

*The Ninth
Acolyte Reader*



© 1993 by The Acolyte Press

Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel

First Edition published October, 1993

All rights reserved. Except for brief passages quoted in a newspaper, magazine, radio or television review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf

The Acolyte Press

P. O. Box 12731

1100 AS Amsterdam

The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Acolyte

The Ninth Acolyte Reader / [ed. Frank Torey]. -

Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press

ISBN 90-6971-048-X

Trefw.: homoseksualiteit; mannen / verhalen ;

oorspronkelijk - Engels.

King of the Castle

by Alan Edward

There were soldiers everywhere. For the past week, ever since Candelmas, the town had been in turmoil. At its center, in the old square, the gates of the castle had been opened for the first time in months, a thousand candles burned behind the slit windows, and a huge fire leaped in the great hall. Because tonight the King was in town, and all week heavy ox-carts laden with the choicest viands and poultry, with barrels of the richest wine and ale, had creaked their way up the lanes, along the streets, and through the gates into the milling inner courtyard. And that afternoon, amid the huzzas of the crowd, the carriages with the King and his Court themselves had driven quickly across the square and in at the castle archway, followed by a score of mounted knights, heralds and standard-bearers. Then the flag had been raised, a triple guard had been set, and none dared approach but soldiers or the richest townspeople, guests at the King's banquet. As evening approached, the carriages of the guests, one by one, had rattled over the drawbridge and through the castle gates, which had clanged shut behind each.

The bright-eyed urchin hiding in a doorway opposite watched and calculated. Then, as a soldier opened the gate to admit another carriage, the boy, fast as quicksilver, dodged behind him and was through the gate in an instant. A moment later, as the carriage clattered through and the gates slammed again, he crouched in the shadow of the high courtyard wall, eyes alert in the warm flickering light from the interior. Toby Tyler was aged about thirteen, though no-one was sure, not even he. He was small but wiry, his body and his senses sharpened by the battle for day-to-day survival in the medieval streets. He had done this before. When there were banquets in the castle there were also, he knew, rich pickings of food and wine, some to eat and drink, some to sell. And often the nobles, especially after a yard or two of good ale, were not very careful where they left their valuables....

He skirted the courtyard, keeping close to the wall. Nearly everyone was inside now; he could hear the hubbub from the kitchens, the shouts and roars of laughter and the strumming of the minstrels from the great hall, where the banquet had already begun. He knew where the kitchens were, and in a moment he was through the wide arch, down a flight of stone stairs and was flattening himself in a corner by the doorway, watching the sweating, quarreling cooks, maids and scullions laboring round the huge stoves, running

up and down with laden wooden trays on the stairway to the banqueting hall above. Rows of joints – ham, beef, venison – were laid out on a long trestle table opposite him, ready to be carried upstairs. Toby's mouth watered; the desire in his belly was almost painful.

No-one was looking in his direction; it was a moment for boldness. As if fired from a bow, Toby was out of the doorway, had snatched a ham, and then was through the door and haring back up to the courtyard, all in a split second. There was a shout, then another, and footsteps came pounding after him, but Toby, dodging from one patch of shadow to another in the vast courtyard, was confident that he could evade any pursuer. And he knew the pursuit would be half-hearted anyway; small thieves and starvelings, through not exactly tolerated, were nevertheless a fact of life in the castle as well as in the town.

In an angle of the high wall, knees tucked up to his chest, Toby munched the ham; soon he felt good, better than he had for a long time. He looked around. He knew he could get out as easily as he had got in, but he was reluctant to abandon his adventure so soon. Just across from him, a long outside staircase wound upwards on the castle wall, then ended at an area bathed in light, just below one of the tall windows of the banqueting hall itself. He tucked the remains of the ham into the waistband of his ragged trousers, made sure he was unobserved, then scampered across the yard and up the stairs, stopping just before he reached the top, raising his eyes above the level of the sill with great caution, inch by inch.

He could see almost nothing. The window gave on to a broad but deserted gallery, but beyond its rim he could see the leaping firelight and the candle-light on the roof, could hear the roar of the multitude underneath. Carefully, Toby swung his legs over the sill, then crawled on his knees to the edge of the gallery and peered over.

He gasped. Underneath, far underneath, as in a fairytale, sat row upon row of richly-attired burghers, burgesses, earls, peers, knights and their ladies eating and drinking from vessels of gleaming gold and silver; in a lower gallery minstrels, tumblers and jesters entertained the guests. But Toby's intake of breath was because he was directly facing the high table where sat the King himself, with the Queen and the very greatest of the nobles. Initially alarmed, he ducked his head quickly, then raised it again; all were occupied with their conversations, tales and jesting, and none was likely to look up, still less likely to see his small form half-hidden in the shadows.

So he crouched, completely still, taking it all in. His eye was caught in particular by the boy, scarcely older than himself, who stood behind the King, slightly to his right, sometimes pouring wine, sometimes fetching fresh

dishes. A boy with long fair locks, richly dressed in scarlet and gold livery, his doublet carrying the royal arms on its chest, gleaming crowns on his high collar. The boy's blue eyes roamed around ceaselessly, attending to the King's every wish, yet relaxed; sometimes he smiled when the King spoke to him, smiled brilliantly, showing perfect white teeth.

Toby sighed. To be page to the King of England; how wonderful. Probably the boy himself was of noble blood; he certainly looked like it, with his fair, clear skin and his easy and graceful carriage. He was clearly the favorite of the King, too; a couple of times Toby saw the King look up and share a joke with the boy; he smiled at him often, once patted his arm. The urchin, his eyes still riveted on the page, felt something odd twist deep in his stomach. If only he had a friend, a *best* friend, like that, instead of the little ruffians and vagabonds who were his daily companions. It was unthinkable, but the thought that it would never be hurt in a way he wouldn't have believed.

He must have grown careless, approached too near the edge. His eyes had begun to roam around the hall, over the rushlights, the tapestries, the banners, the great hounds asleep in front of the fire. But when he looked back towards the high table he saw, to his horror, that the page-boy's eyes were fixed full on him. Or was he mistaken? He saw the boy whisper to an attendant, who left, but then everything seemed as usual, the boy didn't look again, and there were no signs of alarm or upheaval. Slowly, Toby relaxed. However, he sat down on the stone gallery floor, back against the wall, for a moment; watching the banquet had made him hungry, and he fumbled for the ham-bone again.

"So here's a nice little cock-sparrer."

Toby started and shot to his feet, but he wasn't quick enough for two soldiers, both young and fit, who had come silently through the gallery window. He was caught and held firmly, with only a token struggle.

"Well, well, well," said the other soldier, looking the ragged youngster up and down with distaste. "We do get proper little vermin in this place, no doubt about it. *Come* on!"

Toby was dragged back down into the yard, down a further flight of stone steps, then the door of a dungeon was pulled open.

"The King's got a nice cage for sparrers like you."

He was pushed forward hard, falling on to the straw, then the door clanged behind him. He ran to the barred space in the door and swore at the guards, though without rancor. He sat on the straw-covered floor with his legs doubled under him and went back to work on the ham, which fortunately had not been found. He wasn't greatly bothered. He would be released in the

morning, he knew – probably after being beaten – but it wasn't the first time, and he had survived. For the moment, he was warm, dry, and had a full belly; what more could a street-urchin want?

In a few hours the hubbub from the banqueting hall had subsided, the wheels of the home-going carriages had stopped echoing through the yard, and Toby, head on a straw-filled sack, was asleep as deeply as he had ever been, either in the hovel he called home or on the streets.

When he awakened, however, it was still dark. There were lanterns that burned in the courtyard all night, and some light penetrated even into the dungeon, making barred squares on the floor, but of daylight there was none. He knew, somehow, that a sound had wakened him – a sound very near at hand. He stiffened, trying to see into the darkness, but could distinguish nothing.

There it was again – a muffled sob, then another. Someone, in the dark, was crying, crying bitterly. All of Toby's flesh tingled; he went ice-cold. He had heard the stories about the old castle, about the ghosts, the hauntings, the headless knights and white ladies, the cries and screams heard in the empty dark. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw a fairly solid shape huddled in the straw a short distance away. There was no ghost; no mystery. He had company. Another prisoner had been brought in while he slept.

The crying continued, and he gingerly moved closer. He drew in his breath slightly. Curled in the straw was a young boy, completely naked, his head hidden in his hands, his body shaken by sobs.

Toby touched his shoulder. "'S all right," he said awkwardly. "It'll be all right, we'll get out tomorrow, we always do."

"It's not just that," came the muffled voice. "I've been punished. I spilled the best wine, I was whipped. Look."

He twisted slightly, and Toby whistled as he saw the red lines on the boy's pale buttocks. Then, touching him again, he said, "It's hard luck, it hurts, but it doesn't last I know. You'll have forgotten about it by morning, you'll see."

"But – but I'm so ashamed."

"G'wan, nothing to be ashamed of. I'm always spilling and breaking things. Here, my name's Toby. What's yours?"

"Arthur." The boy on the straw twisted around again and looked up, his face tear-stained, his hair mussed, but Toby drew in his breath immediately.

"You're the *page*! The King's page!"

Arthur hesitated, then nodded. "But if I spill wine, do anything wrong, then I get in trouble. Like now."

Toby nodded. Clearly, being a page in the royal household had its drawbacks. But he still couldn't take his eyes off the fair-haired boy beside him. He was like one of those boys in great paintings in the local churches or cathedrals, like the slim beautiful angels you saw clustered round the saints on the altarpieces – beings with flawless bodies, perfect features. This boy, like them, didn't look real; touch him and he might disappear.

With great care, grimacing slightly, Arthur pulled himself up to a sitting position on a sack of straw and hugged his knees.

He smiled weakly. "You're right, it doesn't feel *quite* so bad after a while."

"You want to talk for a bit?" asked Toby, now wide awake.

Arthur looked down at the ground. "You won't want to talk to me, will you?" he asked in his soft, cultured voice, so different from those Toby was used to. "You've probably guessed, haven't you?"

Toby frowned. "Guessed what?"

"Well, it was I who gave you away, wasn't it? You must know that. I saw you, and told them."

Toby shrugged. "I don't mind; it ain't so bad here."

"But you want to know *why* I told them?"

"I s'pose you had to."

"It wasn't just that. But it was just – well, I was looking into the gallery, and suddenly saw this dark-haired imp with very bright eyes looking down at me and – well, I wished I could have a boy like that for a friend. You – don't mind, do you?"

"*Mind?*" said Toby, his eyes wide. He swallowed, then said, "You know, *I* was... But never mind, you'd think I was making it up. But – *why* though? And you the King's page?"

"It's very dull sometimes. And I don't really have any friends – well, not of my own age. I've no one to play with. I get very bored. But then – when I looked up, I thought... it could be different."

He shifted off the sacking with another grimace, then curled up on the straw. He shivered. "Brr, it's cold in here."

Toby hesitated, then said half-shyly, half defensively, "S'pose you wouldn't want a street boy to keep you warm, snuggle against you, would you?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, my clothes isn't so nice, I mean..."

"Take them off, then," said Arthur. "I'd like to feel all of your warm skin against me. It would be good."

"Sure you don't mind?"

Arthur nodded, and Toby wriggled out of his clothes, then crawled across to Arthur and wound himself around him; Arthur's arms twisted round his neck and their thighs twined together; soon Toby felt the smooth cool skin become warm and the shivering cease.

"How's it feel *there*?" asked Toby, reaching round Arthur and down, gently touching the spot with his fingers.

"Stings a bit."

"You – you wouldn't want the likes of me to stroke it a little, would you?"

Arthur took Toby's hand and pressed it back into place, nodding vigorously, and Toby gently moved his palm to and fro over the smooth rear cheeks, stroking them, gently parting, then stroking again.

"And stop saying things like that about yourself," Arthur said. "We're friends now, aren't we? If you like."

Toby said quietly, "There's nothing more I'd want in the world. But we can't, Arthur, can we? Tomorrow you'll be back paging again, and I'll be out on the street. It ain't no good, is it?"

Arthur said slowly, "I don't know. *You* could be a page too."

"Yah!" said Toby derisively. And then, "Don't make fun of me, Arthur."

"I'm not," said Arthur earnestly. He twisted up to a kneeling position. "Stand up."

Toby did so; he stood, slightly embarrassed, in the lamplight while Arthur's eye ran over him from top to toe.

"You're very nice," said Arthur quietly. "There was a knight who said once, "Even a little peasant boy, stripped of his clothes, can have the skin of a prince and the body of an angel."

"Don't be daft."

"I'm not." Arthur smoothed Toby's dark hair and arranged it on either side of his face.

"Yes – washed, combed, and in the King's livery, you could make the nicest page anyone ever saw. And – speaking of princes – the prince needs a page – has done for a while."

"The princeling, you mean," said the urchin with slight contempt. "He's a bumptious little whipper-snapper, they say."

"I – I suppose so. Anyway, the King keeps trying to find a page for him, but he's hard to please. He's only got a tutor, whom he hates."

"Well, *you* couldn't fix it, anyhow," said Toby. "You, thrown down in die dungeon like me."

Arthur shrugged. "It's happened before. As you say, tomorrow it'll be forgotten. Let me try, anyhow." He hesitated. "If you really want me to,

that is?"

Toby nodded vigorously. Then he said slightly cheekily, pulling at Arthur's arm, "Now it's *my* turn. Come and stand in the light and let *me* have a look."

Arthur stood on the straw; Toby slid to his knees, his hands gliding down Arthur's flanks and thighs. Then he said shyly, leaning forward, "You got a *nice* one. The nicest one I ever seen. And you're getting little hairs, too."

He reached out gently with his fingertips. "And it's *hard!* *Cool!*"

Arthur bent slightly; his palms slid all over the urchin's slim body. "It's hard because of you," he whispered. "Because – I really like you. A lot."

"Because of *me!*" said Toby, thrilled and flattered. Then he said, "And *mine's* –"

"Sssh!" said Arthur, then he clasped his hands behind the urchin's head and pulled it down and forward, his hands remaining tight clasped in the tumbled dark hair.

A moment later Arthur squealed. "You *bite!*"

"Sorry."

"No – again, again. *Please!*"

Arthur slid back on the straw; Toby above him, on his knees, then stretched on his tummy on Arthur's legs, growing more and more vigorous, till Arthur was writhing and twisting on the straw, beginning to gasp and whimper, his hips starting to thud up and down on the floor.

"Oh, oh, *waaaah!* Oh, Toby, *Toby!*"

Toby's hand slid round on the straw, under Arthur's wriggling buttocks, then he slid a finger in between, pushed.

Arthur yelled aloud, whooped, laughed, sobbed, all limbs flailing.

"Yes, yes! And *teeth* again, Toby. Please – *please!* *WaaaAAAH!*"

Then Arthur convulsed, screamed. His long slim legs spun, scissored, clamped on either side of Toby's head, splayed, then smacked back again.

"Oh, Toby, *Toby!* *WaaaaaeEEEEH!!!*"

He held Toby's head where it was for a moment, his whole body still shivering from top to toe. Then, very quickly, he pulled upright and pushed Toby back on the straw.

He asked breathlessly, "You want *me* to bite a little?"

The urchin nodded eagerly, "A *lot!*"

And then, under the enthusiastic ministrations of Arthur's lips, teeth and tongue, Toby put up an even more spectacular performance – body, legs and arms trashing mightily and furiously, faster and faster. Then, finally, a piercing crescendo of shrieks, one after the other, as his body, jack-knifing again and again, was racked from end to end with shock after delectable

shock, such as he had never – ever – felt in his young life until now.

After that, light-headed and exhausted, he remembered very little, perhaps just whispering "*Best friends?*" into Arthur's ear as they twisted together to go to sleep, and feeling the other boy nod emphatically.

It was completely light when he opened his eyes for the second time. Remembering, he looked round, but he was alone. Awake almost at once, and almost panic-stricken, he jumped up, searching, rummaging through the straw, throwing handfuls aside. Nothing and no-one. His breath coming in hoarse sobs, he sat down on the straw to think. *Had* it been a dream? But it had been so vivid; he'd never had a dream like that before...

Perplexed, he raised a hand to rub his eyes, then noticed something, stopped, and frowned in puzzlement. On his hand, traces of dull red – like ocher, or chalk dust.

He rubbed it and it came off. He remembered what had been red – the marks on the delicate skin, on those pale rear cheeks, the previous night; he remembered how, and for what a long time, he had touched and stroked them. His frown deepened. But *that* sort of red didn't come off – or it wasn't supposed to. Not a dream, then – but had he been tricked? Had someone made a fool of him? But if so, why?

He was still puzzling, and no further on, when he heard the rattle of chains and the door was pushed open. It was the two guards, the same two as the previous night.

"Come on, nipper, you got a job, you're lucky."

"Eh?" said Toby foolishly.

"Yes, so move it," said the other guard. "An' get them clothes on. We can't 'ave a page showing all 'e's got, can we?"

"A *page*?" Toby stared, then began to struggle quickly into his rags.

"Not that you won't need to get new stuff first, any'ows," said the first guard, watching him with distaste. "And I don't think much of 'Is Royal 'Ighness's choice neither, but the Prince's wish is my command. I want to keep me 'ead on me shoulders for a bit longer."

"Aving 'is royal bath, 'e is," said the second guard. "Wants you to wash 'is 'air – no doubt 'is other pretty little bits, too."

"Come now," said the other with a wink, "we mustn't speak of 'is 'Igh an' Mightiness like that, so disrespectful, must we?" To Toby, "*Come on, you!*"

Toby, at the cell door, hesitated. "Where – where's the page who was here last night?"

The guard frowned. "What d'you mean page? The King don't never bring no page 'ere. Where d'you think this is, Windsor Castle? Now – *git*."