

The PRINCE of GRAUSTARK

By GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

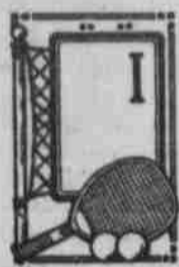
Author of BEVERLY of GRAUSTARK, BREWSTER'S MILLIONS, Etc.

Illustrations by R. F. Schabelitz.



The Prince remained in the far court, idly twirling his racket. Mrs. King could hardly believe her eyes. ... Mr. Blithers was paying his first visit to Red Roof.

RETROSPECTIVE—Prince Robin of Graustark, traveling about the world, arrives in the Catskills to visit the Truxton Kings. W. W. Blithers, self-made multimillionaire and doting father of an only daughter, Maud, prematurely decides on the Prince as a son-in-law. He knows that Graustark is financially embarrassed as a result of the Balkan wars, and with the Blithers millions in mind he confides his domestic ambition to his wife.



I REPEAT: Prince Robin was as handsome a chap as you'll see in a week's journey. He was just under six feet, slender, erect and strong in the way that a fine blade is strong. His hair was dark and straight, his eyes blue-black, his cheek brown and ruddy with the health of a life well-ordered. Nose, mouth and chin were clean-cut and indicative of power, while his brow was broad and smooth, with a surface so serene that it might have belonged to a woman. At first glance you would have taken him for a healthy, eager American athlete, just out of college, but that aforementioned seriousness in his deep-set, thoughtful eyes would have caused you to think twice before pronouncing him a fledgling. He had enjoyed life, he had made the most of his play-days, but always there had hung over his young head the shadow of the cross that would have to be supported to the end of his reign, through thick and thin, through joy and sorrow, through peace and strife.

Toward the end of his first week at Red Roof, the summer home of the Truxton Kings, he might have been found on the broad lawn late one afternoon, playing tennis with his hostess, the lovely and vivacious "Aunt Loraine." To him, Mrs. King would always be "Aunt Loraine," even as he would never be anything but Bobby to her.

She was several years under forty and as light and active as a young girl. Her smooth cheek glowed with the happiness and thrill of the sport, and he was hard put to hold his own against her, even though she insisted that he play his level best.

Truxton King, stalwart and lazy, lounged on the turf, umpiring the game, attended by two pretty young girls, a lieutenant in flannels and the ceremonious Count Quinnox, iron-gray and gaunt-faced battleman with the sabre scars on his cheek and the bullet wound in his side.

"Good work, Rainie," shouted the umpire as his wife safely placed the ball far out of her opponent's reach.

"Hi!" shouted Robin, turning on him with a scowl. "You're not supposed to cheer anybody, d' you understand? You're only an umpire."

"Outburst of excitement, Kid," apologized the umpire complacently. "Couldn't help it. Forty thirty. Get busy."

"He called him 'kid,'" whispered one of the young girls to the other.

"Well, I heard the Prince call Mr. King 'Truck' a little while ago," whispered the other.

"Isn't he good-looking?" sighed the first one.

They were sisters, very young, and lived in the cottage across the road with their widowed mother. Their existence was quite unknown to Mr. and Mrs. Blithers, although the amiable Maud was rather nice to them. She had once picked them up in her automobile when she encountered them walking to the station. After that she called them by their Christian names, and generously asked them to call her Maud. It might appear from this that Maud suffered somewhat from loneliness in the great house on the hill. The Felton girls had known Robin a scant three-quarters of an hour and were deeply in love with him. Fannie was eighteen and Nellie but little more than sixteen. He was their first Prince.

"Whee-ee!" shrieked Mrs. King, going madly after a return that her opponent had lobbed over the net. She missed.

"Deuce," said her husband laconically. A servant was crossing the lawn with a tray of iced drinks. As he neared the recumbent group he paused irresolutely and allowed his gaze to shift toward the road below. Then he came on and as he drew alongside the interested umpire he leaned over and spoke in a low tone of voice.

"What?" remanded King, squinting.

"Just coming in the gate, sir," said the footman. King shot a glance over his shoulder and then sat up in astonishment.

"Good Lord! Blithers! What the deuce can he be doing here? I say, Loraine! Hi!"

"Vantage in," cried his pretty wife, dashing a stray lock from her eyes.

MR. KING'S astonishment was genuine. It might better have been pronounced bewilderment. Mr. Blithers was paying his first visit to Red Roof. Up to this minute it is doubtful if he ever had accorded it so much as a glance of interest in passing. He bowed to King occasionally at the station, but that was all.

But now his manner was exceedingly friendly as he advanced upon the group. One might have been pardoned in believing him to be a most intimate friend of the family and given to dropping in at any and all hours of the day.

The game was promptly interrupted. It would not be far from wrong to say that Mrs. King's pretty mouth was open not entirely as an aid to breathing. She couldn't believe her eyes as she slowly abandoned her court and came forward to meet their advancing visitor.

"Take my racket, dear," she said to one of the Feltons. It happened to be Fannie, and the poor child almost fainted with joy.

The Prince remained in the far court, idly twirling his racket.

"Afternoon, King," said Mr. Blithers, doffing his panama—to fan a heated brow. "Been watching the game from the road for a spell. Out for a stroll. Couldn't resist running in for a minute. You play a beautiful game, Mrs. King. How do you do! Pretty hot work, though, isn't it?"

He was shaking hands with King and smiling genially upon the trim, panting figure of the Prince's adversary.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Blithers," said King, still staring. "You—you know my wife?"

Mr. Blithers ignored what might have been regarded as an introduction, and blandly announced that tennis wasn't a game for fat people, patting his somewhat aggressive extension in mock dolefulness as he spoke.

"You should see my daughter play," he went on, scarcely heeding Mrs. King's tactless remark that she affected the game because she had a horror of getting fat. "Corking, she is, and as quick as a cat. Got a medal at Lakewood last spring. I'll fix up a match soon, Mrs. King, between you and Maud. Ought to be worth going miles to see, eh, King?"

"Oh, I am afraid, Mr. Blithers, that I am not in your daughter's class," said Loraine King, much too innocently.

"We've got a pretty fair tennis court up at Blitherwood," said Mr. Blithers calmly. "I have a professional instructor up every week to play with Maud. She can trim most of the amateurs so—"

"May I offer you a drink of some kind, Mr. Blithers?" asked King, recovering his poise to some extent. "We are having lemonades, but perhaps you'd prefer something—"

"Lemonade will do for me, thanks," said the visitor affably. "We ought to run in on each other a little more often than—thanks! By jove, it looks refreshing. Your health, Mrs. King. Too bad to drink a lady's health in lemonade but—the sentiment's the same."

He was looking over her shoulder at the bounding Prince in the far court as he spoke, and it seemed that he held his glass a trifle too high in proposing the toast.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Blithers," mumbled King. "Permit me to introduce Count Quinnox and Lieutenant Dank." Both of the foreigners had arisen