

***Passing* by Nella Larsen; selections courtesy of Gutenberg holdings**

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When the film by the same name appeared in American movie theaters (a few – art theaters) in 2021, as new forms of racial problems were raging through our pandemic-suffering world, it raised new interest in this important short book which is the female version of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography*. You might want to see the trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trwq3CNCMKU>

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size.

...

She ran through the letter, puzzling out, as best she could, the carelessly formed words or making instinctive guesses at them.

". . . For I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . ." Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, "and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago. . . ." . . .

After introducing us to Irene, who, after she recognizes and remembers Clare – and is flustered, Larsen shifts the time to the girlhood of Irene and Clare (note their names; anything symbolic? Then this:

And she could remember quite vividly
how, when they used to repeat and discuss these

tantalizing stories about Clare, the girls would
always look knowingly at one another and then,
with little excited giggles, drag away their
eager shining eyes and say with lurking under-
tones of regret or disbelief some such thing as:
"Oh, well, maybe she's got a job or something,"
or "After all, it mayn't have been Clare," or
"You can't believe all you hear."

And always some girl, more matter-of-
fact or more frankly malicious than the rest,
would declare: "Of course it was Clare! Ruth
said it was and so did Frank, and they cer-
tainly know her when they see her as well as
we do." And someone else would say: "Yes,
you can bet it was Clare all right." And then
they would all join in asserting that there could
be no mistake about it's having been Clare,
and that such circumstances could mean only
one thing. Working indeed! People didn't take
their servants to the Shelby for dinner. Cer-
tainly not all dressed up like that. There would
follow insincere regrets, and somebody would
say: "Poor girl, I suppose it's true enough, but
what can you expect. Look at her father. And
her mother, they say, would have run away If
she hadn't died. Besides, Clare always had a —
a — having way with her."

Color has not been mentioned yet in the novel. It is unclear (it was to me) who is actually “passing,” but Irene turns down Clare’s offer to come to dinner and instead invites Clare to a party later that week. Then

Irene Redfield, search-
ing her face, had an offended feeling that be-
hind what was now only an ivory mask lurked
a scornful amusement. She looked away, at the
wall far beyond Clare. Well, she deserved it,
for, as she acknowledged to herself, she was
relieved. And for the very reason at which
Clare had hinted. The fact that Clare had
guessed her perturbation did not, however. In
any degree lessen that relief. She was annoyed

at having been detected in what might seem to be an insincerity; but that was all.

The waiter came with Clare's change. Irene reminded herself that she ought immediately to go. But she didn't move.

When Irene finally goes to see Clare, another mutual friend from their childhood is there; they talk about their childhood and their children and their husbands; then this:

"No," she went on, "no more for me either. Not even a girl. It's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out. Why, he actually said he didn't care what colour it turned out, if I would only stop worrying about it. But, of course, nobody wants a dark child." Her voice was earnest and she took for granted that her audience was in entire agreement with her.

Irene, whose head had gone up with a quick little jerk, now said in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: "One of my boys IS dark."

Gertrude jumped as if she had been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open. She tried to speak, but could not immediately get the words out. Finally she managed to stammer: "Oh! And your husband, is he — is he — er — dark, too?"

Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt, was, however, still able to answer as coolly as if she had not that sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found herself drinking iced tea from tall amber glasses on that hot August afternoon. Her husband, she informed them quietly, couldn't exactly "pass."

At that reply Clare turned on Irene her seductive caressing smile and remarked a little scoffingly: "I do think that coloured people — we — are too silly about some things. After all, the thing's not important to Irene or hundreds of others. Not awfully, even to you, Gertrude. It's only deserters like me who have to be afraid of freaks of the nature. As my inestimable dad used to say, 'Everything must be paid for.' Now, please one of you tell me what

ever happened to Claude Jones. You know, the tall, lanky specimen who used to wear that comical little moustache that the girls used to laugh at so. Like a thin streak of soot. The moustache, I mean."

At that Gertrude shrieked with laughter. ^"Claude Jones!" and launched into the story of how he was no longer a Negro or a Christian but had become a Jew.

"A Jew!" Clare exclaimed.

"Yes, a Jew. A black Jew, he calls himself. He won't eat ham and goes to the synagogue on Saturday. He's got a beard now as well as a moustache. You'd die laughing if you saw him. He's really too funny for words. Fred says he's crazy and I guess he is. Oh, he's a scream all right, a regular scream!" And she shrieked again.

Clare's laugh tinkled out. "It certainly sounds funny enough. Still, it's his own business. If he gets along better by turning — "

At that, Irene, who was still hugging her unhappy don't-care feeling of rightness, broke in, saying bitingly: "It evidently doesn't occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain."

When Clare's husband comes into the room, there's this:

"Hello, Nig," was his greeting to Clare.

Gertrude who had started slightly, settled back and looked covertly towards Irene, who had caught her lip between her teeth and sat gazing at husband and wife. It was hard to believe that even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider, though he chanced to be her husband. So he knew, then, that Clare was a Negro? From her talk the other day Irene had understood that he didn't. But how rude, how positively insulting, for him to address her in that way in the presence of guests !

In Clare's eyes, as she presented her husband, was a queer gleam, a jeer. It might be. Irene couldn't define It.

an introduction over, she inquired: *'Did you hear what Jack called me?'^

*'Yes," Gertrude answered, laughing with a dutiful eagerness.

Irene didn't speak. Her gaze remained level on Clare's smiling face.

The black eyes fluttered down. *'Tell them, dear, why you call me that."

The man chuckled, crinkling up his eyes, not, Irene was compelled to acknowledge, unpleasantly. He explained: "Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as — as — well as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger."

He roared with laughter. Clare's ringing bell-like laugh joined his. Gertrude after another uneasy shift in her seat added her shrill one. Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: "That's good!" and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided. Until, catching sight of Clare's face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped.

Clare's husband is, obviously racist and horrible (and blind); Irene's, on the other hand, a "copper colored" doctor is quite the reverse. He, Brian, urges Irene to pick up the friendship with Clare, and this conversation takes place as they have breakfast:

Curious, isn't it, that knowing, as she does, his unqualified attitude, she still — "

Brian interrupted: "It's always that way. Never known it to fail. Remember Albert Hammond, how he used to be for ever haunting Seventh Avenue, and Lenox Avenue, and the dancing-places, until some 'shine' took

a shot at him for casting an eye towards his 'sheba?' They always come back. I've seen it happen time and time again."

"But why?" Irene wanted to know.
"Why?"

"If I knew that, I'd know w^hat race is."

"But wouldn't you think that having got the thing, or things, they were after, and at such risk, they'd be satisfied? Or afraid?"

"Yes," Brian agreed, "you certainly would think so. But, the fact remains, they aren't. Not satisfied, I mean. I think they're scared enough most of the time, when they give way to the urge and slip back. Not scared enough to stop them, though. Why, the good God only knows."

...

[Time passes; Irene resists the pressure of her NYC. The letter and the memory of the accidental meeting with Clare has upset Irene – her whole world view]. Then Clare turns up in her apartment; this is part of a n intense conversation]

She was aware, too, of a dim premonition of some impending disaster. It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all-important: "Safe! Damn being safe!" and meant it.

With a gesture of impatience she sat down. In a voice of cool formality, she said:

"Brian and I have talked the whole thing over carefully and decided that it isn't wise. He says it's always a dangerous business, this coming back. He's seen more than one come to grief because of it. And, Clare, considering everything — Mr. Bellew's attitude and all that — don't you think you ought to be as careful as you can?"

Clare's deep voice broke the small silence that had followed Irene's speech. She said, speaking almost plaintively: "I ought to have known. It's Jack. I don't blame you for being angry, though I must say you behaved beautifully that day. But I did think you'd understand, 'Rene. It was that, partly, that has made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything. If it

hadn't been for that, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me, and I've been so lonely since! You can't know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to."

....

Irene pressed out her cigarette. While doing so, she saw again the vision of Clare Kendry staring disdainfully down at the face of her father, and thought that it would be like that that she would look at her husband if he lay dead before her.

Her own resentment was swept aside and her voice held an accent of pity as she exclaimed: "Why, Clare! I didn't know. Forgive me. I feel like seven beasts. It was stupid of me not to realize."

"No. Not at all. You couldn't. Nobody, none of you, could," Clare moaned. The black eyes filled with tears that ran down her cheeks and spilled into her lap, ruining the priceless velvet of her dress. Her long hands were a little uplifted and clasped tightly together. Her effort to speak moderately was obvious, but not successful. "How could you know? How could you? You're free. You're happy. And," with faint derision, "safe."

[in time Irene invites Clare and her husband to a Harlem dance party with friends of her husband and herself.]

A pale rose-colour came into Clare's ivory cheeks. She lifted a hand in protest. "Don't be silly! Certainly not! I mean that in a crowd of that kind I shouldn't be noticed."

On the contrary, was Irene's opinion. It might be even doubly dangerous. Some friend or acquaintance of John Bellew or herself might see and recognize her.

At that, Clare laughed for a long time, little musical trills following one another in sequence after sequence. It was as if the thought of any friend of John Bellew's going to a Negro dance was to her the most amusing thing in the world.

"I don't think," she said, when she had done laughing, "we need worry about that."*

[What happens after this - talks to the boys about caution (lynchings) by Brian, reprimands by Irene; planning a large party; much lingering on potentials for unfaithfulness as Brian (good husband of Irene) becomes more and more interested in beautiful Clare and as Irene is drawn to another man, Hugh. The large party takes place; when Clare and her horrible husband arrive, he understands, finally, that his wife has mixed blood, and says horrible things. Something unexpected and very sad happens, but I will not tell you here. You may want to read the book or see the movie.]