



The Moralist

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Published: 1956

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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There are exceptions to almost every rule and Xenon was one of them. The rule in this particular case was the old cataloguers' adage that cataloguing duty was never pleasant, often dangerous and always hard. Xenon is the fourth planet of one of the stars investigated some seven or eight years ago by the battleship *Terra* on her swing around the edge of the Black Hole.

Unequipped for exploration, the *Terra* hadn't bothered to land on the planet, but instead had taken only the usual gravitational and atmosphere readings and then had continued on her long mapping patrol. She had slowed just long enough to send back her report on tight beam to Venus Relay Station and propose the name of Xenon, "the unknown." After all, a planet with point nine Earth gravity and almost twenty per cent oxygen in its atmosphere was well worth a name rather than a number.

About a year later, the preliminary exploration ship arrived and spent several weeks mapping and testing this, that and the other thing. Then she went home and wrote her report—and what a report it was! The thing read like a Chamber of Commerce bulletin that had been sponsored by a subdivider. All it needed was a couple of ads offering some choice business locations for sale and it would have been complete.

The planet was perfect, the climate was perfect, the soil fertile. There were no natives or hostile life to bother a man. The forests were wide, the plains were broad and the numerous rivers were not only full of fish but also emptied into blue seas that were just as full of fish as the rivers. That report was enough to make a man quit his job and go to Xenon to start a chicken ranch or grow oranges.

The bureau of Colonization acted with its usual speed. Three years later, a cataloguing group landed from the supply ship *Hunter*. The duties of the groups are simple enough; they determine which of the food crops known to Man can best adapt themselves to the conditions found on the particular planet under examination. They list the native flora and fauna, minerals and resources. They chart the weather and its cycles and, in general, try to determine if Man can exist there and, if so, if the planet is worth the expense, trouble and danger of colonization.

Most planets are not worth it, but Xenon was.

And now the group had returned with its final report and its recommendations. The report? Xenon was perfect, just perfect. The recommendations? Immediate colonization, but be careful who is sent so that

place isn't spoiled by a bunch of land-grabbing exploiters who might not appreciate the place.

They had been back nearly a week before Lee Spencer had time to come to my place for the weekend. Due to a combination of my wife's cooking and a sedentary desk job with the Bureau, I was beginning to have a bit of difficulty in bending over far enough to zip on my shoes in the mornings, but Lee was still as lean and fit as he was the day he blasted off for Xenon nearly four years before.

He had been given the full returned-hero treatment, complete with press conferences, testimonial dinner, audience with the Coordinator—everything. He hadn't had a waking moment to himself since he landed, so I suppose that might have been one reason that he relaxed so completely in front of the library fire after dinner and talked more than he perhaps should have. Or the generous slug of the old brandy my grandfather left me may have had something to do with it.

At any rate, he was in an expansive mood that night after Martha had filled him with one of her always excellent dinners and I had nearly floated him in Grandfather's brandy.

We had a lot of "do you remember" man talk to catch up on and after enduring nearly two hours of conversation about people and happenings of which she knew nothing, Martha gave up and headed for the stairs.

"You two can talk all night if you want," she announced over her shoulder, "but I'm going to bed. Breakfast on the patio about nine or so, Lee."

"I'll be there, Marty. Sleep tight."

"Not as tight as you will, I'll bet," she grinned. "There's another jug in the kitchen if you think you may need it."

We heard her bedroom door hiss as it slid closed and sat for a moment looking into the fire and listening to it whispering secrets to itself.

"She's a pretty nice wife, Sam," he told me.

"Thanks. I like her, too."

"Not at all like Prunella."

"Prunella?" I said. "I don't think—"

"Well, that's what the boys at the station began calling her a couple of days after she landed. Behind her back, of course."

"I still don't know who—"

"You know, the niece of that windbag in World Congress that you featherheads in the front office sent out to replace Pop Jensen when he fell out of that tree and had to be sent back to Earth for hospitalization."

"Oh, *that* one. Look, Lee, I didn't have anything to do with her selection. She was appointed by the Old Man himself. Understand there was some kind of pressure on him from the top."

"I forgive you, Sam, but I rather doubt if some of the other people of the group will for a while."

"How come she didn't stay?" I asked. "Political pressure or not, I can't imagine the supervisors sending out an incompetent replacement."

"Incompetent?" he almost snorted. "Prunella was the most belligerently competent female that it has ever been my misfortune to run across. Prunella was efficiency personified, make no mistake about that. She was—or is—a top-flight botanist and had led several expeditions here on Earth, but she couldn't realize that Xenon wasn't Earth. She tried to live by the book as she had here, but in spite of the general excellence of the *Spaceman's Handbook*, her methods didn't work so well."

I primed him with another two fingers out of the bottle and sat back to listen.

"Good brandy," he said. "I made some once on Xenon, but Prunella put a halt to that in a hurry, just as she did a lot of other things. The trouble with her was that she was always insufferably right. Every blasted time! And she was right again when she pointed out that if we were to come under attack, the products of the little distillery might impair our efforts to defend ourselves. My still went under the ax."

He sighed and then went on. "She neglected to say what might attack us or where this enemy might come from, since men are the only animals to achieve space flight thus far and there was nothing on Xenon that was hostile to us.

"But I'm getting ahead of my story," he told his glass. "It probably all started when she arrived. We had been looking forward to the day, but none of us more than Joe, our cook. Joe was that rare find, a man who took pride in his work and worked with pride. Joe, I firmly believe, could barbecue a spaceman's boot so that it would taste like steak. He considered Prunella and her arrival a fine opportunity to show what he could do when he really wanted to.

"For her first meal with us, Joe had prepared Prunella a feed from every edible native fruit, vegetable and meat that he could lay his hands on. It was the same stuff that we had been getting fat on for nearly two

years, but did we eat any of his cooking that night? Not a bite," he answered himself. "I thought she was going to toss a fit right there and then.

"Gentlemen,' she said, 'you know as well as I that consumption of any native product of a strange planet is expressly forbidden by the *Spaceman's Handbook of Survival* until these products have been thoroughly investigated and passed upon by the proper authorities. Therefore, we shall eat the synthetics that have been provided for us until these have been examined by the labs on Earth.'

"She was right, of course," Lee went on. "Many poor devils have died in agony because they were foolish enough to eat some luscious-looking fruit before it had been checked. We tried to tell her that our lab monkeys and cats had eaten and liked everything on the table, as had we, but we still had to send samples to Earth. That was two years ago and they still haven't handed back a report."

He sighed again and this time didn't wait for me to pour for him.

"So we ate synthetics, but you know how they are—every morsel filled to the brim with everything a man needs to live on indefinitely, except one thing—taste. It almost broke Joe's spirit, he fixed the stuff for us in every way known to mortal Man. No matter how thin he sliced it, it was still synthetic and still had that flavor of a well-aged glue-pot."

Lee ran his tongue over his lips, as though the taste were still in his mouth. "There were countless little incidents such as that," he said, "none of them important, but they all added up to a constant irritation and resentment among the men. Maybe it was easygoing Pop Jensen who spoiled us. I don't know."

Lee thought for a moment or two. "Then there was the time a water-pup nuzzled Prunella while she was taking a lone swim in the river that ran near the station. She spent all morning on a sandbar in the middle of the river before the school of pups tired of their play and left long enough for her to consider it safe enough to swim back to the river bank."

He grinned to himself. "Sam, those pups are as harmless and friendly and playful as any pups of Earth, but Prunella didn't know that and none of us could convince her of it. She said that the pups might be dangerous, under some unknown circumstances which she didn't define, then quoted us a passage from the *Handbook* which prohibited fraternization with any native life-forms until friendly relations were established.

She evidently didn't consider being nuzzled a friendly act. Ergo, no more swimming and that was an order."

He made another trip to the brandy bottle, then sank back into the deep chair again. "But the most exasperating thing Prunella pulled on us was the inspections every morning before we left on our daily field trips. We had all been on Xenon long enough to know what equipment we needed to carry, right down to the last specimen box, but what we carried and what the *Survival Handbook* said to carry were two different things. That is, they were two different things before Prunella began her inspections. We had found long before that all of the gear prescribed by the *Handbook* was heavy, most of it was useless, none of it necessary on Xenon. It might be of some use on some other planet, but we didn't need it there. So, as a consequence, we didn't lug much of that junk around over the landscape with us."

"None of it?" I said.

"Well, almost none. But after Little Miss Efficiency began making her morning spot checks, we left the compound each day looking like a picture of what the well-dressed man on a strange planet will wear. We carried everything in the book and a few more that Pruny thought up all by her little self. In addition to all the survival, signaling and first-aid equipment that dangled and jangled from various parts of us, we also carried enough offensive and defensive weapons to start and maintain a war of no small size.

"Granted, the first-aid and radio paraphernalia might be handy in some way, but blasters, needle-guns, knives, defense shields and all the other apparatus struck as being a little on the ridiculous side, especially since neither we nor the men before us had found a single life-form on Xenon that would attack Man. Or rather, with one exception, none of them would and a blaster or needle-gun was of no use on *that* one."

I followed my cue. "Really? And what was this mysterious exception?" I thought I was playing straight man for some elaborate joke, but Lee was serious.

"Damn it all, don't you people even read your own directives? I'm talking about the powder puffs. Does *that* mean anything to you?"

Seeing my blank look, he explained resignedly, "The powder puffs are the way the Xenon equivalent of Earthly mushrooms takes to spread its spores. They have some unpronounceable Latin name, but we called them powder puffs because, oddly enough, that's what they looked like. The puffs are little round balls of a very light fluffy material, with the

spores adhering to small fibers on the surface. The things are carried by the winds over great distances and when they finally come down, they bump along, leaving a dusting of spores on anything they touch."

"They don't sound very dangerous," I told him.

"They aren't then. It's the next step in their life cycle that makes them a nuisance. You see, Sam, if they don't come in contact with some substance containing moisture and a high percentage of nitrogen, the spores lie dormant. Can you think of any substance fitting those requirements better than a nice warm mess of living protein?"

He grinned at me ghoulishly. "Don't look so horrified, Sam. I'll bet credits against chalk that you're host to at least one kind of fungus right now. Do you have athlete's foot?"

He was thirsty again and took steps to remedy such a deplorable situation. "The puffs are only another type of fungus, even though they do cause more trouble than most. The animals on Xenon are immune from them, but when they land on a man, they send out tiny rootlets that are like minute hairs. These go into the nearest capillary and start taking the nitrogen they need from the blood. After a week or so, they drop off and continue their cycle. I'm told that a man can be practically covered with the varmints and his nitrogen balance won't be disturbed enough to bother him."

"Then why worry about them?" I asked as he paused a moment.

He didn't seem to hear me. "Those puffs would be just another annoyance except for the fact that those little rootlets evidently work on the nerve endings of the body just enough so they don't hurt but itch instead and, brother, how they do itch! Makes you wish you had four more hands and someone else to help scratch."

He squirmed in remembrance. "I understand some of the earlier men dug out divots of flesh to get rid of the intolerable itch and to keep from going crazy. It's that bad. Good thing, though, that the spores can't live inside the body. Can you imagine having an itch like that in your lungs?"

Another sip and then he continued. "You'll forgive me if I seem to wander from La Prunella, but you have to understand the powder puffs to know why she left our bed and board so suddenly.

"Of course, it's true all of the old-timers on Xenon had been puffed at one time or another, but just to prevent a repeat performance, we all, including Prunella, wore that protective goo you people sent out to us a few years ago. Works pretty well. You build up a considerable immunity after the first attack of puffs and more after each succeeding one, but

that's the hard way. The goo is easier." His voice trailed off as, with a surprised look, he noticed his glass, was again empty. This time he brought the bottle back with him. "But to get back to Pruny. Well, the men were getting pretty fed up with Prunella's arbitrary ways and her morning inspections, but the last straw was when she shot Johnny, the station's pet Me-too bird that we had raised from almost an egg. Same as humans, Johnny had his little faults and foibles, but we loved him in spite of them.

"One of those faults was the reason Johnny lived outside the dome instead of inside with the rest of us, as he would have liked. We never let him stay inside for any length of time because he was never able to understand why floors should be clean and kept that way. So Johnny's nest was on top of the ultra-wave tower and that's where he spent most of his time when he wasn't lazily riding around on the shoulders of one of us or pan-handling Joe, the cook, for something extra to eat.

"He was in his nest when Prunella got him with that delicate-looking, deadly little needle-gun of hers. I'll bet he had a hundred of those tiny slivers of steel in him. One would have been enough, but she must have set the gun on full automatic and then let it spew itself empty."

I made sympathetic noises.

"She said afterward that Johnny had been a possible disease carrier and, besides, he was dirty. There was absolutely no doubt about it—Johnny *was* dirty and in more ways than one, but as for diseases, Xenon seemed to have none that the human race hadn't already overcome on some other planet far more dangerous than this one."

I laid more wood on the fire as Lee paused to sip and roll the brandy. He said, "I've always suspected, however, that the real reason for Johnny's assassination struck Prunella, so to speak, like a bolt from the blue when she walked under his nest in the tower. At any rate, I saw her shoving her shirt into the disposer chute. Johnny had one bad habit and all of us knew better than to get within his range, but Prunella, being new with us, just didn't understand that bird."

He stopped, twirling his empty glass suggestively, with painful memories obviously clouding his eyes while he stared into the hypnotically flickering fire.

"Empty," he said mournfully, "just as my heart was." He bowed his head to Johnny's memory as I hastily left him alone with his grief. I quickly returned from the kitchen, bringing a fresh supply of the medicinal spirits that Grandfather had advised for moments of stress and,

over Lee's feeble protests, forced a generous dosage into his glass. He regarded it with a wan, pathetic smile, then, at my urging, choked back his sorrow and nearly drained the goblet in a manful gulp. Grandfather was right. The sorrow left Lee's eye and from somewhere he found new courage to go on.

"The death of the bird seemed to crystalize the rebellion. That night, the entire personnel of the station unanimously elected themselves as joint chairmen of the Ways and Means Committee of the Xenon Anti-Prunella and After-sundown Elbow-bending League and immediately called a special meeting. The emergency session convened around a keg of my illegal brandy which, in some miraculous manner, had escaped Prunella's searching hatchet. Not wishing to offend the unknown gods who had thus smiled upon us, we took small token sips as we meditated."

Lee demonstrated with the glass in his hand. "How to throw off the yoke of the oppressor who had come among us? How to ease the bite of her lash on our quivering backs? How to restore our tiny, inoffensive still whose musical, tinkling drip we loved so well? The suggestions put before the committee that night were many and varied and wonderful."

Lee tried to light a cigarette and nearly broiled the end of his nose with the flame.

"Lopez, head of our camera team, wanted to pickle her in a barrel of brandy and send her back to Venus Relay Station aboard the next courier rocket. Sounded like a good idea, too, until Olsen, one of the biologists, objected on the grounds that those bums on Venus never did anything for us, so why should they get all that good brandy? The motion was tabled as impractical when we saw the pit into which Lopez and his wild ideas had nearly led us. A whole barrel of brandy! The man must have been desperate to call for such extreme measures."

He shook his head. "Akermann, the chemist of the bunch, proposed smoking her as one would a ham and then hanging her over the main gate of the compound to keep away the beasties and things that go boomp in the night. Now *that* was what I thought a fine idea. Functional, you might say. Might as well get some good out of her. But then Joe smothered it with his observation that, after one look at that face of hers, the good beasties would stay out of the compound, too.

"The dark and devious ways of the plotter were difficult for us to assume, scientists and technicians that we were, and the trips to the keg became more frequent as we sought the aid of the nameless gods who had

sent it to us." He paused again as Grandpa's brandy took another beating. "The web of our own fuzzy thinking was entangling us more and more when I was privileged to be present during the only true flash of genius I've ever witnessed."

The wonder, the awe was still in his voice. "Akermann's assistant, the Kid, was singled out for the touch and I must say for him that he held up very nicely under the blow, but one could see that his sudden responsibility set heavy on his narrow bony shoulders. The Kid drew additional inspiration from the glass in his hand, then leaped to his feet and as promptly sat down again. He gave the decking at his feet a baleful glare and tried again, first choosing his footing carefully as a man should when the floor shows that alarming tendency to tilt."

"Men,' he said owlishly, 'le's fix it show see—I mean so she—won't like it here an' maybe she'll go 'way. Le's set the puffs on her.'

"On her what?' someone wanted to know.

"On her nuthin'. Just on *her*!' the Kid said.

"Oh.'

"There was another mass assault on the speedily diminishing supply of illicit brandy while the committee prayed to the gods of the spacemen for guidance. The committee decided to consider the motion.

"Wunnerful idea,' Akermann beamed at his protege, 'but how you gonna get 'em to bite through that protective goo she dunks herself in every mornin'. Just how you gonna, huh?'"

I nodded. "How about that?" I asked Lee.

"The Kid was ready with an answer. 'Do y' know why we wear clothes made only of vegetable or synthetic fibers and not any animal wool, hide or fur?'

"Sure, any fool knows that,' Akermann said. 'The cotton lobby had a law passed.'

"I'm serious,' the Kid told him disgustedly.

"Howdy,' our learned chemist said happily, sticking out his hand. 'I'm Akermann.'

"The Kid must have finally decided that his boss was even more advanced in brandy shock than he was if it was possible—and it was. He picked another chemist, Harry North, as his new straight man and, squinting one eye a bit in an effort to keep him in focus, said, 'Harry, do *you* know why we don't wear wool 'n stuff like that?'

"Sure,' Harry answered. 'The *Handbook* says animal fibers are protein an' if the puffs get a foothold on any article of clothing made of 'em, then

their rootlets c'n penetrate most any kind of goo an' fasten into the guy that happens to be so stupid. Then someone has to give him the treatment to keep him from scratching right down to the liver an' lights.'

"The Kid's punch line was trying to get out so bad that he was about to blow a tube. 'That's right, Harry,' he smiled patronizingly. 'Now if Prunella was to wear somethin' like that, do y' spose the puffs would get 'er?'

"Harry was still puzzled. 'Sure they would, but she's not gonna do it. *Handbook* says not to, n' even gives a long list of stuff *not* to wear. Nope, she won't.'

"I know there's a list, but one nitrogenous fiber didn't get on it. Silk is a protein—fibroin—but it's not on the list.'

"Silk? Why should silk be on the list?' Martin, a big, beefy physicist, was red-faced and indignant. 'It's too expensive and fragile for ordinary wear an' besides, no self-respecting spaceman I ever knew would be caught dead in a silk undershirt or a silk anything else! What d'you think those guys are, a bunch of women to go around wearing sil—' He stopped abruptly, staring at the Kid with something like awe. 'Do you think we can get 'er into something made of silk?' he asked humbly, as befits a man when he speaks to a superior being.

"There was a respectful silence as the group waited for Mr. Paulson, formerly the Kid, to speak.

"Mr. Paulson clapped his hand over his mouth, said 'Urp' between his clenched fingers, turned a remarkable shade of green and looked about him like a trapped animal. A few of his admirers led him through a small door, no doubt to worship silently at his feet while he rested after his soul-shaking ordeal. It was clear that Mr. Paulson had given his all for the cause."

Lee said, "The door slid shut on Mr. Paulson's pain-racked exit, its latching hiss drowned by the simultaneous demand of the committee, individually, for the attention of the committee, collectively. Each of them considered himself the sole person present capable of carrying on the great work for which Mr. Paulson had so nobly sacrificed himself. Ordinarily sedate doctors of this or that gibbered at each other in an arm-waving, frenzied attempt to be heard.

"In a matter of seconds, half the committee had the other half backed into chairs, against tables and into corners, earnestly explaining in a conspiratorial roar just how Prunella was to be enticed into wearing the silken booby-trap.

"The committee gradually shouted itself into a red-faced, thirsty semi-hoarseness only to find a demon—ne Shulman, our top botanist—guarding the inspirational keg with a heavy stool and promising a swift and personal drought to any man who didn't shut up on the spot. I need not say that we shut nor that order was fast in coming among us.

"In the comparative quiet that followed, there was a rapid-fire shifting of ideas, deleting some, adding to others, and Prunella was doomed. The plot wasn't *too* thick. It depended only on the fact that an expert's eye was needed to detect the difference between sheer Enduron, the newest and best of the synthetic fibers, and sheer silk. By the same token, the reverse was true. That is, given silk, one could easily mistake it for Enduron.

"The services of a woman on Terra were necessary to us, so Sparks magnanimously recruited his young sister, a writer or artist or something of the sort, who lives somewhere in southern Europe. All she had to do was buy a dozen pairs of the fluffiest, frilliest, most outrageously feminine silk undies she could find in the most chi-chi shop in Paris and then send them to Prunella with a note honoring her as the first woman on Xenon and asking Prunella to accept them as a token of admiration from one woman to another. Some fictitious name was to be signed to it.

"We raided the office, obtained Prunella's file and copied out the proper measurements from it. Sparks fed the message, measurements and a blank signed photo-check into the coder and the automatic ultra-wave transmitter took it with a swift *blip* of sound and that was that."

I waited for Lee to catch his breath, which he did by inhaling from a full glass. Then he continued talking.

"All this occurred about the middle of Xenon's third month. We expected the skivies to arrive on a supply ship due the first of the following month, which gave us nearly three Earth weeks to wait, but we didn't mind. After all, we had something to wait *for*.

"The ship, bless the crew, was on schedule almost to the hour. Adams had had his wide-angle 'scope aimed at the sky above Xenon since long before breakfast, and he and the detectors ran a dead heat when the ship winked out of sub-space about two million or so miles out.

"By mid-morning, the ship's gravitors had floated her into the field for the usual feather-light landing, and mail call, always the first order of business, was over.

"Women have a well-deserved reputation for dawdling over trifles when important matters wait, but that morning Prunella broke all previous records. She gossiped with the ship's captain about interminable bills of lading, she inspected the field for any possible damage by the ship, she swallowed enough coffee to start a fair-sized shortage. Finally, just in time to save the station from a mass nervous collapse, she left the office for her quarters, carrying her mail in one hand and that small, all-important package in the other.

"She reappeared for lunch wearing the tiny smile of a woman who knows she is appreciated by *someone* and, we hoped, also wearing something else not quite so visible. Never was one so closely watched by so many. If she looked distressed, we gloated. If she squirmed in her chair, we rejoiced. Her every move was analyzed for possible puff symptoms.

"Prunella, that evening, dined as the captain's guest aboard ship. In the mess hall, with Mr. Paulson installed in the seat of honor, the arguments were long, loud and heated: She had 'em on. She didn't. The puffs had her. They didn't.

"I hadn't realized there were so many synonyms for fool and idiot or so many genteel ways to sneer until my learned colleagues that night debated the case of the puffs versus Prunella. We went to bed still in an agony of indecision."

Lee waited for me to be appropriately sympathetic. I obliged.

"The next morning, Prunella had breakfast alone in her quarters, but then she often did. Or I should say she ordered breakfast sent and then ate only a little of it and sent it back. A short while later, Prunella left her room, went to the library and returned to her quarters with a spool of microfilm in her hand. All the people who could cram into the tiny library cubicle were in before the hiss of Prunella's closing door died away. A wild rape of the library files improved our digestions, dispositions and belief in the ultimate triumph of good over evil—Prunella had withdrawn the film on 'Effects of Xenon Life-forms on the Human Body.'

"I learned later that some far-sighted soul had added lurid details to the section of the film dealing with the puffs, describing minutely what one could expect after powder puff infestation. Odd thing about a few of those added details—some of the more horrible ones had never been noticed before nor have they been reported since.

"Prunella went aboard the supply ship *Hunter* shortly after noon, scratching determinedly in several places that no lady should, at least in public.

"The captain, most of his loading done and seeing her dire need, blasted off for Terra immediately and flipped into sub-space much closer to the planet than he should have. Prunella was on Terra that same night, Xenon time. The captain told me on his next trip that Pruny had commandeered both quarantine nurses at Polar Space Field to work on her. It still took the two women several hours to finish, according to him. She must have been covered with the things. Bet she looked as though she were sprouting fur."

"One thing I don't understand," I told Lee. "You kept referring to a 'treatment' of some kind for the powder puffs. Didn't Prunella know about it? If she did, I don't see why she didn't take it on Xenon. Surely, at the risk of being insubordinate, you didn't deny it to her if she had ordered it."

"Quite the contrary, Sam. Prunella knew all about the 'treatment.' And in spite of your suspicions as to our hard hearts, many of us offered our services after leering in what we hoped was a suggestive manner. You see, Sam, the mysterious treatment consisted of nothing more than a very close examination of every square centimeter of the skin with a high-power magnifier and using a pair of fine tweezers to pull out the puff rootlets. But in addition to all of Prunella's other faults and/or virtues, Prunella was a prude."

We drank a silent toast to pure womanhood.

—JACK TAYLOR

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