

FRANCHISE SUPERINTENDENT FOR NEW ZEALAND.

INTERVIEWED BY AN ENTHUSIAST.

'What will not woman, gentle woman, dare  
When strong affection stirs her spirit up.' SOUTHEY.

TO the lot of but few women does it fall to play an important part in a national revolution, and when one hears of such a woman the mind instantly conjures up a picture of a strong-minded looking individual, somewhat masculine in personal appearance, dress, and speech, and without any of the graces, accomplishments, and refinements of a lady. Most women in New Zealand now have an idea that certain of their sisters have been working for their emancipation, and they have heard that a Canterbury lady has given some addresses advocating the extension of the franchise, and has also written sundry letters to different people in the colony urging the same. But a very small number have the faintest conception of the toil involved in the long and arduous campaign that has just now so successfully terminated. I say that when we hear of a woman public spirited enough to carry on such a warfare we are apt to conclude that only a mannish woman could or would undertake so trying a task. One glance, however, at the lady we to day claim as our leader will dispel that idea. Mrs Sheppard, the wife of Mr W. A. Sheppard, a gentleman well known in Canterbury for many years past, has not an atom of the woman's rights style about her. Seen in her pretty, pleasantly situated residence at Fendalton it is somewhat difficult to realise that this graceful, tastefully-attired woman, who possesses such rare tact as a hostess and places you so completely at your ease, can be the one who has had so much to do with political tactics during the last few years. Mrs Sheppard is essentially a womanly woman, taking a practical interest and part in music and art. She is also quite an authority among her friends in matters pertaining to health and sick nursing. Of her kindly, sympathetic nature I should like to say much, but refrain, simply quoting Lowell's words as most aptly describing the private life of one of whom New Zealand may justly be proud.

She doeth little kindnesses  
That most leave undone or despise;  
And naught that sets one heart at ease,  
Or giveth happiness or peace,  
Is low esteemed in her eyes.

In public speaking Mrs Sheppard has a pleasant, clear, though not powerful voice, and, better still, she has not a trace of the mannerisms that are so usually acquired by women who attempt to open their lips in public. Talking one day over the well-appointed lunch table I asked Mrs Sheppard if she could give me an outline of the history of this great movement.

'Well,' said Mrs Sheppard, 'Women's Franchise was first seriously mooted in the New Zealand House of Representatives fourteen years ago, in 1879. In the Qualifications of Electors' Bill, the late Mr Ballance carried an amendment affirming the principle of Woman Suffrage. This was, however, subsequently thrown out. In the following year, 1880, Dr. Wallis, member for Auckland, introduced a Bill for extending the franchise to women. This was read a first time, but went no farther. In 1887 Sir Julius Vogel introduced a Woman's Suffrage Bill, which passed its second reading by 41 to 22, and was referred to Committee. Unfortunately for the measure, the Stout-Vogel Government went out shortly afterwards. It was evident that although the leaders of public opinion recognised the justice of the claim and were anxious to grant it, yet the public themselves were not ready for such a change. In 1888 the Women's Christian Temperance Union sent up a petition, signed by its Executive, asking for such an amendment in the interpretation clauses of the Electoral Bill as would admit women to the franchise. Sir John Hall undertook to present it to the House. Owing, however, to press of work during the session the Electoral Bill was not brought forward at all. At the request of the Franchise Department of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Sir John Hall promised to endeavour to introduce, during the next session, an amendment in the Electoral Bill. He gave notice in the House of a motion to that effect, and even arranged with the late Sir Harry Atkinson a definite date for the discussion. But, as usual, so many things of greater importance crowded the Order Paper that the session closed without the amendment having a chance of being heard. At the 1890 session Sir John Hall succeeded in carrying by a large majority the following resolution:—"That the right of voting for members of Parliament be extended to women." Later on he introduced a Bill for the extension of the franchise and succeeded in getting it read a first time, but owing to the crowded state of the Order Paper it suffered the usual fate of private members' Bills. Anticipating this result Sir John endeavoured to insert a clause, granting our desire, in a Government Bill which was passing through the House. He was defeated, however, many giving as their reason for opposing that it was unwise to pass so radical a measure on the eve of a general election. At this general election candidates were asked to express their opinion as to the advisability or otherwise of granting a vote to women, and a large majority of those returned expressed themselves as favourable to such a measure. In 1891 a petition circulated throughout the

colony by the Women's Christian Temperance Union and signed by 10,000 women was presented by Sir John Hall to the Lower House, and also one to the Legislative Council by the late Hon. John Fulton. These excited considerable interest as being the largest petitions ever presented to Parliament. Sir John also introduced the Female Suffrage Bill, and despite opposition, carried it successfully through its various stages. It was during this session that the episode of the impromptu petition from the Ladies' Gallery occurred. One evening some of our opponents declared that women did not want the franchise. Mrs Ballance at once circulated throughout the Ladies' Gallery an impromptu memorial asking for the vote. This was signed by those present, some sixty in number, and at once forwarded to the Speaker. When the Bill reached the Legislative Council it was lost by 17 to 15, the two Maori members voting against it. Another petition was then prepared and circulated throughout the colony, and when presented to Parliament contained the names of 20,274 adult women. You remember,' said Mrs Sheppard, 'that Woman Suffrage was made a Government measure, and that in the unfortunate disagreement between the Lower and Upper Houses on the question of Electoral Rights, Women's Rights were lost sight of.'

'What led you to take up the work in connection with the obtaining of the Franchise?'

'Well, I was going to say I took to it naturally. But really it was the fact of being hampered and hindered in various departments of work that led me to so ardently long for a vote. In 1887 I was appointed by the Women's Christian Temperance Union as Franchise Superintendent for New Zealand, and have retained that office, through re-election year by year, ever since.'

'What means have been used to educate women re extension of Franchise?'



F. L. Jones, photo. Dunedin.  
MRS W. A. SHEPPARD.

'Under the Women's Christian Temperance Union auspices meetings have been held, an enormous quantity of literature has been circulated, and literary and debating societies have been induced to discuss the question. The petitions circulated by the Union have done more to educate the mass of women than anything else. The last one was signed by over 31,000 women. The Women's Christian Temperance Union organisation is splendidly fitted for such work. Each branch has its own local superintendent of Franchise, and with these I, as New Zealand's superintendent, have corresponded, and the interest has spread. I have corresponded with Australia and America, and also with the English Champions, Mrs Fawcett and Miss Helen Blackburn, secretary of the League. Two years ago Franchise Leagues were started in Auckland and Dunedin, and during the present year in Wanganui, Napier and Ashburton. These really owe their existence to the Women's Christian Temperance Union, having been organised by its members. These Leagues have naturally reached many which the Women's Christian Temperance Union could not. The strong opposition in some quarters has also greatly helped. The attention of thoughtful men and women has been thereby directed to the question. I should like you to note, too,' said Mrs Sheppard, 'that at the last General Election every candidate was questioned as to his views on the subject, and the reply given in each case was recorded.'

'What do you think the general effect of the enfranchisement of women will be?'

'Why, the elevating of both women and politics. I believe also that the Franchise will be a bond of sympathy between men and women. They will have far more in common in the future than they have had in the past.'

'Do you think men will be less deferential to women than formerly?'

'My experience within the last few days,' said Mrs Shep-

pard, with a merry twinkle in her eyes, 'is that men are much more deferential to a woman with a vote than to one without it. Commonly the deference paid to women in the past has been a sort of patronising condescension. Now men will respect a woman as an equal.'

'In what particular do you think women have suffered through their non-enfranchisement?'

'George Macdonald says "a think is worth nothing till it becomes a thing." Now, women have had a good many things, but they have not had the power to make them things. Women working for a living have been sadly handicapped. In formulating Labour Bills and Factory Acts, for example, they have had no voice. Then as regards the marriage laws, divorce, and custody of children; how unrighteous and one-sided the man-made laws are. Is it not time women rose up and with one voice claimed on behalf of themselves and their children justice and equality?'

'What in your idea with regard to occupations for women?'

'I certainly think the professions should be open to them, and also that many light posts that are now filled by men should be left for women.'

'What public positions do you take it to be the duty of women to fill?'

'Women should have a seat on Boards of Education, School Committees, Hospital Boards, and Juries, and in fact woman should have an opportunity to express her opinion upon everything which concerns the welfare of women and children.'

'Do you think women will as a whole be either Conservative or Liberal in their politics?'

'I firmly believe that the balance of power will be much the same as now. Neither party will be benefited to any appreciable extent.'

Referring to a rumour that women would upset the Education Act and bring in denominational schools, Mrs Sheppard said: 'No, I don't believe women will or ought to attempt to do that. At one time I was strongly in favour of purely secular instruction, but the growing irreverence and larrikinism of the young colonial has convinced me that in our schools we ought to have a text book of morals. I am sure a code of Bible lessons could be drawn that would satisfy Catholics, Anglicans, and Nonconformists. Such a code has recently been so arranged in one part of Ireland, and surely what can be done in old Ireland can be done in young New Zealand.'

'Some say women ought not to have a vote because they are not capable of dealing with finance.'

'Probably when women have had large financial questions to deal with for twenty years they will prove themselves not inferior to men in this respect. In Wyoming, where the women have had the franchise for some years, they have no debt, but a surplus in the treasury. Still, granting for the sake of argument that their powers in this direction are less than men's, to refuse a vote on those grounds would be to place financial questions before moral. Women, as a rule, have wished for a vote for the sake of moral questions, and for this very reason the true woman, the womanly woman, will be most anxious to use her vote. It has always been considered woman's mission to help the suffering, sorrowful, and helpless, and we have come to the conclusion that in the past we have been like doctors giving physic continually to cure, but leaving the patient in a pestilential atmosphere and in surroundings generally conducive to disease and death. Through the exercise of the franchise we intend getting to the fountain head of evil and suffering.'

'Do you think mothers of large families should vote?'

'True mothers especially will value the vote. While children are in the home the mother tries to shield them from temptation and to frame the best possible rules for their government, and she will only be too glad of the opportunity to use her influence on their behalf when they are beyond immediate parental control.'

'What do you think of the argument that only those possessed of property should have a vote?'

'The base idea of putting property above individuality savours of barbarism. It is only too true that in English law, as commonly administered, injury to property has always been punished with more severity than injury to person; so it is no wonder that people have grown to think that property is the thing to be respected. Really, those without possessions require a vote more than those who have them, as such have their living to earn, and on the prosperity of the country their living depends. Moreover, not having the power that money brings they are more helpless, and without a vote are liable to suffer from unjust laws made by one class against another for selfish ends.'

'Do you think women only will benefit by this radical change?'

'I believe the change will be for the benefit and happiness of men as well as women.'

'Will not our victory here in New Zealand help the struggle for freedom in other countries?'

'Most assuredly. Listen to what an American lady writes me from Melbourne: "Your long . . . earnest effort is highly rewarded, . . . which means so much not only for you and the women of New Zealand, but for women everywhere on the face of the globe. It will give new hope and life to all women struggling for emancipation, and give promise of better times and an approaching millennium for all the down-trodden and enslaved millions of women not only in so-called Christian countries, but in India and the harem of the East. Right glad am I, and proud of New Zealand."

After a little more conversation I left my kind hostess, feeling thankful that we have in this fair land a woman who is ready to sacrifice ease, leisure, and pleasure for the sake of her less favoured sisters and for humanity as a whole.