

End of the Crippen story?

C.T. Feb. 14, 1964

THE trial of Dr. Crippen was the great criminal sensation of 1910. It lasted a week. On the 22nd October in that year he was found guilty of the murder of his wife and sentenced to death. Three days later Miss Ethel le Neve was charged with being an accessory to the murder after the fact.

In the Christchurch Times last week we asked, on behalf of a reader, for confirmation of a statement that Ethel le Neve had lived in Christchurch. By 5.30 p.m. on Friday we received a telephone call from Coun. Mrs. Stevenson saying she had been told a body she had removed from a cafe in Christchurch when she was an ambulance driver in the early part of the war was that of Miss le Neve.

But for Dr. Crippen's senseless flight from England (with Miss le Neve disguised as "his son"), the mystery of the disappearance of Cora Turner (Crippen's second wife) might never have been solved.

THE MURDER

At the beginning of February 1910 Crippen had suddenly announced his wife had gone to America where, he stated shortly afterwards, she died. Between February and July le Neve's association with the doctor became open. The suspicions of Mrs. Crippen's friends grew and they communicated with the police. On 8th July Crippen's offices were visited and his house searched. Nothing was revealed. Returning to the office three days later to make a trifling inquiry, Police Inspector Drew found the bird had flown. After two further days of intensive searching, the remains of Mrs. Crippen were discovered buried under the floor of the cellar.

The story of how Crippen and Miss le Neve sailed (20th July) on the S.S. "Montrose" for Quebec is well remembered. How the Captain became suspicious of the unusual attention one of his passengers, by the name of "Robinson", was paying to "his son"! The Captain had read of the missing couple in the newspapers before leaving Antwerp. He communicated by wireless; police caught a faster boat from England and were waiting to meet "the Robinsons". They were arrested, brought back and committed for trial.

MISS LE NEVE

Ethel le Neve came from the lower middle class. She was a gentle, affectionate girl, not unattractive, though anaemic and a sufferer from neuralgia. She was a typist with a firm of patent medicine vendors in London working for Dr. Crippen who had qualified in medicine in the States. By 1907 or '08 she had become his mistress whilst still his clerk. Throughout Crippen's trial, and her own, she denied all knowledge of the crime. The jury acquitted her.

At shortly after 5 o'clock last Friday afternoon Mr. Egbert Stevenson was at home (in Lymington Road, Highcliffe) reading his Christchurch Times. Suddenly he called out: "Didn't you once have something to do with Ethel le Neve".

"Yes; why?" replied his wife.

Mr. Stevenson read out the bit about Mr. Gollan's inquiry. Coun. Mrs. Stevenson rang the Christchurch Times - to relate what may possibly be the end of the Crippen story.

THE AMBULANCE DRIVER

"I joined the Red Cross in 1938" Mrs. Stevenson began. "Soon after the outbreak of war I was allocated to the Military Wing of Christchurch. After a year I was transferred as ambulance driver. I thought the work would merely be accompanying patients as a nurse.

"Before I knew where I was, I was a driver---and a mortuary assistant --- on duty 24 hours a day. One day I was sent to a cafe which I knew very well. I had often been in for the odd "cuppa" and I knew the lady who ran it.

"When I arrived with the police we had difficulty in opening the door because a body was wedged behind it. But eventually we succeeded in dislodging it and back we went to the mortuary.

"While I was at work", continued Mrs. Stevenson, "the police who were accompanying me said 'Do you know, you're working on a very famous body?' I was very tired at the time and I answered I couldn't care less how famous it is. This is a filthy job and I hate it'!

"Eventually", reported Mrs. Stevenson, "the police told me it was Ethel le Neve".

NO JOB FOR A WOMAN"

But there is a postscript to it. Mrs. Stevenson related the facts to the Christchurch Times because of an inquiry by Squadron Leader Gollan. This gentleman may well recall a dreadful accident at Hurn Airfield in 1942 when a taxi-ing aeroplane ran into a tractor being driven by a young man of 20 who was caught by the propeller.

When the ambulance arrived its driver was told: "This is no job for a woman!"

S/Ldr. Gollan may remember her reply: "If you don't have a woman to do it, you won't have anybody! I'm the only person around here for this sort of thing!"

Mrs. Stevenson it was who had that conversation at Hurn — and who claims to have seen the last of Ethel le Neve.

In the course of her long service with the British Red Cross Society she has attended 2,000 cases (all but one!). "Many of which", she told the Christchurch Times, "would make your hair stand on end!"

Note: Ex-Police Inspector W. P. Thomas, who was in charge of Christchurch Police Station during the war, told the Christchurch Times there was no confirmation at the time that the woman who died in Christchurch was, in fact, Miss le Neve. "At the Coroner's inquest on a Miss de Vere", he added, "no such statement was made---so we shall never know.