

Isabella Stewart Gardner pays a call at Glen Magna

BY MYRNA FEARER
HERALD STAFF

"Oh, isn't the forsythia lovely over there. I do so want everything to be perfect for Mary's homecoming."

With these words, Isabella Stewart Gardner swept into the drawing room at Glen Magna, capturing her audience in the excitement of an event that probably took place sometime around the turn of the century. It was supposed to be a party for Mary (Endicott) Chamberlain, wife of the Hon. Joseph Chamberlain of England, about to make her yearly visit to Glen Magna. The summer estate was the home of her parents, Ellen and William Endicott, who were Isabella Stewart Gardner's cousins by marriage. Mary Chamberlain continued to visit the estate almost until her death in 1957 at the age of 94.

Dressed in Victorian finery, the character actress Jessa Piaia portraying the famous, and often infamous, Isabella, fascinated her audience of Danvers Historical Society members and guests at the Stephen Page Weston lecture held annually in honor of the late Danvers lawyer and historian.

Piaia, who works in the Oral History Office of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, portrays a number of famous women in a dramatic presentation that makes the character come to life.

The controversial Isabella (1840-1924) was an appropriate guest at the annual commemoration. As a cousin of Ellen (Peabody) Endicott, by marriage, she and her husband, Jack, were

frequent guests at the mansion. Photographs of the upstairs bedroom above the little parlor found among the Endicott's possessions have Isabella and Jack's name on them, and a guest book confirms their presence at many events.

As the indomitable Mrs. Gardner continues her monologue, her relationship with the Endicotts becomes more apparent.

"Our families were close," she says. Jack Gardner's mother and Ellen (Peabody) Endicott's father were sister and brother. "Ellie and William were married a year before Jack and I. "Little Mary and William played with my Jack."

Though the beautiful Mary Endicott, whose portrait hangs over the fire place in the drawing room, did marry into the British aristocracy, it was a marriage that probably raised a few eyebrows at the time.

"He was twice her age with six children, two older than Mary," Lady Jack reveals. With the marriage to the British Colonial secretary stationed in Washington, D.C., Mary became the stepmother of Sir Austin Chamberlain and Nevil Chamberlain. "When they were married in the nation's capitol, we were there.

"She was taken into the British heart with her sweet charm and winning smile."

On and on Mrs. Gardner went, allowing her audience a glimpse, however vicariously, into society as it was back then, as she planned the social event of the season.

Among the guests invited were landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, creator of Boston's famous Emerald Necklace, a series of beautiful parks throughout the city. His landscaping touches still survive at Glen Magna.

"Frederick Law Olmstead and his wife will be motoring up from Brookline," Lady Jack says. "He's done quite a bit of work for Mary's mother and father (Ellen and William Crowninshield Endicott Sr., lawyer, associate justice of the Supreme Judicial Court and secretary of war under President Grover Cleveland).

"Miss Beau of Green Alley will be motoring over in Henry Sleeper's Cadillac, coming at the legal limit of 10 miles per hour."

Expected also were the "beautiful people" from Gloucester, Beauport, Eastern Point and other resort areas where the wealthy summered. There were names like John Hayes Hammond Jr., Alexander Graham Bell, art collector Bernard Berenson and his wife, Mary, just returned from Italy, and the Gardner's nephew, the Republican Congressman Augustus "Gussie" Gardner and his family.

"I want this to be so special for Mary, she's like the daughter I never

ISABELLA, page 6



PHOTO BY MYRNA FEARER

So nice to see you both — Character actress Jessa Piaia, left, in the role of Isabella Stewart Gardner, graciously welcomes Bob Linden, president of the Danvers Historical Society, and Constance Weston Woodberry to the annual Stephen Page Weston lecture in honor of Woodberry's late brother, Danvers lawyer, philanthropist and historian.

Isabella

Continued from page 5

had," Isabella says, glancing around the room. "We shall all sing around the piano just as we do the Fourth of July, Christmas and Thanksgiving."

Unlike Mary, who was embraced by British society, through her portrayal Piaia reveals Isabella was snubbed by Boston society. Having grown up as the indulged and pampered daughter of a wealthy Manhattan couple, educated by governesses and nannies before going to a finishing school in Paris, Isabella wasn't used to this kind of treatment.

We learn how she had her family tree traced by a genealogist then in vogue. A handwritten scroll was produced, linking her via the Stewarts to royalty. This immediately upped her social standing. We also learn that, though the couple were married before the Civil War, the family's influence kept him out of it.

We sympathize with Isabella when we learn of the death of her 2-year old

son, Jack, of pneumonia. We listen with fascinated interest to stories of her trips, her thirst for culture, her introduction to the Barbizon School of Art and the purchase of her first painting by Emile Jacques that led to an incredible art collection now available to the public.

And we laugh, too, at the gossip surrounding her portrait by the famous artist John Singer Sargent, the painting that had people convinced she posed in the nude.

Through the years, Isabella Stewart Gardner's flamboyant life style, her contribution to the arts and the Italian palace in the Fenway that bears her name as the famous Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum more than compensate for the earlier slights. It's Lady Jack who has left her mark on history.

The colorful Isabella is only one of the fascinating guests who have visited Glen Magna, according to Elizabeth Mulholland, executive director of the Danvers Historical Society. Through the guest book and photos, the society hopes to unearth more of these connections for future presentations.