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The death of A'lelia Walker removes another of the picturesque personalities in which New York was at one time so rich, figures like Diamond Jim Brady, Mrs. Philip Lydig, Oscar Hammerstein. Born the daughter of a washerwoman, A'lelia became through her mother's energy and ambition a symbol for luxurious Negro life. To her own race she became an example of what could be done; to such of the white race as did not know her personally she was that rich colored woman who lived in a palace in Irvington-on-Hudson.

She was not, as has so often been said in print in both the white and the Negro press, a social leader. She took no part in organizing the great charity balls beyond buying a box in which she might appear surrounded by her satellites. She made no effort to limit society in any strict sense. She invited whom she pleased to her own apartment when she entertained, and frequently they invited whom they pleased. Her parties were not exclusive and they in no sense represented the best of the Negro intellectual and social world. Some of the people in that world had never set foot across her threshold. Others had, to be sure, and the theatrical set and what would be known as the "fast" set in another community swarmed around her.

A'lelia adored her mother and her mother in return had spoiled her completely. Madame C.J. Walker beginning her life most humbly lived to see herself acclaimed as one of the most prominent members of her race. Through her invention of a process for the straightening of kinky hair and her other beauty preparations, she established her house in Irvington, named Villa Lewaro by Caruso after early syllables in the name A'Leila Walker Robinson; she erected her splendid town house on West 136th Street, now owned by the city as a health centre.

A'lelia was not a business woman; nor was she a good housekeeper. Responsibility irked her. She hired a housekeeper to take charge of
the Villa Lewaro and she rented her townhouse out to dances. Eventually she established the Dark Tower, intended as a rendezvous for poets, on the top floor. She installed herself in a modest, though luxuriously furnished apartment on Edgcumbe Avenue. Here with the occasional aid of Ernest, her butler, whom she imported from Irvington, she lived the kind of existence that appealed to her: an existence in which was surrounded by her friends and by no plants.

Nearly every day of her life she played poker and so nearly every afternoon a group gathered at her apartment to play poker with her. After the game she went to dinner, frequently downtown for she had scores of white friends and was asked many places. Frequently, when she was not invited out to dinner she cooked it herself. She liked to cook and cooked well. In the evening she usually went to a round of parties and often went to a night club to dance to round off the night. She was a good dancer and she loved dancing. Connie Inn was her favorite club. She also loved the theatre and attended anything from which she believed she could derive pleasure. The last time I saw her was coming out of the Follies at the Ziegfeld Theatre.

Like many another woman in her position she was suspicious and had a horror of being done. This sometimes led her into making mistakes with people who were really her friends and it seldom protected her from those who were not, as she was no judge of character and could be easily won with flattery.

She looked like a Queen and frequently acted like a tyrant. She was tall and black and extremely handsome in her African manner. She often dressed in black. When she assumed more regal habiliments, rich brocades of gold or silver, her noble head bound in a turban, she was a magnificent spectacle. I have been told that her appearance in a box at an opera season at Covent Garden was so spectacular that the singers were put
completely out of countenance. She bought her dresses at Wanamakers and her shoes. I should imagine that many other of her possessions came from there, including perhaps her linen sheets, heavily embroidered with her monogram. But her most cherished possession was a gold shoe horn presented to her by one of her husbands as a wedding gift.

In love and in marriage she was unsuccessful as was but natural. She was too spoiled, too selfish, to used to having her own way to make any kind of compromise.

Circa 1927

Carl Van Vechten

unfinished and unpublished

A'Lelia died on a weekend at Atlantic City after she had consumed a chocolate cake and a whole lobster in the middle of the night. The food, of course, had been washed down with champagne.

CVV: November 27, 1957