

## The Open Door

BY ALFRED SUTRO

### THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

SIR GEOFFREY TRANSOM  
LADY TORMINSTER

### THE OPEN DOOR

SCENE: *The drawing-room of LORD TORMINSTER'S cottage by the sea. It is 2 a.m. of a fine July night; the French windows are open on to the lawn. The room is dark; in an armchair, SIR GEOFFREY TRANSOM, a man of forty, with a frank, pleasant face, is seated, deep in thought. Suddenly the door opens, and LADY TORMINSTER appears and switches on the light. She starts at seeing SIR GEOFFREY.*

LADY TORMINSTER. Oh!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Rising.*] Hullo! Don't be afraid--it's only I!

LADY TORMINSTER. What a start you gave me Why haven't you gone to bed?

SIR GEOFFREY. I'm tired of going to bed. One always has to get up again, and it becomes monotonous. Why haven't you gone to sleep?

LADY TORMINSTER. I don't know--it's too hot, or something. I've come for a book.

SIR GEOFFREY. Let me choose one for you.

[*He goes to the table.*]

LADY TORMINSTER. Why were you sitting in the dark?

SIR GEOFFREY. Because the light annoyed me. What sort of book will you have? A red one or a green one?

LADY TORMINSTER. Is there a virtue in the colour of the binding?

SIR GEOFFREY. Why not? They're all the same inside. There are three hundred ways, they say, of cooking a potato--there are as many of dressing up a lie, and calling it a novel. But it's always the same old lie. Here take this. [*He hands her a book.*] Popular Astronomy. That will send you to sleep.

LADY TORMINSTER. The stars frighten me. But I'll try it. Good-night.

SIR GEOFFREY. Good-night.

LADY TORMINSTER. And you really had better go to bed.

SIR GEOFFREY. I move as an amendment that you sit down and talk.

LADY TORMINSTER. At this time of night!

SIR GEOFFREY. Why not? It's day in the Antipodes.

LADY TORMINSTER. And in this attire!

[*She glances at her peignoir.*]

SIR GEOFFREY. Pooh! You are more dressed than you were at dinner. That's awfully rude, isn't it? But then, you see, you're not my hostess now--you're a spirit, walking in the night. One can't be polite to spirits. Sit down, oh shade, and let us converse.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Hesitating.*] I don't know--

SIR GEOFFREY. The household have all retired; and we will make this concession to Mrs. Grundy--we will leave the door open. There!

[*He flings it open.*] The Open Door! Centuries ago, when I was alive, I remember paragraphs with that heading.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Laughing.*] So you're not alive now?

SIR GEOFFREY. Sir Geoffrey Transom ceased to be when he said good-night to Lady Torminster. Sir Geoffrey is upstairs asleep. So is her ladyship. We are their souls. Let us talk.

LADY TORMINSTER. You are in your whimsical mood.

SIR GEOFFREY. And you in your wrapper--peignoir--tea gown--it don't matter what you call it. You look--jolly. Ridiculous word--I don't mean that at all. You look--you. More you than I've seen you for years. Sh--don't interrupt. Shades never do that. By the way, do you know that the old lumber-room, my owner--my corporeal sheath--means to go away in the morning, before you are up?

LADY TORMINSTER. Sir Geoffrey! What nonsense! You've promised to stay a month!

SIR GEOFFREY. I assure you I have been charged to invent fitting and appropriate lies to account for the ridiculous creature's abrupt departure. The man Transom is a poor liar.

LADY TORMINSTER. You are making me giddy. Would you mind putting on your body? I've not been introduced to your soul.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Springing up with a flourish.*] How very remiss of me! Permit me. Gertrude this is Geoffrey. You have often heard me speak of him.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Rising.*] I think I'll go to bed.

SIR GEOFFREY. Now that is preposterous. Jack, my dear old friend--the best and only friend I have in the world--is slumbering peacefully upstairs, and Jack's wife is reluctant to talk to Jack's old pal because the sun happens to be hidden on the other side of the globe. Lady Torminster, sit down. If you're good you shall have a cigarette.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Sitting.*] Well, just one. And when I've finished it, I'll go.

SIR GEOFFREY. Agreed.

*[He hands her the box; she takes a cigarette; he strikes a match and holds it for her; he then takes a cigarette himself, and lights it.]*

SIR GEOFFREY. And, while smoking it, remember Penelope's web. For I've heaps of things to tell you.

LADY TORMINSTER. They'll keep till to-morrow.

SIR GEOFFREY. That's a fearful delusion. Nothing keeps. There is one law in the universe: NOW.

LADY TORMINSTER. I want to know what you mean by this nonsense about your going.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Puffing out smoke.*] Yes--I'm off in the morning. It has occurred to me that I haven't been to China. Now that is a serious omission. How can I face my forefathers, and confess to them that I haven't seen the land where the Yellow Labour comes from?

LADY TORMINSTER. China has waited a long time--a month more or less will make no difference. They are a patient race.

SIR GEOFFREY. There is gipsy blood in my veins--I must wander--I'm restless.... Not like Jack--he's untroubled--he can sleep. Jack's a fine sleeper, isn't he?

LADY TORMINSTER. Yes.

SIR GEOFFREY. Calm, serene, untroubled, with the conscience of a babe--one, two, three, he sleeps. He and I have had some rare times together. I've been roped to him on the Andes--he shot a tiger that was about to scrunch me--I rubbed his nose when it was frost-bitten. He saved my life--I saved his nose. I always maintain that the balance of gratitude is on his side--for where would he have been without his nose?

LADY TORMINSTER. You *are* absurd.

SIR GEOFFREY. Would you have married him without a nose?

LADY TORMINSTER. I might have.

SIR GEOFFREY. Now you know you wouldn't. You'd have been afraid of what people would say. And what would he have done when he became short-sighted, and had to wear glasses?

LADY TORMINSTER. My cigarette has gone out.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Jumping up and handing her the box.*] Take another. Never re-light a cigarette--it's like dragging up the past. Here.

LADY TORMINSTER. I said only one.

SIR GEOFFREY. This is not the hour for inflexibility. The Medes and Persians have all gone to bed.

[*She takes the cigarette; he lights it for her.*]

LADY TORMINSTER. Tell me why you mean to leave us. And remember--I shan't let *this* one go out.

SIR GEOFFREY. My explanation will be handed to you with your cup of tea in the morning.

LADY TORMINSTER. And you will be gone?

SIR GEOFFREY. I shall be gone. There is a train at 7.45--which will be packed with husbands. I shall breakfast in town.

LADY TORMINSTER. Why?

SIR GEOFFREY. Well, one must breakfast somewhere. It's a convention.

LADY TORMINSTER. Sir Geoffrey, I want you to tell me what this means.

SIR GEOFFREY. Give your decision, said the judge to the arbitrator, but never your reasons. I go, because I go. Besides, has one reasons? Why do people die, or get married, or buy umbrellas? Because of typhoid, love, or the rain? Not at all. Isn't that so?

LADY TORMINSTER. I wish you'd be serious.

SIR GEOFFREY. I'm fearfully serious. When Jack shot that tiger he had to go so near the brute that he held his life in his hands. Do you know what was my chief impression as I lay there, with the ugly cat's paw upon my chest, beginning to rip me?

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Shuddering.*] Horrible! What?

SIR GEOFFREY. I resented his having eaten something that smelt like onions.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Smiling.*] A tiger!

SIR GEOFFREY. Onions may have been his undoing. That's the beggar's skin on the floor. But you should have seen me rub Jack's nose!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Warningly.*] Sir Geoffrey, there's very little cigarette left--

SIR GEOFFREY. There are lots more in the box--and dawn is a long way off. Hang it, Lady Torminster, don't be in a hurry! Do you hear the sea out there? It's breathing as regularly as old Jack. And don't you think this is fine? Here we are, we two, meeting just as we shall meet on the other side of the Never-Never Land. It's a chance for a man to speak to a woman, and tell her things.

LADY TORMINSTER. What things!

SIR GEOFFREY. That's just it--what things? What have I to say, after all? I am going to-morrow because I am a fantastic, capricious ass. Also because I'm lonely.

LADY TORMINSTER. How will China help you?

SIR GEOFFREY. They colour it green on the map--and there *is* such a lot of it!

LADY TORMINSTER. You should get married.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a sudden burst of passion.*] You say that--you!

[*He starts back, ashamed, and hangs his head.* LADY TORMINSTER *throws a quick glance at him, then looks ahead of her, puffing quietly at her cigarette.*

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Quietly.*] So that is why you are going?

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a great sigh of relief.*] Now, that really is fine of you! Every other woman in the world would have seized that chance for a melodramatic exit. "Good-night, Sir Geoffrey; I must go to my husband." "Good-night, Lady Torminster." A clasp of the hand--a hot tear--mine--on your wrist. But you sit there. Splendid!

LADY TORMINSTER. I ask you again--is that truly why you are going?

SIR GEOFFREY. Well, yes, that's the fact. I apologise humbly--it's so conventional. Isn't it?

LADY TORMINSTER. I suppose it's difficult for human beings to invent new situations.

SIR GEOFFREY. You've known it, of course, all the time; you've known it ever since Jack brought me to you, the day after you were engaged. And that's nine years ago. It's the usual kind of fatality.

LADY TORMINSTER. These things happen.

SIR GEOFFREY. Yes. Well, I thought I was cured. I've been here five days, and I find I am not. So I go. That's best, isn't it?

LADY TORMINSTER. Yes.

SIR GEOFFREY. It's so infernally stupid. You're a beautiful woman, of course; but there are heaps of beautiful women. You've qualities--well, so have other women, too. I'm only forty-one--and, as you say, why don't I marry? Simply because of you. Because you've an uncomfortable knack of intruding between me and the other lady.

LADY TORMINSTER. That is a great misfortune.

SIR GEOFFREY. It's most annoying. So I shall try China. I shall come back in two years--I shall be forty-three then--I shall come back, sound as a bell; and I shall marry some healthy, pink-cheeked young woman, take a house next to yours, and in the fulness of time your eldest son shall fall in love with my daughter.

LADY TORMINSTER. Why not?

SIR GEOFFREY. I shouldn't have told you, of course; but I'm glad that I have. It clears the air. Now what excuse shall I make?

LADY TORMINSTER. A wire from town?

SIR GEOFFREY. Jack knows all about my affairs; in fact, that's why I take the early train, to avoid his questions.

LADY TORMINSTER. You find it impossible to stay out your time here?

SIR GEOFFREY. Quite. There are moments when I am unpleasantly volcanic.

LADY TORMINSTER. Then I tell you the best thing to do. Don't take your trunks; just go up with a bag. Leave a note that you'll come back on Tuesday. Then write from town and say you're prevented.



SIR GEOFFREY. That's a good idea--yes, that's much better.

LADY TORMINSTER. And, if you find that you really cannot come back--

SIR GEOFFREY. Exactly; you'll forward my goods and chattels. And old Jack will ascribe it all to my wayward mood; he'll think I have found it too dull down here. I'm immensely obliged.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*With a smile.*] Remark that I've not offered to be a sister to you.

SIR GEOFFREY. You've been superb. Oh, the good talk we've had! Do you know, I could almost wish old Jack to have heard what I said. I'm so fond of him, that grand old fellow, that I've been on the point of telling him, myself, more than once. For you know he *will* have me take you about, and it's painful. Besides, I've felt it almost disloyal to--keep this thing from him. You understand, don't you?

LADY TORMINSTER. Yes.

SIR GEOFFREY. He and I almost are one, you see. It's not British to show any feeling, but really I--love him. And the devil comes along, and, of all women in the world, singles out Jack's wife, and fills my heart with her. That's the devil's sense of humour.

LADY TORMINSTER. Perhaps he has read Bernard Shaw. But you must never let Jack know--never.

SIR GEOFFREY. I suppose not. He's so direct, so single-minded, that the shock would be terrible. But I'm not to blame. How could I help it? Oh, all that cackle about being master of one's fate!

LADY TORMINSTER. Two years in China--

SIR GEOFFREY. We'll hope so. Of course, it didn't matter about my telling you, because you knew already.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Nodding*] Yes, I knew. Although--

SIR GEOFFREY. Oh, you've done what you could! I've felt, in a hundred subtle ways, how you almost implored me--not to. Well, there it is. I'll write that note at once.

*[He sits at the table and begins to write.]*

LADY TORMINSTER. I'm sorry you are so lonely.

SIR GEOFFREY. That's my fault, too--the fault of the ridiculous class to which we belong. I don't do anything.

LADY TORMINSTER. Why not?

SIR GEOFFREY. What would you have me do? Go into the House? Thank you, I've been there. You spend your time on the Terrace or in the smoke-room till a muffin-bell rings; then you gravely walk into the lobby, where an energetic gentleman counts you as Polyphemus counted his sheep. Philanthropy! Well, I've tried that, but it's not in my line. I'm quite a respectable landlord, but a fellow can't live all by himself in a great Elizabethan barrack. Town--the Season? Christian mothers invite you to inspect their daughters' shoulders, with a view to purchase. I'm tired of golf and polo; I'm tired of bridge. So I'll try the good sea and the open plains; sleep in a tent and watch the stars twinkle--the stars that make you afraid.

LADY TORMINSTER. Yes, I'm afraid of the stars.

SIR GEOFFREY. Why?

LADY TORMINSTER. You remember the Persian poet? "I too have said to the stars and the wind, I will. But the wind and the stars have mocked me--they have laughed in my face...."

SIR GEOFFREY. *[A little uncomfortable.]* Persian poets, like all poets, have a funny way of pretending that the stars take an interest in us. To me, it's their chief charm that they're so unconcerned. They are lonely, too.

LADY TORMINSTER. *[Suddenly, violently.]* Don't say that again--don't--I can't bear it!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Aghast.*] Gertrude!!!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*In a whisper.*] Yes.

[*He stares haggardly at her; she does not move, but looks out, through the open window, into the night.*

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a deep breath.*] Well, I suppose we had better turn in--

LADY TORMINSTER. When do you go to China?

SIR GEOFFREY. I shall take the first boat.

LADY TORMINSTER. And you will come back--?

SIR GEOFFREY. In a year--or two--or three--

LADY TORMINSTER. We shall hear from you?

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With an effort of lightness.*] Certainly. And I will send you chests of tea--best family Souchong--and jars of ginger. Also little boxes that fit into each other. I am afraid that is all I know at present of Chinese manufactures.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Musing.*] You will be away so long?

SIR GEOFFREY. You told me to do something. I shall learn Chinese. I believe there are five hundred letters in the alphabet.

LADY TORMINSTER. As many as that!

SIR GEOFFREY. It is possible that I exaggerate. Well, Lady Torminster, I think I'll say good-night.

[*He offers his hand, which she ignores. She smiles, and motions him back to his seat.*

LADY TORMINSTER. The sun is still shining in the antipodes, my dear Geoffrey, and you are still Jack's old friend, talking to Jack's wife. Sit down, and don't be foolish. You'll be away for years; it's possible we may never meet again. It's possible, too, that next time we do meet you may be married.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With iron control.*] Who knows?

LADY TORMINSTER. Exactly--who knows? So there's no reason why we shouldn't look each other squarely in the face for once, and speak out what's in us.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Sorrowfully.*] Oh, Lady Torminster, what is there to say?

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Bending forward a little and smiling.*] How you resent my having told you!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a guilty start.*] Resent! I!

LADY TORMINSTER. You do, and you know it. In your heart you are saying, "All was going so well--she has spoiled it! If she *does* love me she shouldn't have said it--Jack's wife!"

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Sturdily.*] Well--Jack's wife. Yes!

LADY TORMINSTER. Geoffrey, Jack bores me.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Aghast.*] Lady Torminster!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Clapping her hands in glee.*] There! I've said it! Oh, it's such a relief! I never have before, and I don't suppose I ever shall again--for whom can I say it to but you? Listen--I tell you--quite *entre nous*--he bores me shockingly!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*In positive distress.*] Lady Torminster! I beg of you!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Cheerfully.*] The best fellow in all the world, and he bores me. A heart of gold, a model husband, a perfect father--and a bore, bore, bore! There! I assure you I feel better.

SIR GEOFFREY. I suppose there are moments when every woman says that of every man.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Fanning herself.*] My dear Geoffrey, please send for your soul; it has wandered off somewhere, and I don't like talking to copybooks.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Doggedly.*] You are talking to Jack's friend.

LADY TORMINSTER. Jack's friend--and mine--don't forget that! And could I say these things about Jack to any one else, and can't you conceive what a joy it is to say them? Besides, aren't we just now on the rim of the world--aren't we a little more than ourselves--aren't we almost on the other side of things? If we ever meet again, we shall look curiously at each other, and wonder, was it all true? As it is, I am scarcely sure that you are real. Everything is so still, so strange. Jack! He is up there, of course, the dear boy, his big red face pressed on the pillow. Oh, Geoffrey, when Jack brought you to me, and I was engaged--if you only hadn't been so loyal!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Grimly.*] Do you know what you are saying?

LADY TORMINSTER. I am saying the things a woman says once in a lifetime, and feels all her life. Oh, it was all so simple! You loved me--you ... were blind because of Jack ... And I married Jack ... I mustn't complain ... I am one of the hundreds of women who marry--Jacks.

SIR GEOFFREY. A better, finer man never lived.

LADY TORMINSTER. I dare say--in fact, I am sure. But you should see us when we are alone, sitting there night after night, with never a word to say to each other! You tell me you're tired of polo, and golf, and bridge. Well, how about me? And need you be scowling so fiercely, and begrudge me my one little wail, you who are going away?

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Angrily.*] Yes, I am going away, and I shall marry a Chinese. I shall marry the first Chinese woman I meet.

LADY TORMINSTER. This is very sudden. Why?

SIR GEOFFREY. Because, at least, not knowing the language, she won't be able to say unkind things about me to my friends.

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Her chin on her hand, looking squarely at him.*] Geoffrey, is Jack a bore?

SIR GEOFFREY. He never bores me.

LADY TORMINSTER. That's because he shot your tiger, and you rubbed his nose. Besides, you talk about horses, and so on. And yet I heard him, for a solid hour, telling you about a rubber he lost at bridge through his partner making diamonds trumps when he should have made spades.

SIR GEOFFREY. He's not clever, of course--and you are. But still! Is cleverness everything?

LADY TORMINSTER. Haven't I told you he's the very best fellow in all the world? And do you think I'm posing, pretending that I'm misunderstood, and the rest? You know me better. I am indulging, for once, in the luxury of absolute candour.

SIR GEOFFREY. You loved him--

LADY TORMINSTER. Of course I loved him--and I love him now.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Triumphantly.*] You see!

LADY TORMINSTER. If we women had had a hand in the making of the language, how many words there would be to express our feelings towards the men we are fond of! Of course I love Jack. I'm cruel to him sometimes; and there comes a look into his eyes--he has dog's eyes, you know--a faithful Newfoundland--

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Very earnestly.*] I don't think women quite realise what friendship means to a man.

LADY TORMINSTER. I am certain that men don't realise what marriage means to a woman! Dear funeral, am I not a good wife--shall I not remain a good wife, till the end of the chapter? Because there isn't only Jack--there are Jack's children.

SIR GEOFFREY. Yes.

LADY TORMINSTER. And isn't it wonderful, when you think of it--here are we two, Jack's friend and his wife, alone on a desert island--and we have confessed our love for each other, and we are able to discuss it as calmly as though it were rheumatism!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a groan.*] If only I hadn't induced you to stay!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Smiling.*] My dear friend, you didn't!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Amazed.*] I didn't?

LADY TORMINSTER. Why no--of course not. I knew you were going to-morrow.

SIR GEOFFREY. How?

LADY TORMINSTER. Oh, never mind how! I knew. And I suspected you would be sitting up here to-night. So I came down, hoping to find you. I wanted this talk with you. And I extracted your confession--as though it had been a tooth.

SIR GEOFFREY. And why?

LADY TORMINSTER. Why? Because it will be something to think of, in the dull days ahead. Because I knew that you loved me, and wanted to be told. Because your life lies before you, and mine is ended. Because I love you, and insisted that you should know. You leave me now, and I have no illusions. Paolo and Francesca are merely a poet's dream. You will marry--of course you will marry--but this moment, at least, has been mine.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Stretching out yearning hands.*] This moment, and every moment, in past and future!

LADY TORMINSTER. Ah, the future! Strange little syllables that hide so much! I can see you, introducing your wife to me, a little shyly--I can see myself, shaking hands with her--and with you.... My boy is seven already--time travels fast.... But it's good to know that you really have loved me, all these years....

SIR GEOFFREY. By day and by night--you, and only you!

LADY TORMINSTER. And I have loved you--ah, yes, I have loved you!... And, having said this to each other, we will not meet again--till you bring me your wife.

SIR GEOFFREY. Ah--then!

LADY TORMINSTER. I have loved you, and I love you, for the fine, upright, loyal creature that you are. I love you for loving Jack; and it is Jack's great quality in my eyes that he has been able to inspire such love. And, my dear friend, let us not be ashamed, we two, but only very proud, and very happy. We shall go our ways, and do our duty; but we shall never forget this talk we have had to-night.

SIR GEOFFREY. [*Gently.*] I am beginning to understand....

LADY TORMINSTER. You will be less lonely in future ... and I no longer afraid of the stars.... Brave heart--oh, brave little heart that I for a moment have held in my hands!

SIR GEOFFREY. [*With a passionate movement towards her.*] Gertrude!

LADY TORMINSTER. [*Lifting a finger.*] No--stay where you are.... Those are the first rays of dawn--I must go.... Good-bye. We have no need to shake hands, you and I.... Ah, Geoffrey--good-bye!

[*She goes swiftly, and closes the door. He bends his head, and remains standing, motionless, by the table.*]



CURTAIN