



## Legacy

*by James Avey*

ALFRED Turner sat hunched over his plate, transferring food to his mouth in a steady, unbroken stream. His thick shock of white hair bounced with his efforts as he scraped the last remnants from his plate with a piece of bread, drained his coffee cup, and leaned back. A great sigh of satisfaction filled the room as he brought his cold blue eyes to bear on his son.

George's eyes held a vacant, far-away cast when he looked up from his plate. His slim figure and springy black hair showed his father's blood; but the eyes were a softer blue, without the steely glint.

Alfred eyed George contemplatively as he shook tobacco into a strip of white paper. "How old you gettin' to be, George?"

George stopped eating. His fork made a tiny clink as he laid it down. For a long minute he did not speak. "You know how old I am," he said softly. "I'm nineteen."

"Nineteen." Alfred drew on his formless cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "When I was nineteen I was supportin' a wife and baby and farmin' two hundred acres, with horses. What do you think of that?"

George didn't answer.

"Yessir, just a boy I was, but farmin' more than most

men. I used to keep track, how many horses I wore out and killed; lost track years ago. In rainy weather, when the neighbors loafed or went to town, I fixed harness, or painted, or cleaned the hoghouses. And I showed 'em; you bet I showed 'em."

George did not look at his father; he lifted his cup and peered into it. A little puddle of black liquid washed over the grounds. He lifted the cup to his lips and drank the cold black coffee.

Alfred's eyes still bore down on his son. "You goddam right, I showed 'em. I worked while they were screwin' around. And you know who loaned 'em money when the bank wouldn't? I did. I loaned 'em money all right; and when they couldn't pay, out they went, and I got me another farm." There was a triumphant ring in his voice.

For a long time the two men sat silently before the cluttered table. Alfred stared into the shadows that ringed the room, his lips and eyes flicking as he remembered the years of his youth. George toyed with his knife, tracing patterns on the worn oilcloth.

"By God, I was glad I did then, and I'm still glad I did. I'm glad because now I got something to give away to my own; I put your brothers on farms and now I'm goin' to put you on one. I want you to go run the old Higgins place."

For the first time that evening George's eyes met his father's. "I don't want the Higgins place." His eyes wavered, then slid away.

"What do you mean, you don't want it? It's the best one I got left, outside of this place here. What do you want me to do, move over there and let you run this place?"

"No, I don't want you to move anyplace. I don't want this place or any of them. I just don't want to farm, that's all." His words were barely audible.

For a moment the old man stared at his son, an expression of surprise and anger tugging at his face. Then he threw back his head and laughed, booming his hoarse cackle through the room until he choked for breath and subsided into a coughing fit. He wiped the tears from his eyes with a stubby thumb and leered at George.

"Just what the hell you plannin' on doin', Boy? Maybe you want to get a job sellin' women's shoes. That what you want to do?"

A red flush crept up George's neck and spread across his face. "No, I don't want to sell shoes," he said quietly. His thin brown hands were shaking. "I want to go to college."

Alfred's lips curled in contempt. "Oh, so you want to go to college." He mimicked George's voice. "I'm too good to stay at home with my dad and brothers. They're willin' to stay on the land, to work like honest folk, but not me. I'm goin' to BE somebody. You won't catch me eatin' no dirt or haulin' no manure. I'm quality, can't you see that?"

George's knife clattered to the table. He kicked back from the table, whirled, and hurried for the door.

"Come back here, Boy." There was a flat coldness to the voice, a ring of authority that reached out and stopped the boy in his tracks. He stood frozen, his hand on the doorknob.

"I said come back here, Boy." Slowly George turned and retraced his steps. He came back to the table but did not sit down. His hands were shaking and he shoved them in his pockets, but he lifted his head and looked into the old man's eyes.

"Do you know what you're walkin' away from?" Alfred's voice was low and he spoke slowly. "Do you know how many boys would give their souls to trade places with you? Do you know what I own, Boy?"

"I ought to know, you tell me every day." George's voice quivered. "I know it by heart. Nine farms, twenty-five hundred acres, seven hired men, thirteen tractors, more hogs than you can count, five hundred cattle; oh, I know what you own, all right."

"Well, here's somethin' else you ought to know, since you're so smart. You walk out that door, you don't get one damn cent. Ever. You hear? Not one damn cent. You think I worked all these years so's you could suck me dry in some smart alec college, you got another think comin', Boy." Alfred's eyes glittered and he waved a fist at George.

"You think I didn't know that?" George's hands came from his pockets and twisted around the back of his chair. "You think I didn't know what you'd do? I never expected to get anything from you that didn't have strings attached. I always planned on working my way through, so you can keep it all. I don't want it."

For a moment the two glared at each other; the old man, staring up from beneath gnarled eyebrows at the boy, notic-

ing for the first time a hidden flash of steel. Alfred's heart thumped in his chest and he was the first to look away. He picked up his knife and scraped imaginary crumbs off the table.

"You got me all wrong, Boy." The authority in his voice was gone now, replaced by a whining tone. "I just try to take care of my own, that's all. You can't blame a man for tryin' to take care of his own children, the best way he knows how."

"I don't want to be taken care of. I don't want you to take care of me like you do Donald and Frank. Oh, you put them on farms, all right. Farms you own. You tell them when to get up and when to go to bed. And I don't want any of it. I don't care if I have to clean streets, I just want to get away from here. And you." George's fingers on the chair had gone white from the pressure. He was breathing heavily.

The old man leaped to his feet. He leaned across the table at George, the mottled skin of his face shining in his rage. "Then get out!" he shouted. "Go on, run out on me like your mother did, you ungrateful pup!"

For a moment there was a shocked silence in the room. Both men stood rigid, paralyzed by the venom of the old man's words. Then George leaped over the table, smashing into his father, and the two fell to the floor. The old man was wiry and strong and for a long time they rolled over and over, upsetting the table and chairs and writhing across the floor. Alfred's claw-like hand clamped shut on George's throat, but the boy twisted away. Slowly he bent Alfred's arm behind his back until the old man squealed in pain. George flipped Alfred onto his back, then sat on his chest. For a long time they stayed that way, sucking air into their aching lungs.

George picked up a kitchen knife from the floor. The light glinted from the blade as he brought it to the pinfeather stubble of Alfred's throat.

"I ought to kill you." The words came choking out. Tears were running down his cheeks, and his chest heaved with racking sobs. "You drove my mother away — you know that, don't you? I remember; I remember the day she left." George's mouth was an ugly wound in the gaunt horror of his face.

"I remember how she cried that day. She picked me up and told me goodbye, and I begged her to take me with her.

But she couldn't do it. She said, 'If I took you along he'd kill us both'; then she put me down and ran out of the house. I didn't know what she meant then, but I do now." George's body shook with his crying, and his tears made great wet splotches on Alfred's faded blue shirt.

Slowly, George rose to his feet. He looked at the knife in his hand, then at the old man cringing at his feet. He flung the knife from him and walked to the stairs. Alfred lay still, his eyes fixed on nothing.

In a few minutes George came down the stairs, carrying a battered brown suitcase in one hand, a jacket looped over his other arm. He picked his way through the broken furniture, ignoring Alfred, who had not moved. He crossed the room to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

"George!" The old man's cry echoed in the silent house as he dragged himself to his knees. There was no answer. "George!" He pulled himself to his feet, and desperation filled his scream.

In the cool night air George could hear his father's moaning sobs all the way across the front yard and until he was walking along the highway.

