

‘You can’t help liking this guy, somehow’



Mr. and Mrs. Crippen

By R. Marc Kantrowitz
Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly
September 22, 2023

Like so many murders and trials of the century, as the years grow longer, the memories grow dimmer — until they disappear altogether. And the spectacular case of Dr. Crippen is no exception. Its unexpected legacy, however, is one that permanently reshaped the world.

Everyone who knew the short and slightly built Hawley Harvey Crippen liked him. Except his shrewish wife, Kunigunde Mackamotzki, who forsook the name in favor of the far simpler Cora Turner, believing it more tolerable for an aspiring opera diva who lacked the talent but carried the attitude.

Born in Michigan in 1862 to an affluent family, Crippen studied medicine in Michigan and London, where he progressively and kindly treated the mentally ill.

In 1887, while working in New York City, he married Charlotte Jane Bell, a nurse who arrived from Ireland. Wishing to abandon the cold, they relocated to San Diego. His parents soon followed, landing in Los Angeles.

Soon a son, Otto, was born, and the young family again relocated, this time to Salt Lake City, where Charlotte again found herself pregnant. Deep into the pregnancy, Charlotte tragically fell ill and died.

A distraught Crippen buried his wife, sent Otto to Los Angeles, and moved back to New York City, where he joined the medical practice of Dr. Jeffrey. It was there that he met Cora Turner, a patient seeking help for a “female” problem.

An attractive and voluptuous woman, 17-year-old Cora seemed more mature and worldly than the 30-year-old widower. Like two magnets, the two quickly gravitated to one another. Despite being unattractive, walking like a duck, and wearing thick glasses that hid bulging eyes, Crippen projected a certain warmth, dressed well, and carried himself in an agreeable manner.

Meanwhile, Cora lived alone in an apartment paid for by a married stove maker, who also provided her with food, clothing and opera lessons. Perhaps she saw Crippen as a step up, while Crippen was drawn to her youth and vitality. They married on Sept. 1, 1892.

Given Crippen’s nomadic inclinations, they moved to quiet St. Louis briefly before returning to New York, an area more conducive to their lifestyle and Cora’s opera dreams.

Once there though, Cora’s “female” problem worsened, resulting in the removal of her ovaries and a permanent, nasty-looking scar. Unable to bear children, coupled with the Panic of 1893, the Crippens found themselves financially and emotionally strained.

Crippen managed the adversity better than his young wife, who felt robbed of operatic fame and fortune. She quickly turned her frustrations and outbursts on her meek husband, who later, in an understatement, observed: “She was always rather hasty in her temper.”

Crippen soon found employment as a distributor of Professor Munyon’s marvelous and magical elixirs that promised to cure any and all ailments. Munyon

found Crippen “as docile as a kitten” in contrast to Cora, “a giddy woman who worried her husband a great deal,” given her flirtatious nature.

As Munyon’s marvels grew in popularity, Crippen was called upon to relocate, to Philadelphia, Toronto and finally London.

Meanwhile, Cora carped at being away from her opera teachers and insisted that she live alone in New York to pursue her dreams.

Crippen reluctantly agreed, paid her bills, and took all his belongings to England, where he certainly read about, if not met, Guglielmo Marconi, who was working on a new-fangled wireless telegraph and meeting much resistance to his efforts.

The public, and indeed some of the leading scientists of the day, could not envision the value of such a contraption, even if it worked — which many did not think it would.

As Cora’s dreams slowly withered due to a lack of talent, she turned to vaudeville, where she also found little success. Perhaps London would be more welcoming? She moved there, accompanied by her burgeoning temper. She complained bitterly and told Crippen of all the men who approached her on the journey.

Returning to the stage with her husband’s continuing financial support, she appeared as Belle Elmore and again failed in grand fashion, with one critic dubbing her “the Brooklyn Matzos Ball.”

Called back to America on business, Crippen left for a few months. When he returned, he learned that Cora filled his void with Bruce Miller, with whom she cavorted.

Despite the unsettled nature of their marriage, the two appeared to reach a détente, agreeing to act agreeably in public as Cora berated him privately and associated with whomever she wished, including Miller.

In 1901, Crippen left Munsey and found employment with the lofty sounding Drouet Institute for the Deaf, which in fact was also a peddler of magic potions. He met a young secretary named Ethel LeNeve, slender and at 5-foot-5 an inch taller than her boss.

Soon they were talking and sharing tea but not secrets. Ethel was unaware of his marriage and only discovered it when a friend of Crippen casually mentioned it.

Later, Ethel quietly asked if it were true, to which Crippen replied: "It would take the lawyers all their time to find out."

As the two lonely souls came closer, Ethel knew little of Cora until she saw a larger-than-life flamboyantly dressed bleached blond adorned with gaudy jewelry storm out of Crippen's office, slamming the door on her way out. How, Ethel thought, could her kind and soft-spoken boss be married to one so extravagant and over the top?

In 1904, Miller left and Cora grew even angrier, despite Crippen continuing to support her lavish expenditures. By then, Ethel and Crippen were in a relationship. Three years later, he rented an apartment for their trysts.

In early 1910, Cora disappeared. Crippen told their acquaintances that she had gone to America, which did not surprise Ethel given Cora's constant threats to leave the marriage for greener pastures. Crippen soon added to the tale, indicating that Cora had sadly died and been cremated in California.

No one was particularly suspicious until Ethel moved into Crippen's house and openly carried on with him while wearing some of Cora's beloved jewelry and outfits. Asked by a friend of Cora's to investigate, the police searched the marital home and found nothing.

They questioned Crippen, who explained that to avoid personal embarrassment, he lied about Cora dying. She had fled to America to be with Miller. The police were satisfied; Crippen was not.

In a panic, he fled, dressing Ethel as his young son and boarding a ship bound for America. The police returned to the home and conducted another search. They dug around in the basement and discovered a headless, limbless and boneless glob of flesh. With little to go on, they were unable to discern even the sex. However, there was a unique scar on a piece of the skin and a small bit of pajama fabric that traced back to Crippen.

With posters flashed across the world, thousands of tips flowed in. One finally bore fruit when Capt. Henry Kendall of the SS Montrose recognized the pair. Using his recently installed Marconi wireless, he alerted the authorities: “Have strong suspicions that Crippen London cellar murderer and accomplice are among saloon passengers. Mustache taken off growing beard. Accomplice dressed as boy. Manner and build undoubtedly a girl.”

Chief Inspector Walter Dew of Scotland Yard jumped aboard the faster SS Laurentic and raced across the Atlantic Ocean. Wireless communications ricocheted around the world, which breathlessly followed the saga. Only Crippen and Ethel and those on the ship were unaware of the drama unfolding around them.

Epilogue

Scotland Yard’s Dew arrested Crippen, observing that “[y]ou can’t help liking this guy, somehow.” Crippen was tried, convicted in 27 minutes, and hanged despite some questioning his guilt. Ethel was acquitted.

And the world now fully accepted Marconi’s invention.