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THE CONSTANT WIFE

A Play in Three Acts

by

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

SAMUEL



FRENCH

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THE CONSTANT WIFE

Produced on 6th April, 1927, at the Strand Theatre, London, and
revived on May 19th, 1937, at the Globe Theatre, London, with the
following cast of characters :

(in the order of their appearance)

MRS. CULVER	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Helen Haye
BENTLEY	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Victor Boggetti
MARTHA CULVER	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Everley Gregg
BARBARA FAWCETT	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Dorothy Lane
CONSTANCE MIDDLETON	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Ruth Chatterton
MARIE-LOUISE DURHAM	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Eileen Peel
JOHN MIDDLETON, F.R.C.S.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Cecil Parker
BERNARD KERSAL	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Cyril Raymond
MORTIMER DURHAM	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	Walter Piers

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

*The action of the play takes place in John's house in
Harley Street.*

THE CONSTANT WIFE*

ACT I

SCENE: CONSTANCE MIDDLETON'S drawing room. A summer afternoon. It is a room furnished with singularly good taste. CONSTANCE has a gift for decoration and has made this room of hers both beautiful and comfortable. There are doors up C., leading to the hall. Another door up R. leads to a morning room or a library. The windows are L. and the fireplace R. At R.C. there is a sofa. Up L.C. is a small grand piano, with a long music stool below it. (NOTE:—If a piano is not available, another small settee may be placed in the position of the piano stool, and above it a round table on which may be set a bowl of flowers, one or two framed photographs or any other desired dressings.) There is a writing desk at the window, a low table down L., and a small easy chair below and R. of it. Another easy chair is set down R., below the fireplace. (See the GROUND PLAN at the end of the play.)

When the CURTAIN rises, MRS. CULVER is discovered seated on the sofa, at the L. end, reading an illustrated periodical. She is an elderly lady with a pleasant face and is dressed in walking costume. After a few moments, the doors up C. open and BENTLEY, the butler, enters. He is followed by MARTHA CULVER, who is MRS. CULVER'S daughter and a fine young woman.

BENTLEY. Miss Culver.

(He exits.)

MARTHA *(moving down a little and seeing MRS. CULVER)*. Mother !
MRS. CULVER *(very calmly)*. Yes, darling. *(She does not look up from the page she is studying.)*

MARTHA *(moving to the L. end of the sofa)*. You're the last person I expected to find here. You never told me you were coming to see Constance.

MRS. CULVER *(good-humouredly)*. 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. *(She puts down the periodical.)*

MARTHA. Bentley says she's out.

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

MARTHA *(crossing down to the fireplace)*. 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 *(turning)*. I don't know what you mean by that, mother.

* N.B. Paragraph 3 on page 2 of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

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 (*moving in, to R. of the sofa*). 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?* (*Moving down R. to the easy chair.*) 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.

MARTHA. It isn't at all difficult to answer. She ought to know the truth *because it's the truth.* (*She sits in the easy chair down R.*)

MRS. CULVER. Of course truth is an excellent thing, but before one tells it one should be quite sure that one does so for the advantage of the person who hears it rather than for one's own self-satisfaction.

MARTHA. Mother, Constance is a very unhappy person.

MRS. CULVER. Nonsense. She eats well, sleeps well, dresses well *and* she's losing weight. No woman can be unhappy in those circumstances.

MARTHA. Of course, if you won't understand it's no use my trying to make you. You're a darling, but you're the most unnatural mother. Your attitude simply amazes me.

(*The door opens and BENTLEY ushers in MRS. FAWCETT. MRS. FAWCETT is a trim, businesslike woman of forty. MARTHA rises.*)

BENTLEY. Mrs. Fawcett.

(*He exits.*)

MRS. CULVER. Oh, Barbara, how very nice to see you.

BARBARA (*crossing down and kissing her*). Bentley told me you were here and Constance was out. What are you doing?

MRS. CULVER. Bickering.

BARBARA (*crossing below the sofa*). What about? (*She sits R. of MRS. CULVER.*)

MRS. CULVER. Constance.

MARTHA (*R. of the sofa*). I'm glad you've come, Barbara . . . Did you know that John was having an affair with Marie-Louise?

BARBARA. I hate giving a straight answer to a straight question.

MARTHA. I suppose *everyone* knows but us. How long have you known? They say it's been going on for months. I can't think how it is we've only just heard it.

MRS. CULVER (*ironically*). It speaks very well for human nature that with the masses of dear friends we have it's only today that one of them broke the news to us.

BARBARA. Perhaps the dear friend only heard it this morning.

MARTHA. At first I refused to believe it.

MRS. CULVER. Only quite, quite at first, darling. You surrendered to the evidence with an outraged alacrity that took my breath away.

MARTHA. Of course I put two and two together. After the first shock I understood everything. I'm only astonished that it never occurred to me before.

BARBARA. Are you very much upset, Mrs. Culver?

MRS. CULVER. Not a bit. I was brought up by a very strict mother to believe that men were naturally wicked. I am seldom surprised at what they do and never upset.

MARTHA. Mother has been simply maddening. She treats it as though it didn't matter a row of pins.

MRS. CULVER. Constance and John have been married for fifteen years. John is a very agreeable man. I've sometimes wondered whether he was any more faithful to his wife than most husbands, but as it was really no concern of mine I didn't let my mind dwell on it.

MARTHA. *Is* Constance your daughter, or is she *not* your daughter?

MRS. CULVER. You certainly have a passion for straight questions, my dear. The answer is yes.

MARTHA. And are you prepared to sit there quietly and let her husband grossly deceive her with her most intimate friend?

MRS. CULVER. So long as she doesn't know I can't see that she's any the worse. Marie-Louise is a nice little thing, silly of course, but that's what men like, and if John is going to deceive Constance, it's much better that it should be with someone we all know.

MARTHA (*to BARBARA*). Did you ever hear a respectable woman—and mother is respectable . . .

MRS. CULVER (*interrupting*). Oh, quite.

MARTHA. . . . talk like that? (*She turns down to the fireplace.*)

BARBARA. You think that something ought to be done about it?

MARTHA (*turning to face them*). I am determined that something shall be done about it.

MRS. CULVER. Well, my dear, I'm determined that there's at least one thing you shan't do, and that is to tell Constance.

BARBARA (*to MARTHA; a trifle startled*). Is that what you want to do ?

MARTHA. Somebody ought to tell her. If mother won't, I must.

BARBARA. I'm extremely fond of Constance. Of course, I've known what was going on for a long time, and I've been dreadfully worried.

MARTHA (*moving a pace towards the sofa*). John has put her into an odious position. No man has the right to humiliate his wife as he has humiliated Constance. He's made her perfectly ridiculous.

MRS. CULVER. If women were ridiculous because their husbands are unfaithful to them, there would surely be a great deal more merriment in the world than there is.

BARBARA (*delighted to have a good gossip*). You know they were lunching together today ?

MARTHA. We hadn't heard that. But they were dining together the night before last.

MRS. CULVER (*brightly*). We know what they had to eat for dinner. Do you know what they had to eat for lunch ?

MARTHA. Mother ! (*She moves down again to the fireplace.*)

MRS. CULVER. Well, I thought she seemed rather uppish about the lunch.

MARTHA. You have no sense of decency, mother.

MRS. CULVER. Oh, my dear, don't talk to me about decency. Decency died with dear Queen Victoria.

(MARTHA *sits, down R.*)

BARBARA (*to MRS. CULVER*). But you can't approve of John having an open and flagrant intrigue with Constance's greatest friend.

MRS. CULVER. It may be that with advancing years my arteries have hardened. I am unable to attach any great importance to the philanderings of men. I think it's their nature. John is a very hard-working surgeon. If he likes to lunch and dine with a pretty woman now and then, I don't think he's much to blame. It must be very tiresome to have three meals a day with the same woman for seven days a week. I'm a little bored myself at seeing Martha opposite me at the dinner-table. And men can't stand boredom as well as women.

MARTHA. I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you, mother.

BARBARA (*significantly*). But they're not only lunching and dining together.

(MARTHA *sits erect and looks at BARBARA.*)

MRS. CULVER. You fear the worst, my dear ?

BARBARA (*with solemnity*). I know the worst.

MRS. CULVER. I always think that's such a comfort. With closed doors and no one listening to us, so long as a man is kind and civil to his wife, do you blame him very much if he strays occasionally from the narrow path of virtue?

MARTHA (*rising and moving up to the R. end of the sofa*). Do you mean to say that you attach no importance to husbands and wives keeping their marriage vows?

MRS. CULVER. I think wives should.

BARBARA. But that's grossly unfair. Why should *they* any more than men?

MRS. CULVER. Because on the whole they like it. We're naturally faithful creatures and we're faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else.

BARBARA. I wonder.

(*MARTHA moves slowly across, above the sofa.*)

MRS. CULVER. My dear, you are a widow and perfectly free. Have you really had any great desire to do anything that the world might say you shouldn't?

BARBARA. I have my business. When you work hard eight hours a day you don't much want to be bothered with love.

MRS. CULVER. A man about the house if often useful. It's nice to have someone around to tell you you're quite right when you know in your heart you're quite wrong.

MARTHA (*to BARBARA; turning, below the piano*). By the way, how is your business?

BARBARA. Growing by leaps and bounds. As a matter of fact I came here today to ask Constance if she would like to come in with me.

MRS. CULVER. Why should she? John earns plenty of money.

BARBARA. Well, I thought if things came to a crisis she might like to know that her independence was assured.

(*MARTHA moves slowly down L.C.*)

MRS. CULVER. Oh, you want them to come to a crisis, too?

BARBARA. No, of course I don't. But you know, they can't go on like this. It's a miracle that Constance hasn't heard yet.

MARTHA. I hope she'll find out as quickly as possible. I still think it's mother's duty to tell her.

MRS. CULVER. Which I have no intention of doing.

MARTHA. And if mother won't, I think I ought.

MRS. CULVER. Which I have no intention of permitting.

MARTHA (*moving to C.*). Her position is intolerable. He's humiliated her beyond endurance. I have no words to express my opinion of Marie-Louise, and the first time I see her I shall tell her exactly what I think of her. She's a horrid, ungrateful, mean and contemptible little cat.

BARBARA (*rising, breaking R., and turning*). Anyhow, I think it would be a comfort to Constance to know that if anything happened she had me to turn to.

MRS. CULVER. But John would make her a handsome allowance. He's a very generous man.

MARTHA (*indignantly*). Do you think Constance would accept it?

BARBARA (*to below and R. of the sofa*). Martha's quite right, Mrs. Culver. No woman in those circumstances would take a penny of his money.

MRS. CULVER. That's what she'd say. But she'd take care that her lawyer made the best arrangement he could. Few men know with what ingenuity women can combine the disinterested gesture with an eye for the main chance.

BARBARA (*easing a little, up R. of the sofa*). Aren't you rather cynical, Mrs. Culver?

MRS. CULVER. I hope not. But when women are alone together I don't see why they shouldn't tell the truth now and then. It's a rest from the weary round of pretending to be something that we quite well know we're not.

MARTHA (*stiffly*). I'm not aware that I've ever pretended to be anything I wasn't. (*She moves away, down L.C., above the low table.*)

MRS. CULVER. I daresay not, my dear. But I've always thought you were a little stupid. You take after your poor father. Constance and I have the brains of the family.

(*CONSTANCE enters up L.C. She is a handsome woman of five and thirty. She has been out and wears a hat. She carries a few small packages.*)

BARBARA (*eagerly, crossing above the sofa to C.*). Constance!

CONSTANCE (*putting her packages on the piano*). I'm so sorry I wasn't in. (*Moving down.*) How nice of you all to wait. How are you mother darling? (*She kisses them—first BARBARA, then MRS. CULVER, and then MARTHA.*)

MARTHA. What have you been doing all day, Constance?

CONSTANCE. Oh, I've been shopping with Marie-Louise. She's just coming up.

BARBARA (*with dismay*). Is she here?

CONSTANCE (*turning to BARBARA*). Yes. She's telephoning.

MARTHA (*ironically*). You and Marie-Louise are quite inseparable.

CONSTANCE (*crossing to the fireplace*). I like her. She amuses me.

(*BARBARA breaks to above the R. end of the sofa.*)

MARTHA. Were you lunching together?

CONSTANCE (*adjusting an ornament on the mantelpiece*). No, she was lunching with a young man.

MARTHA (*exchanging a glance with MRS. CULVER*). Oh, really. (*Breezily.*) John always comes home to luncheon, doesn't he? (*She eases up to the piano.*)

CONSTANCE (*with great frankness, turning*). When he doesn't have to be at the hospital too early.

MARTHA. Was he lunching with you today ?

CONSTANCE (*crossing briskly towards the desk, L.*). No. He was engaged.

MARTHA. Where ?

CONSTANCE (*checking at L.C.*). Good heavens, I don't know ! (*She moves on to the desk.*) When you've been married as long as I have you never ask your husband where he's going. (*She takes off her gloves.*)

MARTHA (*moving down to the L. end of the sofa*). I don't know why not.

CONSTANCE (*smiling*). Because he might take it into his head to ask you.

MRS. CULVER. And also because if you're a wise woman you have confidence in your husband.

CONSTANCE. John has never given me a moment's uneasiness.

MARTHA (*moving down R. to the easy chair*). You're lucky.

CONSTANCE (*with her tongue in her cheek*). Or wise.

(MARIE-LOUISE *enters up L.C. She is a very pretty, beautifully dressed little thing, of the clinging, large-eyed type.*)

MARIE-LOUISE (*moving down C.*). Oh, I didn't know there was a party.

MRS. CULVER (*turning to look at MARIE-LOUISE*). Martha and I are just going.

CONSTANCE. You know my mother, Marie-Louise.

(MRS. CULVER and MARIE-LOUISE *exchange a smile of greeting.*)

MARIE-LOUISE. Of course I do.

CONSTANCE. She's a very nice mother.

MRS. CULVER. With her head screwed on the right way and very active for her years.

(MARIE-LOUISE *moves R., to BARBARA.*)

MARIE-LOUISE (*kissing BARBARA*). How are you ? (*She moves down and kisses MARTHA.*)

MARTHA. Hallo, darling. (*Looking at her dress.*) That's new, isn't it, Marie Louise ?

MARIE-LOUISE. Yes, I've never had it on before.

MARTHA (*sitting, down R.*). Oh, did you put it on because you were lunching with a young man ?

MARIE-LOUISE (*above MARTHA's chair*). What makes you think I was lunching with a young man ?

MARTHA. Constance told me so.

CONSTANCE (*at the desk*). It was only a guess on my part. (*To MARIE-LOUISE, moving in a little, L.C.*) When we met I noticed that your eyes were shining and you had that pleased young look a

woman always gets when someone has been telling her she's the most adorable thing in the world.

MARTHA. Tell us who it was, Marie-Louise.

CONSTANCE. Do nothing of the kind, Marie-Louise. Keep it a secret and give us something to gossip about.

BARBARA (*sitting, R. of MRS. CULVER*). How is your husband, dear?

MARIE-LOUISE (*to the R. end of the sofa*). Oh, very well. I've just been 'phoning him.

BARBARA. I never saw anyone adore his wife so obviously as he adores you.

MARIE-LOUISE. Yes, he's sweet, isn't he?

BARBARA. It must be nerve-racking to live up to such devotion. It would be a dreadful shock if he ever found out that you weren't everything he thought you.

CONSTANCE (*charmingly*). But Marie-Louise *is* everything he thinks her. (*She moves up to the piano.*)

MARIE-LOUISE. And even if I weren't I think it would require more than the evidence of his eyes to persuade him.

CONSTANCE. Listen. There's John. (*She opens the doors L.C. and calls.*) John! John!

JOHN (*off*). Hulloo!

CONSTANCE. Are you coming up? Marie-Louise is here.

JOHN. Yes, I'm just coming.

CONSTANCE (*closing the doors*). He's been operating all the afternoon. (*Moving down L.C.*) I expect he's tired out.

MARTHA (*with a look at MARIE-LOUISE*). I daresay he only had a sandwich for luncheon.

(JOHN *enters up C. He is a tall spare man of about forty.*)

JOHN. Good Lord, I never saw such a lot of people. (*Moving down L. of the sofa.*) How is my mother-in-law?

MRS. CULVER. Mother-in-lawish.

(JOHN *kisses her, and then turns to BARBARA.*)

JOHN. You know, I only married Constance because her mother wouldn't have me.

MRS. CULVER. I was too young at the time to marry a boy twenty years younger than myself.

CONSTANCE (*at C.; L. of JOHN*). It hasn't prevented you from flirting outrageously with the creature ever since.

JOHN. What have you been doing all day, darling?

CONSTANCE. I've been shopping with Marie-Louise.

JOHN (*crossing below the sofa*). Oh, how do you do? (*He shakes hands with MARIE-LOUISE.*) Did you lunch together?

MARTHA. No, she lunched with a young man.

JOHN. I wish it had been me. (*To MARIE-LOUISE.*) What have you been doing with yourself lately? We haven't seen you for ages.

MARIE-LOUISE. You're never about. Constance and I almost live in one another's pockets.

JOHN. How's that rich husband of yours ?

MARIE-LOUISE. I've just been speaking to him. (*Crossing JOHN towards CONSTANCE.*) Isn't it a bore, he's got to go down to Birmingham for the night.

CONSTANCE. You'd better come and dine with us.

MARIE-LOUISE (*L. of the sofa*). Oh, it's awfully nice of you. But I'm tired out. I shall just go to bed and have an egg.

JOHN (*moving up R.C. above the sofa*). I was just going to tell you, Constance. I shan't be in this evening. I've got an acute appendix to do.

CONSTANCE. What a nuisance.

MARTHA. You've got a wonderful profession, John. If you ever want to do anything or go anywhere you've got an operation and no-one can prove it's a lie.

CONSTANCE (*moving R. to the fireplace*). Oh, my dear, you mustn't put suspicions into my innocent head. It would never occur to John to be deceitful. (*To JOHN.*) Would it ?

JOHN. I think I'd have to go an awful long way before I managed to deceive you, darling.

CONSTANCE (*with a little smile*). Sometimes I think you're right.

MARIE-LOUISE. I do like to see a husband and wife so devoted to one another as you and John. You've been married fifteen years, haven't you ?

JOHN. Yes. And it doesn't seem a day too much.

MARIE-LOUISE. Well, I must be running along. I'm late already. (*Moving towards the doors.*) Good-bye darling. Good-bye, Mrs. Culver.

(*JOHN goes up to the doors.*)

CONSTANCE. Good-bye, darling. We've had such a nice afternoon.

MARIE-LOUISE (*giving her hand to JOHN*). Good-bye.

JOHN (*opening the door*). Oh, I'll come downstairs with you.

MARTHA (*rising*). I was just going, Marie-Louise. I'll come with you.

MARIE-LOUISE (*with presence of mind*). John, I wonder if you'd mind looking at my knee for a minute ? It's been rather painful for the last day or two.

JOHN. Of course not. Come into my consulting-room. (*Moving to the door up R. with MARIE-LOUISE.*) These knee-caps are troublesome things when you once get them out of order.

MARTHA (*firmly, as she crosses above the sofa, to C.*). I'll wait for you. You won't be long, will you ? (*Turning to look at MARIE-LOUISE.*) We might share a taxi.

MARIE-LOUISE. I've got my car.

MARTHA. Oh, how nice ! You can give me a lift then.

MARIE-LOUISE. Of course. I shall be delighted.

(JOHN *opens the door for MARIE-LOUISE. She exits and he follows her.* CONSTANCE *has watched this little scene coolly but with an alert mind from the fireplace.*)

MARTHA (*moving down, L. of the sofa*). What is the matter with her knee ?

CONSTANCE. It slips.

MARTHA. What happens then ?

CONSTANCE. She slips too.

MARTHA. Are you never jealous of these women who come and see John in his consulting-room ?

CONSTANCE. He always has a nurse within call in case they should attempt to take liberties with him.

MARTHA (*amiably*). Is the nurse there now ?

CONSTANCE. And anyway I can't help thinking that the sort of woman who wants to be made love to in a consulting-room with a lively odour of antiseptics, is the sort of woman who wears horrid undies. I could never bring myself to be jealous of her.

MARTHA (*moving away to the low table, L.C.*). Marie-Louise gave me two of hers to copy only the other day.

CONSTANCE (*crossing up to the piano*). I thought them sweet. Did she give you the black chiffon one ? I've copied that. (*She begins to open a package.*)

BARBARA (*rising and easing to the fireplace*). It's true that Marie-Louise is very pretty. (*She adjusts her hat at the mirror.*)

CONSTANCE. Marie-Louise is a darling. But she and John have known each other far too long. John likes her, of course, but he says she has no brain.

MARTHA (*moving to the chair down L.*). Men don't always say what they think. (*She sits.*)

CONSTANCE. Fortunately, or we shouldn't always know what they feel.

(BARBARA *has turned to listen.*)

MARTHA. Don't you think John has any secrets from you ?

CONSTANCE (*as she crosses L. to the desk with her parcel, wrapping and string*). My dear, you talk like a confirmed spinster. Do you really think that men are mysterious ? 'They're children. (*Crossing back to the piano.*) Why, my dear, John at forty isn't nearly so grown up as Helen at fourteen.

BARBARA (*sitting in the chair down R.*). How is your girl, Constance ?

CONSTANCE. Oh, she's very well. (*She sits on the piano stool.*) She loves boarding-school, you know. They're like little boys, men. Sometimes, of course, they're rather naughty and you have to pretend to be angry with them. They attach so much importance to such entirely unimportant things that it's really touching. And they're so helpless. Just like dogs. They haven't got the sense to come in out of the rain, poor darlings. You can't help liking them.

I think they're sweet, but it's absurd to take them seriously. You're a wise woman, mother. What do you think?

MRS. CULVER. I think you're not in love with your husband.

CONSTANCE. What nonsense.

(JOHN enters R.)

JOHN. Marie-Louise is waiting for you, Martha. (*As MARTHA rises and crosses to up C.*) I've just put a little bandage round her knee.

CONSTANCE. I hope you weren't rough.

MARTHA (*turning to CONSTANCE*). Good-bye, dear. (*Turning to MRS. CULVER.*) Are you coming, mother?

MRS. CULVER. Not just yet.

MARTHA. Oh. (*After a slight hesitation.*) Good-bye, Barbara.

(MARTHA and JOHN go out up C.)

BARBARA (*rising and crossing to R. of CONSTANCE, at the piano stool*). Constance, I've got a suggestion to make to you. You know that my business has been growing by leaps and bounds and I simply cannot get along alone any more. I was wondering if you'd like to come in with me.

CONSTANCE. Oh, my dear, I'm not a business woman.

BARBARA. You've got marvellous taste and you have ideas. You could do all the decorating and I'd confine myself to buying and selling furniture.

CONSTANCE. But, I've got no capital.

BARBARA. I've got all the capital I want. I must have *help* and I know no-one more suitable than you. We'd go fifty-fifty and I think I can promise that you'd make a thousand to fifteen hundred a year.

CONSTANCE. I've been an idle woman so long. I think I'd find it dreadfully hard to work eight hours a day.

BARBARA. Won't you think it over? It's very interesting, you know. You're naturally energetic. Don't you get bored with doing nothing all the time?

CONSTANCE. I don't think John would like it. After all, it would look as though he couldn't afford to support me.

BARBARA. Oh, but nowadays plenty of women have careers, just as men do.

CONSTANCE. I think my career is looking after John—running his house for him, and making him happy and comfortable.

BARBARA. Don't you think it rather a mistake to put all your eggs in one basket?

(MRS. CULVER rises, breaks to the fireplace and is apparently admiring something on the mantelpiece. BARBARA glances at her and then turns again to CONSTANCE.)

Independence is a very good thing, and a woman who stands on her own feet can look to the future with a good deal of confidence.

CONSTANCE. It's sweet of you, but so long as John and I are happy together I think I should be foolish to do anything to vex him.

BARBARA. Well, I want you to know that if you change your mind the job is open to you.

CONSTANCE. Don't think me horrid if I say I hope I shall never need to accept it.

BARBARA. Of course not. But you've only to say the word.

(MRS. CULVER *turns and eases to below the sofa.*)

Good-bye, darling.

CONSTANCE. Good-bye, dear.

(*They kiss.*)

BARBARA. Good-bye, Mrs. Culver.

MRS. CULVER. Good-bye.

(CONSTANCE and BARBARA *go up to the doors.* BARBARA *exits.* CONSTANCE *rings the bell near the doors, returns to the piano, and deals with another parcel.*)

MRS. CULVER. Are you quite happy, dear?

CONSTANCE. Oh, quite. Don't I look it?

MRS. CULVER. I'm bound to say you do. So far as I can judge by the look of you, I should say you haven't a trouble in the world.

CONSTANCE. You'd be wrong. My cook has given notice and she makes the best meringues I've ever eaten.

(MRS. CULVER *sits at the R. end of the sofa.*)

MRS. CULVER. I like John.

CONSTANCE. So do I. (*Carrying the package and string to the desk L.*) He has all the solid qualities that make a man a good husband; an agreeable temper, a sense of humour, and an entire indifference to petty extravagance.

MRS. CULVER. How right you are, darling, to realise that those are the solid qualities. Of course, one has to compromise in life. If one wants to be happy in one's own way, one must let others be happy in theirs. The great thing is not to let vanity warp one's reasonable point of view.

CONSTANCE (*in humorous reproof*). Mother, mother, pull yourself together!

MRS. CULVER. Everybody's so clever nowadays. They see everything but the obvious. I've discovered that I only have to say it quite simply in order to be thought a most original and amusing old lady.

CONSTANCE (*easing to the low table L.*). Spare me, darling. (*She picks up a book and examines it.*)

MRS. CULVER (*affectionately*). If at any time anything went wrong with you, you would tell your mother, wouldn't you?

CONSTANCE (*putting down the book*). Of course. (*She moves slowly towards the sofa.*)

MRS. CULVER. I hate the thought that you might be unhappy and let a foolish pride prevent you from letting me console and advise you.

CONSTANCE (*sitting on the L. arm of the sofa: with feeling*). It wouldn't, mother dear.

MRS. CULVER. I had rather an odd experience the other day. A little friend of mine came to see me, and told me that her husband was neglecting her.

CONSTANCE. Oh, well, John never neglects me.

MRS. CULVER. I asked her why she told me, and not her own mother. She said that her mother never wanted her to marry, and it would mortify her now to have to say she had made a mistake. Of course, I gave her a good talking to. She didn't get much sympathy from me.

CONSTANCE (*with a smile*). That was very unkind, wasn't it?

MRS. CULVER. I have my own ideas about marriage. If a man neglects his wife it's her own fault, and if he's systematically unfaithful to her, in nine cases out of ten she only has herself to blame.

CONSTANCE (*rising and going up to the bell push*). Systematically is a grim word. (*She rings the bell.*)

MRS. CULVER. No sensible woman attaches importance to an occasional slip. Time and chance are responsible for that.

CONSTANCE (*moving down C.*). And shall we say, masculine vanity?

MRS. CULVER. I told my little friend that if her husband was unfaithful to her it was because he found other women more attractive. Why should she be angry with him for that? Her business was to be more attractive than they.

CONSTANCE. You are not what they call a feminist, mother, are you?

MRS. CULVER. After all, what is fidelity?

CONSTANCE (*turning and crossing L. to the window*). Mother, do you mind if I open the window?

MRS. CULVER. It is open.

CONSTANCE. In that case, do you mind if I shut it? (*She shuts the window.*) I feel that when a woman of your age asks such a question I should make some sort of symbolic gesture. (*She moves to R. of the low table L.C.*)

MRS. CULVER. Don't be ridiculous. Of course I believe in fidelity for women. I suppose no one has ever questioned the desirability of that. But men are different. Women should remember that they have their homes and their name and position and their family, and they should learn to close their eyes when it's possible they may see something they are not meant to.

(BENTLEY enters up L.C.)

BENTLEY. Did you ring, madam?

CONSTANCE. Yes. I am expecting Mr. Bernard Kersal. I'm not at home to anybody else.

BENTLEY. Very good, madam.

CONSTANCE. Is Mr. Middleton in ?

BENTLEY. Yes, Madam, he's in the consulting room.

CONSTANCE. Very well.

(BENTLEY exits.)

MRS. CULVER. Is that a polite way of telling me that I had better take myself off ?

CONSTANCE (*moving towards C.*). Of course not. On the contrary, I particularly want you to stay. (*She sits on the L. arm of the sofa.*)

MRS. CULVER. Who is this mysterious gentleman ?

CONSTANCE. Mother ! *Bernard.*

MRS. CULVER. That says nothing to me at all. Not Saint Bernard, darling ?

CONSTANCE. Pull yourself together, my pet. You must remember Bernard Kersal. He proposed to me.

MRS. CULVER. Oh, my dear, you cannot expect me to remember the names of all the young men who proposed to you.

CONSTANCE. Yes, but he proposed more than any of the others.

MRS. CULVER. Why ?

CONSTANCE. I suppose because I refused him. (*Rising and moving to L.C.*) I can't think of any other reason.

MRS. CULVER. He made no impression on me.

CONSTANCE (*turning*). I very nearly married him, you know.

MRS. CULVER. Why didn't you ?

CONSTANCE (*moving to the L. end of the sofa*). I think he was a trifle too much inclined to lie down on the floor and let me walk over him.

MRS. CULVER. In short, he had no sense of humour.

CONSTANCE. I was quite certain that he loved me, and I was never absolutely sure that John did.

MRS. CULVER. Well, you're sure now, dear, aren't you ?

CONSTANCE. Oh yes. John adores me.

MRS. CULVER. And what's this young man coming for today ?

CONSTANCE. He's not such a very young man any more. He was twenty-nine then and so he must be nearly forty-five now.

MRS. CULVER. He isn't still in love with you ?

CONSTANCE (*crossing to the desk*). I shouldn't think so. (*Taking her mirror from her handbag and looking at her hair.*) Do you think it possible after fifteen years ? It's surely very unlikely. (*Glancing across at MRS. CULVER.*) Don't look at me like that, mother. I don't like it.

MRS. CULVER. Don't talk stuff and nonsense to me, child. Of course you know if he's in love with you or not.

CONSTANCE (*putting away her mirror*). But I haven't seen him since I married John. (*To L. of the low table.*) You see he lives in

China. He's a merchant or something in Shanghai. (*Moving to C.*) He came when I was so dreadfully ill and I didn't see him.

MRS. CULVER. Oh ! Why's he here now then ? Have you been corresponding with him ?

CONSTANCE. No. (*Moving up to the piano.*) One can't write letters to anyone one never sees for fifteen years. (*Looking through some music.*) He always sends me flowers on my birthday.

MRS. CULVER. That's rather sweet of him.

CONSTANCE (*turning*). And the other day, I had a letter from him saying he was in England, and would like to see me. (*Putting down the music.*) So I asked him to come today. (*She moves across R. above the sofa.*)

MRS. CULVER. I wondered why you were so smart.

CONSTANCE (*moving down R. to the fireplace*). Of course he may be terribly changed. Men go off so dreadfully, don't they ? He may be bald and fat now.

MRS. CULVER. He may be married.

CONSTANCE (*turning*). Oh, if he were I don't think he'd want to come and see me would he ?

MRS. CULVER. I see you're under the impression that he's still in love with you.

CONSTANCE (*crossing C., below the sofa*). Oh, I'm not.

MRS. CULVER. Then why are you so nervous ?

CONSTANCE (*turning and sitting on the L. arm of the settee*). It's only natural that I shouldn't want him to think me old and haggard. He adored me, mother. I suppose he still thinks of me as I was then. It wouldn't be very nice if his face fell about a yard and a half when he came into the room.

MRS. CULVER (*rising*). I think I'd much better leave you to face the ordeal alone.

CONSTANCE. Oh, no, mother, you must stay. I particularly want you. You see, he may be awful, and I may wish I'd never seen him again. It'll be so much easier if you're here. I may not want to be alone with him at all.

MRS. CULVER. Oh. (*She sits again, at the R. end of the sofa.*)

CONSTANCE (*with a twinkle in her eye*). On the other hand, I may.

MRS. CULVER. It seems to me you're putting me in a slightly embarrassing situation.

CONSTANCE (*rising from the arm of the sofa and sitting L. of MRS. CULVER*). Now listen. If I think he's awful, we'll just talk about the weather for a few minutes and then we'll have an ominous pause and stare at him. That always makes a man feel a perfect fool and the moment a man feels a fool, he gets up and goes.

MRS. CULVER. Sometimes they don't know how to, poor dears, and the earth will never open and swallow them up.

CONSTANCE. On the other hand if I think he looks rather nice, I shall just take out my handkerchief and carelessly place it on the piano.

MRS. CULVER. Why ?

CONSTANCE (*rising*). Darling, in order that you may rise to your aged feet and say, well, you really must be running along. (*She turns up to the piano.*)

MRS. CULVER. Yes, I know that, but why should you carelessly place your handkerchief on the piano?

CONSTANCE (*turning, at up L.C.*). Because I am a creature of impulse. I shall have an impulse to place my handkerchief on the piano. (*She goes to the piano for her bag.*)

MRS. CULVER. Oh, very well. But I always mistrust impulses.

(BENTLEY enters up L.C.)

BENTLEY. Mr. Kersal.

(BERNARD KERSAL enters. *He is a tall good-looking man, sunburned and of healthy appearance. He is evidently very fit and he carries his forty-six years well.* BENTLEY exits.)

CONSTANCE (*meeting BERNARD up C. and shaking hands*). How do you do. Do you remember my mother? (*She brings BERNARD down stage.*)

BERNARD (*moving down to MRS. CULVER and shaking hands with her*). I'm sure she doesn't remember me.

(CONSTANCE takes a small handkerchief out of her bag. MRS. CULVER observes this.)

MRS. CULVER. That is the soft answer that turneth away wrath.

CONSTANCE. It's rather late for tea, isn't it? Would you like a drink? (*As she says this she goes L. and places her handkerchief on the piano.*)

BERNARD. No, thanks. I've just this moment had one.

CONSTANCE. To brace you for seeing me?

BERNARD. I was nervous.

CONSTANCE (*moving down again*). Have I changed as much as you expected?

BERNARD. Oh, that's not what I was nervous about.

MRS. CULVER (*with a gesture inviting him to sit*). Is it really fifteen years since you saw Constance?

BERNARD. Yes. (*He sits L. of MRS. CULVER.*) I didn't see her when I was last in England. I had to go out to China again and get my business together. I haven't had a chance to come home before.

(CONSTANCE has been giving her mother significant looks, but her mother does not notice them. CONSTANCE takes a second handkerchief out of her bag.)

MRS. CULVER. And are you home for long?

BERNARD. A year.

MRS. CULVER. Have you brought your wife with you?

BERNARD. I'm not married.

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