

THE
LIFE AND LETTERS
OF
Robert Lewis Dabney.

BY
THOMAS CARY JOHNSON.



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ville) safely, where son Charley met us at the depot. Here he and his family were installed for the summer in a nice rented cottage. Another, smaller one ready furnished for us was near by theirs. This was about the 22d of June."⁷

At Asheville they hoped to have a charming summer. Man, however, proposes, but God disposes. The younger children of Dr. Charles Dabney sickened about the end of June. Their parents were burdened with care and nursing. This sickness proved to be tedious cases of typhoid fever. The days were made sad and anxious for the aged grandparents, also. They took the eldest grandchild, Marguerite, to their cottage. Catherine, the youngest was quite ill, but her case took the normal course, and she got well in due time. In Mary Moore's case there were repeated reinfections, and the disease went on its frightful way for twelve weeks. Her life was almost despaired of by nurses and physicians. "During it all," says Dr. Charles W. Dabney, "my father's solicitude was of course intense, but his faith never wavered. He would come several times a day and sit, in his blindness, either on the front porch or in the hall, and sometimes in the room by the bedside, ministering as he well knew how to do, to our distressed spirits. He told us of his own sorrow, and that of my mother, in the illness and death of his boys, and did more than any other mortal could to support us in the great trial. He was always a very deeply affectionate father, but it seems to me he drew closer to us during this great trial than ever before."

While they were in the course of this long agony, he dictated the following lines, so full of suppliant strength and beauty, and, in the end, of exalting gratitude:

"Our Lord had lent to us a blessed child,
Of face and form most fair, of spirit mild,
Yet bright and strong. Throughout ten happy years
She grew into our hearts, 'mid joys and fears,
And as she grew, 'twas ever yet more plain
The spirit's grace had purged the natal stain
Derived from us, from her infantile soul.
The grace grew with her growth, to faith's control,
Obedience, purity, and love's submiss,
Which made her childhood's days a saintly bliss.
But as the cloudless day preludes the storm.

⁷ Letter to Rev. Uncas McCluer, July 27, 1897.

So midst her bloom there fell upon her form
 A creeping blight, so stealthy, sallow, slow,
 Ere we had feared, the fever laid her low;
 Then turned I, weeping, to my Lord in prayer:
 O Thou, who never didst refuse to hear,
 When on our earth, the guilty suppliant's voice,
 But madest each petitioner rejoice,
 E'en though by miracle, with succor swift,
 Divine Physician, give us now this gift,
 The life of our dear lamb! O come and heal
 Our sufferer, nor spurn our sore appeal.
 Then to my spirit came an answering word,
 Not to the outward sense, but from the Lord,
 To faith's clear vision: Knowest thou, old man,
 What thou dost ask? Shall I extend the span
 Of this dear life to four-score weary years,
 And fill them, like thine own, with many tears,
 And fleeting joys, and long enduring pains,
 To stray and sin before temptation's strain,
 And then with shame to duty's path,
 To toil and lose, and bear the victor's wrath,
 Helpless and slandered, while it drinks the gall
 Of sore bereavements; then, as end of all,
 Through darksome days and listless years to pine?
 Which is the wiser love, or thine or mine,
 Should I elect to lift her to my arms,
 By briefest conflict, safe from earthly harms,
 And for her teachers seraphim prefer
 To thy poor schooling? But thou lovest her!
 Is not my love more wise and strong,
 As tears are cheaper than my blood divine,
 Shed for her soul upon the dreadful tree?
 Thou weapest! But I died on Calvary

That she might live.

Then, prone before the heavenly voice, I said,
 Teach me, O Christ, to pray as thou hast prayed,
 When in thy extremity of woe:
 'Spare me, O Father, if it may be so,
 That I this cup of bitter grief may shun.
 If not, then let thy holy will be done,
 Not mine.' We see that goodness infinite
 Doth choose, and too boundless to permit
 Aught but the best for us. Then fell great peace
 Upon our troubled breasts, not by our cease
 Of love parental,—this but deeper grew,—
 But by the growth of love and faith more true.

Then, as with chastened hearts we watched and prayed,
 New, blessed hope was born, the plague was stayed,
 The ebbing tide of life stood still, then stole
 Back to its channels. Lo! the sick was whole.
 What thankfulness, O Father, can befit
 Thy mercy so beyond our hope, so sweet?
 Thy precious loan we consecrate anew,
 By a new baptism. May our vows be true,
 Our earthly schooling like to that above,
 From which our prayers detain her, and our love,
 For Heaven postponed, a compensation prove."

During this period the old, blind grandfather and his eldest grandchild, whom he had long been wishing to teach, were drawing close together. Marguerite was a bright, handsome, earnest, intelligent, high-spirited, wholesomely ambitious child, already a Christian. She lived with her grandfather during these days, read to him, sang to him, led him about town, carried him to Dr. Charles W. Dabney's cottage, took him back again. He had never had a daughter of his own. There is no estimating the happiness he found in this grandchild.⁸

While at Asheville in the summer of 1897, he published several newspaper articles, amongst them two on "Aesthetics as a Substitute for Christianity," in the *Southwestern Presbyterian*. They were not only timely but able.

From Asheville he went to Lenoir, N. C., to pay a visit to his friends the Rev. C. A. Munroe and his wife, the daughter of Col. Henry Stokes, of Prince Edward county, Va. While sojourning in this hospitable home, he learns that the chastening rod has fallen on his old friend and fellow-elder in the College Church, and writes to him:

"LENOIR, N. C., October 6, 1897.
Col. Henry Stokes.

"MY DEAR OLD FRIEND: Here we are. Mrs. Dabney and I, in your Mary's house in Lenoir, N. C., receiving the greatest kindness, and en-

⁸ Margurite was to follow her grandfather to heaven when only seventeen. She died on the 27th of June, 1899. In her obituary we read: "Thoroughly devoted to her grandfather, Rev. Dr. Dabney, when he visited the family, she hung to him like his shadow. The whole of his last summer on earth was spent with his son Charles' family in Asheville, N. C., and Margurite fairly lived with him, and read and sang to him in his blindness. He used to say, when she sang the old-time hymns to him, that she had the voice of an angel."