

The Magnificent Ambersons

By Booth Tarkington

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"OH, NOW YOU HAVE DONE IT!"

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 statuary, 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 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." George announces to her his intention to be a gentleman of leisure. Lucy disapproves and George resents her father's influence. The lovers "almost quarrel." George tries to insult Morgan. The sight of Morgan with his mother makes him "see red."

CHAPTER XIV.

He went to his room, threw off his coat, waistcoat, collar and tie, letting them lie where they chanced to fall, and then, having violently enveloped himself in a black velvet dressing-gown, continued this action by lying down with a vehemence that brought a wheeze of protest from his bed. His repose was only a momentary semblance, however, for it lasted no longer than the time it took him to groan "Riffraff!" between his teeth. Then he sat up, swung his feet to the floor, rose and began to pace up and down the large room.

He had just been consciously rude to his mother for the first time in his life; for, with all his riding down of populace and riffraff, he had never before been either deliberately or impulsively disrespectful of her. But now he had done a rough thing to her; and he did not repent; the rather he was the more irritated with her. And when he heard her presently go by his door with a light step, singing cheerfully to herself as she went to her room, he perceived that she had mistaken his intention altogether, or, indeed, had failed to perceive that he had any intention at all.

There came a delicate, eager tapping at his door, not done with a knuckle but with the tip of a fingernail, which was instantly clarified to George's mind's eye as plainly as if he saw it: the long and polished white-mooned pink shield on the end of his Aunt Fanny's right forefinger. But George was in no mood for human communications, and even when things went well he had little pleasure in Fanny's society. Therefore it is not surprising that at the sound of her tapping, instead of bidding her enter, he immediately crossed the room with the intention of locking the door to keep her out.

Fanny was too eager and, opening the door before he reached it, came quickly in, and closed it behind her. Her look was that of a person who had just seen something extraordinary or heard thrilling news.

"Now, what on earth do you want?" her chilling nephew demanded.

"George," she said hurriedly, "I saw what you did when you couldn't speak to them. I was sitting with Mrs. Johnson at her front window, across the street, and I saw it all."

"Well, what of it?"

"You did right!" Fanny said with a vehemence not the less spirited because she suppressed her voice almost to a whisper. "You did exactly right! You're behaving splendidly about the whole thing, and I want to tell you I know your father would thank you if he could see what you're doing."

"My Lord!" George broke out at her. "You make me dizzy! For heaven's sake quit the mysterious detective business—at least do quit it around me! Go and try it on somebody else, if you like; but I don't want to hear it!"

She began to tremble, regarding him with a fixed gaze. "You don't care to hear, then," she said huskily, "that I approve of what you're doing?"

"Certainly not! Since I haven't the faintest idea what you think I'm 'doing,' naturally I don't care whether you approve of it or not. All I'd like, if you please, is to be alone. I'm not giving a tea here, this afternoon, if you'll permit me to mention it!"

Fanny's gaze wavered; she began to blink; then suddenly she sank into a chair and wept silently, but with a terrible desolation.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" he moaned. "What in the world is wrong with you?"

"You're always picking on me," she quavered wretchedly, her voice indistinct with the wetness that bubbled in to it from her tears. "You do—you always pick on me! You've always done it—always—ever since you were a little boy! Whenever anything goes wrong with you, you take it out on me! You do! You always—"

George flung to heaven a gesture of despair; it seemed to him the last straw that Fanny should have chosen this particular time to come and sob

in his room over his mistreatment of her!

"Oh, my Lord!" he whispered; then, with a great effort, addressed her in a reasonable tone: "Look here, Aunt Fanny; I don't see what you're making all this fuss about. Of course I know I've teased you sometimes, but—"

"Teased" me?" she wailed.

"Teased" me! Oh, it does seem too hard sometimes—this mean old life of mine does seem too hard! I don't think I can stand it! Honestly, I don't think I can! I came in here just to show you I sympathized with you—just to say something pleasant to you, and you treat me as if I were—oh, no, you wouldn't treat a servant the way you treat me! You wouldn't treat anybody in the world like this except old Fanny!"

"Oh, my Lord!" George groaned.

Fanny spread out her small, soaked handkerchief, and shook it in the air to dry it a little, crying as dully and as wretchedly during this operation as before—a sight which gave George a curious shock to add to his other agitations, it seemed so strange.

"You're so proud," she quavered, "and so hard! I tell you I didn't mean to speak of it to you, and I never, never in the world would have told you about it, nor have made the faintest reference to it, if I hadn't seen that somebody else had told you, or you'd found out for yourself some way. I—"

In despair of her intelligence, and in some doubt of his own, George struck the palms of his hands together. "Somebody else had told me what? I'd found out what for myself?"

"How people are talking about your mother."

Except for the incidental tearfulness of her voice, her tone was casual, as though she mentioned a subject previously discussed and understood; for Fanny had no doubt that George had only pretended to be mystified because, in his pride, he would not in words admit that he knew what he knew.

"What did you say?" he asked incredulously.

"Of course I understood what you were doing," Fanny went on, drying her handkerchief again. "It puzzled other people when you began to be rude to Eugene, because they couldn't see how you could treat him as you did when you were so interested in Lucy. But I remembered how you came to me, that other time when there was so much talk about Isabel; and I knew you'd give Lucy up in a minute, if it came to a question of your mother's reputation, because you said then that—"

"Look here," George interrupted in a shaking voice. "Look here, I'd like—"

He stopped, unable to go on, his agitation was so great. His chest heaved as from hard running, and his complexion, pallid at first, had become mottled; fiery spots appearing at his temples and cheeks. "What do you mean by telling me—telling me there's talk about—about—"

He gulped, and began again: "What do you mean by using such words as 'reputation'?"

speaking of a 'question' of my—my mother's reputation?"

Fanny looked up at him woefully over the handkerchief which she now applied to her reddened nose. "God knows I am sorry for you, George," she murmured. "I wanted to say so, but it's only old Fanny, so whatever she says—even when it's sympathy—pick on her for it!" She sobbed. "It's only poor old lonely Fanny!"

"You look here!" George said harshly.

"When I spoke to my Uncle George after that rotten thing I heard Aunt Amelia say about my mother, he said if there was any gossip it was about you! He said people might be laughing about the way you ran after Morgan, but that was all."

Fanny lifted her hands, clenched them and struck them upon her knees. "Yes; it's always Fanny!" she sobbed. "Ridiculous old Fanny—always, always!"

"You listen!" George said. "After I'd talked to Uncle George I saw you; and you said I had a mean little mind for thinking there might be truth in

what Aunt Amelia said about people talking. You denied it. And that wasn't the only time; you'd attacked me before then, because I intimated that Morgan might be coming here too often. You made me believe that mother let him come entirely on your account, and now you say—"

"I think he did," Fanny interrupted desolately. "I think he did come as much to see me as anything—for a while it looked like it. He did act a good deal that way—and if Wilbur hadn't died—"

"You told me there wasn't any talk."

"I didn't think there was much, then," Fanny protested. "I didn't know how much there was."

"What?"

"People don't come and tell such things to a person's family, you know. You don't suppose anybody was going to say to George Amberson that his sister was getting herself talked about, do you? Or that they were going to say much to me?"

"You told me," said George, fiercely, "that mother never saw him except when she was chaperoning you."

"They weren't much alone together, then," Fanny returned. "Hardly ever, before Wilbur died. Everybody knew that he'd been engaged to her—"

"What's that?" George cried.

"Everybody knows it. Don't you remember your grandfather speaking of it at the Sunday dinner one night?"

"He didn't say they were engaged or—"

"Well, they were! Everybody knows it; and she broke it off on account of that serenade when Eugene didn't know what he was doing. He drank when he was a young man, and she wouldn't stand for it, but everybody in this town knows that Isabel has never really cared for any other man in her life! Poor Wilbur! He was the only soul alive that didn't know it!"

Nightmare had descended upon the unfortunate George; he leaned back against the footboard of his bed, gazing wildly at his aunt. "I believe I'm going crazy," he said. "You mean when you told me there wasn't any talk, you told me a falsehood?"

"No!" Fanny gasped.

"You did!"

"I tell you I didn't know how much talk there was, and it wouldn't have amounted to much if Wilbur had lived." And Fanny completed this with a fatal admission: "I didn't want you to interfere."

George overlooked the admission; his mind was not now occupied with

that—they think they were right when they said she was in—love with him before—before—"

She looked at him gravely with her eyes now dry between their reddened lids. "Why George," she said, gently, "don't you know that's what they say? You must know that everybody in town thinks they're going to be married very soon."

George uttered an incoherent cry; and sections of him appeared to writhe. He was upon the verge of actual nausea.

"You know it," Fanny cried, getting up. "You don't think I'd have spoken of it to you—unless I was sure you knew it?" Her voice was wholly genuine, as it had been throughout the wretched interview. "Somebody must have told you?"

"Who told you?" he said.

"What?"

"Who told you there was talk? Where is this talk? Where does it come from? Who does it?"

"Why, I suppose pretty much everybody," she said. "I know it must be pretty general."

"Who said so?"

"What?"

George stepped close to her. "You say people don't speak to a person of gossip about that person's family. Well, how did you hear it, then? How did you get hold of it? Answer me!"

"Why—" Fanny hesitated.

"You answer me!"

"I hardly think it would be fair to give names."

"Look here," said George. "One of your most intimate friends is that mother of Charlie Johnson's, for instance. Has she ever mentioned this to you? You say everybody is talking. Is she one?"

"Oh, she may have intimated—"

"I'm asking you: Has she ever spoken of it to you?"

"She's a very kind, discreet woman, George; but she may have intimated—"

George had a sudden intuition, as there flickered into his mind the picture of a street-crossing and two absorbed ladies almost run down by a fast horse. "You and she have been talking about it today!" he cried. "You were talking about it with her not two hours ago. Do you deny it?"

"I—"

"Do you deny it?"

"No!"

"All right," said George. "That's enough!"

She caught at his arm as he turned away. "Where are you going to do, George?"

"I'll not talk about it, now," he said, heavily. "I think you've done a good deal for one day, Aunt Fanny!"

And Fanny, seeing the passion in his face, began to be alarmed. "George, you know I'm sorry for you, whether you care or not," she whimpered. "I never in the world would have spoken of it if I hadn't thought you knew all about it. I wouldn't have—"

But he had opened the door with his free hand. "Never mind!" he said, and she was obliged to pass out into the hall, the door closing quickly behind her.

CHAPTER XV.

George took off his dressing-gown and put on a collar and tie, his fingers shaking so that the tie was not his usual success; then he picked up his coat and waistcoat, and left the room while still in process of donning them, fastening the buttons as he ran down the front stairs to the door. It was not until he reached the middle of the street that he realized that he had forgotten his hat; and he paused for an irresolute moment then he decided that he needed no hat for the sort of call he intended to make, and went forward heedlessly. Mrs. Johnson was at home; the Irish girl who came to the door informed him, and he was left to await the lady, in a room like an elegant well—the Johnsons' "reception room."

Mrs. Johnson came in, breathing noticeably; and her round head, smoothly but economically decorated with the hair of an honest woman, seemed to be lingering far in the background of the Alpine bosom which took precedence of the rest of her everywhere; but when she was all in the room, it was to be seen that her breathing was the result of hospitable haste to greet the visitor, and her hand suggested that she had paused for only the briefest abatement. George accepted this cold, damp bump mechanically.

"Mr. Amberson—I mean Mr. Minafer!" she exclaimed. "I'm really delighted; I understood you asked for me. Mr. Johnson's out of the city, but Charlie's downtown and I'm looking for him at any minute, now, and he'll be so pleased that you—"

"He didn't want to see Charlie," George said. "I want—"

"Do sit down," the hospitable lady urged him, seating herself upon the sofa. "Do sit down."

"No, I thank you. I wish—"

"Surely you're not going to run away again when you've just come? Do sit down, Mr. Minafer. I hope you're all well at your house and at

the dear old Major's, too. He's looking—"

"Mrs. Johnson," George said, in a strained loud voice which arrested her attention immediately, so that she was abruptly silenced, leaving her surprised mouth open. "Mrs. Johnson, I have come to ask you a few questions which I would like you to answer, if you please."

She became grave at once. "Certainly, Mr. Minafer. Anything I can—"

He interrupted sternly, yet his voice shook in spite of its sternness. "You were talking with my Aunt Fanny about my mother this afternoon."

At this Mrs. Johnson uttered an involuntary gasp, but she recovered herself. "Then I'm sure our conversation was a very pleasant one, if we were talking of your mother, because—"

Again he interrupted. "My aunt has told me what the conversation virtually was, and I don't mean to waste any time, Mrs. Johnson. You were talking about a—" George's shoulders suddenly heaved uncontrollably; but he went fiercely on: "You were discussing a scandal that involved my mother's name."

"Mr. Minafer!"

"Isn't that the truth?"

"I don't feel called upon to answer, Mr. Minafer," she said with visible agitation. "I do not consider that you have any right—"

"My aunt told me you repeated this scandal to her."

"I don't think your aunt can have said that," Mrs. Johnson returned sharply. "I did not repeat a scandal of any kind to your aunt and I think you are mistaken in saying she told you I did. We may have discussed some matters that have been a topic of comment about town—"

"Yes!" George cried. "I think you may have! That's what I'm here about, and what I intend to—"

"Don't tell me what you intend, please," Mrs. Johnson interrupted crisply. "And I should prefer that you would not make your voice quite so loud in this house, which I happen to own. Your aunt may have told you—though I think it would have been very unwise in her if she did, and not very considerate of me—she may have told you that we discussed some topic as I have mentioned, and possibly that would have been true. If I talked it over with her, you may be sure I spoke in the most charitable spirit, and without sharing in other people's disposition to put an evil interpretation on what may be nothing more than unfortunate appearances and—"

"My God!" said George. "I can't stand this!"

"You have the option of dropping the subject," Mrs. Johnson suggested tartly, and she added: "Or of leaving the house."

"I'll do that soon enough, but first I mean to know—"

"I am perfectly willing to tell you anything you wish if you will remember to ask it quietly. I'll also take the liberty of reminding you that I had a perfect right to discuss the subject with your aunt. Other people—"

"Other people!" the unhappy George repeated viciously. "That's what I want to know about—these other people! You say you know of other people who talk about this."

"I presume they do."

"How many?"

"What?"

"I want to know how many other people talk about it?"

"Dear, dear!" she protested. "How should I know that?"

"Haven't you heard anybody mention it?"

"I presume so."

"Well, how many have you heard?"

Mrs. Johnson was becoming more annoyed than apprehensive, and she showed it. "Really, this isn't a court-room," she said. "And I'm not a defendant in a libel suit, either!"

The unfortunate young man lost what remained of his balance. "You may be!" he cried. "I intend to know just who's dared to say these things, if I have to force my way into every house in town, and I'm going to make them take every word of it back! I mean to know the name of every slanderer that's spoken of this matter to you and of every tattler you've passed it on to yourself. I mean to know—"

"You'll know something pretty quick!" she said, rising with difficulty; and her voice was thick with the sense of insult. "You'll know that you're out in the street. Please to leave my house!"

George stiffened sharply. Then he bowed, and strode out of the door.

Three minutes later, disheveled and perspiring, but cold all over, he burst into his Uncle George's room at the Major's without knocking. Amberson was dressing.

"Good gracious, George!" he exclaimed, "what's up?"

"I've just come from Mrs. Johnson's—across the street," George panted.

"You have your own tastes!" was Amberson's comment. "But curious as they are you ought to do something better with your hair, and button your waistcoat to the right buttons—"

even for Mrs. Johnson! What were you doing over there?"

"She told me to leave the house," George said desperately. "I went there because Aunt Fanny told me the whole town was talking about my mother, and that man Morgan—that they say my mother is going to marry him and that proves she was too fond of him before my father died—she said this Mrs. Johnson was one that talked about it, and I went to her to ask who were the others."

Amberson's jaw fell in dismay. "Don't tell me you did that!" he said, in a low voice; and then, seeing it was true, "Oh, now you have done it!"

"I've done it?" George cried. "What do you mean? I've done it? And what have I done?"

Amberson had collapsed into an easy chair beside his dressing table, the white evening tie he had been about to put on dangling from his hand, which had fallen limply on the arm of the chair. "By Jove!" he muttered. "That is too bad!"

George folded his arms bitterly. "Will you kindly answer my question? What have I done that wasn't honorable and right? Do you think these riffraff can go about bandying my mother's name—"

"They can now," said Amberson. "I don't know if they could before, but they certainly can now!"

"What do you mean by that?"

His uncle sighed profoundly, picked up his tie, and, preoccupied with despondency, twisted the strip of white lawn till it became unworkable. Mean-



"Gossip is Never Fatal, George," He Said, "Until It Is Denied."

while, he tried to enlighten his nephew. "Gossip is never fatal, George," he said, "until it is denied. Gossip goes on about every human being alive and about all the dead that are alive enough to be remembered, and yet almost never does any harm until some defender makes a controversy."

"See here," George said, "I didn't come to listen to any generalizing dose of philosophy! I ask you—"

"You asked me what you've done, and I'm telling you," Amberson gave him a melancholy smile, continuing: "Suffer me to do it in my own way. Fanny says there's been talk about your mother, and that Mrs. Johnson does some of it. I don't know, because naturally nobody would come to me with such stuff or mention it before me; but it's presumably true—I suppose it is. I've seen Fanny with Mrs. Johnson quite a lot; and that old lady is a notorious gossip, and that's why she ordered you out of her house when you pinned her down that she'd been gossiping. I suppose it's true that the 'whole town,' a lot of others, that is, do share in the gossip. In this town, naturally, anything about any Amberson has always been a stone dropped into the center of a pond, and a lie would send the ripples as far as a truth would. You can be sure that for many years there's been more gossip in this place about the Ambersons than about any other family. I dare say it isn't so much so now as it used to be, because the town got too big long ago, but it's the truth that the more prominent you are the more gossip there is about you, and the more people would like to pull you down. Well, they can't do it as long as you refuse to know what gossip there is about you. But the minute you notice it it's got you! I'm not speaking of certain kinds of slander that sometimes people have got to take to the courts; I'm talking of the wretched buzzing that Mrs. Johnsons do—the thing you seem to have such a horror of—people 'talking'—the kind of thing that has assailed your mother. People who have repeated a slander either get ashamed or forget it, if they're let alone. People will forget almost any slander except one that's been fought."

"Is that all?" George asked.

"I suppose so," his uncle murmured sadly.

"Well, then, may I ask what you'd have done in my place?"

"You're not wanted in this house, Mr. Morgan, now or at any other time."

(TO BE CONTINUED)