

Back to God's Country and Other Stories

by

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Back To God's Country

When Shan Tung, the long-cued Chinaman from Vancouver, started up the Frazer River in the old days when the Telegraph Trail and the headwaters of the Peace were the Meccas of half the gold-hunting population of British Columbia, he did not foresee tragedy ahead of him. He was a clever man, was Shan Tung, a cha-sukeed, a very devil in the collecting of gold, and far-seeing. But he could not look forty years into the future, and when Shan Tung set off into the north, that winter, he was in reality touching fire to the end of a fuse that was to burn through four decades before the explosion came.

With Shan Tung went Tao, a Great Dane. The Chinaman had picked him up somewhere on the coast and had trained him as one trains a horse. Tao was the biggest dog ever seen about the Height of Land, the most powerful, and at times the most terrible. Of two things Shan Tung was enormously proud in his silent and mysterious oriental way--of Tao, the dog, and of his long, shining cue which fell to the crook of his knees when he let it down. It had been the longest cue in Vancouver, and therefore it was the longest cue in British Columbia. The cue and the dog formed the combination which set the forty-year fuse of romance and tragedy burning. Shan Tung started for the El Dorados early in the winter, and Tao alone pulled his sledge and outfit. It was no more than an ordinary task for the monstrous Great Dane, and Shan Tung subserviently but with hidden triumph passed outfit after outfit exhausted by the way. He had reached Copper Creek Camp, which was boiling and frothing with the excitement of gold-maddened men, and was congratulating himself that he would soon be at the camps west of the Peace, when the thing happened. A drunken Irishman, filled with a grim and unfortunate sense of humor, spotted Shan Tung's wonderful cue and coveted it. Wherefore there followed a bit of excitement in which Shan Tung passed into his empyrean home with a bullet through his heart, and the drunken Irishman was strung up for his misdeed fifteen minutes later. Tao, the Great Dane, was taken by the leader of the men who pulled on the rope. Tao's new master was a "drifter," and as he drifted, his face was always set to the north, until at last a new humor struck him and he turned eastward to the Mackenzie. As the seasons passed, Tao found mates along the way and left a string of his progeny behind him, and he had new masters, one after another, until he was grown old and his muzzle was turning gray. And never did one of these masters turn south with him. Always it was north, north with the white man first, north with the Cree, and then with the Chippewyan, until in the end the dog born in a Vancouver kennel died in an Eskimo igloo on the Great Bear. But the breed of the Great Dane lived on. Here and there, as the years passed, one would find among the Eskimo trace-dogs, a grizzled-haired, powerful-jawed giant that was alien to the arctic stock, and in these occasional aliens ran the blood of Tao, the Dane.

Forty years, more or less, after Shan Tung lost his life and his cue at Copper Creek Camp, there was born on a firth of Coronation Gulf a dog who was named Wapi, which means "the Walrus." Wapi, at full growth, was a throwback of more than forty dog generations. He was nearly as large as his forefather, Tao. His fangs were an inch in length, his great jaws could crack the thigh-bone of a caribou, and from the beginning the hands of men and the fangs of beasts were against him. Almost from the day of his birth until this

winter of his fourth year, life for Wapi had been an unceasing fight for existence. He was maya-tisew--bad with the badness of a devil. His reputation had gone from master to master and from igloo to igloo; women and children were afraid of him, and men always spoke to him with the club or the lash in their hands. He was hated and feared, and yet because he could run down a barren-land caribou and kill it within a mile, and would hold a big white bear at bay until the hunters came, he was not sacrificed to this hate and fear. A hundred whips and clubs and a hundred pairs of hands were against him between Cape Perry and the crown of Franklin Bay--and the fangs of twice as many dogs.

The dogs were responsible. Quick-tempered, clannish with the savage brotherhood of the wolves, treacherous, jealous of leadership, and with the older instincts of the dog dead within them, their merciless feud with what they regarded as an interloper of another breed put the devil heart in Wapi. In all the gray and desolate sweep of his world he had no friend. The heritage of Tao, his forefather, had fallen upon him, and he was an alien in a land of strangers. As the dogs and the men and women and children hated him, so he hated them. He hated the sight and smell of the round-faced, bleary-eyed creatures who were his master, yet he obeyed them, sullenly, watchfully, with his lips wrinkled warningly over fangs which had twice torn out the life of white bears. Twenty times he had killed other dogs. He had fought them singly, and in pairs, and in packs. His giant body bore the scars of a hundred wounds. He had been clubbed until a part of his body was deformed and he traveled with a limp. He kept to himself even in the mating season. And all this because Wapi, the Walrus, forty years removed from the Great Dane of Vancouver, was a white man's dog.

Stirring restlessly within him, sometimes coming to him in dreams and sometimes in a great and unfulfilled yearning, Wapi felt vaguely the strange call of his forefathers. It was impossible for him to understand. It was impossible for him to know what it meant. And yet he did know that somewhere there was something for which he was seeking and which he never found. The desire and the questing came to him most compellingly in the long winter filled with its eternal starlight, when the maddening yap, yap, yap of the little white foxes, the barking of the dogs, and the Eskimo chatter oppressed him like the voices of haunting ghosts. In these long months, filled with the horror of the arctic night, the spirit of Tao whispered within him that somewhere there was light and sun, that somewhere there was warmth and flowers, and running streams, and voices he could understand, and things he could love. And then Wapi would whine, and perhaps the whine would bring him the blow of a club, or the lash of a whip, or an Eskimo threat, or the menace of an Eskimo dog's snarl. Of the latter Wapi was unafraid. With a snap of his jaws, he could break the back of any other dog on Franklin Bay.

Such was Wapi, the Walrus, when for two sacks of flour, some tobacco, and a bale of cloth he became the property of Blake, the uta-wawe-yinew, the trader in seals, whalebone--and women. On this day Wapi's soul took its flight back through the space of forty years. For Blake was white, which is to say that at one time or another he had been white. His skin and his appearance did not betray how black he had turned inside and Wapi's brute soul cried out to him, telling him how he had waited and watched for this master he knew would come, how he would fight for him, how he wanted to lie down and

put his great head on the white man's feet in token of his fealty. But Wapi's bloodshot eyes and battle-scarred face failed to reveal what was in him, and Blake--following the instructions of those who should know--ruled him from the beginning with a club that was more brutal than the club of the Eskimo.

For three months Wapi had been the property of Blake, and it was now the dead of a long and sunless arctic night. Blake's cabin, built of ship timber and veneered with blocks of ice, was built in the face of a deep pit that sheltered it from wind and storm. To this cabin came the Nanatalmutes from the east, and the Kogmollocks from the west, bartering their furs and whalebone and seal-oil for the things Blake gave in exchange, and adding women to their wares whenever Blake announced a demand. The demand had been excellent this winter. Over in Darnley Bay, thirty miles across the headland, was the whaler Harpoon frozen up for the winter with a crew of thirty men, and straight out from the face of his igloo cabin, less than a mile away, was the Flying Moon with a crew of twenty more. It was Blake's business to wait and watch like a hawk for such opportunities as there, and tonight--his watch pointed to the hour of twelve, midnight--he was sitting in the light of a sputtering seal-oil lamp adding up figures which told him that his winter, only half gone, had already been an enormously profitable one.

"If the Mounted Police over at Herschel only knew," he chuckled. "Uppy, if they did, they'd have an outfit after us in twenty-four hours."

Oopi, his Eskimo right-hand man, had learned to understand English, and he nodded, his moon-face split by a wide and enigmatic grin. In his way, "Uppy" was as clever as Shan Tung had been in his.

And Blake added, "We've sold every fur and every pound of bone and oil, and we've forty Upisk wives to our credit at fifty dollars apiece."

Uppy's grin became larger, and his throat was filled with an exultant rattle. In the matter of the Upisk wives he knew that he stood ace-high.

"Never," said Blake, "has our wife-by-the-month business been so good. If it wasn't for Captain Rydal and his love-affair, we'd take a vacation and go hunting."

He turned, facing the Eskimo, and the yellow flame of the lamp lit up his face. It was the face of a remarkable man. A black beard concealed much of its cruelty and its cunning, a beard as carefully Van-dycked as though Blake sat in a professional chair two thousand miles south, but the beard could not hide the almost inhuman hardness of the eyes. There was a glittering light in them as he looked at the Eskimo. "Did you see her today, Uppy? Of course you did. My Gawd, if a woman could ever tempt me, she could! And Rydal is going to have her. Unless I miss my guess, there's going to be money in it for us--a lot of it. The funny part of it is, Rydal's got to get rid of her husband. And how's he going to do it, Uppy? Eh? Answer me that. How's he going to do it?"

In a hole he had dug for himself in the drifted snow under a huge scarp of ice a hundred yards from the igloo cabin lay Wapi. His bed was red with the stain of blood, and a trail of blood led from the cabin to the place where he had hidden himself. Not many hours ago, when by God's sun it should have been day, he had turned at last on a teasing, snarling, back-biting little kiskanuk of a dog and had killed it. And Blake and Uppy had beaten him until he was almost dead.

It was not of the beating that Wapi was thinking as he lay in his wallow. He was thinking of the fur-clad figure that had come between Blake's club and his body, of the moment when for the first time in his life he had seen the face of a white woman. She had stopped Blake's club. He had heard her voice. She had bent over him, and she would have put her hand on him if his master had not dragged her back with a cry of warning. She had gone into the cabin then, and he had dragged himself away.

Since then a new and thrilling flame had burned in him. For a time his senses had been dazed by his punishment, but now every instinct in him was like a living wire. Slowly he pulled himself from his retreat and sat down on his haunches. His gray muzzle was pointed to the sky. The same stars were there, burning in cold, white points of flame as they had burned week after week in the maddening monotony of the long nights near the pole. They were like a million pitiless eyes, never blinking, always watching, things of life and fire, and yet dead. And at those eyes, the little white foxes yapped so incessantly that the sound of it drove men mad. They were yapping now. They were never still. And with their yapping came the droning, hissing monotone of the aurora, like the song of a vast piece of mechanism in the still farther north. Toward this Wapi turned his bruised and beaten head. Out there, just beyond the ghostly pale of vision, was the ship. Fifty times he had slunk out and around it, cautiously as the foxes themselves. He had caught its smells and its sounds; he had come near enough to hear the voices of men, and those voices were like the voice of Blake, his master. Therefore, he had never gone nearer.

There was a change in him now. His big pads fell noiselessly as he slunk back to the cabin and sniffed for a scent in the snow. He found it. It was the trail of the white woman. His blood tingled again, as it had tingled when her face bent over him and her hand reached out, and in his soul there rose up the ghost of Tao to whip him on. He followed the woman's footprints slowly, stopping now and then to listen, and each moment the spirit in him grew more insistent, and he whined up at the stars. At last he saw the ship, a wraithlike thing in its piled-up bed of ice, and he stopped. This was his dead-line. He had never gone nearer. But tonight--if any one period could be called night--he went on.

It was the hour of sleep, and there was no sound aboard. The foxes, never tiring of their infuriating sport, were yapping at the ship. They barked faster and louder when they caught the scent of Wapi, and as he approached, they drifted farther away. The scent of the woman's trail led up the wide bridge of ice, and Wapi followed this as he would have followed a road, until he found himself all at once on the deck of the Flying Moon. For a space he was startled. His long fangs bared themselves at the shadows cast by the stars. Then he saw ahead of him a narrow ribbon of yellow light. Toward this Wapi sniffed out,

step by step, the footprints of the woman. When he stopped again, his muzzle was at the narrow crack through which came the glimmer of light.

It was the door of a deck-house veneered like an igloo with snow and ice to protect it from cold and wind. It was, perhaps, half an inch ajar, and through that aperture Wapi drank the warm, sweet perfume of the woman. With it he caught also the smell of a man. But in him the woman scent submerged all else. Overwhelmed by it, he stood trembling, not daring to move, every inch of him thrilled by a vast and mysterious yearning. He was no longer Wapi, the Walrus; Wapi, the Killer. Tao was there. And it may be that the spirit of Shan Tung was there. For after forty years the change had come, and Wapi, as he stood at the woman's door, was just dog--a white man's dog--again the dog of the Vancouver kennel--the dog of a white man's world.

He thrust open the door with his nose. He slunk in, so silently that he was not heard. The cabin was lighted. In a bed lay a white-faced, hollow-cheeked man--awake. On a low stool at his side sat a woman. The light of the lamp hanging from above warmed with gold fires the thick and radiant mass of her hair. She was leaning over the sick man. One slim, white hand was stroking his face gently, and she was speaking to him in a voice so sweet and soft that it stirred like wonderful music in Wapi's warped and beaten soul. And then, with a great sigh, he flopped down, an abject slave, on the edge of her dress.

With a startled cry the woman turned. For a moment she stared at the great beast wide-eyed, then there came slowly into her face recognition and understanding. "Why, it's the dog Blake whipped so terribly," she gasped. "Peter, it's--it's Wapi!" For the first time Wapi felt the caress of a woman's hand, soft, gentle, pitying, and out of him there came a whimpering sound that was almost a sob.

"It's the dog--he whipped," she repeated, and, then, if Wapi could have understood, he would have noted the tense pallor of her lovely face and the look of a great fear that was away back in the staring blue depths of her eyes.

From his pillow Peter Keith had seen the look of fear and the paleness of her cheeks, but he was a long way from guessing the truth. Yet he thought he knew. For days--yes, for weeks--there had been that growing fear in her eyes. He had seen her mighty fight to hide it from him. And he thought he understood.

"I know it has been a terrible winter for you, dear," he had said to her many times. "But you mustn't worry so much about me. I'll be on my feet again--soon." He had always emphasized that. "I'll be on my feet again soon!"

Once, in the breaking terror of her heart, she had almost told him the truth. Afterward she had thanked God for giving her the strength to keep it back. It was day--for they spoke in terms of day and night--when Rydal, half drunk, had dragged her into his cabin, and she had fought him until her hair was down about her in tangled confusion--and she had told Peter that it was the wind. After that, instead of evading him, she had played Rydal with her wits, while praying to God for help. It was impossible to tell Peter. He had aged

steadily and terribly in the last two weeks. His eyes were sunken into deep pits. His blond hair was turning gray over the temples. His cheeks were hollowed, and there was a different sort of luster in his eyes. He looked fifty instead of thirty-five. Her heart bled in its agony. She loved Peter with a wonderful love.

The truth! If she told him that! She could see Peter rising up out of his bed like a ghost. It would kill him. If he could have seen Rydal--only an hour before--stopping her out on the deck, taking her in his arms, and kissing her until his drunken breath and his beard sickened her! And if he could have heard what Rydal had said! She shuddered. And suddenly she dropped down on her knees beside Wapi and took his great head in her arms, unafraid of him--and glad that he had come.

Then she turned to Peter. "I'm going ashore to see Blake again--now," she said. "Wapi will go with me, and I won't be afraid. I insist that I am right, so please don't object any more, Peter dear."

She bent over and kissed him, and then in spite of his protest, put on her fur coat and hood, and stood for a moment smiling down at him. The fear was gone out of her eyes now. It was impossible for him not to smile at her loveliness. He had always been proud of that. He reached up a thin hand and plucked tenderly at the shining little tendrils of gold that crept out from under her hood.

"I wish you wouldn't, dear," he pleaded.

How pathetically white, and thin, and weak he was! She kissed him again and turned quickly to hide the mist in her eyes. At the door she blew him a kiss from the tip of her big fur mitten, and as she went out she heard him say in the thin, strange voice that was so unlike the old Peter:

"Don't be long, Dolores."

She stood silently for a few moments to make sure that no one would see her. Then she moved swiftly to the ice bridge and out into the star-lighted ghostliness of the night. Wapi followed close behind her, and dropping a hand to her side she called softly to him. In an instant Wapi's muzzle was against her mitten, and his great body quivered with joy at her direct speech to him. She saw the response in his red eyes and stopped to stroke him with both mittened hands, and over and over again she spoke his name. "Wapi--Wapi--Wapi." He whined. She could feel him under her touch as if alive with an electrical force. Her eyes shone. In the white starlight there was a new emotion in her face. She had found a friend, the one friend she and Peter had, and it made her braver.

At no time had she actually been afraid--for herself. It was for Peter. And she was not afraid now. Her cheeks flushed with exertion and her breath came quickly as she neared Blake's cabin. Twice she had made excuses to go ashore--just because she was curious, she had said--and she believed that she had measured up Blake pretty well. It was a case in which her woman's intuition had failed her miserably. She was amazed that such a man

had marooned himself voluntarily on the arctic coast. She did not, of course, understand his business--entirely. She thought him simply a trader. And he was unlike any man aboard ship. By his carefully clipped beard, his calm, cold manner of speech, and the unusual correctness with which he used his words she was convinced that at some time or another he had been part of what she mentally thought of as "an entirely different environment."

She was right. There was a time when London and New York would have given much to lay their hands on the man who now called himself Blake.

Dolores, excited by the conviction that Blake would help her when he heard her story, still did not lose her caution. Rydal had given her another twenty-four hours, and that was all. In those twenty-four hours she must fight out their salvation, her own and Peter's. If Blake should fail--

Fifty paces from his cabin she stopped, slipped the big fur mitten from her right hand and unbuttoned her coat so that she could quickly and easily reach an inside pocket in which was Peter's revolver. She smiled just a bit grimly, as her fingers touched the cold steel. It was to be her last resort. And she was thinking in that flash of the days "back home" when she was counted the best revolver shot at the Piping Rock. She could beat Peter, and Peter was good. Her fingers twined a bit fondly about the pearl-handled thing in her pocket. The last resort--and from the first it had given her courage to keep the truth from Peter!

She knocked at the heavy door of the igloo cabin. Blake was still up, and when he opened it, he stared at her in wide-eyed amazement. Wapi hung outside when Dolores entered, and the door closed. "I know you think it strange for me to come at this hour," she apologized, "but in this terrible gloom I've lost all count of hours. They have no significance for me any more. And I wanted to see you--alone."

She emphasized the word. And as she spoke, she loosened her coat and threw back her hood, so that the glow of the lamp lit up the ruffled mass of gold the hood had covered. She sat down without waiting for an invitation, and Blake sat down opposite her with a narrow table between them. Her face was flushed with cold and wind as she looked at him. Her eyes were blue with the blue of a steady flame, and they met his own squarely. She was not nervous. Nor was she afraid.

"Perhaps you can guess--why I have come?" she asked.

He was appraising her almost startling beauty with the lamp glow flooding down on her. For a moment he hesitated; then he nodded, looking at her steadily. "Yes, I think I know," he said quietly. "It's Captain Rydal. In fact, I'm quite positive. It's an unusual situation, you know. Have I guessed correctly?"

She nodded, drawing in her breath quickly and leaning a little toward him, wondering how much he knew and how he had come by it.

"A very unusual situation," he repeated. "There's nothing in the world that makes beasts out of men--most men--more quickly than an arctic night, Mrs. Keith. And they're all beasts out there--now--all except your husband, and he is contented because he possesses the one white woman aboard ship. It's putting it brutally plain, but it's the truth, isn't it? For the time being they're beasts, every man of the twenty, and you--pardon me!--are very beautiful. Rydal wants you, and the fact that your husband is dying--"

"He is not dying," she interrupted him fiercely. "He shall not die! If he did--"

"Do you love him?" There was no insult in Blake's quiet voice. He asked the question as if much depended on the answer, as if he must assure himself of that fact.

"Love him--my Peter? Yes!"

She leaned forward eagerly, gripping her hands in front of him on the table. She spoke swiftly, as if she must convince him before he asked her another question. Blake's eyes did not change. They had not changed for an instant. They were hard, and cold, and searching, unwarmed by her beauty, by the luster of her shining hair, by the touch of her breath as it came to him over the table.

"I have gone everywhere with him--everywhere," she began. "Peter writes books, you know, and we have gone into all sorts of places. We love it--both of us--this adventuring. We have been all through the country down there," she swept a hand to the south, "on dog sledges, in canoes, with snowshoes, and pack-trains. Then we hit on the idea of coming north on a whaler. You know, of course, Captain Rydal planned to return this autumn. The crew was rough, but we expected that. We expected to put up with a lot. But even before the ice shut us in, before this terrible night came, Rydal insulted me. I didn't dare tell Peter. I thought I could handle Rydal, that I could keep him in his place, and I knew that if I told Peter, he would kill the beast. And then the ice--and this night--" She choked.

Blake's eyes, gimleting to her soul, were shot with a sudden fire as he, too, leaned a little over the table. But his voice was unemotional as rock. It merely stated a fact. "That's why Captain Rydal allowed himself to be frozen in," he said. "He had plenty of time to get into the open channels, Mrs. Keith. But he wanted you. And to get you he knew he would have to lay over. And if he laid over, he knew that he would get you, for many things may happen in an arctic night. It shows the depth of the man's feelings, doesn't it? He is sacrificing a great deal to possess you, losing a great deal of time, and money, and all that. And when your husband dies--"

Her clenched little fist struck the table. "He won't die, I tell you! Why do you say that?"

"Because--Rydal says he is going to die."

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