

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER XVII.

George choked. For an instant he was on the point of breaking down, but he commanded himself, bravely dismissing the self-pity roused by her compassion. "How can I help but be?" he said.

"No, no," she soothed him. "You mustn't. You mustn't be troubled, no matter what happens."

"That's easy enough to say!" he protested; and he moved as if to rise. "Just let's stay like this a little while, dear. Just a minute or two. I want to tell you: Brother George has been here, and he told me everything about—about how unhappy you'd been—and how you went so gallantly to that old woman." Isabel gave a sad little laugh. "What a terrible old woman she is! What a really terrible thing a vulgar old woman can be!"

"Mother, I— And again he moved to rise.

"Must you? It seemed to me such a comfortable way to talk. Well—" She yielded; he rose, helped her to her feet, and pressed the light into being. As the room took life from the sudden lines of fire within the bulbs Isabel made a deprecatory gesture, and, with a faint laugh of apologetic protest, turned quickly away from George. What she meant was: "You mustn't see my face until I've made it nicer for you." Then she turned again to him her eyes downcast but no sign of tears in them, and she contrived to show him that there was the semblance of a smile upon her lips. She still wore her hat, and in her unsteady fingers she held a white envelope, somewhat crumpled.

"Now, mother—" she said; and though he stood stone cold, she lifted her arms, put them round him again, and pressed her cheek lightly to his. "Oh, you do look so troubled, poor dear! One thing you couldn't doubt, beloved boy. You know I could never care for anything in the world as I care for you—never, never!"

"Now, mother—" she released him and stepped back. "Just a moment more, dearest. I want you to read this first. We can get at things better." She pressed into his hand the envelope she had brought with her, and as he opened it and began to read the long inclosure she walked slowly to the other end of the room; then stood there, with her back to him, and her head drooping a little, until he had finished.

The sheets of paper were covered with Eugene's handwriting.

"George Amberson will bring you this, dear Isabel. He is waiting while I write. He and I have talked things over, and before he gives this to you he will tell you what has happened. I ought to have known it was coming, because I have understood for quite a long time that young George was getting to dislike me more and more. Somehow, I've never been able to get his friendship; he's always had a latent distrust of me—or something like distrust—and perhaps that's made me sometimes a little awkward and difficult with him. I think it may be felt from the first that I cared a great deal about you, and he naturally resented it. I think perhaps he felt this even during all the time when I was so careful—at least I thought I was—not to show, even to you, how immensely I did care, it's perfectly comprehensible to me, also, that at his age

would to any other kind of old cats' mewling! We'd not be very apt to let such things keep us from the plenty of life we have left to us for making up to ourselves from old unhappiness and mistakes. But now we're faced with—not the slander and not our own fear of it, because we haven't any, but someone else's fear of it—your son's. And, oh, dearest woman in the world, I know what your son is to you, and it frightens me! Let me explain a little: I don't think he'll change—at twenty-one or twenty-two so many things appear solid and permanent and terrible which forty sees are nothing but disappearing miasma. Forty can't tell twenty about this; that's the pity of it! Twenty can find out only by getting to be forty. And so we come to this, dear: Will you live your own life your way, or George's way? I'm going a little further, because it would be fatal not to be wholly frank now. George will act toward you only as your long worship of him, your sacrifices—all the unseen little ones every day since he was born—will make him act. Dear, it breaks my heart for you, but what you have to oppose now is the history of your own selfless and perfect motherhood. I remember saying once that what you worshipped in your son was the angel you saw in him—and I still believe that is true of every mother. But in a mother's worship she may not see that the will in her son should not always be offered in obedience along with the angel. I grow sick with fear for you—for both you and me—when I think how the will against us two has grown strong through the love you have given the angel—and how long your own sweet will has served that other. Are you strong enough, Isabel? Can you make the fight? I promise you that if you will take heart for it, you will find so quickly that it has all amounted to nothing. You shall have happiness, and, in a little while, only happiness. You need only to write me a line—I can't come to your house—and tell me where you will meet me. We will come back in a month, and the angel in your son will bring him to you; I promise it. What is good in him will grow so fine, once you have beaten the turbulent will—but it must be beaten!"

"Your brother, that good friend, is waiting with such patience; I should not keep him longer—and I am saying too much for wisdom I fear. But, oh, my dear, won't you be strong—such a little short strength it would need! Don't strike my life down twice, dear—this time I've not deserved it."

"EUGENE," George tossed it abruptly from him so one sheet fell upon his bed and the others upon the floor; and at the faint noise of their falling Isabel came, and, kneeling, began to gather them up.

"Did you read it, dear?" George's face was pale no longer, but pink with fury. "Yes, I did."

"All of it?" she asked gently, as she rose.

"Certainly!" She did not look at him, but kept her eyes downcast upon the letter in her hands, tremulously rearranging the sheets in order as she spoke—and though she smiled, her smile was as tremulous as her hands. Nervousness and an irresistible timidity possessed her. "I—I wanted to say, George," she faltered. "I felt that if—if some day it should happen—I mean, if you came to feel differently about it, and Eugene and I—that is if we found that it seemed the most sensible thing to do—I was afraid you might think it would be a little queer about—Lucy. I mean—if she were your step-sister. Of course, she'd not be even legally related to you, and if you—if you cared for her—"

Thus far she got stammering with what she wanted to say, while George, watching her with a gaze that grew harder and hotter; but here he cut her off. "I have already given up all idea of Lucy," he said. "Naturally, I couldn't have treated her father as I deliberately did treat him—I could hardly have done that and expected his daughter ever to speak to me again."

Isabel gave a quick cry of compassion, but he allowed her no opportunity to speak. "You needn't think I'm making any particular sacrifice," he said sharply, "though I would, quickly enough, if I thought it necessary in a matter of honor like this. I was interested in her, and I could even say I did care for her; but she proved pretty satisfactorily that she cared little enough about me! The truth is, we're not congenial and we'd found that much out, at least, before she left. We should never have been happy; she was 'superior' all the time, and critical of me—not very pleasant, that! I don't think she has the very deepest nature in the world, and—"

But Isabel put her hand timidly on his arm. "George, dear, this is only a quarrel; all young people have them before they get adjusted, and you mustn't let—"

"If you please!" he said emphatically, moving back from her. "This isn't that kind. It's all over, and I don't care to speak of it again. It's settled. Don't you understand!"

"No. I want to talk to you about this letter of her father's."

"Yes, dear, that's why—"

"It's simply the most offensive piece of writing that I've ever held in my hands!"

She stepped back from him, startled. "But, dear, I thought—"

"I can't understand your even showing me such a thing!" he cried. "How did you happen to bring it to me?"

"Your uncle thought I'd better. He thought it was the simplest thing to do, and he said that he'd suggested it to Eugene, and Eugene had agreed. They thought—"

"Yes!" George said bitterly. "I should like to hear what they thought!"

"They thought it would be the most straightforward thing."

George drew a long breath. "Well, what do you think, mother?"

"I thought it would be the simplest and most straightforward thing; I thought they were right."

"Very well! We'll agree it was simple and straightforward. Now, what do you think of that letter itself?"

She hesitated, looking away. "I—of course I don't agree with him in the way he speaks of you, dear—except about the angel! I don't agree with some of the things he implies. You've always been unselfish—nobody knows that better than your mother."

"And yet," George broke in, "you see what he implies about me. Don't you think, really, that this is a pretty insulting letter for that man to be asking you to hand your son?"

"Oh, no!" she cried. "You see how fair he means to be, and he didn't ask for me to give it to you. It was brother George who—"

"Never mind that, now! You say he tries to be fair and yet do you suppose it ever occurs to him that I'm doing my simple duty? That I'm doing what my father would do if he were alive? That I'm doing what my father would ask me to do if he could speak from his grave out yonder? Do you suppose it ever occurs to that man for one minute that I'm protecting my mother?"

George raised his voice advancing upon the helpless lady, fiercely; and she could only bend her head before him. "He talks about my 'will'—how it must be beaten down; yes, and he asks my mother to do that little thing to please him! What for? Why does he want me 'beaten' by my mother? Because I'm trying to protect her name! He's got my mother's name banded up and down the streets of this town till I can't step in those streets without wondering what every soul I meet is thinking of me and of my family, and now he wants you to marry him so that every gossip in town will say 'There! What did I tell you? I guess that proves it's true! You can't get away from it; that's exactly what they'd say, and this man pretends he cares for you, and yet asks you to marry him and give them the right to say it. He says he and you don't care what they say, but I know better! He may not care—probably he's that kind—but you do. There never was an Amberson yet that would let the Amberson name go trailing in the dust like that! It's the proudest name in this town, and it's going to stay the proudest; and I tell you that's the deepest thing in my nature—not that I'd expect Eugene Morgan to understand—the very deepest thing in my nature is to protect that name and to fight for it to the last breath when danger threatens it as it does now—through my mother!"

He turned from her striding up and down and tossing his arms about in a tumult of gesture. "I can't believe it of you that you'd think of such a sacrifice! That's what it would be—sacrifice! When he talks about your unselfishness toward me he's right—you have been unselfish and you have been a perfect mother. But what about him? Is it unselfish of him to want you to throw away

your good name just to please him? That's all he asks of you—and to quit being my mother! Do you think I can believe you really care for him? I don't! You are my mother and you're an Amberson—and I believe you're too proud! You're too proud to care for a man who could write such a letter as that!" He stopped, faced her, and spoke with more self-control: "Well, what are you going to do about it, mother?"

George was right about his mother's being proud. And even when she laughed with a negro gardener, or even those few times in her life when people saw her weep, Isabel had a proud look—something that was independent and graceful and strong. But she did not have it now; she leaned against the wall, beside his dressing table, and seemed beset with humility and with weakness. Her head drooped.

"What answer are you going to make to such a letter?" George demanded, like a judge on the bench.

"I—I don't quite know, dear," she murmured.

"You don't?" he cried. "You—"

"Wait," she begged him. "I'm so—confused."

"I want to know what you're going to write him. Do you think if you did what he wants you to I could bear to stay another day in this town, mother? Do you think I could ever bear even to see you again if you married him? I'd want to, but you surely know I just—couldn't!"

She made a futile gesture, and seemed to breathe with difficulty. "I—I wasn't—quite sure," she faltered, "about—about it's being wise for us to be married—even before knowing how you feel about it. I wasn't even sure it was quite fair to—Eugene. I have—I seem to have that family trouble—like father's—that I spoke to you about once." She managed a deprecatory little dry laugh. "Not that it amounts to much, but I wasn't at all sure that it would be fair to him. Marrying doesn't mean so much, after all—not at my age. It's enough to know that—that people think of you—and to see them. I thought we were all—oh, pretty happy the way things were, and I don't think it would mean giving up a great deal for him or me, either, if we just went on as we have been. I—I see him almost every day, and—"

"Mother!" George's voice was loud and stern. "Do you think you could go one seeing him after this!"

She had been talking helplessly enough before; her tone was little more broken now. "Not—not even—see him?"

"How could you?" George cried. "Mother, it seems to me that if he ever set foot in this house again—oh! I can't speak of it! Could you see him, knowing what talk it makes every time he turns into this street, and knowing what that means to me! Oh, I don't understand all this—I don't! If you told me, a year ago, that such things were going to happen, I'd have thought you were insane—and now I believe I am!"

Then, after a preliminary gesture of despair, as though he meant harm to the ceiling, he flung himself heavily, face downward, upon the bed. His anguish was none the less real for its vehemence; and the straight over him, once—something in her arm, once—she said nothing, but suddenly her tears fell upon his head; she saw them, and seemed to be startled.

"Oh, this won't do!" she said. "I've never let you see me cry before, except when your father died. I mustn't!"

And she ran from the room.

A little while after she had gone, George rose and began solemnly to dress for dinner.

He sat gauntly at the dinner table with Fanny to partake of a meal throughout which neither spoke. Isabel had sent word "not to wait" for her, an injunction it was as well they obeyed, for she did not come at all. But with the renewal of sustenance furnished to his system, some relaxation must have occurred within the high-strung George. Dinner was not quite finished when, without warning, sleep hit him hard. His burning eyes could no longer restrain the lids above them; his head sagged beyond control; and he got his feet, and went lurching upstairs, yawning with exhaustion. From the door of his room, which he closed mechanically, with his eyes shut, he went blindly to his bed, fell upon it suddenly, and slept—with his face full upturned to the light.

It was after midnight when he woke, and the room was dark. He had not dreamed, but he woke with the sense that somebody or something had been with him while he slept—somebody or something infinitely compassionate; somebody or something infinitely protective, that would let him come to no harm and to no grief.

mother, who put it there. It shall never come again! I love you better than anything and everything else on earth. God gave you to me—and oh! how thankful I have been every day of my life for that sacred gift—and nothing can ever come between me and God's gift. And Eugene was right—I know you couldn't change about this. Your suffering shows how deep-seated the feeling is within you. So I've written him just about what I think you would like me to—though I told him I would always be fond of him and always his best friend, and I hoped his dearest friend. He'll understand that, though I didn't say it in so many words. You mustn't trouble about that—he'll understand. Good-night, my darling, my beloved, my beloved! You mustn't be troubled. I think I shouldn't mind anything very much so long as I have you all to 'myself'—as people say—to make up for your long years away from me at college. We'll talk of what's best to do in the morning, shan't we? And for all this pain you'll forgive your loving and devoted mother.

"ISABEL."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Having finished some errands downtown, the next afternoon, George Amberson Minaer was walking up National avenue on his homeward way when he saw in the distance, coming toward him, upon the same side of the street, the figure of a young lady—a figure just under the middle height, comely indeed, and to be mistaken for none other in the world—even at two hundred yards. To his sharp discomfiture his heart immediately forced upon him the consciousness of its acceleration; a sudden warmth about his neck made him aware that he had turned red, and then, departing, left him pale.

For a panicky moment he thought of facing about in actual flight; he had little doubt that Lucy would meet him with no token of recognition, and all at once this probability struck him as unendurable. And if she did not speak, was it the proper part of chivalry to lift his hat and take the cut bareheaded? Or should the finer gentleman acquiesce in the lady's desire for no further acquaintance, and pass her with stony mien and eyes constrained forward? George was a young man badly flustered.

As they drew nearer George tried to prepare himself to meet her with some remnant of aplomb. He kept his eyes from looking full at her, and as he saw her thus close at hand, and coming nearer, a regret that was dumfounding took possession of him. For the first time he had the sense of having lost something of overwhelming importance.

Lucy did not keep to the right, but came straight to meet him, smiling, and with her hand offered to him.

"Why—you—" he stammered, as he took it. "Haven't you—" What he meant to say was: "Haven't you heard?"

"Haven't I what?" she asked; and he saw that Eugene had not told her.

"Nothing!" he gasped. "May I—may I turn and walk away?"

"Yes, indeed," he said cordially. "I've altered what had been done; he was satisfied with all that—satisfied that it was right, and that his own course was right. But he began to perceive a striking inaccuracy in some remarks he had made to his mother. Now when he had put matters in such shape that even by the relinquishment of his 'ideals of life' he could not have Lucy, knew that he never could have her, and knew that when Eugene told her the history of yesterday he could not have a glance or a word even friendly from her—now when he must in good truth 'give up all idea of Lucy,' he was amazed that he could have used such words as 'no particular sacrifice,' and believed them when he said them! She had looked never in her life so bewitchingly pretty as she did to-day; and as he walked beside her he was sure that she was the most exquisite thing in the world."

"Lucy," he said huskily, "I want to tell you something. Something that matters."

"I hope it's a lively something, then," she said, and laughed. "Eugene's been so glum today he's scarcely spoken to me. Your Uncle George Amberson came to see him an hour ago and they shut themselves up in the library, and your uncle looked as glum as papa. I'll be glad if you'll tell me a funny story, George."

"Well, it may seem one to you," he said bitterly. "Just to begin with; when you went away you didn't let me know; not even a word—not a line—"

Her manner persisted in being inconsequent. "Why, no," she said. "I just trotted off for some visits. Don't you remember, George? We'd had a grand quarrel, and didn't speak to each other all the way home from a long, long drive! So, as we couldn't play together like good children, of course it was plain that we oughtn't to play at all."

"Evidently!" she said. "If you're going away tomorrow night."

"Lucy—this may be the last time I'll see you—ever—in my life."

At that she looked up at him quickly, across her shoulder, but smiled as brightly as before, and with the same cordial inconsequence: "Oh, I can hardly think that!" she said. "And of course I'd be awfully sorry to think it. You're not moving away, are you, to live?"

"I don't know when I'm coming back. Mother and I are starting tomorrow night for a trip around the world."

"At this she did look thoughtful. 'Your mother is going with you?'"

"Good heavens!" he groaned. "Lucy, doesn't it make any difference to you that I am going?"

"At this her cordial smile instantly appeared again."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I'm sure I'll miss you ever so much. Are you to be gone long?"

He stared at her wanly. "I told you indefinitely," he said. "We've made no plans—at all—for coming back."

"That does sound like a long trip!" she exclaimed admiringly. "Do you plan to be traveling all the time, or will you stay in some one place the greater part of it? I think it would be lovely to—"

He halted; and she stopped with him. They had come to a corner at the edge of the "business section" of the city, and people were everywhere about them, brushing against them, sometimes, in passing.

"I can't stand this," George said, in a low voice. "I'm just about ready to go in this drug store here, and ask the clerk for something to keep me from dying in my tracks! It's quite a shock, you see, Lucy!"

"What is it?"

"To find out certainly, at last, how deeply you've cared for me! To see how much difference this makes to you! By Jove, I have mattered to you!"

Her cordial smile was tempered now with good nature. "George!" she laughed indulgently. "Surely you don't want me to do paths on a downtown corner!"

"You wouldn't 'do paths' anywhere!"

"Well—don't you think paths is generally rather soothing?"

"I can't stand this any longer," he said. "I can't! Good bye, Lucy! He took her hand. "It's good bye—I think it's good bye for good, Lucy!"

"Good bye! I do hope you'll have the most splendid trip." She gave his hand



"I Am Doing What My Father Would Do if He Were Alive."



She Had Not Gone, Oh, but Stood Watching Him.

a cordial little grip, then released it lightly. "Give my love to your mother. Good bye!"

He turned heavily away, and a moment later glanced back over his shoulder. She had not gone on, but stood watching him, that same casual, cordial smile on her face to the very last; and now, as he looked back, emphasized her friendly unconcern by waving her small hand to him cheerily, though perhaps with the slightest hint of preoccupation, as if she had begun to think of the errand that brought her down town.

Lucy remained where she was until he was out of sight. Then she went slowly into the drug store which had struck George as a possible source of stimulant for himself.

"Please let me have a few drops of aromatic spirits of ammonia in a glass of water," she said, with the utmost composure.

"Yes, ma'am!" said the impressionable clerk, who had been looking at her through the display window as she stood on the corner.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Very Few Are.

"No man I ever saw," said Uncle Eben, "was quite as good his own-self as he thought ev'body else ought to be."



Eugene's Handwriting.

me gets excited about gossip. Dear Isabel, what I'm trying to get at, in my confused way, is that you and I don't care about this nonsensical gossip, ourselves, at all. Yesterday I thought the time had come when I could ask you to marry me, and you were dear enough to me to tell me 'some time it might come to that.' Well, you and I, left to ourselves, and knowing what we have been and what we are, we'd pay as much attention to 'talk' as we