

THE STRUGGLE FOR IMMORTALITY

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The struggle for immortality by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

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ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

**THE STRUGGLE
FOR IMMORTALITY**

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BY

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*** Several of these essays are reprinted from "The North American Review" and "The Forum."

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THE
STRUGGLE FOR IMMORTALITY.

I.

WHAT IS A FACT?

THIS is a noisy age. The dreamer can find no sacred silence in which to hide his fantasy. The thinker may double-lock his study door, but the winds of heaven will pilfer his thoughts from him through the window, and the birds of the air will carry the matter; if they do not, the world concludes that there was none to carry. The believer, too, is tremulous to the vibrations of the atmosphere. His mysticism and quietism come by the hardest. If he have a faith, he feels that he must believe aloud. On every hand the air is quick with clamors. The "advanced mind" shouts to the scientist. The theologian thunders at the infidel. The ecclesiastic menaces the liberal Christian. The philosopher sneers at each.

Representing none of these wise and urgent people, the writer of this fragment is moved to say a word concerning that considerable portion of humanity who walk outside the circle of this portentous amphitheatre, yet near enough to be alert to its contests as well as deafened by its din. To these honest, quiet, and thoughtful people, who in all militant eras press nearest to the combatants, constituting at once their busiest critics and truest friends, it seems, if I mistake not, as if the main question in dispute were one uncommonly easy to ask and uncommonly hard to answer.

It is a long time ago since our great-grandfathers were crossing lances over the doctrine of imputed sin, or the souls of infants condemned by predestination and foreknowledge absolute to an eternal hell. A damned baby at best was a theory. Nobody ever saw one.

This is not the age of theory ; hence we long since took our babies to be blessed by One who thought it worth while to mention the fact that of such was the kingdom of heaven. Thus we care no more whether we are to be punished for the sin of Adam, having enough of our own to look to, to say nothing of the

additional doubt whether Adam himself can be called a fact. This, we find, is the age of fact. No one asks to-day, What is your theory? but, Where is your fact?

So, at least, it seems to these good people of whom I speak, who compose what we call "the masses" of the church and the world. The young man of business, who sits under your preaching from Sunday to Sunday, Reverend sir, watches you with a keen but yet with a slightly saddened eye. Whether this be an age for the encouragement of faith or the preservation of doctrine he is not sure. Whether he has fallen upon an era of inductive or deductive reasoning he does not know; it is probable that he does not care. But, that forces which he does not understand are threatening faiths that he reveres, he does know; and for this, in a downright, manly fashion, he does care very much indeed.

The thoughtful woman at the head of the crowded Bible class which has given such celebrity to your Sunday-school is puzzled, too. She no longer finds Barnes's Notes adequate to the religious difficulties of her observant, critical, restless pupils; she no longer teaches,

either, that the world was made in six days, or that the majority of the human race are doomed by a loving Father to an eternal struggle with a lake of material fire. She has heard the authenticity of the Fourth Gospel and even the original authorship of the Golden Rule called in question. She has a general impression that Darwin is to blame, and that geology is at the bottom of the trouble. She finds this, however, less satisfactory as an argument than might be, when her pet convert, nineteen wise years of age, announces that he will immediately become a free-thinker, on the ground that, next to immorality, there is nothing he so much prays to be delivered from as superstition. Perhaps she learns, as some of us have, to assume in general the uselessness of discussion with the initial moods of "emancipated minds."

So, perhaps, our friend, the young pew-owner, feeling himself unable to hold his ground with the fellows at the club, yet all the fonder of the faith which he cannot defend, as the father is of the child whom he sees surrendering to a stealthy disease, saddens a little more and more, but joins himself to the great