

A WOMAN'S PREFERENCE 7

"It's all right, girlie. I'm not the first man by a good many who has left his country for his family's good, even to climb the diplomatic ladder. And when I've got up a few rungs, as the father calls them, and can afford to have an establishment, you shall come and boss it, and we'll have a high old time."

"Yes, but that's just it, Nand."

"What's just it?"

"Why, of course, you're just the dearest brother in the world and awfully good at Spanish and all that, but I don't believe you'll be a bit of good as a diplomatist; and you'll never get on enough to have any place for me to boss."

"What a flatterer you are! For telling the beastly, barefaced, ugly truth, commend me to sisters," and I laughed. "But I believe you're right; and I shall probably never earn bread and cheese rind as a tactician. But I'll have a good time all the same."

"Oh, isn't that like a man! For sheer Christian unselfishness, commend me to—brothers."

"A fair hit, and a bull's-eye, too. But we've always been good chums, you and I, and what's the good of chums if they can't slang each other? That's the test of chumminess, say I. I wish Cello was a bit of a chum for you."

"Poor Cello," and Mercy smiled at the notion. "But I think the whole thing's just horrid," she added; and for all her smiles she was not far off tears. That seems to be the way with girls of her sort; so I made some silly joke and laughed, and then kissed her and went off to the study.

There was never anything jocular about my father; and now I found him preternaturally grave and serious.