

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Jack London
The Sea-Wolf

Read by **Garrick Hagon**

CLASSIC
FICTION



NA325112D

1	Afloat on San Francisco Bay	10:23
2	Aboard the schooner 'Ghost'	9:22
3	Humphrey van Weyden: a new cabin boy	11:10
4	Pain and the reality of shipboard life	5:57
5	The Captain's state-room	9:08
6	The Ghost: 80 tons, 23ft beam, 90ft length	5:14
7	Cruelty aloft	5:28
8	'Life is valueless except to itself.'	3:27
9	A game of Nap and Spencer's Data of Ethics	7:33
10	Whet, whet, whet, it went all day long.	3:23
11	Louis's dirk	3:07
12	The loneliness of Wolf Larsen	4:40
13	The loneliness of Wolf Larsen (cont.)	3:15
14	Pessimism of the blackest	4:28
15	A carnival of brutality	8:43
16	Thomas Mugridge returns to work	2:49
17	Wolf Larsen over the side	5:26
18	The descent into the forecastle	3:21
19	'How did he get away?'	3:35
20	The duties of mate	4:38
21	The coast of Japan	9:15
22	A woman	3:57
23	'Will you take the lady below...'	3:31

24	Leach and Johnson, still bailing	6:48
25	Miss Brewster	7:06
26	A tow over the side	5:03
27	'This man is a monster.'	2:32
28	'I am afraid, so afraid.'	3:55
29	The Macedonia	4:16
30	The Macedonia again	7:45
31	Saturnalia	4:23
32	A fight and escape	6:15
33	Approaching Japan at six miles an hour	4:11
34	Arrival on Endeavor Island	4:37
35	Hot Coffee!	4:40
36	A hut with seal-skin roof	3:07
37	A ghost appears	8:13
38	Wolf Larsen – a surprise discovery	4:02
39	Repairing the Ghost	4:12
40	Hard work ruined	3:13
41	Handcuffs	4:16
42	Paralysis	4:56
43	B-O-S-H	3:16
44	Departure	6:08

Total time: 3:55:14

Jack London

The Sea-Wolf

Jack London (1876-1961) lived his novels. Like his contemporaries Herman Melville (1819-1891), Ambrose Bierce (1842-c.1914) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), he was an adventurer with a youth based on graft but with a natural gift for storytelling. London was perhaps the most direct of these writers yet his great novels (*The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang* and *The Sea-Wolf*) remain popular a century after they were written because they combine real experience with an inquiring literary and political sensibility. The ability to throw a punch and quote Milton – and probably to enjoy both equally – characterised Jack London.

Certainly, *The Sea-Wolf*, published in 1904, emerged directly from his months spent on the schooner *Sophia Sutherland* in 1893, when he was 17. It was not such a hell-ship as the *Ghost*, but it took him to the sealing grounds on the edge of Japan where he saw, first-hand, the slaughter of the cow seals by men in boats with shotguns. It was an ugly, barbarous experience, yet the *Sophia* was well-run and orderly, and the voyage profitable. There

were misfits aboard, but no one like the tormented yet reflective captain of the *Ghost*.

Wolf Larsen has many antecedents – notably Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, which was published nearly half a century later in 1851, though it failed to find the respect it now carries until many years later; and even Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman*. But whereas Ahab assumes a mythical status, Larsen is more human and real in his savagery, unable to assimilate his great tragedy – what he has become with the knowledge of what he could have become. In short, one could never expect to meet Captain Ahab, but Wolf Larsen really does exist.

Jack London was himself on the way to becoming like Larsen early in his life. Living in San Francisco and forced to earn money as a boy to help support the family, he crossed the boundaries of law with impunity. His love of boats and the sea took him out into the bay, enjoying the challenging waters and using his skills to steal oysters from the oyster beds. His

activities allowed him to buy boats of his own.

It was the voyage on the *Sophie* (as it was always called), which he signed on at the age of 17, that steered him away from what could have become a life of crime. By that time he had had numerous jobs, including panhandling, and was running tough company. He set sail for the coast of Japan in 1893, a time when uncontrolled hunting for the fur seal was pushing the species to the brink of extinction. There was an attempt at international control of killing at the rookeries on islands at the Bering Sea and the only option for those without a licence was to kill in the open sea, during the migration period. But even the profitability of this was coming to an end as London set sail on the *Sophie* – although ultimately it proved a profitable voyage.

With years spent in boats and fights, London, despite his youth, was no Humphrey van Weyden aboard the *Sophie*. The captain was the eighty-year-old owner and no Larsen. But London wrote *The Sea-Wolf* some ten years after his own sealing time and he had met men like Larson. When he put pen to paper, he had been up in the Klondike (travelling with Darwin and Milton in his backpack), and was already an

established writer. His early short stories had been accepted by magazines, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) had proved highly successful, and London was beginning to earn sums which somewhat embarrassed his communist principles – by this time he had read and espoused Marx. During his life he was to earn a million dollars, though he spent it as fast as he made it.

London said that Larsen did have a model – a skipper in a seal boat which raided rookeries. His name was Alexander MacLean who achieved some notoriety as an overbearing, powerful captain who was, nevertheless, intelligent and capable. But it is significant that Larsen quotes Milton and has Darwin in his cabin. His philosophy is coloured by the harshness of reality seen through the prism of survival – a view London himself knew only too well.

The weakness of *The Sea-Wolf* is the weak-kneed love story, which even Bierce criticised at the time. The clean, polite relationship between Humphrey van Weyden and Maud Brewster is more fitting to a romantic pulp magazine than such a raw-boned story. But London was in love with his second wife at the time he was writing it, and sentiment obviously slipped under his guard. London himself argued,

rather unsatisfactorily, that there were contemporary conventions of the time which had to be observed.

Nevertheless, this doesn't detract from the power of *The Sea-Wolf* as one of the great fictions of American literature. The gradual growth of van Weyden's sailing knowledge is well done and very real, as is the transformation of his character. Above

all there is Wolf Larsen, one of the strongest and most vivid personalities in literature. Just how close elements of Larsen were to London himself may be suggested by the fact that it is generally presumed that London took his life at the age of 40.

Notes by Nicolas Soames

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue

TCHAIKOVSKY TEMPEST OVERTURE	8.553017
Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra (Katowice)/Adrian Leaper	
TCHAIKOVSKY MANFRED SYMPHONY	8.550224
Slovak Symphony Orchestra, Ondrej Lenárd	
MAHLER SYMPHONY NO. 3	8.550525-26
Polish NRSO, Antoni Wit	

Music programmed by Nicolas Soames

Front cover: Ships in New York Harbour, 1891 (oil on canvas) by Granville Perkins (1830-95)
Private Collection/Phillips/Bridgeman Art Library

Jack London

The Sea-Wolf

Read by **Garrick Hagon**

Humphrey van Weyden led a privileged existence during his early life, but suddenly finds himself cast into the sea, fighting for survival. Pitted against ruthless but educated captain Wolf Larsen, van Weyden's courage and determination allow him to fight adversity and learn valuable lessons in this American classic originally published in 1904.

One of the great tales of the sea, *The Sea-Wolf* is in the tradition of *Moby Dick*, though London provides his own unique atmosphere and accurate maritime detail.



Garrick Hagon has appeared in many films including *Batman*, *Star Wars*, *Cry Freedom*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Fatherland*. His television credits include *A Perfect Spy*, *The Nightmare Years*, *Henry V*, *The Chief* and *Love Hurts*. On London's West End he played Chris Keller in *All My Sons* and he is a frequent story reader for the BBC. He also reads *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Call of the Wild* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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