

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

Cost to
RECOMM.

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Do

KING FOOL-BOY WITH THE PRIDE OF SATAN."

We can while we are at the most pessimistic predictions. By the time George returns from college, George monopolized Lucy Morgan, a stranger and the prettiest girl present, and gets on famously with her until he learns that a "queer-looking duck" who has been making such 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.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

"Give me the next and the one after that," he said hurriedly, recovering some presence of mind, just as the nearest applicant reached them. "And give me every third one the rest of the evening."

She laughed. "Are you asking?"

"What do you mean, 'asking'?"

"It sounded as though you were just telling me to give you all those dances."

"Well, I want 'em!" George insisted.

"Are you going to give me—"

"Good gracious!" she laughed.

"Yes!"

The applicants flocked round her, urging contracts for what remained, but they did not dislodge George from her side, though he made it evident that they succeeded in annoying him; and presently he extricated her from an accumulating siege—she must have connived in the extrication—and bore her off to sit beside him upon the stairway that led to the musicians' gallery, where they were sufficiently retired, yet had a view of the room.

"How'd all those ducks get to know you so quick?" George inquired, with little enthusiasm.

"Oh, I've been here a week."

"Looks as if you'd been pretty busy!" he said. "Most of those ducks, I don't know what my mother wanted to invite 'em here for."

"Perhaps it was on account of their parents," Miss Morgan suggested mildly. "Maybe she didn't want to offend their fathers and mothers."

"Oh, hardly! I don't think my mother need worry much about offending anybody in this old town."

"It must be wonderful," said Miss Morgan. "It must be wonderful, Mr. Amberson—Mr. Minafer, I mean."

"What must be wonderful?"

"To be so important as that!"

"That isn't 'important,'" George assured her. "Anybody that really is anybody ought to be able to do about as they like in their own town, I should think!"

She looked at him critically from under her shading lashes—but her eyes grew gentler almost at once. In truth, they became more appreciative than critical. George's imperious good looks were altogether manly, yet approached actual beauty as closely as a boy's good looks should dare; and dance music and flowers have some effect upon nineteen-year-old girls as well as upon eighteen-year-old boys.

The stairway was drafty: the steps were narrow and uncomfortable; no older person would have remained in such a place. Moreover, these two young people were strangers to each other; neither had said anything in which the other had discovered the slightest intrinsic interest; there had not arisen between them the beginnings of congeniality, or even of friendliness—but stairways near ball-rooms have more to answer for than have moonlit lakes and mountain sunsets.

Age, confused by its own long accumulation of follies, is everlastingly inquiring, "what does she see in him?" as if young love came about through thinking—or through conduct. At eighteen one goes to a dance, sits with a stranger on a stairway, feels peculiar, thinks nothing, and becomes incapable of any plan whatever. Miss Morgan and George stayed where they were.

They had agreed to this in silence and without knowing it; certainly without exchanging glances of intelligence—they had exchanged no glances at all. Both sat staring vaguely out into the ballroom, and, for a time, they did not speak. Here and there were to be seen couples so carried away that, ceasing to move at the decorous, even glide, considered most knowing, they pranced and whirled through the throng, from wall to wall, galloping bounteously in abandon. George suffered a shock of vague surprise when he perceived that his aunt, Fanny Minafer, was the lady-half of one of those wild couples. She flew over the floor in the capable arms of the queer-looking duck; for this person was her partner.

The queer-looking duck had been a real dancer in his day, it appeared; and evidently his day was not yet over. In spite of the headlong, gay rapidity with which he bore Miss Fanny about the big room he danced authoritatively, avoiding without effort the lightest collision with other

couples, maintaining sufficient grace throughout his wildest moments, and all the while laughing and talking with his partner. What was most remarkable to George, and a little irritating, this stranger in the Amberson mansion had no vestige of the air of deference proper to a stranger in such a place: he seemed thoroughly at home. He seemed offensively so, indeed, when, passing the entrance to the gallery stairway, he disengaged his hand from Miss Fanny's for an instant, and not pausing in the dance, waved a laughing salutation more than cordial, then capered lightly out of sight.

George gazed stonily at this manifestation, responding neither by word nor sign. "How's that for a bit of freshness?" he murmured.

"What was?" Miss Morgan asked.

"That queer-looking duck waving his hand at me like that. Except he's the Sharon girls' uncle I don't know him from Adam."

"You don't need to," she said. "He wasn't waving his hand to you: he meant me."

"Oh, he did?" George was not mollified by the explanation. "Everyone seems to mean you! You certainly do seem to have been pretty busy this week you've been here!"

She pressed her bouquet to her face again and laughed into it, not displeased. She made no other comment, and for another period neither spoke.

"Well," said George finally, "I must say you don't seem to be much of a prattler. They say it's a great way to get a reputation for being wise—never saying much. Don't you ever talk at all?"

"When people can understand," she answered.

He had been looking moodily out at the ballroom, but he turned to her quickly, at this, saw that her eyes were sunny and content, over the top of her bouquet, and he consented to smile.

"Girls are usually pretty fresh!" he said. "They ought to go to a man's club about a year: they'd get taught a few things about freshness! What you got to do after two o'clock tomorrow afternoon?"

"A whole lot of things. Every minute filled up."

"All right," said George. "The snow's fine for sleighing: I'll come for you in a cutter at ten minutes after two."

"I can't possibly go."

"If you don't," he said, "I'm going to sit in the cutter in front of the gate, wherever you're visiting, all afternoon, and if you try to go out with anybody else he's got to whip me before he gets you." And as she laughed—though she blushed a little, too—he continued, seriously: "If you think I'm not in earnest you're at liberty to make quite a big experiment!"

She laughed again. "I don't think I've often had so large a compliment as that," she said, "especially on such short notice—and yet I don't think I'll go with you."

"You're ready at ten minutes after two."

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will!"

"Yes," she said, "I will!" And her partner for the next dance arrived, breathless with searching.

"Don't forget I've got the third from now," George called after her.

When "the third from now" came George presented himself before her without any greeting, like a brother or a mannerless old friend. Both George and Miss Morgan talked much more to everyone else that evening than to each other, and they said nothing at all at this time. Both looked preoccupied as they began to dance, and preserved a gravity of expression to the end of the number. And their next number they did not dance, but went back to the gallery stairway, seeming to have reached an understanding without any verbal consultation that this suburb was again the place for them.

"Well," said George coolly, when they were seated, "what did you say your name was?"

"Morgan."

"Funny name!"

"Everybody else's name always is." "I didn't mean it was really funny," George explained. "That's just one of my crowd's bits of horsing at college. We always say 'funny name,' no

matter what it is. I guess we're pretty fresh sometimes; but I knew your name was Morgan because my mother said so downstairs. I mean: what's the rest of it?"

"Lucy."

"How old are you?" George asked.

"I don't really know myself."

"What do you mean: you don't really know yourself?"

"I mean I only know what they tell me. I believe them, of course, but believing isn't really knowing."

"Look here!" said George. "Do you always talk like this?"

Miss Lucy Morgan laughed forgivingly, put her young head on one side like a bird and responded cheerfully: "I'm willing to learn wisdom. What are you studying at school?"

"College!"

"At the university! Yes. What are you studying there?"

George laughed. "Lot o' useless guff!"

"Then why don't you study some useful guff?"

"What do you mean: 'Useful'?"

"Something you'd use later, in your business or profession?"

George waved his hand impatiently. "I don't expect to go into any business or profession."

"No?"

"Certainly not!" George was emphatic, being sincerely annoyed by a suggestion which showed how utterly she failed to comprehend the kind of person he was.

"Why not?" she asked mildly.

"Just look at 'em!" he said, almost with bitterness, and he made a gesture presumably intended to indicate the business and professional men now dancing within range of vision.

"That's a fine career for a man, isn't it? Lawyers, bankers, politicians!

What do they get out of life, I'd like to know! What do they ever know about real things? Where do they ever get?"

He was so earnest that she was surprised and impressed. She had a vague, momentary vision of Pitt, at twenty-one, prime minister of England; and she spoke, involuntarily in a lowered voice, with deference:

"What do you want to be?" she asked.

George answered promptly.

"A yachtsman," he said.

CHAPTER V.

Having thus, in a word, revealed his ambition for a career above courts, marts and polling booths, George breathed more deeply than usual, and, turning his face from the lovely companion whom he had just made his confidant, gazed out at the dancers with an expression in which there was both sternness and a contempt for the squalid lives of the unyachted Midlanders before him. However, among them he marked his mother, and his somber grandeur relaxed momentarily; a more genial light came into his eyes.

Isabel was dancing with the queer-looking duck; and it was to be noted that the lively gentleman's gait was more sedate than it had been with

"We've lived all over," she answered.

"Papa used to live here in this town, but that was before I was born."

"What do you keep moving around for? Is he a promoter?"

"No. He's an inventor."

"What's he invented?"

"Just lately," said Lucy, "he's been working on a new kind of horseless carriage."

"Well, I'm sorry for him," George said, in no unkindly spirit. "Those things are never going to amount to anything. People aren't going to spend their lives lying on their backs in the road and letting grease drip in their faces."

"Papa'd be so grateful," she returned, "if he could have your advice."

Instantly George's face became flushed. "I don't know that I've done anything to be insulted for!" he said. "I don't see that what I said was particularly fresh."

"No, indeed!"

"Then what do you—" She laughed gayly. "I don't! And I don't mind your being such a lofty person at all. I think it's ever so interesting—but papa's a great man!"

"Is he?" George decided to be good-natured. "Well, let us hope so. I hope so, I'm sure."

Looking at him keenly, she saw that the magnificent youth was incredibly sincere in this bit of graciousness. She shook her head in gentle wonder. "I'm just beginning to understand," she said.

"Understand what?"

"What it means to be a real Amberson in this town. Papa told me something about it before we came, but I see he didn't say half enough!"

George superbly took this all for granted. "Did your father say he knew the family before he left here?"

"Yes. I believe he was particularly

a friend of your Uncle George;

and he didn't say so, but I imagine he must have known your mother very well, too. He wasn't an inventor

then; he was a young lawyer.

The town was smaller in those days,

and I believe he was quite well known."

"I dare say. I've no doubt the fam-

ily are all very glad to see him back, especially if they used to have him at the house a good deal, as he told

him from the day he was born. He

thinks he's little tin god on wheels

weak and sick just to think about him! Yet that high-spirited, intelligent woman, Isabel Amberson, actually sits and worships him! She hear it in her voice when she speaks to him or speaks of him. You can see it in her eyes when she looks at him. My Lord! What does she see when she looks at him?"

Morgan's odd expression of genital apprehension deepened whimsically. "She sees something that we don't see," he said.

"What does she see?"

"An angel."

Kinney laughed aloud. "Well, if

she sees an angel when she looks at

him, I suppose it's because he's

than I thought she was."

"Perhaps she is," said Morgan. "But

that's what she sees."

"My Lord! It's easy to see you've

only known him an hour or so. In

that time have you looked at George

and seen an angel?"

No. All I saw was a remarkably

good-looking foot-boy with the pride

of Satan and a set of nice new draw-

ing-room manners that he probably

couldn't use more than half an hour

at a time without bursting."

"Then what—"

"Mothers are right," said Morgan.

"Mothers see the angel in us because

the angel is there. If it's shown to

the mother the son has got an angel

show, hasn't he? When a son cuts

"Oh, dry up!" said the nephew. "I understand this Morgan—"

"Mr. Eugene Morgan," his uncle suggested. "Politeness requires that the young should—"