

CRIPPENS' CURSE

By David Chamberlain

Captain Kendall had discreetly studied the odd couple who had boarded the Canadian Pacific Liner Montrose. On the passenger list their names were Mr. Robinson and son; but Mr. Robinsons' boy looked and acted just too effeminate. Before his ship had steamed far into the Atlantic he requested the Marconi wireless operator to send that famous Morse message to Liverpool. It stated that he had a strong suspicion that the suspected murderer, Crippen, was aboard his ship.

Shortly after the message was received, Chief Inspector Walter Dew boarded a much faster vessel, the White Star liner Laurentic. He arrived at Quebec before the other ship and made contact with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As the Montrose entered the St. Lawrence River, the policeman, who had disguised himself as a pilot, arrested Dr. Crippen and his mistress, Ethel Le Neve. Captain Kendall stood closely by with his pistol, as it was believed that Crippen was armed. As the doctor was led off the ship he turned and cursed Kendall for his initiative. Within ten months of murdering his wife, Hawley Harvey Crippen was himself hanged at Pentonville prison on a cold November morning in 1910.

The 5,440 ton Montrose had been built in 1897, but at the approach of the Great War she was being superseded by the modern and faster ships that were plying the Atlantic route. It was for that reason the company put her up for sale.

As hostilities were declared, the German U-boats caused havoc amongst the Allied shipping. With their successes they became more daring by approaching still closer to the British shorelines. The Admiralty at Dover realised that their harbour, full of warships, would be a target. Their solution was that two strategically sunk block ships, at each entrance,

would deflect a torpedo, but not hamper the comings and goings of the fleet. The 444 feet long Montrose was purchased by the Ministry of War Transport and moored against the Admiralty Pier in Dover Harbour. As she underwent alterations her superstructure was ripped away and many tons of ballast was poured into her empty holds. They erected a line of pylons along the deck to secure the anti-torpedo nets. As she lay alongside the pier, hardly recognizable from her former glory, superstitious sailors and dockworkers deemed her as an unlucky ship. It was even said that if she was to be used, the war would go badly for the British.

Three days after the Christmas of 1914, a great storm swept up the Channel. Along with rain, the south-west wind reached 77 miles per hour and made the sea conditions evil. The South Goodwin lightship was the first casualty of this gale and her anchor started to drag as the weather worsened. Her rockets of distress were seen and North Deal lifeboat was made ready to launch. With the help of the haul off rope, and four men almost up to their armpits in water holding the greenheart skids, Coxswain Adams successfully pulled the lifeboat through the surf.

That night, as the storm raged on, the high spring tide filled Dover Harbour. The Montrose snatched at her ropes and eventually broke away from her moorings. With the haven full of warships she miraculously drifted past all of them without doing any damage. In a shower of sparks she grazed against the Breakwater and carried on out of the Eastern entrance; hotly pursued by the Admiralty tug, Char.

Conditions outside the harbour were horrific, but the gallant little tug managed to get alongside and two officers and two ratings scrambled onboard the lifeless hulk. A tow rope was connected but with the strength of the wind and tide the Montrose did not respond to the tug's efforts. As the Char's engine roared at full throttle, the inevitable happened, the hawser broke and the derelict drifted out of sight towards the dreaded Goodwins.

Meanwhile the lifeboat had been unsuccessful in getting to the South Goodwin lightship, which had been driven past the Sands and into a minefield. Coxswain Adams felt it was prudent to anchor and await a moderation in the gale. The crew managed to squat down under the lee of the gunwales and away from the cold spray breaking over the bows of the Charles Dibden. Their uneasy rest was soon to be disturbed. They watched in disbelief as the dark shape of the Montrose surged past them and bumped across the Goodwins. In the raging seas she went aground on the falling tide. Will Adams and his crew struggled to haul in their anchor and with only a corner of the lifeboat's mizzen sail showing they made for the wreck.

By the light of the full moon the black hull of the liner could be seen through the surf. Owing to the shallow water and with wires and nets hanging from the Montrose's sides the lifeboat approached with caution. The four men on board watched with apprehension as the Charles Dibden edged closer in the turmoil. As her anchor was let go, up-wind and tide, the lifeboat was veered towards the wreck. Two men on the wreck jumped as the small vessel scraped alongside the hulk. They managed to catch hold of the shrouds on the lifeboat's mast and were helped into the rolling boat. As the manoeuvre had been difficult and dangerous a rope was thrown to the remaining two seamen who, in turn, tied it to their waists and jumped into the surf. Speedily they were pulled towards the safety of their rescuers and when aboard they poured out their relief and thanks to the coxswain Adams.

One of the wreck's survivors stated that it was the second time he had been saved from a shipwreck and expected not to be so lucky the third time. His premonition was to be realised quicker than he thought. Less than three weeks later their tug, Char, would be in a collision four miles from the wreck, and every one of them would perish. It was also a strange coincidence that the last man who jumped from the ill-fated Montrose's deck on that stormy night - was named Crippen.