



"Yes—F. D. Brewster," she said.

WHEN Street entered the office, laid down his card and asked for the president he had the appearance of a man who is ready to fight and is going to be disappointed if he does

not get the chance.

He stalked to the inner room with his jaw squared and an ominous twinkle in his eye—then stopped in a heap, for it was a woman who stood at the desk to receive him with his card in her hand, a woman whom he had once known better than any other.

He saw at once that she had grown stouter: the five years had left their mark; yet how completely it was she.

"Why, Fanny!" he stammered. "Of course, you are F. D. Brewster. I thought it must be some relative, but I never thought of you." In his confusion he forgot to shake hands.

The president laughed very pleasantly over his embarrassment. Certainly her eyes and lips were just the same—quite sweet and frank. "Yes—F. D. Brewster," she said.

He had prepared to meet a man and demand immediate and unconditional surrender. As it was he slid into a chair and began in a troubled, apologetical way:

"Well, you see, you're bringing out this Lazarus mine, offering the stock for public subscription. I just happened to run across one of the prospectuses." He got the document from his pocket. "It contains, here, a statement by me, under my name, about the condition and prospects of the property. Now—I don't know whether you're acquainted with the facts in the case."

"I know Fred bought it of you," she replied.

He rubbed his brow. "Hardly bought it." He pulled himself together. "You see, it was just like this: The Lazarus mine was my first venture down there at Joplin. I suppose I was a good deal of a greenhorn. The engineer's report sounded all right, though, and the mine opened up all right, so I intended to ask some of my friends to go in and take some stock, and I prepared this statement, just as you have it here. But before I got any further the thing began to go bad. We ran into quicksand and what not. It looked as though it was going to play out. In short, it didn't seem worth while to go on working the mine any longer, so I did nothing more with it. Now, your husband, you know—why, Fred and I were both doing something in the mining business and we used to have deals with each other now and then, a good deal the way boys trade jack-knives, 'unsight-unseen,' each trying to stick the other in a perfectly friendly sort of way. Well, I traded Lazarus to Fred that way, and afterwards I came across this statement that I had prepared and sent it to him—just to complete the joke, as you might say. That statement was made half a dozen years ago. I'm very sure that he never understood it to represent my ideas of the property at the time I traded with him, and it doesn't at all represent my ideas of the property now."

He could not tell her quite all the truth—namely, that though he and Brewster had kept up a show of good fellowship, it had never been just the

A Plague of Women.

By WILL PAYNE.

same after she had preferred the more dashing man; that when he traded jack-knives with Brewster there may have been a bad little flavor of revenge in his amusement over getting the best of the deal.

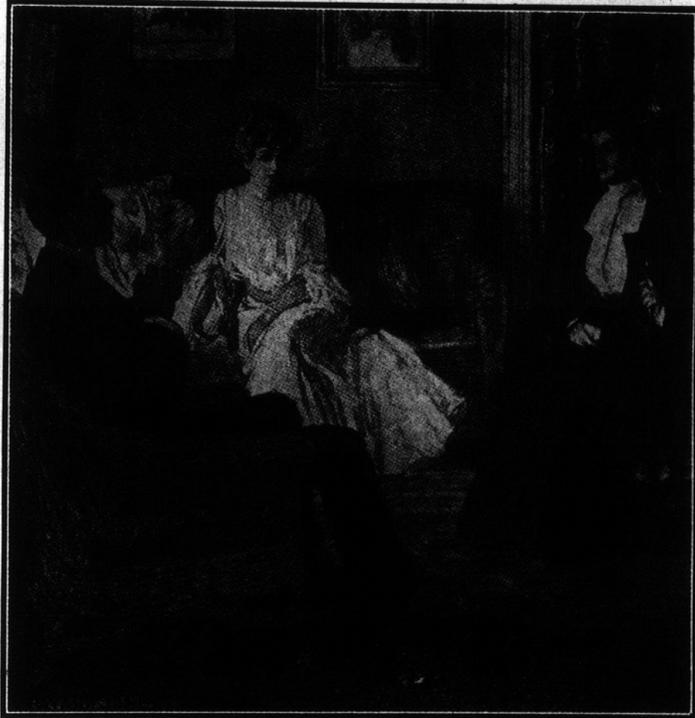
"I knew something about it," she said with perfect frankness. "But Fred went all over it a short time before he died. You know he was unfortunate, his affairs got tangled up so he had to look around for whatever might promise to yield something. He looked over the Lazarus and concluded that you'd given it up too easily. He felt sure it would pay out if it was worked again. So he concluded to bring it out—form a company, you know, turning in the mine for \$25,000 and selling enough stock besides to work it. He prepared this prospectus and all the plans before he was taken sick. When he died I found affairs involved and not much that was available in sight. I had to see what I could do for myself and the children—a boy and a girl, you know—and I thought the best thing would be

"So it's just as likely that you were right then as that you're right now, isn't it? If your judgment of the mine wasn't right then it may not be right now."

"But that's hardly the point, is it?" he pleaded. "The point is putting out to-day a statement which to-day I don't believe. Of course, I'm perfectly selfish about it!" He seemed to be on quite sure ground at last and brightened up in consequence. "I'm doing something now and then in the zinc-mine line myself, and if anybody got into this on the strength of my statement and was disappointed it would react on me. As a selfish business man I can't afford to recommend goods that I'm not sure of."

"Oh, certainly not!" she assented cheerfully; "and I wouldn't expect you to do it. You needn't recommend anything. If anyone inquires of you you will have to tell them that you've changed your mind."

"But the trouble is they'll just accept the statement; they won't ask me whether I've changed by mind."



"It's just what we were speaking of?" Mrs. Street exclaimed.

to go on with the Lazarus just as he had intended, in fact"—she smiled a little—"there wasn't anything else. And he had this all ready, so it wouldn't be like the responsibility of taking up something new."

Street stared at her, then at the carpet. He could not tell her what he knew to be true, that her husband had deteriorated under the touch of misfortune, had plunged recklessly and, finally, got himself mixed up in two or three things that were not spoken of with respect. It was clear enough to him. The desperate man had at last come down to the mere goldbrick game of unloading the Lazarus. Perhaps there was a touch of malice—on account of those old jack-knife trades—in putting his statement into the prospectus.

"He may have been right," Street stumbled unhappily; "but—why, in fact, Fanny, I don't believe he was right about the Lazarus. Of course, I haven't looked at it for some time, but I should be surprised if it turned out as well as he expected. So the way it stands the stock is being offered on the strength of a statement by me that I couldn't say I believe to be true at the present time. There's no date to the statement, you see. I might have made it yesterday."

She laughed with perfect good-humor, as witnessing a masculine eccentricity. "Well, you believed the statement when you made it."

"Oh, certainly—then!"

"Well, then, there's no responsibility on you, is there?" she said, smiling.

He thought, "Ah there's the Brewster touch!"

She put her fingers to her cheek in a way he remembered her using when she was thoughtful.

"You see, Fred got up the prospectus and I'm using it just as he left it," she said gravely, but with a perfectly sweet temper. "He counted on it to put us in a better position. I feel that it's what he left for the children and I ought not to do anything that would interfere with its chances. I know I'm not much of a business woman. I wouldn't trust myself to get up a new prospectus."

He clutched at a straw. "Suppose we fix it this way, then: I'll get up a new prospectus for you, but leaving my name out?"

She laughed a little at this further masculine eccentricity; then regarded him with her frank gravity. "If you don't believe in the mine you could hardly put it convincingly, could you? This prospectus seems to attract attention. Could you get one up that would answer as well?"

"Why—I'd get it up, you know, acting as your clerk, taking your point of view. I believe it would answer just as well. It's quite embarrassing to me, just now, to have my name used in that way." He wished to add, "Give this thing up! Don't bring it out! It's a swindle!" But how could he do that?



"I told Aunt Trotman she'd probably lost all her money."

He saw she was a bit hurt, and that made him miserable. She thought a moment, her hand at her cheek; then replied gently: "Well, Frank, if you wish it—and the new one will answer as well?"

"Oh, I think so. We'll make it so it will!" To get out of the scrape on any terms was good enough. "I'll go right to work at it—have it to the printer this afternoon and send 'em over to you in the morning."

When he left the office he was thinking that at any rate he would accomplish the chief point of getting his name off the thing. He was entitled to that surely! Yet he felt some way as though he had been detected embezzling the widow's mite.

II

Coming home to dinner the next night Street climbed heavily up the steps, applied his latch-key and stepped in, hardly knowing where he was.

But he was instantly made aware. A voice called, and his wife came gliding down the hall to him, cool and dainty in her light gown, smiling, her chin uplifted, her eyes shining. He put his arm over her shoulders and was loth to let her go. At the moment she seemed his only refuge in a welter of trouble.

"Tired?" she asked.

He frowned unconsciously, still holding her. "Well, I've had the two rottenest days in the world," he confessed. He hardly ever talked shop to her. He wished to drop all that when he got home.

"Business?" She smiled and with her thumb ironed the wrinkle out of his brow.

"Well—not so much business as women; a regular plague of women."

They went into the living-room. He stretched himself in the Morris chair; she sat beside him and took his hand.

"What women, dear?" she asked.

"All kinds," he replied without mirth.

He had made up his mind to tell her as he was coming home. But after the first moment of her greeting, as they went into the room and sat down together, as he looked at her now, bending a little toward him, solicitous and fond and generous, it came over him that telling her was not so easy. Looking at her loving blue eyes and tender lips it came to him that she was altogether a woman and that the affair was altogether his disingenuous, masculine way, his gether that of another woman. So, in dodged.

"There's the new stenographer, for one thing. She let Aunt Trotman in on me yesterday when I was awfully busy getting up a new deal, and Aunt Trotman talked for an hour and a quarter without taking breath. I don't object to her talking but to the way she rambles. The upshot was that she'd decided to be reckless and invest \$1000 in a mine if I'd guarantee her against loss and pay Tom's expenses for a week to go down to Joplin and look over the property." "But she's very kind-hearted, dear," said Mrs. Street sympathetically.

"Well, that's something," he replied. "I suppose I was rather short with Miss Prothro for letting Aunt Trotman in on me, and I told her if anybody else came I was out. As it happened, Willets came. I was depending on him to find the money for the deal. She told him I was in but was too busy to see him, and the old man went off piping mad. He sent me a note to say so. I just asked Miss Prothro what her