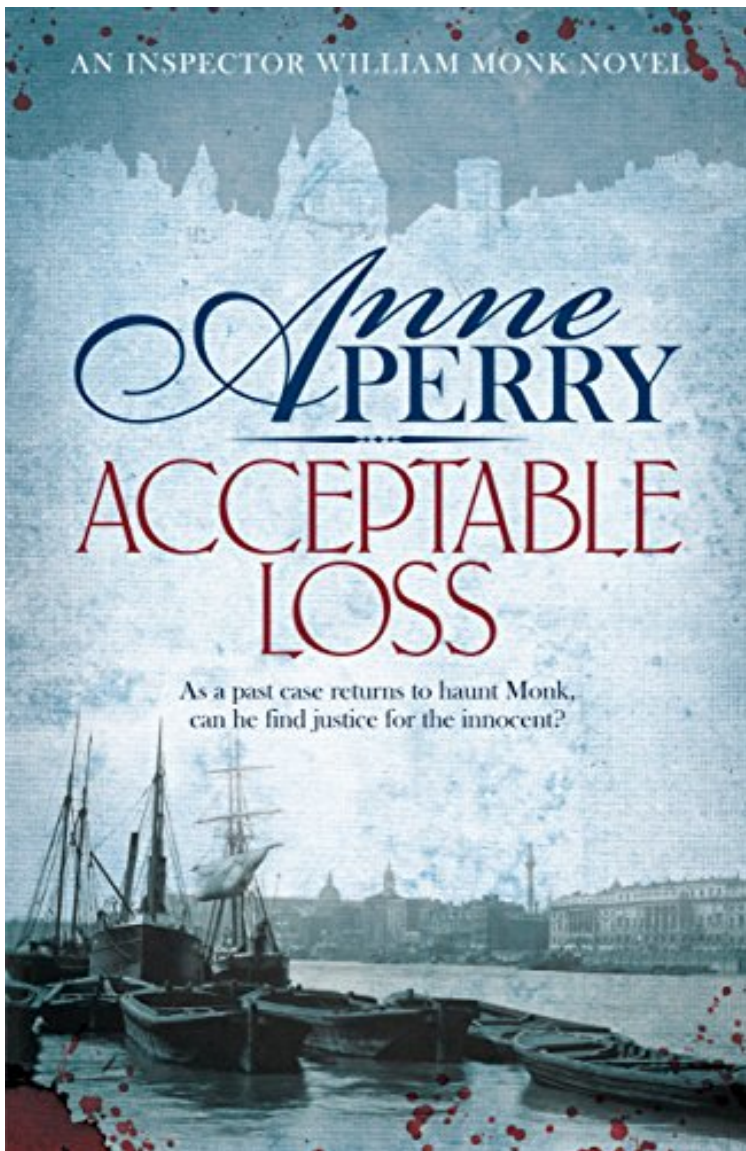


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Acceptable Loss (William Monk Mystery, Book 17): A gripping Victorian mystery of blackmail, vice and corruption



Par Anne Perry
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur As a past case returns to haunt Monk, can he find justice for the innocent? Inspector William Monk once again faces a dangerous foe in Acceptable Loss, the seventeenth novel in Anne Perry's acclaimed series. Perfect for fans of C. J. Sansom and Ann Granger.[An Anne Perry novel can] take us away to the far reaches of our imaginations, to a place and a time about which we can only dream... We see the

gaslight, we feel the fog, and in Perry's latest, *Acceptable Loss*, we experience the horror of murder, blackmail and sordid crime, as well as the shining victory of heroic sacrifice and personal courage' - Asbury

Park Press In 1864, Monk and his wife Hester are doing their best to care for Scuff, a homeless boy recovering from a terrifying ordeal at the hands of Jericho Phillips, the runner of a child prostitution ring. Although Scuff's evil abductor is dead, there is no suggestion that the ring has been broken and Scuff is certain that more children are suffering an even worse fate. Monk is determined to find the remaining children and uncover the men funding the operation. And when the body of small-time crook Mickey Parfitt washes up on Mortlake's shore, it fortuitously points him in the right direction. But as Monk's investigation continues, the reputations of respected gentlemen start being called into question and his task becomes fraught with unforeseen dangers. In an illicit world of blackmail, vice and corruption, Monk must follow the trail - and his conscience - wherever it leads, no matter how disturbing the truth may be. What readers are saying about *Acceptable Loss*: "There is no one who better captures the Victorian period. From the homes of the wealthy, to the lowest, meanest parts of London, [Anne Perry] creates a fully-realised world" "A riveting mystery wrapped up in the dark and seedy side of Victorian London" "Anne Perry is the best Victorian crime [writer] I have ever read" *Extrait* chapter 1 Hester was -half--asleep when she heard the slight sound, as if someone were taking in a sharp breath and then letting out a soft, desperate gasp. Monk was motionless beside her, his hand loose on the pillow, his hair falling over his face. It was not the first time in the last two weeks that Hester had heard Scuff crying in the night. It was a delicate relationship she had with the boy she and Monk had befriended. He had lived on the streets by the river and had largely provided for himself, which had made him wise beyond his age, and fiercely independent. He considered he was looking after Monk, who in Scuff's opinion lacked the knowledge and the fierce survival instincts required for his job as head of the Thames River Police at Wapping, in the heart of the London docks. Until last month Scuff had come and gone as he'd pleased, spending only the occasional night at Monk's house in Paradise Place. However, since his kidnapping, and the atrocity on the boat at Execution Dock, he had come to live with them, going out only for short periods during the day, and tossing and turning at night, plagued by nightmares. He would not talk about them, and his pride would not let him admit to Hester that he was frightened of the dark, of closed doors, and, above all, of sleep. Of course she knew why. Once the tight control he kept over himself in his waking hours slipped from him, he was back on the boat again, curled up on his side beneath the trapdoor to the bilges, nailed in with the -half--rotted corpse of the missing boy, fighting the swirling water and the rats, the stench of it making him gag. In his nightmares it did not seem to matter that he was now free, or that Jericho Phillips was dead; Scuff had seen the man's body himself, imprisoned in the iron cage in the river, his mouth gaping open as the rising tide trapped him, choking off his voice forever. Hester heard the gasping sound again, and slipped out of bed. She pulled on a wrap, not so much for warmth in the late September night, but for modesty so as not to embarrass Scuff if he was awake. She crept across the room and along the passage. His bedroom door was open just wide enough for him to pass through. The gas lamp was on low, maintaining the fiction that she had forgotten and left it on, as she did every night. Neither of them ever mentioned this. Scuff was lying tangled in the sheets, the blankets slipped halfway to the floor. He was curled up in just the same position as they had found him in when she and the -rat--catcher, Sutton, had pried open the trapdoor. Without debating with herself anymore, Hester went into the room and picked up the blankets, placing them over him and tucking them in lightly. Then she stood watching him. He whimpered again, and pulled at the sheet as if he were cold. She could see in the faint glow of the gaslight that he was still dreaming. His face was tight, eyes closed hard, jaw so clenched he must have been grinding his teeth. Every now and again his body moved, his hands coming up as if to reach for something. How could she wake him without robbing him of his pride? He would never forgive her for treating him like a child. And yet his cheeks were smooth, his neck so slender and his shoulders so narrow that there was nothing of the man in him yet. He said he was eleven, but he looked about nine. What lie would he not see through? She could not waken him without tacitly admitting that she had heard him crying in his dream. She turned and walked back to the door and went a little way along the passage. Then a better idea came to her. She tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen and poured a glass of milk. Then she took four cookies and put them on a plate. She went back upstairs, careful not to trip over her nightgown. Just before she reached his room, she deliberately banged the door of the linen cupboard. She knew it might waken Monk as well, but that could not be helped. When she reached Scuff's room, he was lying in bed with the blankets up to his chin, fingers gripping them, eyes wide open. "You awake too?" she said, as if mildly surprised. "So am I. I've got some milk and cookies. Would you like half?" She held up the plate. He nodded.

He could see there was only one glass, but the milk did not matter. It was the chance to be awake and not alone that he wanted. She came in, leaving the door ajar, and sat on the edge of the bed. She put the glass on the table beside him and the plate on the blankets. He picked up a biscuit and nibbled it, watching her. His eyes were wide and dark in the low lamplight, waiting for her to say something. "I don't like being awake at this time of the night," she said, biting her lip a little. "I'm not -really hungry; it just feels nice to eat something. Have the milk if you want it." "I'll take 'alf," he said. Food was precious; he was always fair about it. She smiled. "Good enough," she agreed, picking up a biscuit herself so he would feel comfortable eating. He reached for the glass, holding it with both hands. He drank some, then looked at it to measure his share, drank a little more, then handed it to her. He sat very upright in the bed, his hair tousled and a rim of white on his upper lip. She wanted to hold him, but she knew better. He might have wanted it too, but he would never have allowed such an admission. It would mean he was dependent, and he could not afford that.

He had lived in the docks, scavenging for pieces of coal off the barges, brass screws, and other small valuable objects that had fallen off boats into the Thames mud. The low tide allowed boys like -him-- mudlarks--to survive. He had a mother somewhere, but perhaps she had too many younger children, and neither the time nor room to care for him. Or maybe she had a new husband who did not want another man's son in the house. Boys like himself had been his friends, sharing food, warmth, and one another's pain, comrades in survival. "Have another biscuit," Hester offered. "I've 'ad two," he pointed out. "That was 'alf." "Yes, I know. I took more than I wanted," she replied. "I thought I was hungry, but now I'm just awake." He looked at her carefully, deciding if she meant it, then took the last biscuit and ate it in three mouthfuls. She smiled at him, and after a moment he smiled back. "Are you sleepy?" she asked. "No_._._." "Nor am I." She hitched herself up a little so she could sit on the bed with her head against the headboard beside him, but still keeping a distance away. "Sometimes when I'm awake I read, but I haven't got a good book at the moment. The newspaper's full of all sorts of things I don't -really want to know." "Like wot?" he asked, twisting round so he was facing her a little more, settling in for a conversation. She listed off a few social events she remembered, adding where they had been held and who had attended. Neither of them cared, but it was something to say. Presently she wandered off the subject and remembered past events, describing clothes and food, then behavior, wit, flirting, disasters, anything to keep him entertained. She even recalled the chaotic remembrance service where her friend Rose had been hopelessly and unintentionally drunk; she had climbed onto the stage and seized the violin from the very earnest young lady who had been playing it, and had then given her own rendition of several current music hall songs, growing bawdier with each. Scuff giggled, trying to picture it in his mind. "Were it terrible?" he asked. "Ghastly," Hester affirmed with relish. "She told them all the truth of what a fearful person the dead man had been, and why they had - really come. It was awful then, but I laugh every time I think of it now." "She were yer friend." He said the word slowly, tasting its value. "Yes," she agreed. "D'yer 'elp 'er?" "As much as I could." "Fig were my friend," he said very quietly. "I din't 'elp 'im. Nor the other neither." "I know."

She felt the lump, hard and painful, in her throat. Fig was one of the boys Jericho Phillips had murdered. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Yer can't 'elp it," he said reasonably. "Yer did yer best. No one can stop it." He moved an inch or two closer to her. "Tell me some more about Rose and the others." She had seen survivor's guilt before. In her nursing in the Crimea she had heard soldiers cry out from the same nightmares and had seen them waken with the same shocked and helpless eyes, staring at the comfort around them, and feeling the horror inside. She tried to think of something else to say to Scuff, happy things, anything to take away his memory of his own lost friends, adding a little more until she looked at him and saw his eyes closing. She lowered her voice, and then lowered it even more. He was so close to her now that he was touching her. She could feel the warmth of him through the sheet that separated them. A few minutes later he was asleep. Without being aware of it he had put his head against her shoulder. She stopped talking and lay still. It was a little cramped, but she did not move until morning, when she pretended to have been asleep also. After a breakfast of hot porridge, toast, and marmalade, Monk sent Scuff out on an errand and turned to Hester. "Nightmares again?" he asked. "Sorry," she apologized. "I knew I'd probably waken you, but I - couldn't leave him alone. I banged the door so-""You don't need to explain." He cut across her. The ghost of a smile softened the angular planes of his face for a moment, and then it was gone again. He looked grim, full of a pain he did not know how to deal with. She knew he was remembering the terrible night on the river when Jericho Phillips had kidnapped Scuff to prevent Monk from completing the case against him, for which he would have assuredly hanged. Phillips had so very nearly succeeded. Had it not been for Sutton's little dog, Snoot, they would never have found the boy. "He's still afraid," she said quietly. "He knows

Phillips is -dead-- he saw the drowned body in the -cage--but there are other people doing the same thing, other boats on the river that use boys for pornography and -prostitution--boys just like him, his friends. People we can't help. I don't know what to say to him, because he's far too clever to believe comforting lies. And I don't want to lie to him anyway. Then he'd never trust me in anything. I wish he -didn't care about them so much, and yet I'd hate it if he could feel safe only by never looking back. He thinks we can't help." She blinked hard. "William, parents ought to be able to help. That's part of what they are for. He sees us not even trying, just accepting defeat. He - doesn't even understand why he feels so guilty, and thinks he's betraying them by being all right. He won't believe that we don't secretly think the same of him, whatever we say." "I know." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And that isn't the only problem." She waited, her heart pounding. They had avoided saying it; all their time and emotion was concentrated on Scuff. But she had known it would have to come. Now she looked at the lines of strain in Monk's face, the shadows around his eyes, the lean, high cheekbones. There was a vulnerability there that only she understood. She thought of Oliver Rathbone, who had been both Monk's friend and hers for so long, and beside whom they had fought desperate battles for justice, often at the risk of their reputations, even their lives. They had sat up for endless nights searching for answers, had faced victory and disaster together, horrors of grief, pity, and disillusion. Rathbone had once loved Hester, but she had chosen Monk. Then he had married Margaret Ballinger and found a happiness far better suited to his nature. Margaret could give him children, but more obvious than that, she was socially his equal. She was of a calmer, more judicious nature than Hester; she knew how to behave as Lady Rathbone, wife of the most gifted barrister in London, should. Was it -really conceivable that Margaret's father had been the power and the money behind Jericho Phillips's abominations? That is what Lord Justice Sullivan had claimed, right before his terrible suicide at Execution Dock. Hester longed for Monk to tell her that it was not true. "You heard what Rathbone said about Arthur Ballinger and Phillips?" Monk said. "Yes. Has he said anything more?" "No. I suppose there's nothing legal, or he would have. He'd have no choice." "You mean there's no proof, just Sullivan's -word--and he's dead anyway?" "Yes." "But you believe it?" That also was not -really a question. "Of course I do," he said very softly. "Rathbone believes it, and do you think he would if there were any way in heaven or hell that he could avoid it?" Monk lifted up his hand and touched Hester's cheek so softly, she felt the warmth of him more than the brush of his skin against hers. "I have to know if Ballinger was involved, for Scuff, so at least he knows I'm trying," he continued. "And Rathbone has to know too, however much he would prefer not to." "Are you going to speak to him?" "I've been avoiding it, and so has he. He's been in court on another case for the last two weeks, but it's finished now and I can't put it off any longer." "Are you sure he needs to know?" she pressed. "The pain of it would be intolerable, and he would have no choice but to do something about it." "That's not like you," he said ruefully. "To want to avoid someone else's pain?" She was momentarily indignant. "To be evasive," he corrected her. "You are too good a nurse to want to put a bandage on something that you know needs surgery. If it's gangrene, you must take off the arm, or the patient will die. You taught me that." "Am I being a coward?" She winced as she said the word. She knew that to a soldier, "coward" was the worst word in any language, worse even than "cheat" or "thief." From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* Fascinating and fast-paced . . . will keep readers entranced. *Wichita Falls Times Record News* [An Anne Perry novel can] take us away to the far reaches of our imaginations, to a place and a time about which we can only dream. . . . We see the gaslight, we feel the fog, and in Perrys latest, *Acceptable Loss*, we experience the horror of murder, blackmail and sordid crime, as well as the shining victory of heroic sacrifice and personal courage. *Asbury Park Press* The real drama in the story involves the struggle between loyalty and truth. Questions of morality and painful choices haunt every chapter. *Lincoln Journal Star* Terrific . . . Readers will not be prepared for the twists and turns that lay in wait. *Bookreporter*