THE CONSTANT WIFE

by W. Somerset Maugham

AUDITION SIDE — MARTHA & MRS. CULVER

Act I

Constance Middleton's drawing room. A summer afternoon. Mrs. Culver is seated on the sofa, reading. Bentley enters, followed by Martha Culver.

BENTLEY. Miss Culver.

He exits.

MARTHA. Mother!

MRS. CULVER. Yes, darling.

MARTHA. You're the last person I expected to find here. You never told me you were coming to see Constance.

MRS. CULVER. I didn't intend to till I saw in your beady eye that you meant to. I thought I'd just as soon be here first.

MARTHA. Bentley says she's out.

MRS. CULVER. Yes. Are you going to wait?

MARTHA. Certainly.

MRS. CULVER. Then I will too.

MARTHA. That'll be very nice.

MRS. CULVER. Your words are cordial, but your tone is slightly frigid, my dear.

MARTHA. I don't know what you mean by that, mother.

MRS. CULVER. My dear, we've known one another a great many years, haven't we? More than we always find it convenient to mention.

MARTHA. Not at all. I'm thirty-two. I'm not in the least ashamed of my age. Constance is thirty-six.

MRS. CULVER. And yet we still think it worth while to be a trifle disingenuous with one another. Our sex takes a natural pleasure in dissimulation.

MARTHA. I don't think anyone can accuse me of not being frank.

MRS. CULVER. Frankness, of course, is the pose of the moment. It is often a very effective screen for one's thoughts.

MARTHA. I think you're being faintly disagreeable to me, mother.

MRS. CULVER. I, on the other hand, think you're inclined to be decidedly foolish.

MARTHA. Because I want to tell Constance something she ought to know?

MRS. CULVER. Ah, I was right then. And it's to tell her that you've broken an engagement and left three wretched people to play cut-throat.

MARTHA. It is.

MRS. CULVER. And may I ask why you think Constance ought to know?

MARTHA. Why? *Why?* That's one of those questions that really don't need answering.

MRS. CULVER. I've always noticed that the questions that really don't need answering are the most difficult to answer.