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The Magnificent Ambersons

BOOTH TARKINGTON

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Major Amberson had 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 the Midland City had ever seen.

CHAPTER II—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 was only one child, however, George Amberson Minafer, but his upbringing and his youthful accomplishments as a mischief maker was quite in keeping with the most pessimistic predictions.

CHAPTER III—By the time George went away to college he did not attempt to conceal his belief that the Ambersons were about the most important family in the world. His Aunt Fanny, given in his honor when he returned from college, George introduced Lucy Morgan, a stranger and the prettiest girl present, and got on famously with her until he learned that a "queer looking duck" at whom he had been poking much fun, was the young lady's father. He was Eugene Morgan, a former resident of Bigburg, and he was returning there to erect a factory and to build horseless carriages of his own invention.

CHAPTER IV—Eugene was an old admirer of Isabel and the fact had been engaged when Isabel threw him over because of some youthful indiscretion and married Wilbur Minafer.

CHAPTER V—George made rapid progress in his courtship of Lucy.

CHAPTER VI—While driving with Lucy, next day, George allows the horse to get beyond control, and the animal overturns the cutter, spilling George and Lucy in the snow, unhurt, although George is greatly annoyed.

CHAPTER VII—George reveals intense dislike of Morgan, whom he suspects of financial designs on his uncle or grandfather. His Aunt Fanny, Minafer, to his great astonishment, sharply rebukes him.

CHAPTER VIII—Home on vacation, George has a heart-to-heart talk with his mother, in which the state of the family finances and his father's falling health, both figure. George is optimistic as to both.

CHAPTER IX—Hearing rumors concerning Lucy and her suitors—in particular, Kinney—George urges her to consent to a formal engagement of marriage, but Lucy refuses.

CHAPTER X—George becomes annoyed at gossip which connects his mother's name with Eugene Morgan, and rightly rebukes his Aunt Amelia for her remarks on the subject. Aunt Fanny is sympathetic but somewhat bewildering.

CHAPTER XI—The sudden death of his father, following graduation, recalls George from college.

CHAPTER XII—Lucy and George talk of ideals of life, which they find surprisingly different and part in something which very nearly approaches a quarrel.

CHAPTER XIII—At a dinner given by Major Amberson, at which Eugene Morgan is a guest, George plainly shows his animosity to his mother's old friend.

of himself; and no young gentleman in the world was more loath than George Amberson Minafer to look a figure of fun. And while he stood here, unobtainably such a figure, with faint and Mary Sharon threatening to faint at any moment, if laughter were longer denied them, Lucy sat looking at him with her eyebrows delicately lifted in casual, polite inquiry. Her own complete composure was what most galled him.

"Nothing of the slightest importance," he managed to say. "I was just leaving. Good-afternoon!" And with long strides he reached the door and hastened through the hall; but before he closed the door he heard from Janie and Mary Sharon the outburst of wild, irrepressible emotion which his performance had inspired.

He drove home in a tumultuous mood, and almost ran down two ladies who were engaged in absorbing conversation at a crossing. They were his Aunt Fanny and Mrs. Johnson; a work of the reins at the last instant saved them by a few inches; but their conversation was so interesting that they were unaware of their danger, and did not notice the rumpshot, nor how close it came to them.

He drove into the Major's stable too fast, the snarling Penderennis snatched himself from going through a partition by a swerve which splintered a shaft of the rumpshot and almost threw the driver to the floor. George swore, and then swore again at the fat old darkey, Tom, for giggling at his swearing.

He strode from the stable, crossed the Major's back yard, then passed behind the new houses, on his way home. These structures were now approaching completion, but still in a state of rawness hideous to George—though, for that matter, they were never to be anything except hideous to him.

In this temper he emerged from behind the house nearest his own and, glancing toward the street, saw his mother standing with Eugene Morgan upon the cement path that led to the front gate. She was bareheaded and Eugene held his hat and stick in his hand; evidently he had been calling upon her, and she had come from the house with him, continuing their conversation and delaying their parting.

George stared at them. A hot dislike struck him at the sight of Eugene; and a vague revulsion, like a strange, unpleasant taste in his mouth, came over him as he looked at his mother; her manner was eloquent of so much thought about her companion and of such reliance upon him.

The two began to walk on toward the gate, where they stopped, turning to face each other, and Isabel's glance, passing Eugene, fell upon George. Instantly she smiled and waved her hand to him, while Eugene turned and nodded; but George, standing as if some rigid trance, and staring straight at them, gave these signals of greeting



Gave These Signals of Greeting No Sign of Recognition Whatever.

no sign of recognition whatever. Upon this, Isabel called to him, waving her hand again.

"George!" she called, laughing. "Wake up, dear! George, hello!"

George turned away as if he had neither seen nor heard, and stalked into the house by the side door.

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 "Riff-raff!" 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 riff-raff, 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-mounted pink shield on the end of his Aunt Amelia'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—"

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 what out for myself?"

"How people are talking about your mother."

Except for the incidental fearfulness of her voice, her tone was casual, as though she mentioned a subject not at all 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 know 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'? What do you mean, 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 desperately. "I think you did come as much to see me as anything—for a while it looked like it. He did get 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—"

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