

Toast to Irene Adler
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by Will Walsh

When it comes to Scandal in Bohemia and, particularly, Irene Adler, we are all guilty of seeing without observing. To cover up the true event of international intrigue, Watson has fictionalized, modified and rewritten the 1889 murder/suicide of Crown Prince Rudolph, heir apparent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his mistress Mary Vetsera. We should disregard everything that we believe we know from the tale.

By 1888, Irene Adler was a leading independent agent with close connection to the U.S. government. She had received her original training under Kate Warne at the Female Detective Bureau. Irene's combination of talent, brains and beauty insured significant successes for the United States. Ms. Adler's time in Milan, Warsaw, Paris, London and other European cities had enabled her to establish connections across the continent and situated her perfectly for a U.S./German dispute.

For those questioning Ms. Adler's role as a U.S. spy, consider the hints that Watson provides in Scandal. Holmes's filing system offers our initial introduction as Watson's finds her details next to a monograph on deep sea fishes. The placement is revealing as one of the international achievements of the first Cleveland administration was a deep sea fishing treaty between Great Britain and the U.S. Further, the King confirms her role as a U.S. operative when he binds Holmes and Watson to secrecy for two years. In March 1888, the next presidential election was eight months away and, presuming a change in administration, nearly two years might pass before the next U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain would arrive. And, indeed, in late 1889, Robert Todd Lincoln arrived as the new Minister to the Court of St. James. The change in administrations and foreign policy approaches rendered moot the actions of 1888.

Although the King twice describes her as resolute, Ms. Adler's role as a spy explains Watson's unusual characterization of her as being of "dubious and questionable memory." For the average Tommy, or Army surgeon, a spy is an individual of marginal integrity whom you can never fully trust. Holmes himself states about foreign agents in "The Second Stain," "it is a question of money with these fellows." As Watson knew of Ms. Adler's true role in the unrevealed mystery, his choice of adjectives go directly to his view of her profession.

Here, Dr. Watson erred. There was nothing dubious or questionable about her. She was the best espionage agent of her era. The British Home Office set Sherlock Holmes against her and she circumvented the man who, three years later, would defeat the Napoleon of Crime. On behalf of her nation, she proved herself the sharpest mind within the secretive community of international espionage. So let us raise a glass to the daintiest thing under a bonnet; an adventuress whose word is inviolate and who is as resolute as the desk behind which the U.S. President sits, ladies and gentlemen, Irene Adler Norton.