

# The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

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## "WILL YOU BE ENGAGED TO ME?"

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 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 Minsifer 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 Minsifer, 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 she had been engaged when Isabel threw him over because of a youthful indiscretion and married Wilbur Minsifer. George makes rapid progress in his courtship of Lucy. A collision helps their acquaintance along famously. Their "friendship" continues during his absence at college.

### CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

In the matter of coolness George set Lucy upon her own predestined ground; in fact, he was there first, and at their next encounter proved loftier and more formal than she did. Their estrangement lasted three weeks, and then disappeared without any preliminary treaty: it had worn itself out and they forgot it. The Major had taken a great fancy to her, insisting upon her presence and her father's at the Amberson family dinner at the mansion every Sunday evening. She knew how to flirt with old people, he said, as she sat next him at the table on one of these Sunday occasions; and he had always liked her father, even when Eugene was a "terror" long ago. "Oh, yes, he was!" the Major laughed when she remonstrated. "He came up here with my son George and some others for a serenade one night, and Eugene stepped into a bass fiddle, and the poor musicians just gave up! That serenade was just before Isabel was married—and don't you fret, Miss Lucy; your father remembers it well enough!" The old gentleman burst into laughter, and shook his finger at Eugene across the table. "The fact is," the Major went on hilariously, "I believe if Eugene hadn't broken that bass fiddle and given himself away Isabel would never have taken Wilbur! I shouldn't be surprised if that was about all the reason that Wilbur got her! What do you think, Wilbur?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Wilbur placidly. "If your notion is right I'm glad Gene broke the fiddle. He was giving me a hard run!"

The Major always drank three glasses of champagne at his Sunday dinner, and he was finishing the third. "What do you say about it, Isabel? By Jove!" he cried, pounding the table, "she's blushing!"

Eugene was as pink as Isabel, but he laughed without any sign of embarrassment other than his heightened color. "There's another important thing—that is, for me," he said. "It's the only thing that makes me forgive that bass viol for getting in my way."

"What is it?" the Major asked.

"Lucy," said Morgan gently.

Isabel gave him a quick glance, all warm approval, and there was a murmur of friendliness round the table.

Summer glided by evenly and quickly enough, for the most part, and at the end seemed to fly. On the last night before George went back to be a junior his mother asked him confidently if it had not been a happy summer.

"He hadn't thought about it, he answered. "Oh, I suppose so. Why?"

"I just thought it would be nice to hear you say so," she said, smiling.

"It seemed to me that it must have been a happy summer for you—a real summer of roses and wine—without the wine, perhaps. Gather ye roses while ye may—or was it primroses? Time does really fly, or perhaps it's like the sky—and smoke—"

George was puzzled. "It strikes me you're getting mixed. I don't see much resemblance between time and the sky, or between things and smoke wreaths; but I do see one reason you like Lucy Morgan so much. She talks that same kind of wishful, moony way sometimes—I don't mean to say I mind it in either of you, because I rather like to listen to it, and you've got a very good voice, mother. It's nice to listen to, no matter how much smoke and sky, and so on, you talk. So's Lucy's, for that matter; and I see why you're congenial. She talks that way to her father, too; and he's right there with the same kind of guff. Well, it's all right with me! I've got plenty to think about when people drool along!"

She pressed his hand to her cheek, and a tear made a tiny warm streak across one of his knuckles.

"For heaven's sake!" he said.

"What's the matter? Isn't everything all right?"

"You're going away! I never can bear to see you go—that's the most of it. I'm a little bothered about your father, too."

"Why?"

"It seems to me he looks so bad. Everybody thinks so."

"What nonsense!" George laughed. "He's been looking that way all sum-

mer. He isn't much different from the way he's looked all his life, that I can see. What's the matter with him?"

"He never talks much about his business to me, but I think he's been worrying about some investments he made last year. I think his worry has affected his health."

"What investments?" George demanded. "He hasn't gone into Mr. Morgan's automobile concern, has he?"

"No," Isabel smiled. "The 'automobile concern' is all Eugene's, and it's so small I understand it's taken hardly anything. No; your father has always prided himself on making only the most absolutely safe investments, but two or three years ago he and your Uncle George both put a great deal—pretty much everything they could get together, I think—into the stock of rolling mills and some friends of theirs owned, and I'm afraid the mills haven't been doing well."

"What of that? Father needn't worry. You and I can take care of him the rest of his life on what grandfather—"

"Of course," she agreed. "But your father's always lived so for his business and taken such pride in his sound investments; it's a passion with him. I—"

"Pshaw! He needn't worry! You tell him we'll look after him." He kissed her. "Good night; I'm going to tell Lucy goodby. Don't sit up for me."

"Yes, I will," she laughed. "You won't be very late."

"Well—it's my last night."

"But I know Lucy, and she knows I want to see you too, your last night. You'll see; she'll send you home promptly at eleven!"

But she was mistaken: Lucy sent him home promptly at ten.

### CHAPTER IX.

Isabel's uneasiness about her husband's health—sometimes reflected in her letters to George during the winter that followed—had not been alleviated when the accredited Senior returned for his next summer vacation.



"For Heaven's Sake!" He said, "What's the matter?"

and she confided to him in his room, soon after his arrival, that "something" the doctor had said to her lately had made her more uneasy than ever.

"Doctor Rainey says we ought to get him away."

"Well, let's do it, then."

"He won't go."

"He's a man awfully set in his ways; that's true," said George. "I don't think there's anything much the matter with him, though. Have you seen Lucy lately? How is she?"

"She looks—pretty!" said Isabel.

"I suppose she wrote you they've moved?"

"Yes; I've got her address. She said they were building."

"They did. It's all finished, and they've been in it a month. It's small, but oh, such a pretty little house!"

"Well, that's fortunate," George said. "One thing I've always felt they didn't know a great deal about is architecture."

"Don't they?" asked Isabel, surprised. "Anyhow, their house is charming. It's way out beyond the end of Amberson boulevard; it's quite near that big white house with a gray-green roof somebody built out there a year or so ago. I suppose you'll be driving out to see Lucy tomorrow."

"I thought—" George hesitated. "I thought perhaps I'd go after dinner this evening."

At this his mother laughed, not astonished. "It was only my feeble joke about 'tomorrow,' George! I was pretty sure you couldn't wait that long. Did Lucy write you about the factory?"

"No. What factory?"

"The automobile shops. This spring they've finished eight automobiles and sold them all, and they've got twelve more almost finished, and they're sold already! Eugene is so gay over it! They're very interesting to look at; behind the driver's seat there's a sort of box where four people can sit, with a step and a little door in the rear, and—"

"I know all about it," said George. "I've seen any number like that, east. You can see all you want of 'em if you stand on Fifth avenue half an hour any afternoon. I've seen half a dozen go by almost at the same time—within a few minutes, anyhow; and of course electric hansom cars are a common sight there any day. I hired one myself the last time I was there. How fast do Mr. Morgan's machines go?"

"Much too fast! It's very exhilarating—but rather frightening; and they do make a fearful uproar. He says, though, he thinks he sees a way to get around the noisiness in time."

"I don't mind the noise," said George. "Give me a horse for mine, though, any day. I must get up a race with one of these things; Pendergill's leave it one mile behind in a two-mile run. How's grandfather?"

"He looks well, but he complains sometimes of his heart."

George had taken off his coat. "I don't like to hint to a lady," he said, "but I do want to dress before dinner."

"Don't be long; I've got to do a lot of looking at you, dear!" She kissed him and ran away, singing.

But his Aunt Fanny was not so fond; and at the dinner table there came a spark of liveliness into her eyes when George patronizingly asked her what was the news in her own "particular line of sport."

"Well, what's the gossip? You usually hear pretty much everything that goes on around the nooses and crannies in this town, I hear. What's the last from the gossip's corner, auntie?"

Fanny dropped her eyes, but a movement of her lower lip betokened a tendency to laugh as she replied, "There hasn't been much gossip lately except the report that Lucy Morgan and Fred Kinney are engaged—and that's quite old by this time."

There was a clatter upon George's plate. "What—what do you think you're talking about?" he gasped.

"Miss Fanny looked up innocently. "About the report of Lucy Morgan's engagement to Fred Kinney."

George turned dumbly to his mother and Isabel shook her head reassuringly. "People are always starting rumors," she said. "I haven't paid any attention to this one."

"But you—you've heard it?" he stammered.

"Oh, one hears all sorts of nonsense, dear. I haven't the slightest idea that it's true."

"Then you have heard it?"

George turned pale.

"Eat your dinner, George," his aunt said sweetly. "Food will do you good. I didn't say I knew this rumor was true. I only said I'd heard it."

"Fanny, you're a hard-hearted creature," Isabel said gently. "You really are. Don't pay any attention to her, George. Fred Kinney's only a clerk in his uncle's hardware place; he couldn't marry for ages—even if anybody would accept him!"

George breathed tumultuously. "I don't care anything about 'ages'! What's that got to do with it?" he said, his thoughts appearing to be somewhat disconnected. "Ages, don't mean anything! I only want to know—I want to know—I want—" He stopped.

"You must finish your dinner, dear," his mother urged. "Don't—"

"I have finished. I've eaten all I want. I don't want any more than I wanted. I don't want—I—" He rose, still incoherent. "I prefer—I want—please excuse me!"

He left the room, and a moment later the screens outside the open front door were heard to slam.

"Fanny! You shouldn't—"

"Isabel, don't reproach me. He did have plenty of dinner, and I only told the truth; everybody has been saying—"

"We don't actually know there isn't," Miss Fanny insisted, giggling. "We've never asked Lucy."

"I wouldn't ask her anything so absurd!"

"George would," George's father remarked. "That's what he's gone to do."

Mr. Minsifer was not mistaken: that was what his son had gone to do. Lucy and her father were just rising from their dinner table when the stirred youth arrived at the front door of the new house. It was a cottage, however, rather than a house; and Lucy had taken a free hand with the architect, achieving results in white and green outside and white and blue inside to such effect of youth and daintiness that her father complained of "too much springtime!"

The whole place, including his own bedroom, was a young damsel's boudoir, he said, so that nowhere could he smoke a cigar without feeling like a ruffian. However, he was smoking when George arrived, and he encouraged George to join him in the pastime, but the caller, whose air was both tense and preoccupied, declined with something like agitation.

"I never smoke—that is, I'm seldom—I mean, no, thanks," he said. "I mean not at all. I'd rather not."

"Aren't you well, George?" Eugene asked, looking at him in perplexity. "Have you been overworking at college? You do look rather pale—"

"I don't work," said George. "I mean I don't work. I think, but I don't work. I only work at the end of the term. There isn't much to do."

Eugene's perplexity was little decreased, and a tinkle of the doorbell afforded him obvious relief. "It's my foreman," he said, looking at his watch. "I'll take him out in the yard to talk. This is no place for a foreman." And he departed, leaving the "living room" to Lucy and George.

"What's wrong, George?" she asked softly.

"What do you mean? 'What's wrong?' What makes you think anything's 'wrong' with me?"

"You do look pale, as papa said, and it seemed to me that the way you talked sounded—well, a little confused."

"See here!" George stepped close to her. "Are you glad to see me?"

"You needn't be so fierce about it!" Lucy protested, laughing at his dramatic intensity. "Of course I am! Do tell me what's the matter with you, George!"

"I will!" he exclaimed. "I was a boy when I saw you last. I see that now, though I didn't then. Well, I'm not a boy any longer. I'm a man, and a man has a right to demand a totally different treatment."

"I don't seem to be able to understand you at all, George. Why shouldn't a boy be treated just as well as a man?"

George seemed to find himself at a loss. "Why shouldn't? Well, he shouldn't, because a man has a right to certain explanations."

"What in the world do you want me to explain?"

"Your conduct with Fred Kinney!" George shouted.

Lucy uttered a sudden cry of laughter; she was delighted. "It's been awful!" she said. "I don't know that I ever heard of worse misbehavior! Papa and I have been twice to dinner with his family, and I've been three times to church with Fred—and once to the circus! I don't know when they'll be here to arrest me!"

"Stop that!" George commanded fiercely. "I want to know just one thing, and I mean to know it, too!"

"Whether I enjoyed the circus?"

"I want to know if you're engaged to him!"

"No!" she cried, and lifting her face close to his for the shortest instant possible, she gave him a look half merry, half defiant, but all fond. It was an adorable look.

"Lucy!" he said huskily.

But she turned quickly from him, and ran to the other end of the room. He followed awkwardly, stammering: "Lucy, I want—I want to ask you. Will you—will you—will you be engaged to me?"

She stood at a window, seeming to look out into the summer darkness, her back to him.

"No," she murmured, just audibly. "Why not?"

"You're too young."

"Is that—" he said, gulping—"is that the only reason you won't?"

She did not answer.

As she stood persistently staring out of the window with her back to him she did not see how humble his attitude had become; but his voice was low, and it shook so that she could have no doubt of his emotion. "Lucy, please forgive me for making such a row," he said, thus gently.

"I've been—I've been terribly upset—terribly! You know how I feel about you, and always have felt about you, don't you?"

Still she did not move or speak.

"Is the only reason you won't be engaged to me you think I'm too young, Lucy?"

"It's—it's reason enough," she said faintly.

At that he caught one of her hands, and she turned to him; there were tears in her eyes, tears which he did not understand at all.

"Lucy, you little dear!" he cried. "I knew you—"

"No, no!" she said, and she pushed him away, withdrawing her hand. "George, let's not talk of solemn things."

"Solemn things! Like what?"

"Like—being engaged."

But George had become altogether jubilant, and he laughed triumphantly. "Good gracious, that isn't solemn!"

"It is too!" she said, wiping her eyes. "It's too solemn for us."

"No, it isn't! I—"

"Let's sit down and be sensible, dear," she said. "You sit over there—"

"I will if you'll call me 'dear' again."

"No," she said. "I'll only call you that once again this summer—the night before you go away."

"That will have to do, then," he laughed, "so long as I know we're engaged."

"But we're not!" she protested. "And we never will be if you don't promise not to speak of it again until I tell you to!"

"I won't promise that," said the happy George. "I'll only promise not to speak of it till the next time you call me 'dear,' and you've promised to call me that the night before I leave for my senior year."

"Oh, but I didn't!" she said earnestly, then hesitated. "Did I?"

"Didn't you?"

"I don't think I meant it," she murmured, her wet lashes flickering above troubled eyes.

"I know one thing about you," he said gayly, his triumph increasing. "You never went back on anything you said yet, and I'm not afraid of this being the first time."

"But we mustn't let—" she faltered; then went on tremulously. "George, we've got on so well together we won't let this make a difference between us, will we?" And she joined in his laughter.

"It will all depend on what you tell me the night before I go away. You agree we're going to settle things then, don't you, Lucy?"

"I don't promise."

"Yes, you do! Don't you?"

"Well—"

### CHAPTER X.

That night George began a jubilant warfare upon his Aunt Fanny, opening the campaign upon his return home at about eleven o'clock. Fanny had retired, and was presumably asleep, but George, on the way to his own room, paused before her door, and serenaded her in a full baritone:

"As I walk along the Boy de Balong  
With my independent air,  
The people all declare,  
"He must be a millionaire!"  
Oh, you bear the burden  
And see you wink the other eye  
At the man that broke the bank at Monte Carlo!"

After breakfasting in bed, George spent the next morning at his grandfather's and did not encounter his Aunt Fanny until lunch, when she seemed to be ready for him.

"Thank you so much for the serenade, George!" she said. "Your poor father tells me he'd just got to sleep for the first time in two nights, but after your kind attentions he lay awake the rest of last night."

"Perfectly true," Mr. Minsifer said grimly.

"Of course, I didn't know, sir," George hastened to assure him. "I'm awfully sorry. But Aunt Fanny was so gloomy and excited before I went out last evening, I thought she needed cheering up."

He turned to his mother. "What's the matter with grandfather?"

"Didn't you see him this morning?" Isabel asked.

"Yes. He was glad to see me, and all that, but he seemed pretty fidgety. Has he been having trouble with his heart again?"

"Not lately. No."

"Well, he's not himself. What's he upset over?"

Isabel looked serious; however, it was her husband who suggested gloomily, "I suppose the Major's bothered about this Sydney and Amelia business, most likely."

"What Sydney and Amelia business?" George asked.

"Your mother can tell you, if she wants to," Minsifer said. "It's not my side of the family, so I keep off."

and won't run again—so there's Sydney's idea of a big diplomatic position gone for good. Well, Sydney and your Aunt Amelia are terribly disappointed, and they say they've been thinking for years that this town isn't really fit to live in—for a gentleman, Sydney says—and it is getting rather big and dirty. So they've sold their house and decided to go abroad to live permanently; there's a villa near Florence they've often talked of buying. And they want father to let them have their share of the estate now, instead of waiting for him to leave it to them in his will."

"Well, I suppose that's fair enough," George said. "That is, in case he intended to leave them a certain amount in his will."

"Of course that's understood, George. Father explained his will to us long ago; a third to them, and a third to Brother George, and a third to us."

Her son made a simple calculation in his mind. Uncle George was a bachelor, and probably would never marry; Sydney and Amelia were childless. The Major's only grandchild appeared to remain the eventual heir of the entire property, no matter if the Major did turn over to Sydney a third of it now. "Well, I suppose it's grandfather's own affair. He can do it or not, just as he likes. I don't see why he'd mind much."

"He seemed rather confused and pained about it," Isabel said. "I think they oughtn't to urge it. George says that the estate won't stand taking out

of it."

"I will if you'll call me 'dear' again."

"No," she said. "I'll only call you that once again this summer—the night before you go away."

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