



CHAPTER VI.

SOME OF THE PIONEER WOMEN OF EARLY OTAGO.

IT is worthy of record, when so much of the past history of Otago is being reviewed, that when the first party of settlers arrived there were a few families settled here who were living in comparative comfort, and who were able to help and counsel the new arrivals. Willingly they gave their hospitality and shared their homes, likewise assisting with advice gained in the earlier days of the other settlement. They especially could guide others, as the mode of housekeeping was new to many, and they made many kindly suggestions as to making the best of things and taking comfort out of the material that came to hand. The making of bread was new to the immigrant women, also the management of wood fires, while many other things would have been more slowly learned but for the kindness of these friendly women. Notably the chief surveyor and his young wife threw open their doors to the strangers, shared their bread and all else with the new arrivals, and their unselfish, generous conduct went far to gladden the hearts of lonely and homesick women, who might otherwise have sunk under difficulties. For, indeed, these difficulties were neither few nor small, and might well have crushed women of less nerve than those who came in the early times. While the women of the early days gave the best of their life and strength for the domestic comfort of their families, they ever took a deep interest in all that concerned the public good. At the helm there were wise men, who had to contend with difficulties that cannot be easily understood in the present day, but the majority of the settlers stood shoulder to shoulder, fought their battles, and conquered, while thoughtful women watched with keen interest the progress of public events.

The first fruit trees in the colony were brought by a little vessel from Tasmania. The women were diligent gardeners. Mrs. Cargill set a praiseworthy example, and

her love of flowers led her to cultivate many varieties, as well as fruit and vegetables. Hers were the first grapes seen in Dunedin, and many were assisted by her in their first attempts from the abundance her garden produced. Perhaps it may interest some to know that the first scarlet geranium was brought from Home to Otago by a lady who kept the plant safely during her long voyage. When the far south was opened for occupation, many of the settlers near Dunedin turned their thoughts to wider fields, and began to take up land in Southland. The journey was a long one, the men going overland with their cattle, the women mostly going by sea. When provisions ran short, the neighbours divided their tea and shared the last of their flour and sugar with each other, and, when stores did arrive, and they found that one half was eaten by the way, and the remainder had been submerged in landing, it is not surprising that the disappointed settler sometimes desired an interview with the captain and crew. The patient, heroic women, however, had many resources. Sometimes tea was made from the small leaves of the manuka, or the shoots of the bid-a-bid, while wheat was roasted and ground as a substitute for coffee.

One lady, who was among the first party who took up land in Southland and sailed south round the coast, deserves mention. "We left Dunedin," she says, "in November, 1856, in the 'Star,' three other ladies and their children and myself. We were three weeks on the way, and the vessel put into Waikawa, where she stayed for some days. We ran short of provisions and had to fall back on the cargo, which consisted chiefly of flour. We sailed again, and after beating about in a wearisome way were at last landed at the Bluff, only to be driven back to the vessel by the tormenting sand-flies—there was no welcome for us there. Again we set sail with weary hearts, and at last reached our destination, thankful that we had been preserved thus far."

Another lady gives an account of landing in Dunedin in 1850 by the "Mooltan," sixteen of whose passengers died of cholera on the voyage. This lady and her family were fortunate to secure accommodation in a small wooden building at the corner of Princes and Rattray Streets, where the new Government Insurance Office now stands. Here this brave lady began colonial life in earnest, and very laborious it must often have been. Besides the cares of her house and family, there were the fowls and garden

and the labours of a considerable dairy, early and late, but she brought a brave spirit to the work, which prospered in her hands. But further effort was yet in store for her. The land in Matura was thrown open for occupation, and, nothing daunted, this heroic woman prepared to accompany her husband and begin pioneer life anew, undertaking the journey overland. In 1858, she and her husband arranged their affairs, gathered together their cattle, put the fowls in crates, and packed up all their household goods, and one bright morning bade adieu to the home which had sheltered them for eight happy years. The last look was taken of the deserted house, and, stepping into the waggon beside their children, they started off; the corner was turned, the old life was a thing of the past, and she set her brave heart to the long, weary journey which stretched away before her—a weary journey of three fatiguing weeks. Slowly they made their way over the hills and along the sidelings, resting awhile at mid-day, and pushing on till evening. There were no tracks to guide them on the way, and they had to mark carefully the leading ridges, for to take the wrong spur would have caused much trouble and loss of time. Between Dunedin and Matura there were no bridges, the cattle and horses had to swim the larger rivers, while the passengers crossed in a boat. The smaller streams were forded, and the travellers had often to cut the banks to allow a dray to get safely through the fords. The little party of pioneers bravely held on their way, sometimes under a hot sun, sometimes with a hot wind, till at last one evening they came in sight of their new home, not another habitation within tens of miles, the wide plain with its winding river lying before them, with difficulties which might well have discouraged a less brave spirit than this lady carried to her new home.

A few special remarks are due to the wife of the Rev. Dr. Burns. Her life as a pioneer was very full of interest, her work rough and distasteful, such as she had not before experienced; but like her family she possessed an indomitable spirit that nothing could conquer. She brought culture and refinement to bear on her household and work. An accomplished musician, even at this day her voice in singing would be considered above the average for sweetness and melody. She had ever an affectionate and hearty sympathy for the poor, but it was known to few even of her own family how she helped those in need.

Innumerable instances could be given of how brave, patient women accompanied their husbands to the bush, assisted in dragging posts and wattles for their houses, cut and carried coarse grass for thatch, while some helped to split shingles for roofing, mixed clay, and helped to form the walls of their little cottages. This done, they again assisted to bring material to fence a garden, and in this way soon made cheerful homes, small indeed, but with bright firesides, a tight roof, a door, and perhaps two windows. One very young woman became a widow just after landing, her husband being carried on shore only to die. There was a small, half-ruined cottage at Port Chalmers, and a few of the young men, with great kindness, repaired it and made it a shelter for the widow and her little baby. Another woman with her little dying boy shared this cottage. She could get neither oil nor candles, and often said afterwards that she "never knew exactly at what hour little Sandy died," for he passed away in the night as she held him on her knee by the fire. But, as a rule, good health prevailed among the pioneers, with the exception of a few delicate women, who soon passed away, their end being hastened, no doubt, by the hardships they endured. As immigration continued, more country was opened up, and the pioneers pushed further and further inland. Slowly they made their way over the wilderness, many going on foot, as there were few conveyances, and there were no roads or bridges. Some went round the coast by means of an open boat, sailing if the wind were favourable, landing at night, and sleeping in a tent made of the sail of the boat. Sometimes it was weeks before these ladies reached the end of their voyage, sometimes the boats would run before the wind, then would be suddenly turned back. Often the passengers had to walk the rest of the way, the mother carrying a baby, and the others such few necessaries as they could, sleeping under the flax at night, and bravely pushing onwards through the day, wading the creeks, and crossing the deeper streams on a raft made of the koradi. Many still living can testify to and give far more romantic adventures than any here recorded.

A very touching incident from the pen of a lady who came with her father in the very early days may be interesting. Her father brought his two little motherless girls to make a home for them in Otago, and she thus records their landing at Port Chalmers in one of the ship's

boats, which was in charge of two sailors:—"Hoisting sail, we started, and all went very well until a wind arose, and we were glad to seek shelter somewhere in the vicinity of where St. Leonards now stands. We landed there early in the afternoon, and some of the passengers proposed to walk to Dunedin, my father with his two little girls being amongst those brave enough to make the attempt. We started right over the hill, through dense bush and scrub, making very little way indeed, and little wonder, when you think of our mode of travelling. My father took it in stages, carrying one of us so far, and then returning for the other one. After a few of these trips it began to rain, so we retraced our steps as best we could, reaching the boat at evening. The sailors had rigged up a tent with the sail of a boat, and there we were glad to spend the night, drying our dripping clothes in front of a large fire. Next morning the wind was still contrary. What we breakfasted on or whether we had any breakfast I cannot remember. Again our party started to walk to Dunedin, keeping round the beach over the rough rocks, and sometimes wading in the sea. The two sailors carried my sister and me on their backs nearly all the way. Over the Water of Leith there was a tree thrown across for a bridge. The water was deep there, and I well remember clinging in terror to the sailor who carried me across."

Another extract, from the pen of one of the first pioneer women to the Clutha, gives some idea of the adventures by the way. "We left Port Chalmers to go to the Clutha in a boat, half-decked—my husband, five children, and myself, and two men to manage the boat. Half-way to the Heads we were caught on a sandbank, and had to wait till the tide rose and floated us. Long after dark we reached the old Maori Kaik at the Heads, and anchored there. The children (my baby was only six months old) and I were so sick that we had to be carried on shore, where we lay in the open air all night. In the morning, having no cooked food with us, we walked to a small accommodation house about a mile off, and stayed there four days. Then back to the rocks for another day and night, waiting for a wind to take us out. At last the wind favoured us, and we rounded the Heads and put to sea, making the Molyneux Bay the same day, but had to lie off in the bay till morning, the wind not being favourable for landing. Here I was welcomed by the Maori

Princess, Makariri, who plunged into the waves, took my baby, and carried him ashore. On landing we pitched a tent, which was our home for two months, but the children were so tormented with sandflies that we removed some distance away from the beach to the house of a friend, till my husband built a whare for us, and we settled down in our new home and began pioneer life in earnest."

This brave woman records another voyage and another journey two years later. They started in an open boat to go to Taieri Mouth, and after being beaten back and starting again, and sleeping in a Maori hut at night, reached their destination thoroughly worn out. But the return journey was full of adventure, and again she writes:—

"My husband, a friend and I, with a baby seven weeks old, started to walk home. We crossed the Taieri River in a flat canoe, hired a boat on the Waihola Lake, and sailed so far in it; then walked from the head of the lake to what is now Milton, resting there two nights. Then we started again, I carrying my baby, my husband and our friend carrying heavy loads, and we walked to the Kaitangata Lake, where our friend had left a boat. We embarked once more, and were again caught on a shallow mud bank, but managed to land at a hut which had been left by a party of the first surveyors. We had nothing to eat—our provisions were exhausted—and waited patiently for daylight; then started again, this time reaching the Clutha River. Soon we were at the mouth, where I landed and walked the rest of the way home."

This lady also records a flood on the Clutha in January, 1851, quite as heavy as that which took place in 1878. Inch Clutha and the land on which Balclutha now stands were then all under water. Many can yet testify to the kindness and hospitality ever shown by herself, her husband, and her family.

Among this noble band of women some few stand out more prominently than the others. L—— settled in one of the most fertile places, and her beautiful home was the resting place of many a weary traveller, who was always made welcome to that hospitable house, no matter how many came, or how often she spread a repast in the day. Sometimes, when she required to leave home for a day, the table was laid with a comfortable meal, and on it was placed a slip of paper on which was written: "Stranger, help thyself." The door was fastened on the outside, so

that anyone arriving in her absence might enter and be refreshed. L——'s example, in the way she worked, and her brave, patient spirit under difficulties inspired many a woman to bear up under hardship and discouragement little known by the later generation. She was well educated and refined, yet she patiently took up the work she had come to do, though it often proved heavy and sometimes distasteful.

The foregoing sketch is but one among many of the careers of a noble band of women who came in the very early years to the colony. Many of them were ladies who, in the Home Country, had been accustomed to every luxury, and whose education and pursuits had been so different to the life they were called on to lead here. But how willingly and nobly they did their life's work can still be testified by many yet living.

One word in conclusion may perhaps be permitted to the daughters and grand-daughters who are so ably filling up the gaps in the ranks of the pioneer women, whose work may be compared to the lines laid down for the railways. No one travelling in the swift-rushing train ever thinks of the slow, toilsome workers who, foot by foot, laid the rails for the rapid travelling now enjoyed. But it would not be amiss sometimes to cast a thought backwards to the patient women who helped so largely to lay the foundation of much that the women and girls of to-day enjoy. Their work is not seen, and can never be fully told, yet they should have a place in the records of the early days, and in the memories of those who are taking their places. All honour to the bright and gifted daughters who are treading in the footsteps of the pioneer women.