

A Synopsis of *The Yeomen of the Guard*, by Gary Briggie

Time: July, 1542

Place: The Greensward of the Tower of London

OVERTURE: "The Fire in Beauchamp Tower."

ACT ONE

On February 13, 1542, Queen Catherine Howard, King Henry VIII's fifth and youngest wife, was beheaded for treason on Tower Green...It is now five months later, on a summer morning clouded with impending doom, and Phoebe Meryll, daughter of the Sergeant of the Yeomen, is working at her spinning wheel, contemplating the difficulties that arise WHEN MAIDEN LOVES, as she does, a handsome but ill-fated nobleman imprisoned in the bloody Tower. Phoebe is engaged in fending off the advances of Wilfred Shadbolt, the Head Jailer, because she is infatuated with the aforementioned Colonel Fairfax. Unfortunately, Fairfax's romantic eligibility is hampered by the fact that he is to be beheaded on this very day for alleged dealings with the Devil.

The proud Yeomen of the Guard enter, led by Sergeant Meryll, to be greeted by family members and townsfolk. TOWER WARDERS, UNDER ORDERS. Not unnaturally, Phoebe hates the Tower and its sanguine history, but Dame Carruthers, the Tower Housekeeper, reminds her of its origin WHEN OUR GALLANT NORMAN FOES ruled the land. (Construction began in the 1070's, under William the Conqueror).

Sergeant Meryll has a secret plan to rescue Colonel Fairfax, who saved the Sergeant's life in battle, and conspires with his daughter and son, the much-honored soldier Leonard, to undertake the dangerous mission. Phoebe's courage momentarily falters, but is bolstered by her father and brother: ALAS! I WAVER TO AND FRO.

Colonel Fairfax enters under guard and philosophically wonders, as befits a prisoner sentenced to death, IS LIFE A BOON? (This lyric was chosen by Gilbert to adorn Sullivan's memorial). He explains to Cholmondely, the Lieutenant of the Tower, that he was charged with sorcery by a jealous cousin who will inherit his estate if he, Fairfax, dies unmarried. Being a chivalrous gentleman, he therefore begs the Lieutenant to marry him to the poorest woman he can find, so that she may inherit the Fairfax title - to say nothing of a dowry of "an hundred crowns."

Just then, Jack Point, a strolling jester, is chased onto the Green with his companion, a charming singer named Elsie Maynard. They entertain the hostile crowd with their popular ballad, I HAVE A SONG TO SING, O!, which tells the tale of The Merryman and His Maid. The Lieutenant rescues them from the unruly mob, and takes special notice of Elsie, selecting her as the ideal wife for Colonel Fairfax, with scant objection from Point: HOW SAY YOU, MAIDEN, WILL YOU WED? As she is blindfolded and hustled off to the secret marriage to Fairfax, the Lieutenant interviews Jack Point for the position of his official jester: I'VE JIBE AND JOKE.

The hasty wedding ceremony completed, Elsie has private a moment to consider the implications of her situation: TIS DONE! I AM A BRIDE! Phoebe, meanwhile, steals the Tower keys by pilfering them from Wilfred, teasing him with how happy she would be WERE I THY BRIDE. She then gives the keys to her father, Sergeant Meryll, who helps Fairfax escape his prison cell by disguising him as a Yeoman of the Guard, in a uniform intended for her brother, Leonard, newly appointed to their ranks. Though a soldier of legendary bravery, Leonard is unknown in London, so Meryll introduces Fairfax as his son to all assembled, the real Leonard having gone into hiding. OH, SERGEANT MERYLL, IS IT TRUE?

When the moment for Fairfax's execution arrives, the Yeomen are horrified to discover that their prisoner has escaped! Jack Point is distraught that Elsie, whom he loves, is saddled with a husband, while Elsie, who had counted on widowhood and an hundred crowns rather than wifehood, faints in distress.

ACT TWO

Two days have passed, and the Yeomen are forced to admit that their search for the escaped criminal has been in vain, while Dame Carruthers and Kate, her niece, deride them for their failure. NIGHT HAS SPREAD HER PALL ONCE MORE.

Jack Point, jilted by Elsie, broods in the moonlight, reading from an anthology of light humor by the famous clown, Hugh Ambrose. Wilfred interrupts with an observation of how easy it is to be a reputable jester. Jack is quick to point out his error: A PRIVATE BUFFOON. He then agrees to teach Wilfred all his methods in return for a perjured oath, swearing that Fairfax is dead - which would compel Elsie back into his loving arms: HEREUPON WE'RE BOTH AGREED.

Fairfax himself, unaware of his bride's identity, is annoyed by the idea that, although he is free both in life and limb, he is bound to an unknown wife. Dame Carruthers, thinking that Fairfax is "Leonard", informs him that Elsie Maynard loves him. But Kate, the Dame's niece, has overheard Elsie's delirious ravings, causing her to believe that the poor girl is married to Colonel Fairfax. Along with Sergeant Meryll, they pause to consider this STRANGE ADVENTURE. Then Fairfax, delighted to discover that it is the winsome Elsie to whom he is wed, tests her fidelity in the guise of "Leonard".

Suddenly they hear a gunshot: HARK, WHAT WAS THAT, SIR? Wilfred rushes in with Jack Point to declare - per their agreement - that while Fairfax was attempting to escape, Wilfred dispatched him through the head with an ounce or two of lead. But now, when Point begs Elsie to marry him, the disguised Fairfax tells him that A MAN WHO WOULD WOO A FAIR MAID must have more to offer than a jester's bag of tricks. And to the despair of Phoebe, who aided and abetted Fairfax's disguise, he continues in pursuit of Elsie as together they contemplate the marital joys that ensue WHEN A WOOER GOES A-WOOING.

In her anguish, Phoebe lets slip the truth about the disguise to Wilfred and promises him her hand in hopes that he will not betray their secret. Hardly has she given her word when the Lieutenant interrupts the nuptial proceedings to announce that Colonel Fairfax is alive - and has been pardoned. COMES THE PRETTY YOUNG BRIDE. Fairfax bids Elsie set aside all thoughts of "Leonard Meryll" and claims her as his bride. Elsie submits sorrowfully to her fate, but when she recognizes Fairfax as "Leonard", she is overjoyed. Phoebe contents herself with an eventual marriage to her adoring Wilfred - but Jack Point is heartbroken to realize that Elsie is lost to him forever.