

INVENTING PARIS

By Pat Dobie

Chapter One

Alec Ferguson took stock of himself before he entered the customs shed in Dieppe. The green plaid suit had seemed just the thing when he'd put it on yesterday but now, in harsh daylight, he discovered a button missing and stains all down the front. He was disheveled, dry-mouthed, sweating from the heat. Dieppe shimmered in the May sunshine, a busy harbor with its fishing boats and pebble beaches, bathing huts and raucous seagulls. Inside, customs agents lay in wait; his last barrier to getting on the Paris train. He'd made it this far despite starting out drunk and gradually sobering, so that now he felt like a sick shell of himself, a dry husk in a sack of skin enfolded in olive-green tweed. He rolled back his shoulders and stepped inside.

Ferguson swung his valise onto the counter in front of the nearest available customs officer and said, "*Bonjour.*" It was hard to say how old the man was—although he had the downy cheek of a youth, his eyes were hard and flat, full of suspicion.

The agent stared up at him. "Have you anything to declare?" The folds of his nostrils were red and flaking; some kind of skin condition.

"No." Did he? The rules kept changing. He had some gin in his flask.

The man motioned him to open his valise and used the wrong end of his pen to poke through its contents: extra collar and cuffs, socks and a night shirt. There was his sponge bag, his bottle of Rowland's Cerelaeum Elixir, and his photograph of Frances in the souvenir frame gilded '1887.' It was a keepsake from Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee—only two years ago, but a different life. His married life, when he'd been happy.

The agent lifted Ferguson's sponge bag and smelled it. "Any tobacco?"

"I don't smoke." They stared at each other. Dear Heavenly Father, Ferguson thought. If you exist, don't let this scabby Frenchman keep me out of this scabby country. As your will desires, have him not peer into my bag too closely and find forbidden goods. No snuff! No gin!—

"What is this?" The agent held up the Rowland's Elixir.

"It's medicine," Ferguson said. "I get headaches."

The agent uncorked the bottle and smelled it. "What is in it? Any spirits?"

"I don't know." Ferguson heard the antagonistic edge to his voice. The crowd from the boat had thinned to a handful of people. Everyone else was getting sent through to the Paris train after a cursory inspection. He'd been singled out, as usual.

"This is your bag?" The agent pulled Ferguson's satchel toward him.

"Yes." Lying there, the brown leather satchel looked like part of his body, like some internal organ, but instead of blood and gristle it was filled with his tools: chisel point pens, ink, pencils, brushes, a knife, a block of India rubber.

The agent picked up the knife and felt its blade with his thumb. "What is this for?"

"Sharpening pencils. I use it for work."

"What sort of work?"

"I'm a sketch artist," Ferguson said. "For the *Illustrated London News*. They're sending me to Paris to cover the Exposition."

"Let me see your papers."

Ferguson didn't point out that travel documents weren't mandatory these days; he just handed over his passport. This wasn't his first time being harassed at a border.

The agent unfolded it and, after a long squint downward, reared his head back with a belligerent air. "This is unreadable."

"It's the visa stamps," Ferguson said, meeting his eyes. "Look, here's my name." Helpfully, he pointed a smudged and trembling finger at the page.

After long scrutiny the agent folded his passport and put it aside, then held out his hand for the sketchpad. "Let me see that."

Ferguson handed it over. It was open to his sketch of the Paris train, done from shipboard while he waited to disembark. While he watched, the agent flipped to a sketch that showed a row of men sleeping on a bench in the ship's second-class lounge, with the caption: *'Tally Ho!'* It was sloppy work; he'd been drunk when he did it. The page before that showed a woman lying in an alleyway, her dress disturbed, a small purse open beside her.

The agent looked up. "Who is this woman?"

Ferguson had no idea; he didn't remember drawing her. The pain behind his eye sharpened as he tried to concentrate. She looked dead. Surely he hadn't done it—he'd never deliberately hurt another creature in his life, though there were a few he'd wished would die through some greater agency: fall down a sewer grate, for example, or get hit by a runaway omnibus. He fumbled for a story. "A victim of theft, poor thing. I worked the crime report last night."

He hadn't worked the crime report. All he remembered of last night was Cole's big red face up against his, then staggering down a narrow street in the rain. His eyes hurt. He'd kept them open all night. No he hadn't, or he would remember more.

He remembered standing over his little son, William, who lay on his side, arm up and fist curled as if protecting his face; only nine and already fighting in his sleep. He must have gone home to say goodbye, then decided not to wake William. Instead, he'd swayed over the bed, looking at the bare back exposed by the fallen sheet, the narrow white neck, the bony shoulderblades like amputated wings. That must have been early this morning.

Eyeing the customs agent's domed, peevish forehead, Ferguson wished himself torn in half: one portion sent back to London to say a proper goodbye to William, the other placed on the Paris train.

The agent closed the pad. "You are from London." It wasn't a question.

"That's right." Ferguson looked toward the exit. Only two passengers remained in Customs: he and another man farther up the counter, who was packing up the contents of a wooden box.

"And in Paris? Where will you stay?"

"Hotel Luis, Rue d'Astorg. They know me there."

The agent considered him. Ferguson bent his knees and let his shoulders slump, trying to look as small as possible. If they didn't let him in the country, he'd lose the commission—they'd give it to Cole. And if he lost the commission Stephens would never give him another job, nor would anyone else. He'd be finished; he'd missed too many deadlines since Frances died. He'd only gotten this assignment because Wrigley, the publisher, had insisted on sending him. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

The agent began writing in a ledger, recording Ferguson's name, his hotel, and some other notes Ferguson couldn't make out. Finally he handed back the passport.

*"Bienvenue en France."*

Ferguson didn't move. He felt hollow with relief, transparent; as though he might float like a balloon toward the rectangle of light at the far end of the customs shed and drift with his bags through an open window onto the train.

Outside, a whistle blew. He hurriedly gathered up his things. "*Merçi, monsieur.*"

On his way out he glanced at the other man's customs agent, who was attempting to collapse a sheet of paper into its original folds. He glimpsed a complicated diagram of spools and cogs. Then the passenger heaved his box off the counter and stepped back, directly into Ferguson's path.

Ferguson stopped short.

"*Excusez-moi!*" The man smiled at Ferguson. He was tall—six foot four at least—and solid, with a prosperous air. Gray side whiskers swooped down from his cheekbones, ending in a neatly trimmed vertical edge. Inside the whiskers, deep lines bracketed his mouth. The eyes were familiar.

Ferguson paused. In his mind's eye, next to the large man in front of him, he saw the same man twenty years ago, hair and moustache brown, face and neck thinner, less lined. "Why, it's you," he said. "Mr. Duval."

Duval studied him back then smiled again, his eyebrows rising. "Ferguson." For a moment they faced each other, surprise between them like an energy field. Then a whistle blew and the conductor's voice floated through the open door, "*En Voiture!*"

"The train's leaving!" Ferguson started for the door.

"Quickly!" Duval clutched the box to his stomach and they jogged side by side toward the wash of light beyond the exit.

Ferguson's satchel bounced against his thigh; his brain bounced inside his skull. His mouth was parched and he could hear his own rasping breaths. He'd been doing far too much running lately, trying to catch up or get away, and he was in no shape for it.

"I hope there's seats," he said as they emerged onto the platform. Inside the train, heads were at windows, bodies moving about, passengers settling in for the trip. A station worker began to walk alongside, putting away the steps.

"They telegraph ahead with the number of passengers," Duval said, hurrying to the nearest carriage. He tried to lift his box into the open door, then turned to Ferguson. "Would you mind? My shoulder—"

"Not at all." Ferguson took the box, surprised at its weight. "You should put it in the luggage car."

"Absolutely not," Duval said. "I cannot let it out of my sight." He climbed up and Ferguson shoved the box up, then boarded. Just in time—the worker picked up the steps and shoved them inside, then reached up and slammed the door behind them.

Inside the train, Ferguson followed Duval through the carriage, peering into compartments. All men, nearly identical: Oriental, wearing black suits and bowler hats, taking off coats and lifting bags to luggage racks. They might be Japanese. He'd noticed a lot of Japanese in London lately—peering at artifacts at the British Museum, gathering under trees in Hyde Park, crowding platforms in the Underground.

"Christ, it's a tour group," he muttered.

"They were on the ship," Duval said. "Ah. This one." He entered a compartment and, with a sigh of relief, heaved the box onto the seat. He sat, putting a protective arm over the box as the train lurched into motion.

Ferguson clutched the doorframe and looked in. This was good, better than he'd imagined. He'd never traveled first class. It was clean and spacious, the bench seats well-padded and covered with brown tapestry, a wide strip of leather across the top. The compartment was empty except for one piece of luggage, a wardrobe trunk on one of the benches. The trunk looked new, painted a glossy black with shiny brass fittings. A label pasted to its side said '10 rue de Presbourg, Paris,' and some Oriental characters.

"I'll have to leave you here," Ferguson said. "My ticket's for second class."

Duval beamed at him. "Nonsense, Ferguson. Look, it's empty. Sit and talk. It's been how long—twenty years?"

Ferguson hesitated. He'd hoped to sleep all the five hours to Paris but now, thanks to the poxy customs agent, he'd have to tramp the length of the train for a seat, weathering looks from those already established and finally, where he encountered least resistance, lower himself to six inches of bench. This compartment, on the other hand, did look comfortable.

"All right." He sat opposite Duval. Looking down, he realized his shoes were caked with some kind of clay, dried into a flaking white mess. A dark stain crusted his left knee. He scratched at it and stared uneasily at the reddish-brown pigment on his thumbnail, the color of dried blood. His knee didn't feel cut or scraped—he'd have to lower his trousers to be sure, but not here, of course. Not now. He glanced at Duval, then pulled his sketchpad from the satchel and put it across his lap.

They looked out the window as the train moved forward with a slow banging, like a giant plodding along in metal boots. The whistle gave another anguished toot and the station house moved away; the platform ended. The track curved; up ahead a line of wagons and carts waited for the train to pass. A boy in a blue shirt sat up front on a wagon full of barrels, pulled by an ox. The boy waved and Ferguson waved back, picturing himself as a blank face in the window, a large pink hand blurred behind the glass.

Light and shadow revolved on the walls. He sighed, thinking there is no feeling as satisfactory as departing on a train. For a few hours he would be nowhere at all: neither in London nor Paris, neither alive nor dead. For a few hours, at least, he would have nothing new to worry about.