

For Elise:

Unveiling the Forgotten Woman on the Criddle Homestead

Chapter 1

Your Name is Vane

It was early Friday morning, July 14, 1882. Elise's old trunk had been filled with precious possessions, the lid forced down, and its latches fastened. Each family member carried a bag of essentials. Everything else had been given to friends. Elise checked her bag once more: baptismal record, her January '67 Baden passport, her collection of poetry, knitting, envelopes, paper, and two pencils. One, a farewell present, had an eraser on the end. She had a few coins in her pocket and the money from her brothers sewn into the hem of her petticoat.

Elise cast a few last hurried glances at the familiar rooms. Then, with hugs and farewells, especially to Mr. and Mrs. Foulgar, her lodgers, she and her children set forth into the great unknown.

The children had grown up in crowded Southwark. Minnie, almost 14, gave up her education with its prospects for a good future, Isabel, approaching 13, was already missing her friends. Edwy, almost 11, Harry, 9, and Cecil, 7, fancied the adventure. Threats of being locked up in the Clink would no longer scare them. Many things ran through Elise's mind. *No more wretched souls passing the door on their way to the Bedlam Asylum. No more pungent, polluted air from the breweries and leather factories. No more long treks across London Bridge, around the Tower of London to Little Alie Street and the beautiful St. George's German Lutheran Church.*

They walked behind a hired cart from their home on St. George's Rd., past their schools, over the Thames: at long last they crossed over the Euston Road towards their station. The children stared up at the magnificent Euston Arch as, with feet aching, they reached their destination.

Euston Station! They'd never seen such a place! Paper boys cried. Pedlars barked! Tramps begged. People rushed. Locomotives erupted!

Steam blasted. Black clouds billowed. Conductors shouted, “All A-b-o-a-r-d!” Men stepped down from coaches; others clambered aboard. Beggars, mutts, and pigeons poked about, scrounging for breakfast. In the midst of the throngs some were simply perched, unmoving, on their bags.

In all the confusion Elise found the ticket booth and they unloaded the trunk. “We are in time,” she told her children. “Papa will find us here.” She cleared her throat, and added, “He told me to tell you at the station, ‘I want them to call me Mr. Criddle. It’s very important – don’t call me Papa!’”

They looked puzzled, but their mother looked so serious they dared not question her.

“There’s Papa,” Little Cecil pointed to a gentleman in a top hat hurrying toward them.

“Hush!” Minnie clamped her hand over his mouth.

Their papa came rushing up, “You’ve told them I’m Mr. Criddle from now on?”

Elise nodded.

“I will get your tickets – check your trunk. Be sharp. . . . We’re late.”

That accomplished, he led them to his wife waiting impatiently with her children, near the steam-spouting Liverpool train. They hustled up the steps and into the coach. The frazzled lady settled with a sigh beside her husband and, with a bob of her head toward Elise, said, “So this is the foreign woman who is to take the place of my dear little servants, Ellen and Louisa.”

He nodded. When Mrs. Criddle, baby on her knee, caught her breath she leaned across the aisle, “Norman has just turned seven; Evelyn is five and a half; Stuart is four; and this is our little Beatrice. You’ll be seeing to their needs.”

Elise thought about the situation. *Percy had his family’s tickets for America when he came begging. Told me his wife needed help. Clearly she is a lady accustomed to being served. My girls like children; my boys are quick. We’ll manage until we get our own home.*

The train jolted forward. Through London they steamed; eager eyes snatched glimpses of tiny back yards—wash tubs and clothes lines. Beyond London they saw a magical checker-board of England’s green countryside. They peeked into farmyards with chickens and piglets. Above and beyond were sheep-dotted hill-sides.

With everyone settled, Elise could think. Her heart was overflowing with emotion: *another one-way journey.*

The train clattered on and the passing fields blurred into the green hills of her youth. *I loved our family walks in the forest with its clear running streams. I can almost feel the soft spring air. And Percy and I sang Schumann's beautiful songs about rippling brooks. Sometimes we stood in the great square looking up at Heidelberg Castle, its ruins shining silvery in the moonlight. The church at our backs reached towards the stars. Generations of my mother's family lived in its shadow. . . .*

Oh Mama, my dear Mama. When I said good-bye to you, that dreary January day in 1867, I was so happy; you, so sad. You did your best with your small pension . . . sacrificed so I could attend Herr Ekbert's school. I loved my studies: French and English literature, music, painting. Thank you, dear Mama. She felt in her bag again for her precious Poesie book. I'm going even further now, Mama . . . you'll be as out of reach as Papa. She was a girl again, hearing the words, "Your Papa is dead." She stared out the window, blinking away tears. Mama always said, "Our family has weathered storms in the past and will again." I'm so homesick. What am I doing?

Mrs. Criddle broke in, "The servants prepared a basket this morning. It's time for lunch."

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Late that afternoon the train puffed into Liverpool station. Mr. Criddle claimed the baggage and arranged transport for nine children and three adults to the North Western Hotel. With his wife settled, he sent for Elise. "You'll need tickets to get on the ship in the morning."

Does he need me? But she got up wearily and followed him to the Guion Office where he ordered tickets, "Two adults, four children." Elise didn't dare remind him of Isabel's age. *I know under twelve travel half fare, but can she pass as eleven?*

The ticket agent asked no questions as he squinted through the wicket over the buyer's shoulder. "Steerage, is it? That will be twice twenty-nine pounds, plus four children to a total of one hundred sixteen pounds." Adding as he counted, "You know, of course, the fare doesn't include bedding or utensils. Can be got just out, to the right."

They found the place. Mr. Criddle hesitated, "Confounded Jewish slop shop!"

Then Elise watched in astonishment as four beds, a water can, two tin pint cups, canteen, utensils—six knives, six spoons, and six forks

appeared on the counter. *Six of us to share those four thin blankets . . . two cups!*

At the door, a scrawny little porter offered his services for the transfer of Elise's supplies to their lodgings. She smiled; her companion cursed. After considerable haggling, a few coins dropped into the anxious palm. Anxious to dine with his wife, Mr. Criddle left them collecting the supplies.

I understand now, I'm to see that the porter doesn't make off with the goods. My willingness to 'help' Mrs. Criddle has turned me into a servant. No matter that I'm exhausted after a frantic day and night of packing.

Elise learned she and her children were expected at five the next morning to prepare the Criddle family for departure. Forces beyond her control or comprehension had suddenly swept her up into his vision of becoming a wealthy landowner.

Before turning in to sleep that night there was a late night entry in the gentleman's diary.

A most officious little official-looking party in a uniform pressed his help on me most indefatigably. I resisted his advances as well as I could, though E. smiled & grinned at his sundry sallies, much to my rage. . . . much luggage, ill-labeled, on my mind. – lost my voice – to bed at 11 o'clock.

He'd worked every angle to persuade his wife to accept his dream, even disowning his own children. What he did about the 'ill-labelled luggage' would be discovered in the morning.

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Breakfast over, Mr. Criddle arranged the four-mile trip to the Langton Dock. For himself, his wife, and little Beatrice he engaged a cab; the rest travelled with the luggage in an omnibus. And there waiting, spewing smoke from her single stack, towered the S. S. Wisconsin with two masts rigged for sail.

Edwy was busily unloading the trunks when he yelled, "Someone's stolen our trunk! Look!"

His father grabbed him by the collar, "Quiet! Can't you see it's your trunk! That's your name now!" And with another shake he dropped him back to earth.

Shortly afterwards, a gentleman asked Minnie, "What's your name, young lady?"

Friendly and outgoing as usual, she answered with a smile, “Minnie Criddle.”

Her father pounced on her, pointing to the trunk, “Can’t you read? Vane! You’re Minnie Vane.”

It stung like a whip! Minnie had always been the apple of her father’s eye. Suddenly she’d lost both her name and her papa. Her mother whispered, “If we’re going to get on the ship, we’ll have to go along with him.”

Mr. Criddle went on as if nothing had happened, “We’re lucky: not too many years ago this voyage would take months instead of ten days. This ship can do eleven knots using both sail and steam. All the Guion vessels begin and end here. We’ve one stop to pick up some starving Irish at Queenstown (Cork) and then it’s New York.”

He walked away, then came back to say, “Don’t leave the luggage.” He paced about grumbling, “Far too late to be sailing – should have sailed in March – arrive in time to plant a garden. Not surprising the ship isn’t full. What the deuce is the hold up now?”

He was not the only anxious person waiting to board. Elise heard a snippet of conversation— “You let that emigration agent talk you into this? I was happy! What’s to become of us?” Elise also felt sorry for the Scandinavians: *they don’t understand our language and they’ve already been on the way for weeks.*

Eventually their trunks were collected, hoisted up in a great sling and lowered into the ship. By morning’s end people began to board. Mr. and Mrs. Criddle had a private cabin in intermediate class: a common sitting room, freedom to move about the ship and meals served at a set table. By tipping the cooks he did even better, “Excellent supper for wife and children from the galley – Beef steak, hot buttered toast, baked potatoes – good, very.”

Meanwhile, Elise and children, laden with bags and purchases of the previous night, arrived on deck. An arm pointed, a harsh voice ordered, “Steerage, down there.” The light dimmed with each step. At the bottom, they hesitated, adjusting to the darkness. Then, finding their bunks close by, they perched there, clutching their bundles and looked about.

Light filtered down the stairs and ventilation hatches. They were in a long narrow space with two tiers of bunks on either side. A low board

separated individual bunks from each other. They saw no dividing curtains, no chairs, nor hangers, not a cupboard nor a shelf to store their bags.

“It’s bloody awful! What’s the stench? Phew! . . . We’re sleeping with all these?”

Minnie found her voice. “Must be a mistake. Steerage is for poor immigrants.”

“Papa will put it straight when he finds out,” Isabel said assuredly.

Their mother didn’t have the heart to explain. *We’re not here for lack of money. British people send their servants steerage. It keeps them in their place.*

Elise looked about for a private space. There was none. So with Cecil on her knee, she gathered her children and began, “It’s been hectic . . . when your papa cleaned up his office last spring he told me he was done with business. Wouldn’t need the drawing room anymore. . . . Wouldn’t be paying the rent for our flat. I didn’t want to upset you. I’m sorry, I should have told you. He said he was leaving for Canada, going to take up land. I thought he’d gone. But he came; wanted me to go too. Said, “I have a wife and four little children. Mrs. Criddle needs someone to help her.” I was shocked and told him, no. We are managing . . . you girls have an education and can find a position. Edwy can apprentice. I tried to resist, but he wouldn’t give up. he promised you boys farms of your own. And you, Minnie and Isabel, can marry rich young farmers. Doesn’t that sound like your papa? . . . He made it sound so fine. . . . I didn’t know what to say. You were all at school. I wanted time to think it over. . . .

“But your papa said, “The ship is leaving in two days. It’s now or never. He wouldn’t wait, not even a half hour for you to come home.” I broke down. “Alright, I’ll do it for the children.”

“I want to tell you something else. . . .” She hesitated, “You thought I was Mrs. Criddle. . . . But your papa married the Mrs. Criddle we met yesterday. I’ve agreed to help her . . . for your future. He doesn’t want anybody to know he is your father, so you must remember **not** to call him ‘Papa’ . . . and you must always **obey**.”

A wall separated the new Vanes from their father. Their mother was now Mrs. Vane, domestic servant.

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