



**WHITE
TRYST**

**Martha
Ostenso**

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a Fadedpage.com administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: White Tryst

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Martha Ostenso (1900-1963)

Date first posted: Jan. 14, 2019

Date last updated: Jan. 14, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190160

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

White Tryst

BY MARTHA OSTENSO

Author of Wild Geese

*Ten years of loyal waiting and ecstatic anticipation,
and then
at the climacteric moment of fulfillment, a wraith in
the mists and eyes that looked beyond*

Now the mist thickened to an unforgettable dream and all that was left of the familiar world was the hard sand underfoot. The desire came upon Don Barry to remove his shoes and pound up that cold, wind-cemented beach in his bare feet, until his lungs should be bursting with fog. But that was only another of those impulses that his return had summoned from their false death ten years ago, when he had said good-by to Diane upon the highest of these dunes. Did this excitement that possessed him mean that Diane had really come back, too, as she had promised, and was waiting for him up there where the sand ended?

A short way back he had stopped before the driftwood fence, grown rotten and dingy now, and with tears of exultation in his eyes had torn away a bit of the black seaweed that clung to it, and pressed the dark and bitter growth into his palms. Farther back than that, coming up from the landing where his boat was anchored, he had peered in at the window of the old crone who used to sell red and yellow balloons to the shore children on picnic days. To the island children she had given the balloons for nothing. But the ancient dame was not there. In her stead, before the whitewashed fireplace, Don had seen a strident, brick-colored young woman in an unlovely attitude of argument with an oilskinned coast guard. It was with a feeling profounder than dismay that he had turned from the window of the shack and pressed on up the dunes.

AS THOUGH they had been waiting for him through the years, the plaintive ghosts of youth and desire waylaid him, materializing out of the mist in the shapes of things uncouth and humble and inexpressibly cherished in memory. Below him now he could see the black hulk of the wrecked *Andalusia*, like a fabulous monster half swallowed by that greater monster, the fog. It seemed that the dim, impotent spars beckoned to him, and then he remembered that that had been Diane's fantasy as she huddled against him here on the upper dunes at their last meeting. Oh, Diane, Diane! name that would never be done with breaking a heart!

The way became rocky and steep. Now sand-coated grass speared out, and suddenly an apple-tree, incredibly gnarled and formidable to the eye, stood its ground. Nailed to its trunk like the sign on a blind beggar, and weathered almost out of recognition, appeared a board with the dim legend, "White Tryst".

Don's heart oppressed him with its excitement. Would she have come before him, granting the mad chance that she would come at all?

HE HAD been in his early twenties, she just out of her teens, that last time they had rowed out to the island—not ten, but ten thousand years ago. They had been used to going out to the island in one way or other since they were children. It had been the vast country of ineffable delight, and upon it had been the incorruptible stronghold of gnomes and elves and all the beings of enchantment. Then, by some earth-alchemy, it had become a shy place, a retreat on sunny afternoons for a tow-headed boy and a girl with eyes as blue as the rare sand flower that looked to the sea.

"Ten years, my dearest, dearest!" he had cried brokenly, over and over against her lips, all but speechless from the bitterness and passion that had gathered in his throat.

"Wait for me, sweetheart!" she had whispered, her fingers twining through and through his hair. "Ten years will have paid him. And surely, surely—will I not have paid for happiness by then? Father will not live another ten years, I know, but I shall be fair. Ten years of my life is so little, really, in return for father's freedom. You can see that—can't you, dearest? Prison—prison—" her voice had grown rigid with fear—"a day of it would kill him. In ten years he will be gone. Then I'll come back to you, Don. Right here—among the dunes—ten years from today. Come for me here—I'll go with you—anywhere. Nothing will matter then—nothing, nothing!"

She had begun to cry and her tears had run hot on his neck. He had gathered her desperately to him then, a dull heat suffusing all his body. The mists had circled and hovered about them, gigantic, nebulous wings laden with fear and pain and desire.

“White Tryst—it will be white then—after the waiting—won’t it, Donny, mine?”

On the day following, Diane Inglis had married Clyde Endicott, and old John Inglis had been simultaneously freed from a charge of embezzlement of funds that had belonged to Endicott.

THE mists of ten years had gathered and flowed away from the island, and from the indiscriminate seas that had taught him life Don Barry had returned.

With a hand that trembled like a boy’s he reached up and pulled off one of the grotesque apples of the tree. It came stubbornly into his hand and was wet and cold. Mechanically he set his teeth into the green thing, and the rush of memory that followed its tart, stinging flavor of wind and salt and fog overwhelmed him.

He unlatched the gate and it sagged back upon its hinges to admit him. The stone walk, tufted about by brittle grass, led crazily up to the house. The building had been white once, but now it was of no color whatever. It appeared as untenanted as an old nest. A raw feeling that was not caused by the fog crept over him as he made his way up the walk.

“She won’t be here,” he told himself, to steady the beating of his heart.

He was up on the sloping veranda now and saw that the boards of the floor gaped apart and that the sand had drifted into the cracks. Old Silas Tate, if he were still alive and in charge of the place, must have fallen upon evil days. Don’s hand reached for the door knob. Ten years was a long time for a woman to remember. But Diane had been more than a woman. She had been the mate of a man’s soul, and her eyes had been like a calm day at sea.

THE door plunged inward the instant the latch released its sodden weight. For a few seconds Barry’s eyes struggled to adjust themselves to that darker projection of the fog with which the room was filled. Then the scuffle of a chair across the bare floor had almost the same

effect that the lighting of a lamp might have had: it revealed to him the presence of another person in that walled density that was neither light nor darkness.

“Silas Tate?” he asked across the room.

The gray webs seemed to knit suddenly together, and from the corner of the room a shape, vast and flabby and indifferent as the mist itself, rose to meet him.

“Yes, sir—yes, sir,” came the voice, a thin wisp of a thing. “Must of dozed off—an’ here it’s gone an’ got dark on me. Take a chair, there, sir, while I light the lamps.”

Barry sat down on something. She had not come, then—not yet. During the brief moment before the light flared up under Silas Tate’s hand, Don Barry lived through an eternity of loneliness and loss. All the futility and barren mockery of his life, that had been—he realized it now—a vain pursuit of the elusive wraith of happiness, bored at his heart like a sickening pain. Empty, empty, as a floating mist!

BARRY got up and went over to the desk where the old hotel keeper was polishing the nickel bowl of the lamp. When he came close to him he was shocked to see how Silas Tate had aged. He would not have thought it possible for a human being to become so old. And then, in the dusty glass behind the old man, Barry caught a glimpse of his own face.

Where now was the eager image of youth that had looked out at him there only ten years ago? The eyes had narrowed, the mouth had been drawn slightly awry by compromise and struggle against compromise. Pinching lines of disillusion had appeared on either side of his nose. His damp hair showed threadings of gray. For an instant it seemed to him that his presence here and its grave significance held something comic as well as pitiful. Resurrecting a ghost, that was what he was trying to do—and clumsily fitting flesh upon it! Diane—what would she see in that face now, where before she had seen never the bruise nor the blemish of life? With something like fright he turned his eyes from the glass to Silas Tate.

“Hain’t many comin’ here no more,” the old man was droning, as though to himself. “‘Ceptin’ yourself, there hain’t been a soul here now for near a week.”

WHEN Don spoke there was a nervous catch in his voice. “A lady hasn’t been here, then, today? A dark haired lady, slim, with blue eyes and —” He paused suddenly and found that he was pouring out his heart to the unconcerned embodiment of senility itself.

“No, sir. No, sir,” Silas told him, his head wagging. “There hain’t been a soul, sir, not for more’n—but say, there was somethin’ queer happened this afternoon, now. Yes, sir. Mebbe it’s just that I’m gettin’ on, but I swear to it—I saw a ghost! I was lookin’ out o’ the window there, thinkin’ as how I ought to be goin’ to the village tomorrow for supplies. There’s a party o’ shore folk comin’ out day after tomorrow, sir. I was thinkin’ o’ that, sir, when all of a sudden somethin’ white steps out o’ the mist. It had just started to gather—the fog, I mean. The sun hadn’t gone yet, quite, an’ this here ghost—God knows I’m no superstitious fool—steps right out o’ the fog. You know, mebbe, how the fog looks at sundown, if it’s just beginnin’ to gather—like as if there’s a furnace blazin’ up somewhere far away, you can’t tell just where. Well, there she stood, as I say, like part o’ the fog had got whiter against the rest of it. And all that was dark of her was the eyes, an’ they stared toward the house here—kept a-starin’, sir, till they made me creep. I wouldn’t believe it—but I seen it—plain as day.”

“All right, Silas,” Don interrupted, extremely calm. “I’ll believe you. Now, get me some hot tea, eh? Is that little sitting room on the east side of the house still open?”

“Yes—and no, sir. It’s open, but there ain’t been fire in it for some time back. The flue don’t work, sir. You can sit in there, right enough, if you want, but there’s a wind comin’ up that’ll fair tear them shutters off. I’ll get a pot o’ tea.”

DON BARRY, treading veritably on air, passed through the corridor and into the room that was so secure in memory. Diane had come to White Tryst before him. It had been Diane whom Silas had seen. Barry could not doubt that. It was like her to come early, drink the place in, and go away for a while. She would be back—oh, she would be back! His veins fairly burned with the rushing of his blood.

He seated himself in that room where ten years before he and Diane Inglis had taken tea at twilight with the shadows of the apple blossom boughs from which White Tryst took its name falling across the table, blues and ambers and the faint colors of china.

Tonight the room was a shambles of neglect. Rain had dripped from a

corner of the ceiling and made a rusty hole in the carpet. The springs of the chair in which Don had seated himself complained in an uncanny key whenever he stirred. Out of the tail of his eye he saw once the fugitive shadow of a mouse vanish into a crack beneath the window. The wind that old Silas had predicted came up and the shutters threshed viciously to and fro. The tea in Barry's cup grew cold, untouched.

Seven o'clock—eight o'clock—nine o'clock. . . .

Old Silas pattered into the room, endeavored vainly to still the clamor of the shutters.

"You really expectin' somebody—a night like this?" he asked, turning toward the door.

"A ghost, Silas," said Don.

The old man regarded him strangely, then took himself out of the room.

DON waited, his heart bounding at every sound he heard within the old house or in the yard outside. He paced back and forth, up and down the floor, halting to listen now and then. He was convinced that she would come. He would not have forgotten a single little detail of her. There would be her straight, slim throat, and the sensitive depression in her full upper lip. Her eyes would be direct and yet far away, as though she were taking you with her to unimagined places. She would come to him as sweet, as enchanting as when she had left him Or would she—would she? Great Heaven, how was such a thing possible! A physical panic seized him. He paused and looked about the room in bewilderment, as though someone there had shouted a startling truth into his ears. Something within him crumpled, collapsed. He made his way to the chair, dropped into it, buried his head in his hands. All these years . . . waiting . . . nonsense, all of it! It was memory that was sweet, memory alone that held indestructible beauty.

That was it, he thought bleakly. What if she did come, did go away with him? There would be the rotten noise, the scandal, the hideous adjustments to be made, the thousand unanticipated changes that each would find in the other. What, in that base shuffle, would become of the precious days of wind and sun and mountainous white clouds over island dunes? Madness, madness, his coming here! What if she returned . . . now? He would have to meet her, drag the lovely fabric of romance through the mire. No, he would bolt, rather. Far rather play the coward than be the spoiler of that beautiful thing.

HE HEARD the outer door of the house open. He heard old Silas Tate's voice bidding someone come in.

The door of the sitting room was pushed back, and framed against the dim light of the corridor stood, not Diane, but the man who had been Diane's husband for ten years.

The man laughed, quietly, deliberately.

"I made a little bet with myself that you'd be here. It amuses me to find that I have won," he said, coming forward without troubling to close the door behind him.

Don Barry faced him on the middle of the floor. His eyes were expressionless as they met those of the other man.

"You are very careful with your wagers, Endicott," he said levelly. "You seem to have a knack for games in which you take no chances."

Endicott smiled and bowed slightly. "On the contrary, Barry," he said amiably, "I was betting against very heavy odds. Who would believe that romance still lived in a man of your experience in the world and your—well, your years?"

Barry picked up his hat from the table where he had placed it. He began to fear that he would be unable to control the desire to dash his fist into Endicott's face.

"It would be impossible for you to believe it, Endicott, naturally," he observed.

"You're just a little hard on me, Barry," Endicott said. "The fact is, it's only an accident that I'm here at all. It just happened that my wife wrote you a letter ten years ago—on our wedding night, to be precise. That, perhaps, wasn't so accidental, after all, but I happened to come upon the maid who was taking the letter out to post. That's how I came to know of your little rendezvous—arranged ten years ahead of time. Delightful information for a happy bridegroom to receive, what? You'll have to give me credit for one thing, Barry—I never spoke of it to her. I call that rather decent, eh? There are men who would have gone back and—"

A SHUTTER flailed itself upon the outer wall, shaking the house to its foundations. Endicott's voice ceased suddenly. Don discovered his mind suddenly out there upon the upper ridges of sand, where the fog must now be hurtling like a flock of white sheep driven by the moon. Funny idea, that—Diane's, perhaps.

Endicott's voice whirred on again, a little diffident now, halting. He was standing very straight, his knuckles white about the head of his cane which, Don observed, was precisely wedged in a crack in the floor.

“But though I never spoke to her about it, Barry, I never forgot it, either. All my life—all her life—hung upon that secret. It's a hard thing to explain to you, you see. I said to myself—oh, a thousand times—I said, ‘Come, now, this is no great matter, after all. Ten years is a long time and she'll change.’ You see? And all the while she was saying to herself, undoubtedly, ‘I'll never change—never!’ You see? But she did change, Barry. A woman—especially a woman like Diane—can't wage a secret war for ten years and live. I was kind to her—certainly—and she was always courteous to me. Outwardly, you see. But the doctor began to understand after a time. He warned her against any undue strain on her heart. That made the case a serious one. She knew it was serious. But men—men like me—and you, too, Barry—know very little about a woman like her. You've been gone ten years—having your fling, no doubt, after the manner of a man. Certainly. I'd have done the same. But she—she was a gallant soul, Barry! She *would* keep this tryst—this silly, romantic promise of hers was all she ever lived for. Gallant, what? But that was Diane. Straight as an arrow.”

BARRY'S eyes became hot with sudden anger. He took a step toward Endicott, his fingers twitching about the brim of his hat. But Endicott lifted his hand.

“Don't be hasty, my friend,” he urged. “Wait until I have told you. She came to this island every year—just at this time. Came to this room, too. Poor girl! Today the doctor told her she should not leave the house. But she didn't hear him. She asked me to take her down here to the island. I didn't ask her to wait till tomorrow. You see, I knew. No other day would do. We came down in my yacht. She was nearly bursting with excitement all the way. She didn't even try to hide it from me. We dropped anchor about sundown. There was a strange fog running in from the sea. Diane stood on the deck when we moored. One moment her face would be white as paper—the next she would look like a rose. And all eyes—off somewhere.”

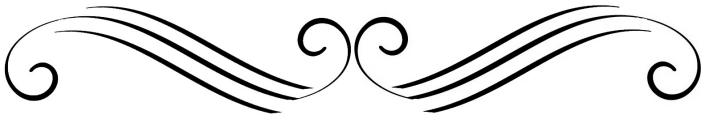
WHAT Don Barry saw then in the face of Diane's husband would not bear scrutiny. It was something stark, helpless and lost.

"When we landed, she slipped away alone. I let her go, but sent two of my men to see that she should not lose her way. I went down to the village. When I came back—an hour later—she was lying dead in her cabin. The men had carried her in. That's why I came here—to tell you."

Perhaps it was the clamor of the outer world that made Endicott's voice sound so low, so unsure. Barry looked at the knuckles on the head of the cane, white and motionless as marble.

THERE was a message," Endicott added. "She gave it to her maid. Her last words." His voice fell away and his fingers relaxed as he lifted the cane to the crook of his other arm. "I think you ought to know what they were, Barry. She said, 'White Tryst—white forever!' Gallant, what?"

In the next moment he was gone, his erect shoulders framed only for an instant in the doorway. The shutter slammed upon the sudden vacancy of the room and Don Barry's mind saw the broken fog hurtling down the sand, like white sheep under a moon.



THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This is one of the author's short stories. It was published in *The North American Review*, Vol. 226, No. 6 (Dec., 1928), pp. 758-764.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this project.

[The end of *White Tryst* by Martha Ostenso]