

The Yeomen of the Guard
or, The Merryman and His Maid
A New and Original Opera, in Two Acts

Synopsis by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson

First produced at the Savoy Theatre, London, under the management of R. D'Oyly Carte, on Wednesday, October 3, 1888, for 423 performances through November 30, 1889. Sullivan conducted the first performance.

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| SIR RICHARD CHOLMONDELEY, Lieutenant of the Tower | <i>Baritone</i> | Wallace Brownlow |
| COLONEL FAIRFAX, imprisoned in the Tower, under sentence of death | <i>Tenor</i> | Courtice Pounds |
| SERGEANT MERYLL, of the Yeomen of the Guards | <i>Bass-Baritone</i> | Richard Temple |
| LEONARD MERYLL, Sergeant Meryll's Son | <i>Tenor</i> | W. R. Shirley |
| JACK POINT, a Strolling Jester | <i>Light Baritone</i> | George Grossmith |
| WILFRED SHADBOLT, Head Jailor and Assistant Tormentor | <i>Bass-Baritone</i> | W. H. Denny |
| THE HEADSMAN | <i>Non-singing</i> | H. Richards |
| 1ST YEOMAN | <i>Tenor</i> | J. Wilbraham |
| 2ND YEOMAN | <i>Baritone</i> | A. Medcalf |
| 3RD YEOMAN | <i>Tenor</i> | Mr. Murton |
| 4TH YEOMAN | <i>Baritone</i> | Rudolph Lewis |
| 1ST CITIZEN | <i>Chorus</i> | Tom Redmond |
| 2ND CITIZEN | <i>Chorus</i> | Mr. Boyd |
| ELSIE MAYNARD, a Strolling Singer | <i>Soprano</i> | Geraldine Ulmar |
| PHOEBE MERYLL, Sergeant Meryll's Daughter | <i>Mezzo-Soprano</i> | Jessie Bond |
| DAME CARRUTHERS, Housekeeper to the Tower | <i>Contralto</i> | Rosina Brandram |
| KATE, Dame Carruthers' Niece | <i>Soprano</i> | Rose Hervey |

YEOMEN OF THE GUARD, GENTLEMEN, CITIZENS, etc.

First produced in America by D'Oyly Carte's Opera Company at the Casino Theatre, New York, under the management of Rudolph Aronson, on October 17, 1888, for 100 performances through January 18, 1889. First revived at the Savoy Theatre, under the management of R. D'Oyly Carte, on May 5 through July 31, 1897, and from August 16 through November 20, 1897, for a total of 187 performances.

ACT I — TOWER GREEN, THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The curtain rises to reveal young Phoebe Meryll singing a melancholy song (*When maiden loves, she sits and sighs*) as she works at her spinning wheel. She is approached by the odious Wilfred Shadbolt, her persistent admirer (“Ugh! You brute!”). They discuss the prisoner in the Tower, the gallant Colonel Fairfax, who has been falsely accused of sorcery by a greedy kinsman and is to be executed that very evening. In expressing her admiration for the prisoner, and the hope that a reprieve may arrive, she arouses Wilfred’s jealousy, and takes the opportunity to increase his discomfort: “Oh, you are a heartless jade.”

The People greet the Yeomen (Double Chorus, *Tower warders, under orders*), who are appointed as a reward for long and valiant service (Chorus, *This the autumn of our life*). Dame Carruthers and Phoebe discuss the prisoner, Phoebe revealing that Colonel Fairfax, whom she has never met, had twice saved her father’s life. Dame Carruthers reproves Phoebe severely when Phoebe expresses a distaste for the bloody Tower (Song, *When our gallant Norman foes*).

Dame Carruthers leaves as Sergeant Meryll enters to tell his daughter Phoebe that no reprieve has yet arrived. He brings the news that Phoebe’s brother Leonard, also a brave soldier, is to arrive in order to join the Yeomen. Phoebe worries that her brother may be too strict, for she is used to having her own way. Leonard arrives, and, though he brings no reprieve, he expresses a wish that he could help his old comrade. Sergeant Meryll suggests that if he is in earnest, there might be a way to save Fairfax. Leonard is sent off to hide, and a plan is devised whereby Fairfax is to be spirited from his cell and disguised to take Leonard’s place as a Yeoman. Phoebe is to secure the keys from Wilfred, who keeps them on his belt. They sing (Trio, *Alas! I waver to and fro*) of the dangers of the scheme, and Meryll and Phoebe bid farewell to Leonard.

As Leonard Meryll goes off, Lieutenant Cholmondeley and Colonel Fairfax enter, the latter guarded by four Yeomen. By the Lieutenant’s leave, Fairfax greets his old friend Meryll bravely and with good humor. Phoebe is moved to tears, but Fairfax makes light of his execution (Ballad, *Is Life a Boon?*).

The handsome, bearded Fairfax asks a last favor of the Lieutenant: the unscrupulous kinsman who has caused his imprisonment stands to inherit his estate should Fairfax die unmarried, he asks that the Lieutenant find him a bride before his execution. As it matters not at all who she should be, and he will offer her a hundred crowns, the Lieutenant agrees: “Well, the task should be easy!”

A crowd enters (Chorus, *Here’s a man of jollity*), surrounding a strolling jester, Jack Point, and the young Elsie Maynard. They rebuff the advances of some ruffians, and perform “the singing farce of the Merryman and his Maid” (Duet, *I have a song to sing, O!*). A few

spectators make crude advances to Elsie, and Lieutenant Cholmondeley and several guards enter just in time to disperse the crowd. The players introduce themselves — they are not man and wife (“though I am a fool, there is a limit to my folly”), and the Lieutenant ascertains that young Elsie is badly in need of money to help her ailing mother. He lays before her Fairfax’s proposal, and after some reservations (Trio, *How say you, maiden, will you wed A man about to lose his head?*) Elsie and Point consent, on the strict understanding that the bridegroom should die within the hour. The Lieutenant beckons to Wilfred, who blindfolds Elsie and leads her into the Tower.

Learning that Point is a jester, the Lieutenant says he has “a vacancy for such an one.” He offers Point an opportunity to demonstrate his wit (Recitative, *I’ve jibe and joke; Song, I’ve wisdom from the East and from the West*), but the Lieutenant is not impressed: “I think that manner of thing would be somewhat irritating.” Nevertheless, he and Point retire to his library to discuss the matter further, as Wilfred leads Elsie out of the Tower. She sings of her strange situation (Recitative, *’Tis done! I am a bride!*; Ballad, *Though tear and long-drawn sigh*) and Wilfred broods on the odd circumstances, to which he has not been party. Phoebe enters and flirts with Wilfred, who is suspicious at her uncharacteristic tenderness. She captivates him with a song, however (Ballad, *Were I thy bride*), removing the keys from his belt, giving them to her father, and then replacing them without his noticing. Although the irony of her words is lost on him, Phoebe manages to leave Wilfred with the impression that he has captivated her: “But this wooing is not of the common order: it is the wooing of one who needs must woo me, if she die for it!”

Secretly Fairfax is led from his cell, shaved, and dressed as a Yeoman. The Yeomen of the Guard assemble (Chorus, *Oh, Sergeant Meryll, is it true*), and Meryll introduces Fairfax as his own heroic son, Leonard. The Yeomen question him about his supposed feats (Couplets, *Didst thou not, oh, Leonard Meryll*), to which he replies, with apparent modesty, “Scarce a word of them is true.” Phoebe enters to greet her brother, and Fairfax is momentarily nonplused when this stranger embraces him so affectionately. Meryll narrowly saves the situation by reminding Fairfax that Phoebe is his sister, whom he has not seen for so many years. Fairfax returns Phoebe’s affectionate gestures, and the dullard Wilfred encourages their affection: “Be thou at hand to take those favours from her” (Trio, *To thy fraternal care*).

The ominous sound of the bell of St. Peter’s signals the procession to the execution (Chorus, *The prisoner comes to meet his doom*). The headsman takes his place at the block. Three of the Yeomen — one of them Fairfax himself — are sent into the Tower to fetch the prisoner. They return in great excitement: “He is not there!” They relate their experience (Trio, *As escort for the prisoner*), and the outraged Lieutenant, concluding that the escape was the result of Wilfred’s inattention, orders his arrest: “Thy life shall forfeit be instead!”

The act concludes as a search party is organized and a reward is offered (Chorus, *All frenzied with despair they rave*). Overcome with the realization that she is still the bride of

the escaped prisoner, Elsie faints in Fairfax's arms. The Yeomen and populace rush off the stage, leaving only the Headsman towering over the block.

ACT II — TOWER GREEN, TWO DAYS LATER, AT NIGHT

The women, led by Dame Carruthers, shame the Warders (Chorus, *Night has spread her pall once more*), who are baffled by their lack of success in hunting for the prisoner (Double Chorus, *Up and down, and in and out*). They all go off, and Jack Point enters, in low spirits: Elsie, whom he had hoped to marry, seems lost to him.

Wilfred enters, also in low spirits, and Point loses no chance to taunt him. Wilfred thinks himself a wit, and suggests that "a jester's calling would suit me to a hair." Point laments the hardships of the jester's life (Song, *Oh! A private buffoon is a light-hearted loon*). Point suggests a plan to Wilfred: their difficulties would be equally solved if Wilfred should *pretend* to shoot the escaped prisoner. Wilfred agrees, and they seal their pact to "Tell a tale of cock and bull" (Duet, *Hereupon we're both agreed*), and they go off together.

Fairfax enters, ridiculing the Yeomen's search attempts and wondering about the bride he has never seen (Song, *Free from his fetters grim*). Sergeant Meryll joins him, and he complains that Dame Carruthers, who has had marital designs on the old Sergeant, has taken advantage of poor Elsie Maynard's fainting to take up her quarters in Meryll's house. Dame Carruthers and her niece Kate enter and reveal that Elsie Maynard is not the maiden that she had been taken for — Kate had overheard her talking in her sleep. They reflect on the poor girl's situation (Quartet, *Strange adventure*). Fairfax now realizes that his bride is none other than the winsome Elsie, and he congratulates himself on his good fortune: "I might have fared worse with my eyes open!" Elsie enters, and, by pretending to woo her, Fairfax callously tests her loyalty to her unknown and unwanted husband. But Elsie is loyal, and shames Fairfax: "Is it thus that brave soldiers speak to poor girls?"

A shot is heard in the distance, and the people and Warders enter (Chorus, *Now what can that have been*), wondering what has happened. Wilfred appears, accompanied by Jack Point, and claims to have shot the prisoner (Duet and Chorus, *Like a ghost his vigil keeping*), giving minute particulars which Point contradicts rather more than corroborates: "Like a stone I saw him sinking — I should say a lump of lead." Wilfred is acclaimed a hero (Chorus, *Hail the valiant fellow*) and is carried offstage leaving Point, Elsie, and Fairfax.

Jack Point suggests that Elsie should be comforted by the death of this "pestilent fellow," her unwanted husband, but she rebukes him: "by your leave, my tears may flow unchidden, Master Point." Fairfax questions Point further on the shooting, and Point describes the supposed victim: "a felon face — a face to fright the headsman himself, and make him strike awry." Fairfax, secretly amused, vows to repay the jester.

Point proposes to Elsie: "I am young and well-favoured. I have a pretty wit." But Fairfax

chides him: “Tush, man, thou knowest not how to woo.” Fairfax, Elsie, and Phoebe instruct Point in the art of love (Trio, *A man who would woo a fair maid*) — with the result that Elsie is wooed and won by Fairfax himself, to the consternation of Point and Phoebe. They join in a poignant quartet (*When a wooer goes a-wooing*), leaving Phoebe alone on stage, weeping.

Wilfred blunders on and Phoebe inadvertently admits that her tears are tears of “yellow, bilious, jaundiced jealousy” for the man who is to marry Elsie Maynard. Dullard that he may be, Wilfred pieces together the truth that Fairfax is alive and disguised as her brother Leonard. She has no alternative but to buy his silence: “Thou art a very brute — but even brutes must marry, I suppose.” She offers her hand for his silence.

At that moment, Leonard appears bearing the long-awaited reprieve. Sergeant Meryll enters and they rejoice in the good news as Dame Carruthers overhears. Meryll quickly realizes that the only way to buy her silence is with *his* hand (Duet, *Rapture, rapture!*).

The women enter (Chorus, *Comes the pretty young bride*) to escort Elsie to her marriage with Fairfax, whom she still believes to be Leonard Meryll. Elsie, Phoebe, and Dame Carruthers join in a tender trio (“This is her joy-day unalloyed”) and Elsie prepares to meet her bridegroom. The Yeomen enter, and the Lieutenant announces (Recitative, *Hold, pretty one!*) that her husband Fairfax lives, and comes to claim his bride. She is overcome (*No! no! recall those words — it cannot be!*), and the announcement causes general alarm (Ensemble, *Oh, day of terror!*). Fairfax enters (Recitative, *All thought of Leonard Meryll set aside*), undisguised but unseen by Elsie, who submits to him (*A suppliant at thy feet I fall*). After a cruel delay he reveals himself to her (*With happiness my soul is cloyed*) and as she realizes that her unknown husband and her bridegroom are one and the same, the company join in rejoicing.

Jack Point makes a pathetic entrance (*Oh, thoughtless crew!*), and he reminds Elsie of the life she has left behind her: “Attend to me and shed a tear or two — For I have a song to sing, O.” The opera concludes as Elsie and the entire company take up the merryman’s song. Elsie embraces Fairfax as Point falls “insensible” at their feet.

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