

# The Late Mattia Pascal – Chapter 6 – ... Click, click, click, click...

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In Italiano – [Il fu Mattia Pascal](#)

En Español – [El difunto Matias Pascal](#)



## The Late Mattia Pascal Chapter 6 ... Click, click, click, click...

Of all the things and people in the great salon, the ivory ball, gracefully circling the roulette in a direction opposite to the whirl of the quadrant, seemed alone to be at play: Click, click, click, click....

The ball alone! Surely this could not be play to the people standing and sitting there with their eyes glued upon that ball, tense in the torment occasioned them by its caprices. To that same ball, on the yellow squares of the table just below, many many hands had brought votive offerings of gold; and, all around, many other hands were nervously fingering more

gold—the gold of the next play; while suppliant eyes seemed to pursue the ball in its swift but graceful gyrations: “Where it be thy pleasure, little ball of ivory! Where it be thy pleasure, delightful, cruel, Divinity of Chance!”

I had wandered to Monte Carlo by merest accident—after one of the usual scenes between me, my mother-in-law, and my wife. In the harrowing torture of my recent bereavement, I had no endurance left for this life of quarreling, of bitter nagging, of physical and moral squalor absolute. One day in sheer disgust and quite without premeditation, I went to the old volume where I had put the money from Roberto, transferred the five hundred lire to my pocket, put on my hat and coat and took to the road.

I started out, on foot, with not a thought except that of escape from the hell in which I had been living. Mechanically, my steps turned toward a neighboring village through which the railroad passed. On the way thither a plan formed vaguely in my mind. I would go to Marseilles, and take a steamer thence to one of the Americas. The money I had with me should suffice—for the steerage at least. Beyond that, I might trust to luck. What could possibly happen to me anywhere worse than what I had been through? Perhaps beyond the horizon ahead a new slavery awaited me—but with heavier chains, I asked myself, than those I had just snapped from my feet? It would be interesting to see a bit of the world, at any rate. And I might even hope to shake off the deadly oppression that had settled on my spirit and was inhibiting all my impulses of ambition and action. To Marseilles, then!

But before I got to Nice my courage failed. Alas! Where was that old capacity for decision that had been one of the virtues of my boyhood? Discouragement must have eaten deeply into the fibre of my being. My will seemed to have decayed, to have been paralysed, in all my sufferings. Five hundred lire! Could I launch out into the unknown on that miserable guarantee? Had I the mental

training to win a successful battle for existence in a new and strange environment?

My train was to make a long stop at Nice. When I alighted there, I had virtually decided to go no farther, though I was not resolved to go back home. I compromised by wandering about through the town.

Somewhere on the Avenue de la Gare I stopped in front of a shop with a large gilded sign: Dépôt de Roulettes de Précision! Wheels of every description were on show in the windows, with other accessories of gaming, among these, a number of manuals, their paper covers ornamented with pictures of the roulette.

It has often been observed that unhappy people fall ready victims to superstition; however prone they may be thereafter to laugh at the credulity of others and the hopes which belief in luck aroused suddenly in themselves (hopes inevitably deceived, of course!). Well, I remember that when I had read the title of one of those manuals of gambling: "A Sure Method for Winning at Roulette," I walked away from the shop window with a smile of pitying contempt on my lips. Why was it then, that a few steps further on, I stopped, turned around, went back to the shop, and smiling with the same pitying contempt for the stupidity of others, bought a copy of that very manual?

I could make neither head nor tail to what it said. I failed to get a clear idea of what roulette was like, or even of the exact construction of the wheel. But I read on.

"Guess my trouble is with French," I finally concluded. I had never had a lesson in that language. Back in the Library I had looked a grammar through and worked out a text here and there. But I had no notion of French pronunciation, and I had never uttered a word in the strange tongue for fear of making people laugh. This latter preoccupation left me undecided for

some time as to whether I ought to enter a gambling house. But then I thought: "Here you were a moment ago starting off for the Americas with barely a cent to your name and without a word of Spanish or English inside your head. A man as brave as that ought to be brave enough to go as far as the Casino: you know a little French! Besides you have the manual..."

Monte Carlo, I further reflected, was only a short walk from Nice. "Neither my wife nor my mother-in-law know about this money Roberto sent me. I think I'll go and lose it there. That will take away all temptation to run away for good. Perhaps I can manage to save enough for a ticket home; but even if I don't..."

I had heard that the Casino had a beautiful garden with tall-and strong-trees. In the worst case I could take my belt and hang myself to one of these. Dying gratis, and with dignity, that would be indeed! "Who knows how much the poor devil may have lost?" people would say, on finding me!

To tell the truth, I was disappointed in the Casino. The portal, perhaps, was not so bad. Those eight marble columns really made you feel that the architect intended a sort of Temple to the Goddess Fortune. Here, then, was a big door, with side entrances, one to the right and one to the left. My French helped me over the TIREZ inscribed on the latter; and by inference I solved the POUSSEZ on the one in front of me: if "tirez" meant "pull," I could risk "push" on the other.

So I pushed, and I was admitted to the building.

All in bad taste! And something, I think, should be done about it! People, who go to Monte Carlo to leave good money behind, ought at least to have the satisfaction of being skinned in a place somewhat less pretentious and a whole lot more beautiful. All wideawake towns in Europe are putting up the most attractive slaughterhouses these days—a courtesy wasted, so far as I can see, on the poor unschooled animals that are

killed in them. The fact is, of course, that the great majority of players at Monte Carlo have something else on their minds than the decorations of those five great halls; just as the idlers sitting on the sofas all around are often not in a condition to notice the questionable taste of the upholstery.

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Before trying my own luck (with no great hopes, I may say) I thought it would be better to look on a while, and familiarize myself with the manner of the game. And this was by no means so complicated as my manual had led me to suppose. In a few minutes, indeed, I thought I had mastered it. I went, accordingly, to the first table on the left in the first room.

I laid a few francs on a number that came into my head: twenty-five. Most of the people about me followed the whirling ball with a strained nervous expectation. I could not conceal my interest in its flight entirely; but I smiled nonchalantly, despite a curious tickling sensation that seemed to creep around the inside lining of my chest.

The ball slowed up and finally fell upon the quadrant.

"\_Vingt-cinq\_," the croupier called; "\_rouge, impair, et passe\_!"

I had won. I was reaching out to gather up the pile of chips that were tossed upon my ante, when a tall strapping fellow who had been standing behind me pushed my hand aside and gathered in my money. In my faltering French I tried to make him understand that he had made a mistake—oh, yes, by mistake, not intentionally, of course! The man was a German, and spoke French even more falteringly than I. But he had a brazen courage to make up for any deficiencies in his grammar. He came back at me with vigor, asserting that the mistake was mine and the money his. I looked around the table helplessly. No one breathed a word, not even a neighbor who had made some

comment when I put my money on the 25. I looked appealingly at the croupiers in charge of the table. They sat there as passive as statues. "Ah, I see," said I to myself, gathering up the chips I had prepared for another bet.

"Here we have a sure method for winning at roulette! Pity they forgot to mention it in the manual. I imagine it's the only sure one, in the end!"

I went to another table, where the game was running high, and stood for some time examining the people seated around it—gentlemen in formal dress for the most part, and several women, more than one of whom seemed of questionable calling. My interest fell, in particular, upon a short light-haired man with big blue eyes, the balls of which were streaked with veins of red, while the lashes were long and almost white. I did not like the looks of him at first; he too was in formal clothes, but such stylish attire did not seem to be in tone on him exactly. I thought him worth watching, however. He laid a heavy stake and lost. He plunged again still more heavily. Again he lost. Not a trace of emotion was visible on his face. "There!" I reflected mentally; "he's not the kind of person to steal the penny or two I risk!" And a certain shame came over me, besides, despite my unfortunate experience at the other table. Here people were throwing money away by the fistfuls, and without a shadow of fear! What a cheap sort I must be to worry about the few francs in my pocket! And here, next to this man, with an empty chair between, sat a young fellow, his face as pale as wax, a huge monocle on his left eye. He was using only green chips, but he was throwing his money down with an affectation of bored indifference and showing no interest in the ball. Indeed he sat half turned away from the table, twirling his mustache. At the end of a play he would ask a neighbor if he had lost. And he lost every time.

How the money was flying there! Gradually the excitement of the game seized on me as well. I sat down between the two men and began to place my chips now on this number and now on

that. My first bets all went against me; but then suddenly I began to feel a very strange sensation creeping over me—a sort of inspired supernatural intoxication, that took me out of myself, making me the automatic agent of unconscious intuitions from within. Why this number rather than any other? “There, that square at the end—on the right! Yes!” I was absolutely sure the number was going to win; and win it did. My bets were small at first; but soon I was throwing out my money without counting it. The longer I played, the clearer my strange power of drunken divination seemed to grow, nor did my confidence wane when I suffered a loss or two; in fact, I imagined I had foreseen such breaks in my luck, and I had even said to myself more than once: “Yes, this time I am going to lose—I must lose!” And now I was quite beside myself: I had a sudden impulse to risk everything I had, my original bet and all that I had won. My guess came out! It was getting too much for me: my ears were buzzing and I began to sweat. One of the croupiers noticed my persistent good fortune. I thought I caught a challenge in the glance he gave me. Never mind! Let’s try again! Again I pushed everything I had upon the board. I remember that my hand stopped on the number 35, the same number that had won before. That was a bad chance! I started to change; but no, a voice within me seemed to whisper: “Stay where you are!” I closed my eyes, and I must have grown as pale as death. A great silence fell over the table as though everyone were sharing in my terrible anxiety. The ball started round and round. And round and round it whirled! Would it never stop? Now it was going a little more slowly, but that seemed only to exasperate my torture. Click! It had fallen. I did not open my eyes. But I knew what the croupier was going to say (his voice when it sounded seemed to come from far far away as from a distant world):

“\_Trente-cinq, noir, impair, et passe\_!”

I raked in the pile of money and left the table. I had to go! I was too weak to continue playing; and when I walked it was

with the stagger of a drunken man. I collapsed on a divan, at the end of my endurance, my head sinking on the back of a chair. Yes! Sleep! I needed sleep! A little nap would do me good. And I was almost yielding, when a sudden sense of heaviness about me restored my consciousness with a shock. How much had I won? I looked up, but I had to close my eyes again. The great hall of the Casino seemed to be whirling dizzily round and round. How hot it was in there! How stifling! A breath of air! Yes, a breath of air! What, dark already? The lights were coming on! How long had I been playing?

I rose with difficulty to my feet, and left the room.

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Outside, in the atrium, night had not yet fallen; and a breath of the cool bracing air revived me. A number of people were about, some of them walking up and down by themselves, concerned with their own thoughts; others in groups of two or three, chatting, smoking, joking. They were all objects of interest to me. I was still a stranger to the Casino, and conscious of looking the greenhorn too. I began carefully to watch such as appeared most at their ease. But how could one ever tell? When I should least have expected such a thing, one of them would suddenly fall silent, toss his cigarette aside, and pale, haggard, distraught, start off toward the play rooms again, pursued by the laughter of his companions. "What was the joke? I could not see; but instinctively, I would join in the laugh, looking after the fugitive with a silly smile on my face.

"\_A toi, mon chéri\_!" I heard a harsh female voice whisper behind me. I turned around. It was one of the women who had been sitting near me at the table. She was holding out a rose toward me, keeping another for herself. She had just bought them at the buffet there in the outer hall. A flash of anger came over me! So I did look like an easy mark!



I refused the flower without a "thank you," and started to walk away. But she broadened her smile into a frank laugh, and taking me confidentially by the arm she began to talk to me hurriedly and in a half whisper. She was proposing, so I understood after a fashion, that we play together, in view of the luck she had seen me having. I would choose the numbers and she would divide earnings fifty fifty with me. I tore my arm loose, with a show of anger, and left her standing there.

Shortly afterward, I wandered back into the gaming rooms. There I saw the same woman again, but talking now with a short dark-complexioned fellow with a bushy beard—a Spaniard, as I judged—whose appearance I did not like. She had given him the rose just previously offered to me. They both winced at my approach, and I was sure they had been talking about me. I decided to keep on my guard. Sauntering off toward another room, I approached the first table there, without however intending to play. Sure enough! I had not been there long when the Spaniard put in an appearance, but without the woman, taking up a position near me, though pretending not to be aware of my presence. I turned and fixed my eyes frankly upon him, to let him know that I had noticed his attentions and was not to be trifled with. And yet, as I now began to think, he might not be the swindler I was taking him for! He laid three heavy bets in succession, and lost all three, winking his eyelids furiously at each defeat, perhaps in an effort to conceal the shock of disappointment. After the third throw, he looked up at me and smiled. I left him there and went back into the other room to the table where I had made my heavy winnings.

The croupiers had changed. The woman was again in the seat where I had observed her first. I kept off some distance from the table so that she would not see me. Her bets were all small, and she did not play every round. I stepped forward to the table. She was about to lay down a chip; but when she noticed me, she withheld her money with the intention,

evidently, of putting it on the number I should choose. But I did not play. 'As the croupier called "Le jeu est fait! Rien ne va plus!" I looked at her: she was shaking a finger at me with a smile of reproach. I kept out of the game for some time; but gradually the spell caught me again. The animation about the table was too pervasive. Besides I seemed to feel my strange inspiration coming over me again. I sat down in the first chair that became empty, forgot all about the woman, and began to play.

What was the source of that mysterious foresight I had for choosing the right number and color unfailingly? Was it just luck—the wildest craziest luck man ever had? Was it a sort of miraculous divination beyond the control of my consciousness? How explain, at any rate, certain obstinate obsessions of mine, the very absurdity of which now makes my hair stand on end, as I reflect that I was risking everything, perhaps even my life, on some of those bets that were just mad impudent challenges to Fortune? However you may account for it, I know how I felt: I felt the presence of a devilish power within me, which, at that particular time, made Fortune my captive, rendered her obedient to my every gesture and bent her caprice to my will. I felt this, I say; but I was not the only one to feel it. Others about the table soon acquired the same conviction; and shortly everybody was betting on the numbers that I kept choosing for risks of the most hazardous kind. Why was it I stuck to red for turn after turn—and why did red always come out? And why was it I would switch to zero, just as zero was about to fall? Even the young man with the monocle began at last to take a direct interest in the game; and a fat man beside him to pant louder than ever. A fever of excitement ran about our table—shivers of impatience, moments of nervous gasping suspense, bursts of anxious expectancy that attained climaxes of veritable fury. Eventually the croupiers themselves lost their stiff, impassive, well-mannered indifference.

Suddenly, after pushing a pile of chips forward on the table, I felt myself give way. A sense of tremendous responsibility came over me. I had eaten practically nothing since morning; and all the emotions of that violent evening had exhausted my strength. My head began to swim, and I could not go on. I won the bet, but I drew back from the table.

And now I felt a strong grip fasten itself upon my arm. It was that short, squatty, bushy-faced Spaniard, beside himself with excitement, and determined, at all costs, to make me continue playing. "Look," he said. "Eleven and fifteen. We come to last three rounds. Play! We break bank!"

He had decided I was an Italian and was addressing me in my own language, but with a Spanish brogue that, done for as I was, made me laugh. I had just enough strength left to persist mechanically, obstinately, in a refusal: "No, no! I've had enough! I've had enough! Let me go, sir! Let me go, sir!"

He let me go; but he followed me, even boarding my train to accompany me back to Nice. He insisted that I take a midnight meal with him, and engage a room in the hotel where he was living. At first I was not loath to accept the almost awe-struck admiration which this fellow had for me as for a master of divination. I have noticed that human vanity is inclined to sniff with pleasure even the acrid and stupefying incense that rises from the most petty and miserable of censers. My own case was that of a general who by sheer luck, quite beyond any provision or plan of his own, has stumbled on a decisive victory. And this reflection began actually to take form in my own mind, as, little by little, I came out of my bewilderment, recovered a part of my strength, and grew conscious of the annoyance this man's company was really giving me.

However, though I bade him good-night in the station at Nice, he would have none of it. He took me off to supper with him by main force. And then it was that he confessed to having sent the woman to me in the lobby of the Casino. She was one of the

habitual idlers about the place; and for three days he had been providing her with funds for "a start in life"—giving her, that is, a hundred francs every now and then, on the chance that eventually she might make a real killing. Following my numbers that evening, she must have won something at last; for she was not waiting for the Spaniard in the lobby:

"What I can do?" said he resignedly. "She probably find a better looking man. I too old! \_Quiza\_, I thank God, signore, He send her away so soon!"

My importunate friend had been at Nice for a week or more; and every morning he had gone to the Casino. Up to that evening, he had done nothing but lose. What he wanted now was the secret of my success: either I must have learned the game to the bottom or have devised an unfailing system. This made me laugh; and I assured him I had never seen a roulette wheel before that morning, and that I was as surprised as any one else at my unheard-of good luck. But he was not convinced. He decided, I imagine, that he was dealing with a sharper of no ordinary merits; for he returned to the attack after a skillful detour; and in his curiously fluent gibberish, half Spanish, half God knows what, eventually came out with the proposal he had tried to make to me that evening through the girl.

"But, my dear sir," I answered, half amused and half angered by his insistence, and the assumptions it implied. "I have no system: how can there be any science to a game like that? I had luck, that's all. Tomorrow I may lose everything. On the other hand I may win again—as I hope I shall!"

"But why you not provech today of your good fortune?"

"Provech?"

"Yes, provech, profit, how you say?"

"Why, I did, considering the few francs I started with!"

"Good! I pay for you. You, luck, I, money?"

"But I might lose it all for you! Look here, sefior: if you are so sure I'm going to win, you do tomorrow just as you did today: put your money on my numbers; then if I lose, you can't blame me; and if I win..."

He did not let me finish:

"Eh no, \_segno\_; no; today, yes, I do this. But tomorrow, no, I do not! You bet \_conmigo\_ strong? Good! I play! If no, I no play \_seguramente\_. Muchas gracias\_!"

I looked at the man, trying to fathom the meaning of all this chatter. The one thing certain was that he suspected me of some trick or other. I flushed and demanded an explanation. He suppressed the shrewd smile that had been playing about his lips, although the leer in it continued to dominate his expression:

"I say no—I no play. \_No digo altro\_!"

I brought my fist down solidly on the table in front of me.

"No, you don't get out of this that way!" I answered angrily—"What's the meaning of what you said, and of that fool smile of yours? I don't see anything to laugh at!"

He grew pale, as I raised my voice, and seemed to cringe before me. I felt sure an apology was coming. However, I shrugged my shoulders and rose from the table:

"Anyhow, I don't care what you meant! But I want nothing more to do with you!"

I paid my bill and left the restaurant.

\* \* \*

I once knew a man who, from his extraordinary endowments of

intellect, was worthy of the most venerating admiration. He never received any whit of it, however, and all on account of a pair of checkered trousers (gray and black if I remember rightly and fitting too tight to his legs) which he would wear, come what may. Our clothes have something, it may be about their cut, it may be about their color, which gives people the strangest impressions of us.

Take my present case. I thought I had a right to be put out. I was not in a dinner coat, of course; but I was quite decently dressed in a black suit in keeping with my state of mourning. Well, from the very same outfit that miserable German thought I was enough of an idiot to risk his stealing my pot; while now this Spaniard took me for a rascal so deeply dyed in the wool that he was afraid of me! "Must be these whiskers," I concluded as I hurried along, "or the way my hair is cut. I am clipped pretty close. On the other hand, my beard is a bit too scraggly!" Meanwhile I was anxious to get to a hotel to see how much I had really won. It was two o'clock by this time and the streets were deserted. Eventually, a cab came rattling by. I hailed it, and got in.

I was a walking cash-box; I had money in the pockets of my coat, in the pockets of my vest, in the pockets of my trousers, everywhere—gold, silver, paper. The total must have been an enormous one. As soon as I reached a room, I spread my earnings out on the bed. Eleven thousand lire! I had not seen any money for such a long time that I thought it was a fortune that had thus come to me almost without effort on my part. But then my mind reverted to the good old days of the prosperity of my family, and a bitter sense of my degradation came over me. Indeed! Two years there in that library—along with my other misfortunes—had so crushed me that a paltry two thousand dollars could look like wealth?

My old feeling of discouragement returned.

"Here, you tame spineless virtuous librarian," I

apostrophized, looking at all my gold contemptuously. "Run along home and pass this over to the widow Pesca-tore. She will be sure you stole it; and your stock will go up in her esteem on that account. Or rather, sail on to America as you had planned, if this windfall does not seem a fitting reward for your courageous efforts hitherto. You could, now, you see; you have two thousand dollars to bank on! What a millionaire!"

I swept the money together, tossed it into a drawer of my dresser, and went to bed. But I could not get to sleep. What was I really to do? Go back to Monte Carlo and lose the money I had made? Or should I rest content with this one stroke of fortune, lay it aside somewhere, and enjoy it modestly as occasion offered? Enjoy it! A pretty thought for a man stuck with a family like mine! Well, I might buy my wife some better clothes. Romilda seemed not only to have grown indifferent as to whether I liked her or not, but even to take particular pains to prove odious to me—never fixing her hair, going around in ugly mules all day long, and wearing an old wrapper that left her not a single charm of figure. Did she feel that it wasn't worth the trouble to dress decently for a husband like me? For that matter, she had never quite recovered from her long illness; and she was growing more irritable and despondent from day to day—not toward me alone, but toward everybody. Slovenliness, laziness, were the natural result of her many disappointments and the lack of any real affection on her part for me. She had taken no interest in our one little girl who had survived; because that child was a defeat for her as compared with the fine boy that had come to Oliva barely a month later—and with none of the trials and torments that had fallen to Romilda's lot. All these things—and that friction, besides, which develops inevitably when poverty, like a black cat of ill-omen, huddles in the ashes of a joyless hearth—had made married life unbearable to both of us. Would eleven thousand lire cure all that? Would eleven thousand lire resurrect a love that had been traitorously slain in its early days by the widow Peseatore? Nonsense! To America then! But

why America? Why go seeking Fortune so far away, if, as it seemed, that very Fortune had halted me, almost by violence, in front of a gambling store in Nice? No! I must show some appreciation for such a courtesy—play the game. Everything or nothing! After all, ruin would leave me only where I was before. Eleven thousand lire! What was that?

So, the next day, I went back to Monte Carlo, as indeed I did for twelve successive days. In all that time, I had neither leisure nor opportunity to wonder at the amazing fortune that attended me, so completely was I absorbed in the game—even to the point of utter madness. And I have not wondered much since, in view of the turn my luck finally took after favoring me so absurdly. In nine days of reckless playing I amassed a sum of money that must truly have been prodigious. On the tenth, I began to lose, and my ruin was just as phenomenal. My intuition came to fail me, as though there were not sufficient energy left in my nerves to sustain it. I was not shrewd enough—or rather, I lacked the physical strength—to stop in time. I did stop, as a matter of fact; but not of my own accord. My salvation came from one of those horrible spectacles that are not infrequent, they say, at Monte Carlo.

I was entering the Casino on the morning of the twelfth day, when a gentleman I had often met about the tables came up to me in great alarm and announced more by his excited gestures than by actual words that a man had just killed himself outside in the gardens. Somehow I felt sure it was my Spaniard, and a twinge of remorse ran through me. After our talk at supper that first evening, he had refused to follow my game, and had lost consistently. Then seeing me continue my lucky play, he had finally begun to imitate me. But by this time, my own good fortune was coming to an end, and I had taken to going about from one table to another. In this way I had lost sight of him, and he had lost interest in me.

As I hurried to join the crowd that had gathered about the body, I tried to imagine how he would look stretched out there



on the ground, dead. However, I found, not him, but the young man with the monocle who had affected such indifference to the great sums he was losing that he always sat with his back to the wheel. He was lying in such a natural posture that it seemed he must have taken that position before firing the fatal shot. One arm was eased along his body; the other was raised to one side, the hand closed and the forefinger bent as for the clutch of the revolver. The weapon was lying a few inches away, and a little beyond, the boy's hat. His face was covered with blood, which had clotted thick in the socket of one of his eyes. Still more blood had flowed out from his right temple upon the sand of the driveway. Horseflies were already buzzing about; and one of them alighted on his face. None of the spectators seemed inclined to interfere. Finally I stepped forward, drew a handkerchief from my pocket and spread it over the poor fellow's head. The crowd was irritated rather than not at this decent act of mine: I had spoiled the spectacle if anything!

Then I took to my heels and ran. I ran to the station, boarded the first train for Nice, gathered up my belongings, and started for home again.

I counted the remnants of my winnings. I still had eighty-two thousand lire left.

Could I ever have dreamed that before evening of that day something similar to the fate of this young man was to come to me?

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