

The Free Press Short Story

A MOST SACRED TRUST

BY RUSSELL GORDON CARTER

THE old Riverside Hotel had been sold. William Kendall, the night clerk, handed a couple of letters across the desk to a guest who had inquired for mail, before he turned again to his informant, Willis Coady, the real estate man.

"Yes," Coady went on. "It was sold yesterday, I understand. That's why Dawson went down to New York. Can't tell you very much, though, about the new owner except that he's said to be a live wire! You'll probably see him yourself in a few days. Take my advice and watch your step if you value your job!"

"My job—huh?"

The telephone buzzed, and William reached for it mechanically. He frowned as he recognized the voice. That fellow in room 313 again. He had another complaint, the third within the past hour. First a pounding radiator bothered him, then a rattling window, and now no towels were in the bathroom.

"I'm sorry, sir," said William. "I'll see that you get some at once." He called to the sleepy-eyed boy sprawled on the long seat opposite the desk. "Joe, take a couple of towels up to 313."

As the boy made his way toward the dim stairway that opened off the lobby, a big, heavy-set man in a dark overcoat came in with a rush of wind. He asked for a first-floor room with a bath. On the card that the clerk pushed toward him, he wrote, "W. J. Kramer, New York." William assigned him to room 126, just down the corridor.

The newcomer, who had something of the look of an alert, middle-aged traveling man, glanced downward at his big suit case. "Have I got to lug that?" His voice was sharp, but his blue eyes were not unkind.

William stepped out from behind the desk, and picking up the suit case, led the way along the corridor. "Only one boy on duty to-night," he explained, "and he's on an errand. I don't want to keep you waiting."

The man nodded and grunted. Back at the desk, William looked for Willis Coady, intending to ask him several questions about the sale, but the real estate man had gone. "My job!" William said to himself. "I don't know that I value it so much, even with jobs as scarce as they are."

The telephone buzzed again. A guest on the second floor asked to be called promptly at a quarter past seven the next morning. William jotted on his memorandum pad "Call 296 at 7:15," before he glanced up as a group of half a dozen men came crowding in through the main door, carrying cumbersome bags and suit cases. They were traveling salesmen just arrived from New York. William recognized familiar faces.

"Greetings, William! How's tricks?" "Best room in the house, William, my lad! That's me!" "How you been since last time, my boy? Br! S a lot cold up this way!" "Look now, William, any room at all so long as it's warm. Atta boy!"

William did the best he could for them, all the while listening to their line of talk, and now and then responding to a good-humored jibe. Two or three others from the same train came in, and by that time it was twenty minutes past ten. He yawned as he looked at the clock above the desk; he would be on duty until eight o'clock, a long stretch. "No," he thought, "I wouldn't care one bit if I lost this job tomorrow!"

The telephone buzzed. One of the late arrivals had misplaced his gloves. Had William seen anything of a pair? "Yes. You left them here on the desk. I'll send them up." William smiled faintly as he handed the gloves to Joe and told him to take them to room 232. In the safe behind the desk, awaiting claimants, were articles that earlier guests had forgotten—a gold fountain pen, a watch, an old bill fold, one gold cuff link.

The big, heavy-set man who had signed himself "W. J. Kramer" strolled into the lobby and glanced at the clock. "One more New York train tonight, isn't there?" he inquired. "Yes, sir. It gets in at eleven-fifty when it's on time."

"Cold night. There's ice in that wind from off the river." Mr. Kramer bought a copy of the local newspaper. "You been on the job here long?"

"A little over a year."

"Like it?"

William was on the point of saying he would like it much better if things were run more efficiently, when the telephone buzzed. One more complaint. A man in room 109 said he could not get to sleep on account of a faucet that dripped, dripped, dripped. He wanted the management to do something about it.

"All right, sir," said William. "I'll see what can be done about it."

Who could fix a dripping faucet? It sounded like a job for a plumber! William, nevertheless, stepped out from behind the desk. Number 109 was just two doors down the corridor; he would have a look at the faucet himself.

Yes, it was a job for a plumber, William realized. Nothing except a new washer would stop the drip. He wrapped a towel round the faucet. "There," he said, "you won't hear the drip now for a long time."

"The man grinned sleepily. "I never thought of that."

The telephone was buzzing when William reached the desk. A guest in one of the corner rooms on the top floor wanted to know if he could not have more heat in the radiator. The pipes were almost cold.

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

Another guest, also on the top floor, voiced the same complaint. He said he did not want to freeze.

William sent Joe with a message to the furnace man. A lot of good that would do. It was impossible to heat the top-floor rooms properly on a very cold night, especially when the wind was blowing. The hotel needed a larger heating apparatus.

Mr. Kramer had seated himself in one of the shabby armchairs near by and was reading his paper. Two or three other loungers were on the long settee beside the fireplace.

William looked at his memorandum pad. Call 305 and 271 at 7:30. Bus schedule to Beckville for Mr. Chalmer. Call 225 at 7:10. Telephone for taxicab for Mr. Benson at 8:35. Call 296 at 7:15. "A sort-of glorified servant, that's all I am," he said to himself. "Twenty-two dollars a week, a dull, thankless job in a small town, no future, no chance to do anything really worth while and—"

The telephone buzzed. This time it was an outside call; a man with a throaty voice, speaking from Jacobstown, across the river, wanted to talk to a Mr. Hess. William explained that no one by that name was registered at the hotel. The man at once protested; he insisted in positive and emphatic tones that the clerk was mistaken, because a letter had come from Mr. Hess that afternoon, saying he was stopping at the Riverside. No doubt about it. William told him again that no such name was on the hotel list. Thereupon the man became angry and wanted to talk to the manager, and quite obviously did not believe the clerk when he said the manager was in New York.

At that point Mr. Kramer rose and walked over to the desk, his eyebrows quizzically lifted.

Finally William said to the man on the wire, "It's possible that your friend, Mr. Hess, may come in on the late train tonight. If he does, is there any message for him?"

After some further discussion the man gave a number, which Mr. Hess was to call at once if he should arrive on the late train, then rang off abruptly, as if he had been mistreated.

Mr. Kramer sat down again and once more became interested in his newspaper; or at least he appeared to be interested.

The eleven-fifty was thirteen minutes late. Shortly after it had pulled out of the station, a taxicab came grinding up the slope and stopped in front of the hotel. A puffing, red-faced fat man tumbled into the lobby, carrying two enormous black bags. "A room," he said and blinked about him.

William pushed the usual slip toward him, and with chubby fingers he wrote, "Thomas Hess, Staten Island." William smiled faintly and then told him of the telephone call and gave him the message and the number that the man with the throaty voice had left.

The fat man grunted. "That was George Becker. Know him? I'll call him in the morning. Do him good to wait."

Mr. Kramer rose and sauntered over to the desk again; he was the only guest in the lobby now. "I asked you a question awhile back," he said abruptly.

William raised his eyebrows. "Remember? I asked you how you liked your job here."

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "There are worse jobs than mine," he replied with an attempt at indifference. He wrinkled his nose, seeking to identify a vague odor that had just reached him.

"Of course," agreed Mr. Kramer, "only that wasn't what I asked you, you know." He smiled in a curiously friendly manner.

William frowned, then wrinkled his nose again, still trying to identify that odor. It was a little stronger now.

Mr. Kramer leaned an elbow on the desk and waited expectantly, his clear blue eyes unblinking. William felt vaguely resentful. He had no desire to talk about his job, to tell

an utter stranger whether he liked it or not.

Joe came down the stairs at that moment. He was through for the night. "So long, William. See you tomorrow."

"Night, Joe." The boy went round the desk and down the narrow stairway that led to the basement, where he had left his hat and overcoat.

"I've had a good chance to observe things," Mr. Kramer went on easily, "and maybe I'm wrong, but I got the impression you're not exactly happy. Or am I wrong?"

William suddenly laughed—briefly, mirthlessly. Oh, well! Why not get the matter off his chest? Perhaps he would feel better. "No, you're right," he said. "The fact is, I'd like to be doing something worth while, instead of just being everybody's servant."

"You mean, the job is beneath you?"

"No, I don't mean that. But there's much that's petty about a job like this, that's what I mean. A great lot of trivial details—and who cares?"

"Well, there's the fellow in room 296, I guess he'd care all right if you forgot to call him at seven-fifteen."

"Yes, that's the point," William agreed. "If things go wrong, there's trouble. But no body gives a thought to the other side of the picture. And then in an old run-down hotel like this one—well, it's hard sometimes to make the guests comfortable."

"You've done a pretty good job of it tonight," remarked Mr. Kramer.

William brightened. It was the first expression of positive approval that he had heard during his fourteen months behind the desk! Mr. Dawson, the old proprietor, had been habitually tight-mouthed, taking everything for granted. "Well, sir—" he began diffidently, then turned his head suddenly toward the narrow stairway leading to the basement.

Some one was shouting. Some one was running. Footsteps pounded on the stairs. A moment later Joe burst into the lobby, his face red, his eyes wild.

"William! Fire! Grease or something in the kitchen—boiled over! Fire!"

William leaped out from behind the desk and caught the boy by the shoulders. "Shut up!" he ordered. "Don't shout like that! Do you want to start a panic? He ran to the stairway and went down it three steps at a time. Now he knew that odor—burning grease!

His first glimpse of the big square kitchen seemed to send his heart up into his throat. Flames all along a section of the opposite wall! Yellow flames licked upward! Gray smoke stung the eyes! He took a step or two forward and stumbled over something. It was a rumpled length of heavy carpet that evidently served as a rug. He seized it, and with head bent and eyes half closed, crossed to the farther wall. He swung the carpet against the flames—again, again, again! Showers of sparks flew at him. He brushed them from his coat sleeves.

The smoke was becoming more dense, more acrid. He coughed, half strangled with it. His temples throbbed. Bang went the carpet against the burning woodwork! Sparks flew in all directions; they stung his hands, his wrists, bang, with the old carpet. He swung it until his arms ached. His vision blurred. He stumbled against a chair, heard it clatter upon something metallic, the stove perhaps.

Some one else was in the kitchen now. He heard the thud of something soft striking the wall. He thought he heard some one shouting. A sudden sickness seized the young man. He staggered, went to his knees, gasping and choking. Things were going round and round—flames, smoke, that chair he had knocked

over. Still clutching the carpet, he crept backwards as far as the door. A wave of cool air came sweeping in from the passage. He opened his mouth, gulped, swallowed, gulped again, then rose to his feet.

Not so many flames now. Some one had switched on the light. Through the swirling smoke he saw Mr. Kramer in his shirt sleeves, swinging his coat against the wall. Joe was beside him. William advanced again, carpet in hand. Once more he was beating at the flames. He felt a sudden wild sense of triumph. He was winning!

William and Mr. Kramer stood gazing at each other in the blackened kitchen—then led him to the basement windows, and the room was rapidly clearing of smoke.

"What shall I do now?" the boy asked.

"Go up to the desk," said William. "Answer the telephone if it rings. I'll be up in less than five minutes." He braced his legs, then took an awkward step sideways.

Mr. Kramer reached forth and caught him, then led him to a chair. William seated himself heavily in it. "I'll be all right in a minute—"

"Are you burnt?"

William shook his head. "Just my hands and wrists a little. I'll be all right in a minute. Dizzy, that's all."

Mr. Kramer said a surprising thing. "Soon as you're able I want you to go home and go to bed. You've earned it!"

"Oh, but I can't do that," William protested. "I'm on duty till eight o'clock."

"No, you're not! I'm letting you off. I'll take your job, myself."

"You?"

The man suddenly smiled. "Why not I bought this hotel yesterday."

William stared at him, dumb-founded.

"Just thought I'd like to see how things worked before I made myself known," Mr. Kramer went on. "And there's one thing I'm sure of: I've got a first-rate night clerk! Now, my boy, if you feel better—"

William rose slowly to his feet. "I think we're going to get on well together," Mr. Kramer was saying. "We've made a pretty good start, eh? With a friendly smile he added, "It isn't often a night clerk is called upon to put out a fire and prevent a panic and save lives; yet there's always that possibility, you know. Because he has a job with a lot of responsibility—a job that's in every sense worth while! Don't forget it."

COMPLIMENT

At the request of her fifteen-year-old son, a young Toronto matron the other day called at the neighborhood cleaner's shop to pick up his hat that had been left there for reblocking.

Asking for the hat, she said: "My son brought it in to you last week."

"Was that your son?" said the cleaner. "What a fine big boy he is!"

The young matron agreed.

"You're sure that was your son that left the hat?" said the cleaner, showing incredulity.

Flattered by the implied compliment, the mother smilingly said that she was sure.

At the dinner-table that night, she told the story, only to have her pleasure spoiled when her son piped up: "But, Mother, it was Father who took the hat in!"—The Printed Word.

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Thousands of miles from the war zone, people are now lifting their letters open with paper knives made from bits of bombs rained by the Nazis on London in the Blitz.

The larger pieces are melted down and used again by industry, but small fragments have been shaped into blades, leaving the handle in the rough of the original splinter.

The paper knives are from six inches to two feet long and quantities of these souvenirs have already been shipped to the Dominions and U. S. A.

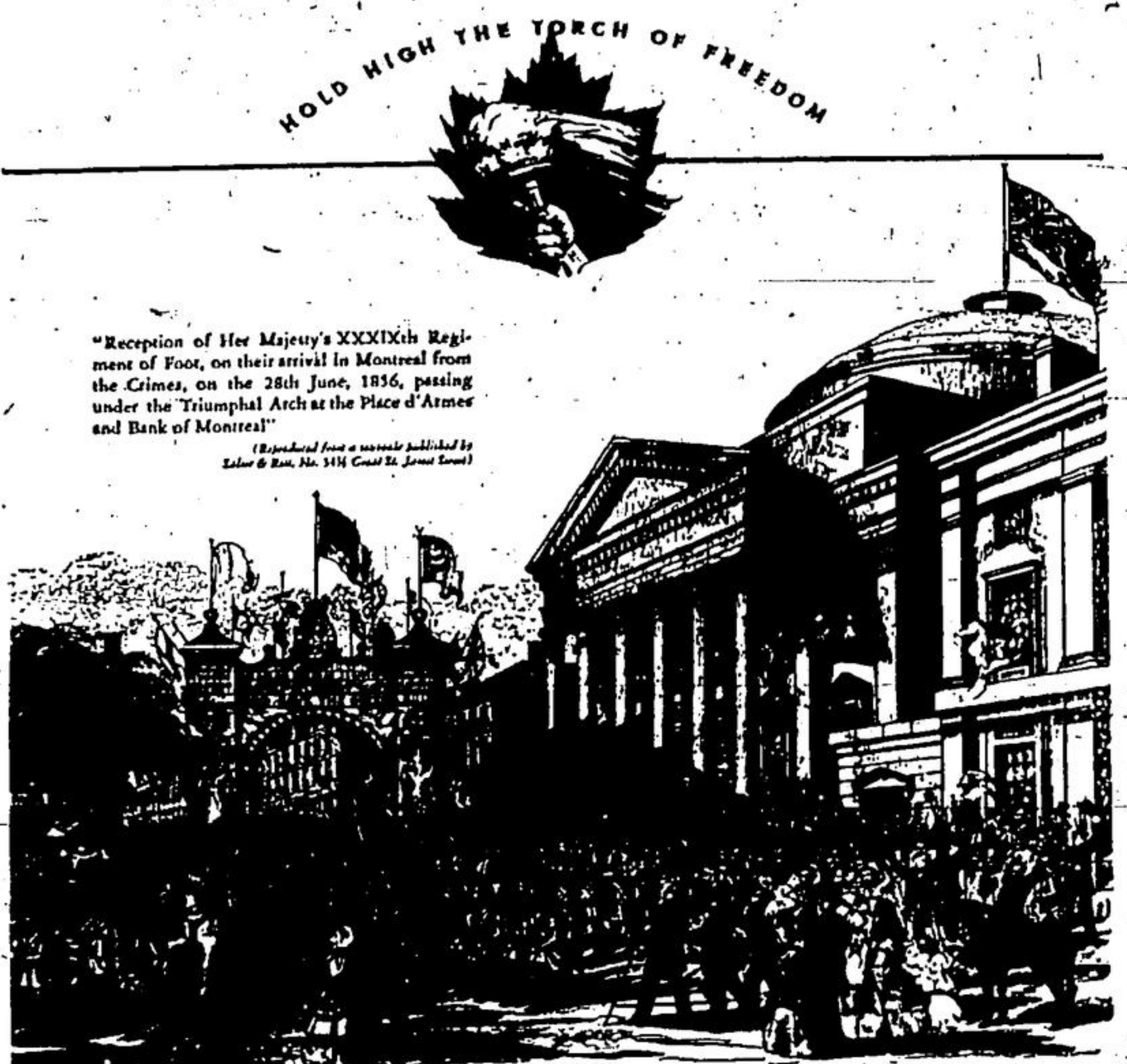
Bars Down For Doctors

LONDON, (CP).—A new defence regulation provides that a foreign doctor with a foreign diploma and debarred from practising in his own country by racial legislation may be given the right to practise temporarily in Britain.

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