

ADDRESS GIVEN AT MEETING OF WOMEN.

(Mrs Wilson, North Canterbury
H. and C.A. Board.)

We are met together, a company of women, to consider one of the most vital questions that confront our race, a question upon the proper solution of which hang issues of life and death, happiness or misery to thousands. We have to recognise that we are in this question dealing with the great primal instinct upon which the continuance of our race depends. The first law of life is self-preservation; the second race preservation; and it is a thing awful to contemplate that the same instinct which guided, controlled and rightly used forms the foundation of love and home, and health and happiness is the self-same instinct which, if abused, leads inevitably to misery, disease and death. By the awfulness of the penalty, we see the majesty of the law. The abuse of this instinct seems in Nature's judgment to be the sin par excellua, whose consequences persist to the third and fourth generation. Nature's laws are God's laws. God is not mocked, and what is ethically wrong cannot be made physically right.

At our Supreme Court some little time ago, a much respected Judge, in sentencing a wretched young man for some act of gross indecency, made some scathing remarks on the senseless prudery that leaves children without warning or guidance on matters of vital importance to their welfare, and he pertinently added: "No sensible man would willingly entrust a complicated machine to an ignorant mechanic; yet parents and teachers are content to leave their children without any knowledge of that marvellous machine, the human body."

How many mothers and fathers in this community can lay their hands upon their hearts and plead not guilty to this indictment? We parents must learn to face facts—hard, disagreeable, unlovely facts, but none the less facts. We are bound upon the wheel of things, and in the turn of the wheel we have arrived at a position fraught with grave national danger. All around disintegrating forces seem at work, and a slackening tendency in all moral restraints is everywhere noticeable. Our children, girls as well as boys, are thrown into the industrial world as never before. It is impos-

sible to keep them from the knowledge of evil; the question is how best to safeguard them from it. "Forewarned is forearmed," and the one thing we cannot afford to do is to place upon our children the burden of their own protection without first arming them with the weapon of knowledge. I am aware, painfully aware, that knowledge alone will not be an all sufficient shield in the hour of temptation; but knowledge is better than ignorance, or information gained at prurient sources. From time to time the suggestion is made that Sex Physiology and Social Hygiene should be taught in the schools. There can be no subject so delicate and difficult, and the success or otherwise of such teaching would depend entirely on the personality of the teacher, the age at which it is given, and the way in which the subject is handled. Personally, I have always considered it pre-eminently the duty, or I should say the privilege, of the parents to instruct their children in the nature and meaning of sex, both as regards the individual and the race, but seeing that, as a rule, a murderous silence is maintained by those whose duty it is to speak, it seems there is nothing for it but for the State, in its own defence, to take the matter up. I cannot yet see my way to advocate class instruction in sex matters in elementary schools. I would rather advocate classes of instruction for mothers, or at any rate, that mothers should be invited and encouraged to attend such classes with their own girls, but I do not hesitate to recommend that in secondary schools, training colleges, universities, factories, training camps, and wherever young people most do congregate, specific teaching should be given by persons of both sexes, fully accredited, and in every way suitable for the discharge of a task so delicate and yet so important. The efforts of the State should be reinforced by all religious agencies and private endeavour. We should see to it that no boy or girl is launched upon life, with its snares and pitfalls, without at least the knowledge of life's significance and responsibility. But while the State may be competent to give specific information on these matters, it is the parents alone who can create the proper atmosphere in which such teaching can best be given; therefore, I will take this opportunity of addressing myself to par-

ents, for it is their failure that makes outside measures necessary. It is not so much a question of teaching or not teaching; it is a question of what kind of teaching the child is to receive, and under what conditions, for if parents keep silence, others will not, and so it comes to pass that many of our children derive their earliest information on this most sacred and important function through polluted channels, chiefly through prurient-minded schoolmates or adult corruptors of both sexes, and, remembering the secrecy and dishonesty with which his natural enquiries have been met in his own home, the child naturally associates the whole matter with degradation and dishonour. As he develops, he finds himself launched on a new world of emotions and temptations hitherto undreamt of, with little instruction, and that of the worst possible kind, and when the blinding storms of passion sweep over him, when he needs the utmost sympathy and wisest parental counsel, the parents are the last persons to whom he is likely to turn. The result is written in tragedy.

We all know and respect the wholesome shyness of the growing youth, and we feel that the matter is one requiring, as I have said, the utmost tact and delicacy, but as parents we must see to it that we are first in the field before the youthful consciousness is irretrievably smirched with low and obscene ideas. It is of little use to wait until the boy has merged into the self-conscious youth before beginning the necessary instruction. By that time, in most cases, it is too late. Neither can it be done at a sitting. It requires a preparation of heart as well as of mind, for after all it is heart rectitude rather than head knowledge that shields us in temptation's hour, and this is why I would so strongly urge this duty on the parents themselves, for to them, particularly to the mother, come golden opportunities and occasions that can never come to the class instructor, however able or enthusiastic. A birthday or the advent of a new baby, and other occasions, will arouse in any intelligent child the inevitable question, and furnish a suitable opportunity for a little heart-to-heart talk between mother and child, for at this stage the mother is the proper person to speak; the father's turn will come later on. Appeal to the childish imagination