

Christmas Eve at the China Dog

Tam o' the Scoots

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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INVENTORS are proverbially consecrated amongst the gods. Tam M'Tavish recalled the proverb and grinned at the reeking pot which bubbled and frothed above the burner.

It was a large iron pot, and he had first qualified for his ration by extemporizing from the tubes of an ancient bicycle a tripod from which his boiler was suspended.

The draughty little barn which housed the home-scientist was a discarded army hut of iron, and its few appointments were of a character which would not burn. Moreover the boiling mess, which from time to time he stirred with an iron rod,

was non-inflammable. The smell of it poisoned the adjoining fields and penetrated to the village a mile away, but Tam, in the throes of invention, sniffed nothing.

The tap of a stick's iron ferrule against the door roused him from his rapt contemplation of the cauldron. The little man rose reluctantly, stooping to turn down the flame of the burner, opened the door and stepped out into the light.

At first he thought the caller was a complete stranger. A glimpse of the car's bonnet on the road at the end of the garden explained how the visitor had come.

"Why, Tam," said the stranger, "you're just as skinny and ugly as you always were!"

Tam's eyes narrowed.

"It's not Mr. Merrick?" he said in genuine astonishment. "Why, Mr. Merrick, sir, you have changed."

In the days of the war, Merrick had been one of the brightest and most resourceful of the fighting airmen, and Tam spoke no more than the truth when he said that his erstwhile comrade had changed. It was not a change for the better. Sudden prosperity had not agreed with Walter Merrick: it had made him unhealthily plump, and had brought tiny sacks under his eyes, and an unwholesome color to the skin which Tam remembered used to be like the skin of a girl.

"Changed, have I?" said the other carelessly. "Well, you haven't. What are you doing in there, Tam?"

"It's a wee invention of mine," said Tam solemnly. "A new dope, Mr. Merrick. 'Tis fireproof and waterproof, and I ha' no doots that I'll be making me fortune one of these days."

"You're married, aren't you!" said Merrick, as he walked towards the house, with the shirt-sleeved Tam at his elbow.

"Aye," said Tam, with that habitual caution which made him admit even such important facts as his marriage with an air of reservation, "but ma lady is awa'—in America. She's American," explained Tam, "and her folks wanted to see the wee bairn."

"So you're a grass widower—h'm, that's awkward."

Mr. Merrick looked round the cozy sitting-room into which Tam had ushered him without any evidence of approval.

"Why do you live out in this God-forsaken part of the world—I suppose it is handy for your air taxi—I saw your advertisement in *The Times* the other day. What is the bus like?"

"She's like all the buses you ever knew, Mr. Merrick, sir," said Tam. He was wondering why the absence of his wife should be described as "awkward." "She has the engine of a bomber and the wings of a scout. I bought bits of her from the disposal board, and I assembled them myself. You're not wanting a ride, Mr. Merrick?"

His eyes twinkled mischievously.

"A ride? Good lord, no," said Mr. Merrick. "I haven't the nerve for it now, Tam; I think I must be getting old."

"Maybe your nerves are losing their confidence in ye," said Tam quietly.

Merrick had seated himself in a chair by the window and was looking around restlessly.

"My nerves are gone, that's a fact," he admitted. "I wouldn't dare trust myself with a joy-stick now, though I don't suppose I'd be afraid to go as a passenger, especially if you were the pilot, Tam."

"Any testimonial you'd like to give to me would you kindly put into writing, Mr. Merrick! I'm making a collection of them."

There was an awkward pause. The visitor had certainly not yet revealed his business, and Tam was curious to hear.

Presently the object of his visit was exposed.

"Tam," he said suddenly, "I'm wondering how you're fixed for money. Would you like a five hundred pound job?"

"Five hundred a year or five hundred a week?" asked Tam.

"Five hundred pounds for a few days' work," said Mr. Merrick impressively.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the room.

"I'll tell you what it is all about, Tam," he said, "and you'll understand that I am putting myself rather in your power. It's about a girl."

"Aye," said Tam quietly, "I was thinking it was, Mr. Merrick, sir."

"She's very unhappy," said Mr. Merrick, who was no story-teller, and left many gaps to be filled in by his hearer. "The fact is, Tam, she's married to a fellow who doesn't appreciate her."

"I've read of such cases," said Tam. "Ye have to get married before ye get thoroughly unappreciated."

"But I'm fond of her," said Mr. Merrick doggedly, "and she's fond of me. I'm a pretty rich man, Tam. I came into all my uncle's money after the war, and I can give her the time she wants, but I don't want to get mixed up in this business, you see."

"Do ye want her to get mixed up in it?" asked Tam dryly.

"That's different," said Mr. Merrick, with a wave of his hand. "She's going to run away from him anyway. He's as poor as a church mouse, and naturally a girl who likes life and pleasure, theatre parties, Tam, and all that sort of thing... she's just fretting her heart out."

"Puir lassie," said Tam, without any great display of sympathy. "Maybe she's never tried the ceenema pictures? They're verra interesting, Mr. Merrick."

"Don't be a fool," said the other rudely. "Pictures! What the devil does she want to go to pictures for, when she can have the time of her life? However, I don't want to discuss that matter. Would you bring her over to Paris and bring her back again at the end of a week and"—he hesitated—"well," he blurted out at last, "you're married and nobody knows your wife isn't here. Suppose any inquiries were made, would you say that she'd been staying..." he ended a little breathlessly, for he had seen the queer, hard look in Tam's eyes.

"It is all square and above-board," he added hastily. "Platonic friendship, you know, Tam. She will come with a chaperone, and all that sort of thing, and it's worth five hundred."

"Maybe it is worth five thousand," said Tam quietly, "but not to me, Mr. Merrick. I believe in making the coorse of love run smooth, but I've no experience with platonic friendship. And noo, Mr. Merrick, we'll talk about other things. Why, I haven't seen you since Mr. Selby's wedding. He's a graund young fellow, that

friend of yours, Mr. Merrick. I mind the day he brought doon six of our late enemy."

Merrick, who had resumed his chair, shifted round uncomfortably and swallowed something.

"A guy fine man," said Tam emphatically, "and a verra fine lady he married, Mr. Merrick. Wi' all that graund golden hair and eyes like blue saucers. Have ye seen him lately?"

"Oh yes," said Merrick indifferently, "I see them occasionally. She often speaks about you," he said, and Tam thought he spoke meaningly.

"About me," he said in surprise. "And I did na' think she ever saw me; I was eating all the time I was there."

"She likes you, Tam," said Merrick, "and she trusts you. She only said the other day, 'I'm sure Tam would do anything for me.'"

Tam M'Tavish stepped back, his head perched on one side like an inquisitive hen, his hands thrust deeply into his breeches pocket.

"Oh aye," he said softly, "but you're not telling me, Mr. Merrick, that Mrs. Selby is the lady who is starving for the grand boulevards de Paris?"

"Yes she is," said the other doggedly. "Now are you going to help?"

Tam looked at the floor for a long time. Then he walked slowly to the door and opened it.

"Ye'll be getting along now, Mr. Merrick," he said. "There'll be rain coming, or my corn is committing pair-jury."

"All right," said the other, his face red with anger, "if you're going to play the sneak on an old comrade, Tam, of course I'm in your power."

"I would no outrage yar sense of decency by so low doon an action," said Tam with cold sarcasm. "There's na reason to sneak against ye, Mr. Merrick; ye're no married, and if ye were I shouldna want your wife, or the chaperone within yair gates, to go zooming off to Paris wi' me. Noo, will ye get oot?" His voice trembled with suppressed fury, and Mr. Merrick did not look back as he strode down the flagged path of the garden to his waiting car.

Tam went back to his room not a little perturbed. Such problems as these came very seldom into his experience, and when, as they did at times, he caught glimpses of an ugly side of life, more ugly than the battle-fields of France and Flanders had shown him, he was nauseated.

Before he had joined the Flying Corps he had been a mechanic in a Glasgow factory, and his life had been one of singular austerity. He had hated war: his chief offense against society had been his hatred of war, and his steadfast refusal to join the army until the sheer mechanics of flying had lured him into uniform. But there were things he hated worse than war.

He had heard, and perforce been a spectator, of uncleanly things, but to him they were part of the phenomena of the circumstances in which he found himself. He was a spectator without ever having the faintest idea that he could be a participator in irregularities which neither offended nor interested him.

He was not readily shocked, but now, as he sat down and thought out the situation which had been presented to him that afternoon, he was first bewildered, then horrified. Little Selby had been a favorite of his: Tam had liked him because of his sheer incompetence. He was the worst pilot in the flight, crashed more

machines on landing than any other man in the squadron, and had escaped the consequence of his blundering so often that he had earned the nickname of "the immortal Selby." He was a straight little man, with a heart as big as his head, a man without fear or malice. He had eventually been transferred to the tactical bureau of the corps, where he had made a big name for himself. Tam went to his wedding, and had admired, in his critical way, his fluffy little bride. Tam was not a fair judge of women. Whatever might be their qualities, they were foredoomed to fall short of the standard represented by the girl who bore his name, and who, at that moment, with the chubby son of his house, was visiting her relations on the other side. It didn't seem possible that a girl like Mrs. Selby... and yet Tam knew in his heart of hearts that Merrick had spoken the truth. To go to the injured husband was impossible. To warn the girl herself was beyond Tam's courage.

He went back to his little barn to find half his precious dope had boiled over on the floor, extinguishing the fire and adding to the general confusion of smells the additional pungency of escaping gas.

It was a week later before Tam found time to go to London. His experiment, and a hiring which took him into Cornwall, intervened.

Selby, he discovered, was employed by a firm of city architects, but he was not in his office. He had not been there for three days. Tam inquired for his private address, and took a bus to Hampstead to call at the house, without having any definite idea in his mind as to what he would say, or what excuse he would make for his visit when he got there.

He had, too, an uncomfortable feeling that Mrs. Selby knew of his refusal to aid Merrick, and the knowledge that he was privy to her secret could not fail to be embarrassing to both.

The house, a little villa, was locked up. No answer came to his knock; the blinds were drawn; and he inquired of a neighbor. The neighbor was so woodenly discreet that Tam felt his heart sink. Then by a piece of good luck he came upon a gossiping milkman who supplied disquieting information.

Mrs. Selby had gone away; whither, nobody knew. She had left a note, because the housemaid had seen Selby read it on his return in the evening. The next morning he closed up the house, and himself disappeared.

The milkman was satisfied that the lady had run away, and that her husband had started off in pursuit of her, and that was the view that Tam took until he read the next week in the newspaper a paragraph saying that John Selby, an ex-officer of the Royal Air Force, had been charged with being drunk and disorderly in the west end of London, and had been discharged with a caution.

Tam came to London again and tried to find his old comrade. At the police court they furnished him with the address that the prisoner had given. This proved to be a furnished room in Bloomsbury, which Selby had quitted the day after his appearance at the police court.

Tam went back to his experiments with a sad heart.

It was four days before Christmas that he received a letter, and the handwriting on the envelope seemed familiar. He opened it. It was from Selby, and it was dated from Tunbridge Wells.

Dear Tam [it ran], I hear you have been making inquiries about me and I am sorry I missed you. At present I am in a nursing home, rather run down, but I hope you will come and call upon us when I get out, which will be some time in the new year. My wife will be very glad to see you. She has been abroad for a little while, but she is now back in town.

Tam read the letter again. "She is now back in town." He frowned, and then a smile slowly dawned on his face, and he went back to the work of painting his machine, for he had discovered that non-inflammable dope for which inventors had sought, a dope that rendered even a soft wood fireproof, so that he could thrust a stick painted with the wonder into the heart of a coal fire and withdraw it hot but flameless. The sturdy little air-taxi grew green under his persevering brush, and his diminutive assistant and he worked while daylight lasted, covering fuselage and wings, rudder post, and elevators with the fire-resisting concoction.

On the Christmas Eve Tam had finished his work. It had been a raw, gray day, a southwesterly gale had blown itself out, and had been succeeded by a drizzling rain, and Tam, who, like most Scotsmen, had less of a sentimental interest in Christmas than in the New Year, retired to his snugery to read.

Two long shelves carried his reading matter, and the literature was of a type which is very seldom found in the libraries of ordinary students. For they were those stories of daring and adventure which delight the heart of youth. Stories of superhuman cowboys, of unnaturally villainous desperadoes, and amazingly brilliant detectives, who discovered on the last page the solution which the reader had found for himself on the second. Stories of heroic young sailors, who, although of a tender age, had ordered captains from the bridge in moments of peril, and had piloted gallant barques to safe harborage amidst the applause of beautiful passengers. They were all very precious to Tam, and more convincing, more human than the tales of Phryxus or Ulysses, or the Pythian Apollo.

He filled his pipe and settled back comfortably into his chair, and only the sound of rainwater dripping from the runnels and the occasional flap-flap where the wind caught a loose board of his hangar broke the stillness. Presently the sound of the tapping board got on Tam's nerves, and he rose, slipped on his boots, and went out into the night with a hammer and a nail. He nailed down the board, opened the door of the hangar and took a look at the machine. He touched the glittering paint with his finger, and wiped his finger on his overall before he withdrew, locking the door behind him. As he drew nearer the house he was conscious of a shrill sound. It was the telephone ringing, and he hurried indoors.

"Is that Mr. M'Tavish?" said a voice.

"That's me," said Tam.

"We've a job for you tonight."

"Who is it talking?" asked Tam.

The speaker gave the name of a firm that Tam did not remember having heard before.

"It's no' a night for flyin'," said Tam discouragingly, for the cheerful fire and the open book on the table had a powerful appeal. "There's no moon and—"

"The fee is a hundred guineas each way," was the reply. "The glass has gone up and the wind is veering to the west. It is a case of life or death, Mr. M'Tavish."

Tam scratched his chin.

"Will it no' do in the morning?" he asked.

"No," was the emphatic reply. "A gentleman has been bitten by a mad dog. He must get over to Paris tonight to the Pasteur institute for an injection. You can bring him back before the early morning."

"Is there no Pasteur institute in this country?" asked Tam in surprise.

"This is a special case," said the man impatiently. "Will you take it?"

"How long will he be?" asked Tam.

"He'll be with you in an hour," was the answer.

Tam looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock.

"All right," he said. "Does he know where I live? I'll be waiting in the field."

"Flash a lamp," said the speaker. "He will come over on his motor-bicycle."

"Where are you speaking from?" asked Tam.

"From London," and then they were cut off.

Tam hung up the telephone receiver, put a fire-guard before the fire, and then went up to change. A quarter of an hour later with some difficulty he wheeled the aeroplane from its hangar and filled up his tanks. Then he dragged the machine to the end of the field he leased. A night ascent had no terrors for Tam, particularly now that the wind had fallen and the stars showed through the breaking clouds.

He had been waiting half an hour when he heard the "ticka-tick" of a motor-cycle coming along the road. Presently it stopped and he flashed his hand-lamp. A few minutes later a man came walking towards him out of the darkness. He saved Tam from committing the impertinence of flashing his lamp upon him by stopping to light a cigarette. Tam had a glimpse of a man with a close-cropped iron beard and heavy black eyebrows.

"You'll no' be able to smoke, sir," said Tam.

"Oh, shan't I?" said the other gruffly as he threw his cigarette away. "Are you ready?"

"Ah've just to swing the prop," said Tam, and was moving off.

"You'd better take this money," said the passenger, and thrust a roll of notes into Tam's hand.

"It would have done any time," said Tam politely. Nevertheless, he buttoned it away into his pocket. The stranger, he noticed, was dressed in a leather coat perfectly equipped for the journey.

"Where would you like to be landing?" said Tam. "There are two aerodromes."

"There's one to the east of the city—the old army aerodrome."

"It's no' used now," said Tam.

"It will do," said the man. "It is nearest to—to the institute."

Tam looked at him suspiciously. He was not the type of man who would be engaged in smuggling, beside which he carried no baggage whatever, and the things in which smugglers find profit have bulk. Tam knew that it was an irregularity to land passengers at any other than the official aerodromes, but he was not a stickler for the law. Tam, at heart, was a revolutionary. Regulations filled him with an insane sense of resentment, and his first temptation on being acquainted with a new rule was to break it.

"Will you be able to land here on the return journey?" asked the passenger.

"I'll land or fa'," said Tam laconically.

Ten minutes later the machine was racing through a mist of cloud, and they glimpsed the world below at intervals. Tiny spangles of light at wide intervals and parallelograms of lighted pin-points distinguished country from town.

Now they were over the sea, rolling and pitching in the uneven air which the storm had left in its trail.

Calais light stabbed up at them in vivid, narrow beams, and an air-way lighthouse sent a steady pillar of light to the sky to direct them. Soon Paris was ahead on the horizon, a blur of white and yellow lights, and Tam banked to the left and peered downward for the landing ground he had known so well during the war.

It lay in the center of a triangle, the base of which was the white arcs of a railway siding, the apex a blast furnace, the blue light of which was visible.

Tam had not landed here for eighteen months. It might have been built on for all he knew, or worse still, it might be littered with war stores, the fate of so many aerodromes.

He could see nothing in the black void to which the nose of his machine was pointing. Down, down he swept, and then peering through two eyes which were veritable slits he dropped the nose a fraction more, flattened out and landed without mishap.

"Here ye are, sir," he said. "What time will ye be thinking of returning?"

The man leapt lightly to the ground.

"If I'm not back by three o'clock I shall not be coming at all," he said, and added, "I shall have been detained in the institute for further treatment."

"Very good, sir," said Tam gravely. "The best way into the town is along by the railway. You strike the road about five hundred yards away."

The stranger did not trouble to reply. He disappeared into the darkness, and Tam remembered that he had not asked him his name. He lit his pipe and was walking round the machine when he felt something soft at his feet, and turned the flashlight on it. It was the stranger's leather coat, his gloves and the helmet he had been wearing. Apparently he had carried some sort of cloth cap in his pocket. Tam looked at the coat and smiled ruefully, for it was daubed and streaked with the fire-resisting dope which was perfect in all respects save that it refused to dry.

It happened that that night Mr. Merrick entertained a party at the *Chien de Chine*, which at the moment was the rendezvous of all that was smart and fashionable in Paris. At eleven o'clock in the evening his dinner-party might be said to have only just begun for most of the guests. For Mr. Merrick it had begun in the afternoon at the American bar at Pangianas, and eleven o'clock found him tearfully voluble on women and their fickleness. He had an interested audience. For "Walter Merrick was an extraordinarily wealthy young man, and those kind of orators command a respectful hearing. *Donna e mobile* from the orchestra furnished at once the text and the excuse for the lecture, which began with a toast which he insisted upon all his guests drinking. The toast was "Absent fairies" and most of the company knew who his fairy was and the circumstances in which she had flown away.

"...mind you, I admit I was disagreeable," said Mr. Merrick a little thickly. "But when a woman whines all the time about another fellow, what is a fellow to do? I sent her packing! She bored me, she wearied me, but, girls, I adore her!"

He blinked back two drunken tears.

"She's got 'n impossible husband, the awful fool—"

He went on to talk frankly and, to the ears of any decent man or woman, unpleasantly. They would have got up and left the gilded-mirrored room, and would have drunk in God's fresh air with gratitude and relief. But the acquaintances Walter Merrick had accumulated—and he had had the pick of every revue house in Paris—only imperfectly understood him when he spoke in English, and would not have been greatly offended if they had understood all.

"What I think about women—" resumed Merrick after a pause.

He got so far when the door opened slowly. A man with an iron-gray beard stood in the doorway. The bemused host did not see him for a moment, and when he did a frown gathered on his plump face.

"Hello, who the devil are you?" he asked.

The stranger did not reply. He raised an automatic which was in his hand and fired twice, and Walter Merrick fell across the table stone dead. Before the most excitable could scream, the door closed with a crash and a key was turned.

It was half-past one when Tam thought he heard somebody moving toward him, and pressed the key of his electric lamp.

"There you are!" said a voice. "Put out your lamp. Are you ready?"

"Aye," said Tam. "Did ye get what ye wanted?"

"Yes," said the man shortly.

They made a good get-away, but it was not till they were over Abbeville that Tam remembered that he had not mentioned the leather coat which he had stowed in the fuselage. He leant forward and tapped the man on the shoulder.

"Your coat's under your seat," he yelled, and saw the passenger nod, but he made no attempt to shelter himself from the keen southwesterly wind.

Tam reached Horsham, flying unerringly by certain land-lights which were familiar to him, and he made his landing in the dark without troubling to fire the magnesium flares under his wing tips. It was four o'clock when he said good-bye to the stranger, and heard the "ticka-tick" of his cycle growing fainter and fainter in the direction of Horsham town. Then he turned to the task of housing his machine.

"A happy Christmas to ye, son," he said grimly as he stood surveying himself in the bedroom mirror. "Ye're a grand pilot but, man, ye're a puir, mean kind of inventor," and he spent another hour ridding himself of the dope that would hot dry on anything except his clothing.

It was later in the morning over a frugal breakfast that he read of the murder of Walter Merrick. The reporters had given a very graphic description of the orgy which had preceded the murder, and one had secured an almost verbatim report of Merrick's drunken homily. Tam read the account through several times. Then he folded the paper and went on eating his breakfast with great calmness. Now the story of May Selby's folly was revealed in all its ugliness, for although no names were given, Tam guessed who the woman was—the woman who had "bored" the exigent Mr. Merrick and whom he had sent "packing."

In the afternoon he got out his little two-seater and drove to Tunbridge Wells, a journey of twenty miles.

He had no difficulty in finding the nursing-home where Selby was confined, and almost immediately he was taken by the matron to the big room which the sick man occupied.

"No," said that lady in reply to his question. "Mr. Selby isn't very ill. He requires rest and quiet. He has been suffering a little from over-strain."

"Has he been here long?"

"For nearly a week," said the matron. "He has a room on the ground floor in one of the wings. He is such a light sleeper that the slightest noise awakens him. Mrs. Selby is with him now."

Tam stopped dead.

"Mrs. Selby?" he said in a panic, and then, drawing a long breath, "Verra good, ma'am if ye'll be kind enough to show me the way."

Selby was in bed, a fair-haired young man, his face was drawn and a little wasted by care, but he greeted Tam with a smile and a nod.

"I'm glad to see you, Tam," he said. "You got my letter."

"Aye, I got your letter. Good afternoon, Mistress Selby."

The girl who was sitting by the side of her husband's bed rose and held out her hand. Something had matured what had been mere prettiness into an almost ethereal beauty, thought Tam. There was no challenge in her eyes as he had expected. She met him with the assurance which wisdom gives to saint and sinner alike, and which comes from a knowledge of the worst. Her eyes were red, Tam noticed, and Selby with his quick intuition must have realized that Tam had noted this.

"My wife is rather upset by the death of an old friend of ours," he said. "You remember Merrick, Tam?"

The coolness of the question took Tam's breath away.

"Aye, I remember him," he said, after a pause.

"He was the man who was shot in Paris last night," said Selby gently, and Tam looked at him fascinated.

"You don't say," he said; then:

"Have you been to Paris lately?" asked Selby unexpectedly.

Tam was silent for a moment, then he shook his head.

"No, I've no' been to Paris for months," he replied, and his voice was as steady as Selby's.

Mrs. Selby went soon after, and Tam was left alone with the sick man.

"It's a grand room you've got, Mr. Selby, sir," he said. "A beautiful large window, and you could drop into the garden as easy as saying knife. And I don't doot that ye could keep a nice little motor-cycle in yon garage."

He nodded his head toward the open window.

"I dare say I could, Tam," said Selby quietly.

Tam rubbed his chin with an irritable gesture.

"Mr. Selby, sir," he said, "do ye remember the theatrical entertainments we used to have in France? They were fine and gay. And do ye remember how ye used to make up like an auld gentleman, so that you're best friends wouldn't know ye?"

Selby did not reply.

"I'll be awa' the noo," said Tam, and held out his hand.

The other hesitated, and then with a quick movement clasped the outstretched palm.

Tam held the hand for a moment, then turned its palm upwards. There was a faint green stain across the fingers.

"Ye'll find pumice-stone the only thing that'll take it off," said Tam, and walked slowly to the door.

With the edge of the door in his hand he turned.

"Did ye not know, Mr. Selby, sir," he said reproachfully, "that ye could no' smoke a cigarette in a bus! It was verra unprofessional, Mr. Selby, sir, verra unprofessional."

