

## **Praise for *The Paris Express***

“A tension-filled panorama of fin de siècle French society.”

—**Alida Becker, *The New York Times***

“A riveting mix of social commentary and mystery. . . . If the steam engine is an astonishing feat of engineering, so is Donoghue’s propulsive and thought-provoking sixteenth novel.”

—**Leigh Haber, *The Washington Post***

“Clever, ambitious, and richly researched. A slice of 1890s Paris that makes us see that our modern problems aren’t so modern after all! *The Paris Express* is a smartly structured novel that ratchets up the pace until it’s hurtling along as fast as the doomed train itself.”

—**Alice Winn, author of *In Memoriam***

“*The Paris Express* offers readers the opportunity to recognize something kindred in its characters’ passions and dilemmas. . . . Well-researched, empathetic . . . steams across fin de siècle France with unstoppable momentum.”

—**Heller McAlpin, *The Wall Street Journal***

“*Titanic* superfans will fall hard for this historically immersive story of glamour, hubris, chaos, and heartache.”

—***Oprah Daily*, The 25 Most Anticipated Books of 2025**

“A nail-biter—and you’ll learn some history, too.”

—*People*

“Thrilling . . . I could not put this book down.”

—**Bill Goldstein, NBC New York**

“Historical fiction you can feel in your bones.”

—*Los Angeles Times*, **10 Books We’re Looking**

**Forward to in 2025**

“Deliciously tense . . . A heart-pounding ride.”

—*Real Simple*

“Irresistible . . . Beautifully capture[s] the thrill and romance of train travel’s heyday.”

—**Chris Hewitt, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune***

“Riveting . . . Drama, terror, and chaos unfold aboard the train.”

—*Woman’s World*, **9 New Historical Mystery**

**Books Perfect for Cozy October Nights**

“Donoghue’s particular forte lies in showing how confined circumstances shape interactions. Her characterization is a marvel as she dexterously illustrates people’s outward appearances and innermost desires. In her hands, the novel’s long-ago setting becomes an exciting place buzzing with fresh life and technological ideas on the cusp of a new century, even as horror strikes.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Donoghue establishes an intricate web of human relationships as the narrative speeds toward an unexpected yet plausible finale. . . . Readers ought to jump on board.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“In exploring a little-remembered event in history, Emma Donoghue manages to hold a mirror up to a whole society, from its train porters to its members of parliament, and show that however much one tries to wrench life to conform to one’s will, everyone is vulnerable to its shocks. What an absorbing, panoramic, meticulously researched, lovingly peopled gem.”

—**Esi Edugyan, author of Booker Prize finalist**

***Washington Black***

“Captivating! Emma Donoghue writes in rich, luxuriant detail, yet the story moves at an exhilarating clip. *The Paris Express* brings big questions about human interconnectedness into an edge-of-your-seat historical thriller that I couldn’t put down.”

—**Shelby Van Pelt, author of *Remarkably Bright Creatures***

“Donoghue’s talents are at such glorious heights in this novel.”

—**Heather O’Neill, author of *The Capital of Dreams***

Also by  
Emma Donoghue

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*Learned by Heart*

*Haven*

*The Pull of the Stars*

*Akin*

*The Wonder*

*Frog Music*

*Astray*

*Room*

*Inseparable: Desire Between  
Women in Literature*

*The Sealed Letter*

*Landing*

*Touchy Subjects*

*Life Mask*

*The Woman Who  
Gave Birth to Rabbits*

*Slammerkin*

*Kissing the Witch:  
Old Tales in New Skins*

*Hood*

*Stir-Fry*

T H E  
PARIS  
EXPRESS

*A novel*

Emma  
Donoghue

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This book is for my beloved *belle-mère*,  
Claude Gillard,  
translator and best of readers



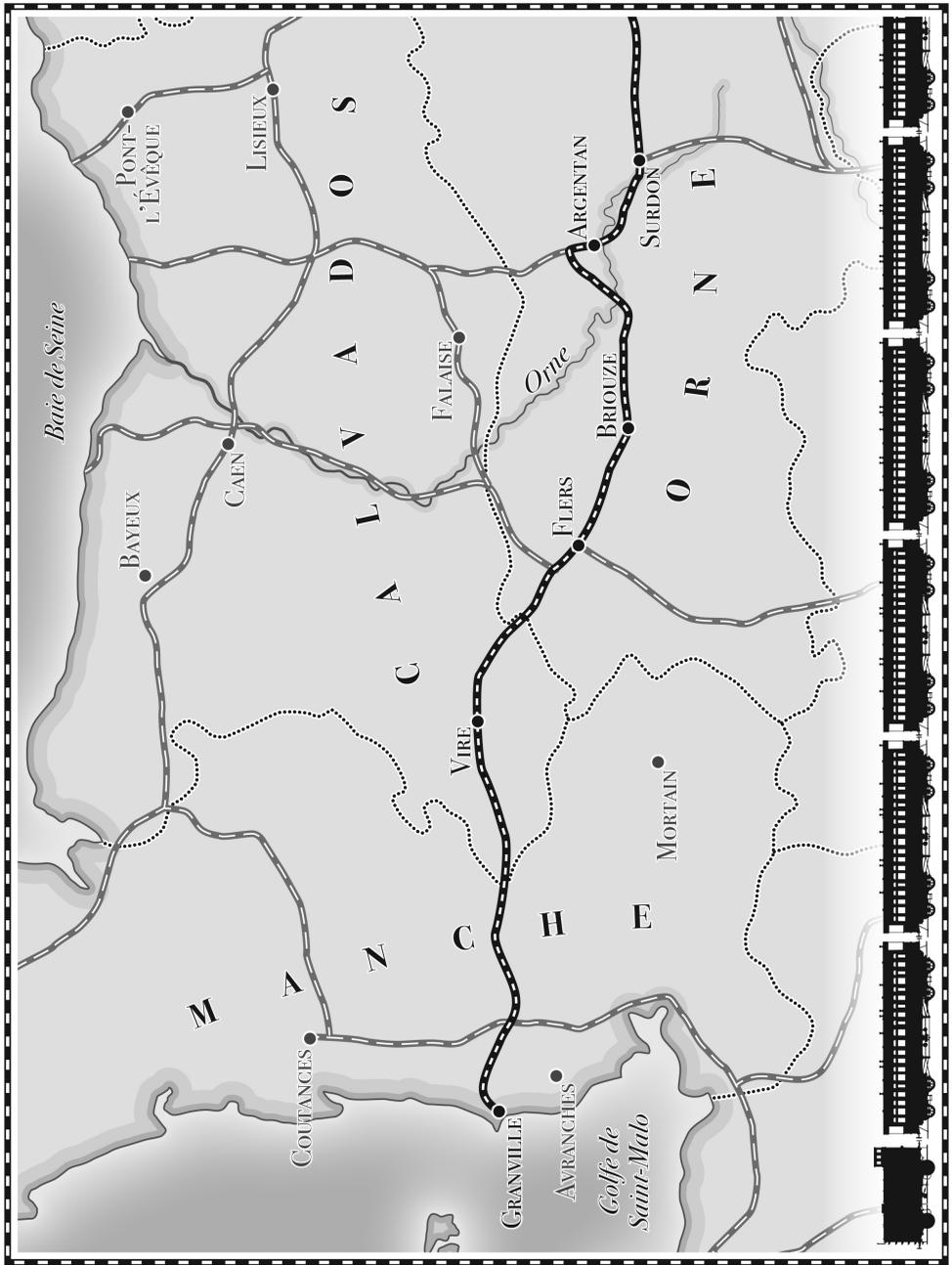
*The occasional disaster,  
What does it matter?  
Let's take necessary evils in our stride—  
Every great invention costs a few lives!*

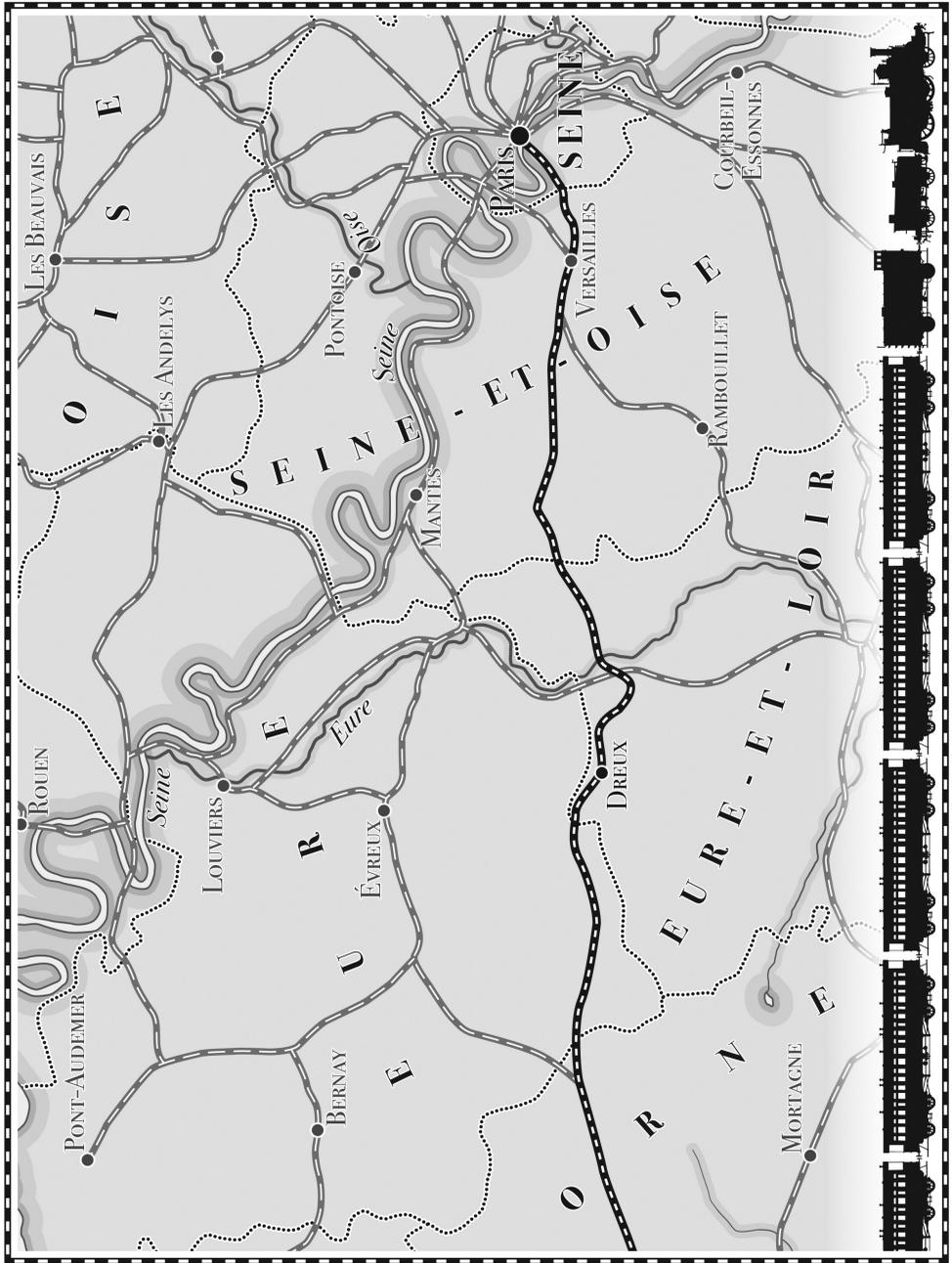
**AUGUSTE-MARSEILLE BARTHÉLEMY,  
“STEAM” (1845)**



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8:30 a.m.

# EMBARR GRANVILLE

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*There isn't a train I wouldn't take,  
No matter where it's going.*

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY,  
"TRAVEL" (1921)

Half past eight in the morning, on the twenty-second of October, 1895, in Granville, on the Normandy coast. Stocky, plain, and twenty-one, in her collar, tie, and boxy skirt, Mado Pelletier stands across the street from the little railway station holding her lidded metal lunch bucket, watching.

The down train, as they call any service from the capital, deposited Mado here yesterday afternoon, sooty and bone-jarred. Only now does it occur to her that she could have waited until this morning to leave Paris, disembarked early at Dreux, Surdon, or Flers, bought what she needed, and caught the next express back. All that really matters is that she be on a fast train to Paris by lunchtime on the twenty-second.

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She supposes she came all the way to Granville because it's the end of the line. The Company of the West's posters call this wind-raked town the Monaco of the North. In the hours Mado's been here, she hasn't sought out the lighthouse or the casino or any of the so-called sights of this resort, off-season. Except one—she had a hankering to, for once in her life, set eyes on the sea.

It wasn't pretty like everyone said. Wonderfully fierce, in fact—those waves biting into the stones of the beach yesterday evening as the sun went down behind the empty Lady Bathers' hall. Hard to believe in October that invalids flocked here every summer to be wheeled out in bathing machines and half drowned for their health. Mado found a sandy patch and even made an attempt at a castle.

She's always loved being outside, staying out late, spending as little time as possible in the room that has a tang of rot at the back of the Pelletiers' greengrocery in Paris. (It had to hold all four of them when Mado was growing up, but it's just her and her long-faced mother now.) Mado's best memory is of setting off firecrackers in the street one Bastille Day. So this trip to Granville is the kind of thing she'd have enjoyed hugely when she was younger. Not that her parents would ever have been able to spare the money. Like much of the population of the famously wealthy City of Light, even before she was widowed, Madame Pelletier lived by the skin of her teeth.

Her daughter's been planning this trip since she turned twenty-one. Mado spent last night in a room on the unfashionable inland side of the Granville train station, picked at

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random and paid for with the few coins she hadn't set aside for buying supplies. She blew out the lantern and squeezed her eyes shut for hours at a time, but her mind would never stop buzzing long enough to let her fall asleep.

Up at dawn this Tuesday morning, like a good housewife she did her shopping as soon as the shutters opened. Back in the shabby room, she made her meticulous preparations before leaving in plenty of time to catch the up train to Paris.

So what's preventing Mado from walking into Granville Station now and taking her seat in a Third-Class carriage? What's keeping her feet—still stubby, child-size, in second-hand boots—rooted to the pavement?

Motionless at her side, a small boy with a schoolbag over his shoulders stares at the station entrance as if imitating Mado. She gives him a glare, but his round eyes don't even blink.

*Come on, in you go*, she tells herself. The strap of her satchel cuts uncomfortably between her breasts.

A fellow glides by on a bicycle, smirking and waggling his eyebrows at her. Mado's been getting this a lot in Granville. That's the price of wearing a tailored jacket with short, oiled-down hair. Even back in Paris, where quite a few young women go about *à l'androgynie*, sneers and jeers have come Mado's way ever since she scraped together the cash to buy this outfit at a flea market last year. Her hair she cuts herself with the razor that was one of the few possessions her father had when he died.

She'll take sneers and jeers over lustful leers any day. Bad enough to have been born female, but she refuses to dress the

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part. Stone-faced, Mado checks the set of her cravat, then her hat. Her mother's always nagging her to make half an effort to catch a husband when the fact is there's nothing Mado wants less. Even if you got a kind one like her papa, marriage uses you up like a fruit. Mado likes to look at a handsome fellow as much as the next girl, but if the choice is virginity or slavery, she'll take virginity. *Like the Maid of Orléans*, she thinks, straightening her back.

And then: *The Maid of Orléans would be on the blasted train by now. Get moving—unless you mean to miss it?*



Frowning, Maurice Marland looks up at the clock over the station entrance as the Breton guard with the great moustache sent him out to do. Railwaymen are figures of legend to Maurice, and engines are the dragons they command.

The boy lives in the Calvados town of Falaise, more than a hundred kilometres inland. He's taken five rail journeys already in his seven and a half years, but this is the first time he'll be riding alone. Georges had a friend to meet in Granville so couldn't stay to see his little brother settled on the train, but he says Maurice has such a good head on his shoulders that he's ready to travel on his own like a grown man.

The clock shows just past 8:40, the longer hand stabbing the *V* of the *VIII*. That can't be right. Georges told him the Paris Express would be leaving at 8:45, and why would the guard send Maurice outside the station if it's almost time to go?

*A trick?*

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Maurice pelts back into the station, ducking under elbows, vaulting a terrier's leash and then a spaniel's, almost tripping over a cane, his face brushing bustles and coats. But this steam engine, which the guard assured him was *a splendid beast and fighting fit*, is showing no signs of motion yet, only hissing through her veils of white and grey.

The Breton takes the chewed pipe out from under his furry handlebar. "What did I tell you about the clock outside, youngster?"

"You said it would surprise me." Maurice's forehead is so furrowed, it aches. "But if the time's gone eight forty already . . . does that mean we're going to be late setting off?"

With a shake of his head, the man points his pipestem at another clock, this one hanging over the platform. It shows 8:36—the minute hand barely nudging past the *VIII*. "Time's different inside the station."

Maurice's mouth falls open. When a train takes off, do its crew and passengers somehow stay on this inner time, moving along in an enchanted bubble of five-minutes-behind? That makes no sense, not even for magic. Trains cut through the air so blindingly fast, wouldn't they be, if anything, five minutes *ahead*?

Behind his leathery hand, the guard says: "Stationmaster keeps this clock wound back, doesn't he?"

"Does he?" Maurice's voice a squeak.

"Otherwise half of you would miss the train."

"Half of me?" His eyes bulge. Maurice's left half or his right? Top or bottom half?

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“The dawdlers.” The guard gestures at the throng.

Maurice puzzles over this, tugging the straps of his schoolbag higher up on his shoulders. So the stationmaster puts back the hands of this clock, the one inside the station, with the result that half the passengers will believe they’re boarding on time when in fact they’re dawdlers, and the train’s been waiting patiently for them. “You mean the Express actually runs five minutes late?”

“Every train in France does.”

*What a cheat!* Railways are pure speed, the most modern thing there is. They’re a shortcut to the future, steaming along gleaming metals. So the clocks should all tell true, and the trains should set off on time and leave the dawdlers in the dust.

A gent’s voice: “Over here!”

The guard tips out his embers and pockets his pipe. “Coming, monsieur.”

Maurice remembers to pull out his brown cardboard ticket, printed with *Third-Class Granville–Paris*. “You haven’t clipped this yet.”

He only nods. “Don’t lose that—you’ll need to show it when you get down at Dreux. And don’t let anyone take anything off you.”

What might they try to take—Maurice’s lunch wrapped in waxed paper? His milk bottle stoppered with a clean rag?

The guard grabs a T-shaped handle on the train above him and pulls open a brown door, beckoning.

Maurice hurries over, ready to climb the iron steps. But

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the man seizes the back of his collar and the belt that keeps up Georges's hand-me-down trousers and hoists Maurice into the carriage like a dog. "Dreux—remember."

Affronted, straightening his seams, Maurice nods over the half-flowered pane in the door. How could he forget the name of the station east of Falaise, the name Georges has drilled into him, the place where Papa has business this week, where Papa will be waiting for Maurice in the cart outside the station at 2:16 this afternoon?

He glances over his shoulder but can't spot anywhere to sit. He's embarrassed for all these strangers to see him harbouring designs on their benches; they probably think he's a *dawdler*. So for now Maurice stays at the door as if he prefers standing, eyes fixed on the mud-brown wall covered with words and pictures—*Louriste Razors, Valda Pastilles, The Divine Sarah, Smoke Gauloises, Irisine Beauty Powder, Liebig Meat Extract, St. Raphael Quinine, Rochet Bicycles, Colle-Bloc Glues Everything*—as if he's enclosed in a book, a sturdy volume with the power to carry these people all the way to Paris.

On the platform below, the bookstall's yellow awning reads *Hachette: Banish Monotony and Ennui*. The word *banish* makes Maurice think of villains sent abroad and never allowed to return to France. Georges says if Maurice listens to his elders and reads every spare minute he gets, one day he'll know all the words there are and could even be a schoolteacher. Before his brother hurried out of Granville Station this morning, he bought Maurice a story about an Englishman circumnavigating the globe in eighty days, which sounds

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impossible, but Maurice doesn't think the book would be called *Around the World in Eighty Days* if the hero failed.

His right hand turns over the hoard of shells in his pocket. These few days in Granville were his first encounter with the sea. The rock pools! The wide, blustery beach where big boys were flicking stones at the waves and each other in a game that seemed to get more hilarious the closer they came to shedding blood.

Papa's from the Normandy town of Caen, and Maman's always lived in nearby Falaise; they've buried a baby in each town, which is what she calls *a root that never breaks*. But it strikes Maurice that when he's grown to be a man, he could choose to move away and settle on the coast, where he could smell this salt breeze every day. Is that what a holiday is, a glimpse of another, larger life?

An exotic-looking woman glides along the platform—no, it's a man in a skirt, a limp skirt all the way down to his sandals; Maurice can see the fellow's bare brown toes. An extraordinary tank on the man's back wobbles high above his brimless cap, with . . . could that be steam leaking out of the top? The appliance has its own long wooden leg behind. Is the little man half machine?

A gent in a top hat with a valise puts his hand up, and the foreigner produces a tiny handleless cup and fills it with brown liquid from a tap on his chest. *He's a human coffeepot!* The gent pays and tries to walk away with his drink, but he's brought up short by the thinnest of chains attaching the cup to the tank; that makes Maurice grin. Top Hat has to knock

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back the drink in one go before he hurries off, leaving the wet cup dangling.

Here's the guard again, snatching two cases off a cart as if they weigh no more than pillows . . .



Jean Le Goff settles passengers in carriages with the tolerant air of one who has stepped away from important business to do them a favour; that makes them more inclined to offer him a *pourboire*. Not yet thirty, he keeps the points of his great handlebar waxed, hoping the combination of peaked cap, pipe, and moustache will add a few years. (Jean would quite fancy a goatee but the Company of the West frowns on beards.) Le Goff—or “Ar Goff,” the way they say it in Brittany—means “blacksmith,” and the men in Jean’s family are squarely built; he keeps his shoulders set in a soldierly fashion. He did register with the military at twenty, as required by law, but he’s never been called up, as they don’t need so many soldiers in peacetime. At any rate, it does no harm to give the impression of having served, since every second railwayman is a veteran. Jean lets passengers thank him for his patriotism as they dig deeper in their pockets.

He prefers to keep Rear First vacant at the start of the day in case someone awfully rich needs to board later. So he tries to induce First-Class passengers to bunch up in the front carriage of their two in the middle of the train rather than spread out over both. They’re mostly hard-to-please Parisians, but he supposes their reluctance to share is understandable;

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the whole point of paying top rates is to stretch out in something like a private sitting room—except, of course, that it’s rattling through the countryside on wheels.

Jean opens the green door of Front First and ushers in a gent with a wooden arm and a family of three complete with a yappy cocker spaniel. He seats them on the plump red velvet banquettes and sucks up mightily—stows their hatboxes, bags, muffs, shawls, and canes in the nets overhead; arranges travel rugs over laps as if it were deepest January instead of October; tucks hats by their brims under the taut strings that run along the ceiling for storage . . . shall he pull back the lace-edged curtains and put the blind up? Half up—just so; he adjusts it tenderly by its tassel. Turn up the lamps for reading? No need, no weak eyes among this party. Very good, and yes, the oil does smoke rather.

The spaniel spins and yips. “Animals are really supposed to be kept in their baskets in one of the baggage vans,” Jean mentions.

“Oh, but Ouah-Ouah would be lonely. He’d whine.” The girl’s so wan, she’s almost greenish.

“He promises to be good,” the mother says.

Must be nearly tip time, especially if Jean’s going to turn a blind eye to the dog. He drops a hint about the radiator’s being freshly filled with boiling water.

“Oh, a footwarmer for our daughter too, please.”

*Merde!* Tell First Class what you’ve already done for their comfort, and you prompt them to ask for more.

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“I wouldn’t bother, *ma chère*,” the husband tells the wife, “they’re always stone-cold after an hour.”

A show of brains can shake the money tree, so Jean puts in, “Ah, but we use acetate of soda now, which holds on to the heat longer.”

The gent looks impressed.

Jean jumps down to the platform to grab the girl a footwarmer—but he’s distracted by a dark young lady tugging at the door of Rear First. “Locked, I’m sorry to say, mademoiselle.”

“Could you open it, please?”

She hasn’t reached for her purse, and judging from her plain blue outfit, she’s not a lavish tipper, so Jean lies: “Very likely that one’s being taken off before Paris.”

She sighs, switching her cumbersome case—some kind of sewing machine?—from one hand to the other. A *femme de couleur*, Jean would guess—mixed ancestry—and she’d be quite pretty if she took a little trouble.

He hands her up the steps into Front First, where the one-armed gent is already occupying the tiny mahogany table with a notebook and pen. The family man’s immersed in a copy of this morning’s *Granvillais*, its ink still damp. The four make room for the intruder civilly. But the footwarmer Jean meant to get for the pale young girl! There’s never enough time at stops, and more than once he’s forgotten a passenger’s request and missed his chance to earn a tip. “Just one more minute, mademoiselle.”

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He lopes along the platform to the bubbling cistern. He hooks one of the oval metal footwarmers, grips it with a rag, and canters back to Front First to get . . . fifty centimes in copper from the father. Could be worse. That'll buy bread and cheese and coffee or a condom, depending on what he's in the mood for at the end of his shift in Paris.

Jean pulls out the heavy disc of his watch: no more time. At Christmas all crewmen receive up to a full month's pay for *good work*, which boils down to keeping their train on schedule. He rushes down the train to position himself in Rear Baggage, where the junior guard always rides as if ready for any danger from behind. (Brigands galloping down the track? That makes him grin.) Or in case the convoy wrenched apart in the middle, Jean supposes, so the second half wouldn't be left unmanned. Or, more realistically, so that if they were rammed from the back by a train with a drunk or dozing driver, it would be Rear Baggage that got staved in; injured passengers or bereaved families might sue, but crewmen (like soldiers) accept the risks that come with the job.

Well, these unlikely hypotheticals don't weigh heavy on Jean. At the start of every journey, Rear Baggage is an empty box, his haven from all the demands to come. Soon he'll have his first long smoke lounging in his chair with his feet up on the desk he uses only for that purpose.



At the front of the train, driver Guillaume Pellerin's taken up his position on the iron footplate. A thick drawbar links his

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engine to the tender that holds her coal bunker and water tank. His stoker, Victor Garnier, stands at his left in the same red scarf to the chin and cap over his ears as Guillaume. There's no cab to sit in, not so much as a stool to rest their arses; the Company prefers its rollers on their toes throughout the journey. The Express has a crew of four, including the guards, but only the driver and stoker count as *rollers*—royals among railwaymen.

Victor Garnier's greying bush of a moustache masks his mouth, but Guillaume can always tell if his mate's in good humour, which he is this morning.

Three Third-Class carriages, two Firsts, two Seconds, one baggage van at the back and another at the front, and a post van behind the tender, which means almost a dozen vehicles for Engine 721 to pull; Guillaume's known this great hog to haul seventeen, though he'd never agree to more than twenty. Her train is put together at Granville every second night by a coupler who ducks beneath undercarriages, deft with his shunting pole. (Guillaume's seen a slow mover get his leg carved right off at the knee.) The Granville yardmen have been up half the night swabbing because the least speck can clog a valve but also for pride in the machine. They've greased her, topped up her oil and sand, and used a high dumper to load her tender with the best black-brown coal. Hours ago they raked out her firebox and threw in a paraffin stick to light her up, so she'll have time to warm up. With a hydraulic crane, they've filled the U-shaped water jacket around her bunker with a tankful pumped out of the Boscq. (Victor's very

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fierce about getting only pure river water; any silt of clay or salt could bung up her pipes.)

Guillaume and his stoker have been here since half past six this morning. He's tried the regulator, reverser, air brake, hand brake, and steam whistle to make sure each wheel and handle moves as it should. Down by his feet, the drain cocks and the sanding gear are in good order. He doesn't need to ask whether Victor's checked his boiler controls on the left—the pressure gauge, safety valve, water-level glass, injector wheel, and dampers.

They're both family men. Guillaume spends every second evening with his Françoise and their little boy in their lodgings just off the tracks, a kilometre before Montparnasse Station in Paris, where the rooms shake every time a train goes by. And Victor lives with his Joséphine by Montparnasse Cemetery, ten minutes' walk from Guillaume's. The mates never see each other in the city, as their wives don't get on, but they spend ten days out of every eleven elbow to elbow on the footplate of Engine 721 and every second night in the same boardinghouse in Granville. Even their work clothes have merged over the years; they grab smock shirts, soft jackets, denim trousers, and caps from the one parcel the laundry-woman sends back.

Guillaume wears boots, but Victor prefers clogs so he can stamp out a flaming cinder without setting his soles on fire. He cracks four eggs into a puddle of butter on his shovel to test the fire's heat.

How they crackle! Guillaume's stomach is empty, harsh