

© 1990 by The Acolyte Press
First edition published March, 1990

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

ISBN 90-6971-023-4

Child of the Age

by Robert Campbell

Colonel Rogers was dead. Bobby Rogers, child of the colonel's age, had not known the old man well. Bobby found a bottle labeled HORSE PISS WHISKEY in a bottom drawer of the colonel's desk, at his office, down in the city. It surprised the boy. He had never heard his father use a dirty word or tell a joke. He made the discovery the day before the funeral. He put the pint bottle into a big envelope to hide it, to make it look like the other things in the "valise" – what his father's secretary called it – he packed at his grief-stricken mother's request. At least she said she was too grief stricken to do anything, though Bobby didn't really know what you looked like if you were grief stricken. Like his mother did, most of the time, Bobby decided, diplomatically. Looking at his father's remains – fresher than life – in the coffin, he imagined the bottle, label up, cradled in the folded hands of the corpse. He rejected the thought as unworthy, but it would not go away. Even when Bobby threw a handful of dirt onto the casket as it was lowered into the grave, he imagined the colonel, at the Last Judgment, sourly offering Jesus a conciliatory nip.

It contributed to Bobby's belief that he was not like good boys. What they did was good. He was bad. He didn't mind that too much. It gave him room to do things. Like taking the bottle, it's contents untasted, back with him to Henry-Eliot Academy for Boys.

A little over six weeks later, Bobby came home from the Academy unexpectedly. He didn't know he was unexpected. Each parent had been "notified." At Henry-Eliot notification meant that Miss Phillips or her secretary dialed a number and, if anyone answered, she left a message. It wasn't as if he'd been expelled for fighting, though Miss Phillips had warned his mother he might be. Bobby didn't start the fight. What upset Miss Phillips was that he finished it. She found the Horse Piss Whiskey bottle later. By then it was empty and harmless, since fifteen boys had sampled it without a single noticeable effect. She had, she said, troubles enough, and just confiscated the evidence. Besides, she was a little touched at Bobby's explanation that it was an heirloom. So he wasn't expelled for that either, nor was his mother notified.

Bobby was surprised to find a champagne party in progress, when, followed by a taxi-driver with a Zapata mustache, he let himself into the front hallway by the unlocked front door. The dark paneling seemed, though nothing had changed, much brighter, and the living room, where the party was in progress, was brilliant, compared to the gloom he knew and remembered so well. "Angel," his mother cried out, bombed and joyous, "what are you doing here? Oh, never mind." Her grin went cockeyed. "I got the letter from that old bitch. Who'd you fight? Who won? Where's my purse?"

Bobby saw it where she usually left it, on a pink Chinese platter that all his life had lain on the huge rosewood table in the entry hall, opposite the staircase. A great mirror hung on the wall behind the table, reflecting Bobby, a little flushed, surprised at the strangeness of his house; his mother, her elbows flapping as she rushed to embrace him; and Zapata, swarthy and morose, in a dirty jacket of fake suede. "Here it is," he said. "And it wasn't fighting—"

"Pay the man," she said, kissing Bobby, as she always did, sloppily on the lips. "Urn, urn," she said, as the kiss was prolonged. Then she broke free and looked in the mirror: "Where in the world did you find him?"

Bobby wasn't sure what the question meant – had finding the driver been a good or a bad thing? He pulled a ten-dollar bill out of the purse, handed it over, and waited for the two dollars change. The driver pocketed the bill and let himself out the door. "At the bus station," Bobby said, putting the purse back on the pink platter.

"You rode the bus? How brave!" A tall man had overheard. He emerged from the conviviality of the living room, a room that, otherwise, had left Bobby's entrance unnoticed. He wore a green velvet jacket with black silk lapels over a frilled shirt, open to the xiphisternum. He had an even, dark tan, and very blond hair in short ringlets.

"The next train was Saturday." Bobby thought it unnecessary to say that Persepolis, Mississippi, had no airport. He remained, feeling foolish and not at all brave, in the hall beside his suitcase. But he smiled just a little in private appreciation of being called brave.

"Angel," his mother burred, "come meet these people. This is Mr. Hapner" – that was the man in the open frilled shirt.

"Mona," he said to Bobby's mother, "who is Angel?" He looked down – he was very tall – directly into Bobby's eyes. "If you tell me your name, Angel, I'll tell you mine."

Bobby was wary. Should he allow anyone besides his mother to call

him "angel?" But that was just for just a moment. Mr. Happer, or whoever, had a quirky smile that, Bobby decided, he liked, even if he was a little faggoty. Coming home this time was beginning to be different from every other time he'd come home before. Exciting. An inarticulatable awareness. "Bobby," Bobby said, and half smiled back.

"Bobby." Mr. Hapner extended a large hand. "I'm Jimmy." He held Bobby's small hand, enveloping it, pulling the boy into the living room. "Everyone, this is Bobby, Mona's brave angel."

"I know Bobby," said Mrs. Youngblood. Bobby recognized her. One of his mother's best friends. He hadn't ever seen so much of her tits before. He tried not to look, then, unable to quell a blush, looked harder. Another face was familiar, Mrs. Talbot, who smiled. He smiled back; she didn't have much to look at. The rest of the people were strange. Mrs. Youngblood sat in an Empire armchair that nobody used much because it was so uncomfortable. "What are you doing home from school?" she asked, staring earnestly. Then Bobby noticed that the chair had a new, bright yellow cushion.

She seemed to want to know, holding him in her eyes, bright with expectation. "The water system—" he began.

"How ghastly!" She turned to others for confirmation, then threw her arms wide, so her nipples almost showed. "Come give me a kiss. You're safe now. Can you imagine?" She turned to the man next to her, on the sofa. It, too, was yellow; it had been – Bobby's memory fuzzed – kind of brown. "The poor, poor child." She took Bobby's kiss on her left cheek, folding him in so that he almost fell onto her. He made it a wet one – whether by design or accident of being unbalanced, he himself was not sure. She brushed it from her cheek, surprised. He grinned, extricating himself, stared at her cleavage a moment, and followed Jimmy.

Jimmy had gone to a satinwood table which, in all Bobby's life, had never before held anything heavier than National Geographic magazines. Now it held a large silver tray which was littered with glasses, green bottles, and what looked like food. Beside it was the brass tub which always before had contained a small tree, out on the windowed sun porch. Now it was full of ice and more bottles. "There's nothing to drink but champagne," Jimmy said, filling a tulip glass, "so take this while you meet people."

Mona, focused momentarily, said, "He's too young for champagne."

"That's your fault, dear thing," Jimmy said. "I told you one bottle of vodka could come in handy." Jimmy rubbed Bobby's shoulder gently.

"There's also beef tartar and cream cheese with caviar, but I think you'll hate them." Bobby thought so too, and while Jimmy's hand was on his shoulder, he could see, at his eye level, the muscles on Jimmy's chest move. That embarrassed him more than Mrs. Youngblood's tits, especially when Jimmy saw him looking, and winked.

Then he decided it was okay.

In fact, he felt a soaring feeling of being grown up for the first time, as if he could do anything he wanted, with the champagne in his hand, and his father dead, and his mother bombed, while Jimmy with the muscular tan chest and the quirky smile introduced him around. The room, the furniture, Mrs. Talbot and Mrs. Youngblood, and all the strange people seemed to belong to a new and better world. All had changed since the funeral and the horse piss, which maybe he understood now, though why he could not have said. Everyone seemed younger. Even his mother. Not one man was wearing a tie. Men always wore ties at parties before the colonel died. Bobby was wearing a tie. He had loosened it on the bus, but tightened it again in the taxi. Now it choked him, and he longed to take it off. A sartorial instinct told him that there was a formality to Jimmy's shirt that made a tie unnecessary. Bobby envied the bizarre elegance that all the men at the party seemed to have.

"Now tell me all about it." Jimmy had finished the introductions, returning to the edge of the hallway, which Mona had abandoned. "What happened with the water? What school do you go to?"

"Henry-Eliot."

"Good God, child. I went there too. That makes us practically brothers! Don't tell me. The water tower pump. That's it."

"Yes," Bobby said, and gulped champagne. The first taste had been acrid, and the bubbles tickled his nose. But it was champagne, and he knew he was going to like it. He took a larger taste, to make certain.

"The annual letter said it was going to go. I'm positively ashamed! I'll send my check in the morning. But what luck! It brought you here. Let me fill that."

Bobby held out the glass. He was certain. The sharp taste wasn't what he expected, but Bobby knew, by instinct and experience, that good stuff could be odd at first. As long as it didn't taste like Horse Piss Whiskey. He was taking chances at home now. He'd never taken chances at home before. "Thank you," he said, following Jimmy to the satinwood table.

"Let me see," Jimmy eyed the ceiling momentarily, after pouring. "You'd be in class two – oh yes, with that awful old Mr. Richardson. Where they found him, I'll never know. He wasn't there in my time. No one is now,

for that matter."

"I'm in class one."

"But you're so big!" Was that fake awe? Was Jimmy putting him on? Bobby withheld judgment, guarded. He knew he was a little above average, but not enough for all that, and not from someone big as Jimmy. "Don't tell me you're fifteen and not very bright. I couldn't bear it!"

Bobby liked that. "No," he said, and let himself giggle. "I'm thirteen." He waited out Jimmy's grinned smile of mock relief, then smiled back. "I don't think I'm very bright, though."

"But a good athlete, aren't you? That's ever so much more important."

"I made the lower house football and track teams. I think I'll make basketball next year. None of the class one boys made the basketball team." Bobby felt very warm, good, and glowing. He finished his glass of champagne and glanced into the mirror that stood opposite the front windows. His skin was flushed and bright; he smiled back at the mirror, admiring his own teeth. He didn't need braces.

"You certainly will," Jimmy said, not having heard Bobby's thought. "But, Mona!" Bobby's mother had returned from wherever she had been. "These clothes! You can't want him to wear these school clothes here and, for heaven's sake, now!"

"God, no," said Bobby's mother, munching a cookie, acquired in that remote realm she'd wandered in and out of.

"And you want to change, don't you, Bobby?"

Yes, but Bobby couldn't answer that. The difficulties were insurmountable, humiliating. Instead he glared at his mother who, he saw now, had betrayed him. "I can't," he said. "All my clothes are like this."

"Come on," Jimmy said. "We'll be creative. We'll go to your room and find something suitable. Here, I'll refill – Tony, you're not doing your job. Keep the corks popping! All right, here we go."

"Jimmy," Mrs. Talbot said irritably, "Bobby's too young for you."

Jimmy made a gesture of cleaning a blackboard. "Wipe the thought from your vulgar mind, dear. I'm just going to make the child socially presentable. Come. Let's examine the closets full of clothes just like the ones you're wearing. You see, I take you at your word, even though I don't believe it's possible."

Bobby wondered what Mrs. Talbot's vulgar thought was. Possibilities excited him. How faggoty was Jimmy? He himself had nothing but vulgar thoughts, but he didn't know adults did too. Or was

that why they had adult book stores? He responded to a light push from Jimmy, picked up his suitcase in the hall, and led the way upstairs.

The top of the staircase was unchanged, his father's ornate black desk dominating the broad landing, and the gloomy picture that the colonel said was called "Desecrating the Altar," with some shocked-looking people watching a crucifix being knocked off a high table, was still ominously in place. Followed by Jimmy, he went on into his room. The poster that his mother had allowed him to put up was still there, Prince's glistening body; everything else was in place. "Why him?" had been her only response. Jimmy looked at it a moment, said, "I understand he sings, too," then he closed the door, put his champagne on the dresser, and went to the closet. Bobby thought the remark was very funny, and he giggled, taking a sip of champagne to quiet himself – then giggled again. Jimmy, his back to Bobby, said, "Now just take all of that off. We'll redo you from the skin out. Hm." He rummaged among the hangers and pulled several things out and laid them on a chair, while Bobby discarded his jacket, tie, and shirt. Looking at the poster, inspired, he took off his shoes and trousers, and stood, Prince-like. He wished he had a mirror to see how Prince-like he looked. Jimmy went to the dresser and opened drawers, rummaging. He looked back at Bobby. "Shorts and socks too; they're a ghastly black. The socks are," he added, in response to Bobby's look. "And no boy wears anything under jeans anymore. And jeans are what you're going to wear." He held up a pair.

"And you said all your clothes were like the ones you wore from school."

"Those are too small," Bobby said, sitting on the bed. He pulled off his socks then tensed his muscles for Jimmy.

Jimmy gave him a long look. "Oh you are an athlete, aren't you?" He paused, then turned back to the closet. "I said, for the last time, from the skin out. The shorts have got to go!"

Bobby felt exhilarated. The excitement settled in his groin. He'd never been naked and alone with a grown man. And not even in a crowd at school with a kind of faggoty man. What was a gay guy? How do you know? He pulled at the waistband of his shorts, but couldn't pull down. He was already hard and embarrassed. He put his right hand over his crotch; he couldn't look up.

Jimmy took a quick glance, then, back in the closet, asked, "Shorts off?"

"No." Bobby was beginning to feel afraid. His hard softened.

"I can't be responsible if you don't cooperate!"

With a jerk, Bobby stripped the shorts off and sat on the bed. He hoped Jimmy wouldn't say anything to embarrass him more. Especially when he started getting hard again. He looked at Jimmy, who had turned toward him, and Jimmy's look, that weird smile, told him it would be all right.

"Nothing shocks me," Jimmy said. "A little excitement is Perfectly Normal. I've seen a million."

Instead of hiding his crotch, Bobby spread his knees apart. A million and one. Then he felt elated, as if he was on the edge of a mystery. Oddly, he felt like dancing – but there was no music.

"Bobby," Jimmy said, approaching, his smile replaced by something like wonder. "Forgive me." He stooped and put a hand on each of Bobby's thighs, and paused for a reaction.

Bobby held his breath.

"This is something," Jimmy said, "that I must do." He knelt down in front of Bobby and touched his lips to where Billy Petersen had put his whole mouth more than a year ago, at night, in the cabin, on that hunting trip with Billy's father, when the air smelt of pine branches, spilled bourbon whiskey, and dust from an old rug. Bobby reached both hands onto Jimmy's head, then said, "Ooooh." Jimmy murmured appreciatively, tantalizing Bobby with licks and little bites, then set solidly to his precious effort. After a few moments, he paused long enough to say, "It's good, isn't it?" Bobby, watching, resting on his elbows, absorbed, nodded silently until Jimmy, hearing no answer, drew away to look up. "Yes, yes," Bobby said, reaching a hand to grip Jimmy's hair and pull his head down again. Jimmy resumed, and Bobby lay back on the bed, with another "ooh."

The bedroom door opened. Bobby, alarmed, tried to sit up. A man stood there. Jimmy said, turning, without getting up, "Damn you, Tony, you voyeur. Go back to doing what you're good at."

"You couldn't get through one little party without running off to suck the first new prick you see." Bobby was scared for a moment, seeing that Tony was really mad, but then he saw that he was mad at Jimmy and didn't care what Bobby was doing. Bobby said mentally something like to hell with it, let the adults fight it out, and lay back, waiting, a little nervous, curious, losing his hard.

"Don't be the proverbial dog in the manger," Jimmy was saying. "You're not jealous of this innocent child; you just want to be where I am. Now go away!"

Tony left, closing the door with a bang.

Jimmy shifted attention momentarily to Bobby's stomach, and ran his hands over Bobby's chest reassuringly. Bobby relaxed again, wondering only a moment if Tony really would want to do what Jimmy was doing. Jimmy returned to his pleasure. A few minutes later, Bobby released little cries, and raised himself onto his left elbow. With his right hand he touched Jimmy's ear. "Oh!" Bobby said, in delight, flopping back down as his loins heaved, heaved, jerked, moved and, at last, relaxed.

A little later, Jimmy said, his head resting on Bobby's stomach. "Did you like that?"

Bobby, unmoving, murmured, "Excellent."

"I knew – I just knew you would, you splendid thing." Jimmy rose to look at the body on the bed. "Macho is in, though how you knew it, I can't imagine." Jimmy energized himself. "Now, you can't just lie there, angel. We must prepare your entrance. There's not a second to lose. Lewd tongues will wag!"

Vulgar thoughts, thought Bobby, elated.

Jimmy flung clothes – but no underwear – at Bobby, checking this and trying that, front and back. "Inspiration!" he cried, then added, dismayed, "Your wardrobe has been seized by Brooks Brothers. Ah! This – wait! Just how much too small are those jeans?"

"I don't know. They were tight when I was home for the funeral."

"Put them on! All over the world boys are shrinking jeans to make them tight." He watched Bobby struggle into the legs; he could barely fasten the top button. "They'll do!"

"They're too short. I'll look funny with shoes; I don't have any Reeboks."

"That's the beauty of it! No shoes. Youth is its own ornament. Now. Bobby, I remember something. Mona. No! We won't call her. Come."

"I just did," Bobby said, giggling.

"I won't dignify that with response, angel, just because it's true." Off they went to Mona's bedroom, Bobby clutching his empty champagne glass in one hand.

In his mother's bedroom, Bobby stopped, stunned. It was totally new, even to the drapes on the windows. Her old double bed was gone; one twice the size had replaced it, with a flaming red coverlet. The wall that had set off his father's sleeping space (he had snored) was gone too; the now distant wall had become one huge mirror. The room seemed huge. Jimmy seemed to know it well. He went directly to a new armoire, flung it open and

began to rummage. "Ah, ha!" he said, after a moment, whipping out a bright orange and red silk scarf, frail as tissue and at least forty inches long.

He drew the scarf over Bobby's bare shoulders and pulled the boy close. "Do you really want to go back to Henry-Eliot," he asked, his voice soft and full of implication.

"No," Bobby whispered, and rubbed his forehead into Jimmy's exposed chest.

"Then be ready to fight Mona for your freedom!" Jimmy tilted Bobby's head back and planted a quick kiss on the boy's lips, disengaging himself. "Now! to prepare you for your grand re-entrance!" He led Bobby back to his room. "Simplicity is the key." He looked back at Bobby, then bustled on. "God knows I wish I'd known that when I was thirteen."

When Bobby rejoined the party downstairs, he was barefoot, the bottoms of his already short jeans turned up to expose the bulge of his calves. The jean top fell to his hips, belted well below the navel with a red necktie that hung, like an obscene loincloth, over his fly and down almost to his knees. On his upper body he wore a gray vest fastened only at the bottom, where it wasn't supposed to button, so that the vest flared. He'd outgrown it too. Below, it exposed his navel and, above, it opened to show pectoral muscles and tiny roseate nipples. Around his neck, knotted at the side, was his mother's scarf; one end was flung over his shoulder and hung down his back; the other, shorter, lay on his collarbone. On a cue from Jimmy, he flexed a bicep by passing his right hand over his bare chest and resting it on the opposite shoulder. In the other hand was the glass, which Jimmy refilled ceremoniously.

Several people applauded. Bobby was delighted, and felt a stirring in his jeans that he realized would probably show. He'd have to shift his pose to cover it. He decided to let it show, if it wanted to. It was free.

"He's transformed," Jimmy called out to the party, "from a victim of reactionary southern education into a child of the age. This day, the 17th day of April in his fourteenth year, will live in fame and memory. You, Mona, see before you a new vision of your new joy. Your son reborn. You must be enchanted, for he is now the wizard of the new South."

"And I'm never going back to Henry-Eliot!" Bobby said. "I don't care what Mom says." He paused, awed by his own courage.

Jimmy prodded Mona. "What do you say?"

She looked perplexed. "I thought he was kicked out."

"No, Mom," Bobby said impatiently. "It was the water pump."

At this Mona's eyes cleared, as if she had found Bobby in focus for the first time. "I'll be damned," she slurred, and took a big gulp of

champagne. She seemed completely to forget the water pump, fighting, and Henry-Eliot School. She raised a hand to her cheek and stared at Bobby. Around her, the room hushed. Bobby looked briefly to Jimmy for reassurance, then waited for her to speak. She was going to say something momentous, something to confirm the splendor of the occasion. Finally, her lips moved. She smiled, as if somehow, at last, her life, the colonel, and all the rest of it had been worth while.

"Angel," she said, summing it all up, her moment come, determined to make the most of it, "you look—" the perfect words were there, blurred, but real, only hidden "—good enough to—" ah! there it was! "*—eat!*" So it wasn't the word. Who cared? Jimmy was laughing, applauding. "Come here, Cookie, Angel," Mona said, "whoever you are," and she slopped yet once more a kiss on his open and willing mouth.