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ARGOSY





High Duel

I had brought Slade up here to hunt in his own insane way. But I didn't know I was to be the game

THE way they explained it down at the hangar, this Arthur Slade, the millionaire sportsman, had landed at the Bella Coola Airport in the plushiest DC-3 that any of the boys had seen. There'd been a girl with him, they said, and when they talked about this girl, they rocked their heads, the way guys will if she's a very special dish. A horse-drawn sleigh had taken Slade and the girl up to the chateau on the hill. One hour later, take my word for it, the driver was back at the hangar, handing me a hundred-dollar bill. No more complicated than that. One minute I'm a starving helicopter jockey; the next, I am solvent.

"Mr. Slade would like to see you at once, sir."

I said to the driver very simply, "Has he got many more of these?"

Slade had taken over the Prince Charles suite at the chateau. Nothing but the best. About nine rooms, if you didn't count the baths. There was a floor-to-ceiling picture window framing the mountains in their winter power and grandeur. It was a sight that spiced the senses like an oxygen highball.

The girl let me in. Her name was Sarah McBride. She tried to brief me a little on this Arthur Slade and his peculiar fancies, but I can't say I was listening. She was tall and raven-haired, unquestionably beautiful. (Continued on page 53)

by **FREDERIC SINCLAIR**

ILLUSTRATED BY **PHILIP RONFOR**



High Duel

Continued from page 21

All right, I liked her: from the beginning I liked her. She took me inside.

"This is George Nolan," the girl announced. "Do you remember you sent for him?"

"Mmm," said Arthur Slade.

He was stretched out on a chaise longue, with me behind him, and a view of the mountains in front of him. He made no attempt to greet me, nor did he, for a considerable and awkward time, as much as acknowledge my presence. He was rude and weird—the only egomaniac I've ever known who could posture and strut while sitting absolutely still. He had a drink in his hand and his legs were crossed. Once or twice he sipped at the drink. He still hadn't turned.

"Nolan?" he said then.

I waited.

"Nolan—pay attention to me. That mountain out there. The big one, Nolan. What do they call it?"

"Defiance," I told him. "Mount Defiance. It's twelve thousand feet straight up and there's a glacier bowl on two sides of it."

"Mmm. That's what I thought. Did you get the money, Nolan?"

"I got it," I said.

"And you've decided to take me hunting?"

I didn't answer him right away, but of course I would, for the right kind of money. I needed it much too badly to turn down any reasonable job. *He wants a bear*, I was thinking, *a bear to fulfil his shaggy personality*. I watched him get up from the chaise then. A bigger man than myself, he was taller, heavier all around. I would say he was in his middle thirties, and I would also say he wasn't pleased with me when he had to repeat the question:

Would I take him hunting?

"All depends, Mr. Slade. A hundred dollars won't take us very far."

"A hundred dollars," he said to beam me, "is my usual introductory gesture to headwaiters, pretty girls and unemployed pilots. There's another five hundred in it for you, Nolan, if you take me where I want to go."

I'm sure he saw the impact of his offer. For six hundred dollars I'd have flown him to the moon.

"It won't cost you that kind of money, Mr. Slade. If you're trying to get back

to one of the hunting lodges in the brush, I'll take you to the farthest one of them for a hundred and a half. Same price for the return trip, with equipment thrown in. What lodge are you aiming to reach?"

"A lodge?" he said. He looked as though he might spit at me. "Seriously, Nolan, do you think I flew all the way up here to pot myself another bear? What the hell do you think I am—an Eagle Scout?"

Even then, I suppose, his ridiculous posturing had revealed him to be a man only half evolved from the strong-arm values of adolescence. Sport was never really sport to Arthur Slade; it was a total obsession in the total service of his psychopathic pride.

"The question, Nolan, is simply this: Can you and that eggbeater of yours get me on top of Mount Defiance?"

HE ENJOYED my astonishment. It was the first real bang he gained from our relationship. I didn't have to remind him that nobody, absolutely nobody, went to the top of Mount Defiance at this time of year.

"What's up there, Mr. Slade, that's worth six hundred dollars of your money, and maybe your life?"

"Goats," he said.

But I did not get excited.

"White goats. Nolan. The kind no one has ever taken in this season. White as scrubbed lambs, Nolan, wild as meteors. I want one now, while its coat is fat. I want to be the first. I want a man with guts enough to make the hoist with me."

"He wants an elevator boy," Sarah McBride said quietly.

He turned on her with savage displeasure but he didn't say anything. I watched the meeting of their eyes and I asked myself: What kind of relationship is this? I watched Slade return his attention to me.

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars to get me to the top of the mountain, Nolan. Can you afford to say no? Can you really afford it?"

He had me, of course, and he knew it, just as the girl beyond him knew it. She sighed and remained there, arms folded, watching us, her lips pursed just a little, her glance very wise. Was she Slade's for the taking, I asked myself; did she belong, lock, stock and soul, to this platinum-plated egomaniac? I refused to believe it.

"Let's get a few things straight," I said to Slade. "First of all, I can't plant you where those goats are frolicking. The best I can do is ease you into the highest canyon. I've never seen the goats myself, but they tell me they're on the peaks."

"Don't worry about their being there," Slade said shortly. In anticipation of the great event, he began pounding his powerful hands together. "We'll climb

the rest of the way for them, Nolan. We'll make a camp and—damn it, we'll climb!"

I repeated very distinctly: "We?" I did not fancy any belly-aching up the last wild thrusts of Mount Defiance.

But Slade had turned to the girl. "I mean angelcake here," he said without embarrassment. "You're only the driver, Nolan, but why do you think she's on my payroll?"

I said, "It's none of my business why she's on your payroll." I kept trying to figure this guy. Then I said, whether or not it was my business, "The top of that mountain's no place for a sane man to take a woman."

"Who has to be sane?" he asked me. He began to cackle, as though he had just come up with the funniest joke of the season. I watched him walk off, powerful, cocky, certain of his cleverness and prowess, to one of the bedrooms.

She said to me, "Well?"

"It's no skin off me, lady. Whether you like frostbite, or even if you like him. It's just no place for a woman."

"Don't worry about me, please," she said. "You imagine too much. Besides, I've shot him before."

"Shot him? Maybe I'm stupid, lady. I don't get it."

"I'm his photographer," Sarah McBride explained. "And just to erase any strange ideas you might have had, I am strictly his photographer."

"That pleases me."

"I'm not trying to please you."

I shrugged. "How much does this guy like pictures, anyhow?"

"It's not a question of fondness," she told me. "It's a matter of dependence on my pictures. He's a mad exhibitionist, and he's got a million dollars for every meal you ever missed. All I do is take pictures of his major exploits—tigers in India, lions in Africa, bears in Alaska—whatever he kills or however he kills it. I record it in eight-millimeter. That way nobody can call him a big-mouthed liar. It's like the finish of a horse race. You get it on film and the facts can't be argued. That's my boss for you, George—the lord of the jungle and the hero of his own imagination."

I KNEW by then she had not only said too much but had said it far too distinctly. Slade had stepped soundlessly back in the room.

"Beat it, Nolan," was all he said to me. "You've got a sample of my money. You'll get the rest tomorrow."

"What guns do you expect to take along on this hoist?" I managed to ask. I was naturally concerned about the total lift the 'copter would have to make. I was also aware that some of these zealots bring along guns enough for a revolution.

Slade was watching me closely now and I knew that he was rehearsing his reply. "I don't hunt with guns, Nolan,"

he told me. "Guns are for women and children. I'll be using a bow and arrow!"

I suppose there's nothing really wrong with bows or arrows, so it's hard to explain why a chill passed through me when he said it. I guess it was the impression I got of this man's intensity; that, plus the ruthless competence that I intuitively knew would be the servant of his pride. I was content enough at that moment to get myself away from Arthur Slade.

THE next morning was a perfect one for lifting a helicopter to the top of a mountain, then settling it gently, slowly into the wind-scrubbed canyon where the crusted snow made a natural landing spot. The rotor wobbled as it slowed, then stopped. We sat for a moment, the three of us, huddled together. The silence into which we had settled appeared to have strength and weight and size. I possessed you. The morning sun poured blindingly into the bubble pit where we sat cramped. The spread of sky and the sheen of snow were a shock to the senses. The jagged peaks around us and above us reached like the arms of beseeching ghosts into the sky. Slade broke the silence.

"Will this buggy start again after sitting here all day, Nolan?"

"It shouldn't throw me unless there's a storm," I said. "Besides, I've got a booster."

"Mmm."

Slade liked machines and he was not a stranger to the more complicated combinations in which they are currently fashioned. "I should buy one of these myself," he had said earlier, and when I asked him why, he looked at me mockingly and said, "I always buy what I want."

He kicked open the cockpit door and pushed his way out. Sarah McBride raised the hood of her parka and followed him. I checked the 'copter's controls, meanwhile watching Slade and the girl who worked for him. I'll admit I did not enjoy the sight of them together. She'd have looked like a queen in a large paper bag, but her parka was of spotted calfskin, expensive, gracefully made. Slade at this time was showing how tough he was by refusing to cover his head with the hood of his parka. He let it dangle behind him for that daring, windswept effect. I'll say this for him, though—he did look mighty masculine; he looked as fit as any primitive beast it might please him to pursue.

Outside the 'copter it was cold. It was cold through your teeth and your lungs and your bones. I had hoped the wind would stay dead today, but there it was now, whispering before it whistled, coming at you playfully from all directions, probing you for fears or misgivings and, in my own case, finding a few. The wild wind then began to wail, far, far off and high above us, like a busted fiddle with but a single, unhappy note to play.

Slade said impatiently. "Come out of it, Nolan. Let's get the tent up."

We'd stowed our equipment in the 'copter's litter racks—a four-man Nylon Arctic tent, a portable combo stove, cold-weather rations. Slade's hunting gear. I now noticed three sleeping bags that I hadn't seen on the racks when they were loaded at dawn.

"You don't have any ideas about staying up here overnight, do you?" I said to Slade.

"If I have to. Certainly."

"Well, don't make a bed for me," I said. "I won't be here."

"Are you that frightened, Nolan? Did your guts freeze up already?"

I'd have enjoyed punching Mr. Slade in the mouth right then. Still, I think I was polite enough. Reasonable enough.

"After a night up here I couldn't start this 'copter with a dozen boosters, Slade."

"All right then," he shouted. "The hell with it. If the girl and I can't get what we want today, you can come back and pick us up tomorrow."

I just stared at him.

"Look, Slade," I said, "you can't keep any normal girl on a peak like this overnight. A goat, yes, but a woman . . ."

That's when he began to laugh in his particularly nasty way. I guess he had a talent for it.

"Are you trying to tell me it will be cold up here, Nolan? You don't think I wasn't aware of it?" Then he looked at the girl, his eyes slowly appraising her natural gifts. He measured his next remark. "Look, you idiot, do you think I intended to climb into one of these bags alone?"

I don't know. Maybe I just wasn't born bright. But I think it was the way Sarah looked from this man to me that made me do what I did. I took a full step forward and punched him cleanly on the jaw. I knocked the big monkey right on his back, so that he was stretched in the snow, his eyes open wide, stiff with surprise, only half believing what had happened. Even so, I don't think he was scared.

"You made a mistake," he announced.

"If I did, I enjoyed it," I told him. "I might even like to do it again. Just get up and give me the chance."

But he didn't get up. Not for that moment. He chose to examine me very closely, then I watched him gaze off, wistful, like a man with dreams. "I won't deal with you now, Nolan," he said unexcitedly. "There are too many things to do."

I knew that Sarah was scared. I know now that she knew far better than I the strange psychotic depths behind the cool façade of this man who had employed her. Watching Slade, you'd think he'd taken that tumble in the snow for the recreation. Silently he began to help us rig the tent. He worked with quick efficiency at one chore, then another. I went into the tent to attach an outlet to the combination gasoline stove. Sarah came inside.

"Thanks for the gallantry," she said, "but I hope it doesn't cost you too dearly." As I looked at her, I realized that her gaze was rewardingly tender. This was no cheap dame, I was thinking. "George," she said then, "he's outside stringing his bow."

"So what?"

"Just this. I recommend you don't press him any further. Keep out of his way and be alert. Do I make myself clear?" She had taken a leather-cased camera from a duffel bag and was rigging it with a telescopic sight. She looped the camera around her neck, then placed films, filter and light meter into a small bag she was able to hook to a belt around her waist.

"If my brilliant boss really had to," Sarah McBride said unmistakably, "he could fly that helicopter back without you. You know that."

WHEN she turned away. I gripped her arm, obliging her to turn and face me directly. Her lips were open, her breath blowing clouds the size of baseballs into the icy air.

"Only one thing more," I said. "Did you want to stay up here with your charming boss tonight?"

"No, George," she said. "Believe me when I tell you—neither here nor any place."

From outside we could hear Slade calling, "Sarah?"

We came out of the tent together and there was Slade standing beside the helicopter. He held a big fiberglass bow at the level of his chest. Almost indifferently, his powerful hands were

bending the bow, with the steel-barbed arrow pointed directly at me. Sarah gasped and stepped in front of me. The sportsman smiled. He lowered the bow, then turned away. I thought to myself: *I should have brought a gun.*

He was pretty weird, this Slade. As calmly as a man spotting birds in Central Park, he said to Sarah, "There are some white ones browsing on a ledge just over the southern glacier bowl. I spotted them through the glasses when we were landing." He looked up, his sharp eyes appraising the task ahead. "It shouldn't be too bad a climb for people who know what they're doing."

"Let's get on with it," was all Sarah said.

It was apparent she wished to get Slade separated from me. She handled herself with a great deal of poise. She made it clear that she had dealt with his strange moods before.

"I'll be needing that other bow and quiver after a while," he said to me then, and I can't say that I was able to read any message from his manner or his tone. "When you get your crate latched down, Nolan, you can bring them over to the end of the pass. I'll be able to see you from above and make contact when I have to. Fair enough?"

He was so close to being cordial that I said nothing. I watched them start out. Slade in the lead. They climbed at a steady, professional pace. Their shadows fell long behind them. The girl climbed well and she received no concessions from the man who was leading the way. I watched them ascend the narrowing pass that rose to a jutting peak above me. They climbed steadily into the glare of sun and snow until I lost the path of their ascent. The wind whipped a curtain of snow between their diminishing figures and myself. They were gone from view.

CLOUDS began to set in about the time I'd finished securing the 'copter. They piled in from the east, massive and multi-shaped. They pressed down lower than the topmost peaks. The wind began to press real big. It frightened you to think how strong a storm was brewing for these peaks. I had no confidence that it would wait for Slade to shoot himself a goat or for the girl to capture his prowess on film. Even so, a job's a job, so I went into the tent and got the fiberglass bow he had requested. I hitched a quiver of arrows over my shoulder, then started up the canyon. It wasn't

fun for a man who had never climbed these mountains before. I had the wrong kind of boots and I pooped out pretty fast. I finally reached the bulge of rock that marked the end of the defile.

Well, one thing they've got up there is scenery. The distances made your eyes ache and your head swim giddily. The timberline was so far below that it looked like a fringe of hair on a bald man's head. With all that, I had to go higher. I kept hugging the wall of rock where the snow was shallowest, turning my face from the sweep and the smash of the wind.

THE gorge ended abruptly on the rim of sheer space. The turning, climbing ledge along which I had to continue scared the hell out of me. I sat down for a brief and comforting moment of security. I kept hoping I wouldn't stumble over the equipment I was carrying. I climbed carefully, prudently to my feet, and then I heard the terrible *tuang* of the thing. I stretched flat on my belly, hugging the wall. Very slowly I turned my head. The arrow, buried in the snow crust, trembled like a torn nerve, the steel shaft glimmering. I hope I didn't whimper. I know I prayed.

Somewhere above I heard a woman's scream. It was a solitary shriek that wandered and soared and lost itself in endless depths and heights. As I moved on, trembling, I watched another arrow rip into the approximate space I had occupied. It whined and it spat and it smashed the stone beneath the snow. Clinging, clinging to the wall, I was barely enough removed from my former position to be out of this madman's range.

"Slade!" I screamed. "Slade, you lunatic—I'm not a goat!"

I could hear him laughing.

"Feel your horns, boy, feel your horns," the sportsman called. "You're armed now, Nolan! You're on your own!"

I knew what he meant, all right, but the great bow, clumsy and unaccustomed in my hands, seemed the cruelest of jokes; I might have done far better with a crutch. Was Slade a madman? I suppose so, if a certain kind of pride, rubbed raw enough, can push a man beyond the bounds of reason.

"Take care of yourself, Nolan!" I heard him screaming then.

I was silent. I was certain that for the moment, at least, he couldn't get a shot at me. But in time, I knew, a chance for his arrows would come again, and

the price I would pay for having punched his face would be all that any man can pay—his total skin.

"You can't afford to kill me, Slade," I shouted up to him then. "I'll take the 'copter and leave you here."

I don't know how high above me he was perched, but his words came clearly in reply.

"You wouldn't leave the girl," he taunted. "You're a ten-cent hero, Nolan, and you're stuck with it."

"Sarah?" I shouted. "Sarah—are you up there? Are you all right? Sarah—can you hear me?"

There was no answer from the girl. Only the wind was talking now and I asked myself: Had he killed her? Of course, there was no possible way I could know.

There were so many things I couldn't know as the minutes passed. One thing, for instance: Where would Slade move next? And how would he move? I knew only that I could not afford to remain long where I was. Given time, he could descend by some other means to the gorge below, then pot-shot me while I was clinging to this wall.

EXCEPT for not knowing where Sarah was, I would have descended myself. But I guess I was a little crazy, too. I kept climbing, satisfied that, for the moment, I was beyond his range. Only once did I stop long enough to examine the bow in my hands. It was a duplicate of the one Slade carried. The strength it took to bend the thing was hard to believe. It wobbled and dipped at the end of my extended left arm when I attempted to draw it taut. Certain bowmen, I had been told, could kill a Kodiak bear with one of these. But I was an amateur. I might as well have been playing with a slingshot full of sand.

I kept belly-close to the rock wall until I had reached the tapering end of it. I waited now, poised for an almost vertical climb. Once, relaxing, I nearly slipped. My weight dislodged a chunk of snow that overhung the edge of the abyss. At first it seemed only a shovelful was falling, until it hit against a jutting mass of snow less solid than it looked. Half the mountain seemed to give way below me while I clung to the rock. I have no talent equal to describing how I felt then.

But I continued to climb. The rocks began to open, affording some purchase for my feet and hands. I dragged the

huge and clumsy bow. I didn't dare look back or down until I had attained a fairly flat and solid rock mass. I was perched out over the glacier bowl now, yet blocked from Slade's surveillance. Or so I believed. Some feeling for the hunt was now invested in myself. I can't say truly that I have ever wished to kill a man, but I knew now that in Slade's case, at least, a lack of appetite would not dissuade me. I felt I could kill him if I had to—if, indeed, I ever got the chance.

The drop below me was ten thousand feet. The line of ascent led to a cornice of protruding stone. It reached out over the void of space like a pouting lip. Under the belly of the rock formation I could see the green patches of moss and lichen that the goats were supposed to nibble. It was the only path upward. It would oblige me to inch around and under the jutting rock on a ledge not more than two feet wide.

Had Slade remained above me? Was he waiting there now? I was gambling that he was looking for me below. But if I could get above him, I reasoned, if I could stand for a minute, spread-legged and solid on my feet, while he was pated against some rock wall sheer as this, the duel with arrows might be partly equalized.

It began to snow then.

I remember how it came from the low sky, as thick as the guts kicked from a pillow. It came in updrafts from the pits of space, and the wind was churning it wildly. It stung my face and slicked the rocks and murdered visibility. My sun glasses were clogged so badly by the snow that I tugged them away from my eyes. But with the sudden action and the press of the wind, they slipped from my grasp, falling, forever, I suppose. The tears the wind whipped from my eyes began almost instantly to freeze

against my face. The only comfort was the knowledge that Slade would be obliged to chuck his glasses, too.

I made my way in torment around the two-foot ledge. There was only one way of doing it. I had to hunch forward on the ledge to accommodate the slant of the wall at my back. I had to edge sideways, step by frightening step, my bent back pressed against the rock, my eyes staring off into the gray and snow-filled emptiness.

I made it, but I had to squeeze my belly like a fist, the arrows clumsy and awkward on my back as they rattled against the bare rock wall. I finally gained a position where the ledge was a little wider, but I still was not safe. The shrieking shaft of an arrow, released from above, slashed by my face with power enough to bury its steel head in the stone. I screamed aloud. I screamed with wild and naked fright. Probably the reflex action of tormented nerves. And I had also guessed wrong. For Slade was still above me.

The snow alone was what saved me. The wind had grown strangely still, so that the falling curtain of flakes was solid, almost impenetrable. I had managed to move another little distance, making no sound for the hunter to hear. All vision was momentarily gone. Even the ledge I stood on was blocked from my own view. I had to fight an awful persuasion to let myself fall forward into the welcoming cushion of silence.

I remember that for a moment I didn't dare move. Then I lowered myself to my hands and knees and pounded the solidity of the ledge, trying to teach my own shocked senses what was real and what was not. I knew that no experience could be any worse than the one I had just survived. Everything from now on was a bonus. Slade was above me, no doubt of that now, but I was still alive.

I began to climb again, going forward and upward, no more in fear than in numb enchantment. Slade, having heard my shriek of terror, likely enough assumed me dead. But he could not know. He would be waiting and ready.

I remembered how the snow stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The total atmosphere seemed sucked into the void, like suds into a drain. There was a sky above me, gray and sick for the moment, but a sky, nonetheless. Behind me the sun was struggling through the haze, as dimly at first as a small-watt bulb clothed with a handkerchief. Some happy intuition told me there would be a glare to challenge any eyes that searched for me. I had room enough to maneuver, and I knew that with the sun at my back, it would not impede me.

I reached for an arrow and clumsily adjusted it to the bow. I closed my eyes and held them pressed tight, just to rest them. I opened them slowly and found that the ledge itself and the masses of rock and the great peaks came into clear and focused view.

SLADE was not more than five yards above me. He was crouched there. His bow was held ready, the arrow half drawn. But he was squinting and half blind in the glare I had anticipated, gazing down from the wide and secure ledge of stone where he had been waiting.

Kneeling and ready, I had the advantage of the moment. There he was, outlined against the sky, not knowing if I were dead or alive. The bow was still clumsy in my hands, but at such a distance I was sure I could not miss. I'm not certain I aimed very well. I just tensed the bow as best I could and let the arrow go. The arrow went into his shoulder and he fell back. That's about how it was.

I know I went up the last stretch of rock very fast. He was flat on his back and he was trying to get up. There was blood escaping through his parka at the shoulder, but it was not anything that bothered me. I plowed into him and flattened him again, before he could rise; then I began to punch this peerless sportsman free of his senses.

It was Sarah McBride who pulled me off him.

I guess we sat there for quite a while, the girl and I, on the top of British Columbia. There was a section of vertical stone to spare us from the wind. We were waiting for Slade to revive enough to make the descent with us.

In many ways, he got off easily. The gash in his shoulder was plugged with my handkerchief. The bleeding had stopped. I'll admit his features were scrambled some, but he'd get over that. From the west now, frying the clouds and the mist away, the bright sun showered the peaks with warmth. The wind had squandered itself. It wasn't bad at all. Far below, we could see the copter, waiting.

"It was a real sweet picnic," I said to Sarah. "Wasn't it?"

She failed to comment at first. She gazed off, very thoughtful.

"It was horrible, George. He sent me far up on one of the peaks, supposedly to look for goats. It was after he was gone, and I was alone up there, that I realized his idea was to kill you. I could see it all from where I was standing. That's why I screamed, and why you heard me. There was nothing else I could do, nothing except pray that he would miss."

I didn't look at her then. I had no way of telling how sincere she was.

"How'd you ever get mixed up with a guy like that?" I demanded.

"A job, George. That's all it ever was. First-class accommodations, which I confess I don't mind. And a lot of heavy paydays. I don't mind those, either."

"Please," I said, "don't mention 'paydays.'"

"But why not?"

"You should know why not. Because this clown will never pay me now. The chances are, with that hole in his shoulder, and his face unpretitled, he'll have me tossed in jail."

"I don't think so," she said slowly.

"I really don't think so."

"With all the lawyers he can hire? Why, he'll probably establish that I

attacked him in the first place, and make the charges stick."

"No, George," she said, turning to me. "He'll pay you in full. Right through his swollen nose." And when I wanted to argue, she smiled at me fondly, patting her camera with surprising tenderness. "It's all here, George. He wanted pictures of the hunt, but not necessarily a man hunt. It's all here, in color. I think he will pay you—and possibly a bonus."

I remember how it was a really fine day in so many respects. Not that I ever saw one of those goats. And I sometimes wonder if they're up there, after all.

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