



PASSING
NELLA LARSEN

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NELLA LARSEN

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INTRODUCTION

FOR a few brief years, Nella Larsen (1891–1964) seemed one of the shining lights of the Harlem Renaissance. Then her light seemed to sputter out; she disappeared, and nobody knew what had become of her.

Was this vanishing act her final reaction to a childhood in which, as the only dark-skinned member of an otherwise white family, she stood out much too conspicuously? Larsen never liked to talk about her background. All her life she was reticent, and such information as she did give out about herself was as often as not made up. For years even the date of her birth was uncertain (she had told people it was 1893), and a lot of guesswork still is necessary in decoding her early years.

It is clear that she was born in Chicago to a West Indian¹ man named Peter Walker and his Danish wife. When she was about two, her father is said to have died, and soon afterward her mother got married again, this time to a white Dane, Peter Larson. But even that is questionable. (Larsen's biographer, Thadious M. Davis,² suggests that Peter Larson and Peter Walker might actually have been the same person—that Walker might have changed his name and begun passing as white in order to get a job with the Chicago railway.) Whatever the case, her mother's second child, Nella's half sister, was white, and it is speculated that her stepfather regarded Nella as an embarrassment. When he enrolled her in the normal school of Fisk University (a prestigious African-American school in Nashville,

¹ From the Danish West Indies, which since 1917 have been known as the U.S. Virgin Islands.

² Her valuable book, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Louisiana State University Press, 1996), is the best source of information about Larsen.

Tennessee) in 1907 she seems to have become permanently alienated from her family. After a few years at Fisk she went to Denmark and stayed with relatives from 1910 to 1912 while she audited classes at the University of Copenhagen. In 1912–1915 she went through nursing school at Lincoln Hospital in New York City, and then went to Alabama as assistant superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute. She found Tuskegee stultifying and after a year returned to New York, where she was a nurse at Lincoln Hospital from 1916 to 1918 and at the New York City Department of Health from 1918 to 1921. Then she changed course, and from 1922 to 1926 worked in the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library and attended Columbia University's library school.

Her 1919 marriage to Elmer Samuel Imes, a physicist, brought her into a more rarefied stratum of Harlem society. Eventually Larsen came into contact with people involved in what would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance—including, among others, Walter White, the assistant executive secretary of the NAACP, and Carl Van Vechten, the ubiquitous white critic, author, and photographer who did so much to win an audience for African-American writers. White, who had seen Larsen's work in draft, encouraged her to finish her autobiographical first novel, *Quicksand*, and when it was done, Van Vechten introduced it to his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf. Knopf brought it out in 1928 to some critical acclaim. (W. E. B. Du Bois praised it as the "best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnut.")

Her second novel, *Passing*,³ which came out in 1929, also was a critical success. As a result of these successes, in 1930 Larsen became the first African-American woman to receive a Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing. The fellowship enabled her to travel to Spain and France to do research for another novel, but the resulting novel was rejected by Knopf and never published.

That rejection came on the heels of another blow to Larsen's self-esteem: After her story "Sanctuary" (which turned out to be

³ Larsen had wanted to call it *Nig*, but was overruled by her publisher.

her final piece of published fiction) came out in *Forum* in January 1930, a reader pointed out that it was strikingly similar to a story someone else had published eight years earlier, raising the question of plagiarism. After investigating, *Forum's* editor concluded that the similarities were entirely coincidental. Some people have speculated that Larsen was so wounded by the plagiarism charge that she abandoned her writing career. Others have said that she was humiliated by her 1933 divorce, which was sensationalized in the African-American press (it was reported that Imes had found himself a white girlfriend and that Larsen had tried to kill herself by throwing herself out a window). In any case, she drew away from her literary friends and, telling some people that she was emigrating to South America, disappeared from Harlem. Though she kept writing, she never published again, and until her ex-husband's death in 1941 she apparently lived on the \$150 alimony he paid her every month. After that she went back to nursing, first at Gouverneur Hospital in Manhattan and then at Metropolitan Hospital.

Towards the end of her life, Larsen made a trip to California, hoping to make contact with her half sister, but her sister—evidently completely unaware that she had any black relatives, or, in fact, that she had a sister of any color—refused to acknowledge her. A year later, Larsen died in her apartment, alone.

T. N. R. Rogers

FOR
Carl Van Vechten
AND
Fania Marinoff

One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

—Countée Cullen

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little group shivering in the small hallway. What did that mean? As she began to work it out in her numbed mind, she was shaken with another hideous trembling. Not that! Oh, not that!

"No, no!" she protested. "I'm quite certain that he didn't. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—"

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.

Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: "Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window."

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"Absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable."

—Alice Walker

"A work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it rises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel."

—*The Saturday Review of Literature*

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NELLA LARSEN

Married to a successful physician and prominently ensconced in Harlem's vibrant society of the 1920s, Irene Redfield leads a charmed existence—until she is shaken out of it by a chance encounter with a childhood friend. Clare Kendry has been "passing for white," hiding her true identity from everyone, including her racist husband. Clare and her dangerous secret pose an increasingly powerful threat to Irene's security, forcing both women to confront the hazards of public and private deception.

An important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen was the first African-American woman to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. Her fictional portraits of women seeking their identities through a fog of racial confusion were informed by her own Danish–West Indian parentage, and *Passing* offers fascinating psychological insights into issues of race and gender.

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