

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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A GOOD-LOOKING FOOL-BOY WITH THE PRIDE OF SATAN.

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 laid out a 200-acre "development" with roads and statutory, 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 mischievous boy are quite in keeping with the most pessimistic predictions. By the time George goes away to college he does not attain the confidence of his belief that the Ambersons are about the most important family in the world. At a ball given in honor when he returns from college, George monopolizes Lucy Morgan, a strong-willed and the prettiest girl present, and gets on famously with her until he learns that a "queer-looking duck" at whom he had been poking much fun, is the young lady's father. He is Eugene Morgan, a former resident of Bigburg, and he is returning to erect a factory and to build horseless carriages of his own invention. Eugene had been an old admirer of Isabel's, and they had been engaged when Isabel threw him over because of a youthful indiscretion and married Wilbur Minafer.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"Give me the next and the one after that," he said hurriedly, recovering some presence of mind, just as the nearest applicant reached them. "And give me every third one the rest of the evening."

She laughed. "Are you asking?"

"What do you mean, 'asking'?"

"It sounded as though you were just telling me to give you all those dances."

"Well, I want 'em!" George insisted. "Are you going to give me—"

"Good gracious!" she laughed. "Yes!"

The applicants flocked round her, urging contracts for what remained, but they did not dislodge George from her side, though he made it evident that they succeeded in annoying him; and presently he extricated her from an accumulating siege—she must have connived in the extrication—and bore her off to sit beside him upon the stairway that led to the musicians' gallery, where they were sufficiently retired, yet had a view of the room.

"How'd all those ducks get to know you so quick?" George inquired, with little enthusiasm.

"Oh, I've been here a week."

"Looks as if you'd been pretty busy!" he said. "Most of those ducks, I don't know what my mother wanted to invite 'em here for."

"Perhaps it was on account of their parents," Miss Morgan suggested mildly. "Maybe she didn't want to offend their fathers and mothers."

"Oh, hardly! I don't think my mother need worry much about offending anybody in this old town."

"It must be wonderful," said Miss Morgan. "It must be wonderful Mr. Amberson—Mr. Minafer, I mean."

"What must be wonderful?"

"To be so important as that!"

"That isn't important," George assured her. "Anybody that really is anybody ought to be able to do about as they like in their own town. I should think."

She looked at him critically from under her shading lashes—but her eyes grew gentler almost at once. In truth, they became more appreciative than critical. George's imperious good looks were altogether manly, yet approached actual beauty as closely as a boy's good looks should dare; and dance music and flowers have some effect upon nineteen-year-old girls as well as upon eighteen-year-old boys.

The stairway was drafty: the steps were narrow and uncomfortable; no older person would have remained in such a place. Moreover, these two young people were strangers to each other; neither had said anything in which the other had discovered the slightest intrinsic interest; there had not arisen between them the beginnings of congeniality, or even of friendliness—but stairways near ballrooms have more to answer for than have moonlit lakes and mountain sunsets.

Age, confused by its own long accumulation of follies, is everlasting inquiring, "what does she see in him?" as if young love came about through thinking—or through conduct. At eighteen one goes to a dance, sits with a stranger on a stairway, feels peculiar, thinks nothing, and becomes incapable of any plan whatever. Miss Morgan and George stayed where they were.

They had agreed to this in silence and without knowing it; certainly without exchanging glances of intelligence—they had exchanged no glances at all. Both sat staring vaguely out into the ballroom, and, for a time, they did not speak. Here and there were to be seen couples so carried away that, ceasing to move at the decorous, even glide, considered most knowing, they pranced and whirled through the throng, from wall to wall, galloping bounteously in abandon. George suffered a shock of vague surprise when he perceived that his aunt, Fanny Minafer, was the lady-half of one of those wild couples. She flew over the floor in the capable arms of the queer-looking duck; for this person was her partner.

The queer-looking duck had been a real dancer in his day, it appeared; and evidently his day was not yet over. In spite of the headlong, gay rapidity with which he bore Miss Fanny about the big room he danced authoritatively, avoiding without effort the lightest collision with other

matter what it is. I guess we're pretty fresh sometimes; but I knew your name was Morgan because my mother said so downstairs. I meant: what's the rest of it?"

"Lucy."

"How old are you?" George asked.

"I don't really know myself."

"What do you mean: you don't really know yourself?"

"I mean I only know what they tell me. I believe them, of course, but believing isn't really knowing."

"Look here!" said George. "Do you always talk like this?"

Miss Lucy Morgan laughed forgivingly, put her young head on one side like a bird and responded cheerfully: "I'm willing to learn wisdom. What are you studying at school?"

"College!"

"At the university! Yes. What are you studying there?"

George laughed. "Lot o' useless guff!"

"Then why don't you study some useful guff?"

"What do you mean: 'Useful'?"

"Something you'd use later, in your business or profession?"

George waved his hand impatiently. "I don't expect to go into any business or profession."

"No?"

"Certainly not!" George was emphatic, being sincerely annoyed by a suggestion which showed how utterly she failed to comprehend the kind of person he was.

"Why not?" she asked mildly.

"Just look at 'em!" he said, almost with bitterness, and he made a gesture presumably intended to indicate the business and professional men now dancing within range of vision. "That's a fine career for a man, isn't it! Lawyers, bankers, politicians? What do they get out of life, I'd like to know! What do they ever know about real things? Where do they ever get?"

He was so earnest that she was surprised and impressed. She had a vague, momentary vision of Pitt, at twenty-one, prime minister of England; and she spoke, involuntarily in a lowered voice, with deference: "What do you want to be?" she asked.

George answered promptly.

"A yachtsman," he said.

CHAPTER V.

Having thus, in a word, revealed his ambition for a career above courts, marts and polling booths, George breathed more deeply than usual, and, turning his face from the lovely companion whom he had just made his confidant, gazed out at the dancers with an expression in which there was both sternness and a contempt for the squallid lives of the unyachted Midlanders before him. However, among them he marked his mother, and his somber grandeur relaxed momentarily; a more genial light came into his eyes.

Isabel was dancing with the queer-looking duck; and it was to be noted that the lively gentleman's gait was more sedate than it had been with



"Are You Engaged to Anybody?"

Miss Fanny Minafer, but not less dexterous and authoritative. He saw George and the beautiful Lucy on the stairway and nodded to them. George waved his hand vaguely: he had a momentary return of that inexplicable uneasiness and resentment which had troubled him downstairs.

"How lovely your mother is!" Lucy said.

"I think she is," he agreed gently. "She's the graceful woman in that ballroom. How wonderfully they dance together!"

"Who?"

"Your mother and—and the queer-looking duck," said Lucy. "I'm going to dance with him pretty soon."

They are all very glad to see him back, especially if they used to have him at the house a good deal, as he told you."

"I don't think he meant to boast of it," she said. "He spoke quite calmly," she retorted, as her partner for the next dance arrived.

She took wing away on the breeze of the waltz, and George, having stared gloomily after her for a few moments, postponed filling an engagement, and strolled round the fluctuating outskirts of the dance to where his uncle, George Amberson, stood smilingly watching, under one of the rose-vine arches at the entrance to the room.

"Hello, young namesake," said the uncle. "Why lingers the laggard heel of the dancer? Haven't you got a partner?"

"She's sitting around waiting for me somewhere," said George. "See here: Who is this fellow Morgan that Aunt Fanny Minafer was dancing with a while ago?"

Amberson laughed. "He's a man with a pretty daughter, George. Me seemed you've been spending the evening noticing something of that sort—or do I err?"

"Never mind! What sort is he?"

"I think we'll have to give him a character, George. He's an old friend; used to practice law here—perhaps he had more debts than cases, but he paid 'em all up before he left town. Your question is purely mercenary, I take it: you want to know his true worth before proceeding further with the daughter. I cannot inform you, though I notice signs of considerable prosperity in that becoming dress of hers. However, you never can tell. It is an age when every sacrifice is made for the young, and how your own poor mother managed to provide those genuine pearl studs for you out of her allowance from father I can't—"

"Oh, dry up!" said the nephew. "I understand this Morgan—"

"Mr. Eugene Morgan," his uncle suggested. "Politeness requires that the young should—"

"I guess the 'young' didn't know much about politeness in your day," George interrupted. "I understand that Mr. Eugene Morgan used to be a great friend of the family. The way he was dancing with Aunt Fanny—"

Amberson laughed. "I'm afraid your Aunt Fanny's heart was stirred by ancient recollections, George."

"You meant she used to be silly about him?"

"She wasn't considered singular," said the uncle. "He was—he was popular. Could you bear a question?"

"What do you mean: could I bear—"

"I only wanted to ask: Do you take this same passionate interest in the parents of every girl you dance with? Perhaps it's a new fashion we old bachelors ought to take up. Is it the thing this year to—"

"Oh, go on!" said George, moving away. "I only wanted to know—" He left the sentence unfinished, and crossed the room to where a girl sat waiting for his nobility to find time to fulfill his contract with her for this dance.

"Pardon f' keep wait," he muttered, as she rose brightly to meet him; and she seemed pleased that he came at all. He danced with her perfumery, thinking the while of Mr. Eugene Morgan and his daughter. "Strangely enough his thoughts dwelt more upon the father than the daughter, though George could not possibly have given a reason—even to himself—for this disturbing preponderance."

"Not wholly mollified, he shrugged his shoulders. "You seem to know a good many people! Do you live in New York?"

"No. We don't live anywhere."

"What do you mean: you don't live anywhere?"

"We've lived all over," she answered.

"Papa used to live here in this town, but that was before I was born."

"What do you keep moving around so for? Is he a promoter?"

"No. He's an inventor."

"What's he invented?"

"Just lately," said Lucy, "he's been working on a new kind of horseless carriage."

"Well, I'm sorry for him," George said, in no unkindly spirit. "Those things are never going to amount to anything. People aren't going to spend their lives lying on their backs in the road and letting grease drip in their faces."

"Papa'd be so grateful," she returned, "if he could have your advice."

Instantly George's face became flushed. "I don't know that I've done anything to be insulted for!" he said. "I don't see that what I said was particularly fresh."

"No, indeed!"

"Then what do you—"

She laughed gayly. "I don't! And I don't mind your being such a lofty person at all. I think it's ever so interesting—but papa's a great man!"

"Is he?" George decided to be good-natured. "Well, let us hope so. I hope so, I'm sure."

Looking at him keenly, she saw that the magnificent youth was incredibly sincere in this bit of graciousness. She shook her head in gentle wonder. "I'm just beginning to understand," she said.

"Understand what?"

"What it means to be a real Amberson in this town. Papa told me something about it before we came, but I see he didn't say half enough!"

George superbly took this all for tribute. "Did your father say he knew the family before he left here?"

"Yes. I believe he was particularly a friend of your Uncle George; and he didn't say so, but I imagine he must have known your mother very well, too. He wasn't an inventor then; he was a young lawyer. The town was smaller in those days, and I believe he was quite well known."

"Do people like young Minafer generally?"

"I don't know about 'generally.' I guess he gets plenty of toadying; but there's certainly a lot of people that are glad to express their opinions about him."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Too much Amberson, I suppose, for one thing. And for another, his mother just fell down and worshipped him from the day he was born. He thinks he's a little tin god on wheels—and honestly it makes some people weak and sick just to think about him! Yet that high-spirited, intelligent woman, Isabel Amberson, actually sits and worships him! You can hear it in her voice when she speaks to him or speaks of him. You can see it in her eyes when she looks at him. My Lord! What does she see when she looks at him?"

Morgan's odd expression of genial apprehension deepened whimsically. "She sees something that we don't see," he said.

"What does she see?"

"An angel." Kinney laughed aloud. "Well, if she sees an angel when she looks at George Minafer she's a funnier woman than I thought she was!"

"Perhaps she is," said Morgan. "But that's what she sees."

"My Lord! It's easy to see you've only known him an hour or so. In that time have you looked at George's and seen an angel?"

"No. All I saw was a remarkably good-looking fool-boy with the pride of Satan and a set of nice new drawing-room manners that he probably couldn't use more than half an hour at a time without bursting."

"Then what—"

"Mothers are right," said Morgan. "Mothers see the angel in us because the angel is there. If it's shown to the mother the son has got an angel to show, hasn't he? When a son cuts



"Gene Morgan!"

somebody's throat the mother only sees it's possible for a misguided angel to act like a devil—and she's entirely right about that!"

Kinney laughed and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I remember what a fellow you always were to argue," he said. "You mean George Minafer is as much of an angel as any murderer is, and that George's mother is always right."

"I'm afraid she always has been," Morgan said lightly.

The friendly hand remained upon his shoulder. "She was wrong once, old fellow. At least, so it seemed to me."

"No," said Morgan, a little awkwardly. "No—"

Kinney relieved the slight embarrassment that had come upon both of them: he laughed again. "Walt till you know young George a little better," he said. "Something tells me you're going to change your mind about having an angel to show, if you see anything of him!"

"You mean beauty's in the eye of the beholder, and the angel is all in the eye of the mother. If you were a painter, Fred, you'd paint mothers with angels' eyes holding impish in their laps. Me, I'll stick to the old masters and the cherubs."

Mr