ISAAC ASIMOV

LET'S NOT

Professor Charles Kittredge ran in long, unsteady strides. He was in time to bat the glass from the lips of Associate

Professor Heber Vandermeer. It was almost like an exercise in slow motion.

Vandermeer, whose absorption had apparently been such that he had not heard the thud of Kittredge's approach, looked at once startled and ashamed. His glance sank to the smashed glass and the puddling liquid that surrounded it.

“Potassium cyanide. I'd kept a bit, when we left. Just.”m case…

“How would that have helped? And it's one glass gone, too. Now it's got to be cleaned up…No, I'll do it.”

Kittredge found a precious fragment of cardboard to scoop up the glass fragments and an even more precious scrap of cloth to soak up the poisonous fluid. He left to discard the glass and, regretfully, the cardboard and cloth into one of the chutes that would puff them to the surface, a half mile up.

He returned to find Vandermeer sitting on the cot, eyes fixed glassily on the wall. The physicist's hair had turned quite white and he had lost weight, of course. There were no fat men in the Refuge. Kittredge, who had been long, thin, and gray to begin with, had, in contrast, scarcely changed.

Vandermeer said, “Remember the old days, Kitt.”

“I try not to.”

“It's the only pleasure left,” said Vandermeer. “Schools were schools. There were classes, equipment, students, air, light, and people. People.”

“ A school's a school as long as there is one teacher and one student.”

“You're almost right,” mourned Vandermeer. “There are two teachers. You, chemistry. I, physics. The two of us, everything else we can get out of the books. And onegraduate student. He'll be the first man ever to get his Ph.D. down here. Quite a distinction. Poor Jones.”

Kittredge put his hands behind his back to keep them steady. “There are twenty other youngsters who will live to be graduate students someday.”

Vandermeer looked up. His face was gray. “What do we teach them meanwhile? History? How man discovered what makes hydrogen go boom and was happy as a lark while it went boom and boom and boom? Geography? We can describe how the winds blew the shining dust everywhere and the water currents carried the dissolved isotopes to all the deeps and shallows of the ocean.”

Kittredge found it very hard. He and Vandermeer were the only qualified scientists who got away in time. The responsibility of the existence of a hundred men, women, and children was theirs as they hid from the dangers and rigors of the surface and from the terror Man had created here in this bubble of life half a mile below the planet's crust.

Desperately, he tried to put nerve into Vandermeer. He said, as forcefully as he could, “You know what we must teach them. We must keep science alive so that someday we can repopulate the Earth. Make a new start.”

Vandermeer did not answer that. He turned his face to the wall.

Kittredge said, “Why not? Even radioactivity doesn't last forever. Let it take a thousand years, five thousand. Someday the radiation level on Earth's surface will drop to bearable amounts.”

“Someday.”

“Of course. Someday. Don't you see that what we have here is the most important school in the history of man? If we succeed, you and I, our descendants will have open sky and free-running water again. They'll even have,” and he smiled wryly, “graduate schools such as those we remember.”

Vandermeer said. “I don't believe any of it. At first, when it seemed better than dying, I would have believed anything. But now, it just doesn't make sense. So we'll teach them all we know, down here, and then we die… down here.”

“But before long I ones will be teaching with us, and then there'll be others. The youngsters who hardly remember the old ways will become teachers, and then the youngsters who were born here will teach. This will be the critical point. Once the native-born are in charge, there will be no memories to destroy morale. This will be their life and they will have a goal to strive for, something to fight for…a whole world to win once more. If, Van, if we keep alive the knowledge of physical science on the graduate level. You understand why, don't you?”

“Of course I understand,” said Vandermeer irritably, “but that doesn't make it possible.”

“Giving up will make it impossible. That's for sure.”

“Well. I’ll try,” said Vandermeer in a whisper.

So Kittredge moved to his own cot and closed his eves and wished desperately that he might be standing in hisprotective suit on the planet's surface. Just for a little while. Just for a little while. He would stand beside the shell of the ship that had been dismantled and cannibalized to create the bubble of life here below. Then he could rouse his own courage just after sunset by looking up and seeing; once more, just once more as it gleamed through the thin, cold atmosphere of Mars, the bright, dead evening star that was Earth.