

The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

A month after her death he walked abruptly into Fanny's room, one night, and found her at her desk, eagerly adding columns of figures with which she had covered several sheets of paper.

"George! You startled me." "I beg your pardon for not knocking," he said huskily. "I didn't think." She turned in her chair and looked at him solicitously. "Sit down, George, won't you?"

"No, I just wanted—" "I could hear you walking up and down in your room," said Fanny. "You were doing it ever since dinner, and it seems to me you're at it almost every evening. I don't believe it's good for you—and I know it would worry your mother terribly if she—" Fanny hesitated.

"See here," George said, breathing fast. "I want to tell you once more that what I did was right. How could I have done anything else but what I did do?"

"Oh, I don't pretend to judge," Fanny said soothingly, for his voice and gesture both partook of wildness. "I know you think you did, George."

"Think I did!" he echoed violently. "My God in heaven!" And he began to walk up and down the floor.

"What else was there to do? What choice did I have? Was there any other way of stopping the talk?" He stopped, close in front of her, gesticulating, his voice harsh and loud.

"Was there any other way on earth of protecting her from the talk?" Miss Fanny looked away. "It died down before long, I think," she said nervously.

"That shows I was right, doesn't it?" he cried. "If I hadn't acted as I did, that slanderous old Johnson woman would still have kept on with her slanders—she'd have kept on!"

"No," Fanny interrupted. "She's dead. She dropped dead with apoplexy one day about six weeks after you left. I didn't mention it in my letters because I didn't want—I thought—"

"Well, the other people would have kept on, then. They'd have—" "I don't know," said Fanny, still averting her troubled eyes. "Things are so changed here, George. The other people you speak of—one hardly knows what's become of them. Of course not a great many were doing the talking, and they—well, some of them are dead, and some might as well be—you never see them any more—and the rest, whoever they were, are probably so mixed in with the crowds of new people that seem never even to have heard of us—and I'm sure we certainly never heard of them—and people seem to forget things so soon—they seem to forget anything. You can't imagine how things have changed here!"

George gulped painfully before he could speak. "You—you mean to sit there and tell me that if I'd just left things go on—Oh!" He swung away, walking the floor again. "I tell you

as you're answering—evaded, and tried to be gentle! I don't care to be handled with gloves! I tell you I was right, and I don't need any coddling by people that think I wasn't! And I suppose you believe I was wrong not to let Morgan see her that last night when he came here, and she—she was dying. If you do, why in the name of God did you come and ask me? You could have taken him in! She did want to see him. She—"

Miss Fanny looked startled. "You think—" "She told me so!" And the tortured young man choked. "She said—'just once.' She said 'I'd like to have seen him—just once!' She meant—to tell him good-bye! That's what she meant! And you put this on me, too; you put this responsibility on me! But I tell you, and I told Uncle George, that the responsibility isn't all mine! If you were so sure I was wrong all the time—when I took her away, and when I turned Morgan out—if you were so sure, what did you let me do it for? You and Uncle George were grown people, both of you, weren't you? You were older than I, and if you were so sure you were wiser than I, why did you just stand around with your hands hanging down, and let me go ahead? You could have stopped it if it was wrong, couldn't you?"

Fanny shook her head. "No, George," she said slowly. "Nobody could have stopped you. You were too strong, and—"

"And what?" he demanded loudly. "And she loved you—too well."

George stared at her hard, then his lower lip began to move convulsively, and he set his teeth upon it but could not check its frantic twitching.

He ran out of the room. She sat still, listening. He had plunged into his mother's room, but no sound came to Fanny's ears after the sharp closing of the door; and presently she rose and stepped out into the hall—but could hear nothing.

What interview was sealed away from human eye and ear within the lonely darkness on the other side of that door—in that darkness where Isabel's own special chairs were, and her own special books, and the two great walnut wardrobes filled with her dresses and wraps? What tragic argument might be there vainly striving to confute the gentle dead? "In God's name, what else could I have done?" For his mother's immutable silence was surely answering him as Isabel in life would never have answered him, and he was beginning to understand how eloquent the dead can be. They cannot stop their eloquence, no matter how they have loved the living; they cannot choose. And so, no matter in what agony George should cry out, "What else could I have done?" and to the end of his life no matter how often he made that wild appeal, Isabel was doomed to answer him with the wistful, faint murmur.

"I'd like to have—seen him. Just once."

A superstitious person might have thought it unfortunate that Fanny's partner in speculative industry as in Wilbur's disastrous rolling-mills, was that charming but too haphazardous man of the world, George Amberson. He was one of those optimists who believe that if you put money into a great many enterprises one of them is sure to turn out a fortune, and therefore, in order to find the lucky one, it is only necessary to go into a large enough number of them.

"You ought to have thought of my record and stayed out," he told Fanny, one day the next spring, when the affairs of the headlight company had begun to look discouraging. Things do look bleak, and I'm only glad you didn't go into this confounded thing to the extent I did."

Miss Fanny grew pink. "But it must go right!" she protested. "We saw with our own eyes how perfectly it worked out in the shop. It simply—" "Oh, you're right about that," Amberson said. "It certainly was a perfect thing—in the shop!"

"But think of that test on the road when we—" "That test was lovely," he admitted. "The inventor made us happy with his oratory, and you and Frank Bronson and I went whirling through the night at a speed that thrilled us. We must never forget it—and we never shall. It cost—"

"But something must be done." "It must indeed! My something would seem to be leaving my watch at my uncle's. Luckily, you—" The pink of Fanny's cheeks became deeper. "But isn't that man going to do anything to remedy it? Can't he try to—" "He can try," said Amberson. "He is trying, in fact. I've sat in the shop watching him try for several beautiful afternoons."

"But you must make him keep on trying!" "Oh, yes. I'll keep sitting!" However, in spite of the time he spent sitting in the shop, worrying the inventor of the fractious light, Amberson found opportunity to worry himself about another matter of business. This was the settlement of Isabel's estate.

"It's curious about the deed to her house," he said to his nephew. "You're absolutely sure it wasn't among her papers?"

"Mother didn't have any papers," George told him. "None at all. All she ever had to do with business was to deposit the checks grandfather gave her, and then write her own checks against them."

"The deed to the house was never recorded," Amberson said thoughtfully. "I've been over to the courthouse to see. I think it would be just as well to get him to execute one now in your favor. I'll speak to him about it."

George sighed. "I don't think I'd bother him about it; the house is mine, and you and I understand that it is. That's enough for me, and there isn't likely to be much trouble between you and me when we come to settling poor grandfather's estate. I've just been with him, and I think it would only confuse him for you to speak to him about it again. I notice he seems distressed if anybody tries to get his attention—he's a long way off, somewhere, and he likes to stay that way. I think—I think mother wouldn't want us to bother him about it; I'm sure she'd tell us to let him alone. He looks so white and queer."

Amberson shook his head. "I won't bother him any more than I can help; but I'll have the deed made out ready for his signature."

"I wouldn't bother him at all. I don't see—" "You might see," said his uncle uneasily. "The estate is just about as involved and mixed up as an estate can well get, to the best of my knowledge. You ought to have that deed."

"No, don't bother him." "I'll bother him as little as possible. I'll wait till some day when he seems to brighten up a little."

But Amberson waited too long. The Major had already taken eleven months since his daughter's death to think important things out. One evening his grandson sat with him—the Major seemed to like best to have young George with him, so far as they were able to guess his preferences—and the old gentleman made a queer gesture; he slapped his knee as if he had made a sudden discovery, or else remembered that he had forgotten something.

George looked at him with an air of inquiry, but said nothing. He had grown to be almost as silent as his grandfather. However, the Major spoke without being questioned.

"It must be in the sun," he said. "There wasn't anything here but the sun in the first place, and the earth came out of the sun, and we came out of the earth. So, whatever we are, we must have been in the sun. We go back to the earth we came out of—the earth will go back to the sun that it came out of. And time means nothing—nothing at all—so in a little while we'll all be back in the sun together. I wish—"

He moved his hand uncertainly as if reaching for something, and George jumped up. "Did you want anything, grandfather?"

"What?" "Would you like a glass of water?" "No—no. No; I don't want anything." The reaching hand dropped back up on the arm of his chair, and he relapsed into silence; but a few minutes later he finished the sentence he had begun:

"I wish—somebody could tell me!" The next day he had a slight cold, but he seemed annoyed when his son suggested calling the doctor, and Amberson let him have his own way so far, in fact, that after he had got up and dressed, the following morning, he was all alone when he went away to find out what he hadn't been able to think out—all those things he had wished "somebody" would tell him.

Old Sam, shuffling in with the breakfast tray, found the Major in his accustomed easy-chair by the fireplace—and yet even the old darkey could see instantly that the Major was not there.

CHAPTER XX.

When the great Amberson estate went into court for settlement, "there wasn't any," George Amberson said—that is, when the settlement was concluded there was no estate. He reproached himself bitterly for not having long ago discovered that his father had never given Isabel a deed to her house. "And those pigs, Sydney and Amelia!" he added, for this was another thing he was bitter about.

"They won't do anything. I'm sorry I gave them the opportunity of making a polished refusal. The estate was badly crippled, even before they took out their 'third,' and the 'third' they took was the only good part of the rotten apple. Well, I didn't ask them for restitution on my own account, and at least it will save you some trouble, young George. Never waste any time writing to them; you mustn't count on them."

"I don't," George said quietly. "I don't count on anything."

"Oh, we'll not feel that things are quite desperate," Amberson laughed,

but not with great cheerfulness. "We'll survive, George—you will, especially. For my part I'm a little too old and too accustomed to fall back on somebody else for supplies to start a big fight with life; I'll be content with just surviving, and I can do it on an eighteen-hundred-dollar-a-year consularship. An ex-congressman can always be pretty sure of getting some such job, and I hear from Washington the matter's about settled. So much for me! But you—of course you've had a poor training for making your own way, but you're only a boy after all, and the stuff of the old stock is in you. It'll come out and do something. I'll never forgive myself about that deed; it would have given you something substantial to start with. Still, you have a little tiny bit, and you'll have a little tiny salary, too; and of course your Aunt Fanny's here, and she's got something you can fall back on if you get too pinched, until I can begin to send you a dribble now and then."

George's "little tiny bit" was six hundred dollars which had come to him from the sale of his mother's furniture; and the "little tiny salary" was eight dollars a week which old Frank Bronson was to pay him for services as a clerk and student-at-law. George had accepted haughtily, and thereby removed a burden from his uncle's mind.

Amberson himself, however, had not even a "tiny bit," though he got his consular appointment, and to take him to his post he found it necessary to borrow two hundred of his nephew's six hundred dollars. "It makes me sick, George," he said. "But I'd better get there and get that salary started. Of course Eugene would do anything in the world, and the fact is he wanted to, but I felt that—ah—under the circumstances—"

"Never!" George exclaimed, growing red. "I can't imagine one of the family—" He paused, not finding it necessary to explain that "the family" shouldn't turn a man from the door and then accept favors from him. "I wish you'd take more."

Amberson declined. "One thing I'll say for you, young George: you have a stinky bone in your body. That's the Amberson stock in you—and I like it!"

He added something to this praise of his nephew on the day he left for Washington. He was not to return, but to set forth from the capital on the long journey to his post. George went with him to the station, and their farewell was lengthened by the train's being several minutes late.

"I may not see you again, George," Amberson said, and his voice was a little husky as he set a kind hand on the young man's shoulder. "It's quite probable that from this time on we'll only know each other by letter—until you're notified as my next of kin that there's an old valise to be forwarded to you, and perhaps some dusty curios from the consulate mantelpiece. Well, it's an odd way for us to be saying good-bye; one wouldn't have thought it, even a few years ago, but here we are, two gentlemen of elegant appearance in a state of bustitude. We can't ever tell what will happen at all, can we? Life and money both behave like loose quicksilver in a nest of cracks. And when they're gone we can't tell where—or what the devil we did with 'em! But I believe I'll say now—while there isn't much time left for either of us to get embarrassed about it—I believe I'll say that I've always been fond of you. We all spoiled you terribly when you were a little boy and let you grow up on principle—and I must say you took to it! But you've received a pretty heavy jolt, and I had enough of your disposition, myself, at your age, to understand a little of what cocksure youth has to go through inside when it finds that it can make terrible mistakes. Well, with my train coming into the shed, you'll forgive me for saying that there have been times when I thought you ought to be hanged—but I've always been fond of you, and now I like you! And just for a last word; there may be somebody else in this town who's always felt about you like that—fond of you, I mean, no matter how much it seemed you ought to be hanged. You might try—Hello, I must run. I'll send back the money as fast as they pay me—so, good-bye and God bless you, George!"

He passed through the gates, waved his hat cheerfully from the other side of the iron screen, and was lost from sight in the hurrying crowd. And as he disappeared, an unexpected poignant loneliness fell upon his nephew so heavily and so suddenly that he had no energy to recoil from the shock. It seemed to him that the last fragment of his familiar world had disappeared, leaving him all alone forever.

He walked homeward slowly through what appeared to be the strange city, and, as a matter of fact, the city was strange to him. He had seen little of it during his years in college, and then had followed the long absence and his tragic return. Since that he had been "scarcely outdoors at all" as Fanny complained, warning him

that his health would suffer, and he had been downtown only in a closed carriage. He had not realized the great change.

The streets were thunderous, a vast energy heaved under the universal coating of dinginess. George walked through the begrimed crowds of hurrying strangers and saw no face that he remembered. Great numbers of faces were even of a kind he did not remember ever to have seen; they were partly like the old type that his boyhood knew, and partly like types he knew abroad. He saw German eyes with American wrinkles at their corners; he saw Irish eyes and Neapolitan eyes, Roman eyes, Tuscan eyes, eyes of Lombardy, of Savoy, Hungarian eyes, Balkan eyes, Scandinavian eyes—all with a queer American look in them. He saw Jews who were no longer German or Russian or Polish Jews. All the people were soiled by the smoke-mist through which they hurried, under the heavy sky that hung close upon the new skyscrapers, and nearly all seemed hurried by something impending, though here and there a woman with bundles would be laughing to a companion about some adventure of the department store, or perhaps an escape from the charging traffic of the streets—and not infrequently a girl, or a free-and-easy young matron, found time to throw an encouraging look to George.

He took no note of these, and, leaving the crowded sidewalks, turned

avenue met Amberson boulevard here at an obtuse angle, and the removal of the pillars made the boulevard seem a cross street of no overpowering importance—certainly it did not seem to be a boulevard!

George walked by the Mansion hurriedly, and came home to his mother's house for the last time.

Emptiness was there, too, and the closing of the door resounded through bare rooms; for downstairs there was no furniture in the house except a kitchen table in the dining room, which Fanny had kept "for dinner," she said, though as she was to cook and serve that meal herself George had his doubts about her name for it. Upstairs, she had retained her own furniture, and George had been living in his mother's room, having sent everything from his own to the auction. Isabel's room was still as it had been, but the furniture would be moved with Fanny's to new quarters in the morning. Fanny had made plans for her nephew as well as herself; she had found a "three-room kitchenette apartment" in an apartment house where several old friends of hers had established themselves—elderly widows of citizens—once "prominent" and other retired gentry. People used their own "kitchenettes" for breakfast and lunch, but there was a table-d'hot arrangement for dinner on the ground floor; and after dinner bridge was played all evening, an attraction powerful with Fanny. She had "made all the arrangements," she reported, and nervously appealed for approval, asking if she hadn't shown herself "pretty practical" in such matters. George acquiesced absent-mindedly, not thinking of what she said and not realizing to what it committed him.

He began to realize it now, as he wandered about the dismantled house; he was far from sure that he was willing to live in a "three-room apartment" with Fanny and eat breakfast and lunch with her (prepared by herself in the "kitchenette") and dinner at the table-d'hot in "such a pretty Colonial dining room" (so Fanny described it) at a little round table they would have all to themselves in the midst of a dozen little round tables which other relics of disrupted families would have all to themselves. For the first time, now that the change was imminent, George began to develop before his mind's eye pictures of what he was in for; and they appalled him. He decided that such a life verged upon the sheerly unbearable, and that after all there were some things left that he just couldn't stand. So he made up his mind to speak to his aunt about it at "dinner," and tell her that he preferred to ask Bronson to let him put a sofa-bed, a trunk and a folding rubber bathtub behind a screen in the dark rear room of the office.

But at "dinner" Fanny was nervous, and so distressed about the failure of her efforts with sweetbreads and macaroni; and she was so eager in her talk of how comfortable they would be "by this time tomorrow night."

After "dinner" he went upstairs, moving his hand slowly along the smooth walnut railing of the balustrade. Half way to the landing he stopped, turned, and stood looking down at the heavy doors masking the black emptiness that had been the library. Here he had stood on what he now knew was the worst day of his life; here he had stood when his mother passed through that doorway, hand-in-hand with her brother, to learn what her son had done.

He went on more heavily, more slowly; and, more heavily and slowly still, entered Isabel's room and shut the door. He did not come forth again, and bade Fanny good-night through the closed door when she stopped outside it later.

"I've put all the lights out, George," she said. "Everything's all right."

"Very well," he called. "Good night, Aunt Fanny."

His voice had a strangled sound in spite of him; but she seemed not to notice it, and he heard her go to her own room and lock herself in with bolt and key against burglars. She had said the one thing she should not have said just then: "I'm sure your mother's watching over you, George." She had meant to be kind, but it destroyed his last chance for sleep that night. He would have slept little if she had not said it, but since she had said it he did not sleep at all. For he knew that it was true—if it could be true—that his mother, if she still lived in spirit, would be weeping on the other side of the wall of silence, weeping and seeking for some gate to let her through so that she could come and "watch over him."

He felt that if there were such gates they were surely barred; they were like those awful library doors downstairs, which had shut her in to begin the suffering to which he had consigned her.

The room was still Isabel's. Nothing had been changed: even the photographs of George, of the Major and of "brother George" still stood on her dressing table, and in a drawer of her desk was an old picture of Eugene and Lucy, taken together, which George had found but had slowly closed away again from sight, not touching it. Tomorrow everything would be gone; and he had heard there was not long to wait before the house itself would be demolished. The very space which tonight was still Isabel's room would be cut into new shapes by new walls and floors and ceilings; yet the room would always live, for it could not die out of George's memory. It would always be as long as he did, and it would always be murmurous with a tragic, wistful whispering.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"There Have Been Times When I Thought You Ought to Be Hanged."



"I Did the Right Thing, I Tell You."

I did the only right thing! You think I was wrong!" "I'm not saying so," she said. "You did at the time!" he cried. "You said enough then, I think. Well, what have you to say now, if you're so sure I was wrong?" "Nothing, George." "It's only because you're afraid to!" he said, and he went on with a sudden bitter divination: "You're reproaching yourself with what you had to do with all that; and you're trying to make up for it by doing and saying what you think mother would want you to, and you think I couldn't stand it if I got to thinking I might have done differently. Oh, I know! That's exactly what's in your mind: you do think I was wrong! So does Uncle George. I challenged him about it the other day, and he answered just