

CHAPTER II.

EARLY BOYHOOD.

(March 5, 1820—June 1, 1836.)

MODEST CIRCUMSTANCES.—HIS FIRST TEACHER.—AN OLD-FIELD SCHOOL.—HIS TEACHERS IN SUCH SCHOOLS, HIS BROTHER CHARLES WILLIAM, MR. CALEB BURNLEY, MR. THOMAS MEREDITH.—HIS TEXT-BOOKS.—MR. CHARLES BURNLEY.—HIS STUDIES UNDER THE REV. JAMES WHAREY.—HIS FATHER'S DEATH.

IT has been seen in the foregoing chapter that Robert Lewis Dabney was born in a family of modest comfort; that his parents were neither poor nor rich. His father was a planter of moderate means, who needed to use frugal thrift in order to educate his children, and to give them comfortable starts in life. The father died early, and the mother had her hands more than full to do for her children what together they had hoped to do. There was constant need for industry and economy, which, however was an advantage rather than a disadvantage. He could never have done the great work of his mature years without both industry and economy, and it was well, accordingly, that he should have these qualities developed in his boyhood days.

An important part of his boyhood was spent, as we might expect, in primary schools. He was entered at a country school, for the first time, when seven years old. His mother had previously taught him to spell. His first school teacher was his oldest brother, Charles William. He was not only a young man of amiable disposition, excellent manners, and ideals much above the average, but had been taught in the best private schools of the country, and possessed "an excellent and thorough knowledge of Latin (Cicero, Virgil, Tacitus and Livy), of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and surveying, and was well read in old English literature. On the whole, he must have been well qualified to do his work as teacher in the neighborhood school. After Robert Lewis Dabney had become eminent, Mr. Charles William would sometimes laughingly say,

'I gave Robert his start. I prepared him in Latin.' He taught this school for three years. It was held in a log-house near the Dabney home, on the South Anna River."

About 1830, Mr. Charles Dabney removed from the place on the South Anna to his farm on Cub Creek; and in 1831 he and his neighbors employed as teacher Mr. Caleb Burnley, an excellent young man of the neighborhood. Mr. Dabney provided the house in which the school was held. It was built on his land—a log-house, with a clap-board roof, log chimney, and one glass window. In his old days, Dr. Robert Lewis Dabney described this house as we have done, and then added that this was the style of building in which the sons of the planters in Virginia in that day were taught, having "always good teachers and plenty of birch—the teachers being very strict about our manners."

During the next three years, he went to a similar school, which was held on the farm of a neighbor, Dr. Meredith. This school was taught by Dr. Meredith's son, Tom. A feature of the school which impressed itself very clearly on the mind of young Dabney was the old-fashioned way of spelling, twenty or thirty thrown into a class in the afternoon toward the close of the session, and "trapping." By trapping is meant the system which provided for the good speller's working his way to the head of the class by going above those who had missed a word which he himself spelled correctly when it came to him. The "turning down," or "going up," produced a rivalry which resulted in good spellers.

At this school he studied the following text-books: Pike's Arithmetic, Madam Willard's Astronomical Geography. The New Testament was his reading book. He also studied Latin and Greek. In Latin he studied Ruddiman's "Institutes of Latin Grammar," Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary, Colloquia Scholastica, by Corderius, Cæsar, Sallust and Virgil, in which he read an extensive course, the whole of Horace and Cicero's Orations; in Greek he studied Bullion's Greek Grammar, Schrevelius' Lexicon Manuale Græcorum Latinum (a Greek dictionary in which the Greek words are defined in the Latin language), a part of the New Testament in Greek, Xenophon's Anabasis, and a compilation in two volumes, octavo, called Græca Minora and Græca Majora, containing some simple Greek fables and extracts from Xenophon, Herodotus, Plato,

Homer, Anacreon, and so forth. "We 'parsed' extensively, an excellent way, now out of fashion."¹

It is worthy of remark in passing that his studies at this period of his life seem to have covered no great number of topics, but that they were extensive in the classics. Two advantages naturally followed from this: concentration of energies along a few lines enabled him to put more force out along those lines, and accomplish relatively great things in those studies; he was also preserved from falling into the habit of skimming over the surface of things. In his modest way, he tells us here that he had, prior to entering college, accomplished more work in the classics than is now required of a candidate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, in order to his graduation in one of our modern colleges. Dr. William G. T. Shedd, in one of his valuable books, criticizes the contemporary college curricula as having suffered from "fatty degeneration." Our academies have done the same thing. Our age would do well to study one of those old-field schools.

During 1835 he went to a similar school taught by Mr. Charles Burnley, who was a young Baptist preacher, and an excellent man.

From January, 1836, to June, 1836, he studied under the Rev. James Whary, his mother's pastor. The gentleman, the father of Rev. Thomas Wharey and the Rev. James Wharey, was a saint and a scholar. In his old days Dr. Dabney was wont to speak of him as "a saintly man and well educated." He has the repute of having been a good pastor, and a solid and instructive preacher. He was the author of a Church History, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication, in Philadelphia—"one of its standard works, which, being condensed and suitable for general use, has had a wide circulation." Young Dabney rode seven miles on a colt once a week, and spent the day with Mr. Wharey, who, with great care, prepared him for college, pressing him on especially in his algebra and geometry. His text books at this time were Day's Algebra and Simpson's Euclid.

Meanwhile a heavy blow had fallen on the family of which Robert Lewis Dabney was a member—the death of the father.

¹ From manuscript Memoranda of his Life, dictated by Robert L. Dabney, and in the possession of his son, Dr. Charles W. Dabney, Knoxville, Tenn., pp. 2, 3.

The character of Mr. Charles Dabney has already been set forth as space allowed. As man sees things, the death of such a father is an irreparable loss to any family, but he who is "a father of the fatherless and a judge of the widows" knows what is for the good of his own. In September, 1833, when only forty-eight years of age, Mr. Dabney sickened and died of fever. His death inflicted a sense of loss on his community and on his entire county. The court and bar of Louisa county gave the following expression to their sense of loss:

"At a Court of Monthly Session, held for the county of Louisa, at the Court-house, on Monday, the 9th day of September, 1833:

"It is represented to the court that Col. Charles Dabney, a member of this court, and Representative-elect for the county of Louisa in the next Legislature, departed this life on Friday, the 6th day of the present month, after a short illness of only seven days;

"*Resolved, therefore*, by the Court and Bar of Louisa, That the death of such a man as Col. Dabney is greatly to be deplored, as a loss to his country, not only for his public services, but for his private virtues, his charity, his benevolence, and kind disposition towards all persons, so well known to the county.

"*Resolved*, That in token of sorrow for the loss of a friend and fellow-citizen, so beloved and esteemed, the members and officers of the court, the members of the bar, and the citizens here assembled, will wear the usual badge of mourning for thirty days.

"*Resolved*, That a copy of these proceedings be sent to the Richmond and Charlottesville papers for publication.

"Afterwards, on motion—

"*Resolved*, That a copy of the foregoing proceedings be sent to Mrs. Elizabeth Dabney, the consort of the deceased, as a token of the sympathy with her, felt by many of her fellow-citizens, at this afflicting bereavement.

"And then the court adjourned.

"A copy—Teste:

"JOHN HUNTER, C. C. L."