

## THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD – Synopsis

### **Dramatis Personæ**

**Colonel Fairfax** – under sentence of death on a false charge of sorcery and famously handsome

**Jack Point** – a strolling jester in love with Elsie

**Elsie Maynard** – a Strolling Singer

**Dame Carruthers** – Housekeeper to the Tower and feared by all

**Kate** – her Niece and spy

**Sergeant Meryll** – of the Yeomen of the Guard

**Phoebe Meryll** – Sergeant Meryll's daughter, in love with Fairfax

**Wilfred Shadbolt** – Head Jailer and Assistant Tormentor, in love with Phoebe

**Sir Richard Cholmondeley** – Lieutenant of the Tower of London

**Leonard Meryll** – Sergeant Meryll's son, about to join the Yeomen of the Guard  
1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Yeomen

**Yeomen** – soldiers rather past their prime but intent on keeping order

**Citizens** – the motley crowd arriving for the executions

**The Headsman**

*Chorus of Yeomen of the Guard, Gentlemen, Citizens, etc.*

*Scene – Tower Green in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*

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### ACT I

The opera opens with Phoebe Meryll sighing over her hopeless love for Colonel Fairfax. This preoccupation is of great annoyance to the Head Jailer and Assistant Tormentor, Wilfred Shadbolt, who is in love with her, and whom - before Fairfax's arrival - she had pretended to treat with affection.

Dame Carruthers, the Tower Housekeeper, and Sergeant Meryll (Phoebe's Father) then arrive. The Dame is busy following a fire in the Beauchamp Tower the previous night which has occasioned the need to move several prisoners, including Fairfax, whom she believes to be guilty of sorcery and is to be beheaded at seven that evening. However Sergeant Meryll, whose life was twice saved by the Colonel in battle, is so distressed by events that not even the imminent arrival of his son, Leonard, can cheer him, even though Leonard may be bringing a pardon for the prisoner.

Leonard arrives without a pardon, but the inconspicuous manner of this arrival leads his father to come up with an idea. Leonard will go into hiding, while Sergeant Meryll and Phoebe will aid Fairfax to escape and masquerade as Leonard, who is due to take up his post as a yeoman. At this point Fairfax himself passes on his way to

spend his last hours in solitude; he seems perfectly resigned to his fate, even though he is an alchemist and not a sorcerer. This only upsets Phoebe and her father more.

Colonel Fairfax asks the Tower's Lieutenant to grant him a favour - to find him a wife. It appears that Fairfax is imprisoned on the false testimony of a greedy cousin, who will inherit his estate if Fairfax dies unmarried. Since the wife will receive a 100 crowns and will be a widow within an hour, there should be no problem finding a willing candidate. The Lieutenant rapidly selects a girl, Elsie Maynard, a merry maid who has arrived at the Tower with a wandering jester, Jack Point, to entertain the crowds. It is obvious that Jack is in love with Elsie - but Elsie's mother is ill and needs medicines that the 100 crowns could buy for her, and so he encourages her to agree to the Lieutenant's proposal since her husband-to-be will be executed within the hour. She is therefore blindfolded and led away to marry Fairfax, whilst Jack is employed as the Lieutenant's new jester.

Meanwhile Phoebe is busy flirting with Wilfred in an attempt to steal his keys. He is enraptured by her attentions, and she is able to slip his keys from his belt and pass them to her father. While Phoebe continues to occupy Wilfred, Sergeant Meryll frees Fairfax and returns the keys to his daughter. She returns the keys to Wilfred unnoticed, and then vanishes, leaving the jailer completely confused. Sergeant Meryll introduces his 'son' Leonard (a clean shaven Fairfax) to the rest of the guards, who is then greeted too affectionately by his 'sister' Phoebe. Just then the bell of St Peters begins to toll and the crowds come forward to watch the execution, but Fairfax is found to have escaped.

## ACT II

The second act finds Jack Point distracted; his beloved Elsie is still married, and there is no sign of her husband. He persuades Wilfred to aid him in creating a story that will help them reclaim their loved ones and in return for his aid, Point will teach Wilfred to become a jester among jesters. Wilfred will claim that he came across Fairfax and, although overcome in a struggle, managed to shoot him as he tried to swim across the Thames to safety.

During his time as a yeoman Fairfax has begun to fall in love with Elsie, who, having fainted at the discovery of the escape of her 'husband' has been cared for in the house of Sergeant Meryll for the past two days. Dame Carruthers' niece, Kate, reveals that Elsie has been talking in her sleep and that she is, in fact, married to Fairfax himself. He sets out to test her fidelity, but just as he is about to reveal his identity a shot is heard and Wilfred and Jack rush in with their tale.

Jack reminds Elsie that with her husband dead she is free to marry whomsoever she wants, and he begins to make his case. 'Leonard' is amused, and telling Jack that wooing is an art, begins to demonstrate how it is done. This distresses both Jack and Phoebe as they realise that Fairfax and Elsie are truly in love. A distressed Phoebe is discovered by Wilfred, to whom, in her anger and confusion, she inadvertently reveals that the man believed to be Leonard Meryll is not her brother. Wilfred

immediately guesses that he is in fact Colonel Fairfax. He extracts a promise of marriage from Phoebe as the price of his silence

At this point Leonard himself arrives to announce that Colonel Fairfax has been pardoned and will shortly come to claim his bride. Meryll and Phoebe are overjoyed but unaware that Dame Carruthers has overheard all. She now confronts Meryll and extracts a promise of marriage from him as the price of her silence.

Elsie appears ready for her marriage with 'Leonard' but is distressed when the Lieutenant arrives to announce that Fairfax lives and is free. However when Fairfax appears she recognises him as her beloved 'Leonard', and the couple are joyfully reunited. In the midst of the celebrations however, broken-hearted Jack Point, devastated by the loss of Elsie and still singing his sorrowful love song, collapses insensible at their feet.