

The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

—18—

But a moment later, as he turned from the shelves of glass jars against the wall, with the potion she had asked for in his hand, he uttered an exclamation: "For goshes' sake, Miss!" And, describing this adventure to his fellow boarders, that evening, "Sagged pretty near to the counter, she was," he said. "F I hadn't been a bright, quick, ready-for-anything young fella she'd 'a' flummoxed plum! I was watchin' her out the window—talkin' to some young s'leety fella, and she was all right then. She was all right when she came in the store, too. Yes, sir; the prettiest girl that ever walked in our place and took one good look at me. I reckon it must be the truth what some you-town wags say about my face!"

At that hour the heroine of the susceptible clerk's romance was engaged in brightening the rosy little coal fire under the white mantelpiece in her pretty white and blue boudoir. Four photographs all framed in decorative plain silver went to the anthracite's fierce destruction—frames and all—and three packets of letters and notes in a charming Florentine treasure box of painted wood; nor was the box, any more than the silver frames, spared this rousing finish. Thrown heartily upon live coal, the fine wood sparkled forth in stars, then burst into an alarming blaze which scorched the white mantelpiece, but Lucy stood and looked on without moving.

It was not Eugene who told her what had happened at Isabel's door. When she got home, she found Fanny Minafer waiting for her—a secret excursion of Fanny's for the purpose, presumably, of "letting out" again; because that was what she did. She told Lucy everything (except her own lamentable part in the production of the recent miseries) and concluded with a tribute to George: "The worst of it is, he thinks he's been such a hero, and Isabel does, too, and that makes him more than twice as awful. It's been the same all his life; everything he did was noble and perfect. He had a domineering nature to begin with, and she let it go on, and fostered it till it absolutely ruled her. I never saw a plainer case of a person's fault making them pay for having it! She goes about, overseeing the packing and praising George and pretending to be perfectly cheerful about what he's done. She pretends he did such a fine thing—so manly and protective going to Mrs. Johnson. And so heroic—doing what his 'principles' made him—even though he knew what it would cost him with you! And all the while it's almost killing her—what he said to your father! She's always been toto enough, so to speak, and had the greatest idea of the Ambersons being superior to the rest of the world, and all that, but rudeness, or anything like a 'scene,' or any bad manners—they always just made her sick! But she could never see what George's manners were—oh, it's been a terrible adulmentation! . . . It's going to be a task for me, living in that big house, all alone; you must come and see me—I mean after they've gone, of course. I'll go crazy if I don't see something of people. I'm sure you'll come as often as you can. I know you too well to think you'll be sensitive about coming there, or being reminded of George. Thank heaven you're too well-balanced." Miss Fanny concluded, with a profound frown, "you're too well-balanced to let 'anything affect you deeply about that—that monkey!"

The four photographs and the painted Florentine box went to their cremation within the same hour that Miss Fanny spoke; and a little later Lucy called her father in, as he passed her door, and pointed to the blackened area on the underside of the mantelpiece, and to the burnt heap upon the coal, where some metallic shapes still retained outline. She flung her arms about his neck in passionate sympathy, telling him that she knew what had happened to him; and presently he began to comfort her and managed an embarrassed laugh.

"Well, well—" he said. "I was too old for such foolishness to be getting into my head, anyhow."

"No, no!" she sobbed. "And if you knew how I despise myself for—for ever having thought one instant about—oh, Miss Fanny called him the right name; that monkey! He is!"

"There, I think I agree with you," Eugene said grimly, and in his eyes there was a steady light of anger that was to last. "Yes I think I agree with you about that!"

"There's only one thing to do with such a person," she said vehemently. "That's to put him out of our thoughts forever—forever!"

And yet, the next day, at six o'clock, which was the hour, Fanny had told her, when George and his mother were to leave upon their long journey, Lucy touched that scorched place on her mantel with her hand just as the little clock above it struck. Then, after this odd, unconscious gesture, she went to a window and stood between the curtains, looking out into the cold No-

vember dusk; and in spite of every reasoning and reasonable power within her, a pain of loneliness struck through her heart. The dim street below her window, the dark houses across the way, the vague air itself—all looked empty, and cold and (most of all) uninteresting. Something more sombre than November dusk took the color from them and gave them that air of desolation.

The light of her fire, flickering up behind her, showed suddenly a flying group of tiny snowflakes nearing the window-pane; and for an instant she felt the sensation of being dragged through a snow-drift under a broken cutter, with a boy's arms about her—an arrogant, handsome, too-conquering boy, who nevertheless did his best to get hurt himself, keeping her from any possible harm.

She shook the picture out of her eyes indignantly, then came and sat before her fire, and looked long and long at the blackened mantelpiece. She did not have the mantelpiece repainted—and, since she did not, might as well have kept his photographs. One forgets what made the scar upon his hand but not what made the scar upon his wall.

New faces appeared at the dances of the winter; new faces had been appearing everywhere, for that matter, and familiar ones were disappearing, merged in the increasing crowd, or gone forever and missed a little and not long; for the town was growing and changing as it never had grown and changed before.

It was heaving up in the middle incredibly; it was spreading incredibly; and as it heaved and spread, it became itself and darkened its sky. You drove between pleasant fields and woodland groves one spring day; and in the autumn, passing over the same ground, you were warned off the tracks by an interurban trolley-car's going, and beheld, beyond cement sidewalks just dry, new house-owners busy "moving in." Gasoline and electricity were performing the miracles Eugene had predicted.

But the great change was in the citizenry itself. What was left of the patriotic old-stock generation that had fought the Civil war, and subsequently controlled politics, had become venerable and was little heeded. What happened to Boston and to Broadway happened in degree to the Midland city; the old stock became less and less typical, and of the grown people who called the place home, less than a third had been born in it.

A new spirit of citizenship had already sharply defined itself. It was idealistic, and its ideals were expressed in the new kind of young men in business downtown. They were optimists—optimists to the point of beligerence—their motto being "Boost! Don't Knock!" And they were hustlers, believing in hustling and in honesty because both paid. They loved their city and worked for it with a plutonic energy which was always ardently vocal. They were viciously governed, but they sometimes went so far as to struggle for better government on account of the helpful effect of good government on the price of real estate and "betterment" generally; the politicians could not go too far with them, and knew it. The idealists planned and strove and shouted that their city should become a better, better, and better city—and what they meant, when they used the word "better," was "more prosperous," and the core of their idealism was this: "The more prosperous my beloved city, the more prosperous beloved I!"

These were bad times for Amberson addition. This quarter, already old, lay within a mile of the center of the town, but business moved in other directions; and the addition's share of prosperity was only the smoke and dirt, with the bank credit left out. The owners of the original big houses sold them, or rented them to big boarding-house keepers, and the tenants of the multitude of small houses moved "farther out" (where the smoke was thinner) or into apartment houses, which were built by dozens now. Cheaper tenants took their places, and the rents were lower and lower, and the houses shabby and shabbier—for all these shabby houses, burning soft coal, did their best to help in the destruction of their own value. Distances had ceased to matter.

The five new houses, built so closely where had been the fine lawn of the Amberson mansion, did not look new. When they were a year old they looked as old as they would ever look; and two of them were vacant, having never been rented, for the Major's mistake about apartment houses had been a disastrous one. "He guessed wrong," George Amberson said. "He guessed wrong at just the wrong time! People were crazy for apartments—too bad he couldn't have seen it in time. Poor man! He digs away at his ledgers by his old gas drop-light lamp almost every night—he still refuses to let the mansion be torn up for wiring, you know. But he had one painful satisfaction this spring: he got his taxes lowered.

Copyright by Doubleday, Page & Company.

Amberson laughed ruefully, and Fanny Minafer asked how the Major could have managed such an economy. They were sitting upon the veranda at Isabel's one evening during the third summer of the absence of their nephew and his mother; and the conversation had turned toward Amberson finances.

"I said it was a 'painful satisfaction,' Fanny," he explained. "The property has gone down in value, and they as-"

sed it lower than they did fifteen years ago."

"But farther out—"

"Oh, yes, 'farther out!' Prices are magnificient 'farther out,' and farther in, too! We just happen to be the wrong spot, that's all. Not that I don't think something could be done if father would let me have a hand; but he won't. He can't, I suppose I ought to say. He's always done his own figuring," he says; and it's his lifelong habit to keep his affairs, and even his books, to himself, and just hand us out the money. Heaven knows he's done enough of that!"

"When they come home!" she echoed sorrowfully—and it was a phrase which found an evasive echo in Isabel's letters. In these letters Isabel was always planning pleasant things that she and Fanny and the Major and George and "brother George" would do when she and her son came home. "They'll find things pretty changed, I'm afraid," Fanny said. "If they ever do come home!"

* * * * *

Amberson went over the next summer and joined his sister and nephew in Paris, where they were living. "Isabel does want to come home," he told Fanny gravely on the day of his return in October. "She's wanted to for a long while—and she ought to come while she can stand the journey—" And he amplified this statement, leaving Fanny looking startled and solemn when Lucy came by to drive him out to dinner at the new house Eugene had just completed.

He was loud in praise of the house after Eugene arrived, and gave them no account of his journey until they had retired from the dinner table to Eugene's library, a gray and shadowy room, where their coffee was brought. Then, equipped with a cigar, which seemed to occupy his attention, Amberson spoke in a casual tone of his sister and her son.

"I found Isabel as well as usual," he said, "only I'm afraid 'as usual' isn't particularly well. Sydney and Amelia had been up to Paris in the spring, but she hadn't seen them. Somebody told her they were there, it seems. They'd left Florence and were living in Rome; Amelia's become a Catholic and is said to give great sums to charity and to go about with the gentry in consequence, but Sydney's ailing and lives in a wheel-chair most of the time. It struck me Isabel ought to be doing the same thing."

He paused, bestowing minute care upon the removal of the little band from his cigar; and as he seemed to have concluded his narrative Eugene spoke out of the shadow beyond a heavily shaded lamp: "What do you mean by that?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, she's cheerful enough," said Amberson, still not looking at either his young hostess or her father. "At least," he said, "she manages to seem so. I'm afraid she hasn't been really well for several years. Of course she makes nothing of it, but it seemed rather serious to me when I noticed she had to stop and rest twice to get up one short flight of stairs in their two-floor apartment. I told her I thought she ought to make George let her come home."

"Let her?" Eugene repeated in a low voice. "Does she want to?"

"She doesn't urge it. George seems to like the life there—in his grand, gloomy and peculiar way; and of course she'll never change about being proud of him and all that—he's quite a swell. But in spite of anything she says, rather than because, I know she does indeed want to come. She'd like to be with father, of course; and I think she's well, she intimated one day that she feared it might even happen that she wouldn't get to see him again. At the time I thought she referred to his age and feebleness, but on the boat coming home I remembered the little look of wistfulness, yet of resignation, with which she said it, and it struck me all at once that I'd been mistaken: I saw she was really thinking of her own state of health."

"I see," Eugene said, his voice even lower than it had been before. "And you say she won't let her come home?"

Amberson laughed, but still continued to be interested in his cigar. "Oh, I don't think he uses force! He's very gentle with her. I doubt if the subject is mentioned between them, and yet—and yet, knowing my interesting nephew as you do, wouldn't you think that was about the way to put it?"

"Knowing him as I do—yes," said Eugene slowly. "Yes, I should think that was about the way to put it."

A murmur out of the shadows beyond him—a faint sound, musical and feminine, yet expressive of a notable intensity—seemed to indicate that Lucy was of the same opinion.

"Yes, mother."

"All you needed?"

"Yes, mother."

She did not speak again for a time; then, "Are you sure you didn't catch cold—coming home?"

"I'm all right, mother."

"That's good. It's sweet—it's sweet."

"What is, mother darling?"

"To feel—my hand on your cheek. I—I can feel it."

But this frightened him horribly—that she seemed so glad she could feel it, like a child proud of some miraculous seeming thing accomplished. It frightened him so that he could not speak, and he feared that she would know how he trembled; but she was unaware, and again was silent. Finally she spoke again:

"I wonder if—if Eugene and Lucy know that we've come home."

"I'm sure they do."

"Has he—asked about me?"

"Yes, he was here."

"Has he—gone?"

"Yes, mother."

She sighed faintly. "I'd like—

"What, mother?"

"I'd like to have seen him." It was audible, this little regretful murmur. Several minutes passed before there was another. "Just—just once," she whispered, and then was still.

She seemed to have fallen asleep, and George moved to go, but a faint pressure upon his fingers detained him, and he remained, with her hand still pressed against his cheek. After a while he made sure she was asleep, and moved again, to let the nurse come in, and this time there was no pressure of the fingers to keep him. She was not asleep, but, thinking that if he went he might get some rest, and be better prepared for what she knew was coming, she commanded those long fingers of hers and let him go.

He found the doctor standing with the nurse in the hall; and, telling them that his mother was drowsing now, George went back to his own room, where he was startled to find his grandfather lying on the bed, and his uncle leaning against the wall.

They had gone home two hours before, and he did not know they had returned.

"The doctor thought we'd better come over," Amberson said, then was silent, and George, shaking violently, sat down on the edge of the bed. His

grandfather: "He was deathly pale and speechless, took his grandfather's hand, but the old gentleman did not seem to notice his action.

"When are they going to let me see my daughter?" he asked querulously. "They told me to keep out of the way while they carried her in, because it might upset her. I wish they'd let me go in and speak to my daughter. I think she wants to see me."

He was right—presently the doctor came out and beckoned to him, and the Major shuffled forward, leaning on a shaking cane; his figure, after all its years of proud soldierliness, had grown stooping at last, and his untrimmed white hair straggled over the back of his collar. He looked old and divested of the world—as he crept toward his daughter's room. His voice was stronger, for the waiting group heard a low cry of tenderness and welcome as the old man reached the open doorway. Then the door was closed.

George began to pace the floor, taking care not to go near Isabel's door, and that his footsteps were muffled by the long, thick hall rug. After a while he went to where Amberson, with folded arms and bowed head, had seated himself near the front window. "Uncle George," he said hoarsely. "I didn't—Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amberson only nodded his head, and did not otherwise change his attitude.

Isabel lived through the night.

At eleven o'clock Fanny came timidly to George in his room. "Eugene is here," she whispered. "He's downstairs. He wants—" She gulped. "He wants to know if he can't see her. I didn't know what to say. I said I'd see her. I didn't know—the doctor said—" Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amberson only nodded his head, and did not otherwise change his attitude.

Isabel lived through the night.

At eleven o'clock Fanny came timidly to George in his room. "Eugene is here," she whispered. "He's downstairs. He wants—" She gulped. "He wants to know if he can't see her. I didn't know what to say. I said I'd see her. I didn't know—the doctor said—" Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amberson only nodded his head, and did not otherwise change his attitude.

Isabel lived through the night.

At eleven o'clock Fanny came timidly to George in his room. "Eugene is here," she whispered. "He's downstairs. He wants—" She gulped. "He wants to know if he can't see her. I didn't know what to say. I said I'd see her. I didn't know—the doctor said—" Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amberson only nodded his head, and did not otherwise change his attitude.

Isabel lived through the night.

At eleven o'clock Fanny came timidly to George in his room. "Eugene is here," she whispered. "He's downstairs. He wants—" She gulped. "He wants to know if he can't see her. I didn't know what to say. I said I'd see her. I didn't know—the doctor said—" Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amberson only nodded his head, and did not otherwise change his attitude.

Isabel lived through the night.

At eleven o'clock Fanny came timidly to George in his room. "Eugene is here," she whispered. "He's downstairs. He wants—" She gulped. "He wants to know if he can't see her. I didn't know what to say. I said I'd see her. I didn't know—the doctor said—" Well?"

"Oh, my God, I didn't think this thing the matter with her could ever be serious! I—" He gasped. "When the doctor I had met us at the boat—" He could not go on.

Amb