

# The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

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## "THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS:" A MAGNIFICENT NOVEL.

The literary critics and book reviewers are continually asking, "When shall we have the 'Great American Novel' by the 'Great American Novelist'?" Perhaps never, in the sense in which the question is asked, for this country is too big and its people differ too greatly by localities to make the "Great American Novel" possible.

Nevertheless, "The Magnificent Ambersons" is a great American novel. Booth Tarkington is an American of sturdy native stock. He knows American life and character as only a native American with generations of American forebears can know them. Moreover he has a charm of style and a power of expression which have endeared him to the reading public.

"The Magnificent Ambersons" is so great a novel that Booth Tarkington has been awarded the Joseph Pulitzer prize of \$1,000 "for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American manners and manhood." The judges making the award are Robert Grant, William Morton Payne and William Lyon Phelps.

### CHAPTER I.

Major Amberson had "made a fortune" in 1873, when other people were losing fortunes, and the magnificence of the Ambersons began then. Their splendor lasted all the years that saw their Midland town spread and darken into a city, but reached its topmost during the period when every prosperous family with children kept a Newfoundland dog.

In that town in those days all the women who wore silk or velvet knew all the other women who wore silk or velvet, and when there was a new purchase of sealskin sick people were got to windows to see it go by. Everybody knew everybody else's family horse and carriage, could identify such a silhouette half a mile down the street, and thereby was sure who was going to market or to a reception or coming home from office or store to noon dinner or evening supper.

During the earlier years of this period elegance of personal appearance was believed to rest more upon the texture of garments than upon their shaping. A silk dress needed no remodeling when it was a year or so old; it remained distinguished by merely remaining silk. Old men and governors wore broadcloth; "full dress" was broadcloth with "doeskin" trousers; and there were seen men of all ages to whom a hat meant only that rigid, tall silk thing known to impudence as a "stovepipe." In town and country these men would wear no other hat, and, without self-consciousness, they went rowing in such hats.

Trousers with a crease were considered plebeian; the crease proved that the garment had lain upon a shelf, and hence was "ready made;" these betraying trousers were called "hand-me-downs," in allusion to the shelf. In the early eighties, while bangs and bustles were having their way with women, that variation of dandy known as the "dude" was invented; he wore trousers as tight as stockings, dagger-pointed shoes, a spoon "derby," a single-breasted coat called a "Chesterfield," with short flaring skirts, a torturing cylindrical collar, laundered to a polish and three inches high, while his other neckgear might be a heavy, puffed cravat or a tiny bow fit for a doll's braids. With evening dress he wore a tan overcoat so short that his black coat tails hung visible, five inches below the overcoat; but after a season or two he lengthened his overcoat till it touched his heels, and he passed out of his tight trousers into trousers like great bags. Then presently he was seen no more, though the word that had been coined for him remained in the vocabularies of the impertinent.

Surely no more is needed to prove that so short a time ago we were living in another age!

At the beginning of the Ambersons' great period most of the houses of the Midland town were of a pleasant architecture. They lacked style, but also pretentiousness, and whatever does not pretend at all has style enough. They stood in commodious yards, well shaded by leftover forest trees, elm and walnut and beech, with here and there a line of tall sycamores where the land had been made by filling bayous from the creek. The house of a "prominent resident," facing Military square or National avenue or Tennessee street, was built of brick upon a stone foundation, or of wood upon a brick foundation. Usually it had a "front porch" and a "back porch;" often a "side porch," too. There was a "front hall;" there was a "side hall," and sometimes a "back hall." From the "front hall" opened three rooms, the "parlor," the "sitting room" and the "library;" and the library could show warrant to its title—for some reason these people bought books. Commonly the family sat more in the library than in the "sitting room," while callers, when they came formally, were kept to the "parlor," a place of formidable polish and discomfort. The upholstery of the library

furniture was a little shabby, but the hostile chairs and sofa of the "parlor" always looked new. For all the wear and tear they got they should have lasted a thousand years. Upstairs were the bedrooms; "mother and father's room" the largest; a smaller room for one or two sons, another for one or two daughters; each of these rooms containing a double bed, a "washstand," a "bureau," a wardrobe, a little table, a rocking chair, and often a chair or two that had been slightly damaged downstairs, but not enough to justify either the expense of repair or decisive abandonment in the attic. And there was always a "spare room," for visitors (where the sewing machine usually was kept), and during the seventies there developed an appreciation of the necessity for a bathroom.

At the rear of the house, upstairs, was a bleak little chamber, called "the girl's room," and in the stable there was another bedroom, adjoining the hayloft, and called "the hired man's room." House and stable cost seven or eight thousand dollars to build, and people with that much money to invest in such comforts were classified as the Rich. They paid the inhabitant of "the girl's room" two dollars a week, and, in the latter part of this period, two dollars and a half, and finally three dollars a week. She was Irish ordinarily, or German, or it might be Scandinavian, but never native to the land unless she happened to be a person of color. The man or youth who lived in the stable had like wages, and sometimes, too, was lately a steerage voyager, but much oftener he was colored.

After sunrise on pleasant mornings the alleys behind the stables were gay; laughter and shouting went up and down their dusty lengths, with a lively accompaniment of curryscombs knocking against back fences and stable walls, for the darkies loved to curry their horses in the alleys. Darkies always prefer to gossip in shouts instead of whispers, and they feel that profanity, unless it be vociferous, is almost worthless. Horrible phrases were caught by early rising children and carried to older people for definition, sometimes at inopportune moments; while less investigative children would often merely repeat the phrases in some subsequent flurry of agitation, and yet bring about consequences so emphatic as to be recalled with ease in middle life.

They have passed, those darkly hired men of the Midland town. The stables have been transformed into other likenesses, or swept away, like the woodsheds where were kept the stovepots and kindling that the "girl" and the "hired man" always quarreled over; who should fetch it.

So with other vanishing. There were the little bunty street cars on the long, single track that went its troubled way among the cobblestones. At the rear door of the car there was no platform, but a step where passengers clung in wet clumps when the weather was bad and the car crowded. The patrons—if not too absent-minded—put their fares into a slot; and no conductor paced the heaving floor, but the driver would rap remindingly with his elbow upon the glass of the door to his little open platform if the nickels and the passengers did not appear to coincide in number. A lone mule drew the car, and sometimes drew it off the track, when the passengers would get out and push it on again. They really owed it courtesies like this, for the car was genially accommodating; a lady could whistle to it from an upstairs window, and the car would halt at once and wait for her while she shut the window, put on her hat and cloak, went downstairs, found an umbrella, told the "girl" what to have for dinner, and came forth from the house.

They even had time to dance "square dances," quadrilles and "lanterns;" they also danced the "raccouette" and schottisches and polkas,

and such whims as the "Portland fancy." They pushed back the sliding doors between the "parlor" and the "sitting room," tacked down crash over the carpets, hired a few palms in green tubs, stationed three or four Italian musicians under the stairway in the "front hall"—and had great nights!

"Keeping open house," was a merry custom; it has gone, like the all-day picnic in the woods, and like that prettiest of all vanished customs, the serenade. When a lively girl visited the town she did not long go un serenaded, though a visitor was not indeed needed to excuse a serenade. Of a summer night young men would bring an orchestra under a pretty girl's window—or, it might be, her father's, or that of an ailing maiden aunt—and flute, harp, cello, cornet and bass viol would pleasantly release to the dulcet stars such melodies as sing through "You'll Remember Me," "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls," "Silver Threads Among the Gold," "Kathleen Mavourneen," or "The Soldier's Farewell."

Croquet and the mildest archery ever known were the sports of people still young and active enough for so much exertion; middle age played euchre. There was a theater, next door to the Amberson hotel, and when Edwin Booth came for a night everybody who could afford to buy a ticket was there, and all the "backs" in town were hired. "The Black Crook" also filled the theater, but the audience then was almost entirely of men, who looked uneasy as they left for home when the final curtain fell upon the shocking girls dressed as fairies. But the theater did not often do so well; the people of the town were still too thrifty.

They were thrifty because they were the sons or grandsons of the "early settlers," who had opened the wilderness and had reached it from the East and the South with wagons and axes and guns, but with no money at all. The pioneers were thrifty or they would have perished; they had to store away food for the winter, or goods to trade for food, and they often feared they had not stored enough—they left traces of that fear in their sons and grandsons. In the minds of most of these, indeed, their thrift was next to their religion; to save, even for the sake of saving, was their earliest lesson and discipline. No matter how prosperous they were they could not spend money either upon "art," or upon mere luxury and entertainment, without a sense of sin.

Against so homespun a background the magnificence of the Ambersons was as conspicuous as a brass band at a funeral. Major Amberson bought two hundred acres of land at the end of National avenue; and through this tract he built broad streets and cross-streets; paved them with cedar block, and curbed them with stone. He set up fountains, here and there, where the streets intersected, and at symmetrical intervals placed cast-iron statues, painted white, with their titles clear upon the pedestals; Minerva, Mercury, Hercules, Venus, Gladiator, Emperor Augustus, Fisher Boy, Stag-hound, Mastiff, Greyhound, Fawn, Antelope, Wounded Doe and Wounded Lion. Most of the forest trees had been left to flourish still, and, at some distance, or by moonlight, the place was in truth beautiful; but the ardent



"Sixty Thousand Dollars for the Wood-work Alone."

citizen, loving to see his city grow, wanted neither distance nor moonlight. He had not seen Versailles, but, standing before the fountain of Neptune in Amberson addition, at bright noon, and quoting the favorite comparison of the local newspapers he declared Versailles outdone. All this art showed a profit from the start, for the lots sold well and there was something like a rush to build in the new Addition. Its main thoroughfare, an oblique continuation of National avenue, was called Amberson boulevard, and here, at the juncture of the new boulevard and the avenue, Major Amberson reserved four acres for himself and built his new house—the Amberson mansion, of course.

This house was the pride of the town. Faced with stone as far back as the dining-room windows, it was a house of arches and turrets and girdling stone porches; it had the first porte cochere seen in that town. There was a central "front hall" with a great black-walnut stairway, and open to a green glass skylight called the "dome," three stories above the ground floor. A ballroom occupied most of the third story, and at one end of it was carved a walnut gallery for the musicians. Citizens told strangers that the cost of all this black walnut and wood carving was sixty thousand dollars. "Sixty thousand dollars for the woodwork alone! Yes, sir, and hardwood floors all over the house! Turkish rugs and no carpets at all, except a Brussels carpet in the front parlor—I hear they call it the 'reception room.' Hot and cold water upstairs and down, and stationary washstands in every bedroom in the place! Their sideboard's built right into the house and goes all the way across one end of the dining room. It isn't walnut, it's solid mahogany! Not veneering—solid mahogany! Well, sir, I presume the president of the United States would be tickled to swap the White House for the new Amberson mansion, if the Major'd give him the chance—but by the Almighty Dollar, you bet your sweet life the Major wouldn't!"

The visitor to the town was certain to receive further enlightenment, for there was one form of entertainment never omitted: he was always patriotically taken for "a little drive round our city," even if his host had to hire a hack, and the climax of the display was the Amberson mansion. "Look at that greenhouse they've put up there in the side yard," the escort would continue. "And look at that brick stable! Most folks would think that stable plenty big enough and good enough to live in; it's got running water and four rooms upstairs for two hired men and one of 'em's family to live in. They keep one hired man loafin' in the house, and they got a married hired man out in the stable, and his wife does the washing. This town never did see so much style as Ambersons are putting on these days; and I guess it's going to be expensive, because a lot of other folks'll try to keep up with 'em. The Major's wife and the daughter's been to Europe, and my wife tells me since they got back they make tea there every afternoon about five o'clock and drink it. Seems to me it would go against a person's stomach, just before supper like that, and anyway tea isn't fit for much—not unless you're sick or something. Looks to be like some people in this city'd be willing to go crazy if they thought that would help 'em to be as high-toned as Ambersons. Old Aleck Minafer—he's about the closest old codger we got—he come in my office the other day, and he pretty near had a stroke tellin' me about his daughter Fanny. Seems Miss Isabel Amberson's got some kind of a dog—they call it a St. Bernard—and Fanny was bound to have one, too. Well, old Aleck told her he didn't like dogs except rat terriers, because a rat terrier cleans up the mice, but she kept on at him, and finally he said all right she could have one. Then, by George! she says Amberson's bought their dog, and you don't get one without paying for it; they cost from fifty to a hundred dollars up! Old Aleck wanted to know if I ever heard of anybody's buyin' a dog before, because, even a Newfoundland or a setter, you can usually get somebody to give you one. He says he saw some sense in payin' a nigger a dime, or even a quarter, to drown a dog for you, but to pay out fifty dollars and maybe more—well, sir, he like to choked himself to death, right there in my office! Of course everybody realizes that Major Amberson is a fine business man, but what with throwin' money around for dogs, and every which and what, some think all this style's bound to break him up, if his family don't quit!"

One citizen, having thus discoursed to a visitor, came to a thoughtful pause, and then added, "Does seem pretty much like squandering, yet when you see that dog out walking with this Miss Isabel, he seems worth the money."

"What's she look like?"

"Well, sir," said the citizen, "she's not more than just about eighteen or maybe nineteen years old, and I don't know as I know just how to put it—but she's kind of a delightful lookin' young lady!"

### CHAPTER II.

Another citizen said an eloquent thing about Miss Isabel Amberson's looks. This was Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster, the foremost literary authority and intellectual leader of the com-

munity—for both the daily newspapers thus described Mrs. Foster when she founded the Women's Tennyson club; and her word upon art, letters and the drama was accepted more as law than as opinion. Naturally when "Hazel Kirke" finally reached town, after its long triumph in larger places, many people waited to hear what Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster thought of it before they felt warranted in expressing any estimate of the play. In fact, some of them waited in the lobby of the theater as they came out and formed an inquiring group about her. "I didn't see the play," she informed them.

"What! Why, we saw you, right in the middle of the fourth row!"

"Yes," she said, smiling, "but I was sitting just behind Isabel Amberson. I couldn't look at anything except her wavy brown hair and the wonderful back of her neck."

The inellegant young men of the town (they were all inellegant) were unable to content themselves with the view that had so charmed Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster; they spent their time struggling to keep Miss Amberson's face turned toward them. She turned it most often, observers said, toward two: one excelling in the general struggle by his sparkle, and the other by that winning if not winsome old trait, persistence. The sparkling gentleman "led Germans" with her, and sent sonnets to her with his bouquets—sonnets lacking neither music nor wit. He was generous, poor, well-dressed, and his amazing persuasiveness was one reason why he was always in debt. No one doubted that he would be able to persuade Isabel, but he unfortunately joined too merry a party one night, and during a moonlight serenade upon the lawn before the Amberson mansion, was easily identified from the windows as the person who stepped through the bass viol and had to be assisted to a waiting carriage. One of Miss Amberson's brothers was among the serenaders, and when the party had dispersed remained propped against the front door in a state of helpless liveliness; the Major going down in a dressing gown and slippers to bring him in, and scolding mildly, while imperfectly concealing strong impulses to laughter. Miss Amberson also laughed at this brother the next day, but for the suitor it was a different matter; she refused to see him when he called to apologize. "You seem to care a great deal about bass viols!" he wrote her. "I promise never to break another."

She made no response to the note, unless it was an answer, two weeks later, when her engagement was announced. She took the persistent one, Wilbur Minafer, no breaker of bass viols or of hearts, no serenade at all. A few people, who always foresaw everything, claimed that they were not surprised, because though Wilbur Minafer "might not be an Apollo, as it were," he was "a steady young business man and a good church goer," and Isabel Anderson was "pretty sensible—for such a showy girl." But the engagement astounded the young people, and most of their fathers and mothers too; and as a topic it supplanted literature at the next meeting of the "Women's Tennyson club."

"Wilbur the Minafer!" a member cried, her inflection seeming to imply that Wilbur's crime was explained by his surname. "Wilbur Minafer! It's the queerest thing I ever heard! To think of her taking Wilbur Minafer, just because a man any woman would like a thousand times better was a little wild one night at a serenade!"

"No, that wasn't her reason," said Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster. "If men only knew it—and it's a good thing they don't—a woman doesn't really care much about whether a man's wild or not, if it doesn't affect herself, and Isabel Amberson doesn't care a thing!"

"Mrs. Foster!"

"No, she doesn't. What she minds is his making a clown of himself in her front yard! It made her think he didn't care much about her. She's probably mistaken, but that's what she thinks, and it's too late for her to think anything else now, because she's going to be married right away—the invitations will be out next week. It'll be a big Amberson-style thing, raw oysters floating in scooped-out blocks of ice and a band from out of town—champagne, showy presents; a colossal present from the Major. Then Wilbur will take Isabel on the careful, little wedding trip he can manage, and she'll be a good wife to him, but they'll have the worst spoiled lot of children this town will ever see."

"How on earth do you make that out, Mrs. Foster?"

"She couldn't love Wilbur, could she?" Mrs. Foster demanded, with no challengers. "Well, it will all go to her children, and she'll ruin 'em!"

The prophetic proved to be mistaken in a single detail merely; except for that her foresight was accurate. The wedding was of Ambersonian magnificence, even to the floating oysters; and the Major's colossal present was a set of architect's designs for a house almost as elaborate and

impressive as the Mansion, the house to be built in Amberson addition by the Major.

At midnight the bride was still being toasted in champagne, though she had departed upon her wedding journey at ten. Four days later the pair had returned to town, which promptness seemed fairly to demonstrate that Wilbur had indeed taken Isabel upon the carefullest little trip he could manage. According to every report she was from the start "a good wife to him," but here in a final detail the prophecy proved inaccurate. Wilbur and Isabel did not have children; they had only one.

"Only one," Mrs. Henry Franklin Foster admitted. "But I'd like to



"You Think You Own This Town!"

know if he isn't spoiled enough for a whole carload!"

Again she found none to challenge her.

At the age of nine George Amberson Minafer, the Major's one grandchild, was a princely terror, dreaded not only in Amberson addition but in many other quarters through which he galloped on his white pony. "By golly, I guess you think you own this town!" an embittered laborer complained one day, as George rode the pony straight through a pile of sand the man was sieving. "I will when I grow up," the undisturbed child replied. "I guess my grandpa owns it now, you bet!" And the baffled workman, having no means to controvert what seemed a mere exaggeration of the facts, could only mutter, "Oh, pull down your vest!"

"Don't haf to! Doctor says it ain't healthy!" the boy returned promptly. "But I tell you what I'll do: I'll pull down my vest if you'll wipe off your chin!"

This was stock and stencil; the accustomed argot of street badinage of the period; and in such matters George was an expert. He had no vest to pull down; the incongruous fact was that a fringed sash girdled the juncture of his velvet blouse and breeches, for the Fauntleroy period had set in, and George's mother had so poor an eye for appropriate things, where George was concerned, that she dressed him according to the doctrine of that school in boy decoration.

Except upon the surface (which was not his own work but his mother's) George bore no vivid resemblance to the fabulous little Eddie. The storied boy's famous "Lean on me, grandfather," would have been difficult to imagine upon the lips of George. A month after his ninth birthday anniversary, when the Major gave him his pony, he had already become acquainted with the toughest boys in various distant parts of the town, and had convinced them that the toughness of a rich little boy with long curls might be considered in many respects superior to their own. He fought them, learning how to go forward at a certain point in a fight, bursting into tears of anger, reaching for rocks, uttering wailed boasts of murder, and attempting to fouth them. Fights often led to indignities, and he acquired the art of saying things more exciting than "Don't haf to!" and "Doctor says it ain't healthy!" Thus on a summer afternoon a strange boy, sitting bare on the gatepost of the Rev. Malloch Smith, beheld George Amberson Minafer rapidly approaching on his white pony and was Impelled by bitterness to shout: "Shoot the ole jackass! Look at the girly curls! Say, bub, where'd you steal your mother's ole sash!"

George Amberson Minafer begins to grow up and meets the beautiful Miss Lucy Morgan.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)