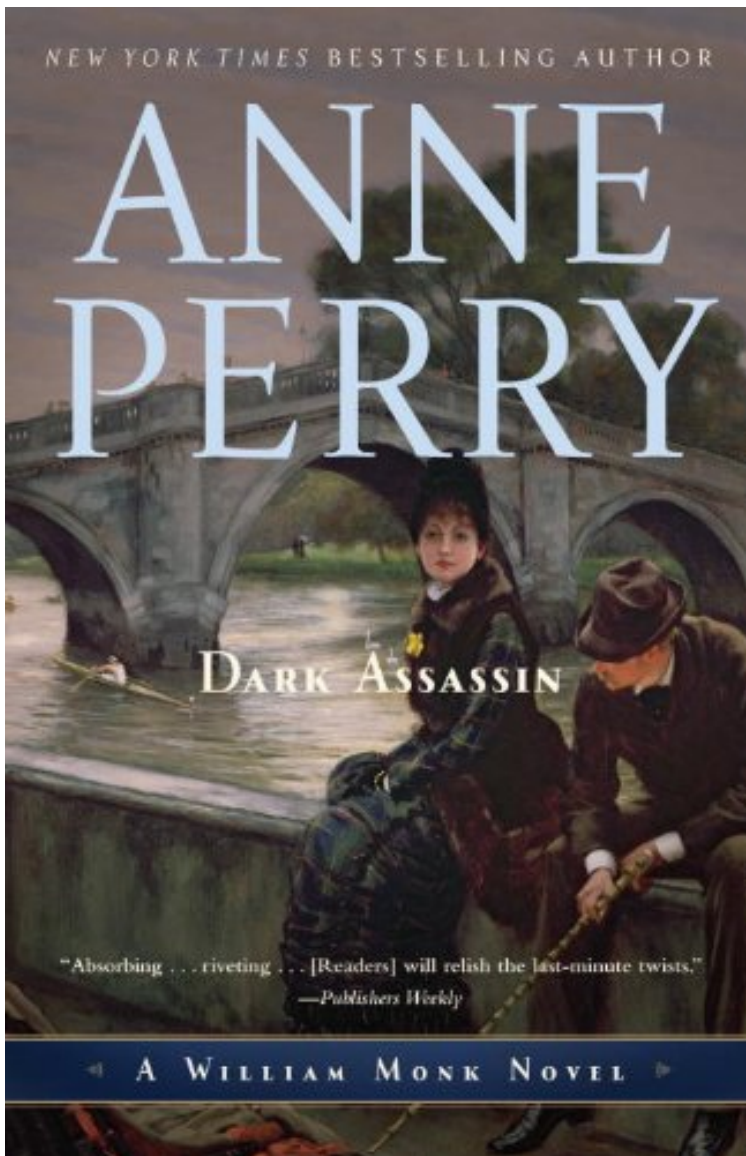


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Dark Assassin: A William Monk Novel



Par Anne Perry
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn a patrol boat near Waterloo Bridge, police superintendent William Monk notices a young couple engaged in an intense discussion. Seconds later, the two plunge to their deaths in the icy waters of the Thames. Was it an accident, a suicide, or a murder? Ever the investigator, Monk learns that the woman, Mary Havilland, had planned to marry the fair-haired man who shared her fate. He also discovers that Marys father had recently died in a supposed suicide. But Marys friends share their own darks suspicions with Monk, who now faces the mysteries surroundingthreedeads. Aided by his intrepid wife, Hester, Monk searches for answers. From luxurious drawing rooms where powerful men hatch their unscrupulous plots, to the sewers beneath the city where poor folk fight crippling poverty, Monk must

connect the clues before death strikes again. Extrait ONE Waterloo Bridge loomed in the distance as William Monk settled himself more comfortably in the bow of the police boat. There were four men, himself as senior officer, and three to man the four oars. Rowing randan, it was called. Monk sat rigid in his uniform coat. It was January and bitterly cold as he and his companions patrolled the Thames for accidents, missing craft, and stolen cargo. The wind ruffled the water and cut the skin like the edge of a knife, but he did not want anyone to see him shivering. It was five weeks since he had accepted the position leading this section of the River Police. It was a debt of honor he already regretted profoundly, the more so with every freezing,

sodden day as 1863 turned into 1864 and the winter settled ruthlessly over London and its teeming waterway. The boat rocked in the wash of a string of barges going upriver on the incoming tide. Orme, at the stern, steadied the boat expertly. He was a man of average height, but deceptive suppleness and strength, and a kind of grace exhibited as he managed the oar. Perhaps he had learned in his years on the water how easy it was to capsize a boat with sudden movement. They were pulling closer to the bridge. In the gray afternoon, before the lamps were lit, they could see the traffic crossing: dark shadows of hansoms and four-wheelers.

They were still too far away to hear the clip of horses hooves above the sound of the water. A man and woman stood on the footpath close to the railing, facing each other as if in conversation. Monk thought idly that whatever they were saying must matter to them intensely for it to hold their attention in such a bleak, exposed place. The wind tugged at the woman's skirts. At that height, where there was no shelter, she must have been even colder than Monk was. Orme guided the boat a little further out into the stream. They were going downriver again, back towards the station at Wapping where they were headquartered. Six weeks ago Inspector Durban had been commander and Monk had been a private agent of enquiry. Monk still could not think of it without a tightening of the throat, loneliness and a guilt he could not imagine would ever leave him. Each time he saw a group of River Police and one of them walked slowly with a smooth, ambling stride, a little rounded at the shoulder, he expected him to turn and he would see Durban's face. Then memory came back, and he knew it could not be. The bridge was only two hundred feet away now. The couple were still there against the balustrade. The man held her by the shoulders as if he would take her in his arms. Perhaps they were lovers. Of course, Monk could not hear their words; the wind tore them from the couples' mouths but their faces were alive with a passion that was clearer with every moment as the boat drew towards them. Monk wondered what it was: a quarrel, a last farewell, even both? The police oarsmen were having to pull hard against the incoming tide. Monk looked up again just in time to see the man struggling with the woman, holding her fiercely as she clung to him. Her back was to the railing, bending too far.

Instinctively he wanted to call out. A few inches more and she would fall! Orme, too, was staring up at them now. The man grasped at the woman and she pulled away. She seemed to lose her balance and he lunged after her. Clasped together, they teetered for a desperate moment on the edge, then she pitched backwards. He made a wild attempt to catch her. She flung out a hand and gripped him. But it was too late. They both plunged over the side and spun crazily, like a huge, broken-winged bird, until they hit the racing, filthy water and were carried on top of it, not even struggling, while it soaked into them, dragging them down. Orme shouted, and the oarsmen dug their blades in deep. They threw their backs against the weight of the river, heaving, hurtling them forward. Monk, his heart in his mouth, strained to keep the bodies in sight. They had only a hundred feet to go, and yet he knew already that it was too late. The impact of hitting the water would stun them and drive the air out of their lungs. When at last they did gasp inward, it would be the icy water laden with raw sewage, choking them, drowning them. Still, senselessly he leaned forward over the bow, shouting, Faster, faster! There! No . . . there! They drew level, turning a little sideways. The oarsmen kept the boat steady in the current and the changing balance as Orme heaved the body of the young woman over the gunwale. Awkwardly, as gently as he could, he laid her inside. Monk could see the other body, but it was too far away to reach, and if he stretched he could tip the boat. Port! he instructed, although the oarsmen were already moving to do it. He reached over carefully to the half-submerged body of the young man, whose coat was drifting out in the water, his boots dragging his legs downwards. Awkwardly, straining his shoulders, Monk hauled him up over the gunwale and in, laying him on the bottom of the boat next to the young woman. He had seen many dead people before, but the sense of loss never diminished. From the victim's pale face, smeared with dirt from the river water and plastered with hair across the brow, he appeared about thirty. He had a mustache but was otherwise clean-shaven. His clothes were well cut and of excellent quality. The hat he had been wearing on the bridge was gone. Orme was standing, balancing easily, looking down at Monk and the young man. Nothing we can do for either of em, sir, he said. Drown quick going off the bridge like that. Pity, he added softly. Looks no more'n twenty, she does. Nice face. Monk sat

back on the bench. Anything to indicate who she was? he asked. Orme shook his head. If she had one of em little bags ladies carry, its gone, but theres a letter in er pocket addressed to Miss Mary Avilland o Charles Street. Its postmarked already, like its bin sent and received, so could be its er. Monk leaned forward and systematically went through the pockets of the dead man, keeping his balance with less ease than Orme as the boat began the journey downstream, back towards Wapping. There was no point in putting a man ashore to look for witnesses to the quarrel, if that was what it had been. They could not identify the traffic that had been on the bridge, and on the water they themselves had seen as much as anyone. Two people quarrelling or kissing and parting who lost their balance and fell. There was nothing anyone could add. Actually, as far as Monk could remember, there had been no one passing at exactly that moment. It was the hour when the dusk is not drawn in sufficiently for the lamps to be lit, but the light wanes and the grayness of the air seems to delude the eye. Things are half seen; the imagination fills in the rest, sometimes inaccurately. Monk turned to the mans pockets and found a leather wallet with a little money and a case carrying cards. He was apparently Toby Argyll, of Walnut Tree Walk, Lambeth. That was also south of the river, not far from the girls address on Charles Street off the Westminster Bridge Road. Monk read the information aloud for Orme. The boat was moving slowly, as only two men were rowing. Orme squatted on the boards near Argylls body. On the shore the lamps were beginning to come on, yellow moons in the deepening haze. The wind had the breath of ice in it. It was time to trim their own riding lights, or they would be struck by barges or the ferries going crosscurrent carrying passengers from one bank to the other. Monk lit the lantern and carefully moved back to where Orme had laid the woman. She lay on her back. Orme had folded her hands and smoothed the hair off her face. Her eyes were closed, her skin already gray-white, as if she had been dead longer than just the few minutes since they had seen her on the bridge. She had a wide mouth and high cheekbones under delicately arched brows. It was a very feminine face, both strong and vulnerable, as if she had been filled with high passions in life. Poor creature, Orme said softly. Spouse well never know wot made er do it. Mebbe e were breakin orff an engagement, or somethin. The expression on his face was all but masked by the deepening shadows, but Monk could hear the intense pity in his voice. Monk suddenly realized he was wet up to the armpits from having lifted the body out of the water. He was shuddering with cold and it was hard to speak without his teeth chattering. He would have given all the money in his pocket for a hot mug of tea with a lacing of rum in it. He could not remember ever being this perishingly cold on shore. Suicide was a crime, not only against the state but in the eyes of the Church as well. If that was the coroners verdict, she would be buried in unhallowed ground. And there was the question of the young mans death as well. Perhaps there was no point in arguing it, but Monk did so instinctively. Was he trying to stop her? The boat was moving slowly, against the tide. The water was choppy, slapping at the wooden sides and making it difficult for two oarsmen to keep her steady. Orme hesitated for several moments before answering. I dunno, Mr. Monk, an thats the truth. Couldve bin. Couldve bin an accident both ways. His voice dropped lower. Or couldve bin e pushed er. It appened quick. Do you have an opinion? Monk could hardly get the words out clearly, he was shaking so much. Youd be best on an oar, sir, Orme said gravely. Get the blood movin, as it were. Monk accepted the suggestion. Senior officers might not be supposed to row like ordinary constables, but they were not much use frozen stiff or with pneumonia, either. He moved to the center of the boat and took up one of the oars beside Orme. After several strokes he got into the rhythm and the boat sped forward, cutting the water more cleanly. They rowed a long way without speaking again. They passed under Blackfriars Bridge towards the Southwark Bridge, which was visible in the distance only by its lights. The wind was like a knife edge, slicing the breath almost before it reached the lungs. Monk had accepted his current position in the River Police partly as a debt of honor. Eight years ago he had woken up in hospital with no memory at all. Fact by fact he had assembled an identity, discovering things about himself, not all of which pleased him. At that time he was a policeman, heartily disliked by his immediate superior, Superintendent Runcorn. Their relationship had deteriorated until it became a debatable question whether Monk had resigned before or after Runcorn had dismissed him. Since the detection and solving of crime was the only profession he knew, and he was obliged to earn his living, he had taken up the same work privately. But circumstances had altered in the late autumn of last year. The need for money had compelled him to accept employment with shipping magnate Clement Louvain, his first experience on the river. Subsequently he had met Inspector Durban and had become involved with the Maude Idris and its terrible cargo. Now Durban was dead, but before his death he had recommended Monk to succeed him in his place at the Wapping station. Durban could have had no idea how Monk had previously failed in commanding men. The former policeman was brilliant, but he had never worked easily with others, either in giving or taking orders.

Runcorn would have told Durban that, would have told him that clever or not, brave or not Monk was not worth the trouble he would cost. Monk had been mellowed by time and circumstance, and above all, perhaps, by marriage to Hester Latterly, who had nursed in the Crimea with Florence Nightingale and was a good deal more forthright than most young women. She loved him with a fierce loyalty and a startling passion, but she also very candidly expressed her own opinions. Even so, Runcorn would have advised Superintendent Farnham to find someone else to take the place of a man like Durban, who had been wise, experienced, and profoundly admired. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly Colacci proves a fine choice as narrator of Perry's latest mystery. In this 15th William Monk adventure, the detective has barely settled into his new position as superintendent of the Thames River Police when he witnesses a young couple fall to their deaths from Waterloo Bridge. Was it suicide, accident or murder? To find the answer, Monk, assisted by his wife, Hester, undertakes an investigation that will take him from the upper realms of London society to the lower depths of the city's poor and homeless, each offering its own particular form of deadly danger. Perry is at her best when she writes about the class distinctions that defined and divided the class-conscious populace of the 19th century, and Colacci syncs perfectly with her as he slips easily from one colloquial accent to another, portraying the wide variety of city dwellers who made up the multitudes occupying London in 1864. Colacci's performance succeeds nicely in bringing the streets and drawing rooms of Monk's Victorian London to life. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.