

“Paid-up Member”

By Will R. Bird

It was raining a little at noon, but Simon Lasher drove out to his corner lot with the disc harrow. He had seen Dickie go up the back road and he meant to intercept him as he returned; he had cleaned and oiled his old army rifle, and he meant to use it.

Simon gritted his teeth as he drove. Jim Dickie had asked for trouble. He had come into the settlement and bought the farm that Simon was on the point of buying. True, he and Hank Wheeler had disagreed on the price, but what right had an outsider to come in and pay more than the land was worth? Then, insult added to injury, Dickie had taken Simon’s girl from him. It was carrying things too far.

Simon hurried his horses. He must get to the road corner a few minutes before Dickie came in sight. He held the rifle and a shovel between his knees, and he swung his whip sharply. Folks said Simon never drove without a whip, but how could one hurry horses without it? And where would he be if he had not hurried? In ten years he had paid for his farm, and now had his house in readiness for a bride.

At the corner of the field he stopped his horses. The ground dipped slightly, forming a small hollow, and he dug in the centre of it, scooping a short, shallow trench. He had not got it as deep as he wished when he saw his horses prick up their ears. Someone was coming. He dropped his shovel. Jim Dickie was plodding past, his head down to the fine rain. Simon sneered. No one but Dickie would go in a rain to Hank Wheeler’s post office.



“He comes regular,” Hank had reported. “He gets soldier magazines and Legion papers. He’s a paid-up member if he does live out here.”

“Paid-up member!” Simon had jeered. “What good’s that to him? Will it help him farm?”

He pretended to be tinkering with the disc harrow. The rifle was on the ground behind the discs.

“Hi,” he called. “Been for mail? Come over. I want to show you something.”

Dickie turned, his pale face friendly. “Yes, I got something I been expecting, something special for returned men ...”

“Come and see where I’ve been diggin’,” interrupted Simon.

He hated soldier stuff as he hated this man who had won Mary Hawkins from him, and the solemn way in which Dickie could recite “In Flanders Fields.” Such rot!

Mary and he had quarrelled when he criticized the poem, and Mary had refused him her company. And now, a friend had told Simon in the morning, she and Dickie were to be married as soon as the school term ended. So Simon had cleaned his rifle.

Dickie carefully fished an envelope from his wet jacket as he came to where Simon had dug. “See what the Legion sent me,” he said proudly, holding it out. “It’s ...”

Crack! The sullen report of a rifle. Simon had looped the reins about his wrist before he fired, and for a moment he was busy jerking the horses to a standstill, then he swung them around to where the limp body was pitched, face down, half into the cavity. His aim had been true. A dreadful redness was welling from the collar of Dickie’s shirt. “Blast you!” grated Simon. “You kin be a paid-up member of that hole till Kingdom Come.”

The horses quieted and Simon caught up the shovel. He had heard the chug-chug of a wheezy motor in the distance. It was Hank Wheeler's car. A twist of his heel buried the envelope Dickie had dropped, a single push straightened the body in the trench. He flung the rifle in beside the dead man and shovelled hurriedly. When the old flivver came in sight, Simon was seated on his harrow and had just crossed the spaded earth. Twenty minutes later no one could have found the spot where he had dug.

At six o'clock Wheeler knocked at Simon's door. He was county sheriff as well as postmaster. "Did you see Jim Dickie this afternoon?" he asked bluntly.

"Yes, I did," said Simon. "He passed when I was harrowin'. Why?"

"He ain't been seen since," said Hank, as bluntly as before.

"That's strange." Simon simulated surprise. "Maybe he's at one of the neighbour's."

"I been all around," said Hank. "You don't know anything, eh?"

"Me? No, I don't," said Simon smoothly. "I'll send you word if I see him."

Three months had passed since Jim Dickie vanished. Simon went to his hoeing contentedly. Mary was recovering from the shock, had got her colour back. He would go and call on her in a few days.

He pulled weeds with a vim. Everything had gone better than he expected. There hadn't been much fuss over Dickie's disappearance, not as much as he had dreaded. And Dickie's Legion had been a joke. An official had come one day and talked with Hank, that was all that had been done. Paid-up member—pooh!

Hank had never seemed the same, but perhaps the sheriff's complete failure to find a clue to Dickie's murderer accounted for that. Simon had often looked at the corner lot, now a shimmering

green, inches deep. Who would guess its secret? It was good ground and the grain was doing fine. In the fall he would scoop more earth in the hollow at the corner, fill it in.

When he reached the house at suppertime, Hank Wheeler and an officer from the city met him. Handcuffs were snapped on Simon's wrists before he could take in what had been said. Hank enlightened him.

"What—me—arrested for murderin' Dickie?" shouted Simon. "You're crazy. I don't know nothin' about him."

"No?" Hank's voice sent shivers up Simon's spine. "You'll have a hard time makin' the judge believe that. You harrowed that field the day Jim was killed—and it was your rifle we found beside him.

"You—you—found—" Simon's face whitened, became ghastly. He seemed to wilt.

"We did," said Hank grimly. "All I been doin' was watch that field of yours. I knowed they'd sprout if they was near the surface."

Simon licked his dry lips. "What—sprouted?" he whispered.

"Poppies," snapped Wheeler as they led Simon to his car. "Poor Jim got an envelope full of seed that day—a special good kind the Legion sent to paid-up members."



