

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

By C. H. M.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THIS chapter closes the second grand division of our book.

In it we have a most solemn appeal to the conscience of the congregation. It is what we may term the summing up and practical application of all that has gone before in this most profound, practical, and hortatory section of the five books of Moses.

“These are the words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb.”

Allusion has already been made to this passage as one of the many proofs of the entire distinctness of the book of Deuteronomy from the preceding section of the Pentateuch; but it claims the reader's attention on another ground. It speaks of a special covenant made with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, in virtue of which they were to be brought into the land. This covenant was as distinct from the covenant made at Sinai as it was from the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In a word, it was neither pure law on the one hand, nor pure grace on the other, but government exercised in sovereign mercy.

It is perfectly clear that Israel could not enter the land on the ground of the Sinai or Horeb-covenant, inasmuch as they had completely failed under it, by making a golden calf. They forfeited all right and title to the land, and were only saved from instant destruction by sovereign mercy exercised toward them through the mediation and earnest intercession of Moses.

It is equally plain that they did not enter the land on the ground of the Abrahamic covenant of grace, for had they done so, they would not have been turned out of it. Neither the extent nor the duration of their tenure answered to the terms of the covenant made with their fathers. It was by the terms of the Moab-covenant that they entered upon the limited and temporary possession of the land of Canaan; and inasmuch as they have as signally failed under the Moab-covenant as under that of Horeb – failed under government as completely as under law, they are expelled from the land and scattered over the face of the earth, under the governmental dealings of God.

But not forever. Blessed be the God of all grace, the seed of Abraham His friend shall yet possess the land of Canaan according to the magnificent terms of the original grant. **“The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”**

Gifts and calling must not be confounded with law and government.

Mount Zion can never be classed with Horeb and Moab. The new and everlasting covenant of grace, ratified by the precious blood of the Lamb of God, shall be gloriously fulfilled to the letter, spite of all the powers of earth and hell – men and devils combined.

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in My covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord: I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to Me a people; and they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.’ In that He saith, ‘A new covenant,’ He hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:8-13).

Now, the reader must carefully guard against a system of interpretation that would apply this precious and beautiful passage to the Church.

It involves a threefold wrong, namely,

- A wrong to the truth of God,
- A wrong to the Church, and
- A wrong to Israel.

We have raised a warning note on this subject again and again in the course of our studies on the Pentateuch, because we feel its immense importance.

It is our deep and thorough conviction that no one can understand, much less expound, the Word of God who confounds Israel with the Church. The two things are as distinct as Heaven and earth; and hence, when God speaks of Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion, if we presume to apply those names to the New Testament Church, it can only issue in utter confusion.

We believe it to be a simple impossibility to set forth the mischievous consequences of such a method of handling the Word of God.

- it puts an end to all accuracy of interpretation, and to all that holy precision and divine certainty which Scripture is designed and fitted to impart;
- it mars the integrity of truth, damages the souls of God’s people, and hinders their progress in divine life and spiritual intelligence.

In short, we cannot too strongly urge upon everyone who reads these lines the absolute necessity of guarding against this fatally false system of handling Holy Scripture.

We must beware of meddling with the scope of prophecy, or the true application of the promises of God.

We have no warrant whatever to interfere with the divinely appointed sphere of the covenants. The inspired apostle tells us distinctly, in the ninth of Romans, that they pertain to Israel; and if we attempt to alienate them from the Old Testament fathers and transfer them to the Church of God – the body of Christ, we may depend upon it, we are doing what Jehovah-Elohim will never sanction. The Church forms no part of the ways of God with Israel and the earth. Her place, her portion, her privileges, her prospect, are all heavenly. She is called into existence in this time of Christ's rejection, to be associated with Him where He is now hidden in the heavens, and to share His glory in the coming day. If the reader fully grasps this grand and glorious truth, it will go far toward helping him to put things into their right places and leave them there.

We must now turn our attention to the very solemn practical application of all that has passed before us to the conscience of every member of the congregation.

“And Moses called unto all Israel, and said unto them, ‘Ye have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh, and unto all his servants, and unto all his land; the great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles; yet the Lord hath not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.’”

This is peculiarly solemn.

The most astounding miracles and signs may pass before us, and leave the heart untouched. These things may produce a transient effect upon the mind and upon the natural feelings, but unless the conscience is brought into the light of the divine presence, and the heart brought under the immediate action of the truth by the power of the Spirit of God, there is no permanent result reached.

Nicodemus inferred from the miracles of Christ that He was a teacher come from God; but this was not enough. He had to learn the deep and wondrous meaning of that mighty sentence, **“Ye must be born again.”** A faith founded on miracles may leave people unsaved, unblessed, unconverted – awfully responsible, no doubt, but wholly unconverted.

We read, at the close of the second chapter of John's Gospel, of many who professed to believe on Christ when they saw His miracles; but He did not commit Himself unto them. There was no divine work, nothing to be trusted. There must be a new life – a new nature, and miracles and signs cannot impart this. We must be born again-born of the Word and Spirit of God. The new life is communicated by the incorruptible seed of the Gospel of God, lodged in the heart by the power of the Holy Ghost. It is not a head-belief founded on miracles, but a heart-belief in the Son of God. It is something which could never be known under law or government. **“The gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”** Precious gift! Glorious source! Blessed channel! Universal and everlasting praise to the Eternal Trinity!

- **“And I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot.”**-Wonderful clothes! Wonderful shoes! God took care of them and made them last, blessed forever be His great and holy name!
- **“Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink; that ye might know that I am the Lord your God.”** They were fed and clothed by God’s own gracious hand.
- **“Man did eat angels’ food.”** They had no need of wine or strong drink – no need of stimulants.
- **“They drank of that spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ.”** That pure stream refreshed them in the dreary desert, and the heavenly manna sustained them day by day.

All they wanted was the capacity to enjoy the divine provision.

Here, alas! like ourselves, they failed; they got tired of the heavenly food, and lusted for other things. How sad that we should be so like them! how very humbling that we should so fail to appreciate that precious one whom God has given to be our life, our portion, our object, our all in all! How terrible to find our hearts craving the wretched vanities and follies of this poor passing world – its riches, its honors, its distinctions, its pleasures, which all perish in the using, and which, even if they were lasting, are not for a moment to be compared with **“the unsearchable riches of Christ”!**

May God, in His infinite goodness, **“grant us, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith; that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.”**

Oh, that this most blessed prayer may be answered in the deep and abiding experience of the reader and the writer!

“And when ye carne unto this place, Sihon the king of Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan” – formidable and much-dreaded foes! – **“came out against us unto battle, and we smote them.”**

And had they been ten thousand times as great and as formidable, they would have proved to be as chaff before the presence of the God of the armies of Israel.

“And we took their land, and gave it for an inheritance unto the Reubenites, and to the Gadites, and to the half tribe of Manasseh.” Will any one dare to compare this with what human history records respecting the invasion of South America by the Spaniards? Woe be to those who do so! They will find themselves terribly mistaken. There is this grand and all-important difference, that Israel had the direct authority of God for what they did to Sihon and Og; the Spaniards could show no such authority for what they did to the poor ignorant savages of South America. This alters the case completely. The introduction of God and His authority is the one perfect answer to every question, the divine solution of every difficulty. May we ever keep this weighty fact in the remembrance of the thoughts of our hearts, as a divine antidote against every infidel suggestion!

“Keep therefore the words of this [the Moab] covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do.” Simple obedience to the Word of God ever has been, is now, and ever shall be the deep and real secret of all true prosperity. To the Christian, of course, the prosperity is not in earthly or material things, but in heavenly and spiritual; and we must never forget that it is the very height of folly to think of prospering or making progress in the divine life if we are not yielding an implicit obedience to all the commandments of our blessed and adorable Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

“If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples. As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you; continue ye in My love. If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love.”

Here is true Christian prosperity. May we earnestly long after it, and diligently pursue the proper method of attaining it.

“Ye stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones” – touching and interesting fact! – **“your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp.”**

How exquisite, how deeply affecting, the expression, **“thy stranger”!** What a powerful appeal to Israel’s heart on behalf of the stranger! **“From the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water; that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and into His oath, which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day; that He may establish thee to-day for a people unto Himself, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He hath said unto thee, and as He hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath, but with him that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day; for ye know how we have dwelt in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the nations which ye passed by; and ye have seen their abominations [that is, the objects of their worship – their false gods] and their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold, which were among them”** (Ver. 10-17).

This earnest appeal is not only general, but also intensely individual. This is very important. We are ever prone to generalize, and thus miss the application of truth to our individual conscience. This is a grave mistake, and a most serious loss to our souls. We are everyone of us responsible to yield an implicit obedience to the precious commandments of our Lord. It is thus we enter into the real enjoyment of our relationship, as Moses says to the people, **“that He may establish thee for a people unto Himself, and that He may be unto thee a God.”**

Nothing can be more precious. And then it is so very simple. There is no vagueness, obscurity, or mysticism about it. It is simply having His most precious commandments treasured up in our hearts, acting upon the conscience, and carried out in the life. This is the true secret of habitually realizing our relationship with our Father and with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

For anyone to imagine that he can enjoy the blessed sense of intimate relationship while living in the habitual neglect of our Lord's commandments is a miserable and mischievous delusion.

"If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love." This is the grand point; let us deeply ponder it.

- **"If ye love Me, keep My commandments."**

- **"Not everyone that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven."**

- **"For whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother."**

- **"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."**

These are seasonable words for this day of easygoing, self-indulgent, worldly profession.

May they sink down into our ears and into our hearts. May they take full possession of our whole moral being, and bring forth fruit in our individual history.

We feel persuaded of the need of this practical side of things. We are in imminent danger, while seeking to keep clear of everything like legality, of running into the opposite evil of carnal laxity. The passages of Holy Scripture which we have just quoted – and they are but a few of many – supply the divine safeguard against both these pernicious and deadly errors. It is blessedly true that we are brought into the holy relationship of children by the sovereign grace of God, through the power of His Word and Spirit. This one fact cuts up by the roots the noxious weed of legality.

But then, surely the relationship has its suited affections, its duties, and its responsibilities, the due recognition of which furnishes the true remedy for the terrible evil of carnal laxity so prevalent on all hands. If we are delivered from law-works – as, thank God, we are, if we are true Christians – it is not that we should be good-for-nothing self-pleasers, but that life-works might be produced in us, to the glory of Him whose name we bear, whose we are, and whom we are bound, by every argument, to love obey, and serve.

May we, beloved reader, earnestly seek to apply our hearts to this practical line of things. We are imperatively called upon to do so, and we may fully count upon the abundant grace of our Lord JESUS Christ to enable us to respond to the call, spite of the ten thousand difficulties and hindrances that lie in our way. Oh, for a deeper work of grace in our souls, a closer walk with God, a more pronounced discipleship! Let us give ourselves to the earnest pursuit of these things!

We must now proceed with the lawgiver's solemn appeal. He warns the people to take heed, **"lest there should be among you man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood."**

These searching words are referred to by the inspired apostle in his Epistle to the Hebrews in a very emphatic manner. **“Looking diligently,”** he says, **“lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”**

What weighty words are these! How full of wholesome admonition and warning! They set forth the solemn responsibility of all Christians. We are all called upon to exercise a holy, jealous, godly care over each other, which, alas! Is but little understood or recognized. We are not all called to be pastors or teachers. The passage just quoted does not refer particularly to such; it refers to all Christians, and we are bound to attend to it.

We hear great complaints on all sides, of the sad lack of pastoral care. No doubt there is a great lack of true pastors in the Church of God, as there is of every other gift. This is only what we might expect. How could it be otherwise? How could we expect a profusion of spiritual gifts in our present miserable condition? The Spirit is grieved and quenched by our lamentable divisions, our worldliness, our gross unfaithfulness. Need we, then, marvel at our deplorable poverty?

But our blessed Lord is full of deep and tender compassion toward us in the midst of our ruin and spiritual desolation, and if we only humbled ourselves under His mighty hand, He would graciously lift us up, and enable us, in many ways, to meet the deficiency of pastoral gift amongst us. We might, through His precious grace, look more diligently and lovingly after one another, and seek each other's spiritual progress and prosperity in a thousand ways.

Let not the reader imagine for a moment that we mean to give the smallest countenance to prying officiousness or unwarrantable espionage on the part of Christians. Far away be the thought! We look upon such things as perfectly insufferable in the Church of God. They stand at the very moral antipodes of that loving, holy, tender, diligent pastoral care of which we speak and for which we long.

But does it not strike the reader that, while giving the widest possible berth to these most contemptible evils to which we have just referred, we might cultivate and exercise a loving, prayerful interest in one another, and a holy watchfulness and care, which might prevent many a root of bitterness from springing up? We cannot doubt it. It is quite true we are not all called to be pastors, and it is equally true that there is a grievous dearth of pastors in the Church of God.

We mean, of course, true pastors – pastors given by the Head of the Church – men with a pastor's heart, and real pastoral gift and power. All this is undeniable, and for this very reason it ought to stir the hearts of the Lord's beloved people everywhere to seek of Him grace to enable them to exercise a tender, loving, brotherly care over one another, which might go a great way toward supplying the need of pastors amongst us. One thing is clear, that in the passage just quoted from Hebrews 12, there is nothing said about pastors. It is simply a most stirring exhortation to all Christians to exercise a mutual care, and to watch against the springing up of any root of bitterness.

And oh, how needful this is!

- How terrible are those roots!
- How bitter they are!
- How widely spread are their pernicious tendrils at times!
- What irreparable mischief they do!
- How many are defiled by them!
- How many precious links of friendship are snapped, and how many hearts broken by them!

Yes, reader, and how often we have felt persuaded that a little judicious pastoral or even brotherly care, a little loving, godly counsel, might have nipped the evil in the bud, and thus hindered an incalculable amount of mischief and sorrow. May we all lay these things to heart, and earnestly seek grace to do what we can to prevent roots of bitterness springing up and spreading abroad their defiling influence. But we must hearken to further weighty and searching words from the beloved and venerable lawgiver. He draws a most solemn picture of the end of the one who caused the root of bitterness to spring up.

“And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst.” Fatal delusion! Crying, Peace, peace! when there is no peace, but imminent wrath and judgment. **“The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and His jealousy shall smoke against that man, and,”** – instead of the **“peace”** which he vainly promised himself, – **“all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven.”**

Awful warning: to all who act as roots of bitterness in the midst of the people of God, and to all who countenance them!

“And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law; so that the generation to come of your children, that shall rise up after you, and the stranger that shall come from a far land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sicknesses which the Lord hath laid upon it; and that the whole land thereof is brimstone and salt and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in His anger and in His wrath.”

Soul-subduing examples of the governmental dealings of the living God, which ought to speak with a voice of thunder in the ears of all those who are turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the Lord that bought them! – **“even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done thus unto this land? What meaneth the heat of this great anger? Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them forth out of the land of Egypt; for they went and served other gods, and worshiped them, gods whom they knew not, and whom He had not given unto them; and the anger of the Lord was kindled against this land, to bring upon it all the curses that are written in this book; and the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day”** (Ver. 19-28).

Reader, how peculiarly solemn is all this! What a powerful illustration of the apostle's words, "**It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God**"! and again, "**Our God is a consuming fire**"! How important that the professing church should give heed to such warning notes! Most assuredly, she is called to learn much from the history of God's dealings with His people Israel; Romans 11 is perfectly clear and conclusive as to this.

The apostle, in speaking of the divine judgment upon the unbelieving branches of the olive-tree, thus appeals to Christendom: "**If some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive-tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive-tree; boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off; and thou standest by faith. BE NOT HIGH-MINDED, BUT FEAR; for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God; on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness,' if thou continue in His goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.**"

Alas! the professing church has not continued in the goodness of God. It is utterly impossible to read her history in the light of Scripture and not see this. She has grievously departed, and there is nothing before her save the unmingled wrath of Almighty God. The beloved members of the body of Christ who, sad to say, are mingled with the terrible mass of corrupt profession, will be gathered out of it and taken to the place prepared in the Father's house in Heaven. Then, if not before, they will see how wrong it was to have remained in connection with what was so flagrantly opposed to the mind of Christ as revealed, with divine clearness and simplicity, in the Holy Scriptures.

But as to the great thing known as Christendom, it will be "**spued out**" and "**cut off.**" It will be given over to strong delusion, to believe a lie, "**that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.**"

Tremendous words! May they ring in the ears and sink down into the hearts of thousands who are going on from day to day, week to week, and year to year, content with a mere name to live, a form of godliness, but denying the power, "**lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.**"

What an awfully graphic picture of so-called Christian England! How appalling the condition and the destiny of the pleasure-hunting thousands who are rushing blindly, heedlessly, and madly down the inclined plane that leads to hopeless and everlasting misery! May God, in His infinite goodness, by the power of His Spirit and by the mighty action of His Word, rouse the hearts of His people everywhere to a more profound and influential sense of these things.

We must now, ere closing this section, briefly direct the reader's attention to the last verse of our chapter. It is one of those passages of Scripture sadly misunderstood and misapplied. "**The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.**"

This verse is constantly used to hinder the progress of souls in the knowledge of “**the deep things of God,**” but its simple meaning is this: The things “**revealed**” are what we have had before us in the preceding chapter of this book; the things “**secret,**” on the other hand, refer to those resources of grace which God had in store, to be unfolded when the people should have utterly failed to “**do all the words of this law.**”

The revealed things are what Israel ought to have done, but did not do; the secret things are what God would do, spite of Israel’s sad and shameful failure, and they are most blessedly presented in the following chapters – the counsels of divine grace, the provisions of sovereign mercy to be displayed when Israel shall have thoroughly learnt the lesson of their utter failure under both the Moab and the Horeb-covenants.

Thus this passage, when rightly understood, so far from affording any warrant for the use so constantly made of it, encourages the heart to search into these things which, though “**secret**” to Israel in the plains of Moab, are fully and clearly “**revealed**” to us for our profit, comfort, and edification. *

*** I Corinthians 2:9 is another of the misunderstood and misapplied passages. “But, as it is written, ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.’ “ Here, people are sure to stop, and hence conclude that we cannot possibly know aught of the precious things which God has in store for us; but the very next verse proves the gross absurdity of any such conclusion. “But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we [that is, all the Lord’s people] have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.” Thus this passage, like Deuteronomy 29:29, teaches the very opposite of what is so constantly deduced from it. How important to examine and weigh the context of the passages which are quoted.**

The Holy Spirit came down, on the day of Pentecost, to lead the disciples into all truth.

The canon of Scripture is complete; all the purposes and counsels of God are fully revealed. The mystery of the Church completes the entire circle of divine truth.

The apostle John could say to all God’s children, “**Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things.**”

Thus the entire New Testament abounds with evidence to prove the mistaken use that is so constantly made of Deuteronomy 29:29. We have dwelt upon it because we are aware that the Lord’s beloved people are sadly hindered by it in their progress in divine knowledge. The enemy would ever seek to keep them in the dark, when they ought to be walking in the sunlight of divine revelation – to keep them as babes feeding upon milk, when they ought, as those “**of full age,**” to be feeding upon the “**strong meat**” so freely provided for the Church of God.

We have but little idea of how the Spirit of God is grieved and Christ dishonored by the low tone of things amongst us. How few really “**know the things that are freely given to us of God**”! Where are the proper privileges of the Christian understood, believed, and realized? How meager is our apprehension of divine things! . How stunted our growth! How feeble our practical exposition of the truth of God! What a blotted Epistle of Christ we present!

Beloved Christian reader, let us seriously ponder these things in the divine presence. Let us honestly search out the root of all this lamentable failure, and have it judged and put away, that so we may more faithfully and unmistakably declare whose we are and whom we serve.

May it be more thoroughly manifest that Christ is our one absorbing object.

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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