

IRMA OF THE ILSA

by Rick Lai

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She is best described as handsome rather than beautiful. The only facial blemish of this tall sleek black-eyed brunette is a high-bridged (Roman) nose. Under different names in the novels of Walter Gibson, she crossed the path of *The Shadow*.

The above physical description fits Nina Valencia of *Washington Crime* (April 1, 1937). Prior to her arrival in the capitol of the United States, she was a spy for Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Due to her recent engagement to a senator's nephew, Nina was able to move unsuspected in Washington. She had no intention of going through with the marriage. The betrothal was merely an excuse for her presence in America.

An unscrupulous ex-major of the U. S. army, Frederick Bryland, had stolen the National Emergency Code, the major cipher for all branches of the military. Hoping to purchase the code, Hugo Creelon, the ace of international spies, hired Nina to act as go-between in the negotiations with Bryland. Besides the fee of twenty thousand dollars, Nina accepted Creelon's offer of employment for another reason: "She knew that the master-spy, superbly entrenched, could end her own game by a mere snap of his fingers."

The Shadow surprised Nina and Bryland as they were about to kill Martha Leeth, a congressman's daughter. In the ensuing struggle, Nina's gun ended up in Martha's hands. The deadly damsel ran into the night as Martha purposely fired high shots to ensure Nina's flight. The seeds of suspicion were eventually sowed between Creelon and Bryland by *The Shadow*, and the treacherous duo perished in a blazing gunfight. Although Creelon's henchmen were eventually apprehended by the authorities, no mention of Nina is made after her retreat in the face of Martha's gunfire.

Nina's face expressed a "haughtiness that seemed part of her make-up." This statement implies that Nina's "definitely Spanish appearance" may be a disguise. Her remark to Creelon that "Spain is supposed to be my native country" adds support to the doubt about Nina's true nationality. Her olive skin indicates a Spanish background, but she could have dyed her complexion. *The Shadow* did so to pose as the olive-skinned Count of Saturnia in the same novel.

Velma Thane from *The Spy Ring* (April 1, 1940) is virtually a dead ringer for Nina. The only significant difference is that Velma's skin displayed "only the slightest touch of olive hue." There are mysteries surrounding Velma's origins. It is not clear whether she was an American or a European. She spoke with a foreign accent, but it may have been an affectation. The former Nina could have lessened the application of the dye, and made other adjustments to transform herself into Velma. The facial similarities between Nina and Velma strengthen rather than weaken the argument that they are the same woman in disguise. Take the case of *The Shadow*. His true identity of Kent Allard was hawk-faced, a characteristic reflected in his impersonation of Lamont Cranston.

Velma played a pivotal role in the conflict between *The Shadow* and the Ilsa, a worldwide espionage apparatus that sold secrets to the highest bidder. The only communication between Velma and the other Ilsa members were phonographs that she purchased in a music shop. When *The Shadow* began to disrupt the Ilsa's scheme to purloin American military secrets, Velma was contacted to determine whether the cloaked investigator was Cranston. In order to confuse Velma, *The Shadow* summoned

the genuine Cranston who fell hopelessly in love with her. Lamont's romance was interrupted when the Shadow decided to prevent Velma from causing further mischief. He left Velma in her apartment guarded by his agent Myra Reldon and Wynne Marriott, a nightclub entertainer who had been inadvertently drawn into the affair. The Shadow had gathered no evidence implicating Velma in the activities of the Ilsa, and she thought there was nothing to fear. According to Walter Gibson, The Shadow knew Velma's true role would be revealed in the final roundup.

Yet, The Shadow subsequently liquidated B-18, the only member of the Ilsa who could implicate Velma. It was stressed that The Shadow wanted to force Velma into testifying against her colleagues. The only way that he could have done so was by revealing knowledge of other crimes by Velma. These previous felonies could have included her earlier actions as Nina Valencia and someone even more sinister.

There are questions about the actual hierarchy of the Ilsa. Hero Dronz was supposed to be the ringleader of the New York cell, and B-18 his agent. In the conclusion, it was revealed that B-18 really gave orders to Dronz. Vic Marquette of the FBI believed that New York was the headquarters of the Ilsa, but he wasn't sure. If Marquette was wrong, then The Shadow severed a tentacle without slaying the octopus.

A clue to the real leader of the Ilsa lies in its name. One rumor was that Ilsa was an acronym for the International League of Secret Agents, but another identified it as a person's name. As every fan of the film *Casablanca* is aware, Ilsa is a woman's name. If the true leader of the Ilsa was a woman, then Velma is the logical suspect. As Donz pretended to receive reports rather than instructions from B-18, Velma pretended to do the reverse with B-18. The reason why The Shadow so strongly desired her testimony was because it would totally expose the Ilsa's global operations.

A woman was the real brains behind the Ilsa. As Nina Valencia, this lethal lady went to Washington to pursue "her own game" of establishing an Ilsa cell there. Her plans became diverted when Creelon, the operative of a rival spy network, secured her services through a combination of financial inducement and implied threat. After Creelon's death, Nina fled the country and left American operations in the hands of B-18, her capable lieutenant. When word reached her that The Shadow was tampering with B-18's plans, she entered the picture as Velma Thane for another crack at her old foe.

There exists a name very similar to Ilsa. It contains the same number of letters plus the same first and last letters. I am referring to Irma, the name of the great villainess of the *Bulldog Drummond* series. It is customary to endow her with the surname of Peterson since she was the mistress of the mastermind popularly known as Carl Peterson. Irma's nationality is unknown, but there are hints of French ancestry. Like Carl, she frequently altered her appearances through disguises. In her real self, she had black hair, dark eyes and a Roman nose.

Drummond's exploits were first recounted by H. C. "Sapper" McNeile. As Carl's accomplice, Irma was featured in *Bulldog Drummond* (1920), *The Black Gang* (1922), *The Third Round* (1924) and *The Final Count* (1926). She participated in two conspiracies to overthrow the British government, the theft of a synthetic diamond process, and mass murder through a poison whose slightest touch means death. On her own, Irma appeared in *The Female of the Species* (1928) and *The Return of Bulldog Drummond* (1932, also called *Bulldog Drummond Returns*). After Carl's apparent death, Irma retaliated by nearly sacrificing Drummond's wife to ancient gods. Following the

failure of this enterprise, Irma imprisoned an eccentric British millionaire in order to manipulate the stock market.

Following McNeile's death in 1937, the Drummond saga was continued by his friend Gerard Fairlie. His novels dealing with Irma were *Bulldog Drummond Attacks* (1939), *Captain Bulldog Drummond* (1945), *Bulldog Drummond Stands Fast* (1947), *Hands Off Bulldog Drummond* (1949) and *The Return of the Black Gang* (1954). Irma's rampage continued unabated. She engaged in the kidnapping of a scientist, the Nazi efforts to suppress the French Resistance, the torture of an ex-official of the Foreign Office, and the sabotage of British industry. Then miraculously, Carl Peterson revealed that he was alive. Starting with the rather mundane sale of weapons to London street gangs, Carl and Irma progressed to seeking world domination with a mind-control drug.

Information from *Bulldog Drummond Attacks* adds credence to the identification of both Nina and Velma as Irma. The Atlantic island of Grand Canary, a Spanish possession, was the site of Irma's headquarters. She could only have operated there with Franco's permission. Her cozy relationship with the dictator obviously sprang from the missions that she performed for him as Nina. Grand Canary rather than New York must have been the central headquarters of the Ilsa. Irma had bank accounts in Brussels, Paris, Buenos Aires and New York. The account in the last city must have been in the name of Velma Thane.

If Velma was Irma, then something prevented The Shadow from turning her over to the FBI in the aftermath of *The Spy Ring*. Irma could have circumvented the presence of Myra Reldon in her apartment by a trick she demonstrated in *Hands Off Bulldog Drummond*. Cornered in her house by Drummond, Irma stepped on a hidden switch covered by a carpet. Suddenly the phone rang. Thinking the caller to be one of Irma's gang, Drummond answered it and received a potent whiff of tear gas. By the time Drummond recovered, Irma had fled. Irma could have used a similar fake telephone to knock the capable Myra out of the action. Overcoming an amateur like Wynne Marriot would then be child's play for a hardened professional like Irma. After leaving the apartment, Irma took an escape route back to Europe.

A more detailed chronology of Irma's activities in the 1930's needs to be established. *The Return of Bulldog Drummond* transpired apparently in August. Four months had passed since an event in the previous April (chap. 5). The year would probably be 1931, one year before the book's publication. *Bulldog Drummond Attacks* could similarly be placed in 1938. *My Chronology of Shadows* assigns *Washington Crime* to December 1936 and *The Spy Ring* to December 1939.

After Bulldog Drummond rescued a financier from her clutches in August 1931, Irma Peterson fled Britain. She devised the plan to create the Ilsa, an independent spy ring. Irma started to create the organization in Spain. When the Spanish Civil War erupted in July 1936, she threw her support to General Francisco Franco. The revolt by Franco was launched from the Canary Islands, the archipelago that includes Grand Canary. In gratitude for her successful espionage efforts, Franco permitted Irma to erect a base of operations on Grand Canary, perhaps the most secure Fascist stronghold in the Civil War. In December, Irma adopted the guise of Nina Valencia on a trip to the United States to create Ilsa cells there. Her desire to build a cell in Washington D. C. was frustrated when Hugo Creelon drafted her into his battle with The Shadow. She left Washington for New York where she erected a network led by a trusted lieutenant, B-18.

Returning to Grand Canary, she would become enmeshed in another battle with Drummond in 1938. As Velma Thane in New York, she was unable to prevent The Shadow's destruction of B-18 and his agents in December 1939. Outwitting Myra Reldon, The Shadow's agent, Irma only narrowly escaped arrest herself. With the Nazis conquering large portions of Europe, Irma returned to Europe and offered her Ilsa network as an adjunct to the Third Reich. With the defeat of Hitler, Irma began to perform services for the Soviet Union during the Cold War. If Irma had any further run-ins with The Shadow during her career, these duels remain unrecorded.

Nevertheless, there is a strange sequel to these battles between Irma and The Shadow. In *Crime Under Cover* (June 1, 1941), The Shadow battled Kurd Malga, the leader of another spy ring. Malga was seeking to steal the Neutralizer, an invention capable of nullifying all forms of poison gas. Malga's gang communicated using Esperanto, the universal language developed by a Polish professor in 1887. Malga may have been a minion of the title villain of *Malmordo* (July 1946). Malmordo also used the language of Esperanto. Malmordo was a famous criminal who rose to prominence before the start of World War II. During the war, he worked for the Nazis. He returned to more mundane crime in peacetime only to have his career ended by The Shadow. It is unlikely that Malmordo and Malga belonged to the Ilsa because that organization had its own secret language that bore no resemblance to Esperanto.

One of Kurd Malga's gang was Freda, a sleek woman with dark hair and eyes. Walter Gibson maintained that Malga's gang was rounded up after The Shadow slew the master spy, but no specific mention is made concerning Freda's fate. She could have easily eluded capture.

In *The Return of Black Gang*, Irma Peterson faked her death by ordering the murder of a woman who resembled her. It had taken Irma nearly two years to find this look-alike. The double's throat was cut by a knife wielded by one of Irma's agents. The members of the Ilsa were infamous for committing murders with a knife specially designed to obscure fingerprints. The killer of the false Irma jokingly referred to his murder weapon as "Freda." Could Freda have also been the name of his victim?

There obviously is a possibility of a theoretical connection here. *The Return of the Black Gang* probably happened in 1953. My Shadow chronology placed *Crime Under Cover* in November 1940 and *Malmordo* in October 1945. Freda joined Malmordo's gang shortly before World War II. Malmordo assigned Freda to work for his top lieutenant, Kurd Malga. Surviving The Shadow's victory over Malga in 1940, Freda returned to Europe to work for Malmordo. Recognizing that Freda's similarity to Irma, Malmordo groomed her for a position in his gang comparable to the role that her counterpart had occupied in Carl's old organization. With Malmordo's death at the hands of The Shadow in 1945, Freda became unemployed. Hearing of Freda, Irma was intrigued by their resemblance. After searching for two years, Irma found Freda and convinced her to join the remnants of the Ilsa spy ring. Initially, Irma enjoyed utilizing Freda as a double to fool her opponents. Freda then began to be viewed with jealousy by Irma. When Carl returned to renew their alliance in 1953, Irma became concerned that he might become attracted to Freda. Irma quickly ordered the death of this potential rival. Displaying a sense of irony, Irma faked her own death by having Freda killed. Irma may soon have joined Freda in the hereafter. *The Return of the Black Gang* concluded with

the capture of Carl and Irma by Bulldog Drummond. If they were brought to trial, they were assuredly sentenced to death by hanging.