



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Master Sandy's Snapdragon

Eldridge S. Brooks

There was just enough of December in the air and of May in the sky to make the Yuletide of the year of grace 1611 a time of pleasure and delight to every boy and girl in "Merrie England" from the princely children in stately Whitehall to the humblest pot-boy and scullery-girl in the hall of the country squire.

And in the palace at Whitehall even the cares of state gave place to the sports of this happy season. For that "Most High and Mighty Prince James, by the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland"—as you will find him styled in your copy of the Old Version, or what is known as "King James' Bible"—loved the Christmas festivities, cranky, crabbed, and crusty though he was. And this year he felt especially gracious. For now, first since the terror of the Guy Fawkes plot which had come to naught full seven years before, did the timid king feel secure on his throne; the translation of the Bible, on which so many learned men had been for years engaged, had just been issued from the press of Master Robert Baker; and, lastly, much profit was coming into the royal treasury from the new lands in the Indies and across the sea.

So it was to be a Merry Christmas in the palace at Whitehall. Great were the preparations for its celebration, and the Lord Henry, the handsome, wise and popular young Prince of Wales, whom men hoped some day to hail as King Henry of England, was to take part in a jolly Christmas mask, in which, too, even the little Prince Charles was to perform for the edification of the court when the mask should be shown in the new and gorgeous banqueting hall of the palace.

And to-night it was Christmas Eve. The Little Prince Charles and the Princess Elizabeth could scarcely wait for the morrow, so impatient were they to see all the grand devisings that were in store for them. So good Master Sandy, under-tutor to the Prince, proposed to wise Archie Armstrong, the King's jester, that they play at snapdragon for the children in the royal nursery.

The Prince and Princess clamoured for the promised game at once, and soon the flicker from the flaming bow lighted up the darkened nursery as, around the witchlike caldron, they watched their opportunity to snatch the lucky raisin. The room rang so loudly with fun and laughter that even the King himself, big of head and rickety of legs, shambled in good-humouredly to join in the sport that was giving so much pleasure to the royal boy he so dearly loved, and whom he always called "Baby Charles."

But what was snapdragon, you ask? A simple enough game, but dear for many and many a year to English children. A broad and shallow bowl or dish half-filled with blazing brandy, at the bottom of which lay numerous toothsome raisins—a rare tidbit in those days—and one of these, pierced with a gold button, was known as the "lucky raisin." Then, as the flaming brandy flickered and darted from the yawning bowl, even as did the flaming poison tongues of the cruel dragon that St. George of England conquered so valiantly, each one of the revellers sought to snatch a raisin from the burning bowl without singe or scar. And he who drew out the lucky raisin was winner and champion, and could claim a boon or reward for his superior skill. Rather a dangerous game, perhaps it seems, but folks were rough players in those old days and laughed at a burn or a bruise, taking them as part of the fun.

So around Master Sandy's Snapdragon danced the royal children, and even the King himself condescended to dip his royal hands in the flames, while Archie Armstrong the jester cried out: "Now fair and softly, brother Jamie, fair and softly, man. There's ne'er a plum in all that plucking so worth the burning as there was in Signer Guy Fawkes' snapdragon when ye proved not to be his lucky raisin." For King's jesters were privileged characters in the old days, and jolly Archie Armstrong could joke with the King on this Guy Fawkes scare as none other dared.

And still no one brought out the lucky raisin, though the Princess Elizabeth's fair arm was scotched and good Master Sandy's peaked beard was singed, and my Lord Montacute had dropped his signet ring in the fiery dragon's mouth, and even His Gracious Majesty the King was nursing one of his royal fingers.

But just as through the parted arras came young Henry, Prince of Wales, little Prince Charles gave a boyish shout of triumph.

"Hey, huzzoy!" he cried, "'tis mine, 'tis mine! Look, Archie; see, dear dad; I have the lucky raisin! A boon, good folk; a boon for me!" And the excited lad held aloft the lucky raisin in which gleamed the golden button.

"Rarely caught, young York," cried Prince Henry, clapping his hands in applause. "I came in right in good time, did I not, to give you luck, little brother? And now, lad, what is the boon to be?"

And King James, greatly pleased at whatever his dear "Baby Charles" said or did, echoed his eldest son's question. "Ay lad, 'twas a rare good dip; so crave your boon. What does my bonny boy desire?"

But the boy hesitated. What was there that a royal prince, indulged as was he, could wish for or desire? He really could think of nothing, and crossing quickly to his elder brother, whom, boy-fashion, he adored, he whispered, "Ud's fish, Hal, what DO I want?"

Prince Henry placed his hand upon his brother's shoulder and looked smilingly into his questioning eyes, and all within the room glanced for a moment at the two lads standing thus.

And they were well worth looking at. Prince Henry of Wales, tall, comely, open-faced, and well-built, a noble lad of eighteen who called to men's minds, so "rare Ben Jonson" says, the memory of the hero of Agincourt, that other thunderbolt of war, Harry the Fifth, to whom in face you are So like, as Fate would have you so in worth;

Prince Charles, royal Duke of York, Knight of the Garter and of the Bath, fair in face and form, an active, manly, daring boy of eleven—the princely brothers made so fair a sight that the King, jealous and suspicious of Prince Henry's popularity though he was, looked now upon them both with loving eyes. But how those loving eyes would have grown dim with tears could this fickle, selfish, yet indulgent father have foreseen the sad and bitter fates of both his handsome boys.

But, fortunately, such foreknowledge is not for fathers or mothers, whatever their rank or station, and King James's only thought was one of pride in the two brave lads now whispering together in secret confidence. And into this he speedily broke.

"Come, come, Baby Charles," he cried, "stand no more parleying, but out and over with the boon ye crave as guerdon for your lucky plum. Ud's fish, lad, out with it; we'd get it for ye though it did rain jeddert staves here in Whitehall."

"So please your Grace," said the little Prince, bowing low with true courtier-like grace and suavity, "I will, with your permission, crave my boon as a Christmas favor at wassail time in to-morrow's revels."

And then he passed from the chamber arm-in-arm with his elder brother, while the King, chuckling greatly over the lad's show of courtliness and ceremony, went into a learned discussion with my lord of Montacute and Master Sandy as to the origin of the snapdragon, which he, with his customary assumption of deep learning, declared was "but a modern paraphrase, my lord, of the fable which telleth how Dan Hercules did kill the flaming dragon of Hesperia and did then, with the apple of that famous orchard, make a fiery dish of burning apple brandy which he did name 'snapdragon.'"

For King James VI of Scotland and I of England was, you see, something too much of what men call a pendant.

Christmas morning rose bright and glorious. A light hoarfrost whitened the ground and the keen December air nipped the noses as it hurried the song-notes of the score of little waifs who, gathered beneath the windows of the big palace,

sung for the happy awaking of the young Prince Charles their Christmas carol and their Christmas noel:

A child this day is born,
A child of great renown;
Most worthy of a sceptre,
A sceptre and a crown.

Noel, noel, noel,
Noel sing we may
Because the King of all Kings
Was born this blessed day.

These tidings shepherds heard
In field watching their fold,
Were by an angel unto them
At night revealed and told.

Noel, noel, noel,
Noel sing we may
Because the King of all Kings
Was born this blessed day.

He brought unto them tidings
Of gladness and of mirth,
Which cometh to all people by
This holy infant's birth.

Noel, noel, noel,
Noel sing we may
Because the King of all Kings
Was born this blessed day.

The "blessed day" wore on. Gifts and sports filled the happy hours. In the royal banqueting hall the Christmas dinner was royally set and served, and King and Queen and Princes, with attendant nobles and holiday guests, partook of the strong dishes of those old days of hearty appetites.

"A shield of brawn with mustard, boyl'd capon, a chine of beef roasted, a neat's tongue roasted, a pig roasted, chewets baked, goose, swan and turkey roasted, a haunch of venison roasted, a pasty of venison, a kid stuffed with pudding, an olive-pye, capons and dowsets, sallats and fricases"—all these and much more, with strong beer and spiced ale to wash the dinner down, crowned the royal board, while the great boar's head and the Christmas pie, borne in with great

parade, were placed on the table joyously decked with holly and rosemary and bay. It was a great ceremony—this bringing in of the boar's head. First came an attendant, so the old record tells us,

"attyr'd in a horseman's coat with a Boares-speare in his hande; next to him another huntsman in greene, with a bloody faulchion drawne; next to him two pages in tafatye sarcenet, each of them with a messe of mustard; next to whom came hee that carried the Boareshead, crosst with a greene silk scarfe, by which hunge the empty scabbard of the faulchion which was carried before him."

After the dinner—the boar's head having been wrestled for by some of the royal yeomen—came the wassail or health-drinking. Then the King said:

"And now, Baby Charles, let us hear the boon ye were to crave of us at wassail as the guerdon for the holder of the lucky raisin in Master Sandy's snapdragon."

And the little eleven-year-old Prince stood up before the company in all his brave attire, glanced at his brother Prince Henry, and then facing the King said boldly:

"I pray you, my father and my Hege, grant me as the boon I ask—the freeing of Walter Raleigh."

At this altogether startling and unlooked-for request, amazement and consternation appeared on the faces around the royal banqueting board, and the King put down his untasted tankard of spiced ale, while surprise, doubt and anger quickly crossed the royal face. For Sir Walter Raleigh, the favourite of Queen Elizabeth, the lord-proprietor and colonizer of the American colonies, and the sworn foe to Spain, had been now close prisoner in the Tower for more than nine years, hated and yet dreaded by this fickle King James, who dared not put him to death for fear of the people to whom the name and valour of Raleigh were dear.

"Hoot, chiel!" cried the King at length, spluttering wrathfully in the broadest of his native Scotch, as was his habit when angered or surprised. "Ye reckless fou, wha hae put ye to sic a jackanape trick? Dinna ye ken that sic a boon is nae for a laddie like you to meddle wi'? Wha hae put ye to't, I say?"

But ere the young Prince could reply, the stately and solemn-faced ambassador of Spain, the Count of Gondemar, arose in the place of honour he filled as a guest of the King.

"My Lord King," he said, "I beg your majesty to bear in memory your pledge to my gracious master King Philip of Spain, that naught save grave cause should lead you to liberate from just durance that arch enemy of Spain, the Lord Raleigh."

"But you did promise me, my lord," said Prince Charles, hastily, "and you have told me that the royal pledge is not to be lightly broken."

"Ma certie, lad," said King James, "ye maunay learn that there is nae rule wi'out its aicciptions." And then he added, "A pledge to a boy in play, like to ours of yester-eve, Baby Charles, is not to be kept when matters of state conflict." Then turning to the Spanish ambassador, he said: "Rest content, my lord count. This recreant Raleigh shall not yet be loosed."

"But, my liege," still persisted the boy prince, "my brother Hal did say—"

The wrath of the King burst out afresh.

"Ay, said you so? Brother Hal, indeed!" he cried.

"I thought the wind blew from that quarter," and he angrily faced his eldest son. "So, sirrah; 'twas you that did urge this foolish boy to work your traitorous purpose in such coward guise!"

"My liege," said Prince Henry, rising in his place, "traitor and coward are words I may not calmly hear even from my father and my king. You wrong me foully when you use them thus. For though I do bethink me that the Tower is but a sorry cage in which to keep so grandly plumed a bird as my Lord of Raleigh, I did but seek—"

"Ay, you did but seek to curry favour with the craven crowd," burst out the now thoroughly angry King, always jealous of the popularity of this brave young Prince of Wales. "And am I, sirrah, to be badgered and browbeaten in my own palace by such a thriftless ne'er-do-weel as you, ungrateful boy, who seekest to gain preference with the people in this realm before your liege lord the King? Quit my presence, sirrah, and that instant, ere that I do send you to spend your Christmas where your great-grandfather, King Henry, bade his astrologer spend his—in the Tower, there to keep company with your fitting comrade, Raleigh, the traitor!"



Without a word in reply to this outburst, with a son's submission, but with a royal dignity, Prince Henry bent his head before his father's decree and withdrew from the table, followed by the gentlemen of his household.

But ere he could reach the arras'd doorway, Prince Charles sprang to his side and cried, valiantly: "Nay then, if he goes so do I! 'Twas surely but a Christmas joke and of my own devising. Spoil not our revel, my gracious liege and father, on this of all the year's red-letter days, by turning my thoughtless frolic into such bitter threatening. I did but seek to test the worth of Master Sandy's lucky raisin by asking for as wildly great a boon as might be thought upon. Brother Hal too, did but give me his advising in joke even as I did seek it. None here, my royal father, would brave your sovereign displeasure by any unknighly or unloyal scheme."

The gentle and dignified words of the young prince—for Charles Stuart, though despicable as a king, was ever loving and loyal as a friend—were as oil upon the troubled waters. The ruffled temper of the ambassador of Spain—who in after years really did work Raleigh's downfall and death—gave place to courtly bows, and the King's quick anger melted away before the dearly loved voice of his favourite son.

"Nay, resume your place, son Hal," he said, "and you, gentlemen all, resume your seats, I pray. I too did but jest as did Baby Charles here—a sad young wag, I fear me, is this same young Prince."

But as, after the wassail, came the Christmas mask, in which both Princes bore their parts, Prince Charles said to Archie Armstrong, the King's jester:

"Faith, good Archie; now is Master Sandy's snapdragon but a false beast withal, and his lucky raisin is but an evil fruit that pays not for the plucking."

And wise old Archie only wagged his head and answered, "Odd zooks, Cousin Charlie, Christmas raisins are not the only fruit that burns the fingers in the plucking, and mayhap you too may live to know that a mettlesome horse never stumbleth but when he is reined."

Poor "Cousin Charlie" did not then understand the full meaning of the wise old jester's words, but he did live to learn their full intent. For when, in after years, his people sought to curb his tyrannies with a revolt that ended only with his death upon the scaffold, outside this very banqueting house at Whitehall, Charles Stuart learned all too late that a "mettlesome horse" needed sometimes to be "reined," and heard, too late as well, the stern declaration of the Commons of England that "no chief officer might presume for the future to contrive the enslaving and destruction of the nation with impunity."

But though many a merry and many a happy day had the young Prince Charles

before the dark tragedy of his sad and sorry manhood, he lost all faith in lucky raisins. Not for three years did Sir Walter Raleigh—whom both the Princes secretly admired—obtain release from the Tower, and ere three more years were past his head fell as a forfeit to the stern demands of Spain. And Prince Charles often declared that naught indeed could come from meddling with luck saving burnt fingers, "even," he said, "as came to me that profitless night when I sought a boon for snatching the lucky raisin from good Master Sandy's Christmas snapdragon."

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