

PARLIAMENTARY SILHOUETTES.

THE existing Parliament contains no more venerable figure than the subject of the present sketch—the highly-esteemed member for Selwyn, Alfred Saunders, Esq.—who, born in 1820, has reached the days when most men would prefer a snug armchair by the fireside to the draughts and dissensions which prevail in the Legislative Chamber. Mr Saunders, however, is not made of the stuff which shrinks from discomfort and pales at the battle call. Accustomed to rough it in the early days of colonization, the temperate habits and simple mode of living which distinguished him then have been maintained to the present day, with the result that, though failing somewhat physically, he is mentally as vigorous, and in will power as strong, as in his best days; while his devotion to principle, his unadulterated patriotism, his unswerving purpose to further such measures as seem to him good, and to thwart those he accounts evil, make him, if not indifferent, at least superior, to discomfort, and, to a wonderful extent, regardless of abuse and misrepresentation, of which, like most men of marked individuality and decided opinion, he has in his time had a pretty considerable share.

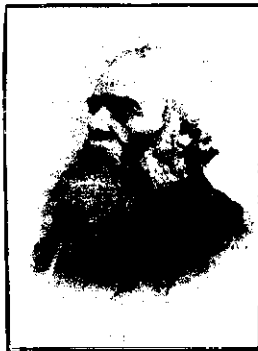
Mr Saunders was born at Lavington, Wilts, and until his fifteenth year was educated at Dr. Day's Academy at Bristol, after which he returned home, to follow, like his father and grandfather before him, the occupation of a farmer and miller. Saunders *père* was the owner of a considerable business connection in Bath and Bristol, and in his warehouses his son obtained an insight into business methods, while gaining at the same time considerable experience of city life. Reared in habits of thrift, conscientious industry and self-restraint, Mr Saunders from very early days manifested a pronounced repugnance to intoxicants, which endures to the present day. At the age of sixteen he helped to form, and became secretary to, the Lavington Temperance Society, and so zealous was he in his opposition to the drink traffic that in 1840, when scarce twenty years of age, he was selected by the Bath Temperance Society as one of its delegates at the great conference held that year at Bridgewater, an appointment which may be regarded not only as evidence of his early zeal for reform, and of the confidence reposed in him, but also as a proof of a decided *penchant* in the direction of public work.

That he should so early have exhibited this inclination is somewhat surprising, because of the plodding, industrious, unambitious character of his parents, who, in their uneventful retirement, could never have dreamt beforehand of the varied public careers which awaited each one of their nine children, all of whom in some way achieved distinction, and no less than six of whom became well known as English authors. Amongst these may be mentioned Mrs Bayley, authoress of 'Ragged Homes,' etc., and William Saunders, Esq., M.P. for Waltham, author of 'Through the Light Continent,' and several other works, while the subject of our sketch stands by no means the lowest in literary fame. His work on 'The Horse,' published in 1885, was alone sufficient to establish his reputation as an author, as may be judged from the encomiums of English critics. Says *Bell's Life* in London, "'Our Horses,' by Alfred Saunders, is in many respects one of the most charming books on equine matters, and all pertaining thereto, that we have perused for many a day. It is so admirably constructed that we experienced a feeling of regret when, after reading every line, we came to the conclusion of the twenty-fourth and final chapter.' Of the same work the *Field* says: 'Mr Saunders has achieved a far greater measure of success than has fallen to the lot of others who have trodden the same path,' and the verdict of the *Home and Colonial* is that the work 'combines theoretical and practical knowledge to a marvellous degree.' Two years previous to the publication of 'Our Horses,' Mr Saunders published 'Our Domestic Birds,' which also received high eulogiums from the English and colonial press. In 1890 Mr Saunders was the only successful New Zealand writer in Mr Cole's, of Melbourne, essay competition. The subject was 'The Federation of the World,' and the prizes offered numbered ten. There were five hundred and thirty-five competitors, and Mr Saunders had the gratification of finding himself placed second, a distinction of which he is justly proud.

As a settler Mr Saunders has borne a full share of the burden and heat of the day, and, during a colonial experience extending over half a century, has participated in many vicissitudes. Leaving England in the 'Fifehire,' in 1841, he arrived in Nelson on the 1st of February, 1842, and since the day of his landing his energies have always been *en evidence*, and always devoted to the furtherance of popular rights, and the public welfare. On the voyage out he inaugurated a Temperance Society which continued to flourish after arrival here, with, Mr Saunders contends, very marked effects upon the early statistics of the Nelson Province. No long time after his landing he was elected Secretary to the original Land Purchase Society, and took an active part in endeavouring to compel the New Zealand Company to carry out the letter and spirit of their promises to the settlers. But, as the original land purchasers soon acquired an undue share of political power which he considered to be too exclusively used in the interests of their own class, Mr Saunders eventually became their chief opponent, and a leader in the advocacy of extended suffrage, and other popular rights; for, as his years increased his views widened,

and his conviction that the many were not originally designed to be the slaves of the few, grew in force. In his character of champion of extended popular rights, he opposed Mr Jolly, the land purchasers' nominee, in his candidature for the first superintendency of Nelson, strongly supporting the successful candidate, Mr Edward Stafford. When Mr Stafford became Premier of the colony another candidate for the superintendency was nominated by the land purchasers, viz., Dr. Monro, who came forward as the representative of the wealthy classes of Nelson, and who was also the popular leader of the then Provincial Council. In various political conflicts Mr Saunders came into strong, though not personally unpleasant, opposition to Dr. Monro, but the result in this instance was one to be vividly remembered, for, having put up in opposition a highly intelligent mechanic, by name John Perry Robinson, he had the satisfaction of seeing him win that contest, and afterwards hold his own against all future opponents, ably discharging the duties of the superintendency until some eight years later he lost his life in the Buller river, after which sad event Mr Saunders was himself elected to that responsible office.

A very interesting episode of Mr Saunders' career which occurred a short time prior to his election as superintendent brought into strong relief his intrepid character and uncompromising integrity. Persuaded in his own mind that District Judge Travers had abused his official position by giving judgment in a case brought before him, utterly at variance with the evidence, and by furnishing the press with a garbled report of the same, Mr Saunders wrote to the *Nelson Examiner* boldly charging the learned judge with the offence. A criminal prosecution was immediately instituted, and the daring exposé of abuses was tried before Judge Johnston by a special jury composed exclusively of his political opponents. He was found guilty, and Judge Johnston punished his audacity by sentencing him to six months' imprisonment, to the payment of a fine of £150, and the removal of his name from the Commission



Wrigglesworth & Binna, photo., Wellington.

MR ALFRED SAUNDERS, M.H.E.

of the Peace. The transparent injustice and excessive severity of the sentence roused the indignation of the Nelson population, and a monster petition on his behalf was immediately addressed to the Governor, with the result that he was at once released from custody without reference to the judge. As a natural consequence District Judge Travers resigned his position and left the province, while, as a further proof of the public confidence in Mr Saunders, he was directly afterwards returned to Parliament at the head of the poll, previously to which his name had been replaced on the Justice's roll. His brief sojourn within prison bars was more like a continued fete than a period of punishment, for his friends vied with each other in efforts to make the hours speed pleasantly, and to this day the recollection of his course of action and its consequences is one of unalloyed pleasure.

Mr Saunders first entered the Nelson Provincial Council in 1855, and it is a proof of the estimation in which he was even then held in the political world that, soon after his entrance into the House of Representatives, he was offered by the Ministry of the day the portfolio of Colonial Treasurer. He, however, declined the position.

His superintendency of the Nelson Province was marked by prudence, foresight, and progress, and it was with deep and mutual regret that his connection with the Province was severed in 1867, in which year he resigned office for the purpose of visiting England. During his visit to the Old Country he was brought prominently before the public through a correspondence in the *Standard*, in which he stoutly defended the settlers of New Zealand from aspersions of ill-advised and hostile writers, who charged them with injustice and cruelty to the Native people. Mr Saunders also delivered lectures, and published pamphlets, on New Zealand with a view to disabusing the popular mind of false impressions, and of disseminating reliable information regarding the colony.

On his return to the colony, in 1872, he selected Canterbury as his place of residence, and a few years later was elected to Parliament as member for Cheviot, a constituency which he represented for some years. During the administration of Sir George Grey he was in opposition, and in the no-confidence debate which ended in the downfall of the Grey Government he was selected by the leaders of his party to make the speech in reply to the veteran orator, a compliment which supplies the best possible proof of the opinion then entertained of his oratorical abilities. Even now, though the creeping years must have stolen something of his eloquence, he is a clear convincing speaker. His voice is wonderfully strong, his articulation distinct, and his manner so deliberate that no word is lost, while his arrange-

ment is so good that his argument is especially easy to follow. He is concise, too, and thoroughly logical, rises only when he has something to say, and never wastes his own breath, or the time of the House in mere verbiage. In debate he is an opponent to be dreaded by all with a crook in their record, for he has an excellent memory for facts, and is pitiless in their production when they can be used with effect as political weapons. Needless to say that when he speaks full benches attest the general recognition of his skill in debate, as well as the high respect in which his character is held.

In the House of Representatives Mr Saunders has ever shown himself the sturdy advocate of Liberal measures and economical government. 'Live within your means' has been his admonition as much to ministers as to private individuals. To save the taxpayer, while at the same time ensuring efficient administration, has been the prime object of his political life. 'The Great Economist of the House,' he has been dubbed, and his long continued efforts in this direction have brought him no slight share both of obloquy and enmity. As far back as 1879, the Hall Government put him on a commission to enquire into the workings of the New Zealand Civil Service. As Chairman of that commission he drew up a report which advised radical changes and drastic economies, which, if carried out, would have resulted in savings to the extent of half-a-million in the annual expenditure. It goes without saying that such action caused deep resentment in the Civil Service, while the report, which he boldly and ably defended in the House, was met by the most strenuous and systematic opposition. Some of the recommendations were very partially carried out by Sir John Hall, but on his forced retirement through the pressure of ill health, his colleagues abandoned all attempts at reform. The enmity awakened by the report was, as it turned out, less easily stifled, and for several years Mr Saunders paid the penalty of his boldness by enforced absence from the House, a result secured by the combined and systematic efforts of those to whose interests he had run counter. Many a time since then has his uncompromising opposition to everything approaching extravagance, or even freeness of expenditure, brought upon his devoted head the jibes and sneers of the more lavishly inclined, but to these Mr Saunders is absolutely indifferent; strong in his own rectitude, and steadfast in his purposes, he pursues his way undaunted by opposition, unmoved by abuse. Too forceful of nature to be put down or ignored, he is a power which those in authority have to reckon with, and though personally unambitious of office, he fills a most useful part as an efficient check upon extravagance, and a perpetual menace to mis-government.

In his character of economist Mr Saunders stood alone in the House of Representatives in 1865, in opposing the first three million loan. He is one of the few who never for one instant subscribed to Sir Julius Vogel's financial policy which he regarded as unprincipled, and calculated to produce disaster. Contending always that every inducement should be offered to industry, he has consistently opposed all taxation likely to fetter the exercise of that virtue. In the Country Roads Bill he struggled unsuccessfully for the exemption of settlers' improvements, and on many other occasions did his utmost to equalise the burdens of taxation, and relieve the classes least able to sustain its weight.

Independent in character, and decided in his opinions, Mr Saunders holds himself free from the trammels of close party ties. To any Government whose policy is progressive, whose measures he esteems Liberal, and of whose good intentions he is persuaded, he will accord support, but any deviation from what he considers the path of rectitude he will unhesitatingly denounce. Thoroughly Liberal in his views, all his energies are employed to further Liberal legislation, thus to advance the cause and secure the well-being of the people, and he cares not greatly by whose agency these beneficial results are secured. Included in the Liberal party to day, he would, without compunction, turn his back on it to-morrow were he convinced that the leaders thereof contemplated subordinating the interests of the people to their own.

In the cause of education Mr Saunders has always been active. The records of the Nelson Provincial Council show that as far back as 1855 he proposed and carried many of the most important and distinctive provisions of our present Education Act. Free, secular, and universal education, combined with the inculcation of a high code of morality, has had his warm advocacy, but any suggestion in the direction of applying public money to the furtherance of denominational objects has met with his uncompromising hostility. When in Nelson he was several times elected Governor of the Nelson College; he also served as a member of the Nelson Education Board, and subsequently in the same capacity in the North Canterbury Board. He was also Governor of the Ashburton High School, and has worked zealously on several Education Committees.

Mr Saunders is a staunch supporter of the movement to enfranchise women. Every human being, he contends, has an inherent right to a voice in framing the laws by which he or she is governed, and therefore as a matter of right, women should be admitted to the political franchise, irrespective altogether of the consideration whether or not the concession would result in any beneficial change in the general machinery of government. So ardent is Mr Saunders in his advocacy of the measure that, like Sir John Hall, he is prepared to accept it with no matter what restrictions and disabilities, and his disappointment, when, at the close of last session, the Government refused to submit to the inconvenient provisions designed by the Council to render the law inoperative, was very openly displayed.

Mr Saunders is a strong supporter of the Hare system, which he would like to see operating in all elections. He is a pronounced opponent of compulsory vaccination which he considers a fertile source of disease unjustified in a country which is not, and is not likely to be affected by small pox. He is also strongly opposed to the importation of alcoholic liquors, contending that as long as their use is permitted at all they should be manufactured within the colony.