

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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"IT'S 'AU REVOIR' TILL TONIGHT, ISN'T IT?"

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 300-acre "development," with roads and stately, 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.

CHAPTER VI.

The appearance of Miss Lucy Morgan the next day, as she sat in George's fast cutter, proved so charming that her escort was stricken to soft words instantly and failed to control a poetic impulse. "You look like—" he said. "Your face looks like—it looks like a snowflake on a lump of coal. I mean a—snowflake that would be a rose-leaf too!"

"Perhaps you'd better look at the reins," she returned. "We almost upset just then."

George declined to heed this advice. "Because there's too much pink in your cheeks for a snowflake," he continued. "What's that fairy story about snow-white and rose-red?"

"We're going pretty fast, Mr. Minafer!"

"Well, you see, I'm only here for two weeks."

"I mean the sleigh!" she explained. "We're not the only people on the street, you know."

"Oh, they'll keep out of the way."

"That's very patrician chariotteering, but it seems to me a horse like this needs guidance. I'm sure he's going almost twenty miles an hour."

"That's nothing," said George; but he consented to look forward again.

"He can trot under three minutes, all right." He laughed. "I suppose your father thinks he can build a horseless carriage to go that fast!"

"They go that fast already, sometimes."

"Yes," said George; "they do—for about a hundred feet! Then they give a yell and burn up."

Evidently she decided not to defend her father's faith in horseless carriages, for she laughed and said nothing. The cold air was polka-dotted with snowflakes, and trembled to the loud, continuous jingling of sleigh-bells. Boys and girls, all aglow and panting jets of vapor, darted at the passing sleighs to ride on the runners, or sought to rope their sleds to any vehicle whatever, but the fleetest no more than just touched the flying cutter, though a hundred soggy mittens grasped for it, then recoiled and whirled till sometimes the wearers of those daring mittens plunged flat in the snow and lay a-sprawl, reflecting.

But there came panting and chugging up that flat thoroughfare a thing which some day was to spoil all their sleightime merriment—save for the rashest and most disobedient. It was vaguely like a topless surrey, but cumbersome with unwholesome excrescences fore and aft, while underneath were spinning leather belts and something that whirred and howled and seemed to stagger. The ride-stealers made no attempt to fasten their sleds to a contrivance so nonsensical and yet so fearsome. Instead they gave over their sport and concentrated all their energies in their lungs, so that up and down the street the one cry shrilled increasingly: "Git a hoss! Git a hoss! Git a hoss! Mister, why don't you git a hoss?" But the mahout in charge, sitting solitary on the front seat, was unconcerned—he laughed, and now and then ducked a snowball without losing any of his good-nature. It was Mr. Eugene Morgan who exhibited so cheerful a countenance between the forward visor of a deer-stalker cap and the collar of a fuzzy gray ulster. "Git a hoss!" the children shrieked, and gruffer voices joined them. "Git a hoss! Git a hoss! Git a hoss!"

George Minafer was correct thus far; the twelve miles an hour of such a machine would never overtake George's trotter. The cutter was already scurrying between the stone pillars at the entrance to Amberson addition.

"That's my grandfather's," said George, nodding toward the Amberson mansion.

"I ought to know that!" Lucy exclaimed. "We stayed there late enough last night; papa and I were almost the last to go. He and your mother and Miss Fanny Minafer got the musicians to play another waltz when everybody else had gone downstairs and the fiddles were being put away in their cases. Papa danced part of it with Miss Minafer and the rest with your mother. Miss Minafer's your aunt, isn't she?"

"Yes; she lives with us. That's our house just beyond grandfather's." He waved a saucy gauntlet to indicate

the house Major Amberson had built for Isabel as a wedding gift. He frowned as they passed a closed carriage and pair. The body of this comfortable vehicle sagged slightly to one side; the paint was old and seamed with hundreds of minute cracks like little rivers on a black map; the coachman, a fat and elderly dandy, seemed to drowse upon the box; but the open window afforded the occupants of the cutter a glimpse of a tired, fine old face, a silk hat, a pearl tie and an astrachan collar, evidently out to take the air.

"There's your grandfather now," said Lucy. "Isn't it?"

George's frown was not relaxed. "Yes, it is; and he ought to give that rat trap away and sell those old horses. They're a disgrace, all shaggy—not even clipped. I suppose he doesn't notice it—people get awful funny when they get old; they seem to lose their self-respect, sort of."

"He seemed a real Brummell to me," she said.

"Oh, he keeps up about what he wears, well enough, but—Another thing I don't think he ought to allow: a good many people bought big lots and they built houses on 'em; and the price of the land kept getting higher, and they'd sell part of their yards and let the people that bought it build on it to live in, till they haven't hardly any of 'em got big, open yards any more, and it's getting all built up. The way it used to be it was a gentleman's country estate, and that's the way my grandfather ought to keep it. He lets these people take too many liberties; they do anything they want to."

"But how could he stop them?" Lucy asked, surely with reason. "If he sold them the land it's theirs, isn't it?"

George remained serene in the face of this apparently difficult question. "He ought to have all the tradespeople boycott the families that sell part of their yards that way. All he'd have to do would be to tell the tradespeople they wouldn't get any more orders from the family if they didn't do it."

"From 'the family'? What family?"

"Our family," said George, unperturbed. "The Ambersons."

"I see!" she murmured, and evidently she did see something that he did

not, for, as she lifted her muff to her face he asked:

"What are you laughing at now?"

"Why?"

"You always seem to have some little secret of your own to get happy over!"

"Always!" she exclaimed. "What a big word, when we only met last night!"

"That's obvious case of it," he said, with oblique sincerity. "One of the reasons I don't like you—much—is you've got that way of seeming quietly superior to everybody else."

"I!" she cried. "I have?"

"Oh, you think you keep it sort of

confidential to yourself, but it's plain enough! I don't believe in that kind of thing. I think the world's like this: there's a few people that their birth and position, and so on, puts them at the top, and they ought to treat each other entirely as equals." His voice betrayed a little emotion as he added, "I wouldn't speak like this to everybody."

"You mean you're confiding your deepest creed—or code, what ever it is—to me?"

"Go on; make fun of it, then!" George said bitterly. "You do think you're terribly clever! It makes me tired!"

"Well, as you don't like my seeming 'quietly superior,' after this I'll be noisily superior," she returned cheerfully. "We aim to please!"

"I had a notion before I came for you today that we were going to quarrel," he said.

"No, we won't; it takes two!" She laughed and waved her muff toward a new house, not quite completed, standing in a field upon their right. They had passed beyond Amberson addition and were leaving the northern fringes of the town for the open country. "Isn't that a beautiful house!" she exclaimed. "Papa and I call it our Beautiful House."

George was not pleased. "Does it belong to you?"

"Of course not! Papa brought me out here the other day, driving in his machine, and we both loved it. It's so spacious and dignified and plain."

"Yes, it's plain enough!" George grunted.

"Yet it's lovely; the gray-green roof and shutters give just enough color, with the trees, for the long white walls. It seems to be the finest house I've seen in this part of the country."

George was outraged by an enthusiasm so ignorant—not ten minutes ago they had passed the Amberson mansion. "Is that a sample of your taste in architecture?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Because it strikes me you better go somewhere and study the subject a little!"

Lucy looked puzzled. "What makes you have so much feeling about it? Have I offended you?"

"Offended" nothing! George returned brusquely. "Girls usually think they know it all as soon as they've learned to dance and dress and flirt a little. They never know anything about things like architecture, for instance. That house was about as bum a house as any house I ever saw!"

He spoke of it in the past tense, because they had now left it far behind them—a human habit of curious significance. "It was like a house made for a street in the city. What kind of a house was that for people of any taste to build out here in the country?"

"But papa says it's built that way on purpose. There are a lot of other houses being built in this direction, and papa says the city's coming out this way; and in a year or two that house will be right in town."

"It was a bum house, anyhow," said George crossly. "I don't even know the people that are building it. They say a lot of riffraff come to town every year nowadays and there's other riffraff that have always lived here, and have made a little money, and act as if they owned the place. Uncle Sydney was talking about it yesterday; he says he and some of his friends are organizing a country club, and already some of these riffraff are worming into it—people he never heard of at all! Anyhow I guess it's pretty clear you don't know a great deal about architecture."

She demonstrated the completeness of her amiability by laughing. "I'll know something about the north pole before long," she said, "if we keep going much farther in this direction!"

At this he was remorseful. "All right; we'll turn and drive south awhile till you get warmed up again. I expect we have been going against the wind about long enough. Indeed, I'm sorry!"

He said, "Indeed, I'm sorry," in a nice way, and looked very strikingly handsome when he said it, she thought. No doubt it is true that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repented than over all the saints who consistently remain holy, and the rare, sudden gentleness of arrogant people have infinitely more effect than the continual gentleness of gentle people. Arrogance turned gentle melts the heart; and Lucy gave her companion a little sidelong, sunny nod of acknowledgment. George was dazzled by the quick glow of her eyes, and found himself at a loss for something to say.

Having turned about he kept his horse to a walk, and at this gait the sleighbells tinkled but intermittently. The snow no longer fell, and far ahead, in a grayish cloud that lay upon the land, was the town.

Lucy looked at this distant thickening reflection. "When we get this far out we can see there must be quite a little smoke hanging over the town,"

she said. "I suppose that's because it's growing. As it grows bigger it seems to get ashamed of itself, so it makes this cloud and hides in it. Papa says it used to be a bit nicer when he lived here; he always speaks of it differently—he always has a gentle look, a particular tone of voice, I've noticed. He must have been very fond of it. From the way he talks you'd think life here then was just one long midsummer serenade. He declares it was always sunshiny, that the air wasn't like the air anywhere else—that, as he remembers it, there always seemed to be gold dust in the air. I doubt it! I think it doesn't seem to be duller air to him now just on account of having a little soot in it sometimes, but probably because he was twenty years younger then. It seems to me the gold dust he thinks was here is just his being young that he remembers. I think it was just youth. It is pretty pleasant to be young, isn't it?"

"You're a funny girl," George said gently. "But your voice sounds pretty nice when you think and talk along together like that!"

The horse shook himself all over, and the impatient sleighbells made his wish audible. Accordingly George tightened the reins, and the cutter was off again at a three-minute trot, no despicable rate of speed. It was not long before they were again passing Lucy's Beautiful House, and here George thought fit to put an appendix to his remark. "You're a funny girl, and you know a lot—but I don't believe you know much about architecture!"

Coming toward them, black against the snowy road, was a strange silhouette. It approached moderately and without visible means of progression, so the matter seemed from a distance; but as the cutter shortened the distance the silhouette was revealed to be Mr. Morgan's horseless carriage, conveying four people atop: Mr. Morgan with George's mother beside him, and in the rear seat, Miss Fanny Minafer and the Hon. George Amberson. All four seemed to be in the liveliest humor, like high-spirited people upon a new adventure; and Isabel waved her handkerchief dashingly as the cutter flashed by them.

"For the Lord's sake!" George gasped.

"Your mother's a dear," said Lucy. "And she does wear the most bewitching things! She looked like a Russian princess, though I doubt if they're that handsome."

George said nothing; he drove on till they had crossed Amberson addition and reached the stone pillars at the head of National avenue. There he turned.

"Let's go back and take another look at that old sewing machine," he said. "It certainly is the weirdest, craziest—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and presently they were again in sight of the old sewing machine. George shouted mockingly.

Alas! three figures stood in the road, and a pair of legs with the toes turned up indicated that a fourth figure lay upon its back in the snow, beneath a horseless carriage that had decided to need a horse.

George became vociferous with laughter, and coming up to his trotter's best gait, snow spraying from runners and every hoof, swerved to the side of the road and shot by shouting, "Git a hoss! Git a hoss! Git a hoss!"

Three hundred yards away he turned and came back, racing; leaning out as he passed, to wave jeeringly at the group about the disabled machine; "Git a hoss! Git a hoss! Git a—"

The trotter had broken into a gallop, and Lucy cried a warning: "Be careful!" she said. "Look where you're driving! There's a ditch on that side. Look—"

George turned too late; the cutter's right runner went into the ditch and snapped off; the little sleigh upset, and, after dragging its occupants some fifteen yards, left them lying together in a bank of snow. Then the vigorous young horse kicked himself free of all annoyances and disappeared down the road, galloping cheerfully.

CHAPTER VII.

When George regained some measure of his presence of mind Miss Lucy Morgan's cheek, snowy and cold, was pressing his nose slightly to one side; and a monstrous amount of her fur boa seemed to mingle with an equally unpalatable quantity of snow in his mouth. He was confused, but conscious of no objection to any of these juxtapositions. She was apparently uninjured, for she sat up, hatless, her hair down, and said mildly:

"Good heavens!"

Though her father had been under his machine when they passed, he was the first to reach them. He threw himself on his knees beside his daughter, but found her already laughing, and was reassured. "They're all right," he called to Isabel, who was turning toward them, ahead of her brother and Fanny Minafer. "This snowbank's a feather bed—nothing the matter with them at all. Don't look so pale!"

"George!" she gasped. "George!"

George was on his feet, snow all over him.

"Don't make a fuss, mother! Nothing the matter. That darned silly horse—"

Sudden tears stood in Isabel's eyes. "To see you down underneath—dragging—oh!" Then with shaking hands she began to brush the snow from him.

"Let me alone," he protested. "You'll ruin your gloves. You're getting snow all over you, and—"

"No, no!" she cried. "You'll catch cold; you mustn't catch cold!" And she continued to brush him.

Amberson had brought Lucy's hat; Miss Fanny acted as lady's maid; and both victims of the accident were presently restored to about their usual appearance and condition of apparel. In fact, encouraged by the two older gentlemen, the entire party, with one exception, decided that the episode was after all a merry one, and began to laugh about it. But George was glummer than the December twilight now swiftly closing in.

"That darned horse!" he said.

"I wouldn't bother about Pendennis, George," said his uncle. "You can send a man out for what's left of the cutter tomorrow, and Pendennis will gallop home to his stable; he'll be there a long while before we will, because all we've got to depend on to get us home is Gene Morgan's broken-down chafing dish yonder."

They were approaching the machine as he spoke, and his friend, again underneath it, heard him. He emerged, smiling. "She'll go," he said.

"What?"

"All aboard!"

He offered his hand to Isabel. She was smiling but still pale, and her eyes, in spite of the smile, kept upon George in a shocked anxiety. Miss Fanny had already mounted to the rear seat, and George, after helping Lucy Morgan to climb up beside his aunt, was following. Isabel saw that his shoes were light things of patent

leather, and that snow was clinging to them. She made a little rush toward him, and, as one of his feet rested on the iron step of the machine, in mounting, she began to clean the snow from his shoe with her almost aerial lace handkerchief. "You mustn't catch cold!" she cried.

"Stop that!" George shouted, and furiously withdrew his foot. "For heaven's sake get in! You're standing in the snow yourself. Get in!"

Isabel consented, turning to Morgan, whose habitual expression of apprehensiveness was somewhat accentuated. He climbed up after her, George Amberson having gone to the other side. "You're the same Isabel I used to know!" he said in a low voice. "You're a divinely ridiculous woman."

"Am I, Eugene?" she said, not displeased. "Divinely and 'ridiculously' just counterbalance each other, don't they? Plus one and minus one equal nothing; so you mean I'm nothing in particular?"

"No," he answered, tugging at a lever. "That doesn't seem to be precisely what I meant. There!" This exclamation referred to the subterranean machinery, for dismaying sounds came from beneath the floor, and the vehicle plunged, then rolled noisily forward.

"Behold!" George Amberson exclaimed. "She does move! It must be another accident."

"'Accident?' Morgan shouted over the din. 'No! She breathes, she stirs; she seems to feel a thrill of life along her keel!' And he began to sing 'The Star Spangled Banner.'"

Amberson joined him lustily, and sang on when Morgan stopped. His nephew, behind, was gloomy. He had overheard his mother's conversation with the inventor; it seemed curious to him that this Morgan, of whom he had never heard until last night, should be using the name "Isabel" so easily; and George felt that it was not just the thing for his mother to call Morgan "Eugene"; the resentment of the previous night came upon George again. Meanwhile his mother and Morgan continued their talk; but he could no longer hear what they said; the noise of the car and his uncle's songful mood prevented. He marked how animated Isabel seemed; it was not strange to see his mother so gay, but it was strange that a man not of the family should be the cause of her gaiety. And George sat frowning.

Lucy turned to him. "You tried to swing underneath me and break the fall for me when we went over," she said. "I knew you were doing that, and—it was nice of you."

"Wasn't any fall to speak of," he returned brusquely. "Couldn't have hurt either of us."

"Still it was friendly of you—and awfully quick, too. I'll not—I'll not forget it!"

Her voice had a sound of genuineness, very pleasant, and George began to forget his annoyance with her father. This annoyance of his had not

been alleviated by the circumstance that neither of the seats of the old sewing machine was designed for three people, but when his neighbor spoke thus gratefully he no longer minded the crowding—in fact, it pleased him so much that he began to wish the old sewing machine would go even slower. George presently addressed Lucy hurriedly, almost tremulously, speaking close to her ear:

"I forgot to tell you something; you're pretty nice! I thought so the first second I saw you last night. I'll come for you tonight and take you to the Assembly at the Amberson hotel. You're going, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm going with papa and the Sharons. I'll see you there."

"Well, we'll dance the cotillion together, anyhow."

"I'm afraid not. I promised Mr. Kinney."

"What!" George's tone was shocked, as at incredible news. "Well, you could break that engagement, I guess, if you wanted to! Girls always can get out of things when they want to. Won't you?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because I promised him. Several days ago."

"See here!" said the stricken George. "If you're going to decline to dance that cotillion with me simply because you've promised a—a miserable red-headed outsider like Fred Kinney, why we might as well quit!"

"Quit what?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean," he said huskily.

"I don't."

"Well, you ought to!"

"But I don't at all!"

George, thoroughly hurt, and not a little embittered, expressed himself in a short outburst of laughter: "Well, I ought to have seen it!"

"Seen what?"

"That you might turn out to be a girl who'd like a fellow of the red-headed Kinney sort. I ought to have seen it from the first!"

Lucy bore her disgrace lightly. "Oh, dancing a cotillion with a person doesn't mean that you like him—but I don't see anything in particular the matter with Mr. Kinney. What is it?"

"I prefer not to discuss it," said George curtly. "He's an enemy of mine."

"Why?"

"I prefer not to discuss it."

"Well, but—"

"I prefer not to discuss it!"

"Very well." She began to hum the air of the song which Mr. George Amberson was now discoursing, "O moon of my delight that knows no wane"—and there was no further conversation on the back seat.

The contrivance stopped with a heart-shaking jerk before Isabel's house. The gentlemen jumped down, helping Isabel and Fanny to descend; there were friendly leavetakings—and one that was not precisely friendly.

"It's 'au revoir' till tonight, isn't it?" Lucy asked, laughing.

"Good afternoon!" said George, and he did not wait, as his relatives did, to see the old sewing machine start briskly down the street, toward the Sharons; its lighter load consisting now of only Mr. Morgan and his daughter. George went into the house at once.

He found his father reading the evening paper in the library. "Where are your mother and your Aunt Fanny?" Mr. Minafer inquired, not looking up.

"They're coming," said his son; and, casting himself heavily into a chair, stared at the fire.

His prediction was verified a few moments later; the two ladies came in cheerfully, unfastening their fur cloaks. "It's all right, George," said Isabel. "Your Uncle George called to us that Pendennis got home safely. Put your shoes close to the fire, dear, or else go and change them."

"Look here," said George abruptly. "How about this man Morgan and his old sewing machine? Doesn't he want to get grandfather to put money into it? Isn't he trying to work Uncle George for that? Isn't that what he's up to?"

It was Miss Fanny who responded. "You little silly!" she cried, with surprising sharpness. "What on earth are you talking about? Eugene Morgan's perfectly able to finance his own inventions these days."

"He strikes me as that sort of man," George answered doggedly. "Isn't he, father?"

Minafer set down his paper for the moment. "He was a fairly wild young fellow twenty years ago," he said, glancing at his wife absently. "He was like you in one thing, George; he spent too much money—only he didn't have any mother to get money out of a grandfather for him, so he was usually in debt. But I believe I've heard he's done fairly well of late years. No, I can't say I think he's a swindler, and I doubt if he needs anybody else's money to back his horseless carriage."

"Well, what's he brought the old thing here for, then? People that own elephants don't take their elephants around with 'em when they go visiting. What's he got it here for?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mr. Minafer, resuming his paper. "You might ask him."

Isabel laughed and patted her husband's shoulder again. "Aren't you going to dress? Aren't we all going to the dance?"



"Good Heavens!"



"There's Your Grandfather Now," Said Lucy.

It proves to be a happy cotillion for George and Lucy.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)