

# The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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## "EVERYTHING IS SO—SO UNSETTLED."

**Synopsis.**—Major Amberson has 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 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, Eugene Morgan, a former resident of Bigburg, and is returning to erect a factory and to build horseless carriages of his own invention. Eugene had been an old admirer of Isabel 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. A cotillion helps their acquaintance along famously. Their "friendship" continues during his absence at college. George and Lucy become "almost engaged." There is a family quarrel over a division of property which reveals that both George's Aunt Fanny and George's mother are more or less interested in Eugene Morgan. George's father dies. George is graduated. He and Lucy remain "almost engaged."

### CHAPTER XI—Continued.

When they went down to the dining room, he pronounced acceptable the salmon salad, cold beef, cheese and cake which Fanny made ready for them without disturbing the servants. The journey had fatigued Isabel, she ate nothing, but sat to observe with tired pleasure the manifestations of her son's appetite, meanwhile giving her sister-in-law a brief summary of the events of commencement. But presently she kissed them both good-night and left aunt and nephew alone together.

"It never was becoming to her to look pale," Fanny said absently, a few moments after Isabel's departure. "I suppose your mother's been being pretty gay? Going a lot?"

"How could she?" George asked cheerfully. "In mourning, of course all she could do was just sit around and look on. That's all Lucy could do either, for the matter of that."

"I suppose so," his aunt assented. "How did Lucy get home? Did you drive out to their house with her before you came here?"

"No. She drove home with her father, of course."

"Oh, I see. So Eugene came to the station to meet you?"

"To meet us?" George echoed, renewing his attack upon the salmon salad. "How could he?"

"I don't know what you mean," Fanny said cheerfully, in the desolate voice that had become her habit. "I haven't seen him while your mother's been away."

"Naturally," said George. "He's been East himself."

At this Fanny's drooping eyelids opened wide.

"Did you see him?"

"Well, naturally, since he made the trip home with us."

Fanny's eyelids drooped, and she sat silent until George pushed back his chair and lit a cigarette, declining his satisfaction with what she had provided. "You're a fine housekeeper," he said benevolently. "I don't believe you'd stay single very long if some of the bachelors and widowers around town could just once see—"

She did not hear him. "It's a little odd," she said.

"What's odd?"

"Your mother's not mentioning that Mr. Morgan had been with you."

"Didn't think of it, I suppose," said George carelessly; and his benevolent mood increasing, he conceived the idea that a little harmless rallying might serve to elevate his aunt's drooping spirits. "I'll tell you something, in confidence," he said solemnly.

She looked up, startled. "What?"

"Well, it struck me that Mr. Morgan was looking pretty absent-minded, most of the time; and he certainly is dressing better than he used to. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if all the young fellows had been waiting for was to know he had an assured income before he proposed."

"What young fellow?"

"This young fellow Morgan," laughed George. "Honestly, Aunt Fanny, I shouldn't be a bit surprised to have him request an interview with me any day, and declare that his intentions are honorable, and ask my permission to pay his addresses to you. What had I better tell him?"

Fanny burst into tears.

"Good heavens!" George cried. "I was only teasing. I didn't mean—"

"Let me alone," she said lifelessly; and, continuing to weep, rose and began to clear away the china and silver. George was distressed. "I didn't mean anything, Aunt Fanny! I didn't know you'd got so sensitive as all that."

"You'd better go up to bed," she said desolately, going on with her work and her weeping.

He obeyed, and could still hear a pathetic sniffing from the dining room as he went up the stairs.

"By George!" he grunted, as he reached his own room; and his thought was that living with a person so sensitive to kindly raillery might prove injurious. He went to the window and looked through the darkness to the great silhouette of his grandfa-

ther's house. Lights were burning over there, upstairs; probably his newly arrived uncle was engaged in talk with the Major.

George's glance lowered, resting casually upon the indistinct ground, and he beheld some vague shapes, unfamiliar to him. Formless heaps, they seemed; but, without much curiosity, he supposed that sewer connections or water pipes might be out of order, making necessary some excavations. Not greatly disturbed, he pulled down the shade, yawned, and began to undress, leaving further investigation for the morning.

But in the morning he had forgotten all about it, and raised his shade, to let in the light, without even glancing toward the ground. Not until he had finished dressing did he look forth from his window, and then his glance was casual. The next instant his attitude became electric, and he ran from his room, plunged down the stairs, out of the front door, and, upon a nearer view of the destroyed lawn, began to release profanity upon the breezeless summer air, which remained unaffected. Between his mother's house and his grandfather's, excavations for the cellars of five new houses were in process, each within a few feet of its neighbor.

It was Sunday, and so the workmen implicated in these defacings were denied what unquestionably they would have considered a treat; but as the fanatic orator continued the monologue, a gentleman in fannels emerged upward from one of the excavations, and regarded him contemptuously.

"Obtaining any relief, nephew?" he inquired with some interest. "You must have learned quite a number of those expressions in childhood—it's so long since I'd heard them I fancied they were obsolete."

"Who wouldn't swear?" George demanded hotly. "What does grandfater mean, doing such things?"

"My private opinion is," said Amberson gravely, "he desires to increase

his income by building these houses to rent."

"Well, in the name of heaven, can't he increase his income any other way but this?"

"In the name of heaven, it would appear he couldn't."

"It's beastly! It's a damn degradation! It's a crime!"

"I don't know about its being a crime," said his uncle, stepping over some planks to join him. "It might be a mistake, though. Your mother said not to tell you until we got home, so as not to spoil commencement for you. She rather feared you'd be upset."

"Upset! Oh, my Lord, I should think I would be upset! He's in his second childhood."

"Well, I thought, myself, it was a mistake. I wanted him to put up an

apartment building instead of these houses."

"An apartment building! Here?"

"Yes; that was my idea."

George struck his hands together despairingly. "An apartment house! Oh, my Lord!"

"Don't worry! Your grandfather wouldn't listen to me, but he'll wish he had, some day. He sticks it out that apartment houses will never do in a town of this type, and when I pointed out to him that a dozen or so of 'em already are doing, he claimed it was just the novelty, and that they'd all be empty as soon as people got used to 'em. So he's putting up these houses."

"Is he getting miserly in his old age?"

"Hardly! Look what he gave Sydney and Amelia!"

"I don't mean he's a miser, of course," said George. "But why on earth didn't he sell something or other rather than do a thing like this?"

"As a matter of fact," Amberson returned coolly, "I believe he has sold something or other, from time to time."

"I suppose you're joking—or trying to!"

"That's the best way to look at it," Amberson said amiably. "Take the whole thing as a joke—and in the meantime, if you haven't had your breakfast—"

"I haven't!"

"Then if I were you I'd go in and get some. And"—paused, becoming serious—"and if I were you I wouldn't say anything to your grandfather about this."

"I don't think I could trust myself to speak to him about it," said George.

"I want to treat him respectfully, because he is my grandfather, but I don't believe I could if I talked to him about such a thing as this!"

And with a gesture of despair, plainly signifying that all too soon after leaving bright college years behind him he had entered into the full tragedy of life, George turned bitterly upon his heel and went into the house for his breakfast.

His uncle, with his head whimsically upon one side, gazed after him not altogether unsympathetically. Being a philosopher he was not surprised, that afternoon, in the course of a drive he took in the old carriage with the Major, when George was encountered upon the highway flashing along in his runabout with Lucy beside him and Pendennis doing better than three minutes.

"He seems to have recovered," Amberson remarked.

"I beg your pardon."

"Your grandson," Amberson explained. "He was inclined to melancholy this morning, but seemed jolly enough just now when they passed us."

"What was he melancholy about? Not getting remorseful about all the money he's spent at college, was he?" The Major chuckled feebly, but with sufficient grimace. "I wonder what he thinks I'm made of," he concluded querulously.

"Gold," his son suggested, adding gently, "and he's right about part of you, father."

"What part?"

"Your heart."

The Major laughed ruefully. "I suppose that may account for how heavy it feels, sometimes, nowadays. This town seems to be rolling right over that old heart you mentioned, George—rolling over it and burying it under! When I think of those devilish workmen digging up my lawn, yelling around my house—"

"Never mind, father. Don't think of it. When things are a nuisance it's a good idea not to keep remembering 'em."

"I try not to," the old gentleman murmured. "I try to keep remembering that I won't be remembering anything very long." And, somehow convinced that this thought was a mirthful one, he laughed loudly and slapped his knee. "Not so very long now, my boy!" he chuckled, continuing to echo his own amusement. "Not so very long. Not so very long!"

### CHAPTER XII.

Young George paid his respects to his grandfather the following morning, having been occupied with various affairs and engagements on Sunday night after the Major's bedtime; and topics concerned with building or excavations were not introduced into the conversation, which was a cheerful one until George lightly mentioned some new plans of his. He spoke of his desire to extend his proficiency in driving; in fact, he entertained the ambition to drive a four-in-hand. However, as the Major said nothing, and merely sat still, looking surprised, George went on to say that he did not propose to "go in for coaching just at the start;" he thought it would be better to begin with a tandem. He was sure Pendennis could be trained to work as a leader; and all that one needed to buy at present, he said, would be "comparatively inexpensive—a new trap, and the harness, of course, and a good bay to match Pendennis." He did not care for a special groom; one of the stablemen would do.

At this point the Major decided to speak. "You say one of the stablemen would do?" he inquired, his widened eyes remaining fixed upon his grandson. "That's lucky, because one's all there is just at present, George. Old fat Tom does it all."

"Oh, that will be all right, sir. My mother can lend me her man."

"Can she?" The old gentleman smiled faintly. "I wonder—" He paused.

"What, sir?"

"Whether you mightn't care to go to law school somewhere perhaps. I'd be glad to set aside a sum that would see you through."

This subtle divergence from the topic in hand surprised George painfully. "I have no interest whatever in the law," he said. "I don't care for it, and the idea of being a professional man has never appealed to me. I was speaking of driving a tandem."

"I know you were," said the Major quietly.

George looked hurt. "I beg your pardon. Of course if the idea doesn't appeal to you—" And he rose to go.

The Major ran a tremulous hand through his hair, sighing deeply. "I—I don't like to refuse you anything, George," he said. "I don't know that I often have refused you whatever you wanted—in reason—"

"You've always been more than generous, sir," George interrupted quickly. "And if the idea of a tandem doesn't

appeal to you, why—of course—" And he waved his hand, heroically dismissing the tandem.

The Major's distress became obvious. "George, I'd like to, but—but I've an idea tandems are dangerous to drive, and your mother might be anxious. She—"

"No, sir; I think not. She felt it would be rather a good thing—help to keep me out in the open air. But if perhaps your finances—"

"Oh, it isn't that so much," the old gentleman laughed uncomfortably. "I guess we could still afford a new horse or two, if need be—"

"I thought you said—"

The Major waved his hand airily. "Oh, a few retrenchments where things were useless. And if you want this thing so very much—"

"It's not important enough to bother about, really, of course."

"Well, let's wait till autumn, then," said the Major in a tone of relief. "We'll see about it in the autumn. If you're still in the mind for it then, you remind me of it, along in September—or October. We'll see what can be done." He rubbed his hands cheerfully. "We'll see what can be done about it then, George. We'll see."

And George, in reporting this conversation to his mother, was ruefully humorous. "In fact, the old boy cheered up so much," he told her, "you'd have thought he'd got a real load off his mind. Of course I know he's anything but miserly; still I can't help thinking he must be saving a lot of money away. I know prices are higher than they used to be, but he doesn't spend within thousands of what he used to, and we certainly can't be spending more than we always have spent. Where does it all go to? Uncle George told me grandfather had sold some pieces of property, and it looks a little queer. I have a faint suspicion, not that he's getting miserly—not that at all—but that old age has begun to make him timid about money. There's no doubt about it, he's getting a little queer: he can't keep his mind on a subject long. Right in the middle of talking about one thing he'll wander off to something else; and I shouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be a lot better off than any of us guess."

Isabel had a bright idea. "George! Instead of a tandem wouldn't it interest you to get one of Eugene's automobiles?"

"I don't think so. They're fast enough, of course. In fact, running one of those things is getting to be quite on the cards for sport, and people go all over the country in 'em. But they're dirty things, and they keep getting out of order, so that you're always lying down on your back in the mud and—"

"Oh, no," she interrupted eagerly. "Haven't you noticed? The way they make them now you can get at most of the machinery from the top. I do think you'd be interested, dear."

George remained indifferent. "Possibly—but I hardly think so. I know

a lot of good people are really taking them up, but still—"

"But still what?" she said as he paused.

"But still—well, I suppose I'm a little old-fashioned and fastidious, but I'm afraid being a sort of engine driver never will appeal to me, mother. It's exciting, and I'd like that part of it, but still it doesn't seem to me precisely the thing a gentleman ought to do. Too much overalls and monkey wrenches and grease! No; I believe I'd rather wait for September and a tandem, mother."

Nevertheless George sometimes consented to sit in an automobile, while waiting for September, and he frequently went driving in one of Eugene's cars with Lucy and her father. He even allowed himself to be escorted with his mother and Fanny through the growing factory, which was now, as the foreman of the paint shop informed the visitors, "turning out a car and a quarter a day."

From the factory Eugene took them to lunch at a new restaurant, just opened in the town, a place which surprised Isabel with its metropolitan air, and, though George made fun of her, in a whisper, she offered everything the tribute of pleased exclamations; and her gayety helped Eugene's to make the little occasion almost a festive one.

George's ennui disappeared in spite of himself, and he laughed to see his mother in such spirits. "I didn't know mineral waters could go to a person's head," he said. "Or perhaps it's this place. It might pay to have a new restaurant opened somewhere in town every time you get the blues."

"No," Isabel said, "what makes me laugh so much at nothing is Eugene's factory. Wouldn't anybody be delighted to see an old friend take an idea out of the air like that—an idea that most people laughed at him for—wouldn't any old friend of his be happy to see how he'd made his idea into such a splendid, humming thing as that factory—all shiny steel, clicking, buzzing away, and with all those workmen, such muscled-looking men and yet so intelligent looking? It's beautiful to see such a thing," she said. "It makes us all happy, dear old Eugene!"

And with a brave gesture she stretched out her hand to him across the small table. He took it quickly, giving her a look in which his laughter tried to remain but vanished before a gratitude threatening to become emotional in spite of him. Isabel, however, turned instantly to Fanny. "Give him your hand, Fanny," she said gaily; and as Fanny mechanically obeyed, "There!" Isabel cried. "If brother George were here, Eugene would have his three oldest and best friends congratulating him all at once. We know what brother George thinks about it, though. It's just beautiful, Eugene!"

Lucy leaned toward George and whispered, "Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

"As what?" George inquired, not because he misunderstood but because he wished to prolong the pleasant neighborhood of whispering.

"As your mother! Think of her doing that! She's a darling! And papa—here she imperfectly repressed a tendency to laugh—"papa looks as if he were either going to explode or utter loud sob!"

Eugene commanded his features, however, and they resumed their customary apprehensiveness. "I used to write verses," he said—"if you remember—"

"Yes," Isabel interrupted gently. "I remember."

"I don't recall that I've written any for twenty years or so," he continued. "But I'm almost thinking I could do it again, to thank you for making a factory visit into such a kind celebration."

"Gracious!" Lucy whispered, giggling. "Aren't they sentimental!"

"People that age always are," George returned. "They get sentimental over anything at all. Factories or restaurants, it doesn't matter what!"

And both of them were seized with fits of laughter which they managed to cover under the general movement of departure, as Isabel had risen to go.

Outside upon the crowded street George helped Lucy into his runabout and drove off, waving triumphantly and laughing at Eugene, who was struggling with the engine of his car. In the tonneau of which Isabel and Fanny had established themselves, "Looks like a hand-organ man grinding away for pennies," said George, as the runabout turned the corner into National avenue. "I'll still take a horse, any day."

He was not so cocksure half an hour later, on an open road, when a siren whistle wailed behind him, and before the sound had died away Eugene's car, coming from behind with what seemed fairly like one long leap, went by the runabout and dwindled almost instantaneously in perspective, with a lace handkerchief in a black-gloved hand fluttering sweet derision as it was swept onward into minuteness—a mere white speck—and then out of sight.

George was undoubtedly impressed—"Your father does know how to drive some," the dashing exhibition forced him to admit. "Of course Pendennis isn't as young as he was, and I don't care to push him too hard. Well, I enjoyed part of that lunch today quite a lot, Lucy."

"The salad?"

"No. Your whispering to me."

George checked Pendennis to a walk. Whereupon Lucy protested quickly: "Oh, don't!"

"Why?"

"I know when you make him walk it's so you can give all your attention to—proposing to me again!"

And as she turned a face of ex-

generated color to him, "By the Lord, but you're a little witch!" George cried.

"George, do let Pendennis trot again!"

"I won't!"

She clucked to the horse. "Get up, Pendennis! Trot! Go on! Commence!"

Pendennis paid no attention; she meant nothing to him, and George laughed at her fondly. "You are the prettiest thing in this world, Lucy!" he exclaimed. "Are you going to drop the 'almost' and say we're really engaged?"

"Oh, not for years! So there's the answer, and let's trot again."

But George was persistent; moreover, he had become serious during the last minute or two. "I want to know," he said. "I really mean it."

"Let's don't be serious, George," she begged him hopefully. "Let's talk of something pleasant."

He was a little offended. "Then it isn't pleasant for you to know that I want to marry you?"

At this she became as serious as he could have asked; she looked down, and her lip quivered like that of a child about to cry. Suddenly she put her hand upon one of his for just an instant, and then withdrew it.

"Lucy!" he said huskily. "Dear, what's the matter? You look as if you were going to cry."

Her eyelids flickered, and then she looked up at him with a sad gravity, tears seeming just at the point. "One reason's because I have a feeling that it's never going to be."

"Why?"

"It's just a feeling."

"You haven't any reason or—"

"It's just a feeling."

"Well, if that's all," George said, reassured, and laughing confidently. "I guess I won't be very much troubled!" But at once he became serious again, adopting the tone of argument. "Don't you care enough about me to marry me?"

She looked down again, pathetically troubled. "Yes."

"Well, then, why in the world won't you drop the 'almost'?"

Her distress increased. "Everything is—everything—"

"What about 'everything'?"

"Everything is so—so unsettled."

And at that he uttered an exclamation of impatience. "If you aren't the queerest girl! What is 'unsettled'?"

"Well, for one thing," she said, able to smile at his vehemence, "you haven't settled on anything to do. At least if you have you've never spoken of it."

As she spoke she gave him the quickest possible side glance of hopeful scrutiny; then looked away, not happily. Surprise and displeasure were intentionally visible upon the countenance of her companion; and he permitted a significant period of silence to elapse before making any response. "Lucy," he said finally, with cold dignity, "haven't you perfectly well understood that I don't mean to go into business or adopt a profession?"

"I wasn't quite sure," she said gently. "I really didn't know—quite."

"Then of course it's time I did tell you. You know yourself there are a lot of people in the East—in the South too, for that matter—that don't think we've got any particular family or position or culture in this part of the country. There were one or two in my crowd at college; their families

had lived on their income for three generations, and they never dreamed there was anybody in their class out here. I had to show them a thing or two, right at the start, and I guess they won't forget it! Well, I think it's time all that sort of stuff out that three generations can mean just as much out here as anywhere else."

"But what are you going to do, George?" she cried.

George's earnestness surpassed hers; he had become flushed and his breathing was emotional. "I expect to live an honorable life," he said. "I expect to contribute my share to charities, and to take part in—in movements."

George got excited and acts as might be expected of him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)