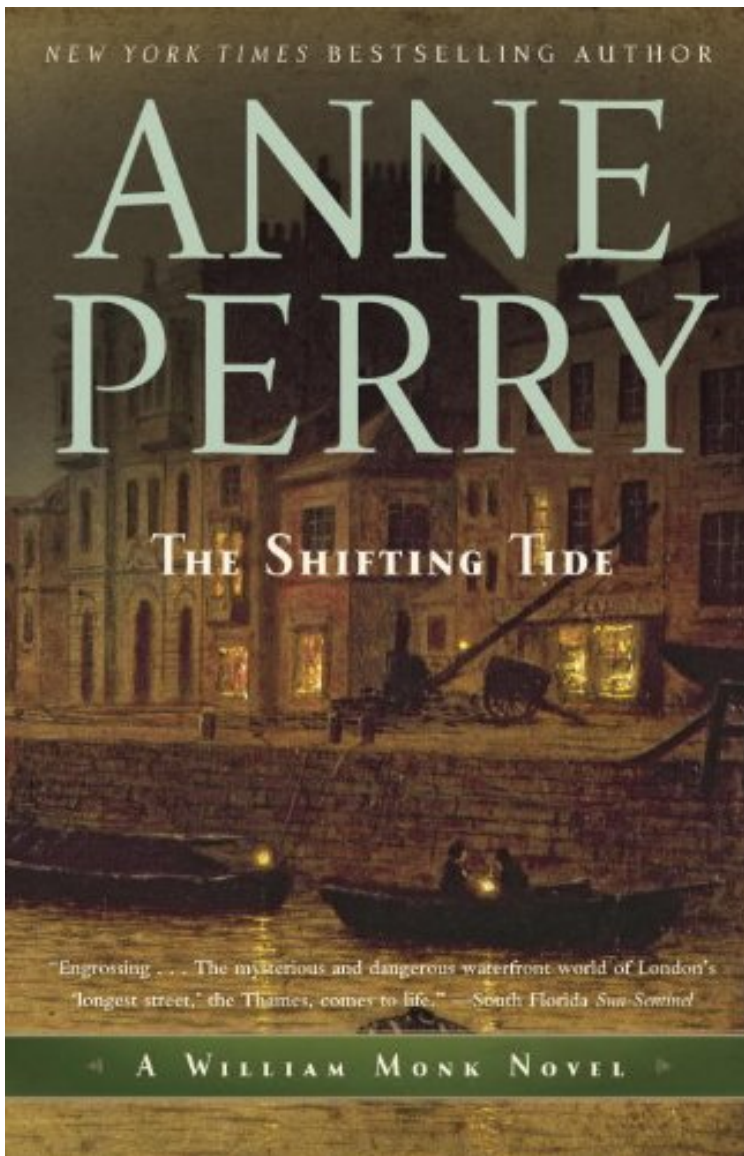


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The Shifting Tide: A William Monk Novel



Par Anne Perry
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWilliam Monk knows Londons streets like the back of his hand. But the river Thames and its teeming dockswhere wharf rats and night plunderers ply their tradesis unknown territory. Only Monks dire need for work persuades him to accept an assignment from shipping magnate Clement Louvain, to investigate the theft of a cargo of African ivory from Louvains recently docked schooner, theMaude Idris.But why didnt Louvain report the ivory theft directly to the River Police? Another mystery is the appearance of a desperately ill woman who Louvain claims is the discarded mistress of an old friend. Is she connected to the theft, or to something much darker? As Monk endeavors to solve these riddles, he cant imagine the trap that will soon so fatefully ensnare him..comCommissioned to find the precious cargo of

ivory stolen by river thieves from the hold of Clement Louvain's ocean-going schooner, private enquiry agent William Monk is intrigued by his new surroundings. The waterfront of the River Thames is a world unto itself, but without the help of the famed River Police, Monk hardly stands a chance of retrieving the ivory or tracking down the murderous men who killed an innocent crew member while robbing Louvain's ship. Not so coincidentally, Monk's wife Hester, who operates a shelter for sick and injured women of the streets, discovers that a woman with a mysterious connection to Louvain may hold the key to the missing ivory as well as many more deaths aboard his ship than the one Monk knows about. Perry's trademarked plotting, characterization, and verisimilitude in recreating Victorian London gleam brilliantly in this well-crafted historical mystery. --Jane Adams

Extrait ONE The murder doesn't matter, Louvain said abruptly, leaning a little over his desk towards Monk. The two men were standing in the big office next to windows that faced the Pool of London with its forest of masts swaying on the tide against the ragged autumn sky. There were clippers and schooners from every seafaring nation on earth, barges from up and down the river, local pleasure boats, as well as tugs, ferries, and tenders. I have to have the ivory! Louvain gritted the words between his teeth. I've no time to wait for the police. Monk stared at him, trying to frame an answer. He needed this job, or he would not have come down to the Louvain Shipping Company offices prepared to undertake a task so far outside his usual area of skill. He was a brilliant detective in the city; he had proved it time and time again, both in the police force and later as a private agent of enquiry. He knew the mansions of the wealthy and the back streets of the poor. He knew the petty thieves and informers, the dealers in stolen goods and the brothel-keepers, the forgers and many of the general ruffians for hire. But the river, the longest street in London, with its shifting tides, its constant movement of ships, and men who spoke scores of different languages, was strange territory to him. The question beat in his mind, insistent as a pulse: Why had Clement Louvain sent for him rather than someone familiar with the docks and the water? The River Police themselves were older than Peels city police; in fact, they had existed for nearly three quarters of a century since 1798. It was feasible that the River Police were too busy to give Louvain's ivory the attention he wanted, but was that really his reason for calling in Monk? The murder is part of the theft, Monk replied at last. If we knew who killed Hodge, we'd know who took the ivory, and if we knew when, we might be a lot closer to finding it. Louvain's face tightened. He was a wind-burned, slender-hipped man in his early forties, but hard-muscled like the sailors he hired to work his ships to the East African coast and back, with ivory, timber, spices, and skins. His light brown hair was thick and sprang up from his forehead. His features were broad and blunt. On the river at night, time makes no difference, he said curtly. There are light-horsemen, heavy-horsemen, night plunderers up and down all the time. Nobody's going to inform on anyone else, least of all to the River Police. That's why I need my own man, one with the skills I'm told you have. His eyes swept over Monk, seeing a man reputed to have the same ruthlessness as himself, an inch or two taller, darker, with high cheekbones and a lean, powerful face. I need that ivory back, Louvain repeated. It's due for delivery, and the money is owed. Don't look for the murderer to find the thief. That might work on shore. On the river you find the thief, and that will lead you to the murderer. Monk would have dearly liked to decline the case. It would have been easy enough; his lack of knowledge alone would have provided grounds for it. In fact, it was increasingly difficult to see why Louvain had sent for him rather than one of the many men who must at least know the river and the docks. There was always someone who would undertake a private commission for a fee. But Monk could not afford to point that out. He faced the bitter fact that he must make himself obliging to Louvain, and convince him, against the truth, that it was well within his power to find the ivory and return it to him in less time, and with greater discretion, than the River Police could or would do. Necessity drove him, the spite of recent trivial cases which paid too little. He dared not go into debt, and since Hester had given her time to the clinic in Portpool Lane, which was wholly charitable, she added nothing to their financial situation. But a man should not expect his wife to keep herself. She asked little enough no luxury, no vanity, only to be able to do the work she loved. Monk would have served any man to give her that. He resented Louvain because he had the power to cause him acute discomfort, but far more than that he was troubled that Louvain showed more concern about catching a thief who had robbed him of goods than a murderer who had taken Hodge's life. And if we do catch him, he said aloud, and Hodge is buried, what evidence do we have? We will have concealed his crime for him. Louvain pursed his lips. I can't afford to have the theft known. It would ruin me. Would it serve if I swear a testimony as to exactly where I found the body, and how and when? The doctor can swear to his injuries, and you yourself can look, too. I'll sign the document and you can have it. How will you explain concealing the crime from the police? Monk asked. I'll hand them the murderer, with proof, Louvain answered. What more could they want? And if I don't

catch him? Louvain looked at him with a wry, delicately twisted smile. You will, he said simply. Monk could not afford to argue. Morally, it set ill with him, but in practical terms Louvain was right. He must succeed;

but if he did not, then the River Polices chances were even less. Tell me as much as you know, he said. Louvain sat down at last, easing himself into the padded round-backed chair and indicating that Monk should sit also. He fixed his gaze on Monks face. The Maude Idris put out from Zanzibar fully loaded with ebony, spices, and fourteen first-grade tusks of ivory, bound round the Cape of Good Hope and home. Shes a four-masted schooner with a nine-man crew: captain, mate, bosun, cook, cabin boy, and four able seamen, one per mast. Thats standard for her tonnage. He was still watching Monks face. She made fair weather most of the way, calling in for supplies and fresh water up the west coast of Africa. She reached Biscay five days ago, Spithead the day before yesterday, and tacked the last few miles upriver with the wind behind her.

Dropped anchor just east of the Pool yesterday, October twentieth. Monk was listening intently, but the account held nothing useful to him. He was certain Louvain knew that; nevertheless they both continued to play out the charade. Crew was paid off, Louvain went on. As is usual. Been away a long time, close to half a year, one way and another. I left the bosun and three able seamen on board to keep things safe. One of them is the dead man, Hodge. A flicker passed across his face. It could have been any emotion at all: anger, sorrow, even guilt. Four out of the nine stayed? Monk confirmed it. As if reading his thoughts, Louvain pursed his lips. I know the rivers dangerous, especially for a ship newly come in. All the watermen will know the cargos still on it. Not much on the river is secret for long, but any fool could work that out. You dont come up this far if youre empty. Youre loading or unloading. I thought four men, armed, would be enough. I was wrong. His face was filled with emotion, but which emotion was unreadable. How were they armed? Monk asked. Pistols and cutlasses, Louvain replied. Monk frowned. Those are close-quarter weapons.

Is that all you carry? Louvains eyes widened almost imperceptibly. There are four cannons on deck, he replied guardedly. But thats in case of piracy at sea. You cant fire that sort of thing on the river! A slight flare of amusement crossed his face and vanished. They only wanted the ivory, not the whole damn ship! Was anyone else injured apart from Hodge? Monk concealed his annoyance with an effort. It was not Louvains fault that he was obliged to work out of his depth. No, Louvain said. River thieves know how to come alongside and board in silence. Hodge was the only one they encountered, and they killed him without arousing anyone else. Monk tried to imagine the scene: the cramped spaces in the bowels of the ship, the floor shifting and tilting with the tide, the creaking of the ships timbers. And then would come the sudden knowledge that there were footsteps, then the terror, the violence, and finally the crippling pain as they struck. Who found him? he said quietly. And when? Louvains face was heavy, his mouth drawn tight. The man who came to relieve him at eight oclock. Before or after he saw the ivory was missing? Louvain hesitated only a second. It was barely discernible, and Monk wondered if he had imagined it. After. If he had said before, Monk would not have believed him. In self-preservation the man would have wanted to know what he was dealing with before he told Louvain anything. And unless he were a complete fool, he would have thought first to make sure the killer was not still on board. If he could have said he had captured him, and kept the ivory, he would have had a very different story to tell. Unless, of course, he already knew all about it and was party to it? Where were you when you got the message? Louvain looked at him stonily.

Here. It was nearly half past eight by then. How long had you been here? Since seven. Would he know that? He watched Louvains face closely. One of the ways he could judge the men left on the ship was by Louvains trust in them. A man in Louvains position could not afford to forgive even error, let alone any kind of disloyalty. Yes, Louvain replied, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. Any seaman would expect it. That doesnt tell you what you think it does. Monk felt the heat burn up inside him. He was clawing after answers, not grasping as he usually did. This was not the right pace at which to play games of wits with Louvain. He must be either blunter or a great deal more subtle. All shipowners are in their offices at that hour? he concluded aloud. Louvain relaxed a little. Yes. He came here and told me Hodge had been killed and the ivory stolen. I went with him immediately. He stopped as Monk stood up. Can you retrace your steps, and Ill come with you? Monk requested. Louvain rose smoothly. Of course. He said nothing else as he led Monk across the worn carpet to the heavy door, opened it and then locked it behind them, putting the key in the inside pocket of his waistcoat. As he took a heavier jacket from a coat stand, he glanced at Monks attire, as if to consider its adequacy, and decided it would suffice. Monk was proud of his clothes. Even in his most financially restricted times, he had dressed well. He had a natural elegance, and pride dictated that the tailors bill had come before the butchers. But that had been when he was single. Now he might have to reverse that order, and it already weighed heavily with him. It was a kind of defeat. However, he had realized that a man

involved in shipping, as Louvain was, might well have business that required them both to go on the river, so he had come with that in mind. His boots were heavy and well soled; his overcoat was easy to move in and would cut the wind. He followed Louvain down the stairs and across the outer office, where clerks were bent over ledgers or sitting on high stools with quills in hand. The odors of ink and dust were in the air, and there was an acrid sting of smoke as he passed the iron heating stove just as someone opened it to put more coke in the top. Outside in the roadway towards the dock, the raw-edged wind struck them immediately, making the skin smart, whipping the hair back, catching in the throat the taste of salt on the incoming tide. It was heavy with smells of fish, tar, and the sour, overbearing effluent of mud and sewage from above the waterline beyond the wharves. The water slurped against the pier stakes in endless movement, rhythm broken now and then by the wash of barges laden so they sank deep. They moved slowly upriver towards London Bridge and beyond. The mewling of gulls was shrill, yet it was a sound that brought back echoes of meaning for Monk, flashes of his life in Northumberland as a boy. A carriage accident seven years before, in 1856, had robbed him of most of those many-colored fragments that build the past and form the pictures of who we are. By deduction he had pieced much of it together, and now and again windows opened suddenly and showed him whole landscapes for a moment. The cry of gulls was one of those. Louvain was crossing the cobbles down to the wharf and striding along without looking right or left. The docks, with their vast warehouses, cranes and derricks, were all familiar to him. He was used to seeing the laborers and watermen and the small craft coming and going. Monk followed Louvain to the end of the wharf, where the dark water swirled and slapped under the shadows, its surface spotted with scum and drifting refuse. On the far bank there was a stretch of mud below the tide line, and three children were wading in it, sunk halfway up to their knees, bent over, searching with busy, skilled hands for whatever they could find. A snatch of memory told Monk it was almost certainly for coal off the barges, fallen by chance, or deliberately pushed a piece at a time, precisely in order to be picked up by the mudlarks. Louvain waved his arm and shouted across the water. Within moments a light boat, twelve or fourteen feet long, drew up to the steps with a single man aboard at the oars. His face was weather-beaten to the color of old wood, his gray beard little more than bristle, and his hat, jammed down over his ears, hid whatever hair he might have had. He gave a brief, half salute of recognition and waited for Louvain's orders. Take us out to the Maude Idris, Louvain told him, stepping easily down into the boat, adjusting his weight to keep his balance as it tipped and jiggled. He offered no assistance to Monk behind him, either assuming he was accustomed to boats or uninterested in whether he made a fool of himself or not. A moment of fear rose in Monk, and embarrassment in case he did it clumsily. He stiffened, and then physical instinct told him that was wrong, and he dropped down loosely, bending his knees and adjusting with a grace that surprised both of them. The waterman wove between the barges with practiced skill, skirting around a three-masted schooner, its canvas lashed, timbers stained and peeling from long days of tropical sun and salt wind. Monk glanced down and saw the crusting of barnacles below the waterline. The river was too murky for him to see more than a foot or so below the surface. He looked up quickly as they passed under the shadow of a much larger ship and caught his breath with a sudden thrill as the sheer beauty of it gripped him. It towered into the air, three tremendous masts with yardarms eighty or ninety feet long and dark against the gray clouds, sails furled, rigging in fine lines like an etching on the sky. It was one of the great clippers that sailed around the world, probably racing from China to London with tea, silk, and spices of the Far East. First one to unload won the stupendous prices, second got only what was left. His imagination teemed with visions of roaring winds and seas, worlds of sky, billowing canvas, spars thrashing in a wild dance of the elements. And there would be calmer seas, flaming sunsets, clear water like glass teeming with creatures of myriad shapes, and windless days when time and space stretched into eternity. Monk jerked himself back to the present and the loud, busy river, the cold spray off the water whipping his face. Ahead of them was a four-masted schooner lying at anchor, rolling slightly on the wake from a string of barges. She was wide beamed and quite deep of draft, an oceangoing carrier of heavy cargo, swift under full sail, easy to maneuver, and this close, the gun ports on the foredeck were plain to see. She would be neither caught nor captured easily. Yet here in her home port she was a sitting target for two or three men creeping up over the black water by night, swarming up the sides to the deck and taking an inattentive guard by surprise. From the Hardcover edition.