

# The Tale of the Three Antiquaries

By H. Pease

Thomas Turnbull stood beside his spade and gazed rapturously at a small portable Roman altar which he had just unearthed. Owing to a fortunate legacy he had recently been enabled to retire from his business as a ship's broker, and had bought a farm not far from the line of the Roman Wall in mid Northumberland.

He prided himself on being a practical man in all he undertook—'Plain Tom Turnbull' he styled himself, and in the pursuit of antiquities, which was now his hobby, he sneered at all theorists, and relied upon the spade. '*Magister Palae*' was his motto, and now he had justified his belief in his farm's occupying the site of an early out-lying Roman camp.

Squat in build, sanguine in complexion, and auburn-haired, he stood 'four-square to all the winds'; his bold, prominent eyes recalled the muzzle of an ancient blunderbuss ready to loose off at a moment's notice.

Now the Society of Antiquaries of Oldcastle, of which he was a member, were making a pilgrimage along the Wall on the next day, and he had offered to provide tea for their refreshment at the conclusion of their excursion.

Thus his 'find' was twice fortunate. He would now be enabled to confound Telfer, one of the most learned of the Society's members, by the evidence of his spade work. Telfer was an antiquary of the 'well-documented' kind, an attorney by profession, thin and anæmic—'a parchment browser,' Turnbull called him, as one founding himself upon references in all discussions on antiquity. He had been indeed very sceptical of the existence of Turnbull's 'early, out-lying camp' and had annoyed 'Plain Tom' by his doubts.

Turnbull laid aside his spade, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and took up his altar again reverently. Then he drew from his pocket a small flask, poured a few drops into the tiny *focus* on the top as a libation to Bacchus, and himself toasted 'the spade.' Carefully handling his precious possession he returned home with it in his arms and placed it on the drawing-room mantelpiece, to the dismay of his wife, who misdoubted the religion of the Romans. 'That's a settler for Telfer,' he said triumphantly; 'he'll be up to-morrow, and he'll have to swallow it.'

'Swallow it! Swallow it!' echoed his wife. 'My dear, what do you mean?'

'He'll have to swallow it first, then he can have his tea on the top of it,' replied her husband with a grin. 'But do you give a look to it before he goes, for he 'd pinch it if he got the chance.'

'You don't mean to say that he would actually steal it?' queried his wife, aghast.

'Wouldn't he, though? He'd lift anything that was not too heavy or too hot,' retorted her husband.

The next day proved to be a lovely autumn morning, and the prospect along the Wall perfect for the antiquary, who could see it crawling like some great serpent on its belly, with many an undulation from east to west, over many a mile beneath the racing clouds and sunshine.

Turnbull walked down to meet the party of excursionists beside a newly excavated mile-castle where they were to eat their sandwiches and discuss their theories. After that he was to conduct them to his house 'The Crag,' and show them his altar and give them refreshment.

Turnbull took the very earliest opportunity of informing them of his 'find,' and while his friends congratulated him Mr. Telfer opined that its discovery proved nothing as to a camp, for a portable altar might easily be discovered anywhere along the Wall, and there was no record of

any camp at that particular spot. 'The spade will show,' cried 'Plain Tom,' triumphantly. 'It's just my first-fruits. Wait a few weeks and my spade will prove it.' Almost at once the party moved onwards, for they had an early train to catch, and as soon as they reached the house tea was set before them, and their host handed round the altar for inspection. 'Pity there's no record on it to show to what God it was dedicated,' said one, 'and by whom.'

'It probably belonged to some pioneers along the Wall who built themselves a temporary camp whilst prospecting,' said Turnbull.

Telfer, on the other hand, was of opinion that the altar was not of the local freestone, had probably been brought from a neighbouring camp, and eventually thrown away when the Picts and Scots overran the Wall.

'If you'll show me the place where you found it,' he added, 'I can prove to you, I think, that the surrounding stone is different.'

'My pioneers probably imported it,' said the other boldly, 'but the kind of stone is neither here nor there. However, I'll gladly show you the identical spot where I howked it out.'

While the rest of the party made their way down the valley towards the railway station, 'Plain Tom' went off with his sceptic to the place of excavation.

'There,' said he, pointing to the spot, 'that's where it came from,' and as he spoke he turned over with his spade some debris that had fallen into the hole. His companion took up a fragment of stone, examined it, shook his head, then proceeded to 'howk' out with his stick a stone of some size lying half-bedded in the earth at the bottom of the hole. He levered it away, and it rolled over on its side; something glittered beneath. 'Ha! an aureus!' cried the attorney, and dashed upon it.

'I told you so, I told you so,' shouted his host in triumphant joy. 'This proves it!'

His joy was perhaps excessive; it seemed to eclipse at least his surprise, but his companion paid no attention to him in his own excitement.

'Ha! an aureus of Hadrian—and in excellent preservation,' rejoined the other, after a careful examination. 'What an uncommonly lucky find!' and without more ado he slid it into the palm of his left hand.

'A find!' echoed 'Plain Tom,' choking upon astonishment and rage. 'Here, hand it over—I'm owner here,' for his own particular pet coin was disappearing from his ken.

'Even if you were the Lord of the Manor you could not make your claim good,' replied the attorney coolly. 'He who finds, keeps. Treasure trove to be claimed must be hidden—*lucri aut metus causâ*. This aureus was evidently lost or cast away in flight. The finder retains it.'

'Cast away in flight' sounded ludicrously enough in the other's ears, but he was incapable of speech. Indeed, 'Plain Tom' with difficulty controlled the fires that were scorching him within. His hands trembled convulsively on the handle of the spade; his enemy had turned about and taken a step down the hillside as if to follow his companions. Now beckoned Opportunity. 'Plain Tom' grasped his spade more tightly, lifted it in air, and brought it down with a thud on the top of his enemy's cloth cap. The attorney's knees gave way instantly; he sank in a heap, then slowly rolled forward and onward down the slope. The aureus had dropped from his limp hand. 'Plain Tom' was on to it like a knife—the song of Deborah and Barak on his lips. Then he paused and looked upon the motionless figure of the man below now lying half hidden amongst some bracken. What was to be done? A shudder of dismay crept up the observer's spine. Could he be dead? No, no, he was only stunned.

Well, 'Plain Tom' swiftly determined on his line of action. There was a shepherd's cottage only a quarter of a mile away where he might get help to lift and carry the fallen man; he would

leave him there for the night after explaining that he had found him lying unconscious from a faint in the bracken. That done, he would himself go for the local doctor and explain how he had found the attorney's body. Then he examined the spade carefully. There was no sign of blood upon it, fortunately. He had caught his enemy squarely with the flat of it; all was well, for none had seen him—not even his victim—lift it and strike.

The shepherd was at home, and at once accompanied him to the spot. 'He's deid,' said the herd, lifting up a limp arm. 'I'm doubtin' he's got awa.'

'Nonsense,' said his companion with affected assurance. 'He'd a weak heart, I know, and the long walk has been over much for him. His pulse is all right,' he added, pretending to feel upon the wrist. 'Now we'll carry him to your house, and I'll fetch the doctor. He'll be all right in an hour or two, I'll bet a guinea.'

The attorney was of slim build, and the two men carried him easily to the cottage. Leaving him there Turnbull strode off for the doctor, whom he found at home. Explaining how he had found the body, he helped the doctor saddle his pony and bade him ride with all speed, requesting him to bring him word to 'The Crag' when he had recalled his patient to consciousness.

Then 'Plain Tom' set off for his home, whistling to himself to keep up his spirits, and ever and anon glancing at his recovered aureus with joy. 'Magister Palae,' he muttered to himself, 'tis a fine weapon.'

The doctor did not arrive at The Crag till some two hours later, and when he did he showed a long face. After he had seated himself in Turnhull's little sanctum, sacred to his antiquities, he delivered himself slowly of his professional opinion. 'He's bad,' he said mournfully, 'verra bad,' for the doctor was Scotch; 'he's had an unco shock'—he glanced keenly at his companion as he spoke—'and a verr a bad fall. His hairt is gey weak—and he says—if he disna recover he'll haunt ye—for what ye've done.'

For what I've done!' cried 'Plain Tom,' aghast. 'The poor man's brain's affected. What on earth can he mean?'

'And he said also that if the worst should happen,' continued the other with unmoved visage, 'that he would bequeath me the aureus. He's a warrum-hearted body, an' he kens that I'm a bit of an antiquary mysel'.'

'His aureus!' exclaimed 'Plain Tom' with re-aroused indignation, and forgetful of secrecy, 'why the damned fellow—no, I don't mean that—I mean he's delirious; but he'll be all right again soon, doctor?' he appealed earnestly.

'I'm nane so sure of that,' replied the other, shaking his head. 'I thought as I came along I had a sort of a feeling as of a wraith nigh about me—a lang, eldritch sort o' a form i' the mist.'

His host shuddered, looked through the window apprehensively in the gloaming, saw some vague, misty wraith approaching. Then he felt for the aureus in his waistcoat pocket.

'Oot wi' it,' the doctor demanded, and 'oot' it came after a struggle. The doctor rose and held out his hand. 'Aweel,' he said, 'it's safe wi' me. I'll awa noo—back to my patient, for I'll no' can leave him just yet.'

Then the door closed silently behind him. '*Vicisti, O Caledonia,*' groaned 'Plain Tom,' and as he spoke he rose up in search of the whisky bottle and consolation.