

The First Wife

01 D. J. McGuire, before his attention was drawn to a residency position
02 at the newly founded Deaconess Hospital in New York.¹⁷

03 As a hospital intern, Crippen's routine would have been gruelling.
04 Young doctors were usually assigned to what was called 'ambulance
05 service', or the emergency ward. He, like the nurses, would have
06 been on call, living on site and dealing with a range of urgent cases;
07 fevers, infections, injuries and attempted suicides. In the middle of
08 the night, when patients in the wards began to sink, an intern was
09 always the first doctor to be summoned. He would be shaken from
10 his bed and appear 'in a dressing gown over his pyjamas, with rum-
11 pled hair and heavy eyes'.¹⁸

12 Dr Crippen and Nurse Bell would have been frequently thrown
13 together, though the Deaconess, like most hospitals, would have
14 attempted to keep male and female staff isolated during their leisure
15 time, with facilities like gender-separate sitting rooms and libraries.
16 Hospital matrons were known to complain that many nurses seemed
17 'to regard the hospital as a matrimonial agency where flirting with
18 young doctors is the first consideration and nursing a secondary
19 matter.'¹⁹ It is difficult to imagine any other scenario while society
20 insisted that marriage for a woman was always preferable to a career.
21 Nevertheless, relationships between male and female staff members –
22 which in some hospitals included women doctors as well as
23 nurses – while discouraged, were grudgingly accepted as a natural
24 occurrence.²⁰

25 The early story of Hawley Crippen and Charlotte Bell's romance
26 does not seem to have been recorded by family members. What
27 drew them to one other will probably never be known. A photo of
28 Hawley Crippen taken in Vermont in the early 1880s shows a thin
29 young man with a full head of neatly combed strawberry-blond hair,
30 his trademark moustache already in place and drooping over the cor-
31 ners of his wide mouth.²¹ One day, his large blue eyes would be
32 covered with heavy, magnifying spectacles, but at this early stage he
33 seemed capable of sight without them. People would later describe
34S Dr Crippen as charming, gentle, kind and always eager to be of assis-
35N tance, especially to ladies. He was also intensely, unstopably driven,

The Crippens

focused and calculating, and perhaps it was a combination of these characteristics which Charlotte believed would make for a good husband. Although almost nothing is known about her personality, Nurse Bell, who had endured the loss of her father and sister, who had learned to earn her own income and had trained for not one but two careers while still in her twenties, who had left behind the country of her birth for the dangers and promises of a new land, and who had daily balanced life and death in her hands, would have been a woman of remarkable resolve and considerable mental and physical strength. She was also four years his senior and would have just turned twenty-nine at the time they had met. Perhaps she reminded Hawley Crippen of his mother, the only determined and stable influence in his life.

Charlotte and Hawley were married on 13 December in the year that they met, 1887. Crippen had returned to Detroit prior to their wedding, and his fiancée had resigned her nursing position and joined him there. The groom had arranged for the union to take place at the home of Dr Porter, who, in the absence of his own father, appears to have assumed that role in his life. The choice of venue may have served another purpose for Crippen too; several years earlier he had proposed marriage to Mrs Porter's niece, who had disdainfully rebuffed him.²² Such performative and symbolic gestures would hold great significance to the doctor for much of his life. Being seen, recognized and admired for his success drove his ambition. He made certain to announce his marriage to 'Miss Charlotte J. Bell of Dublin, Ireland', in a number of medical journals in which he described his bride as 'the niece of the late Dr John Butler', a celebrated homeopathist, a pioneer of electrotherapy and the developer of 'the vibrator'.²³ It appeared to be an auspicious match for the homeopathic community, though whether it augured as well for the couple personally is questionable. There is nothing to suggest that either of their families were present at the wedding. Dr Porter and his wife Isabel acted as the witnesses, and years later, Charlotte's brother William would admit that he never learned where or when his sister had married.

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01 Along with the announcement of their marriage, the newly
02 wedded Dr and Mrs Crippen made it known that they intended to
03 start their life together out west, in San Diego, California. The couple
04 departed the day after their wedding and travelled across the Mid-
05 west to Texas, where, in mid-December, Hawley stopped to collect
06 mistletoe (also used in homeopathic preparations) from alongside
07 the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad.²⁴ By the 20th, they had
08 arrived amid the dry, green and beige hills of Los Angeles, where
09 they were welcomed by a local newspaper as a party of 189 passen-
10 gers from the east 'who have declared their intention to locate in this
11 state'.²⁵ For the Crippens, this journey was undertaken not only to
12 commence an adventurous new chapter in their lives, but also to
13 enjoy a luxurious honeymoon, appropriate to the aspirations of a
14 young medic and his refined wife.

15 A few days before Christmas, Hawley Crippen inscribed their
16 names into the ledger of the Hotel Josephine on Coronado Island, in
17 San Diego Bay.²⁶ Described as 'a first-class family hotel', the Josephine
18 was a dazzlingly elegant beach resort with a veranda and private bal-
19 conies, as well as viewing towers where guests might watch the
20 ferries and pleasure boats glide across the calm water.²⁷ As they
21 strolled along the shore of the glittering Pacific, the Crippens must
22 have felt liberated from whatever challenges they may have faced in
23 New York. Here, in the warm December sun, was hope, promise
24 and a respite from the cold – if only for a while.

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