

SYNOPSIS

The Strange Affair of Dr. Crippen

“The Strange Affair of Dr. Crippen” tells the unbelievable—but true—story of Dr. Peter Crippen, a quiet American doctor and his ostentatious, adulterous wife Cora, an aspiring music hall performer, who move to London in 1908 to start a new life. Soon, the forlorn Crippen enters into a passionate love affair with his secretary, Ethel Le Neve, and both become murder suspects when Cora mysteriously vanishes. After Cora’s remains are found buried in the cellar of the Crippen house, Ethel and Dr. Crippen flee London by ship for Canada, and a spectacular transatlantic chase ensues. They are pursued by Scotland Yard, apprehended, and brought back to London to face trial. The result is a media circus unlike anything London had ever seen at the time.

ACT ONE

London passerbys point and whisper about 39 Hilldrop Crescent, the mysterious, “haunted” house on the hill where Dr. Crippen is said to have murdered his wife, so many years ago (PROLOGUE-1940s). 39 Hilldrop Crescent is magically restored to its former state of beauty as we flashback to 1910 and see Dr. Peter Crippen and his flamboyant wife, Cora, arriving in London to begin their new life (FINALLY FOUND A HOME). Just before her London debut, Cora declares that from henceforth she wants only to be called by her stage name, “Belle Amore” (CALL ME BELLA). Crippen is shocked by the change in Cora (SOLILOQUY).

Belle Amore’s Music Hall debut (THE FLOWER SONG) scandalizes the elite members of London Society, who can’t seem to get enough of her deliciously *awful* act (SOCIETY GOSSIP). In an extended musical sequence, we witness Belle’s ascent to fame (but for all the wrong reasons) as she indulges her expensive tastes in men, alcohol, and jewelry. Crippen watches from the sidelines, sad and obedient.

In order to pay for Belle’s excessive lifestyle, Crippen goes to work at Munyon’s Pharmacy, posing as a doctor and selling elixirs and potions (DAY AFTER DAY—OFFICE SEQUENCE). It is here, while interviewing typists, that Dr. Crippen meets Ethel Le Neve—a kind, quiet girl who treats him like a real human being. The attraction is mutual. As the days turn into months, Ethel and Crippen grow more and more enamored with each other, but are too afraid to act on their feelings (I’VE ONLY A MOMENT/HE GOES BACK TO HER).

Over scones and clotted cream the Society Ladies of the Musical Hall Guild, presided over by the high-strung Regina Bumble, tittle-tattle about the goings-on at 39 Hilldrop Crescent. It would seem that because of financial woes, the Crippen’s have been forced to rent out their rooms to boarders, and the insatiable Belle has taken to bedding every one of them (GOSSIP—Reprise). Belle chronicles the idiosyncrasies of her various lovers and erotic exploits, while Crippen seethes with a silent contempt (MEN/A MAN MUST LEARN).

Crippen turns to Ethel for support, and both find comfort in each other’s arms. They begin a secret affair (SOMETIMES).

Meanwhile, at a seedy pub, we meet Inspector Dew, a down-on-his-luck Scotland Yard detective who drowns his disappointments in booze. 20 years ago, Jack the Ripper slipped through his fingers and Dew is compelled to entertain the tipsy crowd with his failed exploits (WHO IS THIS MAN?).

Crippen and Ethel spend every afternoon consummating their love in a nearby hotel room (SANCTUARY ROOM) but hurry back to the office in the evenings so that Crippen can rejoin Belle for the theatre. This endless, taxing cycle reaches its boiling point when Ethel reveals that she is pregnant. When Belle arrives, a confrontation ensues (CONFRONTATION). Later that evening, Ethel miscarries. At the hospital, Crippen vows that he will do anything for Ethel—no matter what the consequences (I DREAMED THE OCEAN).

That night at the theatre, Belle performs a slanderous music hall act that portrays Ethel as a whore (POOR YOUNG THING). Livid, Dr. Crippen can no longer bear the weight of his miserable existence. He vows to end Belle's life (RED MOON RISING).

ACT TWO

Two weeks later, at the Annual Music Hall Gala: Dr. Crippen arrives with Ethel on his arm. She is swathed in a fur coat, and bedecked in Belle Amore's old jewelry. The couple causes an outrage amongst the Partygoers who wonder what could have happened to Belle (THE GALA).

Worried (and delighted to be part of the unfolding drama) Regina Bumble, from the Music Hall Guild, travels to Scotland Yard to file an official report with Inspector Dew. Dew sees this as his final opportunity to avenge his failure for letting Jack the Ripper get away. Accompanied by his assistant, Mitchell, Dew travels to 39 Hilldrop Crescent to investigate Belle's disappearance. This sets in motion a chain of events that culminate in Dr. Crippen and Ethel (disguised as a boy) fleeing to Canada aboard the SS Montrose. Arriving too late, Dew and Mitchell uncover Belle's mutilated remains in the cellar. Soon, all of London is abuzz with the news about "the meek Doctor who brutally murdered his wife." Inspector Dew vows to travel the world over until the fugitives are reprimanded and brought to justice (THE ESCAPE).

Later that night, in the middle of the Atlantic, Crippen is plagued by nightmares where he is visited by Belle's ghost (NIGHTMARE). Ethel soothes him back to sleep, and vows to stay by his side no matter what (WE MADE IT THIS FAR).

Back in London, the British press has a feeding frenzy over several inaccurate reports and "False Crippen Sightings." Aboard the SS Montrose, Captain Kendall notices strange "affectionate" behavior between two male passengers, and begins to suspect that "Man" and "Son" might be Dr. Crippen and Ethel. After successfully comparing the suspects to newspaper photographs, he radios his suspicions back to Scotland Yard via Marconi telegraph. Inspector Dew agrees to dispatch a faster vessel that will intercept the Montrose before it reaches Canada (THE TELEGRAPH SEQUENCE).

Eleven days later Inspector Dew, who has traveled across the world to catch his prisoner, takes the unsuspecting Dr. Crippen and accomplice into custody (THE CAPTURE). Aside, Dew is

surprised to find that Dr. Crippen is polite, quiet, and kind—not at all the monster he imagined. As a result, Dew honors Crippen’s request to see Ethel one last time before they arrive in London. Across the empty hallway that separates the respective staterooms to which they have been confined, Ethel and Crippen share one final moment (LOVING YOU.)

Upon arriving in London, Dr. Crippen is found guilty and sentenced to death (THE SENTENCING). Dew, surprised by his feelings of guilt when he learns of Crippen’s fate, wonders if justice has truly been served (THE COST). Awaiting his execution, Dr. Crippen and Ethel exchange several love letters (I DREAMED THE OCEAN—Reprise). On November 19, 1910, Dr. Crippen is hanged. Devastated, Ethel clutches his final letter to her heart and wonders how it all went wrong (HOW DID OUR LOVE LEAD TO THIS?).

The house transforms back to the boarded up and abandoned state it was in at the beginning. We are once again in 1940s London. A group of passerbys point and whisper at 39 Hilldrop Crescent. Ethel is now an old woman, watching the house from a safe distance, remembering... (EPILOGUE).