The Preliminaries

by Cornelia A. P. Comer, 1865(?)-1929

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I

Young Oliver Pickersgill was in love with Peter Lannithorne's daughter. Peter Lannithorne was serving a six-year term in the penitentiary for embezzlement.

It seemed to Ollie that there was only one right-minded way of looking at these basal facts of his situation. But this simple view of the matter was destined to receive several shocks in the course of his negotiations for Ruth Lannithorne's hand. I say negotiations advisedly. Most young men in love have only to secure the consent of the girl and find enough money to go to housekeeping. It is quite otherwise when you wish to marry into a royal family, or to ally yourself with a criminal's daughter. The preliminaries are more complicated.

Ollie thought a man ought to marry the girl he loves, and prejudices be hanged! In the deeps of his soul, he probably knew this to be the magnanimous, manly

attitude, but certainly there was no condescension in his outward bearing when he asked Ruth Lannithorne to be his wife. Yet she turned on him fiercely, bristling with pride and tense with over-wrought nerves.

'I will never marry any one,' she declared, 'who doesn't respect my father as I do!'

If Oliver's jaw fell, it is hardly surprising. He had expected her to say she would never many into a family where she was not welcome. He had planned to get around the natural objections of his parents somehow—the details of this were vague in his mind—and then he meant to reassure her warmly, and tell her that personal merit was the only thing that counted with him or his. He may have visualized himself as wiping away her tears and gently raising her to share the safe social pedestal whereon the Pickersgills were firmly planted. The young do have these visions not infrequently. But to be asked to respect Peter Lannithorne, about whom he knew practically nothing save his present address!

'I don't remember that I ever saw your father, Ruth,' he faltered.

'He was the best man,' said the girl excitedly, 'the kindest, the most indulgent.—That's another thing, Ollie. I will never marry an indulgent man, nor one who will let his wife manage him. If it hadn't been for mother—' She broke off abruptly.

Ollie tried to look sympathetic and not too intelligent. He had heard that Mrs. Lannithorne was considered difficult.

'I oughtn't to say it, but can't explain father unless I do. Mother nagged; she wanted more money than there was; she made him feel her illnesses, and our failings, and the overdone beefsteak, and the under-done bread—everything that went wrong, always, was his fault. His fault—because he didn't make more money. We were on the edge of things, and she wanted to be in the middle, as she was used to being. Of course, she really hasn't been well, but I think it's mostly nerves,' said Ruth, with the terrible hardness of the young. 'Anyhow, she might just as well have stuck knives into him as to say the things she did. It hurt him—like knives, I could see him wince—and try harder—and get discouraged—and then, at last—' The girl burst into a passion of tears.

Oliver tried to soothe her. Secretly he was appalled at these squalid revelations of discordant family life. The domestic affairs of the Pickersgills ran smoothly, in affluence and peace. Oliver had never listened to a nagging woman in his life. He had an idea that such phenomena were confined to the lower classes.

'Don't you care for me at all, Ruth?'

The girl crumpled her wet handkerchief. 'Ollie, you're the most beautiful thing that ever happened—except my father. He was beautiful, too; indeed, indeed, he was. I'll never think differently. I can't. He tried so hard.'

All the latent manliness in the boy came to the surface and showed itself.

'Ruth, darling, I don't want you to think differently. It's right for you to be loyal and feel as you do. You see, you know, and the world doesn't. I'll take what you say and do as you wish. You mustn't think I'm on the other side. I'm not. I'm on your side, wherever that is. When the time comes I'll show you. You may trust me, Ruth.'

He was eager, pleading, earnest. He looked at the moment so good, so loving and sincere, that the girl, out of her darker experience of life, wondered wistfully if it were really true that Providence ever let people just live their lives out like that—

being good, and prosperous, and generous, advancing from happiness to happiness, instead of stubbing along painfully as she felt she had done, from one bitter experience to another, learning to live by failures.

It must be beautiful to learn from successes instead, as it seemed to her Oliver had done. How could any one refuse to share such a radiant life when it was offered? As for loving Oliver, that was a foregone conclusion. Still, she hesitated.

'You're awfully dear and good to me, Ollie,' she said. 'But I want you to see father. I want you to go and talk to him about this, and know him for yourself. I know I'm asking a hard thing of you, but, truly, I believe it's best. If he says it's all right for me to marry you, I will—if your family want me, of course,' she added as an afterthought.

'Oughtn't I to speak to your mother?' hesitated Oliver.

'Oh—mother? Yes, I suppose she'd like it,' said Ruth, absent-mindedly. 'Mother has views about getting married, Ollie. I dare say she'll want to tell you what they are. You mustn't think they're my views, though.'

'I'd rather hear yours, Ruth.'

She flashed a look at him that opened for him the heavenly deeps that lie before the young and the loving, and he had a sudden vision of their life as a long sunlit road, winding uphill, winding down, but sunlit always—because looks like that illumine any dusk.

'I'll tell you my views—some day,' Ruth said softly. 'But first—'

'First I must talk to my father, your mother, your father.' Oliver checked them off on his fingers. 'Three of them. Seems to me that's a lot of folks to consult about a thing that doesn't really concern anybody but you and me!'

II

After the fashion of self-absorbed youth, Oliver had never noticed Mrs. Lannithorne especially. She had been to him simply a sallow little figure in the background of Ruth's vivid young life; someone to be spoken to very politely, but otherwise of no particular moment.

If his marital negotiations did nothing else for him, they were at least opening his eyes to the significance of the personalities of older people.

The things Ruth said about her mother had prepared him to find that lady querulous and difficult, but essentially negligible. Face to face with Mrs. Lannithorne, he had a very different impression. She received him in the upstairs sitting-room to which her semi-invalid habits usually confined her. Wrapped in a white wool shawl and lying in a long Canton lounging-chair by a sunshiny window, she put out a chilly hand in greeting, and asked the young man to be seated.

Oliver, scanning her countenance, received an unexpected impression of dignity. She was thin and nervous, with big dark eyes peering out of a pale, narrow face; she might be a woman with a grievance, but he apprehended something beyond mere fretfulness in the discontent of her expression. There was suffering and thought in her face, and even when the former is exaggerated and the latter erroneous, these are impressive things.

'Mrs. Lannithorne, have you any objection to letting Ruth marry me?'

'Mr. Pickersgill, what are your qualifications for the care of a wife and family?'

Oliver hesitated. 'Why, about what anybody's are, I think,' he said, and was immediately conscious of the feebleness of this response. 'I mean,' he added, flushing to the roots of his blond hair, 'that my prospects in life are fair. I am in my father's office, you know. I am to have a small share in the business next year. I needn't tell you that the firm is a good one. If you want to know about my qualifications as a lawyer—why, I can refer you to people who can tell you if they think I am promising.'

'Do your family approve of this marriage?'

'I haven't talked to them about it yet.'

'Have you ever saved any money of your own earning, or have you any property in your own name?'

Oliver thought guiltily of his bank account, which had a surprising way of proving, when balanced, to be less than he expected.

'Well—not exactly.'

'In other words, then, Mr. Pickersgill, you are a young and absolutely untried man; you are in your father's employ and practically at his mercy; you propose a great change in your life of which you do not know that he approves; you have no resources of your own, and you are not even sure of your earning capacity if your father's backing were withdrawn. In these circumstances you plan to double your expenses and assume the whole responsibility of another person's life, comfort, and happiness. Do you think that you have shown me that your qualifications are adequate?'

All this was more than a little disconcerting. Oliver was used to being accepted as old Pickersgill's only son—which meant a cheerfully accorded background of eminence, ability, and comfortable wealth. It had not occurred to him to detach himself from that background and see how he looked when separated from it. He felt a little angry, and also a little ashamed of the fact that he did not bulk larger as a personage, apart from his environment. Nevertheless, he answered her question honestly.

'No, Mrs. Lannithorne, I don't think that I have.'

She did not appear to rejoice in his discomfiture. She even seemed a little sorry for it, but she went on quietly:

'Don't think I am trying to prove that you are the most ineligible young man in the city. But it is absolutely necessary that a man should stand on his own feet, and firmly, before he undertakes to look after other lives than his own. Otherwise there is nothing but misery for the woman and children who depend upon him. It is a serious business, getting married.'

'I begin to think it is,' muttered Oliver blankly.

'I don't want my daughters to marry,' said Mrs. Lannithorne. 'The life is a thousand times harder than that of the self-supporting woman—harder work, fewer rewards, less enjoyment, less security. That is true even of an ordinarily happy marriage. And if they are not happy—Oh, the bitterness of them!'

She was speaking rapidly now, with energy, almost with anguish. Oliver, red in the face, subdued, but eager to refute her out of the depths and heights of his inexperience, held himself rigidly still and listened.

'Did you ever hear that epigram of Disraeli—that all men should marry, but no women? That is what I believe! At least, if women must marry, let others do it, not my children, not my little girls!—It is curious, but that is how we always think of them. When they are grown they are often uncongenial. My daughter Ruth does not love me deeply, nor am I greatly drawn to her now, as an individual, a personality—but Ruth was such a dear baby! I can't bear to have her suffer.'

Oliver started to protest, hesitated, bit his lip, and subsided. After all, did he dare say that his wife would never suffer? The woman opposite looked at him with hostile, accusing eyes, as if he incarnated in his youthful person all the futile masculinity in the world.

'Do you think a woman who has suffered willingly gives her children over to the same fate?' she demanded passionately. 'I wish I could make you see it for five minutes as I see it, you, young, careless, foolish! Why, you know nothing—nothing! Listen to me. The woman who marries gives up everything, or at least jeopardizes everything: her youth, her health, her life perhaps, certainly her individuality. She acquires the permanent possibility of self-sacrifice. She does it gladly, but she does not know what she is doing. In return, is it too much to ask that she be assured a roof over her head, food to her mouth, clothes to her body? How many men marry without being sure that they have even so much to offer? You yourself, of what are you sure? Is your arm strong? Is your heart loyal? Can you shelter her soul as well as her body? I know your father has money. Perhaps you can care for her creature needs, but that isn't all. For some women life is one long affront, one slow humiliation. How do I know you are not like that?'

'Because I'm not, that's all!' said Oliver Pickersgill abruptly, getting to his feet.

He felt badgered, baited, indignant, yet he could not tell this frail, excited woman what he thought. There were things one didn't say, although Mrs. Lannithorne seemed to ignore the fact. She went on ignoring it.

'I know what you are thinking,' she said, 'that I would regard these matters differently if I had married another man. That is not wholly true. It is because Peter Lannithorne was a good man at heart, and tried to play the man's part as well as he knew how, and because it was partly my own fault that he failed so miserably, that I have thought of it all so much. And the end of all my thinking is that I don't want my daughters to marry.'

Oliver was white now, and a little unsteady. He was also confused. There was the note of truth in what she said, but he felt that she said it with too much excitement, with too great facility. He had the justified masculine distrust of feminine fluency as hysterical. Nothing so presented could carry full conviction. And he felt physically bruised and battered, as if he had been beaten with actual rods instead of stinging words; but he was not yet defeated.

'Mrs. Lannithorne, what do you wish me to understand from all this. Do you forbid Ruth and me to marry—is that it?'

She looked at him dubiously. She felt so fiercely the things she had been saying that she could not feel them continuously. She, too, was exhausted.

Oliver Pickersgill had a fine head, candid eyes, a firm chin, strong capable hands. He was young, and the young know nothing, but it might be that there was the making of a man in him. If Ruth must marry, perhaps him as well as another. But she did not trust her own judgment, even of such hands, such eyes, and such

a chin. Oh, if the girls would only believe her, if they would only be content to trust the wisdom she had distilled from the bitterness of life! But the young know nothing, and believe only the lying voices in their own hearts!

'I wish you would see Ruth's father,' she said suddenly. 'I am prejudiced. I ought not to have to deal with these questions. I tell you, I pray Heaven none of them may marry—ever; but, just the same, they will! Go ask Peter Lannithorne if he thinks his daughter Ruth has a fighting chance for happiness as your wife. Let him settle it. I have told you what I think. I am done.'

'I shall be very glad to talk with Ruth's father about the matter,' said Oliver with a certain emphasis on father. 'Perhaps he and I shall be able to understand each other better. Good-morning, Mrs. Lannithorne!'

III

Oliver Pickersgill Senior turned his swivel-chair about, bit hard on the end of his cigar, and stared at his only son.

'What's that?' he said abruptly. 'Say that again.'

Oliver Junior winced, not so much at the words as at his father's face.

'I want to marry Ruth Lannithorne,' he repeated steadily.

There was a silence. The elder Pickersgill looked at his son long and hard from under lowered brows. Oliver had never seen his father look at him like that before: as if he were a rank outsider, some detached person whose doings were to be scrutinized coldly and critically, and judged on their merits. It is a hard hour for a beloved child when he first sees that look in heretofore indulgent parental eyes. Young Oliver felt a weight at his heart, but he sat the straighter, and did not flinch before the appraising glance.

'So you want to marry Peter Lannithorne's daughter, do you? Well, now what is there in the idea of marrying a jail-bird's child that you find especially attractive?'

'Of course I might say that I've seen something of business men in this town, Ross, say, and Worcester, and Jim Stone, and that if it came to a choice between their methods and Lannithorne's, his were the squarer, for he settled up, and is paying the price besides. But I don't know that there's any use saying that. I don't want to marry any of their daughters—and you wouldn't want me to. You know what Ruth Lannithorne is as well as I do. If there's a girl in town that's finer-grained, or smarter, or prettier, I'd like to have you point her out! And she has a sense of honor like a man's. I don't know another girl like her in that. She knows what's fair,' said the young man.

Mr. Pickersgill's face relaxed a little. Oliver was making a good argument with no mushiness about it, and he had a long-settled habit of appreciating Ollie's arguments.

'She knows what's fair, does she? Then what does she say about marrying you?'

'She says she won't marry anybody who doesn't respect her father as she does!'

At this the parent grinned a little, grimly it is true, but appreciatively. He looked past Oliver's handsome, boyish head, out of the window, and was silent for a time. When he spoke, it was gravely, not angrily.

'Oliver, you're young. The things I'm as sure of as two and two, you don't yet believe at all. Probably you won't believe 'em if I put them to you, but it's up to me to do it. Understand, I'm not getting angry and doing the heavy father over this. I'm just telling you how some things are in this world—facts, like gravitation and atmospheric pressure. Ruth Lannithorne is a good girl, I don't doubt. This world is chuck full of good girls. It makes some difference which one of 'em you marry, but not nearly so much difference as you think it does. What matters, from forty on, for the rest of your life, is the kind of inheritance you've given your children. You don't know it yet, but the thing that's laid on men and women to do is to give their children as good an inheritance as they can. Take it from me that this is Gospel truth, can't you? Your mother and I have done the best we can for you and your sisters. You come from good stock, and by that I mean honest blood. You've got to pass it on untainted. Now—hold on!' he held up a warning hand as Oliver was about to interrupt hotly. 'Wait till I'm through—and then think it over. I'm not saying that Peter Lannithorne's blood isn't as good as much that passes for untainted, or that Ruth isn't a fine girl. I'm only telling you this: when first you look into your son's face, every failing of your own will rise up to haunt you because you will wish for nothing on God's earth so much as that that boy shall have a fair show in life and be a better man than you. You will thank Heaven for every good thing you know of in your blood and in your wife's, and you will regret every meanness, every weakness, that he may inherit, more than you knew it was in you to regret anything. Do you suppose when that hour comes to you that you'll want to remember his grandfather was a convict? How will you face that down?'

Young Oliver's face was pale. He had never thought of things like this. He made no response for a while. At last he asked—

'What kind of a man is Peter Lannithorne?'

'Eh? What kind of—? Oh, well, as men go, there have been worse ones. You know how he came to get sent up. He speculated, and he borrowed some of another man's money without asking, for twenty-four hours, to protect his speculation. He didn't lose it, either! There's a point where his case differs from most. He pulled the thing off and made enough to keep his family going in decent comfort, and he paid the other money back; but they concluded to make an example of him, so they sent him up. It was just, yes, and he said so himself. At the same time there are a great many more dishonest men out of prison than Peter Lannithorne, though he is in it. I meet 'em every day, and I ought to know. But that's not the point. As you said yourself, you don't want to marry their daughters. Heaven forbid that you should! You want to marry his daughter. And he was weak. He was tempted and fell—and got found out. He is a convict, and the taint sticks. The Lord knows why the stain of unsuccessful dishonesty should stick longer than the stain of successful dishonesty. I don't. But we know it does. That is the way things are. Why not marry where there is no taint?'

'Father—?'

'Yes, Ollie.'

'Father, see here. He was weak and gave way—*once*! Are there any men in the world who haven't given way at least *once* about something or other?—are there, father?'

There was a note of anguish in the boy's voice. Perhaps he was being pushed too far. Oliver Pickersgill Senior cleared his throat, paused, and at last answered sombrely—

'God knows, Ollie. I don't. I won't say there are.'

'Well, then—'

'See here!' his father interrupted sharply. 'Of course I see your argument. I won't meet it. I shan't try. It doesn't change my mind even if it is a good argument. We'll never get anywhere, arguing along those lines. I'll propose something else. Suppose you go ask Peter Lannithorne whether you shall marry his daughter or not. Yes, ask him. He knows what's what as well as the next man. Ask Peter Lannithorne what a man wants in the family of the woman he marries.'

There was a note of finality in the older man's voice. Ollie recognized it drearily. All roads led to Lannithorne, it seemed. He rose, oppressed with the sense that henceforward life was going to be full of unforeseen problems; that things which, from afar, looked simple, and easy, and happy, were going to prove quite otherwise. Mrs. Lannithorne had angered rather than frightened him, and he had held his own with her; but this was his very own father who was piling the load on his shoulders and filling his heart with terror of the future. What was it, after all, this adventure of the married life whereof these seasoned travelers spoke so dubiously? Could it really be that it was not the divine thing it seemed when he and Ruth looked into each other's eyes?

He crossed the floor dejectedly, with the step of an older man, but at the door he shook himself and looked back.

'Say, dad!'

'Yes, Ollie.'

'Everybody is so terribly depressing about this thing, it almost scares me. Aren't there really any happy times for married people, ever? You and Mrs. Lannithorne make me feel there aren't; but somehow I have a hunch that Ruth and I know best! Own up now! Are you and mother miserable? You never looked it!'

His father surveyed him with an expression too wistful to be complacent. Ah, those broad young shoulders that must be fitted to the yoke! Yet for what other end was their strength given them? Each man must take his turn.

'It's not a soft snap. I don't know anything worth while that is. But there are compensations. You'll see what some of them are when your boys begin to grow up.'

IV

Across Oliver's young joy fell the shadow of fear. If, as his heart told him, there was nothing to be afraid of, why were his elders thus cautious and terrified? He felt himself affected by their alarms all the more potently because his understanding of them was vague. He groped his way in fog. How much ought he to be influenced by Mrs. Lannithorne's passionate protests and his father's stern warnings? He realized all at once that the admonitory attitude of age to youth is rooted deep in immortal necessity. Like most lads, he had never thought of it

before save as an unpleasant parental habit. But fear changes the point of view, and Oliver had begun to be afraid.

Then again, before him loomed the prospect of his interview with Peter Lannithorne. This was a very concrete unpleasantness. Hang it all! Ruth was worth any amount of trouble, but still it was a tough thing to have to go down to the state capital and seek one's future father-in-law in his present boarding-place! One oughtn't to have to plough through that particular kind of difficulty on such an errand. Dimly he felt that the path to the Most Beautiful should be rose-lined and soft to the feet of the approaching bridegroom. But, apparently, that wasn't the way such paths were laid out. He resented this bitterly, but he set his jaws and proceeded to make his arrangements.

It was not difficult to compass the necessary interview. He knew a man who knew the warden intimately. It was quickly arranged that he was to see Peter Lannithorne in the prison library, quite by himself.

Oliver dragged himself to that conference by the sheer strength of his developing will. Every fibre of his being seemed to protest and hold back. Consequently he was not in the happiest imaginable temper for important conversation.

The prison library was a long, narrow room, with bookcases to the ceiling on one side and windows to the ceiling on the other. There were red geraniums on brackets up the sides of the windows, and a canary's cage on a hook gave the place a false air of domesticity, contradicted by the barred sash. Beneath, there was a window-seat, and here Oliver Pickersgill awaited Lannithorne's coming.

Ollie did not know what he expected the man to be like, but his irritated nerves were prepared to resent and dislike him, whatever he might prove. He held himself rigidly as he waited, and he could feel the muscles of his face setting themselves into hard lines.

When the door opened and some one approached him, he rose stiffly and held out his hand like an automaton.

'How do you do, Mr. Lannithorne? I am Oliver Pickersgill, and I have come—I have come—'

His voice trailed off into silence, for he had raised his eyes perfunctorily to Peter Lannithorne's face, and the things printed there made him forget himself and the speech he had prepared.

He saw a massive head topping an insignificant figure. A fair man was Peter Lannithorne, with heavy reddish hair, a bulging forehead, and deep-set gray eyes with a light behind them. His features were irregular and unnoticeable, but the sum-total of them gave the impression of force. It was a strong face, yet you could see that it had once been a weak one. It was a tremendously human face, a face like a battle-ground, scarred and seamed and lined with the stress of invisible conflicts. There was so much of struggle and thought set forth in it that one involuntarily averted one's gaze. It did not seem decent to inspect so much of the soul of a man as was shown in Peter Lannithorne's countenance. Not a triumphant face at all, and yet there was peace in it. Somehow, the man had achieved something, arrived somewhere, and the record of the journey was piteous and terrible. Yet it drew the eyes in awe as much as in wonder, and in pity not at all!

These things were startlingly clear to Oliver. He saw them with a vividness not to be overestimated. This was a prison. This might be a convict, but he was a man. He was a man who knew things and would share his knowledge. His wisdom was as patent as his suffering, and both stirred young Oliver's heart to its depths. His pride, his irritation, his rigidity vanished in a flash. His fears were in abeyance. Only his wonder and his will to learn were left.

Lannithorne did not take the offered hand, yet did not seem to ignore it. He came forward quietly and sat down on the window-seat, half turning so that he and Oliver faced each other.

'Oliver Pickersgill?' he said. 'Then you are Oliver Pickersgill's son.'

'Yes, Mr. Lannithorne. My father sent me here—my father, and Mrs. Lannithorne, and Ruth.'

At his daughter's name a light leaped into Peter Lannithorne's eyes that made him look even more acutely and painfully alive than before.

'And what have you to do with Ruth, or her mother?' the man asked.

Here it was! The great moment was facing him. Oliver caught his breath, then went straight to the point.

'I want to marry your daughter, Mr. Lannithorne. We love each other very much. But—I haven't quite persuaded her, and I haven't persuaded Mrs. Lannithorne and my father at all. They don't see it. They say things—all sorts of dreadful things,' said the boy. 'You would think they had never been young and—cared for anybody. They seem to have forgotten what it means. They try to make us afraid—just plain afraid. How am I to suppose that they know best about Ruth and me?'

Lannithorne looked across at the young man long and fixedly. Then a great kindliness came into his beaten face, and a great comprehension.

Oliver, meeting his eyes, had a sudden sense of shelter, and felt his haunting fears allayed. It was absurd and incredible, but this man made him feel comfortable, yes, and eager to talk things over.

'They all said you would know. They sent me to you.'

Peter Lannithorne smiled faintly to himself. He had not left his sense of humor behind him in the outside world.

'They sent you to me, did they, boy? And what did they tell you to ask me? They had different motives, I take it.'

'Rather! Ruth said you were the best man she had ever known, and if you said it was right for her to marry me, she would. Mrs. Lannithorne said I should ask you if you thought Ruth had a fighting chance for happiness with me. She doesn't want Ruth to marry anybody, you see. My father—my father'—Oliver's voice shook with his consciousness of the cruelty of what was to follow, but he forced himself to steadiness and got the words out—'said I was to ask you what a man wants in the family of the woman he marries. He said you knew what was what, and I should ask you what to do.'

Lannithorne's face was very grave, and his troubled gaze sought the floor. Oliver, convicted of brutality and conscience-smitten, hurried on, 'And now that I've seen you, I want to ask you a few things for myself, Mr. Lannithorne. I—I believe you know.'

The man looked up and held up an arresting hand. 'Let me clear the way for you a little,' he said. 'It was a hard thing for you to come and seek me out in this place.

I like your coming. Most young men would have refused, or come in a different spirit. I want you to understand that if in Ruth's eyes, and my wife's, and your father's, my counsel has value, it is because they think I see things as they are. And that means, first of all, that I know myself for a man who committed a crime, and is paying the penalty. I am satisfied to be paying it. As I see justice, it is just. So, if I seem to wince at your necessary allusions to it, that is part of the price. I don't want you to feel that you are blundering or hurting me more than is necessary. You have got to lay the thing before me as it is.'

Something in the words, in the dry, patient manner, in the endurance of the man's face, touched Oliver to the quick and made him feel all manner of new things: such as a sense of the moral poise of the universe, acquiescence in its retributions, and a curious pride, akin to Ruth's own, in a man who could meet him after this fashion, in this place.

'Thank you, Mr. Lannithorne,' he said. 'You see, it's this way, sir. Mrs. Lannithorne says—'

And he went on eagerly to set forth his new problems as they had been stated to him.

'Well, there you have it,' he concluded at last. 'For myself, the things they said opened chasms and abysses. Mrs. Lannithorne seemed to think I would hurt Ruth. My father seemed to think Ruth would hurt me. Is married life something to be afraid of? When I look at Ruth, I am sure everything is all right. It may be miserable for other people, but how could it be miserable for Ruth and me?'

Peter Lannithorne looked at the young man long and thoughtfully again before he answered. Oliver felt himself measured and estimated, but not found wanting. When the man spoke, it was slowly and with difficulty, as if the habit of intimate, convincing speech had been so long disused that the effort was painful. The sentences seemed wrung out of him, one by one.

'They haven't the point of view,' he said. 'It is life that is the great adventure. Not love, not marriage, not business. They are just chapters in the book. The main thing is to take the road fearlessly—to have courage to live one's life.'

'Courage?'

Lannithorne nodded.

'That is the great word. Don't you see what ails your father's point of view, and my wife's? One wants absolute security in one way for Ruth; the other wants absolute security in another way for you. And security—why, it's just the one thing a human being can't have, the thing that's the damnation of him if he gets it! The reason it is so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven is that he has that false sense of security. To demand it just disintegrates a man. I don't know why. It does.'

Oliver shook his head uncertainly.

'I don't quite follow you, sir. Oughtn't one to try to be safe?'

'One ought to try, yes. That is common prudence. But the point is that, whatever you do or get, you aren't after all secure. There is no such condition, and the harder you demand it, the more risk you run. So it is up to a man to take all reasonable precautions about his money, or his happiness, or his life, and trust the rest. What every man in the world is looking for is the sense of having the mastery over life. But I tell you, boy, there is only one thing that really gives it!'

'And that is—?'

Lannithorne hesitated perceptibly. For the thing he was about to tell this undisciplined lad was his most precious possession; it was the piece of wisdom for which he had paid with the years of his life. No man parts lightly with such knowledge.

'It comes,' he said, with an effort, 'with the knowledge of our power to endure. That's it. *You are safe only when you can stand everything that can happen to you.* Then and then only! Endurance is the measure of a man.'

Oliver's heart swelled within him as he listened, and his face shone, for these words found his young soul where it lived. The chasms and abysses in his path suddenly vanished, and the road lay clear again, winding uphill, winding down, but always lit for Ruth and him by the light in each other's eyes. For surely neither Ruth nor he could ever fail in courage!

'Sometimes I think it is harder to endure what we deserve, like me,' said Lannithorne, 'than what we don't. I was afraid, you see, afraid for my wife and all of them. Anyhow, take my word for it. Courage is security. There is no other kind.'

'Then—Ruth and I—'

'Ruth is the core of my heart!' said Lannithorne thickly. 'I would rather die than have her suffer more than she must. But she must take her chances like the rest. It is the law of things. If you know yourself fit for her, and feel reasonably sure you can take care of her, you have a right to trust the future. Myself, I believe there is Some One to trust it to. As for the next generation, God and the mothers look after that! You may tell your father so from me. And you may tell my wife I think there is the stuff of a man in you. And Ruth—tell Ruth—'

He could not finish. Oliver reached out and found his hand and wrung it hard.

'I'll tell her, sir, that I feel about her father as she does! And that he approves of our venture. And I'll tell myself, always, what you've just told me. Why, it *must* be true! You needn't be afraid I'll forget—when the time comes for remembering.'

Finding his way out of the prison yard a few minutes later, Oliver looked, unseeing, at the high walls that soared against the blue spring sky. He could not realize them, there was such a sense of light, air, space, in his spirit.

Apparently, he was just where he had been an hour before, with all his battles still to fight, but really he knew they were already won, for his weapon had been forged and put in his hand. He left his boyhood behind him as he passed that stern threshold, for the last hour had made a man of him, and a prisoner had given him the master-key that opens every door.