

A close-up photograph of an American flag waving on a wooden pole. The flag's stars and stripes are clearly visible, and the background is a soft-focus bokeh of light and dark spots.

***THOMAS
NELSON PAGE***

***"GEORGE
WASHINGTON'S"
LAST DUEL***

Thomas Nelson Page

"George Washington's" Last Duel

1891

EAN 8596547221777

DigiCat, 2022

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I.

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Of all the places in the county "The Towers" was the favorite with the young people. There even before Margaret was installed the Major kept open house with his major domo and factotum "George Washington"; and when Margaret came from school, of course it was popular. Only one class of persons was excluded.

There were few people in the county who did not know of the Major's antipathy to "old women," as he called them. Years no more entered into his definition of this class than celibacy did into his idea of an "old bachelor." The state of single blessedness continued in the female sex beyond the bloom of youth was in his eyes the sole basis of this unpardonable condition. He made certain concessions to the few individuals among his neighbors who had remained in the state of spinsterhood, because, as he declared, neighborliness was a greater virtue than consistency; but he drew the line at these few, and it was his boast that no old woman had ever been able to get into his Eden. "One of them," he used to say, "would close paradise just as readily now as Eve did six thousand years ago." Thus, although as Margaret grew up she had any other friends she desired to visit her as often as she chose, her wish being the supreme law at Rock Towers, she had never even thought of inviting one of the class against whom her uncle's ruddy face was so steadfastly set. The first time it ever occurred to her to invite any one among the proscribed was when she asked Rose Endicott to pay her a visit. Rose, she knew, was living

with her old aunt, Miss Jemima Bridges, whom she had once met in R——, and she had some apprehension that in Miss Jemima's opinion, the condition of the South was so much like that of the Sandwich Islands that the old lady would not permit Rose to come without her personal escort. Accordingly, one evening after tea, when the Major was in a particularly gracious humor, and had told her several of his oldest and best stories, Margaret fell upon him unawares, and before he had recovered from the shock of the encounter, had captured his consent. Then, in order to secure the leverage of a dispatched invitation, she had immediately written Rose, asking her and her aunt to come and spend a month or two with her, and had without delay handed it to George Washington to deliver to Lazarus to give Luke to carry to the post-office. The next evening, therefore, when the Major, after twenty-four hours of serious apprehension, reopened the matter with a fixed determination to coax or buy her out of the notion, because, as he used to say, "women can't be *reasoned* out of a thing, sir, not having been reasoned in," Margaret was able to meet him with the announcement that it was "too late," as the letter had already been mailed.

Seated in one of the high-backed arm-chairs, with one white hand shading her laughing eyes from the light, and with her evening dress daintily spread out about her, Margaret was amused at the look of desperation on the old gentleman's ruddy face. He squared his round body before the fire, braced himself with his plump legs well apart, as if he were preparing to sustain the shock of a blow, and taking a deep inspiration, gave a loud and prolonged "Whew!"