

People I have met.

" Out of the curious cupboard of the heart  
The memories come to birth."  
Frances Cornford.

The Magnussens.

When I was fourteen years old I stayed in Grantchester at the house of Dr. Lumby. He and his family were then much interested in the arrival in Cambridge of a Mr. Magnussen from Iceland who had been appointed Under Librarian of the University Library. He was a very learned man in prehistoric matters, in Anglo Saxon literature and in the Runic script.

Iceland in those days was not the go-ahead country it is now and the people knew nothing of the more modern inventions. Mr. Magnussen and his wife might find things puzzling in London so rooms were got for them at the hotel and they were met on their arrival by a friend of Dr. Lumby's.

At breakfast time Dr. Lumby read to us a letter from his friend telling the tale of how he had luckily entered the room of the Icelanders late in the evening. He went to see whether they were quite comfortable and was just in time to save their lives for he found them trying to extinguish their gas with wet towels. (I wonder if that story had been made up.)

Soon after that Mr. Magnussen arrived by train at Cambridge unattended. He walked out of the station and looked round him. In those days there were only four-wheelers to



meet the trains and very few of them and those few soon taken up. He evidently did not see one for he beckoned to the driver of a smart phaeton that was in the station yard. He asked to be taken to the University Library making his request in strange, rather archaic English. He was told to get into the phaeton and he was driven to the Library. When there Mr. Magnussen took a handful of coins out of his pocket and asked the driver to take his proper fare. A penny was gravely chosen from among the coins. The driver thanked his fare and drove off. I am told that that penny afterwards lived in the pocket of a don and was shown to many as his most pleasantly earned wage.

Of course the Lumby girls and I wanted to meet the Icelanders and one day they came to tea. By that time Mr. Magnussen had gained many nicknames. He was "the bear", "Maggy", "the wild man", "the prehistoric savage". I remember him well as he first shook hands with me. I felt interested by his fierce intelligent face and I decided at once that I liked him but I realized that I should not like to cross him. I was even made somewhat nervous by his little wife; her brown eyes were so keen and bright. She had a round face and dark smooth hair. Both she and her husband were short and rather stout. Young people are not good at guessing ages. As I see them in my memory I should say that she was thirty five years old and he forty five.

It was the time when High Schools for girls were spring-



ing up in all the larger towns in England and the conversation often and everywhere turned on the higher education of women. I heard that Mrs. Magnussen had caught the germ badly and could think and talk of nothing but how to start a High School for girls at Reykjavik. As the time went on her excitement over the idea grew. So strongly did she feel about it that she returned to Iceland. She found that much money would be needed for the scheme and at first, at all events, only a very few people in Reykjavik were enthusiastic over it. But interest in it must have grown because, in order to help the founding of the school, Mrs. Magnussen was given ancient Icelandic silver necklaces, brooches and ornaments to be sold in England to help the expenses. She returned to England and held a sale in Cambridge. I own an old silver necklace bought from that sale by the Lumbys and given afterwards to me. It was once worn by some Icelandic lady of long ago, perhaps by Vigdis of Laxdale of the locked chest fame.

The sale did not bring in much money but Mrs. Magnussen was hopeful that as time went on more would be forthcoming from Iceland and she was also encouraged by the fact that her enthusiasm had induced many Cambridge residents, who were interested in education, to guarantee sums of money for her purpose. Dr. Lumby was a guarantor for a hundred pounds. Other friends of mine were also guarantors.

The gallant little lady again went back with her gains



and promises and the School was started. But the time was not ripe in Iceland for such a School. She had not sufficient backing and not enough experience for such a work and the Danish government at that time may not have encouraged the scheme. In any case far more money was needed than could be gathered together so, in the end, all the guarantors were called upon to pay up.

Mrs. Magnussen returned to England, with what hopes for further efforts I do not know, nor with what fears. She had to face an angry husband who would be quite aware of how many people in Cambridge had lost money through her influence. No one knows what really went on in her interview with him. It was believed at the time that he had called her a thief. That word was one that she could not brook. No matter what took place it is certain that she walked out of the house and left him. No friend of hers knew where she went to and it was believed that her husband even did not know.

Years passed. I thought no more about the Magnussens. After all I had known them very little. My mother had left Bedford and London and we lived at Harston. I went into my Studio every day, often by train and then by tram and old Mr. Magnussen, who still lived in Cambridge, would nearly always get into the tram at Bateman Street where he lived. We recognised one another and he seemed to like to talk to me. He was very shabby and uncouth and became more so day by day.



The tram journey took, with the change of horses at the cross roads - an open space for some reason called "Hyde Park Corner", - a good ten minutes from Bateman Street to my Studio. There we parted. During those ten minutes he told me many historical and prehistoric facts unknown to me before. He was fond of giving out knowledge, I liked to listen, so I heard about Iceland and the ancient world. I would leave the tram with my head full of his descriptions of winter and summer in Iceland, of ancient man before he had discovered "The cutting Edge" and what we owed to ancient man and his experiments in food during those long prehistoric periods which Mr. Magnussen called "Man's hungry Ages".

It was many, many years since his wife had deserted him. She was apparently regarded as dead and forgotten. But one day a little grey haired lady walked down Bateman Street coming from the station. Her steps were proud and unhesitating. She mounted the steps of a certain uncared for looking house and rang the bell. An unkempt maid answered it. The lady said in a sharp voice - "I am your mistress. Go and tell your master that Mrs. Magnussen is here". The maid declared afterwards to one of the Lumbys that it was the first time that she had heard that there was a Mrs. Magnussen and she "was so taken aback that she might have been knocked down with a feather". No one knows what passed between husband and wife. If the word "thief" had been used the fierce and stubborn old



man would have to withdraw it for the sums that he had regarded as only lent to her had been paid back. His wife had returned to him only when he needs must regard her as free of debt.

No one knows also how Mrs. Magnussen had earned enough money to pay back the sums given by the guarantors. I believe that she was extraordinarily clever in languages but if she earned it by means of that talent, so badly paid, it is a wonder that she lived to come home even after - say - twenty years.

The Bateman Street house was soon to let. A move was made to a far newer one in Tenison Avenue. When I met Mr. Magnussen in the tram he was now well dressed, tidy and clean.

Mrs. Magnussen became a power. The Swedes, Norwegians and Danes found that, before they could be recognised, they must go and do homage to their acknowledged head. I went to one of her gatherings and felt as flattered by her gracious welcome as though it had been given me by a queen. Mrs. Magnussen wore at all receptions, whether at her home or with her friends, her beautiful National costume. The high headdress and the lines of the dress gave her small figure great dignity.

After a time the Magnussens left Cambridge and I saw them no more. I hope they lived to know that later efforts for the higher education of the girls of Ireland succeeded. Mrs. Magnussen had sown the seed.