

THE SOUL IMMORTAL.

Prize Oration of Junior Oratorical Contest, June 24, 1890.

Life, Death, and Immortality. Who can fathom the deep meaning of these three words? The master minds of all ages have been at work upon their solution. Life on earth ends in death, and death is the dark door to the other life in the still land beyond. The soul looking out from its home of clay beholds the actions and effects of that which is called Life. But what is this life? To the present hour, the only answer reached by all scientific research and all philosophical inquiry has been, Life is force. If we go one step farther and inquire what is force, the ever ready reply is, force is life.

The study of this great question, what is life, leads us into realms unseen and unexplored. Does matter generate life into itself, or do we conceive of it as having been supplied to the world at the beginning of all life on the globe, and handed down to succeeding generations of living forms? Is this vital force chemical or physical? What is it? The physical laws may explain the inorganic world, the biological laws may account for the development of the organic, but as to the point where they meet, as to that strange mysterious borderland between the dead and the living, science is silent. Behind all remains a something which the scientist calls law, which Spencer calls the unknowable, and which the Theist calls God.

Life, then, in all its forms, however definable by its phenomena, is confessedly a mystery. The inorganic world is staked off from the living world by barriers which have never yet been crossed from within. No change of substance, no change of environment, no chemistry, no electricity, nor any form of energy, nor any evolution can endow any single atom of the mineral world with the attribute of life. It is only by the bending down into this dead world of some living form that these dead atoms can be gifted with the properties of vitality.

In the study of this question the mortal mind has reached the shore of a vast uncertainty, along which men are still blindly groping to find, if possible, the mystic way to their misty conjectures which seem to lie on the unexplored heights beyond. When at last we think we can distinguish something more than has yet been revealed, the light goes out and we are left in the darkness—the darkness of the grave.

As great if not greater, are the mysteries of desolation which surround us in the midst of strength, of beauty and of splendor. These blossoms, these shapes and tissues which are almost less material than immaterial, even the human form divine, moulder and sink into dust.

The glory of the sunset on the hill grows pale. A strange and appropriate stillness falls upon the earth. Not a breath pervades the awful stillness. Solitude and silence reign supreme. But hark! There speaks a voice firmly and not altogether unkindly. "Thy time is come." An icy coldness strikes the heart. Whose voice it this? Is there one standing near us, invisible friend or foe? Speak and tell us who thou art. There is no response; its nature and character are known only by its desolation,—

'Yet a few days, and thee,
The all beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean shall exist
Thy image.'

What is this that causes broken hearts and desolate homes, heaving bosoms and tearstained eyes? The bleeding spirit gazing upon their desolation cries out: "Oh, thou invisible spirit, if thou hast no other name we will call thee Death." Oh, monster, stay thy hand, sheath thy sword, let one kindly thought penetrate thy heart, if thou hast a heart; and comfort, by cessation, the sorrowing spirit of humanity for one moment. Thou art unmoved. The silence of eternity settles about thee.

All around us thy work is seen, O death; but no chemist, no microscope, no scalpel, no piercing mortal foe can find thee. Poetry draws near