

way ter 'blige Nelse Pullam. He's de one dat sen' de challenge. I'm yer; en I'd des lak ter see 'im er anybody else make me move. See dat rock deh?" pointing to a stone weighing about five pounds; "ef Nelse Pullam des dare ter come nigh me, I'll sen' it at his head, I wouldn't even cock dis pistol."

"Shuh!" grunted Jim, disappointedly, and he turned away to meet Bob, who was leaving Nelse.

"My man's er lill tited wid de walk over yer," remarked Bob, indifferently. "I reckon we better wait er lill while on 'im."

"Peter say he hain't quite ready yit, returned Jim, mashing a troublesome mosquito on his cheek.

"Ter tell you de trufe, dough, Peter is a stric' chu'ch-member, en I 'clare I b'lieve Peter think it wrong ter kill Nelse, but he's er makin' up his min' es fas' ez a dog kin trot. He'll be ready in er minute; des now he look lak he was prayin' ter de Lawd ter tek Nelse's soul in han'."

Both men were awkwardly silent for a moment as they looked off over the tops of the trees where a few buzzards were circling towards the earth. The pause was ended by Bob.

"Look-y yer, Jim," he ventured in a confidential, experimental tone. "I like Peter Brown en he's gotter nice woman fer er wife—seem lak it er pity ter have his funeral ter-morrer; he's er man 'at might live fifty year yit ef he let erlone."

"Dat des 'actly de way I feel 'bout Nelse," said Jim, with a cunning twinkle in his eye; "he's er lill bragsome en bull-heady, but he's er nice feller, tek 'im all in all."

"I wuz des er studyin'," went on Bob, "whut's de use er des fellers shootin' one ernurr? Why'n'l me en you des ez well tek de balls out'n de pistols? Ef dey don't know no diffunce, it all de same."

"Dat's er mighty good plan," acquiesced the other with a face-marring grin, "en den de woul'n't be sech er likeliness er stray balls er flippin' roun' us; no tellin' how blamed crooked dese darkies might shoot ef dey once got started."

Accordingly the two seconds sat down out of sight of their two friends, and in a few moments they had picked the balls from the cartridges.

"Now dey'll do," chuckled Bob; "dey'll mek des de same fus' en dey won't be er bit er harm done. Now, Jim, I'm gwine hat dis duel er me 'n' you kin tek it up; what yer seh?"

"I'm wid yer," said Jim, and both of the men hastened to their principals. But no persuasion could induce the offended men to rise from their respective seats. At last the spectators began to venture nearer and nearer till a dozen or more stood around, indulging in raillery over the evident cowardice of the ones most concerned.

"Dis won't never do," said Bob to Jim, in an under tone; "de whole town is gwine be laughin' over des; suppose we tell um de oin't no loads in de pistols, seem lak it de onlies' way now."

Jim consented and both returned to their men.

"Peter," said Jim to his sulky friend in a whisper, "I want er tell you suppen, en it mus'nt go er step funder: me en Bob Lash is tuk all de balls out'n de 'volvers so de cayn't be nobody hu't, en we is want some show er fightin' ter go off yer terday, kase de whole town 'll be er-laughin' en seh y'all bofe back down. Don't yer see (drawing a blank cartridge from the revolver), don't yer see it all 'ight?"

Peter pretended not to have heard Jim's remark. He rose to his feet hastily, grasping the revolver.

"Who seh I gwine back out?" he asked in a thunderous voice; "who dare to tell me dat in my face? I'm ready en er-waitin'; show me whar ter stan'."

Nelse Pullam was also on his feet and advancing toward the selected spot. The astonished spectators scattered like the fragments of an exploded shell.

"Hurry up en git ready," said Nelse, drawing himself up to his full height and lightly toying with his revolver, as he stood, his right foot placed in front of his left. "Hurry up, I want dis done wid; it mos' sundown now."

"Now," said Jim, "w'en we count three, bofe mus' wheel roun' ez quick ez he ken en 'gin ter shoot, en shoot tell de las' ball out'en de pistols ef he be able ter pull de trigger."

"I objec'," protested Bob; "dat ain't 'cordin ter de code; you mus' bofe des fire one shot erpiece, and den hole up ter see ef damage is been done er anybody is prepared ter 'pologize."

Nelse grunted in profound derision, and Peter echoed the grunt with increased resonance.

"Hol' up," said Jim, "I mus' speak ter you in private, Bob."

The two seconds walked a few paces away together.

"Don't yer see?" said discerning Jim in a perturbed whisper; "don't yer see dat all de shots mus' be fired or somebody might git er hol' er de pistols atter it over en find out dey is blank loads?"

"Dat's er fac'," answered Bob "you is right." Then aloud to the others:

"Gen'men, de 'gestion er my brer secon' is er lill out de reg'lar run, but ez you bofe is so bent on blood, we is 'cide 'at you mus' shoot all de balls des ez you like. You kin tek yo' time er you kin pop um off lak er pack er fire-crackers."

The make-believe duellists began to quiver anew, but they held their revolvers out at arm's length in front of them and got ready to wheel round at the signal.

"W'en I git ter three," said Bob, "wheel en go at it. Now: One! Two! Three!"

They turned and began to fire. Nelse's revolver cracked five times, but Peter in his agitation managed to explode but one shell.

"Hol' up!" cried Bob, and the smoke rose. "Now it seem dat Mr. Brown is got fo' shots lef'; en 'cordin' ter de code he is got er right ter shoot um all in my man. So far it look lak nobody ain't hu't, but I boun' yer dem trees out deh is got many er load in um. Now de 'fair res' twix you two, en ef you kin mek saterfaction dout any mo' smoke en blood oll well en good; ez fer my part I think befo' you men is sho dat you is brave fum de wud go."

Peter raised his revolver majestically and rested it upon the branch of a bush in a direct aim at his opponent's broad breast.

"Nelse Pullam," said he in a deep, thrilling tone, "I is got fo' mo' balls lef'; is you now willin', wid death en 'struction in yo' face, ter 'trac' whut you seh ter me w'en you 'low I is er liar?"

Nelse folded his arms calmly, and looking round upon the sun-lighted spot and up at the sky as if he were bidding farewell to earth, said: "Seem lak I'm yo' meat; I reckon I kin die lak er man; le'me hat 'im yer," putting his broad hand grandly upon his breast.

"I is got fo' mo' shots lef'," threatened Peter slowly, keeping a steady aim at Nelse and humping bis shoulders by way of emphasis. "Is I er liar or not?"

"Let um come," said Nelse, closing his eyes."

"Sholy, gem'men, dis kin be settle," interposed Bob. "You is bofe game, en hit do seem er bnrnin' shame ter hat one er sech two fine men laid out erbout er lill matter. Cayn't suppen be done?"

"I is got fo' mo' balls lef'," repeated Peter, looking along the barrel of his revolver, after he had spit upon his band to take a fresh hold of the handle.

"I don't keer ef you gotter whole houseful er um," said Nelse. "Yer won't see me back down, Peter Brown; yer des let um come; I got my whack at you en mis, kase I been smokin' too much; now you do de same."

"Let 'im off dis time, Peter," advised Jim; "shoot de shots off in the air lak white folks does."

As if thankful for the suggestion, Peter slowly, magnanimously raised his revolver over his head, and bang! bang! bang! bang! went his blank cartridges.

"Now dat's er brave thing!" approved Bob. "Now shek han's lak men; I fer one is glad dis is settle'."

The two armed men threw down their weapons, and in an instant they were warmly shaking hands and laughing.

"Peter Brown, I 'low I is er brave man," said Nelse as they walked away followed by a motley procession of admirers.

"Yes, dat's so," admitted Peter, "en I 'low I is, too; I didn't feel er single shiver thoo de whole battle."