



Curiosity of the day:

Food Factories

Suppose you have a strange cousin named Dexter, with a laboratory in his basement. You go down there and it's as if you had taken an elevator into hell. The smoke is so thick you have to gulp to breathe, and the place stinks like rotten eggs from the sulfuric acid that Dexter is heating up in glass beakers. He wears thick glasses because he's nearsighted, and since they are always getting fogged up from the steam, he often trips on the fuses, comic books, coke cans, bottles of nitro-glycerin, stray socks, and dead cats he has left lying on the floor. For Dexter is a bit messy. He's fitted his glasses out with battery-operated windshield wipers, but he's forgotten to change the batteries, so the wipers are stuck out cockeyed, making him look like a strange kind of bug with drooping antennas.

"Hello there, Dexter," you say. "What are you whipping up today?"

"I am making a sugar factory," he says, and starts to giggle. The fumes get to his head sometimes.



"What are you going to make the sugar out of?"

"Aha, aha, you'll never guess! I will be the richest man in the world. I will have more power than Alexander the Great,

Augustus Caesar, and Napoleon, all put together! I am going to make sugar out of light!"

You open your hands out as if you were trying to hold light in them. "Is that what you have in that big vat, Dexter?" For there's a big vat in the middle of the basement, with pipes.

"Yes!" he says. "That is where I am storing my supply of light."

"And you are going to turn light into sugar?"

"Yes!"

"And rainbows into candy?"

"Yes!"

"And moonbeams into icing?"

"Yes!"

"I think somebody has beaten you to it, Dexter," you say.

That somebody is God.

The sacred author tells us that God said, "Let the earth bring forth every green

growing thing, all plants and all grasses and all trees, to cover the face of the earth,” and so it was. When that happened, many millions of years ago as we reckon time, the earth for the first time made things. I don’t just mean that there were things on the earth, like rocks. Suppose you put a boulder in the middle of a field. What will happen to it? The next day it is still there. Fifty years later it is still there. It is doing what a boulder ought to do. It is being heavy. Otherwise it is doing nothing. A thousand years later it will still be there, unless something outside of it does something to it. Maybe the wind scours the edges off it. Maybe ice gets into its cracks and opens it up. Maybe some dust blows into the cracks, and settles there, and grass seeds take root in the cracks, and begin to split it farther apart. But the boulder itself doesn’t make anything.

All plants make things. All plants are plants – sugar and starch plants. They turn the light from the sun into sugars and starches. They eat the sunlight, and make sweetness from it. They do it because their blades and leaves contain a miraculous substance called *chlorophyll*, which is just a

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fancy Greek word the scientists came up with, meaning *green leaf*. If your mother has ever made puff pastry out of *phyllo* dough, she’s just used special dough pounded as thin as *leaves*. If you’ve ever wrapped something in aluminum *foil*, you’ve used a form of the metal flattened into the thinness of a *leaf*.

Scientists will tell you that chlorophyll turns sunlight into sugar by a process called *photosynthesis*, but that doesn’t explain anything, since *photosynthesis* only means *making something out of light*. We still do not know quite how it works, nor do we have the slightest idea how chlorophyll came to exist in the first place. Suppose you left a pile of bricks in a field, and you came back every morning to see if they had finally gotten their act together and organized themselves into a house. Do you think that if you did that for a million years, you would get a house out of it? But now suppose that they were not even bricks, but lumps of clay. Do you think that if you waited for a million years, you would get even one nicely shaped brick for building a sugar factory, let alone the factory itself?



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