

Appendix

Dr. Louis Agassiz and the Spinster

This is the story of an obscure spinster woman who insisted that she never had a chance.

She muttered these words to Dr. Louis Agassiz, distinguished naturalist, after one of his lectures in London. In response to her complaint, he replied: "Do you say, madam, you never had a chance? What do you do?"

"I am single and help my sister run a boardinghouse."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I skin potatoes and chop onions."

He said, "Madam, where do you sit during these interesting but homely duties?"

"On the bottom step of the kitchen stairs."

"Where do your feet rest?"

"On the glazed brick."

"What is glazed brick?"

"I don't know, sir."

He said, "How long have you been sitting there?"

She said, "Fifteen years."

"Madam, here is my personal card," said Dr. Agassiz. "Would you kindly write me a letter concerning the nature of a glazed brick?"

She took him seriously. She went home and explored the dictionary and discovered that a brick was a piece of baked clay. That definition seemed too simple to send to Dr. Agassiz, so after the dishes were washed, she went to the library and in an encyclopedia read that a glazed brick is vitrified kaolin and hydrous aluminum silicate. She didn't know what that meant, but she was curious and found out. She took the word vitrified and read all she could find about it. Then she visited museums.

She moved out of the basement of her life and into a new world on the wings of vitrified. And having started, she took the word hydrous, studied geology, and went back in her studies to the time when God started the world and laid the clay beds. One afternoon she went to a brickyard, where she found the history of more than 120 kinds of bricks

and tiles, and why there have to be so many. Then she sat down and wrote thirty-six pages on the subject of glazed brick and tile.

Back came the letter from Dr. Agassiz: “Dear Madam, this is the best article I have ever seen on the subject. If you will kindly change the three words marked with asterisks, I will have it published and pay you for it.”

A short time later there came a letter that brought \$250, and penciled on the bottom of this letter was this query: “What was under those bricks?” She had learned the value of time and answered with a single word: “Ants.” He wrote back and said, “Tell me about the ants.”

She began to study ants. She found there were between eighteen hundred and twenty-five hundred different kinds. There are ants so tiny you could put three head-to-head on a pin and have standing room left over for other ants; ants an inch long that march in solid armies half a mile wide, driving everything ahead of them; ants that are blind; ants that get wings on the afternoon of the day they die; ants that build anthills so tiny that you can cover one with a lady’s silver thimble; peasant ants that keep cows to milk, and then deliver the fresh milk to the apartment house of the aristocrat ants of the neighborhood.

After wide reading, much microscopic work, and deep study, the spinster sat down and wrote Dr. Agassiz 360 pages on the subject. He published the book and sent her the money, and she went to visit all the lands of her dreams on the proceeds of her work.

Now, as you read this story, do you feel acutely that all of us are sitting with our feet on pieces of vitrified kaolin and hydrous aluminum silicate—with ants under them? Lord Chesterton answers: “There are no uninteresting things; there are only uninterested people.”

What is the point of the story and how does it relate to you?

Conversion Tables

Conversion Tables for Common Weights and Measures

Common Measures	Conversion Amounts
1 pound	454 grams
2.2 pounds	1 kilogram
1 quart	0.9464 liter
1 gram	15.43 grains
1 metric ton	2,205 pounds
1 inch	2.54 centimeters
1 centimeter	10 millimeters or 0.39 inches
1 meter	39.37 inches
1 acre	0.406 hectare

Conversion Factors for English and Metric Measurements

To Convert the English	To the Metric Multiply by	To Convert Metric	Multiply by	To Get English
acres	0.4047	hectares	2.47	acres
acres	4047	square meters	0.000247	acres
BTUs	1055	joules	0.000948	BTUs
BTUs	0.0002928	kilowatt hours	3415.301	BTUs
BTU/hours	0.2931	watts	3.411805	BTU/hours
bushels	0.03524	cubic meters	28.37684	bushels
bushels	35.24	liters	0.028377	bushels
cubic feet	0.02832	cubic meters	35.31073	cubic feet
cubic feet	28.32	liters	0.035311	cubic feet
cubic inches	16.39	cubic centimeters	0.061013	cubic inches
cubic inches	0.01639	liters	61.01281	cubic inches
cubic yards	0.7646	cubic meters	1.307873	cubic yards
cubic yards	764.6	liters	0.001308	cubic yards
feet	30.48	centimeters	0.032808	feet
feet	0.3048	meters	3.28084	feet
feet/minute	0.508	centimeters/second	1.968504	feet/minute
feet/second	30.48	centimeters/second	0.032808	feet/second
gallons	3785	cubic centimeters	0.000264	gallons
gallons	0.003785	cubic meters	264.2008	gallons
gallons	3.785	liters	0.264201	gallons
gallons/minute	0.06308	liters/second	15.85289	gallons/minute
inches	2.54	centimeters	0.393701	inches
inches	0.0254	meters	39.37008	inches
miles	1.609	kilometers	0.621504	miles
miles per hour	26.82	meters/minute	0.037286	miles per hour
ounces	28.349	grams	0.035275	ounces
fluid ounces	0.02947	liters	33.93281	fluid ounces
liquid pints	0.4732	liters	2.113271	liquid pints
pounds	453.59	grams	0.002205	pounds
quarts	0.9463	liters	1.056747	quarts
square feet	0.0929	square meters	10.76426	square feet
square yards	0.8361	square meters	1.196029	square yards
tons	0.9078	tons	1.101564	tons
yards	0.0009144	kilometers	1093.613	yards
yards	0.9144	meters	1.093613	yards