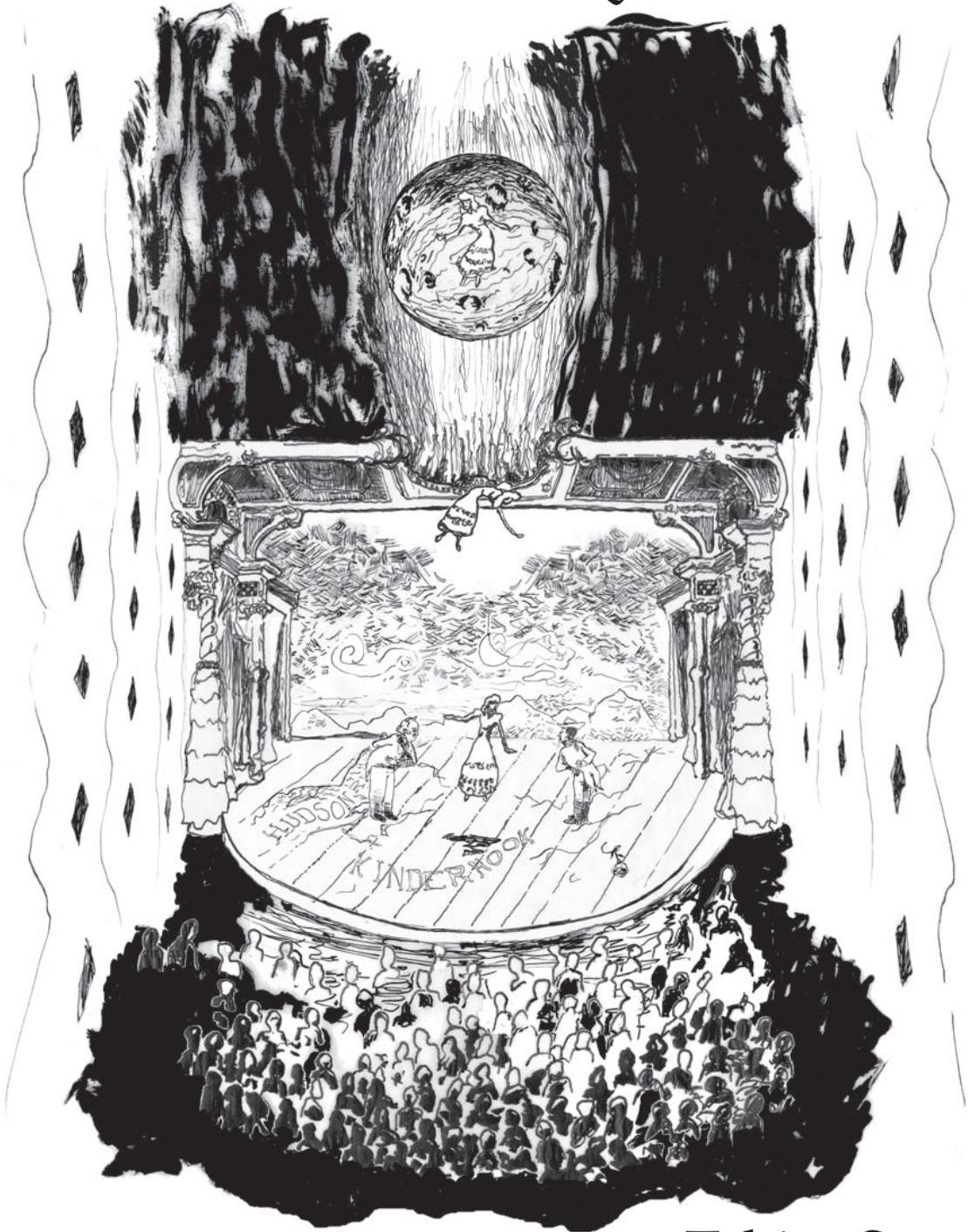


DAME MOREHEAD'S SEA OF TRANQUILITY



by Tobias Seamon

Note: this account originally appeared in 1928 in a self-published volume entitled "Great and Wondrous Follies of Upstate New York." Compiled by one Edward Townsend, the volume is introduced as a historical guide to various esoteric monuments constructed during the Great War period. The follies described by Mr. Townsend are generally considered to be fictions, however; as consultations with county historical societies, the Library of Congress, and the Houghton Library at Harvard have produced scant verification regarding Mr. Townsend's accounts. Nevertheless, we present this chapter with the unabashed hope that readers may attempt to emulate such a heartfelt endeavor, be it real or a fantasy entirely.

The rural village of Kinderhook, New York, has more than its fair share of prestigious place names. Lindenwald, beloved manor of Martin Van Buren, is located in Kinderhook, as is the 8th President's grave. A sign outside a gabled mansion in the village center proclaims it the sleeping spot of "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, the redcoat general who lost the Battle of Saratoga and thus, later on, the entire war. Washington Irving passed through Kinderhook also, and it was there he met a storkish schoolteacher named Merwin, who Irving immortalized in his *Sketch Book* as Ichabod Crane. But perhaps the most fascinating house among the many noteworthies is a tall white Victorian set back from the village green, where a retired actress of the stage, the self-proclaimed "Dame" Veronica Morehead, held a fete upon the Sea of Tranquility in her own backyard.

Now largely forgotten, Veronica Morehead once rivaled the great Sarah Bernhardt in reputation, though Bernhardt was admittedly in decline during Morehead's heyday. Whether playing Broadway, London's West End, or even one controversial turn as Phedre at the Comedie Francaise, Morehead's name guaranteed sold-out auditoriums and critical hyperbole. Close to six feet tall with wide blue eyes, walnut hair and a power-

ful physique, Morehead specialized in the violently tragic heroine. By 1909 at the age of 34, she'd played Judith, Charlotte Corday, Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth several times each, while her ferocious Medea in a 1911 production at the Livingston Theater in New York caused bedlam when shocked audiences rioted at the bloody apex of the drama.

The Livingston riot was Morehead's finest hour. As the women in the audience passed out and the men hurled legal threats towards the stage, Morehead emerged from behind the curtain and came center, the eye of a very ugly storm. She did not plead or remonstrate with the audience, however. Squarely facing the outraged masses, Morehead slowly began to remove her makeup with a wet cloth. Bit by bit the brooding greasepaint came off, revealing her flushed cheeks and the exhausted circles under her eyes. Then too came off the gory outer skirts until she held an arm out in summons. The panicked theater manager raced over and handed her a dressing gown, but for all intents and purposes Morehead stood undressed and shivering in the arc of the gaslights, a lone woman clearly unhinged by what she herself had experienced during the performance. Seeing her removed from the spell of savagery, the audience recognized catharsis for what it was and began to cheer

wildly, and it was rumored that no less than 10 marriage proposals were sent backstage that night.

Unfortunately for Morehead, the riot was the peak of her adulation. Classically trained, Morehead openly proclaimed that she was Bernhardt's successor. She would have done better studying Stanislavsky's technique or accepting proffered leads in *The Cherry Orchard* and *Hedda Gabler*. Instead she ignored modern dramaturgy almost in its entirety. Along with the fact she was undeniably aging, Morehead's anachronistic recitals became the butt of critical jokes. When she finally attempted to modernize in a 1917 production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, her affectations were disastrous and the performance ridiculed as parody. Unmarried and surrounded by a retinue of foppish suitors, Morehead hardly strayed from her rooms at the Peacock Hotel in New York, a louche establishment just off Columbus Circle. There she paraded about in her old costumes, breakfasting in Iphigenia's gauzy robes, then coming to lunch as husky Leah before dining as the armored warrior-queen Theodora. She'd complete her day by slurring off to bed in a drunken disarray of all, taking along whoever would have her. In 1920, Morehead finally realized the absurdity of her behavior, ordered the sycophants out and moved upstate to Kinderhook, where she'd bought a country house during the initial flush of her riches.

Morehead's eccentricities did not cease, though the move certainly mellowed the grosser aspects. If no longer dressing in her old roles, she made the most of being a small town celebrity and began calling herself "Dame." Like "Gentleman Johnny"

before her, her delicious mannerisms outweighed any alien traits and she became quite popular. Traditionally a bastion of snobbish Episcopalians, the town enjoyed the strange woman, recognizing that a good soul was behind all the puffery. Morehead did what she could to make herself neighborly, assisting war widows and offering to host luncheons for the Forsythia Society, and her efforts were appreciated. Also, though the esteemed Episcopalian ladies would have denied it, they took voyeuristic pleasure from Morehead's remembrances of life upon the great stages. If she occasionally shocked society with an outrageous statement—such as the time she blurted the only problem with country life was there weren't any Jewish men around—she made up for it by describing famous English actors, wooly backstage antics, and what one did with the petals when one received 100 red roses from a Romanian prince: "The longest, most luxurious bath in all creation. The flowers may have wilted, my dears, but never the prince."

Still, Kinderhook society was only so thrilling and for Morehead it soon began to dull. It was pacing her untended garden in May of 1921 that she conceived of a way to amuse herself. Bored to tears one night and possibly drunk on bootleg liquor as well, she lay beneath a clump of flowering lilac bushes, "just to get a different angle on things." Staring through the fragrant white blossoms into the sky, she thought how lovely it would be to live on the moon; nothing but whiteness, stars and silvery light. She decided there and then to transform the overgrown slope into a moonscape, with herself the queen of the lunar realm. The next morning she began

to make phone calls, and soon florists, gardeners, artisans and sculptors from as far as New York City were beavering away in the yard. Silver-inked invitations were soon sent out as well, for a party to be held just before racing season opened at Saratoga. Practically all of Kinderhook was invited, most of them having no clue what her “Fete upon the Sea of Tranquility” could be.

Unaccustomed to the rude habit of deliberately arriving late, the country guests were waiting at Morehead’s white picket gate at 9PM promptly. The gate was locked, however, and the house shuttered and darkened. The milling crowd began to murmur—had they gotten the wrong night? Was the woman a loon? Then, around 9:20, a French horn sounded from the hidden garden. The same note rang out seven times, like an eerie call to the hunt in the humid stillness. Everyone looked at each other, then Morehead appeared at the fence and unlocked the gate.

The guests could only stare as she thanked them for their patience, for she had done herself up not as any kind of mild faerie queen but as Diana, the wild goddess of the night. Her already-silvery hair was powdered and curled in intricate rungs around her head, opals glimmered from each ear, while strings of black pearls hung like tiny fruits in the low bodice of her bluish evening dress. Silver rings adorned every finger and toe, and a quiver of pewter-tipped arrows peeked over her back. With a smile for each of her guests, Dame Morehead led the party towards the back, her silvery sandals whisking in the dewy grass.

If amazed by the hostess, however, the party was speechless at the grounds. They

well and truly found themselves walking upon the moon. Though patches of grass and garden remained, most of the yard had been covered in white gravel. Piled and graded, the stones formed little hillocks in some places and shadowy craters in others. Flickering tea candles were suspended with fishing wire from the lilac trees throughout the yard, and reflecting those were hanging glasses. Inspecting the tear-drops closer, the party hooted at Morehead’s ingenuity, for the hanging glasses were actually mercury thermometers. White painted settings and chairs were everywhere, each wrought iron table heaped with green grapes, frosted cakes, cups of melted butter, shelled lobster tails, pale roses, sweating ice buckets, crystal glasses and illegal magnums of champagne. A stone fountain bubbled in the center of the yard, its own centerpiece a massive Austrian quartz carved in the shape of a crescent moon. Limestone urns emanated with the scent of Siberian sage, a marble stag showed off its marble horns from the tallest height, Vivaldi’s summer concerto rang lightly from a set of specialty chimes, and a trio of Persian cats crouched in a white wicker basket watching all with shiny blue eyes.

“Welcome to the Sea of Tranquility,” Dame Morehead cried and the festivities commenced. The following day Kinderhook was hardly able to reconstruct the night. The atmosphere had been so otherworldly, the August air so languid, and the flowing hostess so sultry that both everything and nothing seemed to have occurred. Had Dame Morehead really judged the best of a parade of poodles, naming her favorite “the first ever moon

poodle" which sent the whole throng—dogs, guests and herself—baying at the skies? Had that strange goddess of the hunt really gone throughout the party bestowing pewter arrows to any couple she saw kissing, exhorting everyone to follow suit until no lips remained lonely? Had one frenzied guest cracked the thermometers and carefully emptied the mercury into a champagne flute that he might inhale and declare himself as mad as a hatter? Had the stand-up piano really been carried by four strong men into the yard so that everyone could shimmy and jitter to the Double Back Rag, though Dame Morehead wouldn't allow the black keys painted white because some things were sacred even on the moon? Had members of the fish and game club really stood in a circle around the marble stag, knife in hand as each became blood brother to the others? Was it their imagination that all four of the mayor's beautiful daughters eddied in the water fountain in their see-through dresses, smoking ivory cigarette holders without a care in the world? Was it true that the darkest, dimmest crater came to be called the Bower of Bliss before the evening was half finished, with each disheveled couple emerging to raucous cheers and applause? And where in heck did that breeze come from, the one howling across the open bottles like a wind-blown chorus from the far marches of the universe? How was it possible that they ate and drank so much yet danced and laughed and made love all night long, for not even the Sea of Tranquility could be without gravity, could it? And finally, who was that mysterious stranger from a foreign land, the one Dame Morehead first

would not let through the gate and later would not allow to leave after everyone else was gone, including the stars and the moon? How could any of it have been real? How could it not?

Whatever the reality of the fete upon the Sea of Tranquility, the party was certainly the grandest Kinderhook ever experienced and likely would ever see again. Gradually, though, things began to settle down and resume normal course. Summer faded, children returned to school, farmers worked the harvest, and the Episcopalian matrons selected garden entries for the county fair. Lunar voyage or no, life went on so far as Kinderhook was concerned.

Dame Morehead, however, refused to come to earth. She had transported an entire village to previously unimaginable heights, but if they allowed themselves to descend back into the workaday world she clung with white knuckles to the outermost rim. The grounds were repaired but otherwise kept as the night of the party, and Morehead took to spending all of her hours in the moonscape. Friends were initially glad to return to the garden, if just for a little while, to enjoy late afternoon teas, but Morehead's insistence on outdoor get-togethers felt a bit crazed when September ended and the air began to bite. That she continued to wear nothing except pearl or bluish hues beneath her white rabbit fur coat and was actually spotted sleeping at night in a rope hammock strung between lilac trees only worsened the situation. The shards of broken champagne bottles that once accentuated the lunar gravel became crusty and sordid, much like the town's opinion of Morehead. By mid-October, the ladies of the Kinderhook no longer bothered

to fabricate excuses for why they couldn't attend a Sunday luncheon or book club, they simply did not respond to Morehead's increasingly spectral invitations.

Abandoned to her autumnal moonscape, Veronica Morehead yet again became a joke. Always wrapped in her furs and often lurking by the white picket gates, Morehead was the town's designated crazy woman. Children mocked the "Moon Lady" of Church Street, pretending to howl like dogs whenever they passed the shuttered house. Morehead didn't mind the abuse, though, often howling back before inviting the children in for milk and sugar cookies. Like everyone else, they refused to enter the Sea of Tranquility for even a short visit. Some might have wished to join the Moon Lady for an afternoon snack but their suspicious parents forbade them to do so. Whatever children secretly spent an hour on the moon with that odd goddess would not tell anyone until much later in life.

Scorned and isolated, Morehead fully inhabited her moonstruck fantasies. Her imagination soon began to creep towards the darkened portions of the sphere. Alone in the bone-rattling cold of late November, she was heard howling all by herself into the skies. The next morning she grabbed a passing pale-faced stranger staying around the corner at the old Kinderhook Hotel and informed him that she heard moon dogs calling her.

Her story went on. She claimed that she and other wolfish cohorts were the only ones that could hear the lunar canines. She clutched the unnerved man by the arm, refusing to let him leave, going on and on. She said the moon dogs were very lonely and so too were the earth dogs like herself.

She said she'd once had white moon felines to keep her company but they'd run away, all of them, because they wouldn't eat sugar cookies. She said a dark man from the dark half of the moon sometimes visited her in the dark of the night and they made dark love on a bed of furs and broken glass. She said they cracked the ice of the freezing moon fountain and bathed naked in the way of the icy moon people. She said as chilled as the moon was, it was closer to the sun and that's why moon people could not live for long on the cold, cold earth. She said the moon people planned on escaping to better climes, that they would ride wild moon stags away from the cold of the moon and the earth combined until they lay happy and warm at last on the fiery plains of Venus. She said sheaths of fire like immense curtains kept everyone on Venus alive, safe and forever protected from the chilling depths of the universe where everything got old, froze and died.

She clasped the stranger's hand between her icy fingers and implored with liquid blue eyes, "I can save you too, you'll see," and the white picket fence was open and unlocked, Morehead's Sea of Tranquility just around the corner. But Morehead had allowed her fur coat to fall open and the shocked stranger saw that she was naked beneath it and quite probably mad, and he demanded she release him.

Morehead shivered, let go and said coldly, "Fine. Then you will die." And with that she slammed and locked the gate.

The stranger was the last person in Kinderhook ever to see Veronica Morehead. He told others at the hotel of his harrowing experience at the gate of the Sea of Tranquility and the village elders decided

enough was enough and the deranged woman needed to desist or else. The mayor and select group of churchly matrons went to the house to confront Morehead but they got no response to their pounding on the fence. A few tried to lure the grand Dame out by saying they wanted to visit the lunar fields, but their ruse was met with silence also. Becoming fearful, the mayor gave the matrons a glance and pushed himself over the low fence. Unlocking the gate, the mayor led the women down the path, very afraid of what they might find.

They found nothing except the empty Sea of Tranquility. The white gravel was raked and the tables and chairs were as before, as was everything else. Empty ice buckets graced the settings while worn out tea candles and a few remaining thermometers still clinked from the trees. The group spread out but there wasn't a sign of Morehead. The house loomed behind the gathering, and the mayor murmured he might need to go alone behind the brooding façade. But going further the mayor gave a shout. There on the ground lay Morehead's rabbit fur coat as well as lipstick and tissues smeared with mascara. It looked as though she had undressed and then removed all of her makeup right there beneath the open stars. Leaning over the fur and wads of tissue, the mayor spotted a set of footprints in the gravel leading down a crater past the old Bower of Bliss. Morehead's small sandal tracks were obvious, but alongside those were another set of much larger, deeper prints. A man's shoe, obviously, and the group began to follow the tracks, hunched over like a gaggle of hunch-backed inspectors. The prints led towards the back of the garden, going up and down the little hills, through craters, and finally

ceased at the far edge of the yard, behind the rise where the marble stag stood watch. There at the lilac-bordered end of the property the group saw where the boughs had been pushed apart, with broken twigs and brown leaves littering the ground. Morehead and her companion had left the place and escaped down the wooded hillside. Their trail ended at the bottom of the woods where the road out of town began. Hanging from a branch beside the road were two useless clues: Morehead's string of black pearls and a last thermometer. Obviously faulty, the mercury read all the way to the top, 106 degrees.

As has been noted, nature abhors a void, and a series of completely unsubstantiated rumors circled Morehead's vanishing act. Some said the moon garden had bankrupted her and she fled to Australia. Another said she'd been seen in a play in Cornwall during the summer tourist season. Some years later, the unlikeliest of the stories was heard. A youth of the town was in Europe on the grand tour, and he wrote his parents saying he thought he saw, "that Moon Lady from Church Street" in a hotel lobby in Vienna. He said he was pretty sure it was her but wasn't positive, and that she was on the arm of a tall, dark man in expensive clothes. Inquiring of the desk clerk, the youth was informed the man was some sort of Romanian royalty though no one quite believed that either; the clerk hinted that the Romanian was probably a shiftless bounder. No one at the hotel had any idea who the woman was since she'd signed the registry "Mrs. Theodora Luna," as brazen a guise as the clerks had ever scoffed at. Though the Viennese rumor was slight to say the least, it was enough so far as

Kinderhook was concerned.

As for the house and lunar gardens, they remain untouched to this day. The property has not been sold nor has anyone been in contact regarding the place, and the sheriff is adamant about protecting it from intruders. The strange landmark of Dame Morehead's time in Kinderhook may be nearing its destruction, though. Back taxes on the place have not been paid in the five years since Morehead's disappearance, and the county will undoubtedly be quick to claim the place for its own. Some of the village elders, most especially her direct neighbors, practically count the days until the place is reclaimed. The house

is regarded as an eyesore and memories of Morehead's fete are awkward. If Veronica Morehead was unwilling to descend from fame on the stage or a self-made moon, it can also be said that the village of Kinderhook also refused to admit to the starry heights that she had revealed to them. It's a matter of opinion whether Dame Morehead's insistence on remaining at the peak of her personal firmament is more or less foolish than the town's conviction that life continued the same as ever after if its brightest moment had passed. Either way, Dame Morehead's Sea of Tranquility will likely be lost to the cold flow of time, the taxman, or both.



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