



The Private World of the Chess Problem

Grandmaster John Nunn disagreed about some things I said in my [June 2007](#) column about chess problems being in decline, so I agreed to write about them in this month's column, although in no way do I claim to be an expert on the subject. As a postscript last [month](#), I offered some problems for readers to solve, should they be so inclined, without moving the pieces or resorting to computer aid. These will be discussed in a moment. I also received a lengthy email from another Problem Society expert; his points will be quoted at length later.

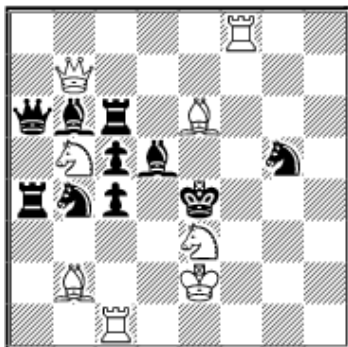
First, how did you get on with the problems I set you? If you overlooked them, you might like to go look at the end of the [September 2007](#) column and then return to this one after trying to solve them.

The Problems Analysed

Despite the limited time available to me for such exercises, I had a go myself at trying to solve the problems and only one defeated me. These were all taken from the final of the Winton Capital British Chess Solving Championship 2006-2007 at Oakham School, Saturday 17 February, 2007, where they had to be solved against the clock. So I did not allow myself infinite time. You can see most of the problems and solutions [here](#).

Grandmaster Nunn suggested I show you two of the harder ones, which follow below, but as a warm-up exercise we can begin with the two-movers. Given that the number of possible variations is relatively small when White has to checkmate in two moves against any defence, two-movers can be solved (given plenty of time) by trial and error, but it helps to work out the essence of the position and then employ some logic. No doubt regular solvers have their own personal algorithms that they use for solving; my own approach was quite unscientific, I expect.

Problem 1. White to play and mate in two



What first struck me about this problem was that, as in many problems, the black king has nowhere to go (no "flight square"), but the attempt to checkmate by Bf5 fails because this interferes with the f8-rook's action down the f-file and gives the flight f4. In some problems, the solution is to move the line piece to the other side of the critical square, but 1 Rf2, for example, is defeated by 1...Nf3!

Remember that Black's object is just to postpone the mate beyond the second move. Also 1 Rf5, threatening 2 Nc3 mate, is foiled by 1...c3!, when the black queen pins the knight. Further examination soon shows that 1...c3 is a very strong threat for the defence, because it not only pins the knight but also defeats many other "tries" by blocking the white bishop's action so that the e5-square is available as a flight.

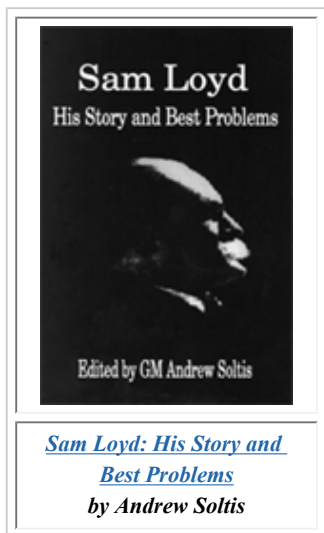
At this stage, the function of most of the pieces on the board is becoming clear, but what about that rook on c1 and clearly the white queen must be involved or she would not be on the board.

It looks as if the key move must be with the queen, but where? If 1 Qb8 (threatening Qe5 or Qf4), Black can block the diagonal. Neither 1...Rc7 nor 1...Rd6 (met by 2 Nd6) works, but after 1...

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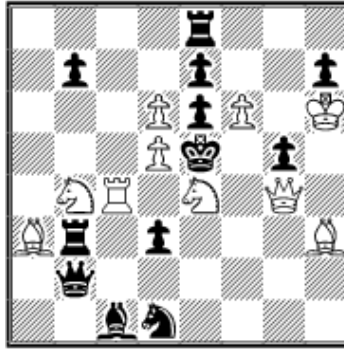
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Bc7! there is no mate.

Did you find the key move, 1 Qe7!, I wonder? This problem by **Felix A. Sonnenfeld** was awarded First Honorable Mention (not a prize, but almost) in *To Mat*, 1960.

Problem 2. White to play and mate in two



In this case the black king looks defenceless, surrounded by heavy white force, but to mate in only two moves requires guile. Of course, problems are not solved by checks, but it is worth observing that 1 Qxe6+ is answered by 1...Kf4, so if the queen (the only piece available to give mate on a dark square) is to participate in some variations, then f4 must be covered in some way. The only piece available to do that is the rook, which implies the e4-knight would move.

At first sight, if the knight moves, then d6 and f6 would be unguarded. Imagine however that White's key move was magically to remove that knight from the board on condition that Black must reply 1...Kxd6 or 1...Kxf6, then in either case 2 Qxe6 would be mate. So let us try moves of that knight. If 1 Nd2, threatening Qxe6, was the answer, then this would not be a very good problem. Black defends by 1...Qd4!, blocking the action of the rook along the rank, so that again 2 Qxe6+ is answered by ...Kf4.

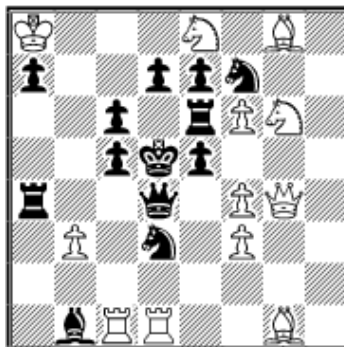
It did not take me long to see that 1 Nc3! should be the key move, because this prevents ...Qd4, but working out all the variations in my head took a little time. If the knight is captured in any of the three available ways, White just carries out the primary threat. You have to bear in mind that a good problem has economy of force: every piece on the board must be there for a reason.

So what is the function of the knight on b4 and the two bishops stuck on the edges? Consider that the threat to mate by Qxe6 can be parried by the e7-pawn capturing, so that the e8-rook covers e6; that is what the rook is doing there. The snag for Black is that when he captures with the pawn on either d6 or f6, that square is no longer available as a flight for his king. White then requires a move that both checks and covers the other square.

So if 1 Nc3! exf6, the mate is by 2 Nxd3. The c3-knight not only guards d5 but prevents ...Rxd3; the unmasked a3-bishop guards d6. On the other hand, if 1...exd6, the fairly crude 2 Qd4 does the job, since the task of controlling f5 is now delegate to the bishop on h3. I thought this problem was easier and less elegant than the first one, so I was surprised to see that **Ottavio Stocchi** won First Prize with it in a 1954 problem tourney of *Trybuna Robotnicza*.

Here is the last of the two-movers, by **Jozsef Szöghy**, from the *British Chess Magazine*, 1934.

Problem 3 White to play and mate in two



It may have struck you, when looking at the diagram, that there are various half-pins and blocking mechanisms in place. The bishop on g8 half-pins the f7-knight and e6-rook; if either moves, then the other is genuinely pinned. Also that rook is blocking the white queen's route to d7. There is another half-pin by the rook on the d-file: either the knight or queen can move, but not both. The queen is also blocking the diagonal action of the g1-bishop towards c5, where there is a potential mate by the c1-rook.

However, Black is not paralysed because if it were his move there are a few things he could do that would not spoil the situation: 1...a6 for example. And what is the bishop on b1 doing?

Unintentionally, I read what the key move was when downloading the problem. It is unusual because the move is a capture. I thought that was supposed to be a flaw, but apparently pawn captures are acceptable as key moves. Moves that give check are not, and neither is castling. So I tried to work out why **1 fxe5!** is the only move to win and why there is no defence to it.

First consider the threat, which is 2 Nc7 mate. The function of controlling d6 is performed by the pawn arriving at e5. So it is only necessary to look at potential defences that stop Nc7 being mate. Clearly 1...c4, to create a new flight at c5, is butchered by 2 Qxd4.

The elegant heart of the problem is what happens when Black recaptures on e5. If 1...Rxe5, then 2 Qxd7 is possible and the knight cannot interpose because of the pin from the bishop. On the other hand, if 1...Nf7xe5 it is the rook that is pinned, so that 2 Nxe7 deals the death-blow.

As one would expect with a half-pin, there is a neat pair also for the pair on the d-file.

If 1...Qxe5, the dark-squared bishop's diagonal is opened and 2 Rxc5 does the trick, while finally, if 1...Nd3xe5, it is the queen that is pinned and mate is administered by 2 Nf4. So it is all very neat and easy when you get over the inhibition of the capturing key. And what was the bishop doing on b1? It was avoiding a dual (alternative mate on the second move), which would otherwise occur by 1...Ndx5 2 Qe4. Also if it were not for the rook on a4, 1...Qxe5 could be met by Qc4 mate. I still haven't worked out why there is a white pawn on b3, but I suppose it must be there to prevent a defence or a dual.

As I said, you may be able to solve two-movers by trial and error, but for the rest you need to work out the logic of the position. So now let us move on to the harder ones.

Problem 4. White to play and mate in four (against any defence)



The aim is to find White's first move and all variations after that where Black manages to put off mate until White's last move. In the competition, these full-length variations are to be written up to White's penultimate move, but I won't go into all that detail.

With a "more-mover" (problem longer than three moves), it can be difficult ensuring the correctness of the problem. Here computers have made checking much easier than it used to be. Black's king is completely constrained at present, but it is going to be necessary to release it and chase it in the desired direction to administer mate in four, using the rook-bishop battery. Yet if the rook moves down the c-file, then e6 is unguarded, and if it moves on the sixth rank, then ...Kc4 is possible.

While four moves sounds like a lot, White does not have much force (no queen) and also little time, because Black threatens to promote a pawn with check in two moves.

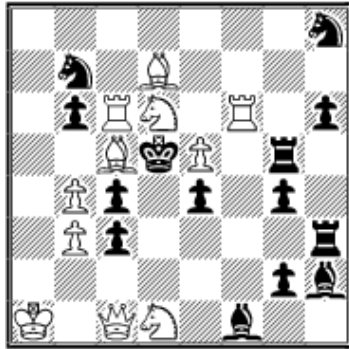
For me, this was the clue: get the king off the first rank so that a promotion is not check. For

example, if 1 Kb2 (threatening 2 Kb3 and 3 Rd6) 1...Rxe6 2 Rc5 mate; yes, mates in less than the specified number of moves are allowed to refute inferior defences. Also from b2 the king can go to b3 to prevent that ...Kc4 escape.

But what about 1...e2; isn't there a danger of Black promoting with check? And anyway a problem must have a unique first move (key) and yet there are two routes by which the white king can reach b3: either 1 Ka2 or 1 Kb2. Obviously 1 Ka2 is a better key, because it is both counterintuitive and yet logical: now the d1-rook can go to b1, guarding b5, and maybe there are some variations where ...exd1=N+ could be a nuisance. If the king is on a2 that is no problem.

So does it work? Yes. The main lines go 1...Nf5 (to cover d6) 2 Rb1 d1=Q 3 Rd6+ Kc4 4 Bd5 mate, or (showing the principal threat) 1...e2 2 Rb6 + (not 2 Rd6+? because after 2...Kc4 3 Rb1 Black prevents the bishop mate by 3...Rf5, while 3 Bd5+ takes a total of six moves to mate.) 2...Kc4 3 Nd6+ Kc3 4 Rc6, a neat switchback of the rook to its original square. (Incidentally, problemists use the German S for Springer instead of N for knight, but I am sparing you that convention.) There are other variations that you can work out for yourself.

Problem 5. White to play and mate in three (against any defence)



Apparently this tripped up some of the leading solvers, including GMs Nunn, who won the competition, and Mestel, who has won the championship the most times! (And I also failed to solve it.)

When I analysed this position with Fritz8 it found three different mates in four and refused to look any further! The problem, by **Erkki A. Wirtanen** (Second Prize, *Magyar Sakkzovetseg*, 1963) has four "set mates," i.e. mates on White's third move that could occur if White "passes" (illegal in chess, of course) and Black makes a reply. In an artistic composition, the key move may destroy the set mates and oblige White to mate in a different way against those defences. Problems, like this one, are called "mutates": the set mates are changed.

Imagine White plays 1 Ka2? (so that we can see the set mate) and Black replies 1...Bd3?. Then White has 2 Nxc3+ Kxe5 3 Re6 mate.

After the key move 1 Qc2!, the queen no longer controls f4, so that 1...Bd3 now has to be refuted differently: 2 bxc4+ Kxe5 (or 2...Bxc4 3 Qxe4 mate) 3 Qxc3 mate.

Another set mate is (1 Ka2) Rd3 2 bxc4+ Kxe5 3 Re6 mate. Again that requires f4 to be covered. After 1 Qc2, 1...Rd3 is now met by 2 Nxc3+ Kxe5 3 Nxc4 mate.

The third set mate is 1...Kxe5 2 Qxg5+ hxg5 3 Rf5 mate; this too is made impossible as the queen has moved to a light square, and after 1 Qc2 Kxe5 the mate is by 2 Bd4+ Kxd4 3 Qxe4. The final set mate is 1...Rxe5 2 Qe3 (threatening to mate either by 3 Qd4 or 3 Nxc3) 2...Rxe3 3 Nxe3 mate.

What probably made the problem so hard to solve is that this changes to 1 Qc2 Rxe5 2 Qd3+!!, a truly amazing move were it to occur in a practical game. White puts his queen *en prise* to four different black pieces, but blocking the action of the h3-rook along the rank. So three of the captures are defeated by 3 Nxc3 mate, and if 2...Rxd3 the rook blocks the f1-bishop and White finishes by 3 bxc4.

Actually 1 Ka2? is no good because Black has several replies, for example 1...Nxc5, after which mate is impossible or much delayed.

White is not able to preserve all the set mates and anyway there is no set mate for 1...Bxe5. After the key 1 Qc2, threatening 2 Qxe4, the bishop capture is futile. Other variations are 1...Re3 2 Nxe3

+ Kxe5 3 Qxc3 mate; 1...Nxc5 2 Rxc5+ bxc5 (or 2...Kd4) 3 Qxe4 mate, and finally 1...Nxd6 2 Rxd6+ Kxe5 3 Bd4 mate.

A Dialogue about Chess Problems

Michael McDowell (Vice-President of the British Chess Problem Society) wrote to me recently, wishing to make various points. In fact, he raises so many that it not really practical to give a précis. Therefore, I will quote large chunks of his email in full, but intersperse them with my own comments. Sometimes I thought he was protesting too much, but many of his points are just given without comment. He provides plenty of useful information and links for people who wish to follow up the subject. Maybe I am just ill-informed, as he evidently thinks.



1) With the advent of home publishing more books on composition are being produced worldwide than ever before. [The Problemist](#) contains at least one review every issue, and often several.

2) Books on tactics should not be compared with books on problems, though they seem to get lumped together in book lists. One is designed to help players improve their game, the other deals with a completely different aspect of chess.

I did not imply anything different. Surely most experienced players are well aware of the difference?

3) The books by Ban and Roycroft are of course excellent, but for my money the best introduction to studies is Beasley and Whitworth's *Endgame Magic*. This, however, does not take the line "buy this book to improve your game" – rather it says "look at what beautiful ideas there are to be found in studies," in other words it tells the reader that studies are inherently valuable and worthy of his time, without reference to any other activity.

I agree that Roycroft's Test Tube Chess is not a book for beginners, but The Tactics of Endgames by Jenő Ban is full of the author's enthusiasm. Back in the mid-1960s, "Assiac" (Heinrich Fraenkel) introduced this book to English readers in his column in the New Statesman and I used to be a regular solver in his competitions. I have looked at Endgame Magic and it is certainly well worth reading, too, though I note that it does not have any section that gives advice on composing endgame studies to people who might be thinking of giving it a try.

4) You say "The mate problem is entirely dead, apart from a few aficionados." Today there are more problem magazines than ever and consequently more problems (mate or otherwise) being published than at any time in the past.

I can see from the response I received that there are still some enthusiasts in the problem world, but how many could be hard to quantify. As for the claim that more problems are now being published than at any time in the past, frankly, I doubt this. At least if we are talking about the English-speaking world. In the nineteenth century, all the chess columns published problems whereas for the last few decades, practical game positions have heavily dominated.

Even if there are many small-circulation problem magazines, coming out perhaps three or four times a year, and even if it were true that more problems are being published (which I don't believe) what counts here is visibility. In the half-century up to 1914 in Britain each column (and there must have been well over a hundred at most times) published at least one problem weekly, and some of these were widely-read national titles.

So maybe at least one hundred new problems were published weekly in the U.K. alone, and anyone interested in chess saw and solved at least one of these a week. Many had a shot at composing problems themselves.

Perhaps you should obtain a recent FIDE Album to see how vibrant the directmate remains. It is true that longer directmates are becoming more abundant relative to two-movers than before, but that is because composers now have the computer to assist with testing positions, and consequently it is much easier to get longer problems sound than thirty years ago. Problems in three and more moves are flourishing, and even the two-mover is very far from dead.

5) You are correct in thinking that the BCPS library is an excellent one, by far the best single resource on composition in the UK. Membership of the BCPS has remained stable around the 500 mark for years, so it will be some time before the question of library disposal arises.

6) Has even one book on problems been published in England in the twenty-first century? Well, I have had collections of problems by G. C. Alvey and the Warton brothers published, in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The Warton booklet, entitled *The Wangling Wizards*, contains over 200

annotated problems (in two and three moves) in its forty-eight pages, and, as they composed primarily for the solver, I think their work is the sort of thing that players might enjoy. BCPS book salesman Steve Giddins sells copies for, I think, £3. (End of plug!)

Books that are not reviewed do not get publicity and distribution is bound to sink without trace. I looked for The Wangling Wizards in the British Library catalogue and they don't have it, which means the publisher has not complied with his legal obligation to make the book available to posterity.

7) Of course any playing program can solve directmates, and specialist programs can solve practically any type of problem, but that's hardly the point. The "aficionado" solves a problem himself in order to fully appreciate the composer's achievement, not just the solution, but also the construction.

Actually I have found that some programs do not solve direct mates correctly, in normal game analysis mode anyway, as they tend to stop when they are satisfied and do not always look for a shorter mate. I have this trouble with Fritz8 when I am trying to check the 'mate in X' claims that Victorians liked to come up with in postal games.

You are right that there are other problems which are more amenable to the casual puzzler, e.g. sudoku, which is accessible to anyone who can count up to nine, but then I would argue that a good chess problem sticks in the memory in a way that something like sudoku does not. Worthwhile things require a little effort.

Actually a good sudoku problem is an exercise in logical deduction, so that put-down does not impress. Solving even a moderately difficult puzzle such as appears most days in The Times requires much more than the knowledge of how to count up to nine.

8) The chess problem is far from played out; in fact, it is in a state of constant development. You are right to say that the problem has over time moved further and further away from the game, but that was happening even in the 1850s and was inevitable, as it became an art form in its own right.

I am aware that problemists like to claim that the chess problem is an art-form, but this is a contestable assertion. Problems and endgame studies began as interesting game positions, or idealisations of them (removing irrelevant pieces). Nowadays endgame studies may be game-like, but mate problems never are. Also, as in other art-forms, the constant need to produce something new can lead artists to go down increasingly rarefied and sterile backwaters.

All art forms develop or they stagnate, and, say, the two-mover of 2007 is a very different creature to the two-mover of 1907, just as schools of painting differ from one another. Fairy chess is increasingly popular with composers because there is less chance of anticipation.

Precisely here is one of the big problems of getting anyone new interested in chess composition. Nobody wants to waste time composing and refining a problem only to find it has been done before. In the nineteenth centuries there were numerous cases of similar problems being published and accusations of plagiarism. However, I don't think that turning to "fairy chess" (pieces like knightriders and so on) can be more than a very small part of the answer to this. It just takes you even further from your potential market, the practical player who might think of branching out into a different form of chess. If you want to avoid anticipation, you might as well forget about chess altogether and devise something totally new as real artists do.

I would refer you to the introductory material on the BCPS [website](#). The hardest thing to get through to players is that composition is a completely different aspect of chess from the game and should be enjoyed for its own sake, not as an aid to playing. They seem to find it difficult to believe that there are people who came into chess through problems, have never played a game in their lives, and have no interest in doing so.

As somebody who has been playing chess for about fifty years and since the age of about thirteen has been well aware that problems are totally different from playing the game, I wonder who are the "they" who find it "difficult"? If they are not interested, that is because the problem fraternity have not made their case well enough.

9) Books have been produced by British problemists since the ones from the 1960s which you mention, but they have not necessarily been published in the UK. The most important was John Rice's *Chess Wizardry* (1995), published by Batsford and an updated version of his 1970 book *An ABC of Chess Problems*. This remains the best guide to theme definitions in the English language. It got a perfunctory review by a player in the BCM that was quite disgusting, given that their Problem Editor David Friedgood could have done the job properly.

OK, well I have this book, but actually it was published in 1996 not 1995. I looked at the review (by Adam Raoof), it can be found on page 532 of the October 1996 issue (volume 116 of British Chess

Magazine). *What does it say that is so “perfunctory” and “disgusting”?*

The review may be fairly brief, but that is typical of BCM reviews nowadays. Of six books mentioned in that issue, this was the second longest review. As for the content of the review, it included the sentence “This is a brilliant book which will entertain anyone who knows their moves for months.” If that was a “disgusting” review, I wouldn’t mind a few of them for my own books! I do agree, though, that it was perverse of the reviewer (Adam Raoof) to illustrate it with the one game position that had been included on page one for contrast. It would make one wonder if he actually read much of the book...

Another important work was Chris Feather’s *Black to Play* (published in Austria in 1994), the best introduction to helpmate problems by a renowned expert on the subject. Incidentally the John Rice book you mention, *Chess Problems for Solving*, consisted of over 100 two-movers that John composed specially for a speed solving competition at a BCPS weekend – an incredible feat in itself.

10) You will find no mention of problems on the FIDE website because the Permanent Commission for Chess Composition has its own [website](#). There you will find details of title holders and the requirements for obtaining them, etc. The PCCC meets once a year at the World Congress for Chess Composition. This year’s event is being held in Rhodes in mid-October. As well as being a social occasion the WCCC hosts many composing tourneys and the World Chess Solving Championship, where Great Britain will be trying to achieve a hat-trick of victories in the team event. Chess problem solving competitions have mushroomed in the last twenty years, and numerous countries now have national championships. Have a look at Lubomir Siran’s Solving Chess [website](#), which details the results of national and international events.

I hope the above refutes the notion that chess problems are somehow dying out. Yes, in the computer age there are many other distractions, but there are still good young composers coming through. On the question of books aimed at players, the real question is – who is interested in publishing such a book?

If there is anybody out there who is interested in publishing such a chess problem book, please contact the British Chess Problem Society.

I notice that there is now a “Handbook of Chess Composition” on the PCCC [website](#)...

This is a downloadable PDF format (Adobe Acrobat) file. It consists of rules and regulations for competitive composers and solvers. What is needed, however, is something like a “Chess Composing for Dummies,” giving advice on how to go about it and how to check as you go along that your problem is sound and is not duplicating the efforts of others.

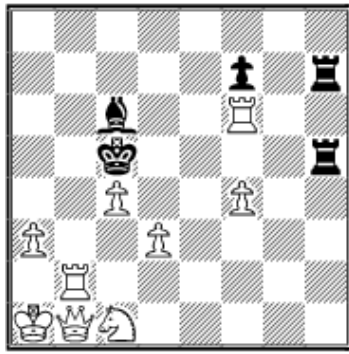
A Classic Problem

I see from the old familiar rubbish dump Wikipedia that “The inaugural meeting of the British Chess Problem Society took place on 10 August 1918.” Actually something of this sort was started in the 1870s, and existed for many years, but perhaps it had lapsed by then. Wikipedia’s source was an article by Paul Valois (one of my contemporaries at Oxford) in *The Problemist*, 1988. Golombek’s *Encyclopaedia* said the same.

The *Illustrated London News* on 3 Nov 1877 announced that: “It is proposed to form a society, under the title of the British Chess Problem Association, for the purpose of holding periodical problem and solution tourneys with adequate prizes, and the establishment of a problem code for the guidance of chessplayers concerned in such competitions...”

Twenty-four problem composers were named as founder members, including Duffy (chess editor of the *Illustrated London News*), J. W. Abbott (his successor in that chair), Grimshaw, the Pierce brothers, Campbell and Ranken. The well-known problem composer H. J. C. Andrews was named as the contact person. One of those named was H. E. Kidson, who celebrated fifty years of composing problems for the paper in 1902 with the following, which solvers found difficult.

White to play and mate in three



Solution next month

I am interested in feedback from readers on whether they are interested in problems and would like one to be featured each month in this way. Please respond accordingly below.

[Yes, I want to see more about problems!](#)

[No, I do not want to see more about problems!](#)

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