

CHAPTER IV.

EARLY EFFORTS TO AID HIS MOTHER.

(October, 1837-December 9, 1839.)

WORKING IN QUARRY.—HIS FIRST SCHOOL.—THE SUMMER OF 1838.—
HIS SECOND SCHOOL.—VISIT TO HIS AUNT, MRS. REUBEN LEWIS,
OF ALBEMARLE COUNTY, IN 1839.—THE INVITATION OF MR. AND MRS.
LEWIS.—HIS CORRESPONDENTS THE MEANWHILE.

YOUNG Dabney was very much in earnest in his purpose not to be a burden, but a help to his widowed mother. He reached home late in September, 1837, fixed in this resolution, and he spent the rest of that year in the stone quarry, and on the boat transporting stone, which was needed in the rebuilding of the mill. We may think of this youth of seventeen years and a half, whom the members of his family lovingly referred to as "the old gentleman," or "the old man," who had won the plaudits of professors and fellow-students for talents, industry and bearing of the most distinguished sort, as suitably garbed, and holding a drill, or, it may be, driving it with a sledge-hammer, or straining with a lever to move a block of stone, helping to steer and propel the boat on which it is being carried to its destination. He shows the quality here of the primordial mass of his manhood. He is the son of a slave-holder. His mother owns slaves, but she is somewhat straitened in her business. He will not be a burden to her; he will help her. There is nothing wrong or dishonorable in manual labor; he will work with his own hands, that his mother's burdens may be made lighter. Mrs. Elizabeth Randolph Dabney may have gone and looked at her son engaged in these labors, and thought of Dr. Carroll's words, "You have great reason to be thankful to God, madam, that he has given you such a son." She may very well have felt that she was getting new proof of the truth of those words.

On the 15th of January, 1838, he opened a neighborhood school. At this time he lacked one month and twenty days of being eighteen years old. The cabin in which he taught was similar to the one in which he had been taught by Mr. Caleb

Burnley. This cabin he helped to build with his own hands. There were about seventeen pupils, boys and girls. His brother Frank (and his sister Betty, perhaps) was among the number. So far as was known, he was a faithful and efficient teacher. It was important to him chiefly as bringing him, clear money, about three hundred dollars.

The summer of 1838 he seems to have devoted to farming operations, and the winter following he seems to have given to the pursuits of the planter.

During the latter part of the summer and the autumn of 1839 he taught a second school. This school was held about four miles west of his mother's, in a log cabin near Col. William Harris's. The benches on which the pupils sat had no backs. He walked all this distance of four miles night and morning, his brother Frank accompanying him. This school brought him in another three hundred dollars. The two schools together had covered a period of about ten months, and together they had netted him six hundred dollars. The last of the two closed early in December, 1839.

Meanwhile, in the early part of the summer of 1839, he had gone, riding a colt, to pay a visit to his aunt, Mrs. Reuben Lewis, of Albemarle county. She lived not far from Charlottesville, the seat of the University of Virginia, an institution whose advantages he had for years hoped some day to enjoy. In all the South, and, indeed, in all the land, there was no place with more of fame for the character of the work done by the students who were graduated. It had amongst its professors men of national reputation. The institution was established on a basis more liberal and enlightened than any other in our country at the time, and had already won a reputation abroad. While on this visit to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis he attended on the exercises connected with the close of the University session, and was greatly impressed by what he saw and heard. His uncle and aunt insisted that he should come and live with them; they offered to give him board and lodging for himself and his horse, and urged that he could ride thence to the University and back, attend the lectures and thus complete his education. This was not an offer to be lightly rejected, nor did it take young Dabney long to accept it.

Up to this time he does not seem to have abandoned the idea of returning to Hampden-Sidney. He had been entreated repeatedly to return, by his student friends, and amongst them,

Moses Drury Hoge. In August, 1839, Mr. Hoge writes, expressing the hope that they may be college-mates again and class-mates. In September, 1839, he wrote again, urging various reasons for his friend Dabney's return, one, at least, of which is worthy of repeating. It is put by Mr. Hoge as follows:

"The other day, Mr. Maxwell" (who was made president in 1838) "was talking to me of the prospects of the College, and said that it was his intention to get two tutors as soon as possible; and asked me if I knew of a young man who would answer his purpose. I immediately gave him an account of you, and he requested me to sound you on the subject. He told me that if I would teach two or three years, he would send me to Europe, and give me an opportunity to fit myself for any chair I pleased. A part of his offers I declined, for I am not willing to make any engagement that would preclude the possibility of studying divinity. I may possibly teach in the College and carry on my studies in the Seminary at the same time. But of this hereafter. It is Mr. Maxwell's plan to train young men for professorships, by first making them tutors; and although a tutorship must be no temptation to you, if you intend to teach, you might not object to being a professor. I hope you will reflect on this seriously. I regret that you cannot come in the fall and have a conversation with Mr. Maxwell yourself."

The venerable widow of the Rev. Dr. John Holt Rice also urged and entreated her "young friend Mr. Dabney" to return to Hampden-Sidney. This noble woman was one of his most regular, and, we must believe, one of his most helpful correspondents in this period. He entertained a most respectful and profound regard for her character then, and continued to cherish her memory throughout his long and full life. Certainly she wrote affectionately, tenderly, and wisely to him of his Christian life. Here are some of her words, on the 13th of February, 1838:

"I trust you will make your religion serviceable to you in every thought and action. It is of little avail if our religion is not in continual practice, if it is not interwoven in our very system. Oh! how much Christians lose by not being more entirely Christian, and how much good they lose the privilege of doing, and how much reproach they bring on the cause of the blessed Redeemer, who gave his life a ransom for all who believe and trust and obey him! I wish you to take a higher stand than the common Christians. How little use is it to pretend to be a Christian at all, when the case is so doubtful to all and even to ourselves. I wish you to enjoy all the blessed and gracious

promises and truths of God's Word; to have that faith which will purify your heart and work by love; that will ever lead you to do good, and in every way be useful. Oh! it is worth all labor, self-denial and exertion to be found so engaged as at last to have it pronounced, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' I trust you will make the Bible, and not other professors, your rule and guide. Shrink not from any duty, however difficult and painful; and diligently seek for duties."

Her letters to him abound in homilies similarly helpful. This venerated lady to whom he wrote, often two letters to her one, makes it her business to urge him to return to Hampden-Sidney. She began this as early as November, 1838. She says, in a letter of the 22nd of that month:

"Though I now have a good many letters pressing on my hands, yet I cannot delay yours, if anything I can say will aid in deciding so important a point as your next year's college course. I must say that Mr. Maxwell . . . seems to take hold of the poor old College with the right spirit; and that every son of Virginia, and especially Presbyterians, ought to hold up his hands, and aid him in every way in their power. This I would by no means wish you to do to the least injury of yourself or your dear young brother. Every man must, in a great measure, form himself, or he will not be a good scholar or anything else; and I should think recitations preferable to lectures for undergraduates. The College, as far as I can learn, is now going on admirably. Mr. Maxwell says his duties thus far are pleasures; and we are apt to attend well to what is a pleasure. He says he has to study hard, but he seems to enjoy it. He talks much of putting the place in thorough repair, and making it attractive by having fine fruits, trees, pleasure walks, and so forth, and of doing everything to improve and please, to benefit and render the students comfortable and happy. Professor Smith [this gentleman was soon to become the head of the Virginia Military Institute] is said to be a fine officer. He wishes to put the College under complete martial law, and make it a sort of West Point. Mr. Maxwell is very anxious to make a truly Christian college, and for this, I believe, ardently prays. Now, although the College has not been patronized by the State, it has been a patron of the State, and I do not think the old mother should be neglected for the pampered daughter, who has sucked all the literary resources, and yet has higher expenses. The cost there is considerably greater, and there are many more temptations to indulgence and extravagances. And as to friends, I do not expect you have one near there more interested in you than I am."

In a letter of January 15, 1839, she again speaks in praise of Mr. Maxwell's administration, and of the college generally;

says that the students are becoming better pleased; mentions Mr. Hoge as a special instance of this, and says, "They have talked of writing to you, and perhaps have, and can tell you much more than I can."

On the 9th of April following she wrote:

"I am, of course, no judge of college matters. But Mr. Maxwell seems to have his heart so much in the work, and his views seem to me so much what they ought to be in relation to such a work, that I cannot but hope he is doing very well, and that if he can be sustained the institution will yet be a blessing and a glory to our State. I should have no doubt of his success if it was not for this lamentable party strife."

The reference is to the conflict between the New and Old School Churches, with the spirit of which this good lady had no sympathy. She thought that the defenders of correct principles had shown a want of Christian charity in dealing with their opponents.

On the 16th of July she wrote:

"I am sorry to hear there will be any difficulty or doubt about you and your brother's coming this fall. This is an important crisis with the good old College, and as much as she wants money, she wants students of the right stamp more, and you know how much our country and the church at this time needs her sons to have every possible qualification for usefulness. The more I see and hear of Mr. Maxwell's views and conduct in regard to college matters, the more I approve and wish him every facility for success. He has many difficulties to contend with, and I wish him to have the aid and comfort of such a pupil as my own young friend. This, though, would not influence me if I did not feel fully assured it would be to the permanent interest of yourself and brother."

Having heard of the offer of Mr. Lewis, near the University of Virginia, to give Mr. Dabney free board, Mrs. Rice wrote, on the 22nd of September, 1839:

"I wish I were in a situation to make an offer that might equal your good aunt's. I think it of considerable importance to build up a good Presbyterian institution, such as President Maxwell has his heart set upon, where pure morals and sound learning may be taught. . . . Mr. Maxwell wishes to raise officers from our own College that will feel and act together, and strive to do good to their country through the College. He has set his heart on Mr. Hoge and young Reid, of Lynchburg, and Mr. Hoge recommends you as a suitable person to

train for that object, and, therefore, Mr. Maxwell wishes to get you here. . . . I think this may be to your advantage, and open a field for great usefulness for you. I am sure I am not making calculations for the gratification of my old age. Yet it would be gratifying to have such young friends settled around me. As far as I can see, Mr. Maxwell has very just views for managing and conducting the College, and I wish him to have help."

These letters were no doubt gratifying to young Dabney, and helpful because of their appreciation; but we cannot doubt that he chose wisely, being as mature in mind and character as he was, and Hampden-Sidney not being perfectly organized, in going to the place of larger opportunities, albeit it was also the place of greater danger. The course which might have proved hazardous in the extreme to others was not so to him, and he was too large a man to have been able to look forward contentedly to a mere professorship in the Hampden-Sidney of his day.