

The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

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"COME ON!" SHE CRIED. "LET'S DANCE!"

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 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 overboard in a youthful indiscretion and married Wilbur Minafer. George makes rapid progress in his courtship of Lucy.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

He groaned faintly. "Aren't your brother and George escorts enough for you and Fanny?" "Wouldn't you enjoy it at all?" "You know I don't." Isabel let her hand remain upon his shoulder a moment longer; she stood behind him, looking into the fire, George, watching her broodingly, thought there was more color in her face than the reflection of the flames accounted for. "Well, then," she said indulgently, "stay at home and be



"We Won't Urge You If You'd Really Rather Not."

happy. We won't urge you if you'd really rather not."

"I really wouldn't," he said contentedly.

Half an hour later George was passing through the upper hall, in a bathrobe stage of preparation for the evening's gayeties, when he encountered his Aunt Fanny. He stopped her. "Look here!" he said.

"What in the world is the matter with you?" she demanded, regarding him with little amiability. "You look as if you were rehearsing for a villain in a play."

His expression gave no sign of yielding to the request; on the contrary, its somberness deepened. "I suppose you don't know why father doesn't want to go tonight," he said solemnly.

"He never wants to go anywhere that I ever heard of," said Fanny. "What is the matter with you?"

"He doesn't want to go because he doesn't like this man Morgan. Look here; what makes you and—and everybody so excited over him?"

"Excited!" she jeered. "Can't people be glad to see an old friend without silly children like you having to make a to-do about it? I've just been in your mother's room suggesting that she might give a little dinner for them—"

"For who?" "For whom, George! For Mr. Morgan and his daughter."

"Look here!" George said quickly. "Don't do that! Mother mustn't do that. It wouldn't look well."

"Wouldn't look well!" Fanny mocked him; and her suppressed vehemence betrayed a surprising acerbity. "See here, George Minafer, I suggest that you just march straight into your room and finish your dressing! Sometimes you say things that show you have a pretty mean little mind!"

George was so astounded by this outburst that his indignation was delayed by his curiosity. "Why, what upsets you this way?" he inquired.

"I know what you mean," she said, her voice still lowered, but not decreasing in sharpness. "You're trying to insinuate that I'd get your mother to invite Eugene Morgan here on my account because he's a widower!"

mother to help you? Is that what you mean?"

Beyond a doubt that was what Miss Fanny meant. She gave him a white-hot look. "You attend to your own affairs!" she whispered fiercely, and swept away.

George, dumfounded, returned to his room for meditation.

He had lived for years in the same house with his Aunt Fanny, and it now appeared that during all those years he had been thus intimately associating with a total stranger. Never before had he met the passionate lady with whom he had just held a conversation in the hall. So she wanted to get married! And wanted George's mother to help her with this horseless-carriage widower!

"Well, I will be shot!" he muttered aloud. "I will—I certainly will be shot." And he began to laugh. "Lord Almighty!"

But presently, at the thought of the horseless-carriage widower's daughter, his grimace returned, and he resolved upon a line of conduct for the evening. He would nod to her carelessly when he first saw her; and after that he would notice her no more; he would not dance with her; he would not favor her in the cotillion—he would not go near her!

He descended to dinner upon the third urgent summons of the colored butler, having spent two hours dressing—and rehearsing.

The Hon. George Amberson was a congressman who led cotillions—the sort of congressman an Amberson would be. He did it negligently to-night, yet with infallible dexterity, now and then glancing humorously at the spectators, glances of his own age. George had carried out his rehearsed projects with precision. He had given Miss Morgan a nod studied into perfection during his lengthy toilet before dinner.

"Oh, yes," I do seem to remember that curious little outsider! This nod seemed to say: "After all our acquaintance of her expatriated; the curious little outsider was permitted no further existence worth the struggle. Nevertheless she flashed in the corner of his eyes too often. She seemed to be having a "wonderful time!"

An unbearable soreness accumulated in his chest; his dislike of the girl and her conduct increased until he thought of leaving this sickening Assembly and going home to bed. "That would show her! But just then he heard her laughing and decided that it wouldn't show her. So he remained.

When the young couples seated themselves in chairs against the walls round three sides of the room for the cotillion George joined a brazen-faced group clustering about the doorway—youths with no partners, yet eligible to be "called out" and favored. He marked that his uncle placed the infernal Kinney and Miss Morgan, as the leading couple, in the first chairs at the head of the line upon the leader's right; and this disloyalty on the part of Uncle George was inexcusable, for in the family circle the nephew had often expressed his opinion of Fred Kinney. In his bitterness George uttered a significant monosyllable.

The music flourished, whereupon Mr. Kinney, Miss Morgan and six of their neighbors rose and waltzed knowingly. Mr. Amberson's white-hot view; then the eight young people went to the favor table and were given toys and trinkets wherewith to delight the new partners it was now their privilege to select.

George strolled with a bored air to the tropical grove, where sat his elders, and seated himself beside his Uncle Sydney. His mother leaned across Miss Fanny, raising her voice over the music to speak to him.

"George, nobody will be able to see you here. You'll not be favored. You ought to be where you can dance."

"Don't care to," he returned. "Bore!"

"But you ought—" She stopped and laughed, waving her fan to direct his attention behind him. "Look—Over your shoulder!"

He turned and discovered Miss Lucy Morgan in the act of offering him a purple toy balloon.

"I found you!" she laughed.

George was startled. "Well—" he said.

move. "I don't care to dance if you—"

"No," he said, rising. "It would be better to dance." His tone was solemn, and solemnly he departed with her from the grove. Solemnly he danced with her.

Four times, with not the slightest encouragement, she brought him a favor: four times in succession. When the fourth came, "Look here!" said George huskily. "You going to keep this up all night? What do you mean by it?"

For an instant she seemed confused. "That's what cotillions are for, aren't they?" she murmured.

"What do you mean: what they're for?"

"So that a girl can dance with a person she wants to?"

George's huskiness increased. "Well, do you mean you want to dance with me all the time—all evening?"

"Well, this much of it—evidently!" she laughed.

"Is it because you want to even things up for making me angry—I mean for hurting my feelings on the way home?"

With her eyes averted—for girls of nineteen can be as shy as boys, sometimes—she said, "Well—you only got angry because I couldn't dance the cotillion with you. I—I didn't feel terribly hurt with you for getting angry about that!"

"Was there any other reason? Did my telling you I liked you have anything to do with it?"

She looked up gently and as George met her eyes something exquisitely touching yet queerly delightful gave him a catch in the throat. She looked instantly away, and, turning, ran out from the palm grove, where they stood, to the dancing floor.

"Come on!" she cried. "Let's dance!"

He followed her.

"See here—I—I—" he stammered.

"You mean—Do, you—"

"No, no," she laughed. "Let's dance!"

He put his arm about her almost tremulously and they began to waltz. It was a happy dance for both of them.

Christmas day is the children's, but the holidays are youth's dancing time. The holidays belong to the early twenties and the teens, home from school and college. It is the liveliest time in life, the happiest of the irresponsible times in life. Mothers echo its happiness—nothing is like a mother who has a son home from college, except another mother with a son home from college. Yet they give up their sons to the daughters of other mothers, and find it proud rapture enough to be allowed to sit and watch.

Thus Isabel watched George and Lucy dancing as together they danced away the holidays of that year into the past.

"They seem to get along better than they did at first, those two children," Fanny Minafer said, sitting beside her at the Sharrons' dance a week after the Assembly. "They seemed to be always having little quarrels of some sort at first. At least George



"I Found You!" She Laughed.

did; he seemed to be continually pecking at that lovely, dainty little Lucy, and being cross with her over nothing."

"Pecking?" Isabel laughed. "What a word to use about George! I think I never knew a more angelically amiable disposition in my life!"

Miss Fanny echoed her sister-in-law's laugh, but it was a rueful echo, and not sweet. "He's amiable to you!" she said. "That's all the side of him you ever happen to see. And why wouldn't he be amiable to anybody that simply fell down and worshipped him every minute of her life? Most of us would!"

"Isn't he worth worshipping? Just look at him!"

"Oh, I'm not going to argue with you about George!" said Miss Fanny. "I'm fond enough of him, for that matter. He can be charming, and he's certainly stunning looking, if only—"

"Let the 'if only' go, dear," Isabel suggested good-naturedly. "Let's talk about that dinner you thought I should—"

"It?" Miss Fanny interrupted quickly. "Didn't you want to give it yourself?"

"Indeed I did, my dear!" said Isabel heartily. "I only meant that unless you had proposed it perhaps I wouldn't—"

But here Eugene came for her to dance, and she left the sentence uncompleted. Holiday dances can be jumpy for youth renewed as well as for youth in bud—and yet it was not with the air of a rival that Miss Fanny watched her brother's wife dancing with the widower. Miss Fanny's eyes narrowed a little, but only as if her mind engaged in a hopeful calculation. She looked pleased.

CHAPTER VIII.

A few days after George's return to the university it became evident that not quite everybody had gazed with complete benevolence upon the various young collegians at their holiday sports. The Sunday edition of the principal morning paper even expressed some bitterness under the heading, "Gilded Youths of the Fin-de-Siècle"—this was considered the knowing phrase of the time, especially for Sunday supplements—and there is no doubt that from certain references in this bit of writing some people drew the conclusion that Mr. George Amberson Minafer had not yet got his come-uppance, a postponement still irritating. Undenialably Fanny Minafer was one of the people who drew this conclusion, for she cut the article out and inclosed it in a letter to her nephew, having written on the border of the clipping, "I wonder whom it can mean!"

George read part of it: We debate sometimes what is to be the future of this nation when we think that in a few years public affairs may be in the hands of the fin-de-siècle gilded youths we see about us during the Christmas holidays. Such foppery, such luxury, such insolence was surely never practiced by the scented, overbearing practitioners of the Palais, even in Louis's most decadent epoch. With his airs of young miorid, his fast horses, his gold and silver cigarette cases, his clothes from a New York tailor, his recklessness of money showered upon him by indulgent mothers or dotting grandfathers, he respects nothing and nobody. He is blasé, if you please. Watch him at a social gathering, and sometimes I have designs to select a partner for the popular waltz or two-step; how carelessly he shoulders older people out of his way, with what a blank stare he returns my salutations of some old acquaintance whom he may choose in his royal whim to forget!

One wonders what has come over the new generation. Of such as these the republic may be made. When we compare the young manhood of Abraham Lincoln with the specimens we are now producing we see too well that it bodes ill for the twentieth century!

George yawned and tossed the clipping into his waste basket, wondering why his aunt thought such dull nonsense worth the sending. As for her insinuation, pencilled upon the border, he supposed she meant to joke—a supposition which neither surprised him nor altered his lifelong opinion of her wit.

He read her letter with more interest: The dinner your mother gave for the Morgans was a lovely affair. It was last Monday evening, just ten days after you left. It was appropriate that your mother, herself an old friend, should assemble a representative selection of Mr. Morgan's old friends around him at such a time. He was in great spirits and most entertaining.

He will soon begin to build his factory here for the manufacture of automobiles, which he may be a term he prefers to "horseless carriages." Your Uncle George told me he would like to invest in this factory, as George thinks there is a future for automobiles; perhaps not for general use, but as an interesting novelty, which people with sufficient means would like to own for their amusement and the sake of variety. However, he said Mr. Morgan laughingly declined his offer; Mr. M. was fully able to finance this venture, though not starting in a very large way. Your uncle said other people are manufacturing automobiles in different parts of the country with success. Your father is not very well, though he is not actually ill, and the doctor tells him he ought not to be so much at his office, but the long years of application indoors with no exercise are beginning to affect him unfavorably, but I believe your father would not die if he had to give up his work, which is all that has ever interested him outside of his family. I never could understand it. Mr. Morgan took your mother and me with Lucy to see Modjeska in "Twelfth Night" yesterday evening, and Lucy said she thought the duke looked rather like you, only much more democratic in his manner. Hoping that you are finding college still as attractive as ever.

Affectionately, AUNT FANNY.

George read one sentence in this letter several times. Then he dropped the missive in his waste basket to join the clipping, and strolled down the corridor of his dormitory to borrow a copy of "Twelfth Night." Having secured one he returned to his study and refreshed his memory of the play—but received no enlightenment that enabled him to comprehend Lucy's strange remark. However, he

found himself impelled in the direction of correspondence, and presently wrote a letter—not a reply to his Aunt Fanny.

Dear Lucy: No doubt you will be surprised at hearing from me so soon again, especially as this makes two in answer to the one received from you since getting back to the old place. I heard you have been making comments about me at the theater, that some actor was more democratic in his manners than I am, which I do not understand. You know my theory of life because I explained it to you on our first drive together, when I told you I would not talk to everybody about things I feel like the way I spoke to you of my theory of life. I believe those who are able should have a true theory of life, and I developed my theory of life long ago.

Well, here I sit smoking my faithful briar pipe, indulging in the fragrance of my tobacco as I look out on the campus from my many-paned window, and things are different with me from the way they were way back in freshman year. I can see now how boyish in many ways I was then. I believe what has changed me as much as anything was my visit home at the time I met you. So I sit here with my faithful briar and dream the old dreams over as it were, dreaming of the waitesses we waltzed together and of that last night before we parted, and you told me the good news you were going to live there, and I would find my friend waiting for me when I got home next summer.

I will be glad my friend will be waiting for me. I am not capable of friendship except for the very few, and looking back over my life, I remember there were times when I doubted if I could feel a great friendship for anybody—especially girls. Here in the old place I do not believe in being half-fellow-well-met with every Tom, Dick and Harry just because he happens to be a classmate any more than I do at home, where I have always been careful who I was seen with, largely on account of the family, but also because my disposition ever since my boyhood has been to encourage real intimacy from but the few.

From several letters from my mother, and one from Aunt Fanny I hear you are seeing a good deal of the family since I left. I hope sometimes you think of the member who is absent. I got a silver frame for your photograph in New York, and I keep it on my desk. It is the only girl's photograph I ever took, the trouble to have framed, though, as I told you frankly, I have had any number of other girls' photographs, yet all were only passing fancies, and sometimes I have questioned in years past if I was capable of much friendship toward the feminine sex, which I usually found shallow until our own friendship began. When I look at your photograph I say to myself, "At last, at last here is one that will not prove shallow."

Friend, this is from your friend,

G. A. M.

George's anticipations were not disappointed. When he came home in June his friend was awaiting him; at least she was so pleased to see him again that for a few minutes after their first encounter she was a little breathless and a great deal glowing, and quiet withal.

Lucy and her father were living at the Amberson hotel, while Morgan got his small machine shops built in a western suburb of the town; and George grumbled about the shabbiness and the old-fashioned look of the hotel, though it was "still the best in the place, of course." He remonstrated with his grandfather, declaring that the whole Amberson Estate would be getting "run down and out at heel if things weren't taken in hand pretty soon." He urged the general need of rebuilding, renovating, varnishing and lawsuits. But the Major, declining to hear him out, interrupted querulously, saying that he had enough to bother him without any advice from George; and retired to his library, going so far as to lock the door audibly.

"Second childhood!" George muttered, shaking his head; and he thought sadly that the Major had not long to live. However, this surmise depressed him for only a moment or so.

Of course people couldn't be expected to live forever, and it would be a good thing to have someone in charge of the Estate who wouldn't let it get to looking so rusty that ruff-dared to make fun of it. For George had lately undergone the annoyance of calling upon the Morgans, in the rather stuffy red velvet and gilt parlor of their apartment at the hotel, one evening when Mr. Frederick Kinney also was a caller, and Mr. Kinney had not been tactful. In fact, though he adopted a humorous tone of voice in expressing sympathy for people who, through the city's poverty in hotels, were obliged to stay at the Amberson, Mr. Kinney's intention was interpreted by the other visitor as not at all humorous, but, on the contrary, personal and offensive.

George rose abruptly, his face the color of wrath. "Good night, Miss Morgan. Good night, Mr. Morgan. I shall take pleasure in calling at some other time when a more courteous sort of people may be present."

"Look here!" the hot-headed Fred burst out. "Don't you try to make me out a bore, George Minafer! I wasn't hinting anything at you; I simply forgot all about your grandfather owing this old building. Don't you try to put me in the light of a bore! I won't—"

But George walked out in the very course of his vehement protest, and it was necessarily left unfinished.

Mr. Kinney remained only a few moments after George's departure; and as the door closed upon him the distressed Lucy turned to her father. She was pliantly surprised to find him in a condition of immoderate laughter.

"It brings things back so!" he managed to explain. "This very Fred Kinney's father and young George's father, Wilbur Minafer, used to do just such things when they were at that age—and, for that matter, so did George Amberson and I, and all the rest of us!" And in spite of his exhaustion, he began to imitate: "Don't you try to put me in the light of a bore!" I shall take pleasure in calling at some time when a more courteous sort of people—" He was unable to go on.

"Papa, I think they were shocking. Weren't they awful?"

"Just—just boys!" he moaned, wiping his eyes.

But Lucy could not smile at all; she was beginning to look indignant. "I can forgive that poor Fred Kinney," she said. "He's just blundering—but George—oh, George behaved outrageously!"

She came and sat upon the arm of his chair. "Papa, why should George behave like that?"

"He's sensitive."

"Rather! But why is he? He does anything he likes to, without any regard for what people think. Then



"Good Night, Miss Morgan."

why should he mind so furiously when the least little thing reflects upon him, or on anything or anybody connected with him?"

Eugene patted her hand. "That's one of the greatest puzzles of human vanity, dear; and I don't pretend to know the answer. In all my life the most arrogant people that I've known have been the most sensitive. The people who have done the most in contempt of other people's opinion, and who consider themselves the highest above it have been the most furious if it went against them. Arrogant and domineering people can't stand the least, lightest, faintest breath of criticism. It just kills them."

"Papa, do you think George is terribly arrogant and domineering?"

"Oh, he's still only a boy," said Eugene consolingly. "There's plenty of fine stuff in him—can't help but be, because he's Isabel Amberson's son."

Lucy stroked his hair, which was still almost as dark as her own. "You liked her pretty well once, I guess, papa."

"I do still," he said quietly.

"She's lovely—lovely! Papa—she paused, then continued—"I wonder sometimes—"

"What?"

"I wonder just how she happened to marry Mr. Minafer."

"Oh, Minafer's all right," said Eugene. "He's a quiet sort of man, but he's a good man and a kind man. He always was, and those things count."

"I don't think I should have called George bad tempered," Lucy said thoughtfully. "No, I don't think he is."

"Only when he's cross about something!" Morgan suggested, with a semblance of sympathetic gravity.

"Yes," she said brightly, not perceiving that his intention was humorous. "All the rest of the time he's really very amiable. Of course he's much more a perfect child the whole time than he realizes! He certainly behaved awfully tonight." She jumped up, her indignation returning. "He did, indeed, and it won't do to encourage him in it. I think he'll find me pretty cool—for a week or so!"

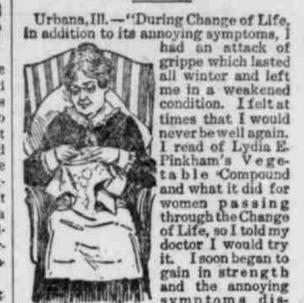
Whereupon her father suffered a renewal of his attack of uproarious laughter.

George continues to grow up. Signs of clouds on the Amberson horizon.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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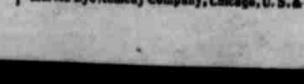
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