

**THE TRIAL OF GIDEON:
AND COUNTESS
ALMARA'S MURDER**

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The Trial of Gideon: And Countess Almara's Murder by Julian Hawthorne

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JULIAN HAWTHORNE

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BY
JULIAN HAWTHORNE.

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THE TRIAL OF GIDEON.

I.

DURING an excursion to the Levant, some years ago, I separated myself from my party, who were bound for Antioch, and rode northeastward, accompanied only by an Arab and a pack-mule. My nominal destination was Mt. Ararat and the shores of the Caspian; but I really wished to explore, in a sentimental mood, and so far as possible alone, the upper portion of the old Mesopotamian region. My Arab, though he acted as dragoon, knew as little about the geography of the country as I did, and nothing whatever about its history. This, however, did not disturb me. I wished to discover, and to enjoy my impressions. I had a smattering of two or three Oriental languages; the cradle of the human race was before me, and, if Achmed knew nothing, he was a reasonably tractable rascal, and could do what he was told.

A journey of some days brought us to the banks of the Euphrates, which we followed up-stream, and soon came in sight of the snow-crowned heights of the Taurus range of mountains. The country hereabouts was extraordinarily picturesque. The valley is very fertile, and its rich luxuriance contrasts with the stern and remote sublimity of the lofty acclivities. The atmosphere at that season of the year—it was early spring—was warm.

and inspiring, with a luxurious quality in it that soothed the mind, and made the life of the senses delicious. And the consciousness that I was treading in the footsteps of the most primitive civilization enhanced the natural charm. The country was now nearly destitute of fixed inhabitants, and might have seemed virgin ; but how many of the splendid nations of a forgotten antiquity had known it as the scene of their wars, their triumphs, their prosperity, and their ruin !

One rosy afternoon, just before sunset, we passed a bend of the river, and suddenly entered a remarkable valley. The left bank of the river had apparently subsided, at some far-distant epoch, and the waters, overflowing, had formed a shallow lake, five or six miles in circumference. The westward margins of the lake were low, and bordered with thick vegetation, and thence lapsed away in subdued undulations. But on the right bank the topography was conspicuously different. The land here rose steeply almost from the brink of the broad stream ; and, after forming a broad and rugged shelf some two hundred feet above our level, ascended higher after the manner of a stupendous and irregular flight of natural steps, growing ever more and more naked and verdureless, until at length only the living rock remained, its crevices marked here and there by growths of hardy bushes ; and high over all were snow-crowned peaks, now tinted with rose-color by the upward rays of the sun, which had already left us in shadow. The river made a curve below of perhaps half a mile diameter, and the acclivity lifted itself above it in the form of a Titanic amphitheatre. Here might the angels of Milton have sat to witness the drama of mankind.

I bade Achmed unload the mule, and we encamped beside the river. As the twilight increased, the crescent

of the moon defined itself low down toward the south, looking (as it frequently does in these countries) only a few miles distant. Its light gleamed on the calm surface of the stream, and threw gigantic shadows down the huge terraces of the mountain. In all my wanderings, methought I had never beheld a grander spectacle. The sky, profound and transparent, seemed to hold the stars midway in its depth. The lake extended black and inscrutable beneath, and there was silence everywhere, save for the minor note of the frogs and the occasional lonely cry of a water-bird among the sedges of the margin. Deserted though the region appeared, however, I was unable to rid myself of the impression that I was looking upon what had been the theatre of some mighty episode of forgotten history. Indeed, the imagination might safely be left to its own devices in such a spot; it could hardly transcend the possible fact. I strolled down to a small knoll, at the point where the waters of the river flowed in to form the lake, and sat down there upon a fragment of rock. By and by the moon disappeared behind a spur of the mountain; but, as I gazed into the bosom of the lake, I saw a bright reflection there; and looking upward, I perceived, nearly in the zenith, an exceedingly brilliant star, the name of which I was not astronomer enough to determine. Be it what it might, it was the most conspicuous object in the heavens, and seemed to dominate the valley—so large was it, and so softly lustrous. I could almost fancy that I was sensible of a peculiar influence from it, as if it shone especially for the place in which I was. No doubt an astrologer might have discovered grounds for humoring this idea. If men have their particular stars, why not also certain defined regions of the earth's surface?

Smiling at my own fantasies, I arose from my rocky

seat and descended to the little strand against which the noiseless current lapped. The reflection of the stars, striking across the surface, fell upon a small rounded object at my feet. I picked it up, and found it to be a fragment of brick-like substance, of a yellowish-brown hue, and with an appearance of erosion on one of its flat surfaces. A closer examination, however, revealed the fact that what had appeared to be natural markings were in truth artificial, and that I held in my hand one of those records stamped in terra-cotta (or some similar material), numerous specimens of which are found among the ruins of Babylon and other immemorial cities. The character appeared to be a primitive form of Hebraic writing; but it had become too much defaced to be easily legible. I could decipher only a single word, apparently the name of a city, which may be rendered in English by "Nebo." I was aware that one or more places bearing a similar title had formerly existed in Palestine, but I had never heard of a Nebo so far east. History, however, really knows comparatively little about this region. It does not present difficulties enough to tempt the more adventurous class of explorers, and it is out of the line of Cook's tourists and their like. As for the wandering, half-savage tribes of Kurds who range through these solitudes, they neither know nor care anything about the past. Imagination might rebuild a city almost anywhere hereabouts without infringing upon the rights of the most exacting geographer.

I took my brick back with me to the tent, intending to investigate it further by candle-light; but it yielded nothing further, and, indeed, I could scarcely recover, by this artificial illumination, even so much as had showed itself under the rays of the great star—which may, perhaps, have lent an imaginary distinctness to my

interpretation. But I had seen enough to awaken my curiosity, and I went to sleep resolved to make further explorations the next day.

On awaking in the morning I was conscious of having had a very vivid dream, but I could not recall a single incident of it. This forgetfulness annoyed me, because I had a vague notion that what I had dreamt was in some way connected with this locality. I picked up my brick, but the broad glare of daylight put the inscription quite out of countenance; I could make out nothing but a confused puzzle of scratches. After all, the lost city of Nebo might be only a creation of star-light, and no more substantial than my dream. While Achmed was getting something ready for breakfast, I walked about to breathe the delicious air, and get a day-time impression of the place. Certainly, nothing could surpass the solemn splendor of the landscape, and I marvel that painters have never bestirred themselves to bring us records of it. The mountain, towering up above the lake, flung its vast shadow across it, but the sunshine glistened here and there on the snow of its sublime pinnacles, and softened the silvery blue of its crevasses. Below, the broad river slept round its gigantic curve, and a gentle movement of the waters thrilled across the silent mirror of the lake. The rocky amphitheatre suggested the forms of stupendous castles, which fancy easily peopled with fitting inhabitants. But it was the lake that most deeply stimulated speculation. If, as I was inclined to think, it had been created at a comparatively recent epoch, what wonders might not lie beneath its surface! The sunken city of Atlantis might not have more marvels to reveal.

On the bank of the river, not far from our camp, there was a rocky projection overgrown with vegetation,