

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

by Mike McCormack, AOH Historian

148 years ago, on January 17, 1861, Marie Gilbert passed away. You may think that you never heard of her, but you have. Born in Limerick in 1818, her father was in the military, and Marie and her mother accompanied him to India where he was posted. When he died in 1825, Mrs. Gilbert remarried an officer from Scotland, but young Marie was unhappy. A rebellious and independent child, she was sent to boarding school in Scotland to continue her education, and improve her manners. She later studied in Paris. At the age of 18, she eloped with a young officer named Capt. James, and they were married in Ireland. When her new husband was posted to India, Marie accompanied him there, but the marriage didn't last. During her schooling, Marie had studied drama and ballet, and she decided to try a dancing career. She took a refresher course in ballet and after a brief visit to Spain, decided to make her dancing debut in London. And what a debut it was!

On June 3, 1843, at Her Majesty's Theater, a new performer calling herself Lola Montez - the Spanish Sensation, made her debut. It was none other than Marie Gilbert. Her beauty and her skimpy, but dazzling, costumes caught the eyes of the men of London more than her dancing. She choreographed her own performance called the **Spider Dance** – a sort of tarantella which involved shaking rubber tarantulas out of her clothing in such a way as to provide generous views of her body. She was showered with flowers and applause and became the Toast of the Theater.

She went to Berlin and even greater success. On a trip to Russia, she was showered with gifts by Emperor Nicholas himself; in Warsaw she got involved with politics, and was asked to leave the country; and in France, two notable individuals fought a duel over her. She was now the Toast of Europe. In 1847, she danced before the King of Bavaria. The old King was captivated, and she consented to become his mistress. He had a great mansion built for her, granted her a pension, and conferred on her two Titles: Baroness of Rosenthal and Countess of Lansfield. She entertained heads of State and actually ruled over Bavaria. She was only 28 years old. However, she was still the selfish person she had always been, and her ambition made her many enemies. She was opposed by the Jesuits and ousted by revolution in 1848. Banished from Bavaria, she returned to London.

Perhaps due to her tarnished reputation, she did not enjoy the success she had known before. She married again and a month later was charged with bigamy; it seems she had forgotten all about Capt. James, but he hadn't forgotten her. She fled to Spain, and by 1851 was in New York, starring in a ballet on Broadway. American audiences gave the so-called Spanish Sensation's career a fresh start, and she packed houses in New York, Philadelphia, and California. She even married again, but as usual, it didn't last long. She toured Australia, where she horsewhipped the editor of a newspaper that printed an article reflecting on her risqué character. She returned to Broadway and after several successful plays, began a lecturing tour. She headed for a while to the gold fields of California where she earned more nuggets with her sensual Spider Dance, than many of the miners did with pick and shovel. An article in a California newspaper on May 28, 1853, read: *Seldom is actress or artist greeted with such a house as was the renowned Countess of Landsfeldt last evening at the American. The performances commenced with the farce of Damon and Pythias, but the people had no patience to watch and listen to that. They came to see Lola Montez, and were impatient till she appeared. The dance was what all had come to see, and there was an anxious flutter and an intense interest at the moment approached which would bring her before the house. She was greeted with a storm of applause, and then she executed the dance, which is said to be her favorite, and has won for her much notoriety. The Spider Dance is a very remarkable affair. It cannot be denied that it is a most attractive performance.*

She settled in California for a while, and built a beautiful and extravagant mansion. She lectured on a wide range of subjects from Heroines in History, to Religion, and even to Marriage. She wrote **Anecdotes of Love, Arts of Beauty** and the **Lectures of Lola Montez**, which included her autobiography, and were published in America and Europe. They brought her a considerable fortune, which she spent on her wild life style, leaving herself near broke.

In 1859, she ran into an old school friend from Scotland, who berated her for the sinful waste she had made of her life. Whatever her friend said should certainly have been written down, for this spoiled, selfish, and arrogant imposter made a dramatic about face in her life style. She began to assist her old friend at the Magdalen Asylum of New York, caring for the poor and destitute women of the streets. She performed charitable works among the prostitutes of the city, even lectured them on the word of God, and came back to the Church that she spurned so many years before. She was no longer Lola Montez, the toast of three continents, she was Marie Gilbert, the girl from Limerick, when she contracted a paralyzing sickness from the destitute among whom she worked. On Jan 17, 1861, she passed away in a sanitarium in Astoria, New York, at the age of 40. She had lived a more adventurous life than women twice her age, had earned and spent larger fortunes than most men see in a lifetime, and explored the dark and shameful side of life to its depths. But perhaps in her final day, she managed to balance the scales, for she had finally found the one thing that eluded her all her life - true compassion.

She is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn and those who think they never heard of her can refer to the film **Lola Montes** (1955) with Peter Ustinov, Oscar Werner and Martina Carol as Lola. She was also the inspiration for the saying *Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets* which, in turn, became the title of a song in the popular musical **Damn Yankees**. While this musical was not based on her life, the female lead in that play was named 'Lola' and, like Lola Montez, was portrayed as a lady who would stop at little to get what she wanted. Lola Montez also has a lake named after her in California's Tahoe National Forest and there is even a Mount Lola named in her honor. At 9,148', it is the highest point in Nevada County, California. Not a bad legacy for a Spanish Dancer who, by any other name, would still be a Limerick Lady.

