

Beginning the Great New Serial Story

The PRINCE of GRAUSTARK

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"MY DEAR," said Mr. Blithers, with decision, "you can't tell me."

"I know I can't," said his wife, quite as positively. She knew when she could tell him a thing and when she couldn't.

It was quite impossible to impart information to Mr. Blithers when he had the tips of two resolute fingers embedded in his ears. That happened to be his customary and rather unfair method of conquering her when an argument was going against him, not for want of logic on his part, but because it was easier to express himself with his ears closed than with them open. By this means he effectually shut out the voice of opposition and had the discussion all to himself. Of course, it would have been more convincing if he had been permitted to hear the sound of his own eloquence; still, it was effective.

She was sure to go on talking for two or three minutes and then subside in despair. A woman will not talk to a stone wall. Nor will she wantonly allow an argument to die while there remains the slightest chance of its survival. Given the same situation, a man would get up and leave his wife sitting there with her fingers in her ears; and, as he bolted from the room in high dudgeon, he would be mean enough to call attention to her pig-headedness. In most cases, a woman is content to listen to a silly argument rather than to leave the room just because her husband elects to be childish about a perfectly simple elucidation of the truth.

MRS. BLITHERS had lived with Mr. Blithers, more or less, for twenty-five years, and she knew him like a book. He was a forceful person who would have his own way, even though he had to put his fingers in his ears to get it. At one period of their joint connubial agreement, when he had succeeded in accumulating a pitiful hoard amounting to but little more than ten millions of dollars, she concluded to live abroad for the purpose of educating their daughter, allowing him in the meantime to increase his fortune to something like fifty millions without having to worry about household affairs. But she had sojourned with him long enough, at odd times, to realize that, so long as he lived, he would never run away from an argument—unless, by some dreadful hook or crook, he should be so unfortunate as to be deprived of the use of both hands. She found room to gloat, of course, in the fact that he was obliged to stop up his ears in order to shut out the incontrovertible.

Moreover, when he called her "my dear" instead of the customary Lou, it was a sign of supreme obstinacy on his part and could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be regarded as an indication of placid affection. He always said "my dear" at the top of his voice and with a great deal of irascibility.

Mr. William W. Blithers was a self-made man who had begun his career by shouting lustily at a team of mules in a railway construction camp. Other drivers had tried to improve on his vocabulary but even the mules were able to appreciate the futility of such an ambition, and later on, when he came to own two or three railroads, to say nothing of a few mines and a steam yacht, his ability to drive men was even more noteworthy than his power over the jackasses had been. But driving mules and men was one thing, driving a wife another. What incentive has a man, said he, when after he gets through bullying a creature that very creature turns in and caresses him! No self-respecting mule ever did such a thing as that, and no man would think of it except with horror. There is absolutely no defense against a creature who will rub your head with loving, gentle fingers after she has worked you up to the point where you could kill her with pleas-

"Say, ain't that Maudie coming up the drive now?" said Mr. Blithers



ure—or at least so said Mr. Blithers with rueful frequency.

Mr. and Mrs. Blithers had been discussing royalty. Up to the previous week they had restricted themselves to the nobility, but as an event of unexampled importance had transpired in the interim, they now felt that it would be the rankest stupidity to consider any one short of a Prince Royal in picking out a suitable husband—or, more properly speaking, consort—for their only daughter, Maud Applegate Blithers, aged twenty.

MRS. BLITHERS long ago had convinced her husband that no ordinary human being of the male persuasion was worthy of their daughter's hand, and had set her heart on having nothing meaner than a Duke on the family roll.—(Blithers alluded to it for a while as the pay-roll)—, with the choice lying between England and Italy. At first, Blithers, being an honest soul, insisted that a good American gentleman was all that anybody could ask for in the way of a son-in-law, and that when it came to a grandchild it would be perfectly proper to christen him Duke—lots of people did!—and that was about all that a title amounted to anyway. She met this with the retort that Maud might marry a man named Jones, and how would Duke Jones sound! He weakly suggested that they could christen him Marmaduke and—but she reminded him of his oft-repeated boast that there was nothing in the world too good for Maud, and instituted a pictorial campaign against his prejudices by painting in the most alluring colors the picture of a ducal palace in which the names of Jones would never be uttered except when employed in directing the fifth footman or the third stable-boy—or perhaps a scullery maid

—to do this, that or the other thing at the behest of Her Grace, the daughter of William W. Blithers. This eventually worked on his imagination to such an extent that he forgot his natural pride and admitted that perhaps she was right.

But now, just as they were on the point of accepting, in lieu of a Duke, an exceptionally promising Count, the aforesaid event conspired to completely upset all of their plans—or notions, so to speak. It was nothing less than the arrival in America of an eligible Prince of the royal blood, a ruling Prince at that. As a matter of fact he had not only arrived in America, but at a country house adjoining their own in the Catskills.

Fortunately nothing definite had been arranged with the Count. Mrs. Blithers now advised waiting a while before giving a definite answer to his somewhat eager proposal, especially as he was reputed to have sufficient means of his own to defend the chateau against any immediate peril of profligacy. She counseled Mr. Blithers to notify him that he deemed it wise to take the matter under advisement for a couple of weeks at least, but not to commit himself to anything positively negative.

MR. BLITHERS said that he had never heard anything so beautifully adroit as "positively negative," and directed his secretary to submit to him without delay the draft of a tactful letter to the anxious nobleman. They were agreed that a Prince was more to be desired than a Count and, as long as they were actually about it, they might as well aim high. Somewhat hazily Mr. Blithers had inquired if it wouldn't be worth while to consider a King, but his wife set him straight in short order.