The Magnificent Ambersons

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

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"I'm not sure, Georgie. When I was your age I was like you in many ways, especially in not being very cool-headed, so I can't say. Youth can't be trusted for much, except asserting itself and fighting and making love."

"Indeed!" George snorted. "May I ask what you think I ought to have done?"

"Nothing."

"'Nothing?'" George echoed, mocking bitterly. "I suppose you think I mean to let my mother's good name—"

"Your mother's good name!" Amberson cut him off impatiently. "Nobody has a good name in a bad mouth. Nobody has a good name in a silly mouth, either. Well, your mother's name was in some silly mouths, and all you've done was to go and have a scene with the worst old woman gossip in the town—a scene that's going to make her into a partisan against your mother, whereas she was a mere prattler before. Don't you suppose she'll be all over town with this tomorrow? And she'll see to it that everybody who's hinted anything about poor Isabel will know that you're on the warpath; and that will put them on the defensive and make them vicious. The story will grow as it spreads and—"

George unfolded his arms to strike his right fist into his left palm. "But do you suppose I'm going to tolerate such things?" he shouted. "What do you suppose I'll be doing?"

"You can do absolutely nothing," said Amberson. "Nothing of any use. The more you do the more harm you'll do."

"You'll see! I'm going to stop this thing if I have to force my way into every house on National avenue and Amberson boulevard!"

His uncle laughed rather sourly but made no other comment.

"Well, what do you propose to do?" George demanded. "Do you propose to sit there—"

"Yes."

"—and let this riffraff bandy my mother's good name back and forth among them? Is that what you propose to do?"

"It's all I can do," Amberson returned. "It's all any of us can do now: just sit still and hope that the thing may die down in time in spite of your stirring up that awful old woman."

George drew a long breath, then advanced and stood close before his uncle. "Didn't you understand me when I told you that people are saying my mother means to marry this man?"

"Yes, I understood you."

"You say that my going over there has made matters worse," George went on. "How about it if such a—such an unspeakable marriage did take place? Do you think that would make people believe they'd been wrong in saying—you know what they say."

"No," said Amberson deliberately; "I don't believe it would. But it wouldn't hurt Isabel and Eugene, if they never heard of it; and if they did hear of it, then they could take their choice between placating gossip or living for their own happiness. If they have decided to marry—"

George almost staggered. Good heaven!" he gasped. "You speak of it calmly!"

Amberson looked up at him inquiringly. "Why shouldn't they marry if they want to?" he asked. "It's their own affair. I don't see anything precisely monstrous about two people getting married when they're both free and care about each other. What's the matter with their marrying?"

"It would be monstrous!" George shouted. "Monstrous even if this horrible thing hadn't happened, but now in the face of this—oh, that you can sit there and even speak of it! Your own sister! Oh—" He became incoherent, swinging away from Amberson and making for the door, wildly gesturing.

"For heaven's sake don't be so theatrical!" said his uncle, and then, seeing that George was leaving the room: "Come back here. You mustn't speak to your mother of this!"

"Don't 'tend to," George said indistinctly, and he plunged into the big, dimly lit hall. He went home and got a hat and overcoat without seeing either his mother or Fanny. Then he left word that he would be out for dinner and hurried away from the house.

He walked the dark streets of Amberson addition for an hour, then went downtown and got coffee at a restaurant. After that he walked through the lighted parts of the town until ten o'clock, when he turned north and came back to the purlieus of the Addition. He walked fiercely, though his feet ached, but by and by he turned homeward, and, when he reached the Major's, went in and sat upon the steps of the huge stone veranda in front—an obscure figure in that lonely and repellent place. All lights were out at the Major's, and finally, after twelve, he saw his mother's window darken at home.

He waited half an hour longer, then crossed the front yards of the new houses and let himself noiselessly in the front door. The light in the hall had been left burning, and another in his own room, as he discovered when he got there. He locked the door quickly and without noise, but his fingers were still upon the key when there was a quick footfall in the hall outside.

"Georgie, dear?"

He went to the other end of the room before replying.

"Yes?"

"I'd been wondering where you were, dear."

"Had you?"

There was a pause; then she said timidly: "Wherever it was, I hope you had a pleasant evening."

After a silence, "Thank you," he said without expression.

Another silence followed before she spoke again.

"You wouldn't care to be kissed good night, I suppose?" And with a little flurry of placative laughter she added: "At your age of course!"

"I'm going to bed now," he said. "Good night."

Another silence seemed blanker than those which had preceded it, and finally her voice came—it was blank, too.

"Good night."

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After he was in bed his thoughts became more tumultuous than ever; while among all the inchoate and fragmentary sketches of this dreadful day, now rising before him the clearest was of his uncle collapsed in a big chair with a white tie dangling from his hand; and one conviction, following upon that picture, became definite in George's mind: that his Uncle George Amberson was a hopeless dreamer, from whom no help need be expected, an amiable imbecile lacking in normal impulses, and wholly useless in a struggle which required honor to be defended by a man of action.

Then would return a vision of Mrs. Johnson's furious round head, set behind her great bosom like the sun far sunk on the horizon of a mountain plateau and her crackling, asthmatic voice. . . . "Without sharing in other people's disposition to put an evil interpretation on what may be nothing more than unfortunate appearance" . . . "Other people may be less considerate in not confining their discussion of it, as I have, to charitable views." . . . And then George would get up again—and again—and pace the floor in his bare feet.

That was what the tormented young man was doing when daylight came gauntly in at his window—pacing the floor, rubbing his head in his hands, and muttering:

"It can't be true: this can't be happening to me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

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Breakfast was brought to him in his room as usual; but he did not make his normal healthy raid upon the dainty tray: the food remained untouched, and he sustained himself upon coffee—four cups of it, which left nothing of value inside the glistening little percolator. During this process he heard his mother being summoned to the telephone in the hall, not far from his door, and then her voice responding: "Yes? Oh, it's you! . . . Indeed I should! . . . Of course . . . Then I'll expect you about three. . . . Yes. . . . Goodby till then." A few minutes later he heard her speaking to someone beneath his window, and, looking out, saw her directing the removal of plants from a small garden bed to the Major's conservatory for the winter. She laughed gayly with the Major's gardener over something he said, and this unconcerned cheerfulness of her was terrible to her son.

He went to his desk, and, searching the jumbled contents of a drawer, brought forth a large, unframed photograph of his father, upon which he gazed long and piteously, till at last hot tears stood in his eyes. "Poor, poor father!" the son whispered brokenly. "Poor man, I'm glad you didn't know!"

He wrapped the picture in a sheet of newspaper, put it under his arm, and, leaving the house hurriedly and steadily, went downtown to the shop of a silversmith, where he spent sixty dollars on a resplendently festooned silver frame for the picture. Having lunched upon more coffee, he returned to the house at two o'clock, carrying the framed photograph with him, and placed it upon the center table in the library, the room most used by Isabel and Fanny and himself. Then he went to a front window of the long "reception room," and sat looking out through the lace curtains.

George looked often at his watch, but his vigil did not last an hour. At ten minutes of three, peering through the curtain, he saw an automobile stop in front of the house and Eugene Morgan jump lightly down from it. The car was of a new pattern, low and long, with an ample seat in the tonneau, facing forward; and a professional driver sat at the wheel, a strange figure in leather goggled out of all personality and seemingly part of the mechanism.

Eugene himself, as he came up the cement path to the house, was a figure of the new era which was in time to be so disastrous to stiff hats and skirted coats; and his appearance afforded a debonair contrast to that of the queer-looking duck capering at the Amberson ball in an old dress coat, and next day chugging up National avenue through the snow in his nightmare of a sewing machine. Eugene this afternoon was richly clad in new outdoor mode: his motoring coat was soft gray fur; his cap and gloves were of gray suede, and though Lucy's hand may have shown itself in the selection of these high garnitures, he wore them easily, even with a becoming hint of jauntiness. Some change might be seen in his face, too, for a successful man is seldom to be mistaken, especially if his temper be genial. Eugene had begun to look like a millionaire.

But, above everything else, what was most evident about him, as he came up the path, was his confidence in the happiness promised by his present errand; the anticipation in his eyes could have been read by a stranger. His look at the door of Isabel's house was the look of a man who is quite certain that the next moment will reveal something ineffably charming, inexpressibly dear.

. . . When the bell rang George waited at the entrance of the "reception room" until a housemaid came through the hall on her way to answer the summons.

"You needn't mind, Mary," he told her. "I'll see who it is and what they want. Probably it's only a peddler."

"Thank you, sir, Mister George," said Mary, and returned to the rear of the house.

George went slowly to the front door and halted, regarding the misty silhouette of the caller upon the ornamental frosted glass. After a minute of waiting this silhouette changed outline so that an arm could be distinguished—an arm outstretched toward the bell, as if the gentleman outside doubted whether or not it had sounded and were minded to try again. But before the gesture was completed George abruptly threw open the door and stepped squarely upon the middle of the threshold.

A slight change shadowed the face of Eugene; his look of happy anticipation gave way to something formal and polite. "How do you do, George?" he said. "Mrs. Minafer expects to go driving with me, I believe—if you'll be so kind as to send her word that I'm here."

George made not the slightest movement.

"No," he said.

Eugene was incredulous, even when his second glance revealed how hot of eye was the haggard young man before him. "I beg your pardon. I said—"

"I heard you," said George. "You said you had an engagement with my mother, I told you, No!"

Eugene gave him a steady look, and then he asked quietly: "What is the—the difficulty?"

George kept his own voice quiet enough, but that did not mitigate the vibrant fury of it. "My mother will

"You're Not Wanted in This House."

have no interest in knowing that you came for her today," he said. "Or any other day!"

Eugene continued to look at him with a scrutiny in which began to gleam a profound anger, none the less powerful because it was so quiet. "I am afraid I do not understand you."

"I doubt if I could make it much plainer," George said, raising his voice slightly. "but I'll try. You're not wanted in this house, Mr. Morgan, now or at any other time. Perhaps you'll understand—this!"

And with the last words he closed the door in Eugene's face.

Then, not moving away, he stood just inside the door, and noted that the misty silhouette remained upon the frosted glass for several moments, as if the forbidden gentleman debated in his mind what course to pursue. "Let him ring again!" George thought grimly. "Or try the side door—or the kitchen!"

But Eugene made no further attempt; the silhouette disappeared; footsteps could be heard withdrawing across the floor of the veranda; and George, returning to the window in the "reception room," was rewarded by the sight of an automobile manufacturer in baffled retreat, with all his wooing furs and fineries mocking him. Observing the heaviness of his movements as he climbed into the tonneau, George indulged in a sickish throat rumble which bore a distant cousinship to mirth.

He went to the library, and, seating himself beside the table whereon he had placed the photograph of his father, picked up a book, and pretended to be engaged in reading it.

Presently Isabel's buoyant step was heard descending the stairs. She came into the library, a fur coat over her arm, ready to put on, and two veils round her small black hat, her right hand engaged in buttoning the glove upon her left; and, as the large room contained too many pieces of heavy furniture, and the inside shutters excluded most of the light of day, she did not at once perceive George's presence. Instead, she went to the bay window at the end of the room, which afforded a view of the street, and glanced out expectantly; then bent her attention upon her glove; after that, looked out toward the street again, and turned toward the interior of the room.

"Why, Georgie!"

She came, leaned over from behind him, and there was a faint, exquisite odor as from distant apple blossoms as she kissed his cheek. "Dear, I waited lunch almost an hour for you, but you didn't come! Did you lunch out somewhere?"

"Yes." He did not look up from the book.

"Did you have plenty to eat?"

"Yes."

A tinkling bell was audible, and she moved to the doorway into the hall. "I'm going out driving, dear. I—" She interrupted herself to address the housemaid, who was passing through the hall: "I think it's Mr. Morgan, Mary. Tell him I'll be there at once."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mary returned. "'Twas a peddler, ma'am."

"Another one?" Isabel said, surprised. "I thought you said it was a peddler when the bell rang a little while ago."

"Mister George said it was, ma'am; he went to the door," Mary informed her, disappearing.

"There seem to be a great many of them," Isabel mused. "What did yours want to sell, George?"

"He didn't say."

"You must have cut him off short!" she laughed; and then, still standing in the doorway, she noticed the big silver frame upon the table beside him. "Gracious, Georgie!" she exclaimed. "You have been investing!" and as she came across the room for a closer view, "Is it—is it Lucy?" she asked half timidly, half archly. But the next instant she saw whose likeness was thus set forth in elegiac splendor—and she was silent, except for a long, just-audible "Oh!"

He neither looked up nor moved.

"That was nice of you, Georgie," she said, in a low voice presently. "I ought to have had it framed, myself, when I gave it to you."

He said nothing, and, standing beside him, she put her hand gently upon his shoulder, then as gently withdrew it, and went out of the room. But she did not go upstairs; he heard the faint rustle of her dress in the hall, and then the sound of her footsteps in the "reception room." After a time, silence succeeded even these slight tokens of her presence; whereupon George rose and went warily into the hall, taking care to make no noise, and he obtained an oblique view of her through the open double doors of the "reception room." She was sitting in the chair which he had occupied so long; and she was looking out of the window expectantly—a little troubled.

He went back to the library, waited an interminable half hour, then returned noiselessly to the same position in the hall, where he could see her. She was still sitting patiently by the window.

Waiting for that man, was she? Well, it might be quite a long wait! And the grim George silently ascended the stairs to his own room, and began to pace his suffering floor.

He left his door open, however, and when he heard the front door bell ring, by and by, he went half way down the stairs and stood to listen. He was not much afraid that Morgan would return, but he wished to make sure.

Mary appeared in the hall below him, but, after a glance toward the front of the house, turned back, and withdrew. Evidently Isabel had gone to the door. Then a murmur was heard, and George Amberson's voice, quick and serious: "I want to talk to you, Isabel" . . . and another murmur; then Isabel and her brother passed the foot of the broad, dark stairway, but did not look up, and remained unconscious of the watchful presence above them.

For a time all that George could hear was the indistinct sound of his uncle's voice: what he was saying could not be surmised, though the troubled brotherliness of his tone was evident. He seemed to be explaining something at considerable length, and there were moments when he paused, and George guessed that his mother was speaking, but her voice must have been very low, for it was entirely inaudible to him.

Suddenly he did hear her. Through the heavy doors her outcry came, clear and loud:

"Oh, no!"

It was a cry of protest, as if something her brother told her must be untrue, or, if it were true, the fact he stated must be undone; and it was a sound of sheer pain.

Another sound of pain, close to George, followed it; this was a vehement sniffling which broke out just above him, and, looking up, he saw Fanny Minafer on the landing, leaning over the banisters and applying her handkerchief to her eyes and nose.

"I can guess what that was about," she whispered huskily. "He's just told her what you did to Eugene!"

George gave her a dark look over his shoulder. "You go on back to your room!" he said; and he began to descend the stairs; but Fanny, guessing his purpose, rushed down and caught his arm, detaining him.

"You're not going in there?" she whispered huskily: "You don't—"

"Let go of me!"

But she clung to him savagely. "No, you don't, George Minafer! You'll keep away from there! You will!"

"You let go of—"

"I won't! You come back here! You'll come upstairs and let them alone; that's what you'll do!" And with such passionate determination did she clutch and tug, never losing a grip of him somewhere, though George tried as much as he could, without hurting her, to wrench away—with such utter forgetfulness of her maiden dignity did she assault him, that she forced him, stumbling upward, to the landing.

"Of all the ridiculous—" he began furiously; but she spared one hand from its grasp of his sleeve and clapped it over his mouth.

"Hush up!" Never for an instant in this grotesque struggle did Fanny raise her voice above a husky whisper. "Hush up! It's indecent—like squabbling outside the door of an operating room! Go on to the top of the stairs—go on!"

And when George had most unwillingly obeyed, she planted herself in his way, on the top step. "There!" she said. "The idea of your going in there now! I never heard of such a thing!" And with the sudden departure of the nervous vigor she had shown so amazingly, she began to cry again. "I was an awful fool. Do you suppose I dreamed you'd go making everything into such a tragedy? Do you?"

"I don't care what you dreamed," George muttered.

But Fanny went on, always taking care to keep her voice from getting too loud, in spite of her most grievous agitation: "Do you dream I thought you'd go making such a fool of yourself at Mrs. Johnson's? Oh, I saw her this morning! She wouldn't talk to me, but I met George Amberson on my way back, and he told me what you'd done over there! And do you dream I thought you'd do what you've done here this afternoon to Eugene? Oh, I knew that, too! Of course he went to George Amberson about it, and that's why George is here. He's got to tell Isabel the whole thing now, and you wanted to go in there interfering—God knows what! You stay here and let her brother tell her; he's got some consideration for her!"

"I suppose you think I haven't!" George said, and at that Fanny laughed witheringly.

"You! Considerate of anybody!"

"I'm considerate of her good name!" he said hotly. "It seems to me that's about the first thing to be considerate of, in being considerate of a person! And look here; it strikes me you're taking a pretty different tack from what you did yesterday afternoon!"

Fanny wrung her hands. "I did a terrible thing!" she lamented. "Now that it's done and too late, I know what it was! I didn't have sense enough just to let things go on. I didn't have any business to interfere, and I didn't mean to interfere—I only wanted to talk, and let out a little! I did think you already knew everything I told you. I did! And I'd rather have cut off my hand than stir you up to doing what you have done! I was just suffering so that I wanted to let out a little—I didn't mean any real harm. But now I see what's happened—or, I was a fool! I haven't any business interfering. Eugene never would have looked at me, anyhow, and, oh, why couldn't I have seen that before! He never came here a single time in his life except on her account, never! and I might have let them alone, because he wouldn't have looked at me even if he'd never seen Isabel. And they haven't done any harm; she made Wilbur happy, and she was a true wife to him as long as he lived. It wasn't a crime for her to care for Eugene all the time; she certainly never told him she did—and she gave me every chance in the world! She left us alone together every time she could—even since Wilbur died—but what was the use? And here I go, not doing myself a bit of good by it, and just"—Fanny wrung her hands again—"just ruining them!"

"I suppose you mean I'm doing that," George said bitterly.

"No. She doesn't let anybody know, but she goes to the doctor regularly."

"Women are always going to doctors regularly."

"No. He told her to."

George was not impressed. "It's nothing at all; she spoke of it to me years ago—some kind of family failing. She said grandfather had it, too; and look at him! Hasn't proved very serious with him! You act as if I'd done something wrong in sending that man about his business, and as if I were going to persecute my mother, instead of protecting her. By Jove, it's sickening! You told me how all the riffraff in town were busy with her name, and then the minute I lift my hand to protect her, you begin to attack me and—"

"Sh!" Fanny checked him, laying her hand on his arm. "Your uncle is going."

The library doors were heard opening, and a moment later there came the sound of the front door closing.

George moved toward the head of the stairs, then stood listening, but the house was silent.

Fanny made a slight noise with her lips to attract his attention, and, when he glanced toward her, shook her head

"Of All the Ridiculous—" He Began Furiously.

at him urgently. "Let her alone," she whispered. "She's down there by herself. Don't go down. Let her alone."

She moved a few steps toward him and halted, her face pallid and awestruck, and then both stood listening for anything that might break the silence downstairs. No sound came to them; that poignant silence was continued throughout long, long minutes, while the two listeners stood there under its mysterious spell; and in its plaintive eloquence—speaking, as it did, of the figure alone in the big, dark library, where dead Wilbur's new silver frame gleamed in the dimness—There was something that checked even George.

Fanny Minafer broke the long silence with a sound from her throat, a stifled gasp; and with that great companion of hers, her handkerchief, retired softly to the loneliness of her own chamber. After she had gone George looked about him bleakly, then on tiptoe crossed the hall and went into his own room, which was filled with twilight. Still tiptoeing, though he could not have said why, he went across the room and sat down heavily in a chair facing the window. Outside there was nothing but the darkening air and the wall of the nearest of the new houses. He had not slept at all the night before and he had eaten nothing since the preceding day at lunch, but he felt neither drowsiness nor hunger. His set determination filled him, kept him but too wide awake, and his gaze at the grayness beyond the window was wide-eyed and bitter.

Darkness had closed in when there was a step in the room behind him. Then someone knelt beside the chair, two arms went round him with infinite compassion, a gentle head rested against his shoulder, and there came the faint scent of apple-blossoms far away.

"You mustn't be troubled darling," his mother whispered.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Machine Shapes Masts.

A machine has been built which will shape masts up to 100 feet in length and three feet in diameter. The timber is set up in the machine and revolved at a speed of 50 revolutions a minute, and it is shaped by a cutter head which is electrically driven at the rate of 700 revolutions a minute. This cutter head is mounted on a carriage, which is moved along the timber against a rail set to give the proper profile to the mast. Heretofore this work has been done by hand and required skilled workmen. At best it has been a slow and laborious task