

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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"BEING A GENTLEMAN, I SUPPOSE."

Synopsis. Major Amberson has made a fortune in 1872 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 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. By the time George goes away to college he does not attempt to conceal his belief that the Ambersons are about the most important family in the world. At a ball given in his honor when he returns from college, George monopolizes Lucy Morgan, a stranger 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. George makes rapid progress in his courtship of Lucy. A cotillion helps their acquaintance along famously. Their "friendship" continues during his absences at college. George and Lucy become "almost engaged."

CHAPTER X—Continued.

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"Poot!" Aunt Amelia was evidently in a passion. "You know what's been going on over there, well enough, Frank Bronson! I thought you were a man of the world: don't tell me you're blind! For nearly two years Isabel's been pretending to chaperone Fanny Minafer with Eugene, and all the time she's been dragging that poor fool Fanny around to chaperone her and Eugene! Under the circumstances, she knows people will get to thinking Fanny's pretty slim kind of chaperone, and Isabel wants to please George because she thinks there'll be less talk if she can keep her own brother around, seeming to approve. 'Talk!' She'd better look out! The whole town will be talking, the first thing she knows! She—"

Amelia stopped, and stared at the

nausea, but under his uncle's encouragement he was able to be explicit. "She said my mother wanted you to be friendly to her about Eugene Morgan. She said my mother had been using Aunt Fanny as a chaperone."

Amberson emitted a laugh of disgust. "It's wonderful what tommy-rot a woman in state of spite can think of! I suppose you don't doubt that Amelia Amberson created this specimen of tommy-rot herself? Of all the damn nonsense!"

George looked at him, haggardly. "You're sure people are not talking?"

"Rubbish! Your mother's on my side about this division because she knows Sydney's a pig and always has been a pig, and so has his spiteful wife. I'm trying to keep them from getting the better of your mother as well as from getting the better of me, don't you suppose? Well, they're in a rage because Sydney always could do what he liked with father unless your mother interfered, and they know your mother to ask him not to do what they wanted. That's all there is to it."

"But she said," George persisted wretchedly; "she said there was talk. She said—"

"Look here, young fellow!" Amberson laughed good-naturedly. "There probably is some harmless talk about the way your Aunt Fanny goes after poor Eugene, and I've no doubt I've abetted it myself. Fanny was always languishing at him, twenty-odd years ago, before he left here. Well, we can't blame the poor thing if she's got her hopes up again, and I don't know that I blame her, myself, for using your mother the way she does."

"How do you mean?" Amberson put his hand on George's shoulder. "You like to tease Fanny," he said, "but I wouldn't tease her about this, if I were you. Fanny hasn't got much in her life. In fact, I don't know of anything much that Fanny has got, except her feeling about Eugene. She's always had it—and what's funny to us is pretty much life-and-death to her, I suspect. Now, I'll not deny that Eugene Morgan is attracted to your mother. He is; and that's another case of 'always was,' but I know him, and he's a knight, George—a crazy one, perhaps, if you've read 'Don Quixote.' And I think your mother likes him better than she likes any man outside her own family, and that he interests her more than anybody else—and 'always has.' And that's all there is to it, except—"

"Except what?" George asked quickly, as he paused.

"Except that I suspect—" Amberson chuckled, and began over: "I'll tell you in confidence. Fanny uses your mother for a decoy duck. She does everything in the world she can to keep your mother's friendship with Eugene going, because she thinks that's what keeps Eugene about the place, so to speak. Fanny's always with your mother, you see; and whenever he sees Isabel he sees Fanny. Fanny thinks he'll get used to the idea of her being around, and some day her chance may come! There! D'you see?"

"Well—I suppose so." George's brow was still dark, however. "If you're sure whatever talk there is, is about Aunt Fanny. If that's so—"

"Don't be an ass," his uncle advised him lightly, moving away. "I'm off for a week's fishing to forget that woman in there, and her pig of a husband." (His gesture toward the Mansion indicated Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Amberson.) "I recommend a like course to you, if you're silly enough to pay any attention to such rubbishes! Good-by!"

George gulped, and wet lines shone suddenly along his lower eyelids. "They—they'd better not!" he said, then stalked out of the room, and out of the house.

Ten minutes later, George Amberson, somewhat in the semblance of an angry person plumping out of the Mansion, found a pale nephew waiting to accost him.

"I haven't time to talk, Georgie."

"Yes, you have. You'd better!"

"What's the matter, then?"

His namesake drew him away from the vicinity of the house. "I want to tell you something I just heard Aunt Amelia say, in there. She says my mother's on your side about this division of the property because you're Eugene Morgan's best friend. She said—" George paused to swallow. "She said—" He faltered.

"You look sick," said his uncle, and laughed shortly. "If it's because of anything Amelia's been saying, I don't blame you! What else did she say?" George swallowed again, as with

and without the emotion he had exhibited during the recital to his uncle: Fanny was the one who showed agitation during this interview, for she grew fiery red, and her eyes dilated. "What on earth do you want to bring such trash to me for?" she demanded, breathing fast.

"I merely wished to know two things: whether it is your duty or mine to speak to father of what Aunt Amelia—"

Fanny stamped her foot. "You little fool!" she cried. "You awful little fool! Your father's a sick man, and you want to go troubling him with an Amberson family row! It's just what that cat would love you to do!"

"Well, I—"

"Tell your father if you like! It will only make him a little sicker to think he's got a son silly enough to listen to such craziness!"

"Then you're sure there isn't any talk?"

Fanny disdained a reply in words. She made a hissing sound of utter contempt and snapped her fingers. Then she asked scornfully: "What's the other thing you wanted to know?"

George's pallor increased. "Whether it mightn't be better, under the circumstances," he said, "if this family were not so intimate with the Morgan family—at least for a time. It might be better—"

Fanny stared at him incredulously. "You mean you quit seeing Lucy?"

"I hadn't thought of that side of it, but if such a thing were necessary on account of talk about my mother, I—I—" He hesitated unhappily. "I suggested that if all of us—for a time—perhaps only for a time—it might be better if—"

"See here," she interrupted. "We'll settle this nonsense right now. If Eugene Morgan comes to this house, for instance, to see me, your mother can't get up and leave the place the minute he gets here, can she? What do you want her to do: insult him? Or perhaps you'd prefer she'd insult Lucy? That would do just as well. What is it you're up to, anyhow? Do you really love your Aunt Fanny so much that you want to please her? Or do you really hate your Aunt Fanny so much that you want to—what you want to—"

She choked and sought for her handkerchief; suddenly she began to cry.

"Oh, see here," George said. "I don't hate you, Aunt Fanny. That's silly. I don't—"

"You do! You do! You want to—you want to destroy the only thing that I—that I ever—" And, unable to continue, she became inaudible in her handkerchief.

George felt remorseful, and his own troubles were lightened: all at once it became clear to him that he had been worrying about nothing. He perceived that his Aunt Amelia was indeed an old cat, and that to give her scandalous meanderings another thought would be the height of folly. By no means insusceptible to such pathos as that now exposed before him, he did not lack pity for Fanny, whose almost spoken confession was lamentable; and he was granted the vision to understand that his mother also pitied Fanny infinitely more than he did. This seemed to explain everything.

He patted the unhappy lady awkwardly upon her shoulder. "There, there!" he said. "I didn't mean anything. Of course the only thing to do about Aunt Amelia is to pay no attention to her. It's all right, Aunt Fanny. Don't cry. I feel a lot better now, myself. Come on; I'll drive back there with you. It's all over, and nothing's the matter. Can't you cheer up?"

Fanny cheered up; and presently the customarily hostile aunt and nephew were driving out Amberson boulevard amably together in the hot sunshine.

CHAPTER XI.

"Almost" was Lucy's last word on the last night of George's vacation—that vital evening which she had half consented to agree upon for "settling things" between them. "Almost engaged," she meant. And George, discontented with the "almost," but contented that she seemed glad to wear a sapphire locket with a tiny photograph of George Amberson Minafer inside it, found himself wonderful in a new world at the final instant of their parting. For, after declining to let him kiss her "good-by" as if his desire for such a ceremony were the most preposterous absurdity in the world, she had leaned suddenly close to him and left upon his cheek the veriest feather from a fairy's wing.

She wrote him a month later:

"No. It must keep on being almost. Isn't almost pretty pleasant? You know well enough that I care for you. I did from the first minute I saw you, and I'm pretty sure you knew it—I'm afraid you did. I'm afraid you always knew it. But it's such a solemn thing it scares me. It means a good deal to a lot of people besides you and me, and that scares me, too. I shouldn't be a bit surprised to find myself an old lady, some day, still thinking of you—while you'd be away and away with somebody else perhaps, and me forgotten ages ago! Lucy Morgan, you'd say, when you saw my obituary."

"What on earth—"

He repeated what Amelia had said.

"What on earth—"

George gulped, and wet lines shone suddenly along his lower eyelids.

"Yonder was where I roomed when I was here," he said, pointing out one of the university buildings to Eugene. "I don't know whether George would let my admirers place a tablet to mark

or, rather, with his lack of emotion; and the anxious sympathy of his grandfather and his uncle made him feel hypocritical. He was not grief-stricken; but he felt that he ought to be, and, with a secret shame, concealed his callousness beneath an affectation of solemnity.

But when he was taken into the room where lay what was left of Wilbur Minafer, George had no longer to pretend; his grief was sufficient. It needed only the sight of that forever inert semblance of the quiet man who had been always so quiet a part of his son's life—so quiet a part that George had seldom been consciously aware that his father was indeed a part of his life. As the figure lay there, its very quietness was what was most life-like; and suddenly it struck George hard. And in that unexpected, racking grief of his son, Wilbur Minafer became more vividly George's father than he had ever been in life.

When George left the room, his arm was about his black-robed mother, his shoulders were still shaken with sobs. He leaned upon her mother; she gently comforted him; and presently he recovered his composure and became self-conscious enough to wonder if he had not been making an unmanly display of himself. "I'm all right again, mother," he said awkwardly. "Don't worry about me: you'd better go lie down, or something; you look pretty pale."

Isabel did look pretty pale, but not ghastly pale, as Fanny did. Fanny's grief was overwhelming; she stayed in her room, and George did not see her until the next day, a few minutes before the funeral, when her haggard face appalled him.

The annoyance gave way before a recollection of the sweet mournfulness of his mother's face, as she had said good-bye to him at the station, and of how lovely she looked in her mourning. He thought of Lucy, whom he had seen only twice, and he could not help feeling that in these quiet interviews he had appeared to her as tinged with heroism—she had shown, rather than said, how brave she thought him. When he went back to college, what came most vividly to George's mind, during retrospections, was the despairing face of his Aunt Fanny. Again and again he thought of it; he could not avoid its haunting. Her grief had been so silent, yet it had so amazed him.

George felt more and more compassion for this ancient antagonist of his, and he wrote to his mother about her:

"I'm afraid poor Aunt Fanny might think now father's gone we won't want her to live with us any longer and because I always teased her so much she might think I'd be for turning her out. I don't know where on earth she'd go or what she could live on if we did do something like this, and of course we never would do such a thing, but I'm pretty sure she had something of the kind on her mind. She didn't say anything, but the way she looked is what makes me think so. Honestly, to me she looked just scared sick. Tell her there isn't any danger in the world of my treating her like that. Tell her everything is to go on just as it always has. Tell her to cheer up!"

Isabel did more for Fanny than telling her to cheer up. Everything that Fanny inherited from her father, old Aleck Minafer, had been invested in Wilbur's business; and Wilbur's business, after a period of illness corresponding in dates to the illness of Wilbur's body, had died just before Wilbur did. George Amberson and Fanny were both "wiped out to a miracle of precision," as Amberson said. They "owned not a penny and owed not a penny," he continued, explaining his phrase. "It's like the moment just before drowning: you're not under water and you're not out of it. All you know is that you're not dead yet."

He spoke philosophically, having his "prospects" from his father to fall back upon; but Fanny had neither "prospects" nor philosophy. However, a legal survey of Wilbur's estate revealed the fact that his life insurance was left clear of the wreck; and Isabel, with the cheerful consent of her son, promptly turned this salvage over to her sister-in-law. Invested, it would yield something better than nine hundred dollars a year, and thus she was assured of becoming neither a pauper nor a dependent, but proved to be, as Amberson said, adding his efforts to the cheering up of Fanny, "an heiress, after all, in spite of rolling mills and the devil."

The collegian did not return to his home for the holidays. Instead, Isabel joined him, and they went South for the two weeks. She was proud of her stalwart, good-looking son at the hotel where they stayed, and it was meat and drink to her when she saw how people stared at him in the lobby and on the big verandas—indeed; her vanity in him was so dominant that she was unaware of their staring at her with more interest and an admiration friendlier than George evoked.

Both of them felt constantly the difference between this Christmas time and other Christmas times of theirs; in all, it was a sorrowful holiday. But when Isabel came East for George's commencement, in June, she brought Lucy with her—and things began to seem different, especially when George Amberson arrived with Lucy on class day. Eugene had been in New York, on business; Amberson easily persuaded him to this outing; and they made a cheerful party of it, with the new graduate of course the hero and center of it all.

His uncle was a fellow alumnus. "Yonder was where I roomed when I was here," he said, pointing out one of the university buildings to Eugene. "I don't know whether George would let my admirers place a tablet to mark

the spot, or not. He owns all these buildings now, you know."

"Didn't you, when you were here? Like uncle, like nephew."

"I'm sure I didn't have it so badly at his age," Amberson said reflectively, as they strolled on through the commencement crowd.

Eugene laughed. "You need only three things to explain all that's good and bad about George."

"Three?"

"He's Isabel's only child. He's an Amberson. He's a boy."

"Well, Mister Bones, of these three things which are the good ones and which are the bad ones?"

"All of them," said Eugene.

George took no conspicuous part in either the academic or the social celebrations of his class; he seemed to regard both sets of exercises with a tolerant amusement, his own "crowd" "not going in much for either of those sorts of things," as he explained to Lucy. What his crowd had gone in for remained ambiguous; some negligent testimony indicating that, except for an astonishing reliability which they all seemed to have attained in matters relating to musical comedy, they had not gone in for anything. Certainly the question one of them put to Lucy.



"I'm All Right Again, Mother," He Said Awkwardly.

In response to investigations of hers, seemed to point that way: "Don't you think," he said, "really, don't you think that being things is rather better than doing things?"

He said "raahthuh bettuh" for "rather better," and seemed to do it deliberately, with perfect knowledge of what he was doing. Later, Lucy mocked him to George, and George refused to smile; he somewhat inclined to such pronunciations, himself. This inclination was one of the things that he had acquired in the four years.

What else he had acquired, it might have puzzled him to state, had anybody asked him and required a direct reply within a reasonable space of time. He had learned how to pass examinations by "cramming"; that is, in three or four days and nights he could get into his head enough of a selected fragment of some scientific or philosophical or literary or linguistic subject to reply plausibly to six questions out of ten. He could retain the information necessary for such a feat just long enough to give a successful performance; then it would evaporate utterly from his brain, and leave him undisturbed. George, like his "crowd," not only preferred "being things" to "doing things," but had contented himself with four years of "being things" as a preparation for going on "being things." And when Lucy rather shyly pressed him for his friend's probable definition of the "things" it seemed so superior and beautiful to be, George raised his eyebrows slightly, meaning that she should have understood without explanation; but he did explain: "Oh, family and all that—being a gentleman, I suppose."

Lucy gave the horizon a long look, but offered no comment.

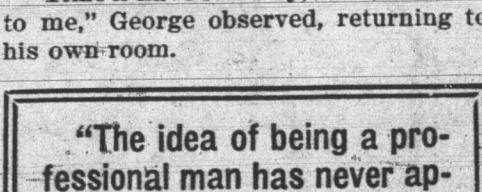
"Aunt Fanny doesn't look much better," George said to his mother, a few minutes after their arrival, on the night they got home. "Doesn't she get over it at all? I thought she'd feel better when we turned over the insurance to her—gave it to her absolutely, without any strings to it. She looks about thousand years old!"

"She looks quite girlish, sometimes, though," his mother said.

"Has she looked that way much since father—"

"Not so much," Isabel said thoughtfully. "But she will, as time goes on."

"Time'll have to hurry, then, it seems to me," George observed, returning to his own room.



"The idea of being a professional man has never appealed to me."