Act I

Colonel Fairfax is under sentence of death, and this is the day fixed for his execution. A scoundrelly relative has preferred a charge of sorcery against him in order to inherit the fortune which comes to him should Fairfax die unmarried. Fortunately, the Colonel has two good friends in the Tower, the Lieutenant in charge and Sergeant Meryll of the Guards, to say nothing of the latter’s daughter, Phoebe, who is in love with the dashing and handsome prisoner. Meryll’s son, Leonard, has been appointed a Yeoman, and his father plans to keep him hiding, get Fairfax out of his cell, and introduce him among the Yeomen as his “brave son, Leonard, with whose exploits all England is running.” To Phoebe is entrusted the delicate task of getting the dungeon keys from Wilfred Shadbolt, the jailer, described by her father as “thy sour-faced admirer.”

Meanwhile, Fairfax has explained the reason for his predicament to his friend the Lieutenant, who undertakes to find him a wife in a hurry, so that the unscrupulous kinsman may be thwarted in his scheme to inherit. A reprieve has been issued, but the said kinsman has succeeded in delaying its deliery until after the time fixed for the execution.

And now a pair of wandering comedians come into the story – Jack Point and Elsie Maynard – and the Lieutenant arrives on the scene in time to prevent their being roughly handled by a boisterous crowd. He induces Elsie to consent to the brief marriage with Fairfax by the offer of a hundred crowns, badly needed by Elsie for her sick mother. Jack Point designs to marry Elsie himself, but, on being assured that the bridgroom will certainly be dead within the hour, agrees to the plan, and shortly thereafter is appointed Jester to the Lieutenant.

The wily Phoebe successfully steals the keys from Wilfred, Fairfax is shaved and dressed as a Yeoman, the crowd assembles, the Yeoman are drawn up in line, the headsman and the block are in place and all is ready for the execution when, amid a scene of wild excitement, it is discovered that Fairfax has escaped! Jack Point is in despair and Elsie, stunned by the realization of her position, faints in the arms of Fairfax as the curtain falls on the first act.

Act II (Two Days Later)

The second act opens with the confession of the Yeomen that their search for the criminal has been in vain, while Dame Carruthers and the crowd deride them for their failure. Elsie has been nursed back to health by the Dame, who reveals that the girl has talked in her sleep and that from her disjointed murmurs it can be clearly gathered that she was married to Fairfax, who, still in his character as Leonard, is agreeably reassured to find that his bride is the lovely Elsie.

Now Point concocts a scheme with Wilfred to free Elsie from her present quandry, in pursuance of which scheme Wilfred fires a shot, and when the whole crowd gathers to find out what is the matter, the two conspirators declare that they discovered Fairfax in the act of escaping and shot him dead as he tried to swim the river. Whereupon the citizens hail Wilfred as a hero, and carry him off shoulder-high.

Point eagerly proposes to Elsie, but Fairfax, as Leonard, calmly steps in and carries her off, leaving both Point and Phoebe in despair. From the hysterical outburst of the latter, her lover Wilfred learns the truth, and Phoebe consents to marry him as the price of his silence with regard to the plot. Dame Carruthers has also heard the revelation, and promptly takes possession of Meryll, whom she has been pursuing for years, on the same terms.

Elsie enters for her wedding to the supposed Leonard. But the delayed reprieve has arrived – Fairfax is alive, and free! Once more she is plunged into despair, but soon recognizes her husband, and all is set for a happy ending when the disconsolate Point arrives, and the curtain falls upon his sorrow and his final collapse amid the merriment of the crowd.