

The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

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A DARK-EYED LITTLE BEAUTY OF NINETEEN.

Synopsis.—Major Amberson had made a fortune in 1873 when other people were losing fortunes, and the magnificence of the Ambersons began then. Major Amberson had a massive "development," with roads and statuary, and in the center of a four-acre tract, on Amberson avenue, built for himself the most magnificent mansion Midland City had ever seen. When the major's daughter married young Wilbur Minafer, the neighbors predicted that as Isabel could never really love Wilbur all her love would be bestowed upon the children. There is only one child, however, George Amberson Minafer, and his upbringing and his youthful accomplishments as a mischief maker are quite in keeping with the most pessimistic predictions.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

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"Your sister stole it for me!" George instantly replied, checking the pony. "She stole it off our clothesline an' gave it to me."

"You go get your hair cut!" said the stranger hotly. "Yah! I haven't got any sister!"

"I know you haven't at home," George responded. "I mean the one that's in jail."

"I dare you to get down off that pony!"

George jumped to the ground, and the other boy descended from the Rev. Mr. Smith's gatepost—but he descended inside the gate. "I dare you outside that gate," said George.

"Yah! I dare you half way here. I dare you—"

But these were luckless challenges, for George immediately vaulted the fence—and four minutes later Mrs. Malloch Smith, hearing strange noises, looked forth from a window; then screamed, and dashed for the pastor's study. Mr. Malloch Smith, that grim-bearded preacher, came to the front yard and found his visiting nephew being rapidly prepared by Master Minafer to serve as a principal figure in a pageant of massacre. It was with great physical difficulty that Mr. Smith managed to give his nephew a chance to escape into the house, for George was hard and quick, and in such matters remarkably intense; but the minister, after a grotesque tussle, got him separated from his opponent and shook him.

"You stop that, you!" George cried fiercely, and wrenched himself away. "I guess you don't know who I am!"

"Yes, I do know!" the angered Mr. Smith retorted. "I know who you are, and you're a disgrace to your mother! Your mother ought to be ashamed of herself to allow—"

"Shut up about my mother bein' ashamed of herself!"

Mr. Smith, exasperated, was unable to close the dialogue with dignity. "She ought to be ashamed," he repeated. "A woman that lets a bad boy like you—"

But George had reached his pony and mounted. Before setting off at his accustomed gallop he paused to interrupt the Rev. Malloch Smith again. "You pull down your vest, you ole billygoat, you!" he shouted, distinctly. "Pull down your vest, wipe off your chin—an' go to h—!"

Such precocity is less unusual, even in children of the Rich, than most grown people imagine. However, it was a new experience for the Rev. Malloch Smith and left him in a state of excitement. He at once wrote a note to George's mother, describing the crime according to his nephew's testimony, and the note reached Mrs. Minafer before George did. When he got home she read it to him sorrowfully.

Dear Madam: Your son has caused a painful distress in my household. He made an unprovoked attack on a little nephew of mine who is visiting in my household, insulted him by calling him a billygoat and falsehoods, stating that ladies of his family were in jail. He then tried to make his pony kick him, and when the child, who is only eleven years old, while your son is much older and stronger, endeavored to avoid his indignities and withdraw quietly, he pursued him into the inclosure of my property and brutally assaulted him. When I appeared upon this scene he deliberately called insulting words to me, concluding with profanity, such as "go to h—," which was heard not only by myself but by my wife and the lady who lives next door. I trust such a state of undisciplined behavior may be remedied for the sake of the reputation for propriety, if nothing higher, of the family to which this unruly child belongs.

George had muttered various interruptions, and as she concluded the reading he said:

"He's an ole liar!"

"George, you mustn't say 'liar.' Isn't this letter the truth?"

"Well," said George, "show old am I?"

"Ten."

"Well, look how he says I'm older than a boy eleven years old."

"That's true," said Isabel. "He does. But isn't some of it true, George?"

George felt himself to be in a difficulty here, and he was silent.

"George, did you say what he says you did?"

"Which one?"

"Did you tell him to—to— Did you say, 'Go to h—'?"

George looked worried for a moment longer; then he brightened. "Listen here, mamma; grandpa wouldn't wipe his shoe on that ole story teller, would he?"

"George, you mustn't—"

"I mean: none of the Ambersons wouldn't have anything to do with

him, would they? He doesn't even know you, does he, mamma?"

"That hasn't anything to do with it."

"Yes, it has! I mean: none of the Amberson family go to see him, and they never have him come in their house; they wouldn't ask him to, and I prob'ly wouldn't even let him."

"That isn't what we're talking about."

"I bet," said George emphatically, "I bet if he wanted to see any of 'em, he'd have to go around to the side door!"

"No, dear, they—"

"Yes, they would, mamma! So what does it matter if I say somep'm to him he didn't like? That kind o' people, I don't see why you can't say anything you want to to 'em!"

"No, George. And you haven't answered me whether you said that dreadful thing he says you did."

"Well—" said George. "Anyway, he said somep'm to me that made me mad." And upon this point he offered no further details; he would not explain to his mother that what had made him "mad" was Mr. Smith's hasty condemnation of herself: "Your mother ought to be ashamed," and "A woman that lets a bad boy like you—" George did not even consider excusing himself by quoting these insolences.

Isabel stroked his head. "They were terrible words for you to use, dear. From his letter he doesn't seem a very tactful person, but—"

"He's just ruffraff," said George.

"You mustn't say so," his mother gently agreed. "Where did you learn those bad words he speaks of? Where did you hear anyone use them?"

"Well, I've heard 'em several places. I guess Uncle George Amberson was the first I ever heard say 'em. Uncle George Amberson said 'em to papa once. Papa didn't like it, but Uncle George was just laughin' at papa, an' then he said 'em while he was laughin'."

"That was wrong of him," she said, but almost instinctively he detected the lack of conviction in her tone. It was Isabel's great failing that whatever an Amberson did seemed right to her, especially if the Amberson was either her brother George or her son George. "You must promise me," she said feebly, "never to use those bad words again."

"I promise not to," he said promptly—and he whispered an immediate codicil under his breath: "Unless I get mad at somebody!" This satisfied a code according to which, in his own sincere belief, he never told lies.

"That's a good boy," she said, and he ran out to the yard, his punishment over.

As an Amberson he was already a public character, and the story of his adventure in the Rev. Malloch Smith's front yard became a town topic. Many

abnly, as to mutter, "Ruffraff!" Possibly he would have shouted it; and certainly most people believed a story that went round the town just after Mrs. Amberson's funeral, when George was eleven. George was reported to have differed with the undertaker about the seating of the family; his indignant voice had become audible: "Well, who is the most important person at my own grandmother's funeral?" And later he had projected his head from the window of the foremost mourners' carriage, as the undertaker happened to pass.

"Ruffraff!"

There were people—grown people they were—who expressed themselves longingly: they did hope to live to see the day, they said, when that boy would get his come-upance! (They used that honest word, so much better than "deserts," and not until many years later to be more clumsily rendered as "what is coming to him.")

Something was bound to take him down some day, and they only wanted to be there! But George heard nothing of this, and the yearners for his taking down went unsatisfied, while their yearning grew the greater as the happy day of fulfillment was longer and longer postponed.

CHAPTER III.

Until he reached the age of twelve George's education was a domestic process; tutors came to the house, and those citizens who yearned for his taking down often said: "Just wait till he has to go to public school; then he'll get it!" But at twelve George was sent to a private school in the town, and there came from this small and independent institution no report, or even rumor, of George's getting anything that he was thought to deserve; therefore the yearning still persisted, though growing gaunt with feeding upon itself.

The yearners were still yearning when George at sixteen was sent away to a great "prep school." "Now," they said brightly, "he'll get it! He'll find himself among boys just as important in their home town as he is, and they'll knock the stuffing out of him when he puts on his airs with them! Oh, but that would be worth something to see!" They were mistaken, it appeared, for when George returned a few months later he still seemed to have the same stuffing. He had been deported by the authorities, the offense being stated as "insolence and profanity"; in fact, he had given the principal of the school instructions almost identical with those formerly objected to by the Rev. Malloch Smith.

But he had not got his come-upance, and those who counted upon it were embittered by his appearance upon the downtown streets driving a dogcart at a criminal speed, making pedestrians retreat from the crossings, and behaving himself as if he "owned the earth."

When Mr. George Amberson Minafer came home for the holidays at Christmastide in his sophomore year, probably no great change had taken place inside him, but his exterior was visibly altered. Nothing about him encouraged any hope that he had received his come-upance; on the contrary, the yearners for that stroke of justice must yearn even more insistently: the gilded youth's manner had become polite, but his politeness was of a kind which democratic people found hard to bear.

Cards were out for a ball in his honor, and this pageant of the tenantry was held in the ballroom of the Amberson mansion the night after his arrival. It was, as Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster said of Isabel's wedding, "a big Amberson-style thing." All "old citizens" recognized as gentry received cards, and of course so did their descendants.

The orchestra and the caterer were brought from away, in the Amberson manner, though this was really a gesture—perhaps one more of habit than of ostentation—for servitors of gayety as proficient as these importations were nowadays to be found in the town. It was the last of the great, long-remembered dances that "everybody talked about"—there were getting to be so many people in town that no later than the next year there were too many for "everybody" to hear of even such a ball as the Ambersons'.

George, white-gloved, with a garde-
nia in his buttonhole, stood with his mother and the Major, emblazoned in the big red-and-gold drawing room downstairs, to "receive" the guests; and, standing thus together, the trio offered a picturesque example of good looks persistent through three generations. The Major, his daughter and his grandson were of a type all Ambersons: tall, straight and regular, with dark eyes, short noses, good chins; and the grandfather's expression, no less than the grandson's, was one of faintly amused condescension. There was a difference, however. The grandson's unlined young face had nothing to offer except this condescension; the grandfather's had other things to say. It was a handsome, worldly old

face, conscious of its importance, but persuasive rather than arrogant, and not without tokens of suffering withstood. The Major's short white hair was parted in the middle, like his grandson's, and in all he stood as briskly equipped to the fashion as the exquisite young George.

Isabel, standing between her father and her son, caused a vague amazement in the mind of the latter. Her age, just under forty, was for George a thought of something as remote as the moons of Jupiter: he could not possibly have conceived such an age ever coming to be his own: five years was the limit of his thinking in time. Five years ago he had been a child not yet fourteen; and those five years were an abyss. Five years hence he would be almost twenty-four; what the girls he knew called "one of the older men." He could imagine himself at twenty-four, but beyond that his powers staggered and refused the task.

He saw little essential difference between thirty-eight and eighty-eight, and his mother was to him not a woman but wholly a mother. The woman, Isabel, was a stranger to her son; as completely a stranger as if he had never in his life seen her or heard her voice. And it was tonight, while he stood with her, "receiving," that he caught a disquieting glimpse of this stranger whom he thus fleetingly encountered for the first time.

Youth cannot imagine romance apart from youth. That is why the roles of the heroes and heroines of plays are given by the managers to the most youthful actors they can find among the competent. Both middle-aged people and young people enjoy a play about young lovers; but only middle-aged people will tolerate a play about middle-aged lovers; young people will not come to see such a play, because for them middle-aged lovers are a joke—not a very funny one. Therefore, to bring both the middle-aged people and the young people into his house the manager makes his romance as young as he can. Youth will indeed be served, and its profound instinct is to be not only scornfully amused but vaguely angered by middle-aged romance. So standing beside his mother, George was disturbed by a sudden impression, coming upon him out of nowhere, so far as he could detect, that her eyes were brilliant, that she was graceful and youthful—in a word that she was romantically lovely.

He had one of those curious moments that seem to have neither cause nor any connection with actual things. There was nothing in either her looks or her manner to explain George's uncomfortable feeling; and yet it increased, becoming suddenly a vague resentment, as if she had done something unmotherly to him.

The fantastic moment passed; and even while it lasted he was doing his duty, greeting two pretty girls with whom he had grown up, as people say, and warmly assuring them that he remembered them very well—an assurance which might have surprised them in "anybody" but George Minafer!

It seemed unnecessary, since he had spent many hours with them no longer than the preceding August. They had with them their parents and an uncle from out of town; and George negligently gave the parents the same assurance he had given the daughters, but murmured another form of greeting to the out-of-town uncle, whom he had never seen before. This person George absently took note of as a "queer-looking duck." Undergraduates had not yet adopted "bird." It was a period previous to that in which a sophomore would have thought of the Sharon girls' uncle as a "queer-looking bird," or, perhaps, a "funny-face bird." In George's time every human male was to be defined at pleasure as a "duck," but "duck" was not spoken with admiring affection, as in its former feminine use to signify a "dear"—on the contrary, "duck" implied the speaker's personal detachment and humorous superiority. An indifferent amusement was what George felt when his mother, with a gentle emphasis, interrupted his interchange of courtesies with the nieces to present him to the queer-looking duck, their uncle. This emphasis of Isabel's, though slight, enabled George to perceive that she considered the queer-looking duck a person of some importance; but it was far from enabling him to understand why. The duck parted his thick and longish black hair on the side; his hair was a forgetful-looking thing, and his coat, though it fitted a good enough middle-aged figure, no product of this year, or of last year either. Observing only his unfashionable hair, his preoccupied tie and his old coat, the Sharon girls' uncle, a tall man, handsome, high-mannered and sparklingly point-device, held laughing converse with that queer-looking duck, the Sharon girls' uncle. The tall gentleman waved a gracious salutation to George, and Miss Morgan's curiosity was stirred. "Who is that?"

"I didn't catch his name when my mother presented him to me," said George. "You mean the queer-looking duck."

"I mean the aristocratic duck."

"That's my Uncle George. Honorable George Amberson. I thought everybody knew him."

"He looks as though everybody ought to know him," she said. "It seems to run in your family."

If she had any sly intention it skipped over George harmlessly. "Well, of course, I suppose most everybody does," he admitted—"out in this part of the country especially. Besides Uncle George is in congress; the family like to have someone there."

"Why?"

"Well, it's sort of a good thing in one way. For instance, Uncle Sydney Amberson and his wife, Aunt Amella, they haven't much of anything to do with themselves—get bored to death around here, of course. Well, probably Uncle George'll have Uncle Sydney appointed minister or ambassador or something like that, to Russia or Italy or somewhere, and that'll make it pleasant when any of the rest of the family go traveling, or things like that. I expect to do a good deal of traveling myself when I get out of college."

The Sharon girls passed on, taking the queer-looking duck with them, and George became pink with mortification as his mother called his attention to a white-bearded guest waiting to shake his hand. This was George's great-uncle, old John Minafer: it was old John's boast that in spite of his completed his portrait took no interest in him.

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connection by marriage with the Ambersons he never had worn and never would wear a swallow-tail coat. Members of his family had exerted their influence uselessly—at eighty-nine conservative people seldom form radical new habits, and old John wore his "Sunday suit" of black broadcloth to the Amberson ball. The coat was square, with skirts to the knees; old John called it a "Prince Albert," and was well enough pleased with it, but his great-nephew considered it the next thing to an insult.

The large room had filled, and so had the broad hall and the rooms on the other side of the hall, where there were tables for whilst. The imported orchestra waited in the ballroom on the third floor, but a local harp, cello, violin and flute were playing airs from "The Fencing Master" in the hall, and people were shouting over the music. Old John Minafer's voice was louder and more penetrating than any other, because he had been troubled with deafness for twenty-five years, heard his own voice but faintly, and liked to hear it. "Smell o' flowers like this always puts me in mind o' funerals," he kept telling his niece, Fanny Minafer, who was with him; and he seemed to get a great deal of satisfaction out of this reminder. His tremulous yet strident voice cut through the voluminous sound that filled the room, and he was heard everywhere.

Presently George's mortification was increased to hear this sawmills droning harshly from the midst of the thickening crowd: "Ain't the dancin' broke out yet, Fanny? Hoopla! Let's push through and go see the young women folks crack their heels! Start the circus! Hoopsey-daisy!" Miss Fanny Minafer, in charge of the lively veterans, was almost as distressed as her nephew George, but she did her duty and managed to get old John through the press and out to the broad stairway, which numbers of young people were now ascending to the ballroom. George began to recover from the degradation into which this relic of early settler days had dragged him. What restored him completely was a dark-eyed little beauty of nineteen, very knowing in lustrous blue and jet; at sight of this dashing advent in the line of guests before him George was fully an Amberson again.

"Remember you very well indeed!" he said, his gracefulness more earnest than any he had heretofore displayed. Isabel heard him and laughed. "But you don't, George!" she said. "You don't remember her yet, though of course you will! Miss Morgan is from out of town, and I'm afraid this is the first time you've ever seen her. You might take her up to the dancing; I think you've pretty well done your duty here."

"Be d'lighted," George responded formally, and offered his arm, not with a flourish, certainly, but with an impressiveness inspired partly by the appearance of the person to whom he offered it, partly by his being the hero of this fete, and partly by his youthfulness—for when manners are new they are apt to be elaborate. The little beauty intrusted her gloved fingers to his coatsleeve, and they moved away together.

As he conducted Miss Morgan through the hall toward the stairway they passed the open double doors of a cardroom, where some squadrons of older people were preparing for action, and, leaning gracefully upon the mantelpiece of this room, a tall man, handsome, high-mannered and