' to catch it, either," Lem Knowles said dryly. "I never would have thought there was a platinum fox in all Patten County."

"Nor me neither!" Wayne bubbled. "You know there ain't no funny business about this don't you, Lem? You saw me take it out of my snare, didn't you? An' you know that whoever catches a fox on state land owns it, don't you? That's the law."

"That's the law all right," Lem admitted. "I--"

But the hunt was starting. From the lodge streamed fifteen smartly dressed hunters, each armed with a .22 rifle. Young Rucker, still the softcheeked lord of the universe, made a careless and easy way along the side of the fence. The rest spread out to . various places, beating through the brush.

Lem and Wayne saw young Rucker approach the corner, watched him duck and go out of sight in the brush.

Then the crisp autumn air was drenched with an eye-smarting, throat-filling stench. Young Rucker leaped up, yelled, and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. Dropping his gun, at a dead run he started back along the fence.

But the stench followed him, seemed

to spring from him. In the corner of the fence appeared a big skunk with a very broad white stripe down its back. The skunk had given all he had to young Rucker and hadn't missed once.

"Let's get out of here," Lem Knowles said.

Lem shook his head. By all the rules Dabbit Run lived by, Wayne, having suffered serious handicaps, should have had to work like the dickens to get through the winter at all. But the deeper hole Wayne got into, the higher he leaped when he came out.

How the deuce that fox had gotten into Wayne's snare! Nobody but Wayne would ever know.

Sitting beside Lem in the car, Wayne held the platinum fox across his lap. It had been easy, for a man who had thrown as many trotlines as Wayne

had, to toss a hook and line over the fence, hook the bag the fox was in, draw it to him, and put the fox in the snare.

It had been even easier to lower the skunk into the place where the fox had been. For the past six weeks the skunk had been sleeping in a bag on Wayne's porch and hadn't made any fuss about it. But Wayne knew how to handle skunks.

"I wonder," Lem Knowles said after a bit, "I wonder just how that skunk got there?"

Wayne stretched luxuriously. There flashed before his mind a picture of the coon dog he should have had, the road job he had lost, and the lean two months when eating or going hungry had been a toss-up

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," he said dreamily.





The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

FINNIAN the Irish bard, a man equally dextrous with harp and blade, has become accustomed to the chaos that has spread through all Europe since the fall of Charlemagne's empire. He attends strictly to his own affairs—until the night he meets an eerie little man who claims to be an ancient Pictish priest. This gnome places a strange judgment on Finnian. "While you are in my land," he says, "you will aid any man or woman in need."

Shortly Finnian is embroiled in the turbu-

lent affairs of that region of France. He makes an enemy of Chilbert, a powerful robber baron: he establishes a tentative friendship with Father Walter, warlike abbot of a large monastery. The third important leader in the Loire district is Conan the Breton, and it is he whom Finnian rescues from Chilbert's men.

Having sworn blood-brotherhood, the Irish bard and the Breton chief wage a valiant battle against their attackers. Eventually some of Conan's followers come to their aid, but Finnian has been badly wounded. When he finds consciousness again, he is in care of a woodsman.

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