

IN THE SMALLEY SET.

VERY few of the women in Pottstown could have told you, if suddenly questioned, what were their aims in life. They tried from day to day and hour to hour to do their duty to husband, children, home and the church.

But Mrs. Loper had one ambition, one clearly defined purpose. It was to be admitted to the Smalley set. She probably never put this desire into words, even to herself, but it dominated her life.

Now the Smalley clique did not by any means comprise the most scholarly or refined or best bred, nor even the wealthiest people in Pottstown. Their claim to social distinction was based solely upon the fact that they had lived in Pottstown longer than their neighbors. Outsiders wondered why anybody should stay in the little smoky mill town who could get out of it. But these people, simply because they had lived for three generations in its smoke and grime, held themselves haughtily aloof from later comers, whom they regarded very much as the nobles of Saint Germain did the canaille of Bonaparte's day.

Mrs. Loper was a new comer. Her husband was a lawyer of ability, his eloquence had gained him a reputation throughout the country. He was a man of integrity, of much distinction in manner and character; he was able to support his wife in comfort, even luxury. But Mrs. Loper, coming to live in Pottstown a few years after her marriage, felt herself to be one of the canaille.

Mrs. Smalley did not call upon her.

There were many other women in the town outside of this exclusive circle. Mrs. Pierce, the stately old lady in the great house on the hill, had quietly withdrawn from it. She looked with cold disapproval upon Mrs. Smalley and her fast, foolish coterie. The Langdons gathered a musical, literary group about them and keenly enjoyed their social life. There were many earnest, devout people, too, who were wholly occupied with charitable and religious work, and never spent a thought on their fashionable neighbors.

Mrs. Loper knew that she could find congenial companions among any of these people—in her secret soul she sneered at little Mrs. Smalley's ignorance and vulgar pretensions—but she was wretched as long as that arbiter of society in Pottstown did not call nor invite her to her receptions.

For, although the Smalley set was pretentious and under bred, it was acknowledged to be the *haut ton* of Pottstown. If you had a card to Mrs. Smalley's receptions, you belonged to "society." If your house stood upon the hill on which she and her friends lived, it was worth several thousands more than if it was in a pleasant quarter.

Mrs. Smalley appreciated to the full the power which circumstances had placed in her hands. Her favor was not easily won. Years passed and she had not yet recognized Mrs. Loper's presence in the town. In that time Sarah Loper, who had much strength of character, would have accepted and submitted to any other misfortune—blindness or a lame leg, for example. She would not submit to social ostracism.

"I must visit in the best society or not at all," she told her husband.

She worked her way into a charitable organization in order that she might meet Mrs. Smalley on the committee. Next, she gave up the pew which they occupied in the old church and took a costly one in the new edifice in which most of the Brahmin caste were members.

Now, her husband protested vehemently.

"I am deeply attached to old Dr. Malling," he said. "He helps my soul on its way to Heaven. As for this flighty boy in the new church, I cannot hear him with patience; he is shallow and inexperienced. I will not promise to go with you, Sarah."

Mrs. Loper was daunted, but only for a moment. The prize was so great for which she played. To gain it Mrs. Loper might submit to be bored for an hour on Sundays, surely.

She took the pew and contributed largely to all church expenses. When after a month or two, some of the exclusive set called upon her, triumph was so great that she scarcely noticed that her husband remained at home on Sundays and by degrees became indifferent to all church work. When they were first married they formed the habit of studying a chapter in the Bible together every morning. But Mrs. Loper's time was so occupied now with her social duties that she neglected it. At first, when she saw her husband sitting alone with his Bible, her heart gave her a wrench of pain, but after a few weeks he, too, gave up the habit.

In other ways their lives were affected by her new ambition. They had nourished high hopes for their children, and made many anxious plans to insure them sound health, strong minds and noble characters. When Bob was but a year old they had begun to examine into the claims of different colleges. While Nelly was a baby on her breast Mrs. Loper had dreamed out her future as a helpful Christian wife and mother.

Her aims for the children were changed now. Bob was kept away from school to practice a part in tableaux and private theatricals, in which he appeared in a Directoire costume of velvet and lace. Nelly soon learned that the object of her life was to dance, to sing, to appear in pretty new gowns, to make herself conspicuous among the other children, in the hope that Irene Smalley would invite her to her Christmas ball.

Their father made a feeble protest.

"Our whole motive of life is changed, Sarah," he said. "The minds of the children are filled with trifles. Our home life is gone, and instead there is a constant buzz and tumult about dress and balls or some other folly."

"I do not consider the social position of my children a trifle or folly," she replied, sharply.

"I only know," he answered, "that you once hoped to fit them to be God's servants in this world and the next. Now your highest hope is to fit them for the Smalley set."

She did not reply. The subject was never broached between them again. Mr. Loper's death a year later left her a wealthy widow with no restraint upon her social ambition. She succeeded in gaining a foothold in the fashionable circle. It was not secure, and she was perpetually forced to curry their favor by means little arts for which

she despised herself. Bob, much to her delight, became the most intimate friend of Jem Smalley. It was whispered in Pottstown that Smalley was corrupting the boy, and would make him as profligate as himself. But his mother, when she saw her boy driving or riding with the leader of fashion, did not ask what lesson of life he was learning from him.

Nelly gave her mother many a heart-ache. She had formed an attachment to a poor young clerk who had no capital but industry and energy. When Dr. Soames began to pay her attention, her mother compelled her to encourage him.

"He is old enough to be my grandfather," the poor girl protested. "He has been a life long drunkard. I cannot even respect him—I love another man, mother."

"He has reformed," urged Mrs. Loper. "You ought to respect him. He is Mrs. Smalley's cousin. He can give you as good a position as her's in Pottstown. As for your fancy of love, every girl has some such silly affair before she takes up life in earnest."

Nelly was timid and weak. She yielded and married a man whom at heart she despised.

A few months after her marriage, Mrs. Loper became seriously ill. Death came slowly to her, so slowly that she had time to look back at her life and judge coolly of the value of her successes.

Her son would look in sometimes at her for a moment with a bloated face and red eyes, bid her "cheer up," and vanish to be seen no more for a day or two.

"He does not waste a minute on his dying mother," she moaned once. "Where is he going, Nelly?"

"To the races, I believe. He and Smalley own a horse together."

A faint smile crossed Mrs. Loper's gaunt face. "Bob keeps good company," she murmured. Then she scanned Nelly's thin face and painted cheeks and heavy, hopeless eyes. The girl wore a Parisian gown. She was the leader of fashion in Pottstown. But even that thought did not seem to give her mother satisfaction as she lay there with death coming nearer, nearer. Did she see in her child's face the dumb accusation of a lost life—a soul tainted and ruined.

As the day crept into night, she lay silent and motionless, summing up her life's triumph, it may be, to comfort herself withal.

"Mother," Nelly said once, "would you like me to send for a minister? Or—shall I read a Psalm to you?"

Mrs. Loper knitted her brows trying to think distinctly. Nelly talked of such unfamiliar things—she scarcely was acquainted with the minister, and as for the Psalms, she used to read them long ago, long ago.

"I can't attend to that sort of thing just now, dear. When I get well—Nelly, what is going on to-night? The carriages—and I hear a band—"

"Mrs. Smalley has a reception, mother. Everybody is going."

"And they know—they know that I am—dying!"

She put her hand over her eyes to shut out the life which had become so paltry and base.

Some one said to Mrs. Smalley that night: "Your friend, Mrs. Loper, has just died, I hear."

"Ah, indeed! I'm very sorry! We