

NAXOS  
AudioBooks

CLASSIC  
FICTION

Jerome K. Jerome  
**Three Men  
in a Boat**  
(To say nothing of the dog)

THE  
COMPLETE  
CLASSICS

UNABRIDGED

Read by **Martin Jarvis**



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**Total time: 6:34:36**

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Jerome K. Jerome

## Three Men in a Boat

The nostalgic vision of the Edwardian age, consisting of long, lazy, sun-drenched afternoons spent on or by a gently lapping river really began with Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. Although written at the end of Queen Victoria's reign (1889), Jerome anticipated a time early in the next century when the working man would have more leisure time and like Kenneth Grahame's trio of Ratty, Mole and Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* would enjoy nothing better than simply 'messaging about in boats'. Guides to the river Thames, pointing out flora and fauna, local beauty spots and local history, were in demand in the 1880s, and Jerome, beginning to establish himself as an essayist and playwright, decided to write such a book and include a few comic anecdotes based on his own boating experiences with his chums George Wingrave and Carl Hentschel. The funny stories grew, the guide diminished, and a classic of English literature was born.

As a humorist, Jerome K. Jerome had had a distinctly unfunny start in life. His father was a strict non-conformist, who was

also a lay preacher. Despite having trained as an architect, he had a penchant for dabbling in unsuccessful investments, such as silver mining in Devon. So, often on the brink of poverty, the family was always on the move, and Jerome's youth was spent partly in the West Midlands at Walsall (where he was born in 1859) and then Poplar, East London. Later he wrote of Poplar: 'There is a menace, a haunting terror that is to be found nowhere else.' The East End of London was indeed grim in the late 19th century; poverty and crime were rife.

After a rudimentary education, at fifteen Jerome found himself an orphan, and he had to fend for himself. He became a clerk for the London and North Western Railway Company. The 1880s were a sort of golden age for clerks. Mostly they were young men from poor backgrounds, who worked in the City, and earned just enough money to swagger into the West End, on the newly introduced half-day holiday. Jerome must have been a typical example of this new breed of working class man-about-town: pursuing the girls, drinking, smoking

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(tobacco was a lifelong love of Jerome's), and inventing their own slang for each other, such as 'old man', 'you fat-headed chunk', 'ass', 'dunderhead'. It was a world of joshing, bantering, larking – words that have long since dropped from modern vocabulary. The office clerk with pretensions was ruthlessly impersonated by the music-hall star Vest Tilley, but they and their like were to be the backbone of the British Army in World War I – epitomised as 'Tommy Atkins' in patriotic song – naïve, good-natured, stoical and innocent. It is the world of *Three Men in a Boat*.

The three 'chums' are all 'something in the City' and as Jerome points out in the Preface: 'things of flesh and blood – especially George, who weighs about twelve stone'. Jerome characterises himself in the novel, as indeed he did in most of his books, as the affable K – an all-round good sort of chap, with a touch of hypochondria and a capacity for having a good time. All he requires is: 'A homely home and simple pleasures, one or two friends, worth the name, someone to love and someone to love you, a cat, a dog, and a pipe or two, enough to eat and enough to wear, and a little more than enough to drink; for thirst is a dangerous thing.'

Whilst still a railway clerk, Jerome had

become stage-struck and tried his luck as an actor:

'There comes a time in every one's life when he feels he was born to be an actor. Something within him tells him that he is the coming man, and that one day he will electrify the world...This sort of thing generally takes a man when he is about nineteen, and lasts till he is nearly twenty. But he doesn't know this at the time...I myself caught it in the usual course. I was at the theatre one evening seeing Romeo and Juliet played, when it suddenly flashed across me that that was my vocation. I thought that all acting was making love in tights to pretty women, and I determined to devote my life to it.'

He wrote that in his first book, *On the Stage and Off* (1885), a reminiscence of his brief time before the footlights. He lasted only three years in the theatrical profession, but the experience shaped him as a writer. The set pieces in *Three Men in a Boat* – K's consultation with his doctor, Harris's attempt to sing Gilbert and Sullivan, the visit to the Hampton Court maze, are all essentially theatrical in their construction, and it is not surprising that Jerome had a considerable success as a playwright. His most successful play was *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* produced in 1908, starring

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the great Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson as the stranger who mysteriously changes the lives of the inhabitants of a seedy boarding house. It suited the tastes of Edwardian London, but today its heavy morality and distinct lack of humour has doomed it for revival. 'I never thought of myself as a humorist' he once wrote, and indeed there is in all his books a thread of morality and homespun sentimental philosophy that threatens to overwhelm the spontaneous comedy in his writing. It is the other side of Jerome, the reflective 'idler' musing over a pipe upon the meaning of life. As K in *Three Men in a Boat* it manifests itself thus:

'...it seems so full of comfort and of strength, the night. In its great presence, our small sorrows creep away, ashamed. The day has been so full of fret and care, and our hearts have been so full of evil and bitter thoughts, and the world has seemed so hard and wrong to us. Then Night, like some great loving mother, gently lays her hand upon our fevered head, and turns our little tear-stained face up to hers, and smiles, and though she does not speak...the pain is gone.'

Jerome was convinced the horrors of living in Poplar as an adolescent had produced in him a tendency towards melancholy. It is therefore not surprising to

find, despite its overall tone of escapism, melancholy moments in *Three Men in a Boat*. The pleasures of boating are interrupted by discovery of the dead body of a woman floating in the Thames: 'It lay very lightly on the water, and the face was sweet and calm. It was not a beautiful face; it was too prematurely aged-looking, too thin and drawn, to be that; but it was a gentle, lovable face, in spite of its stamp of pinch and poverty, and upon it was that look of restful peace that comes to the faces of the sick sometimes when at last the pain has left them.'

In *Three Men in a Boat* such melancholy and sentiment are thankfully passing moments.

After the end of his acting career – 'Could I have lived on laughter and applause I would have gone on,' he wrote – Jerome tried his luck as a penny-a-line journalist, which encouraged his writing talents as he had to write about anything that might contain a scrap of interest, just to eat. His jaunty style appealed to the new young generation of readers who had benefited from the improvements brought in by the 1870 Education Act, and enjoyed reading magazines such as *Tit-bits* and *Comic Cuts* for fun. Jerome hit the mark with *Three Men in a Boat*. It was a

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phenomenal, worldwide success on its first appearance, a million copies being 'pirated' in America alone. Capitalising on his success, Jerome was a co-founder of a magazine called *The Idler*, which published in England for the first time works by Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and he continued to write novels and plays until his death in 1927.

*Three Men in a Boat* captures in aspic the end of an era, before the horrors of World War I changed people's lives and perceptions for ever. Jerome was an ambulance driver for the French army at Verdun during the First World War. Never afraid to speak his mind in public, the sights he saw on the battlefields of France led him to campaign against the war, and press for a negotiated peace. The success of *Three Men in a Boat* overshadowed this aspect of his life, and it seems he would like to have

been remembered as much for his serious side as his comic. In the author's advertisement to the book he wrote: 'The World has been very kind to this book...I have written books that have appeared to me more clever, books that have appeared to me more humorous. But it is as the author of *Three Men in a Boat* (to say *nothing of the Dog*) that the public persists in remembering me...'

But his final appraisal at the end of the advertisement shows his true feelings:

'Bad art may succeed for a time and with a limited public; it does not go on extending its circle throughout nearly half a century.'

Jerome was right. Since its publication, 115 years ago, *Three Men in a Boat* has never been out of print.

**Notes by David Timson**

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## **The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue**

ENGLISH STRING FESTIVAL	8.550331
Capella Istropolitana / Adrian Leaper	
ENGLISH STRING MUSIC	8.550823
Bournemouth Sinfonietta / Richard Studt	
GEORGE FORMBY Let George Do It	8.120554

**Music programmed by Sarah Butcher**

# Jerome K. Jerome

# Three Men in a Boat

(To say nothing of the dog)

Read by **Martin Jarvis**

Here is one of the greatest English comic novels read by incontrovertible

King of English comic audiobook readers – Martin Jarvis. Three men, worried about their health and in search of different experiences, set off ‘up the river’ in a boat.

Jerome’s delightful novel, dating from 1900, paints a vivid picture of innocent fun.



**Martin Jarvis** starred as Jeeves in *By Jeeves* on Broadway in 2001. His films include the Oscar-winning *Titanic* and *Mrs Caldicot's Cabbage War*. Countless television appearances in Britain and America include *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, *Lorna Doone*, *A Touch of Frost*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Space*, *Inspector Morse* and *David Copperfield*. He is, uniquely, recipient of the British Talkie award and the U.S. Audie award. His continuing series of BBC *Just William* recordings are audio classics. He received the OBE in 2000 for his services to drama. He has also read *Wind in the Willows* and *Metamorphosis* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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