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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHE KNEW HE WAS COMING ***



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Mary might have learned a more ladylike trade, but one thing is certain: she had a shining faith in that space guy from Earth. Now, about that cake she baked ...

She Knew He Was Coming

OUTSIDE, the bluish sun slanted low across the green dust of the Martian desert, its last rays sparkling on the far mountain tops. One by one, lights flickered on in the city.

"Mary must be expecting that Earthman," Anne said. She held her glastic blouse tight together over her breasts and leaned a little out of the window.

Milly nodded. "The *Azmuth* landed this morning."

The noises of commerce were fading. From the window Anne saw the neon blaze up over the door. For the thousandth time she blinked between the equivocal words: 30—BEAUTIFUL HOSTESSES—30. Laughter, dry and false, filtered up from the tea bars along the street. She looked westward, toward the spaceport, and made out the shadowy nose of the berthed space liner looming against the night. She could picture the scene—a thousand stevedores unloading cargo, refill men and native spacewriters scurrying over the sleek hull, the Earth voyageurs shouting orders and curses.

"Maybe he isn't even on it." Anne turned from the window. She crossed to the couch and sat down, fluffing out the green crinkly glass of her skirt; pendant, multicolored birds flashed from the rings in her ears. She tucked rosy feet under her scented body. "I don't like Earthmen," she said.

"They spend money."

"They make me sick," Anne said. "With their pale skins and ugly eyes and hairy bodies."

"They have strong arms."

Anne's wide, red mouth curled in distaste. "They're like a bunch of kids."

The room was lighted by soft, overhead fire. Heavy drapes hung from the walls. Sweet, spicy incense curled bluey from the burners by the window.

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Before the mirror, Milly edged in the narrow line of her pink eyebrows with a pencil. She folded her lips in, rubbing them together, licked them, making them a glistening red. She pinched her cheeks.

"I wonder when they'll catch Crescent?" she said.

Anne yawned languorously. "It won't be long."

"I wouldn't want to be in her shoes," Milly said.

Anne patted her mouth lazily. "She ought to have known she couldn't run away."

"What do you think Miss Bestris will do to her?"

Anne stood up, brushing out the wrinkles in her dress. "I should care."

"But what will she do?"

Anne shrugged. "Whip her, maybe. How should I know?"

"Don't you feel you'd like to run away, once in a while?" Milly asked, turning to look at the other girl.

Anne laughed coldly. "I've got better sense."

"But don't you *want* to?"

Anne tossed her purple hair. "Where is there to go? Who is there to go to?"

"Yes.... I guess you're right." Milly turned back to her reflection.

Buzzzzzz....

Both girls turned their heads to the buttons on the wall. The white one was glowing.

"It's Miss Bestris."

"We'd better go," Milly said.

Together they walked down the heavily carpeted stairs to the sitting room.

The Madame was waiting. She was a large woman, rolling in creases of fat, and her pink hair was rough and clipped short. She had a pair of dimples in her cheeks and a single gold band around her right wrist. She was leaning against the piano.

"Hurry now, girls, hurry right along," she said.

More girls were entering the room; they spread out, sitting on the chairs, curling at the Madame's feet. Their eyes—amethyst, gray or golden—were on her face. Many had pink hair, others had tresses of purple or salmon.

"Now, girls, I suppose you know there's an Earth ship in port?"

The girls nodded.

"So I expect we'll have visitors tonight. I want you to all look your very best." She smiled at them. "Anne, why don't you wear that low-cut, orange plastic with the spangles, and June, you the prim white one? You look like an angel in it." June smiled. "And Mary...?"

"Yes, Miss Bestris?"

"Mary. Did you buy that neo-nylon I told you about?"

"No, Miss Bestris."

"Mary, Mary, Mary. I just don't understand you at all."

"I'm saving my money, Miss Bestris," Mary said intently.

"Yes, dear, I know that. We're *all* saving our money. But we simply must look presentable. We have a reputation to hold up."

"Yes, Miss Bestris."

"Then, Mary, dear, do—do, *please*, buy yourself something decent."

"Yes, Miss Bestris. I will.... Tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, if I ..."



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"Child? If you what?"

"Nothing, Miss Bestris."

"Well. See that you get it tomorrow. If you don't, I'm afraid I'll have to take some of your money and get it for you."

Mary looked down at the floor. The flaming glow of the hydrojet torches cast golden lights in her softly purple hair.

"By the way, Mary. Is that your cake in the oven?"

"Yes, Miss Bestris."

The other girls snickered.

"Let her alone," said the Madame. "If she wants to bake a cake, why shouldn't she?"

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No one answered.

Miss Bestris went on around the room, discussing the girls' clothing, brushing this girl's hair, pinching that girl's cheek, chucking this one under the chin, smiling, frowning. Then finally she stepped back and nodded.

"You all look quite good, I think. I can be proud of you. And now, I want you all to go to your rooms and make them extra attractive, and then try to get a little rest, so you'll all be especially beautiful when the boys come. Run along now."

The girls filed out, and night continued to settle. After a while, her cigarette glowing in the gloom, the Madame waddled to her office. There three people were waiting for her.

THE OFFICE was plain, businesslike, masculine; no lace, no ribbons, no perfume, only the crisp smell of new paper, the tangy odor of ink, the sweet smell of eraser fluid. When she came in the door the three people stood up.

She waved her cigarette hand with a once delicate gesture and flame light glinted dully on the gold band. "Please don't get up for me," she said, but her tone was condescending and the three visitors sat down respectfully.

Miss Bestris crossed to her desk; she perched on a corner of it, leaned back, blew smoke.

"You wanted to see me about your girls?"

Two of the people, man and wife, looked at each other. "Yes," they said. And the other man said, "Yes."

"Did you bring any pictures?"

They handed her pictures, and she held them up to the overhead torch. She studied them critically, pursing and unpursing her lips in secret calculation.

"This one," she said finally, holding out one of the pictures.

The man and wife rustled their clothing; they smiled faintly proud at each other.

The other man got up slowly, retrieved his picture, left the room without saying a word.

"We can't do for little Lavada," the woman whined. "She was a late child, and we're getting old, and we thought she would be better here. It's hard to do for a growing girl when you get old. And my husband can't keep steady work, because of his health and ..."

"I'm sure she will be happy here," the Madame said, smiling.

"Yes," the man agreed. "It's for the best. But—you know—well, we hate to do it."

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"How old is she?"

"... Fourteen."

Miss Bestris studied the picture again. "She doesn't look over twelve."

"She's fourteen."

"And healthy—"

"We have doctors to see to that," the Madame said. "How much did you have in mind?"

"Well," the man said, "it's been a month now since I worked, and with debts and everything...."

"And something to put aside for winter," his wife added.

"We couldn't take less than a *milli dordoc*."

"And we wouldn't even think of it, but we don't have a scrap of bread in the house."

"And all our bills, and winter coming on...."

Miss Bestris turned the picture this way and that. The parents waited. The woman cleared her throat. The man shuffled his feet. The clock on the wall went tick-tick, tick-tick.

"I'll give you eight hundred and thirty *dordocs*," the Madame said.

"Well...."

Miss Bestris bent forward, holding out the picture. "Here, then. Take it. I wouldn't offer that, but I need a girl right now. One of mine ran away last week, and I'm afraid she won't be able to work for a month or so after they bring her back. I'm being generous. Eight hundred and thirty, or take your picture and don't waste my time."

The man and woman stared at her. And the clock went *tick-tick*.

"Take it, Chav."

"... All right," the man said. "We need the money."

Miss Bestris leaned across the desk, pressed a button on her panel. Almost immediately, a door slid silently open and her lawyer entered with a white, printed, standard-form sales contract in his hand. Efficiently and rapidly, he entered the particulars. "Sign here," he said, and the parents signed.

"Now," said the Madame, "if you'll bring in Lavada tomorrow at nine, I'll arrange for a doctor to be here. If his examination is satisfactory, the money will be ready."

The lawyer left, and the woman said, "You understand, we wouldn't do this but for ..."

"I understand, perfectly," Miss Bestris said. "You don't need to worry. This is the best kind of house—Earthmen only, you know, and they're very particular. My girls are given the best of care. I'm like a mother to them, and if they are thrifty and diligent, they'll be able to save enough money in a—a very short time to redeem their contract as provided by law. You needn't worry at all."

"Well," the woman said, "I feel better after talking to you. I feel better about the whole thing to hear you talk like that."

The clock went *tick-tick*.

"Uh," the man said, "you won't—? That is, our little daughter is sometimes wilful and ... uh ... well ... Sometimes."

Miss Bestris smiled. "We know how to handle girls."

"You'll treat her...?"

"As I would my own child," Miss Bestris said; she took out another cigarette, lit it. "I think we'll call her—well—Poppy. Earthmen like to feel at home, you know." [34]

The clock went *tick-tick*.

"Well, uh," the man said. "Uh. Thank you."

IN ONE of the rooms upstairs Mary sat before the dressing table with her back to the mirror, while June and Adele occupied the two overstuffed chairs. Night sounds drifted up from the yellow canal, and fresh flower scents whispered on the warm air. The diaphanous glass curtains rustled at the open window.

"They're too expensive," Mary said. "I'm sure Miss Bestris overcharges us for them."

"Hush," said June, glancing around at the walls nervously. "Hush, Mary." She smoothed at the delicate, plutolac lace fringe above her breasts. "Imported material like this costs money. You can't get it for nothing, and we have to have the best."

"I still think she charges too much."

Adele shrugged delicately and crossed shapely ankles. "I think Miss Bestris must like you, or she wouldn't let you wear that dress again tonight. You ought to watch out that you don't get on the wrong side of her."

Mary laughed, her amethyst eyes sparkling. "I won't care. Not after tonight."

"You're not going to run away?" June asked breathlessly. "You wouldn't dare do that. You'd catch it, sure!"

Mary shook her head. "Not *run* away."

Adele leaned forward and said huskily, "You got enough money to redeem your contract?"

Again Mary shook her head. "No. It's nine hundred and ten *dordocs*. I have only ninety-three. But I'll have enough in the morning!" She stood up and crossed to the window, looked out toward the spaceport.

"How?"

"Tell us, Mary!"

"Tell you what?" Anne asked, coming into the room. Languidly she drew the door closed behind her and rested against it. "Tell you what?" she insisted, narrowing milky eyes.

"Mary says she can redeem her contract tomorrow."

Anne's wide mouth curled contemptuously. "Nonsense!"

"It's not," said Mary without turning.

Anne glided sensuously across the room to the bed, her tight fitting plastic rippling with her tigerish muscles. She sat down.

"He said he'd take me away, this trip," Mary continued. "He'll sign off, and then we'll both get a ship and go to one of the frontier planets. Where it won't matter about—all this."

Anne laughed harshly. "My God! You believe *that*?"

"We've both been saving our money," Mary said dreamily. "He's in love with me. He said so."

"Honey, that's what they all say."

Smiling, Mary turned from the window and leaned backward, stretching. "You don't know him. He's different."

"They're all the same," Anne said, her mouth twisting bitterly. "They're just alike. Don't believe any of them." [35]

And Mary said, "With him, it's different. You'll see."

After a moment, Anne said, "That Earthman? That what's-his-name?" Mary nodded, and Anne brushed an imaginary something off her knee. "An Earthman," Anne said. "They're the worst of all."

"You don't know him, or you wouldn't say that."

Adele looked away from Anne. "You love him, don't you, Mary?"

"Yes."

"You're a fool," Anne said. "Listen to me. *Love* a man? God! You'll see. After him, there'll be another and another, and—just like Rosy—you'll watch 'em leave you and laugh at you until finally you're hurt so bad you don't think you can stand being hurt any more, and then along comes another one, and it starts all over again, and then one night you take a razor blade and go to the sink and stick out your throat and...."

"No! No! You're wrong! He's not like the rest!"

Anne leaned back carelessly, resting, propped on one hand. "See. You know I'm right, already."

"You're not!"

Anne shrugged. "Honey, tell me that tomorrow night."

"I better go take my cake out," Mary said. She fled the room in a swirl of shimmering glastic.

Anne sneered, "I don't see why Miss Bestris puts up with her the way she does."

"You're jealous," June said quietly.

Anne did not answer.

"Mary's decent," Adele said. "Maybe that's why. She's from the sticks, and her parents still come to see her on visiting days, and there's something about her so—so innocent. Maybe that's why Miss Bestris likes her."

June said, "I think she's better than the rest of us. I think Miss Bestris feels sorry for her in a way."

"Don't make me laugh," Anne said, facing June. "The only one that'll ever feel sorry for her is herself!"

"You shouldn't have talked like that to her!" June snapped. "Why don't you let her alone? She'll feel bad enough without you helping!"

Anne rolled over on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. June took a helox lamp from her drawer and started to bake her hair darker. Those Earthmen were so funny about colors.

In the kitchen, Mary took the cake out of the oven. It was steamy and light and fluffy, and it smelled sweet and warm. She set it on the table and mixed a two-minute green frosting which she spread, carefully, over the cake. She patted here and there with the spatula and stood back, her eyes proud and serious.

She hummed a little tune under her breath as she scrubbed the pots and pans. Her hands moved in practiced rhythm, and the water splashed and gurgled. When the kitchen was again spotless, she looked once more at the cake, and then, turning out the light, she went back to her room. [36]

Anne and Adele had left, but June was sitting quietly in the dusky moonlight. Her white dress seemed vaguely luminous.

Laughing, Mary flicked on the light.

"It's a wonderful cake," she said. "The best one I ever made. Just the way it should be."

"I wouldn't feel too bad, Mary, if he doesn't come to eat it," June said. "I don't want to sound like Anne, but there was a lot of sense in what she said."

"It's just like a real wedding cake." She hummed the snatch of Martian tune. "Like in the tele-papers." She laughed with her eyes. "The bridegroom takes the silver knife and cuts two large

pieces of the cake while the bride, dressed in filament coral, stands at his right hand. She carries a bouquet of—Anne just likes to be mean!"

June frowned. Mary crossed to the dressing table. She studied her face in the mirror. It was heart shaped, elfin; her purple hair was a riot of curls, and her eyes were amethyst and gold. She smiled at herself. "I want to look as pretty as I can tonight." She twisted around. "You don't think he'll come either, do you?"

"I—no, Mary."

Mary looked back at the mirror. "He likes our canal blossom perfume." She dabbed some of it on her ear lobes. "I like it best, too."

June stood up, crossed to the musikon, found a slow five-toned waltz. She turned the music very low, and left the color mixer dim enough so that only the faintest ghosts projected hues moved on walls and ceiling.

Mary continued to stare into the mirror. "But he will come. I know it."

June said nothing.

"Don't you see. I just *know* he'll come."

June crossed back to her seat.

Mary turned from the mirror. "I'm sure he will. He's—I mean...."

June smiled wanly.

"Well, he will! You'll see!"

June said, "Even if it is an old dress, you look very nice in it."

"I've been learning his language. I can say 'thank you' and 'yes' and 'no' and 'I love you' and all kinds of things in it. He gave me a book, and I've been studying. I want to be able really to talk with him. We've got a lot to talk about. I want to find out about his parents, and what he likes for supper and what kind of music he likes to hear, and—and all sorts of things. I want to find out all about his planet, and...."

"Yes," June said wearily, "I know."

The music played on. The moving lights on the walls were like colored reflections from a sunlit river.

"He may be a little late tonight; he has a lot to do, first. But he'll be here."

Buzzzzz....

It was the red button; it blinked on and off.

"Visitors," June said.

"Look—" Mary said. "Look, June. I'm not half ready yet. Look. Tell Miss Bestris I'll be down a little late. Tell her I have a special boy, and it'll be all right. He wants me to wait for him."

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June was on her feet. "... All right. You'd better not wait too long!"

"I won't."

After June was gone, Mary returned to the task of making her face pretty, but after a moment, she turned from the mirror, leaned back, and tried to relax. Underneath her dress, her heart was pounding.

The warm air carried sounds of the night creatures. One of the great canal insects, screeching, flapped by the window. The tiny third moon crept up over the horizon, and the buildings cast triple shadows.

Buzzz. Buzzzz.

Still Mary waited.

Buzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzzzz....

She was afraid to wait any longer. But by now she was sure that he would be down stairs.

There was a last-minute flurry of combing and primping, and then she rustled out of the room, her head erect, her eyes shining.

THE LARGE reception room was filling. Overhead, the color organ threw shimmering, prismatic beams on the ceiling. Beneath it, stiff, embarrassed spacemen, mostly officers dressed in parade uniforms, chatted in space-pidgin with the laughing, rainbow-haired girls.

Miss Bestris sat in one corner, her eyes roving the room: settling here for a second, there for a

second, checking, approving, disapproving, silently. Occasionally she would smile or nod at one of the girls or one of the spacemen, and once she frowned ever so slightly and shook her head.

Anne was reclining on a couch, eating a golden Martian apple, listening to a second mate; she played with a lock of his hair and smiled her wide smile.

June, angelic, sat primly in a straight-backed chair, the captain at her feet, a boyish, space-pale Earthman, drew embarrassed circles on the carpet with his index finger.

In the next room, three couples were dancing to the slow music of an Earth orchestra.

An inner door opened, and a uniformed native sheriff stepped in, a crisp, military figure. "Miss Bestris?"

She stood up. "Yes?"

The Earthmen fell silent, waiting.

"We think we have your runaway." He turned to the door. "Bring her in."

Two more sheriffs entered, and between them, there was a young, slender girl. Her face was gaunt and tear-stained. Her body trembled. She looked at the Madame fearfully.

"You idiots!" Miss Bestris screamed. "Get her out of here! You'll ruin my party! Take her out!"

The two men removed the girl. To the remaining sheriff, Miss Bestris said, "Damn you, if you ever do anything like that again, I'll ... I'll...."

"I'm sorry, Madame. But we wanted immediate identification. Would you want us to hold the wrong girl?"

"That's her, all right! Now, get out! Wait for me in my office."

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When they were gone Miss Bestris turned to the silent room. In quite passable Esperanto she said, "I—am sorry. A misunderstanding. I assure you, nothing. Go on with the party, and I'll see what I can do for the poor girl."

She stood up and in her own language said, "Lively, girls! Smile! You, Rita, hurry and serve tea!"

She made her exit.

The spacemen grumbled among themselves, coughed uneasily, watched the closed door through which the Madame had gone. Listening, they could hear only a muted mumble of sing-song sounds in several voices.

With determined animation, the girls moved about, smiled, chatted.

Rita came in, wheeling the tea tray, and the girls converged on it, each trying to be the first to serve her escort. The tea was the Martian stuff, concocted of a kind of local hemp. The Earthmen found it harsh and bitter to the taste, but gentle on the soul.

Anne had filled two cups and returned to the second mate when she caught sight of Mary coming down the stairs.

On the lowest step, Mary stood for a long time; her eyes eagerly searched the crowd. Slowly a puzzled, hurt look came over her face.

June came to her side after a little while.

"Isn't he here?"

"No. Not yet."

"I'm sorry," June said, touching Mary's arm lightly.

"It's all right. It's early yet. I'll just sit down by Miss Bestris' chair and wait for him."

She turned from June and went to the chair. Before she could sit down, a space corporal came over, bowed, tried to take her hand. She shook her head. He smiled twistedly and walked stiffly away.

Another man smiled at her. She shook her head slowly.

Someone came in the front door, and she leaned forward. Then she slumped back limply.

She heard a tinkly laugh. She looked in its direction. She met Anne's eyes, bright and amused. Just then Miss Bestris came in, her eyes angry and her cheeks flushed. She strode across the room.

"Well," she said. "I'm glad to see you finally came down." She sank heavily into her chair. "Crescent's back. They just brought her in. The idiots came right in here with her. I'll bet I lost half-a-dozen customers. These Earthmen are sensitive about such things."

Mary was still staring at the door; Miss Bestris looked down at her.

"Well, what are you sitting here for?"

"Please, Miss Bestris. I'm waiting for my special boy friend tonight."

She snorted and looked away. "Why isn't he here?"

"He will be."

"He'd better. I'll let you wait another—half an hour. That's all."

"Thank you, Miss Bestris. You're very kind to me."

"I indulge you more than I ought to, child," she said. "More than is good for you, if the truth were known."

A man came in; Mary stiffened and then relaxed.

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The mutter of voices blended into a steady hum. More couples were dancing. Miss Bestris moved around the room. The music was tinny.

Another man came in.

"Your time's up," the Madame told Mary.

"Please, let me just wait for another few minutes."

Miss Bestris fixed her lips grimly. "I've had enough nonsense for tonight. You heard me!"

"*Please!*"

"You heard what I said."

"Miss Bestris, I couldn't. Not tonight. Honest, I couldn't. If I had to talk to anybody, I'd break down and cry. He'll ... come. I know he will."

Miss Bestris whirled on her. "Listen, you little—" But she stopped, suddenly. "All right," she said, gritting her teeth. "I can't afford another scene tonight. But you'll be sorry for this."

Miss Bestris stormily looked away. The dancers danced; the music swelled louder. Gradually, deliberately, the lights were waning.

"Haven't I always been good to you, Mary?" the Madame asked.

"Yes."

"Then like an obedient girl, do as I say. If he hasn't come by now, he just won't. He's gone to some other house."

"No!" Mary said doggedly.

"Just remember, tomorrow, how you deliberately disobeyed me. Your silly emotions are costing me money, and that's one thing I simply won't stand for."

"He'll come." Mary said. "You won't lose money."

Couples sat side by side, laughing, talking in whispers. Occasionally there were giggles. The room began to empty slowly.

The lights continued to dim until the rooms were gloomy. Even the shifting shades of the color organ were no more than a faint ambience. Anne, laughing, helped her second mate to his feet.

"I'll give you one more chance," Miss Bestris said. "The next man that comes in..."

"No! I just couldn't! Not tonight!"

A few more customers drifted in. Then even the stragglers stopped coming. It was very late.

"He's deserted you; you see that now?" Madame Bestris sneered.

Mary stood up. There were tears in her eyes. "You can't—you don't—know—how I feel," she choked. "You don't care!" She turned and ran up the stairs, crying.

Several Earthmen, still in the big room, turned to watch. The torches were misty twinkles now. The last couples climbed the stairs and then Miss Bestris, too, went to bed.

THE BLUE morning came. The town awoke; commerce began.

At seven, Miss Bestris lay in bed frowning, considering the events of the previous evening. But she was not so annoyed that she forgot to call a doctor on the televue and arrange for him to come at nine to give a physical examination.

Her bulk out of bed, she dressed and went to the kitchen to brew a pot of hemp tea. The cleaning maid, moving about in the next room, heard Miss Bestris call sharply: "Flavia! Come in here!"

[40]

Flavia appeared with a dust rag in her hand.

"Did you cut this cake?"

"No, ma'am."

Miss Bestris glowered. "That little idiot! She must have slipped down here after we were all asleep and sat here and cried her silly little eyes out! If she thinks she can pull that love-sick act on me she'll soon find out different. Am I supposed to put up with having her moon over every space tramp that comes in? Why, I've taken more from her—!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Bestris waddled to the stairs, climbed them determinedly. At Mary's door she stopped and twisted the knob. Locked!

Miss Bestris hammered. "Open up, Mary!" The door rattled under her hand. "Open that door at once!"

No answer.

Miss Bestris pounded harder. "Open up, I say!"

Anne sauntered into the hall, her dressing gown swishing. "She really made you look the fool last night, didn't she?" Anne said lazily.

"You—you slut! Mind your own business."

Anne smiled and shrugged.

"Open the door, Mary! Do you hear me! Open it!"

"Maybe she killed herself," Anne said. "It has happened."

"My God! No.... She wouldn't dare. You think she would?"

Anne shrugged again. "They do funny things sometimes."

Miss Bestris' face was red. "Run down and get my keys. In my desk. You know where they are."

Then, "*For God's sake, hurry!*"

While she waited Miss Bestris rattled the door, pleading and cursing.

Finally Anne returned. Miss Bestris snatched the key with a shaking hand. She hurled the door open and burst inside.

"See here, you little—!" She stopped.

The room was empty.

On the neatly made bed reposed a little stack of money. When Miss Bestris got around to counting it, she found that it contained exactly nine hundred and ten *dordocs*.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

This etext was produced from: If Worlds of Science Fiction May 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

The corrections are indicated within the text by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

Page 39 word "lambence" changed to "ambience" (no more than a faint ambience) meaning a faint light.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHE KNEW HE WAS COMING ***

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