

VARIOUS

CHAMBERS'S
EDINBURGH JOURNAL,
NO. 419

Various
Chambers's Edinburgh
Journal, No. 419

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35492119

*Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 419 / Volume 17, New Series, January
10, 1852:*

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THE LOST AGES

My friends, have you read Elia? If so, follow me, walking in the shadow of his mild presence, while I recount to you my vision of the Lost Ages. I am neither single nor unblessed with offspring, yet, like Charles Lamb, I have had my 'dream-children.' Years have flown over me since I stood a bride at the altar. My eyes are dim and failing, and my hairs are silver-white. My real children of flesh and blood have become substantial men and women, carving their own fortunes, and catering for their own tastes in the matter of wives and husbands, leaving their old mother, as nature ordereth, to the stillness and repose fitted for her years. Understand, this is not meant to imply that the fosterer of their babyhood, the instructor of their childhood, the guide of their youth, is forsaken or neglected by those who have sprung up to maturity beneath her eye. No; I am blessed in my children. Living apart, I yet see them often; their joys, their cares are mine.

Not a Sabbath dawns but it finds me in the midst of them; not a holiday or a festival of any kind is noted in the calendar of their lives, but Grandmamma is the first to be sent for. Still, of necessity, I pass much of my time alone; and old age is given to reverie quite as much as youth. I can remember a time—long, long ago—when in the twilight of a summer evening it was a luxury to sit apart with closed eyes; and, heedless of the talk that went on in the social circle from which I was withdrawn, indulge in all sorts of fanciful visions. Then my dream-people were all full-grown men and women. I do not recollect that I ever thought about children until I possessed some of my own. Those waking visions were very sweet—sweeter than the realities of life that followed; but they were neither half so curious nor half so wonderful as the dreams that sometimes haunt me now. The imagination of the old is not less lively than that of the young: it is only less original. A youthful fancy will create more new images; the mind of age requires materials to build with: these supplied, the combinations it is capable of forming are endless. And so were born my dream-children.

Has it never occurred to you, mothers and fathers, to wonder what has become of your children's lost ages? Look at your little boy of five years old. Is he at all, in any respect, the same breathing creature that you beheld three years back? I think not. Whither, then, has the sprite vanished? In some hidden fairy nook, in some mysterious cloud-land he must exist still. Again, in your slim-formed girl of eight years, you look in vain for the

sturdy elf of five. Gone? No; that cannot be—'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.' Close your eyes: you have her there! A breeze-like, sportive, buoyant thing; a thing of breathing, laughing, unmistakable life; she is mirrored on your retina as plainly as ever was dancing sunbeam on a brook. The very trick of her lip—of her eye; the mischief-smile, the sidelong saucy glance,

'That seems to say,
I know you love me, Mr Grey;'

is it not traced there—all, every line, as clear as when it brightened the atmosphere about you in the days that are no more? To be sure it is; and being so, the thing must exist—somewhere.

I never was more fully possessed with this conviction than once during the winter of last year. It was Christmas-eve. I was sitting alone, in my old armchair, and had been looking forward to the fast-coming festival-day with many mingled thoughts—some tender, but regretful; others hopeful, yet sad; some serious, and even solemn. As I laid my head back and sat thus with closed eyes, listening to the church-clock as it struck the hour, I could not but feel that I was passing—very slowly and gently it is true—towards a time when the closing of the grave would shut out even that sound so familiar to my ear; and when other and more precious sounds of life-human voices, dearer than all else, would cease to have any meanings for me—and even their very echoes

be hushed in the silence of the one long sleep. Following the train of association, it was natural that I should recur to the hour when that same church's bells had chimed my wedding-peal. I seemed to hear their music once again; and other music sweeter still—the music of young vows that 'kept the word of promise to the ear, and broke it' *not* 'to the hope.' Next in succession came the recollection of my children. I seemed to lose sight of their present identity, and to be carried away in thought to times and scenes far back in my long-departed youth, when they were growing up around my knees—beautiful forms of all ages, from the tender nursling of a single year springing with outstretched arms into my bosom, to the somewhat rough but ingenuous boy of ten. As my inner eye traced their different outlines, and followed them in their graceful growth from year to year, my heart was seized with a sudden and irresistible longing to hold fast these beloved but passing images of the brain. What joy, I thought, would it be to transfix the matchless beauty which had wrought itself thus into the visions of my old age! to preserve for ever, unchanging, every varied phase of that material but marvellous structure which the glorious human soul had animated and informed through all its progressive stages from the child to the man!

Scarcely was the thought framed when a dull, heavy weight seemed to press upon my closed eyelids. I now saw more clearly even than before my children's images in the different stages of their being. But I saw these, and these alone, as they stood rooted to the ground, with a stony fixedness in their eyes: every

other object grew dim before me. The living faces and full-grown forms which until now had mingled with and played their part among my younger phantoms, altogether disappeared. I had no longer any eyes, any soul, but for this my new spectre-world. Life, and the things of life, had lost their interest; and I knew of nothing, conceived of nothing, but those still, inanimate forms from which the informing soul had long since passed away.

And now that the longing of my heart was answered, was I satisfied? For a time I gazed, and drew a deep delight from the gratification of my vain and impious craving. But at length the still, cold presence of forms no longer of this earth began to oppress me. I grew cold and numb beneath their moveless aspect; and constant gazing upon eyes lighted up by no varying expression, pressed upon my tired senses with a more than nightmare weight. I felt a sort of dull stagnation through every limb, which held me bound where I sat, pulseless and moveless as the phantoms on which I gazed.

As I wrestled with the feeling that oppressed me, striving in vain to break the bonds of that strange fascination, under the pressure of which I surely felt that I must perish—a soft voice, proceeding from whence I knew not, broke upon my ear. 'You have your desire,' it said gently; 'why, then, struggle thus? Why writhe under the magic of that joy you have yourself called up? Are they not here before you, the Lost Ages whose beauty and whose grace you would perpetuate? What would you more? O mortal!'

'But these forms have no life,' I gasped—'no pulsating, breathing soul!'

'No,' replied the same still, soft voice; 'these forms belong to the things of the past. In God's good time they breathed the breath of life; they had *then* a being and a purpose on this earth. Their day has departed—their work is done.'

So saying, the voice grew still: the leaden weight which had pressed upon my eyelids was lifted off: I awoke.

Filled with reveries of the past—my eyes closed to everything without—sleep had indeed overtaken me as I sat listening to the old church-clock. But my vision was not all a vision: my dream-children came not without their teaching. If they had been called up in folly, yet in their going did they leave behind a lesson of wisdom.

The morning dawned—the blessed Christmas-morning! With it came my good and dutiful, my real life—children. When they were all assembled round me, and when, subdued and thoughtful beneath the tender and gracious associations of the day, each in turn ministered, reverently and lovingly, to the old mother's need of body and of soul, my heart was melted within me. Blessed, indeed, was I in a lot full to overflowing of all the good gifts which a wise and merciful Maker could lavish upon his erring and craving creature. I stood reprov'd. I felt humbled to think that I should ever for a moment have indulged one idle or restless longing for the restoration of that past which had done its appointed work, and out of which so gracious a present had

arisen. One idea impressed me strongly: I could not but feel that had the craving of my soul been answered in reality, as my dream had foreshadowed; and had the wise and beneficent order of nature been disturbed and distorted from its just relations, how fearful would have been the result! Here, in my green old age, I stood amongst a new generation, honoured for what I was, beloved for what I had been. What if, at some mortal wish in some freak of nature, the form which I now bore were for ever to remain before the eyes of my children! Were such a thing to befall, how would their souls ever be lifted upward to the contemplation of that higher state of being into which it is my hope soon to pass when the hand which guided me hither shall beckon me hence? At the thought my heart was chastened. Never since that night have I indulged in any one wish framed in opposition to nature's laws. *Now* I find my dream-children in the present; and to the past I yield willingly all things which are its own—among the rest, the Lost Ages.

STORY OF GASPAR MENDEZ

BY CATHERINE CROWE

The extraordinary motives under which people occasionally act, and the strange things they do under the influence of these motives, frequently so far transcend the bounds of probability, that we romance-writers, with the wholesome fear of the critics before our eyes, would not dare to venture on them. Only the other day we read in the newspapers that a Frenchman who had been guilty of embezzlement, and was afraid of being found out, went into a theatre in Lyon and stabbed a young woman whom he had never seen before in his life, in order that he might die by the hands of the executioner, and so escape the inconvenience of rushing into the other world without having time to make his peace with Heaven. He desired death as a refuge from the anguish of mind he was suffering; but instead of killing himself he killed somebody else, because the law would allow him leisure for repentance before it inflicted the penalty of his crime.

It will be said the man was mad—I suppose he was; and so is everybody whilst under the influence of an absorbing passion, whether the mania be love, jealousy, fanaticism, or revenge. The following tale will illustrate one phase of such a madness.

In the year 1789, there resided in Italy, not far from Aquila in the Abruzzo, a man called Gaspar Mendez. He appears to have been a Spaniard, if not actually by birth, at least by descent, and to have possessed a small estate, which he rendered valuable by pasturing cattle. Not far from where he resided there lived with her parents a remarkably handsome girl, of the name of Bianca Venoni, and on this fair damsel Mendez fixed his affections. As he was by many degrees the best match about the neighbourhood, he never doubted that his addresses would be received with a warm welcome, and intoxicated with this security, he seems to have made his advances so abruptly that the girl felt herself entitled to give him an equally abrupt refusal. To aggravate his mortification, he discovered that a young man, called Giuseppe Ripa, had been a secret witness to the rejection, which took place in an orchard; and as he walked away with rage in his heart, he heard echoing behind him the merry laugh of the two thoughtless young people. Proud and revengeful by nature, this affront seems to have rankled dreadfully in the mind of Gaspar; although, in accordance with that pride, he endeavoured to conceal his feelings under a show of indifference. Those who knew the parties well, however, were not deceived; and when, after an interval, it was discovered that Giuseppe himself was the favoured lover of Bianca, the enmity, though not more open, became more intense than ever.

In the meantime old Venoni, Bianca's father, had become aware of the fine match his daughter had missed, and was

extremely angry about it; more particularly as he was poor, and would have been very much pleased to have a rich son-in-law. Nor was he disposed to relinquish the chance so easily. After first trying his influence on Bianca, upon whom he expended a great deal of persuasion and cajolery in vain, he went so far as to call upon Gaspar, apologising for his daughter's ignorance and folly in refusing so desirable a proposal, and expressing a hope that Mendez would not relinquish the pursuit, but try his fortune again; when he hoped to have brought her to a better state of mind.

Gaspar received the old man with civility, but answered coldly, that any further advances on his own part were out of the question, unless he had reason to believe the young lady was inclined to retract her refusal; in which case he should be happy to wait upon her. With this response Venoni returned to make another attack upon his daughter, whom, however, fortified by her strong attachment to Ripa, he found quite immovable; and there for several months the affair seems to have rested, till the old man, urged by the embarrassment of his circumstances, renewed the persecution, coupling it with certain calumnies against Giuseppe, founded on the accidental loss of a sum of money which had been intrusted to him by a friend, who wanted it conveyed to a neighbouring village, whither the young man had occasion to go. This loss, which seems to have arisen out of some youthful imprudence, appears to have occasioned Ripa a great deal of distress; and he not only did his utmost to repair it by

giving up everything he had, which was indeed very little, but he also engaged to pay regularly a portion of his weekly earnings till the whole sum was replaced.

His behaviour, in short, was so satisfactory, that the person to whom the money had belonged does not seem to have borne him any ill-will on the subject; but Venoni took advantage of the circumstance to fling aspersions on the young man's character, whilst it strengthened his argument against the connection with his daughter; for how was Giuseppe to maintain a wife and family with this millstone of debt round his neck? Bianca, however, continued faithful to her lover, and for some time nothing happened to advance the suit of either party. In that interval a sister of Gaspar's had married a man called Alessandro Malfi, who, being a friend of Giuseppe's, endeavoured to bring about a reconciliation betwixt the rivals, or, rather, to produce a more cordial feeling, for there had never been a quarrel; and as far as Ripa was concerned, as he had no cause for jealousy, there was no reason why he should bear ill-will to the unsuccessful candidate. With Gaspar it was different: he hated Ripa; but as it hurt his pride that this enmity to one whom he considered so far beneath him should be known, he made no open demonstration of dislike, and when Malfi expressed a wish to invite his friend to supper, hoping that Mendez would not refuse to meet him, the Spaniard made no objection whatever. 'Why not?' he said: 'he knew of no reason why he should not meet Giuseppe Ripa, or any other person his brother-in-law chose to invite.'

Accordingly the party was made; and on the night appointed Giuseppe, after a private interview in the orchard with his mistress, started for Malfi's house, which was situated about three miles off, in the same direction as Gaspar's, which, indeed, he had to pass; on which account he deferred his departure to a later hour than he otherwise would have done, wishing not to come in contact with his rival till they met under Malfi's roof. Mendez had a servant called Antonio Guerra, who worked on his farm, and who appears to have been much in his confidence, and just as Ripa passed the Spaniard's door, he met Guerra coming in an opposite direction, and asked him if Mendez had gone to the supper yet; to which Guerra answered that he supposed he had, but he did not know. Guerra then took a key out of his pocket, and, unlocking the door, entered the house, whilst Ripa walked on.

In the meanwhile the little party had assembled in Malfi's parlour, all but the two principal personages, Gaspar and Giuseppe; and as time advanced without their appearing, some jests were passed amongst the men present, who wished they might not have fallen foul of each other on the way. At length, however, Ripa arrived, and the first question that was put to him was: 'What had he done with his rival?' which he answered by inquiring if the Spaniard was not come. But although he endeavoured to appear unconcerned, there was a tremor in his voice and a confusion of manner that excited general observation. He made violent efforts, however, to appear at his ease, but these

efforts were too manifest to be successful; whilst the continued absence of Mendez became so unaccountable, that a cloud seems to have settled on the spirits of the company, which made the expected festivity pass very heavily off.

'Where could Mendez be? What could have detained him? It was to be hoped no harm had happened to him!' Such was the burden of the conversation till—when at about an hour before midnight the party broke up—Alessandro Malfi said, that to allay the anxiety of his wife, who was getting extremely alarmed about her brother, he would walk as far as Forni—which was the name of Gaspar's farm—to inquire what had become of him.

As Ripa's way lay in the same direction, they naturally started together; and after what appears to have been a very silent walk—for the spirits of Giuseppe were so depressed that the other found it impossible to draw him into conversation—they reached Forni, when, having rung the bell, they were presently answered by Antonio Guerra, who put his head out of an upper window to inquire who they were, and what they wanted.

'It is I, Alessandro Malfi. I want to know where your master is, and why he has not been to my house this evening as he promised?'

'I thought he was there,' said Antonio. 'He set off from here to go soon after seven o'clock.'

'That is most extraordinary!' returned Malfi. 'What in the world can have become of him?'

'It is very strange, certainly,' answered the servant. 'He has

never come home; and when you rang I thought it was he returned from the party.'

As there was no more to be learned, the two friends now parted; Malfi expressing considerable surprise and some uneasiness at the non-appearance of his brother-in-law: whilst of Giuseppe we hear nothing more till the following afternoon, when, whilst at work in his vineyard, he was accosted by two officers of justice from Aquila, and he found himself arrested, under an accusation of having waylaid Mendez in a mountain-pass on the preceding evening, and wounded him with the design of taking his life.

The first words Ripa uttered on hearing this impeachment—words that, like all the rest of his behaviour, told dreadfully against him—were: 'Isn't he dead, then?'

'No thanks to you that he's not,' replied the officer; 'but he's alive, and likely to recover to give evidence against his assassin.'

'*Dio!*' cried Giuseppe, 'I wish I'd known he wasn't dead!'

'You confess, then, that you wounded him with the intent to kill?'

'No,' answered Ripa; 'I confess no such thing. As I was going through the pass last night I observed a man's hat lying a little off the road, and on lifting it, I saw it belonged to Señor Mendez. Whilst I was wondering how it came there without the owner, and was looking about for him, I spied him lying behind a boulder. At first I thought he was asleep, but on looking again, I saw he didn't lie like a sleeping man, and I concluded he was dead. Had it been

any one but he, I should have lifted him up; but it being very well known that we were no friends, I own I was afraid to do so. I thought it better not to meddle with him at all. However, if he is alive, as you say, perhaps he can tell himself who wounded him.'

'To be sure he can,' returned the officer: 'he says it's you!'

'*Perduto son' io!*—Then I am lost!' exclaimed Ripa; who, on being brought before the authorities, persisted in the same story; adding, that so far from seeking Mendez, he had particularly wished to avoid him, and that that was the reason he had started so late; for he had been warned that the Spaniard was his enemy, and he apprehended that if they met alone some collision might ensue.

It appeared, however, that he had consumed much more time on the road than could be fairly accounted for; for two or three people had met him on the way before he reached Forni; and then Antonio Guerra could speak as to the exact hour of his passing. This discrepancy he attempted to explain by saying, that after seeing Mendez on the ground, dead—as he believed—he had been so agitated and alarmed that he did not like to present himself at Malfi's house, lest he should excite observation. He had also spent some time in deliberating whether or not he should mention what he had seen; and he had made up his mind to do so on his arrival, but was deterred by everybody's asking him, when he entered the room, what he had done with Mendez—a question that seemed to imply a suspicion against himself.

This tale, of course, was not believed: indeed his whole

demeanour on the night in question tended strongly to his condemnation; added to which, Malfi, who had been his friend, testified that not only had Ripa betrayed all the confusion of guilt during the walk from his house to Forni, but that having hold of his arm, he had distinctly felt him tremble as they passed the spot where Mendez was subsequently discovered.

With regard to Mendez himself, it appeared that when found he was in a state of insensibility, and he was still too weak to give evidence or enter into any particulars; but when, under proper remedies, he had recovered his senses, Faustina Malfi, his sister—to whose house he had been carried—asked him if Giuseppe Ripa was not the assassin; and he answered in the affirmative.

Giuseppe was thrown into prison to await his trial; and having public opinion, as well as that of the authorities against him, he was universally considered a dead man. The only person that adhered to him was Bianca, who visited him in the jail, and refused to believe him guilty. But if he was innocent, who was the criminal? It appeared afterwards that Ripa himself had his own suspicions on that subject, but as they were founded only on two slight indications, he felt it was useless to advance them.

In the meantime Gaspar Mendez was slowly recovering the injuries he had received, and was of course expected to give a more explanatory account of what had happened to him after he left Forni on his way to Alessandro Malfi's. That he had been robbed as well as wounded was already known—his brother and sister having found his pockets empty and his watch gone. The

explanation he could give, however, proved to be very scanty. Indeed, he seemed to know very little about the matter, but he still adhered to his first assertion, that Ripa was the assassin. With regard to the money he had lost, there was necessarily less mystery, since it consisted of a sum that he was carrying to his sister, and was indeed her property, being the half share of some rents which he had received on that morning, the produce of two houses in the town of Aquila which had been bequeathed to them conjointly by their mother. The money was in a canvas bag, and the other half which belonged to himself he had left locked in his strong box at home, where, on searching for it, it was found. As Ripa was known to be poor, and very much straitened by his endeavours to make good the sum he had lost, that he should add robbery to assassination was not to be wondered at. On the contrary, it strengthened the conviction of his guilt, by supplying an additional motive for the crime.

The injuries having been severe, it was some time before Mendez recovered sufficiently to return home; and when he was well enough to move, instead of going to Forni, he discharged his servant Antonio Guerra, and went himself to Florence, where he remained several months.

All this time Giuseppe Ripa was in prison, condemned to die, but not executed; because after his trial and sentence, a letter had been received by the chief person in authority, warning him against shedding the blood of the innocent. 'Señor Mendez is mistaken,' the letter said: 'he did not see the assassin, who

attacked him from behind, and Giuseppe Ripa is not guilty.'

This judge, whose name was Marino, appears to have been a just man, and to have felt some dissatisfaction with the evidence against Ripa; inasmuch as Mendez, who, when first questioned, had spoken confidently as to his identity, had since faltered when he came to give his evidence in public, and seemed unable to afford any positive testimony on the subject. The presumption against the prisoner, without the evidence of the Spaniard, was considered by the other judges strong enough to convict him; but Marino had objected that since the attack was made by daylight—for it was in the summer, and the evenings were quite light—it seemed extraordinary that Mendez could give no more certain indications of his assailant. Added to this, although every means had been used to obtain a confession—such means as are permitted on the continent, but illegal in this country—Giuseppe persisted in his innocence. Moreover, as no money had been found about him, and Faustina Malfi was exceedingly desirous of recovering what had been lost, she exerted herself to obtain mercy to at least the extent that hopes of a commutation of his sentence should be held out to the prisoner, provided he would reveal where he had concealed the bagful of silver he had taken from her brother. But in vain. Ripa was either guiltless or obstinate, for nothing could be extracted from him but repeated declarations of his innocence.

In the meantime Bianca had been undergoing a terrible persecution from her father on the subject of Mendez, who had

returned from Florence and taken up his abode, as formerly, at Forni. Her former lover was a condemned man, and altogether *hors de combat*: she might regret him as she would, and lament his fate to her heart's content, but he could never be her husband; and there was the Spaniard, rich and ready; whilst the increasing age and poverty of her parent rendered a good match of the greatest importance. In short, under the circumstances of the case, it was urged upon her on all hands, that she was bound both by her duty to her father and to evince her abhorrence of Ripa's crime—which otherwise it might be supposed she had instigated—to marry Mendez without delay.

Persuaded of Giuseppe's innocence, and half believing that the accusation was prompted by jealousy, it may be imagined how unwelcome these importunities were, and for a considerable time she resisted them; indeed she seems only to have been overcome at last by a ruse. A rumour being set afloat that the day was about to be appointed for Ripa's execution, a hint was thrown out that it lay in her power to save his life: she had only to become the wife of Mendez, and her lover's sentence should be commuted from death to banishment. This last argument prevailed, and poor Bianca, with a heavy heart, consented to become the mistress of Forni. The Malfis, however, do not seem to have been amongst those who desired the match; and it would appear that they even made some attempts to prevent its taking place, by circulating a report that she had been privy to the assault and robbery. Perhaps they hoped, if Gaspar remained unmarried,

to inherit his property themselves; but however that may be, their opposition was of no avail, and an early period was fixed for the wedding.

The year had now come round to the summer season again, and it happened, by mere accident, that the day appointed for the marriage was the anniversary of that on which Mendez had been robbed and wounded. Nobody, however, appears to have thought of this coincidence, till Mendez himself, observing the day of the month, requested that the ceremony might be postponed till the day after: 'Because,' said he, 'I have business which will take me to Aquila on the 7th, so the marriage had better take place on the 8th.' And thus it was arranged.

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