

THE
LIFE AND LETTERS
OF
Robert Lewis Dabney.

BY
THOMAS CARY JOHNSON.



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through them. He is one of the most brilliant men, in all of his productions, I have ever seen, perhaps the most so; but in private he is a real character. He is as unsociable as a comet, and looks as grim as a *taurus*. We have a tutor named Green, who is a smart fellow. Minutiae must be reserved till the press of matter is off.

"I do not think the course is as well arranged as at Union, but it is more extensive, and we have more work than we had at Union."⁵

The suggestions in this description of the Faculty, which was probably provoked by questions in the letter to which this was the reply, was not lost on this young man in Louisa, who was to rival, and, in some respects, excel Hodge as a teacher of theology.

The brightest, keenest, most fascinating blade amongst these youthful correspondents was that of young "Clem" Vaughan. Here is a piece of a letter that at once illustrates the raciness of Vaughan and characterizes, not unhappily, a certain feature of some of the early letters of Mr. Dabney:

"UNION SEMINARY, *January 25, 1847.*

"AMICE CARISSIME: This day one month ago you dated an epistle to me, and as I have worked hard all day to have a chance of uninterrupted chat with you to-night, I don't see why I should not have that pleasure. Do you? I'll commence by telling you that it is my intention at least to talk about something besides topographical matters. Blast ye, ye beast! Why didn't you tell me something, my dear old crony Bob Dabney, instead of gabberin' abune bad roads, cross-country routes, etc.? Your sheet was just like a surveyor's chart—minus the diagrams; graphic and accurate in description, it is true; but, like the hungry sailor who was turned, by the guid wife, into the stable, 'the ignorant beastie went off widout even so much as tastin' a strae!' you fed a heart, hungry for the gossip of intimacy, with large descriptions of the localities of Buckingham, and its adjacents. Now, verily, I could bite ye, if there wern't just a little about yourself. I love to peep into such places, to see a family knit in love, meeting together after long separation in this selfish world, on the cheery, hearty festival, which rough, good-humored old winter always gives to Virginians, at least, to make amends for pinchin' their noses and bitin' their toeses with his savage cold. Fraternal and filial affection is a beautiful thing. Why is there so little of it? And, in fact, my heart grows soft when I recollect you thought of me on that day. I'm almost ready to forgive you for writing me a (first-rate) engineer's report. I believe I'll do it. But remember, I'm shakin' my fistie at ye, nevertheless."

⁵ Letter from William H. Ruffner, dated November 13, 1846.

On he runs, telling of the quips and quirks of the Seminary life, bubbling over now and then with affection for "Old Bob Dabney," whom he seems to have loved next to his sweetheart, father and sister, recounting his preparations for Presbytery, scintillating, with his ambition for self and his piety in a wrestle. With his friend Dabney he unbosoms himself. He would remind, at that age, an observing horseman, of a mettlesome, blooded young race-horse hitched to a cultivator. Such a correspondent was a corrective and a help to Mr. Dabney.

But there was another side to his life than that of successful missionary worker in old Louisa, and helpful and delighted correspondent with many young men, and support and comfort to his mother; he had to struggle with ill-health. His old enemy, bilious colic, was as troublesome as ever. With the hope of cure or partial relief, he went, in the fall of 1846, to the White Sulphur, and then to the Hot Springs. He derived no substantial relief by his stay at either place. He enjoyed the new scenes, however, and sent back some letters descriptive of the Valley, through which he passed, and portions of Monroe county, which he visited while at the White, which his friend Vaughan would have called excellent "engineer's reports." Naturally he did not at first find the water at the White very palatable, but saw more to interest him in the company gathered there. He says, in a letter to his mother, dated August 17, 1846:

"The water was very nauseous to me at first, but it is becoming less so. If anybody wants to get a tolerably good idea of its smell and taste, let him wash a dirty gun and drink the washings. Still the water is beautifully clear, and the spring very bold. You may smell the sickening, sulphurous odor a hundred yards. It had a somewhat cathartic effect on me at first, but I have been very moderate in my use of it, drinking only two glasses a day as yet. Some people guzzle it in most ridiculous quantities.

"There are several distinguished men here, among them, Mr. Calhoun, Mr. Rhett, Col. Hayne, Mr. McDuffie, etc. Mr. Polk is expected. I have not been introduced to any of them, because, though their conversation would be most delightful to me, I abhor anything like toadyism towards the great. They say Mr. Calhoun is very accessible, and very plain, affectionate and domestic in his habits. He is very ugly, and looks quite old, but still bears the appearance of greatness about him. Mr. McDuffie is very infirm, and does not go out. He fought a duel many years ago, and his antagonist's ball lodged in the small of his back, so near the spinal marrow that they were afraid to take it out. Ever since he has been a miserable invalid.