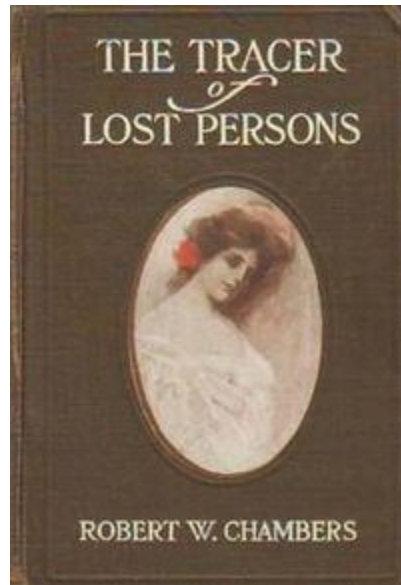


The Repairer of Reputations: The Tracer of Lost Persons by Robert Chambers

A brief history of *The Tracer of Lost Persons*:

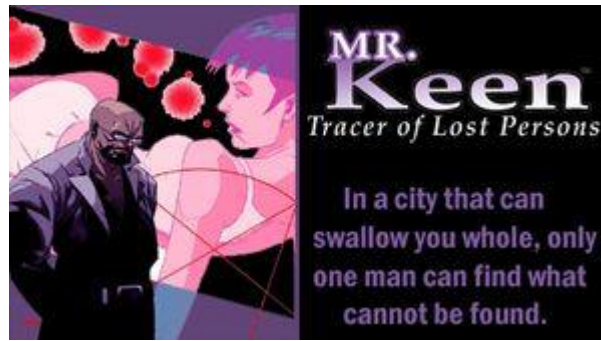
1906: Robert Chambers publishes his book, *The Tracer of Lost Persons*. It is a collection of short stories about young men searching for their true loves. Their quests are aided by an omniscient detective, the talented Mr. Keen, a middle-aged paternal figure with gray hair and the "air of a gentleman".



1937 - 1955: "Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons" is one of radio's longest-running detective serials. It features an elderly sleuth and his bumbling sidekick. After the initial episodes of person-finding, the titular character (written by Frank and Anne Hummert) just went on to solve murders. The theme song, "Someday I'll Find You" was a hit.

1984 - 1985: Aaron Spelling's "Finder of Lost Loves" hits the air for [23 episodes worth of awful](#). Another gray-haired detective, this time played by Anthony Franciosa (he also played Matt Helm!), helps star-crossed lovers get uncrossed. The theme tune was by Dionne Warwick and *it is truly terrible*.

2003: "Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons", a three-issue miniseries from [Moonstone Comics](#). Written by Justin Gray with art by Lee Ferguson, "Mr. Keen" features, as Mr. Gray says, "one serious dude - think Samuel L. Jackson meets Avery Brooks!".



As transformed as it may be over a hundred years, the character, his name and the core concept have all survived virtually intact. What is it that's so compelling about *The Tracer of Lost Persons* that has somehow made it relevant in four completely different channels?

ROBERT W. CHAMBERS has a lively imagination and a strong sense of humor, and his books in the lighter vein are certainly among the best of their kind. In "The Tracer of Lost Persons" (Appleton) he discovers for us in the heart of New York a wonderful personage who combines the genius of Vidouc with the benevolent efficiency of Haroun-al-Raschid and much of the authority of that famous Oriental potentate. He is sentimental, philosopher, detective, and ruler of destinies all in one, and he does a thriving business with the assistance of a large number of coolly typewriting young women of good birth and education. Mr. Chambers describes with delightful gravity and convincing detail a number of the achievements of this extraordinary personage. They all tend to matrimony. Indeed, this is a collection of humorous and fantastic love stories, with the matter-of-fact environment of young New York, and it makes capital reading for a leisure hour or so.

In Mr. Chambers' original book, the concept is quite simple, which is undoubtedly part of its allure.

Mr. Keen is an enigmatic older man who promises to find anyone, anywhere. No find, no fee - and the fee is scaled appropriately based on the task and the client. He's aided in his task by a shadowy network of talented experts and a legion of attractive young typists. Except for the typists, the archetype is very similar to Mr. Wilde in "[The Repairer of Reputations](#)". Except while Mr. Wilde used burglars and journalists to build the mad empire of [The King in Yellow](#), Mr. Keen uses the same resources to help humanity (and, more specifically to get young men married).

In the five interlinked stories of *The Tracer of Lost Persons*, the actual business of tracing goes on in the background. When Mr. Keen is introduced to each of the five protagonists, he does so in a curt, businesslike way - generally with a bit of showing off:

"Mrs. Regan's Danny is doing six months in Butte, Montana. Break it to her as mercifully as possible. He is a bad one. We make no charge. The truck driver, Becker, can find his wife at her mother's house, Leonia, New Jersey. Tell him to be less pig-headed or she'll go for good some day. Ten dollars. Mrs. M., No. 36001, can find her missing butler in service at 79 Vine Street, Hartford, Connecticut. She may notify the police whenever she wishes. His portrait is No. 170529, Rogues' Gallery. Five hundred dollars. Miss K. (No. 3679) may send her letter, care of Cisneros & Co., Rio, where the person she is seeking has gone into the coffee business. If she decides that she really does love him, he'll come back fast enough. Two hundred and fifty

dollars. Mr. W. (No. 3620) must go to the morgue for further information. His repentance is too late; but he can see that there is a decent burial. The charge: one thousand dollars to the Florence Mission. You may add that we possess his full record." (Chapter VII)

However, Mr. Chambers is less interested in the criminal than in the matrimonial. Each of the book's five stories has essentially the same plot: a young man looks for love, Mr. Keen finds it for them.

From the purely romantic perspective, the first story, that of Mr. Gatewood, is probably the best. Gatewood is "thirty-three, agreeable to look at, equipped with as much culture and intelligence as is tolerated east of Fifth Avenue and west of Madison." He both lives and drinks at the Lenox Club (where [Stephen Siward](#) is also a member). He does a bit of business, but mostly saunters around being a genial waste of space. His own friend, Mr. Kerns sums him his situation deftly in a burst of withering sarcasm:

"I can't bear to watch your mental and spiritual dissolution—a man like you, with all your latent ability and capacity for being nobody in particular—which is the sort of man this nation needs. Do you want to turn into a club-window gazer like Van Bronk? Do you want to become another Courtlandt Allerton and go rocking down the avenue—a grimacing, tailor-made sepulcher?—the pompous obsequies of a dead intellect?—a funeral on two wavering legs, carrying the corpse of all that should be deathless in a man? Why, Jack, I'd rather see you in bankruptcy—I'd rather see you trying to lead a double life in a single flat on seven dollars and a half a week—I'd almost rather see you every day at breakfast than have it come to that!" (Chapter I)



Gatewood's problem is that he has an *ideal*. Although he'll spot fragments of the ideal in other women - perhaps the right hair or a cute laugh - he's yet to see enough of it come together in one full-figured body. At Kerns' insistence, Gatewood employs the Tracer of Lost Persons to find a mythical woman. He puts his ideal to the test by briefing Mr. Keen to track down a missing young lady that ticks all the right boxes. It is a brilliant plan in the pre-Soulmates age - Mr. Keen serves as a search engine for all the young lovelies, Gatewood can then select the one with the best profile picture.

The search is derailed immediately and spectacularly when Gatewood is required to brief a particularly lovely specimen of typist, Miss Southerland. While Mr. Keen smirks in his padded

chair, Gatewood fails to remember even the most rudimentary detail of his long-imagined perfect woman. He's smitten at first sight. There's the barest minimum of tension and the two are quickly joined in holy matrimony. Marriage!



Two of the other stories follow the same mold. The sarcastic Mr. Kerns is brought to heel in a particularly farcical scenario. He'd fallen for a young woman years before, but then she'd had the bad taste to marry an Englishman instead. Fortunately, the Englishman had the good taste to die, leaving the young woman free again. With the encouragement of Mr. Gatewood (now happily married and seeking revenge), Mr. Keen goes to work. Within 24 hours, Kerns is tricked into breaking into the wrong home. A slightly bizarre pratfall that resolves nicely when it turns out that the woman holding a shotgun on him is his long-lost love. Marriage!

Mr. Gatewood's cousin also goes the same route - although in an even more comedic way. Victor Carden is an artist, particularly well-known for his beautiful drawings of the "Carden Girl" a figure of such unsurpassed femininity that real women can't compete. Mr. Carden has employed Mr. Keen for a year to find his perfect mate and time is running out (if he's not married in a few days, he loses his legacy). Fortunately, Mr. Keen has the solution - a beautiful young doctor who has spurned the pursuit of men in order to study the legendary "Lamour's Disease" (the patient gets red-faced, blushy and prone to saying stupid things). Hooking these two up is child's play for Mr. Keen. Marriage! (The entire episode is almost certainly Mr. Chambers having a playful poke at his good friend [Charles Dana Gibson](#), the creator of the "[Gibson Girl](#)", based on his own model wife).

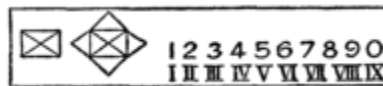
The other two stories in *The Tracer of Lost Persons* take a slightly different tack. In both of these, there's an element of the occult, although, unlike his more overtly supernatural tales, the mysticism is cheerfully benign.

Mr. Harren is a soldier who, years ago, spotted his perfect woman. They locked eyes and never met again. But he has seen her - not just in his dreams, but as a waking vision. As well as being extremely inconvenient (she keeps appearing on battlefields), his obsession has grown. The young woman is wearing a strange ring and always surrounded by eldritch sigils. As a result, Harren has delved into the [Seal of Solomon](#) to find a clue as to her identity. Harren pours his heart out to Mr. Keen who, as luck would have it, is also a master of cryptography. The two spend an afternoon deciphering the text and, thanks to Mr. Keen's intellect, identify the young woman's message. It turns out that the lady in question is a professor at the (nearby!) American Museum of Inscriptions. She too was struck by her chance encounter with Mr. Harren and, whilst

daydreaming, has a tendency to scratch down loving little doodles. Being a Professor of Inscriptions, she just does it in code. Mystical Love Sorcery accomplished the rest. Marriage!



What's particularly charming about Harren's story is that Mr. Chambers takes a Kipling-like approach and insists on showing his work (the [Just So Stories](#) were published four years earlier). Whereas the other stories can't get their protagonist to the altar quickly enough, this one slows down to a crawl as Mr. Chambers, through the voice of Mr. Keen, explains the rudiments of code-breaking to his commercial audience. Although the code itself is simple, there are a few clever touches. For example, a particular diamond shape keeps recurring because the young woman has been idly carving her messages onto the window pane of her office with her diamond ring.



The final story is in a similar semi-occult, semi-cryptological vein. Mr. Burke is an Egyptologist and adventurer. Whilst swashbuckling in the Nile region, he stumbled upon a lost tomb. In the old ruin was a young lady - the perfectly preserved body of an ancient Egyptian temple dancer. That Burke falls in love is creepy in a lot of ways. First, she's dead. Second, he consistently describes her as "child-like" and "scarcely eighteen" (which, given life expectancy in 2500 BC is probably the equivalent of a decrepit 82). Third, as judging by the description of her "ivory skin", she's clearly some sort of cave-creature - the whitest person to ever grace the shores of ancient Egypt (see illustration). Fourth, in case you'd forgotten, *she's still dead*.

Burke doesn't mind any of the above. He's in the sort of head-over-heels wuv that strikes necrophiliac Egyptologists when they encounter the rotting, underage cave-creatures of their dreams. His love only grows stronger when he touches her clothes for the first time - and, as mummified attire will do - they disappear to dust. This is when he gets completely creepy:

"This lovely stranger was to be my guest forever. The living should be near her while she slept so sweetly her slumber through the centuries; she should have warmth, and soft hangings and sunlight and flowers; and her unconscious ears should be filled with the pleasant stir of living things. . . . I have a house in the country, a very old house among meadows and young woodlands. And I—I had dreamed of giving this child a home—" (Chapter XVIII)

Burke's love-dungeon dreams are interrupted by a pair of mercenary scoundrels. They distract Burke ("Look, Thailand!") and run off with the dancing girl. Fortunately, Mr. Keen is already on the case. By the time Burke is done sobbing his fantasies out on the blotting paper, Mr. Keen reveals that the thieves have been captured and the young lady is carefully propped up in the *adjoining room*. Now, with the mere remaining matter of her resurrection, everything will be just dandy.



And the power of life and death is nothing to Mr. Keen, another part of a day's work. He's also - handily - a practicing Egyptologist. And a scrap of paper that Burke found in the tomb just happens to show that the dancing girl isn't dead (whew) - merely sleeping! She's been carefully hypnotised into slumber and has been waiting for millennia for someone to yell her name. Another *Just So Story* follows where Mr. Keen translates hieroglyphics on the fly, and Burke, armed with her name (and hopefully some sort of taser) heads in to find his true love. Marriage?

It is almost disappointing that the reader never learns what happens next - when the 4,000-year old Egyptian temple dancer wakes up in the antechamber of a Manhattan detective agency. Even more disappointing is the unexplored comment in a later story, in which Mr. Gatewood refers to a dinner party for all the couples involved. That's a Sartre play waiting to happen - the doctor, the temple slave and the abstract ideal all sitting down for cocktails while, in the living room, the men write out their checks to Mr. Keen.

Mr. Chambers love of hunting, riding and the outdoors comes out quite frequently. But he was also a collector of more esoteric trivia as well - he knew quite a bit about armor, for example, something that rears its head in *The King in Yellow*. Although the two occult-inspired stories in *The Tracer of Lost Persons* are more romantic than mysterious, they serve to show off not just the breadth of his knowledge, but the joy he took in sharing it. More practically, those two tales also display the versatility of the story's central concept - evidence to Mr. Keen's long-lived appeal to creators of radio, television and comics.

Unlike Mr. Chambers' other romances, *The Tracer of Lost Persons* is almost entirely tongue-in-cheek - especially the low comedy of the artist's tale. In fact, the only story that takes itself at all seriously is the unfortunate tale of the comatose temple dancer - the story that is, in and of itself, the most ridiculous. In the others, there's a charming combination of self-awareness and genuine optimism. These are good-natured, ordinary people that Mr. Keen is helping out of a sense of patriarchal good-temper. As Kerns rants at the beginning of the book, no one involved is exceptional - they're simply the sort of benignly pleasant folk that make up the bulk of this great

country. And, appropriately, *The Tracer of Lost Persons* is filled with the sort of benignly pleasant tales that seem to make up the bulk of this great author's work as well.

[Editor's note: The Tracer of Lost Persons is available as a free ebook (with all the illustrations!) from Project Gutenberg (your chance to be download 52!). [The Repairer of Reputations](#) is our Quixotic attempt to redeem the forgotten works of Robert W. Chambers.]