

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

The Codicil

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

*(1893–1978)

How to cite: Warner, S.T. 'The Codicil'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2025(1), pp. 62–79 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.25.1.04>.

Published: 10 December 2025

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Abstract

An edited presentation of a previously unpublished libretto of an 'opera buffa' by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Three sisters learn some uncomfortable truths about their recently deceased father.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; opera buffa; bawdy houses; solicitors; birdsong



The Codicil

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Editorial note: It seems likely that Valentine Ackland was referring to The Codicil when in 1966 she wrote to William Maxwell that 'If I can, I shall copy the Libretto of another one-act light opera which she likes very much and I not so much: there is only one, very dingy, copy at the moment.' The Codicil is in fact in two acts, but it is short, and the Warner and Ackland Archive includes nothing else that looks like the libretto of a 'light opera' (as against the libretto of The Sea-Change) and the typescript could reasonably be described as 'dingy'. The thought of Sylvia liking the piece more than Valentine adds a certain piquancy.

THE CODICIL
Opera buffa in 2 acts

Characters

Emma		Daughters of a gentleman recently deceased.
Bella		
Ella		
Mr Peploe		A solicitor.
Kate Hubbard		Madam of a bawdy-house.
Alfred		Her son.
John Porter		Respectable citizens.
Henry Bacon		

[Act 1]

SCENE. A parlour of 1870. Curtains drawn, lamplight. On back wall an oil portrait of an elderly man with a lofty expression; also another portrait of the same man, middle-aged. Between them, a marble bust on a pedestal of the same person. Other furniture includes a harmonium, a cast-iron stove, and an obviously presentation clock, hands pointing to 5.50. On the floor are several open deedboxes, with papers ruffled in them. The bottom drawer of a bureau is also open, and BELLA kneels before it, pulling out papers and reading them with a censorious expression. ELLA sits at a small table, writing to the dictation of EMMA, who stands behind her. BELLA and EMMA are in their thirties, ELLA is ten years younger. All three are wearing the deepest mourning, which is new, and yet looks dusty and rumpled.

EMMA (*dictating*). ‘Returning from my continental tour
I feel considerably more mature’ semi-colon.

ELLA. More mature; semi-colon.

EMMA. ‘My mind enlarged, and my soul elevated
Through works of art and science by man created,
And even more by nature’s wildest force –’

ELLA. Nature’s wildest force.

EMMA. ‘Expressed in crag, crevasse, and water-course.’
Crevasse, you idiot, not cravat!

ELLA. I’m sorry, sister; but I’ve been at it all night, and forging
Papa’s handwriting is very tedious.

EMMA (*dictating*). ‘Yet when I saw my native town, and greeted
The Baptist Chapel recently completed,
Raised by subscription and the patient zeal –’

ELLA. Patient zeal.

EMMA. ‘That animates a sturdy commonweal,
I felt a deeper joy than I had known
Before the gothic piles of Milan or Cologne.’

BELLA. Milan or Cologne! I don't suppose he ever went beyond Paris and Monte-Carlo.

EMMA (*dictating*). 'Impetuously I exclaimed – ' inverted comma . . .

ELLA (*after pause*). Yes, dear?

EMMA. Oh, don't flurry me! I've been inventing lofty thoughts for Papa's journal ever since midnight, and my head is splitting.

ELLA. I'm getting writer's cramp. And perhaps no one will ever read it, after all.

EMMA. They must! The whole town knew that Papa kept a journal. We burned the real one – we must produce another. Where was I?

ELLA. Impetuously I exclaimed – inverted comma.

EMMA. 'I exclaimed. I exclaimed' . . . Oh, hang Papa!

BELLA (*rising with a handful of papers*). Oh, the hypocrite! Oh, the old serpent! Girls, listen to this! (*She reads*)

As I was leaving the house of sin
I met John Porter sliding in.
We winked at each other like brother to brother
But not a word did we say,
Except Good-day, and Good-day,
It looks as though spring were on the way.

ELLA. Mr Porter? Well, I never!

EMMA. John Porter, eh? I can quite believe it.

ELLA. But I thought he was such a good man.

EMMA. People thought Papa was such a good man. So did we, till a few hours ago.

BELLA (*continuing*).

Which is the better, the fleeting rose
Or the cosy old arbour where it grows?
The jam in the cupboard, or Mrs Kate Hubbard? –
Who opens the door in a trice,
And welcomes me in to vice,
With a grin like an affable cockatrice.

EMMA. And *that's* the person our Papa left his money to! Kate Hubbard, who keeps the disorderly house! And by tomorrow, all the town will know it.

BELLA (*continuing with enthusiasm, carried away by Papa's eloquence*).

The flower can be plucked and the girl can be kissed
But the bawd is the true philanthropist.
So to put into action my grateful conviction
I've added a codicil
To my most respectable Will,
And Mrs Kate Hubbard shall have it all!

EMMA *snatches the papers from Bella, and thrusts them into the stove. The fire blazes up.*

ELLA. Do you suppose Papa is burning like that in hellfire?

BELLA. If he isn't, he ought to be.

ELLA. Poor Papa!

The page from which BELLA read her song has fallen unnoticed to the ground. ELLA picks it up, gives it a furtive kiss, and puts it in her pocket, unseen by the others. The clock strikes six.

EMMA. What a night!

BELLA. We shall look absolute frights at the funeral. (*Yawns and stretches.*) Let's cheer ourselves up with a hymn. (*Opens harmonium, plays chord.*) 'Hark, my soul, it is the Lord.' Now, girls!

As they sing, a tapping is heard at the window, and Mr PEPLOE sings, off, to a guitar serenade accompaniment.

Softly stealing through the laurels
To the aid of public morals,
I am here.

EMMA, BELLA, ELLA. Mr Peploe? Here on tiptoe? (*They quit harmonium.*)

EMMA. Though he be Papa's solicitor,
Such an early morning visitor
Must look queer.

Mr PEPLOE. I shall soon arouse attention,
Not to say invidious mention,
And surmise –

EMMA, BELLA, ELLA. Goodness gracious! Oh, the neighbours!

Mr PEPLOE. Should the rosy-fingered goddess
In her usual gauzy bodice
Gild the skies.

EMMA. 'Twould be fatal!

BELLA. We must settle.

ELLA. Grasp the nettle.

Mr PEPLOE. Ladies, ladies, let me in!

EMMA, BELLA, ELLA. Let him in!

They draw curtains, unbar French window. Mr PEPLOE enters, removes his hat, places it on the bust. EMMA, BELLA, ELLA point to the deedboxes, the ashes in the stove, the newly-forged journal.

EMMA, BELLA, ELLA. We have laboured, we have finished,
Father's name is now unblemished –
But the Will?

Mr PEPLOE. Ah de mortuis nil nisi
 Bonum, do not be uneasy . . .
 I have lost the codicil.

EMMA, BELLA, ELLA. You have *lost* the codicil?

Mr PEPLOE. I have lost the codicil.

They subside, astonished and relieved. Mr PEPLOE advances to centre stage.

As men of physic prop the frame in sickness,
Lawyers mop up a client's little weakness.
And for a small disbursement (I will send
My charge in shortly) this invisible mend
Which I've applied to your progenitor
Will leave his credit spotless as before.
Good name's a jewel. Need a trifling lapse
The lustre of a virtuous life eclipse

ELLA automatically opens journal and begins to write these sentiments.

And rob the public of a good example?
No, no, I say. Heaven forefend . . . Damn it, who's that?

ALFRED HUBBARD has entered through the window and assumed a noble attitude which no one has observed. He has coughed.

Mr PEPLOE. Young man, who are you?

ALFRED. My name is Alfred (*he hesitates*) Hubbard.

EMMA, BELLA. Alfred? Hubbard? Fie, for shame!

Mr PEPLOE. This is really most uncalled-for.

ELLA (*aside*). Oh, how handsome! Oh, how stalwart!

EMMA, BELLA. If Alfred Hubbard is your name
 You ought to be ashamed to mention it!

ALFRED (*striking another noble attitude*).

In hours that Memory enshrines,
When mother-love was all I knew,
And that my mother's eyes were blue,
I did not ask to see her marriage lines.

In later years, I learned with woe,
The painful truth, yet did not swerve:
The filial bond I still observe –
Her son – though illegitimately so.

Mr PEPLOE. Very proper, very proper. But is that all you've come here to say?

ALFRED. To Duty's clarion voice I thrill,

ELLA (*aside*). What is this thrill

ALFRED. Though stained my scutcheon, I pursue

ELLA (*aside*). So pleasing and so new?

ALFRED. The good, the beautiful, the true;

ELLA (*aside*). He's good! He's beautiful! It's true!

ALFRED. And so I've come about the codicil.

ELLA (*aside*). He's come! about the codicil?

EMMA and BELLA (*advancing menacingly on Alfred*).

Come about the codicil?
You'll regret it! You won't get it!

Mr PEPLOE Ladies, ladies! Peace, be still!
There is no codicil. (*He turns to Alfred.*)
Young man, although your bosom's warmed
By filial love, you're misinformed.
I speak it ex officio:
There is no codicil – and so,
Pray take your hat and go.

ALFRED. How gladly would my throbbing heart
Believe the tidings you impart!
How blithely take my hat – but, Oh!
There is a codicil, I know.
My mother told me so.

Mr PEPLOE, EMMA, and BELLA express perturbation. ELLA gazes at ALFRED with increasing devotion.

She told me in a tone of joy,
She did not mean to grieve her boy.
But, Ah! the scandal, and the low
Surmise that I must undergo!
Avert, avert the blow!

*ALFRED kneels in turn before EMMA, BELLA, ELLA, and Mr PEPLOE.
All but ELLA look completely dumbfounded.*

BELLA. What does he mean?

EMMA. Doesn't he want it?

Mr PEPLOE. Here is a welcome if unwonted
Exit from our imbroglio!

ALFRED. Tainted the dross you would bestow!
Avert, avert the blow!

He repeats the kneeling performance. Enter KATE HUBBARD.

KATE. Alfred, Alfred, that's enough!
Do not talk such silly stuff.
You are old enough to know
What has been my lifelong motto:
Take the cash, and let the credit go.

(She seats herself, and looks affably round on the party.) I knew that
boy would be up to some nonsense, so I came round after him. He's
not a fit companion for young ladies – he's got too many high ideals.

I've been too easy with him, that's the fact. But I'm always too easy with the gentlemen – aren't I, Pepper?

Mr PEPLOE *feigns not to hear this*. EMMA, BELLA, and ELLA *hear: and look at Mr PEPLOE with new interest*. KATE's *glance falls on Mr PEPLOE's hat. She rises, and takes it off the bust*.

A dead man's head is no place for your hat, Pepper. Respect the dead!

Life is a bubble – a toy – a jest.
Life is real, and life is earnest.
Take it and make it what you will, while it is yours. . .
Death is the thing that endures.

Here today, and gone tomorrow:
We know not what we borrow, but the debt's to pay.
Talk to the living of heaven or of hell,
But to the dead there's nothing to say – only, Farewell!

The sincerity of KATE's platitudes overcomes her hearers. EMMA and BELLA, on sofa, lean against each other in tranquil exhaustion. Mr PEPLOE gravely nods his head. ALFRED and ELLA slowly clasp hands, and sing their own set of platitudes with hushed fervour.

ELLA, ALFRED. Life is a desert – a fading flower.
Love is the sun that lends it colour.
Clasp me, but do not ask whither we are bound:
Love is enough. Love makes the world go round.

Curtain falls on Act 1.

[Act 2]

SCENE. The same room a few hours later. French window open, gay front garden beyond, lilacs, etc. in bloom, birds singing. All papers, deedboxes, and so on have been tidied away. The hands of the clock point to 9.15. EMMA, BELLA, ELLA, Mr PEPLOE, ALFRED, KATE HUBBARD have just finished breakfast. All but KATE look constrained and ill at ease.

EMMA (*breaking a silence*). More coffee – any one?

KATE. Well, as you're so kind . . .

EMMA supplies more coffee without looking at her. While KATE drinks, the silence within and the birdsong without persist.

KATE (*setting down her cup*).

Well, as I've said before, *sans cérémonie*
Here I am, and here I stay
Until I get my due –
The codicil, or else the money.
Meanwhile, why not be useful?
Breakfast is over, let us clear away.

All go out, carrying breakfast things, table-cloth, etc., except Mr PEPLOE, who goes morosely towards window.

Mr PEPLOE. Jug-jug, jug! Tirra-lirra! Twee-twee-twee!

Hush, ye pretty warbling choir! How can a man think, while you keep up such a shindy?

Racked with remorse and uneasiness,
Feeling a horrible queasiness,
I'm forced to admit in my bosom's confessional
I've gone and done something that's quite unprofessional.

(Thoughtfully.)

Jug-jug-jug! Tirra-lirra!

Shall I admit it, shall I deny it?
How can I keep that termagant quiet?
Sooner or later, come out it will –
That I have destroyed a codicil.

(Savagely.)

Jug-jug-jug! Tirra-lirra! Twee-twee-twee!

Plunged in this worst of quandaries,
Pestered by larks and canaries,
With everyone being so very unkind,
I feel I shall shortly go out of my mind.

(Wildly.)

Jug-jug-jug! Tirra-lirra! Twee-twee-twee!

ALFRED appears at a window, polishing a lady's boot. ELLA enters, by door L. with a duster.

ELLA.

Alfred! Mr Hubbard! Why have you changed? Why are you so cold?

ALFRED turns away and continues polishing boot.

ELLA.

Have my sisters set you against me? Cats?

ALFRED shakes his head.

ELLA.

What have I done? Was it a fault to love you? Why won't you talk to me, or look at me, or squeeze my hand?

ALFRED (with an effort). It looks like being a fine morning for the funeral.

ELLA.

You talk to me of funerals! Oh, this is breaking my heart!

ALFRED.

Though I think we shall have rain before nightfall.

ELLA. Nightfall? Night has fallen on me already. I can never be happy again.

Nightfall and funeral . . .
My heart I drape
With love's eternal crape;
Flounce me around, my sorrow!
Couch, poor heart, couch
Beneath an onyx brooch.
Hope died today, and I will die tomorrow.

Oh, you ungrateful beast! (*Slaps his face.*)

Mr PEPLOE. Oh, you exasperating cub! (*Kicks him.*)

ALFRED. Mamma, mamma!

KATE (*off*). Get on with the boots, dearie.

ALFRED (*resuming on boots*).

Insult and obloquy. . .
I hide my wounds
In Duty's pantaloons.
On, mask, my woe to smother!
Lurk, lurk, my grief
In a clean handkerchief . . .
For thou art the cause of this anguish, my mother!

ELLA. What has your mother got to do with it?

ALFRED. She told me not to speak to you until she's got the codicil.

ELLA (*to Mr Peploe*). Give her that codicil, and let me have my Alfred! You can't really have lost it. You had it only yesterday.

ALFRED. But if the name of Hubbard is branded with dishonour, I can never ask you to share it. So I can't marry you either way.

ELLA. Alfred, Alfred, do not leave me!
You can change the name if need be.

Mr PEPLOE. Alfred, Alfred, show some sense!
Cast off that woman's influence.

ALFRED. Oh, I never, never can
Disobey a mother's ban.

ELLA. If you leave me here to die,
I will know the reason why.

ALFRED. Loaded with dishonour, how
Can I take the marriage vow?

Mr PEPLOE (*aside*). Oh, I never, never will
Burn another codicil!

ELLA. I implore you!

Mr PEPLOE. I advise you . . .

ELLA. Hear me, Alfred!

Mr PEPLOE. Alfred, hear me!

KATE (*entering left*). Al-fred! Where are those boots?

ALFRED leaves by window, polishing as he goes.

KATE. Pepper! Where is that codicil?

Mr PEPLOE. He might have kept it in the attic. (*Goes out L.*)

ELLA. Mrs Hubbard! Where is your heart?

She points to ALFRED disappearing beyond window.

See how he toils for love of you.
See how he pines for love of me.
Must he be torn between the two?

KATE. When you have learned what I've forgot,
 You'll not heed this hullabaloo.
 Men are a worthless lot.

ELLA. Alfred is not like other men.

KATE. Am I his mother or am I not?

ELLA. He will never smile again,
 He'll join the army, or go to sea,
 Or catch a cold on his chest, and then –

KATE. Fiddle-de-dee, fiddle-de-dee!
 Pull yourself together, do,
 He's as tough as a flea.

ELLA. Lost to me, lost to you,
 Dead he will be!

While they sing, JOHN PORTER and HENRY BACON, each carrying a large funeral wreath, make to enter by French window: but recognising KATE, look dumbfounded, and retire with caution.

KATE. I've heard enough from you, young woman. You're
not the only cat that wants milk.

A woman's passion, Oh, how strong!
Her will to get it, how intense!
You for an Alfred long,
I, for a moderate competence.

I burn as much for gold as you
Languish a lover to obtain.
Give me my lawful due,
Or else for Alfred pine in vain.

Exit KATE. Re-enter JOHN PORTER and HENRY BACON, unnoticed by ELLA, who walks about the room distractedly. She sees the journal. Her face lights up, she utters a cry of joy. PORTER and BACON hide behind harmonium.

ELLA. In girlhood's idle hours when I
 Amused myself with forgery,
 And learned to write just like Papa,
 I did not think, tra-la-la!
 What magic lay in pen and ink, tra-la-la!

She begins to write. PORTER and BACON peer over top of harmonium.

BACON. Did you hear that, John Porter? Tra-la-la?

PORTER. Tra-la-la?

BACON. Are these fit words to be uttered in a house of mourning?

PORTER. Reprehensible!

BACON. Far, far from respectable!

ELLA (*as she writes*). 'I give, devise, and bequeathe . . .'

PORTER. And what was Mrs Hubbard doing in this blighted parlour?

BACON. Up to no good.

PORTER. Up to no good.

ELLA (*as she writes*). 'and by this codicil I revoke . . .'

PORTER. Daughters trilling and trala-ing . . .

BACON. Immoral women dropping in . . .

PORTER. With the corpse of a respected citizen laid out in the
best bedroom.

PORTER AND BACON TOGETHER. I don't like it at all.

ELLA. Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!
 So much for Papa, tra-la-la!

She dances about the room, waving the forged codicil. PORTER and BACON sink behind harmonium.

Mr Peploe! I've found the codicil!

Enter Mr PEPLOE, KATE, ALFRED, EMMA, and BELLA.

ELLA (*to Peploe*). Hapless lawyer, grieve no more.
Our vicissitudes are o'er. . .

and if you say it's a forgery, I'll tell the whole town you burned the other one.


Mr PEPLOE. Maiden, do not be annoyed,
But this deed is null and void . . .

If you had asked me in time I could have told you that it needed the signature of two witnesses. But people never will consult a solicitor until it's too late.

PORTER and BACON (*rising behind harmonium*).
Naughty vixen, blush for shame!
We observed your little game . . .

She sat here forging it under our very noses.

We'll denounce her! We'll report her!

EMMA, BELLA,  Mr Bacon! Mr Porter!

KATE, ALFRED.

PEPLOE.

ELLA. Mr Porter! Now, what does that remind me of? Emma!
Bella! Do you remember?

'As I was leaving the house of sin
I met John Porter sliding in . . .

EMMA, BELLA (*join in*). We winked at each other like brother to brother
But not a word did we say,
Except good-day, and good-day . . .’

ELLA (*pulls paper from pocket and holds it under JOHN PORTER’s nose*).
Do you know my Papa’s handwriting? This is no forgery, at any rate.

KATE. Caught at last, boys! Truth will out.

PORTER and BACON attempt escape, still clutching their wreaths.
ELLA stops them, and holds out the forged codicil.

ELLA. Sign, please!

THE REST. She’ll report you! She’ll denounce you!

ELLA. Sign, please!

PORTER and BACON sign the forged codicil. ELLA then throws it to
KATE and rushes into ALFRED’s embrace.

ELLA & ALFRED. Sign, sign, sign, sign!
O my darling, you are mine!
Mine, mine, thine, thine!
How surprising! How divine!

KATE. Sign, sign, sign, sign!
Sweet retirement now is mine!
Vicious manners I resign,
I will go to bed at nine.

Mr PEPLOE. Sign, sign, sign, sign!
See my ransomed virtue shine!
(to KATE). Madam, if you should design
To make your will, vergiss nicht mein!

ALFRED (*striking an attitude*). Stay! My mind misgives me. Can I as
a man of honour base my future happiness on a forgery?

Mr PEPLOE. Forgery? No! Call it – calligraphy!

ALL. Hail, Calligraphy! Smoothest child of heaven!
 From the sable inkpot flowing,
 Love, and a good name bestowing,
 Take the heartfelt gratitude we owe!

Curtain.

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Dorset County Museum reference STW.2012.125.0883