

The White Ribbon

FOR GOD AND HOME AND HUMANITY

Vol. 3.—No. 26.

CHRISTCHURCH: AUGUST, 1897.

2s 6d Per Annum.
Post Free.

New Zealand's First Lady Lawyer.

THINKING that some account of the first woman in this colony to take the LL.B. degree might be interesting to the readers of the WHITE RIBBON, I resolved to take advantage of a visit to Dunedin, and seek an interview with her.

My first conversation with Miss Benjamin was through the telephone. I had written to her previously, asking if she could spare time for an interview, and telling her the name of the friend with whom I was staying. A discussion through the telephone as to a suitable time and place was the result.

On the windows of an upper floor in one of the large buildings in Princes-street I noticed the inscription—

Ethel R. Benjamin,

Barrister & Solicitor.

On entering and sending in my name, I was, after a few minutes' delay in the outer office, introduced into the inner sanctum. From the side of a business-like office table rose and stepped forward a slight, girlish form. An oval face, broad forehead, and dark, speaking eyes were among my first impressions of the lady I saw before me. After receiving a pleasant greeting and a cordial shake of the hand, I plunged at once into the subject of my mission.

"I have been interviewed before, but not by a lady," Miss Benjamin said, laughing.

"Do you think the ordeal will be more severe?" I inquired.

"Oh, well, it is said that women are less lenient towards women than men are," was the cautious, lawyer-like reply.

"Yes, I am the first lady lawyer south of the line, but not the first British woman lawyer. There is, you know, one in India and another in Canada."

"I always had a liking for the profession. I knew I should have to take up something in order to be self-supporting, and the Legal Profession had more charms for me than any other."

"No, my family offered no opposition to my taking up the profession of law. On the contrary, my father encouraged and helped me in every possible way."

"It is true that the Legal Profession was not then open to women, and that the franchise had not yet been granted, but I had faith that a colony so liberal as our own would not long tolerate such purely artificial barriers.

I therefore entered on my studies with a light heart, feeling sure that I should not long be debarred from the use of any degree I might obtain."

"No, there were no other girl students in the law school with me, although there have been others since."

"How did I come out in my examinations?"

"Pretty well, I think. In my first year at the School of Law (Otago Uni-

versity), I took first place in the first class division in Jurisprudence and in Constitutional History, and Law. In the second section, I came out first in the colony in Roman Law, and this year I was first in New Zealand in 'Equity and Evidence,' bracketed first in Criminal Law, and bracketed first in 'Real and Personal Property.'"

"No, my health did not suffer in the least. Do I look like an invalid? I went to bed at 11 o'clock every night, and gave myself an allowance of nine or ten hours' rest, and, as you can see, this plan has agreed with me pretty well. I believe if students would give themselves a more liberal allowance of resting time they would do better work, and injure their health less. The minimum time in which the LL.B. degree can be taken is four years, and I did it in that time."

"Which branch of the profession do I intend to follow? I particularly wish to practise as a barrister, and hope some day to make my mark at the Bar. Of course, at present, I will not refuse any law work.

"Yes, I was asked to read a paper on 'Laws affecting Women and Children' at the next meeting of the Women's National Council, and thought at the time that that was rather a large order. I therefore suggested that the title of the paper be altered to 'Some of the Inequalities of the Law as regards Men and Women.' If this alteration be accepted, and nothing hinders,