

## CHAPTER VI.

### *THE INTERVAL BETWEEN HIS UNIVERSITY AND SEMINARY LIFE.*

• (July 6, 1842—October, 1844.)

**MIND MADE UP TO STUDY FOR THE MINISTRY.—REASONS FOR NOT GOING TO THE SEMINARY AT ONCE.—MANNER IN WHICH THIS INTERVAL WAS ACTUALLY PUT IN: MANAGING THE FARM, TEACHING CLASSICAL SCHOOLS, GETTING MEANS WITH WHICH TO GO THROUGH THE SEMINARY, READING AND CORRESPONDENCE.—OTHER VOCATIONS OFFERED.—DETERMINED TO THE MINISTRY.**

IN his later days, Dr. Dabney was accustomed to speak of himself as having made up his mind to preach the gospel before going to the University; but there are pretty good reasons for thinking that he was unwilling at the time to make an open announcement of his purpose. His mother's pastor, the Rev. James Wharey, in a letter, dated January 17, 1841, urged the claims of the ministry on his attention, saying, amongs other things:

"Have you not determined to devote yourself to the ministry of the gospel? There is a loud and pressing call at this time for more ministers. I hope that you will find it to be your duty to turn your attention that way. It is the way to usefulness and respectability, if not to honor and wealth. Think prayerfully on this subject; and may the Lord guide you."

From these words it is clear that Mr. Wharey did not regard the matter as settled. Elsewhere we learn, also, that while young Dabney was anxious to secure an abatement of fees at the University, he would not receive gratuitous tuition, seventy-five dollars *per annum*, conditioned on a declaration that he was a candidate for the ministry. This had been offered. He refused it. He did not relish being treated differently because he was a candidate for the sacred office. It seems that he would not have been willing to accept this abatement had he been ready to declare himself; but it was clear that he was not ready to commit himself publicly. His purpose to be a minister was probably firmly fixed in his own mind before he entered the

University, but his caution and strong sense of responsibility would naturally lead him to maintain a prudent silence for some years. By the time he is ready to leave the University, however, his friends generally, as his correspondents show, understand that he expects to be a minister.

Accordingly, many of those friends expected and desired to see him go straight to the Seminary for the study of divinity. Young Moses Drury Hoge exhorts, and would command him if he could, to come straightway to the Seminary. Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Lewis, who have come to look upon him with the affection of parents for a son, deprecate his stopping midway in his preparation, to begin again after an interval. They think he ought to go right on, as the Seminary course is itself a long one. Others, in like manner, urge him to this step. But for certain reasons he decided not to do as these friends had urged. His brother Francis was still quite a boy, and had made no great success as manager for his mother during his one year of trial in that capacity. Besides, he was precisely at that age when he ought to have been attending college, if he was to take such a course of training at all. Betty, the youngest daughter of his mother, and his best beloved sister, was also in need of a capable and scholarly and efficient teacher; but the expenses of sending Frank to college, and of procuring a suitable tutor for Betty, would be too heavy for his mother, who had fallen somewhat into debt again during Robert's career in the University. He felt that she needed and was entitled to his help. He decided to become himself the manager of her farm until he could secure a good man to take the place, decided to act as tutor to his sister Betty, and to replenish his own treasury by teaching a classical school, and so to be able to relieve his mother of embarrassment, to pay his own debt to Col. William Harris, and to lay up something on which to live while in the course of Seminary training.

He spent the last half of the year 1842 as manager for his mother. The crops, which he found in weeds and grass when he got home from the University, he put into order, and on their maturity, garnered them, wound up the year, and procured a manager. He sent his brother Frank to the Virginia Military Institute. He opened a small classical school in his mother's house, from which he derived an income of about four hundred dollars a year. In connection with this school he taught his sister Betty, who blossomed, under his tuition, into a fine

scholar, reading French and Latin with remarkable ease. He threw himself, with his characteristic energy, into this work. Amongst other things, he wrote for his sister Betty an entire Latin Grammar, Part I., in which he set forth, in his own way, the principles which govern word formation. The handwriting is, as always, somewhat cramped, but neat, clear and easily legible. This manuscript volume contains one hundred and fifty-eight closely written duodecimo pages. It is bound in blue manilla paper. On the title page are the words:

"GRAMMATICA LATINA.  
*In usum*  
*Sororis serenissima.*"

The first and second pages *verbatim* are as follows:

I.

"PRINCIPLES OF ETYMOLOGY.

"If any language consisted of words which underwent no changes, either of sense or form, the labor of learning it would be confined wholly to learning the meaning of the words. The language would have neither accidence nor syntax, and the labor of the grammarian would be nothing. But the Latin language, as does every other, admits of changes both of sense and of form, to a great extent, and it is the part of etymology to describe these changes and to give the rules which regulate them. The change of form is intended to represent a change of sense, and, consequently, we may usually expect that the former will not take place without the latter. But—

"(1.) A word often changes its sense without changing its form. They often, indeed almost always, have a meaning derived directly from their composition, which is considered as the leading or *primary* meaning, and then they have several secondary meanings flowing from the first, in succession, by some obvious principle of similarity, or by taking them in a figurative sense. Thus: *Lingua* means, primarily, a tongue, hence it is used to mean a language—the tongue being supposed to be the organ of speech. *Virtus* is derived from *vir*, and means *manhood*; hence, *hardihood*, *courage*, and lastly, in our language, *virtue*, because, among a rude and warlike people, courage is regarded as the chief virtue. If the student would learn the true powers of words, he must seek first this primary meaning, and see how the other meanings flow from it.

"(2.) A word often changes its sense, without other change of form than is necessary, in passing from one language to another. Example: In Greek, *Κοίλον* is the neuter of an adjective which means *hollow*, *concave*. In Latin it is written *Cælum*, and means *the sky*, which is concave. *Τεννω*, *I stretch*, in Latin is *Tendo*."

The production of this volume, which to most, even of the Master of Arts graduates of his *alma mater*, would be a tedious and irksome, if not an impossible labor, was simply a pleasureable vent for his overflowing energies. Of course, it is a philosophic etymology of the Latin. Probably few of the great philologists of the country would agree to all of the explanations, but it was fitted to interest the student, and to make her think. It is the work of one with the instinct of the teacher born in him.

For his teaching in this period he took in about eight hundred dollars. With this he was enabled to repay to Col. Harris his loan of one hundred and fifty dollars, to restock his wardrobe, and to contemplate with equanimity the relatively small expenses to be incurred in two years of seminary life. This was in addition to his satisfaction from the improved income of his mother, which was owing to his supervision of her affairs, and to the pleasure which he derived from having conducted his sister Betty's education to its completion.

Mr. Dabney's letters of this period have apparently been lost for the most part. He corresponded much, for he has saved letters from many persons received in these years. They contain many allusions to his letters, and show clearly, if incidentally, that, though living a retired and sequestered life, his mind was careering around over all the sphere of the individual histories of his friends and acquaintances, the current questions in politics and religion, and in science. Amongst his correspondents are two venerable old ladies, *quondam* University friends, and Moses Drury Hoge. He wrote some at this time for political as well as religious papers. His friend Hoge thinks so, and congratulates him on the successful cover of his identity, which he had found in his pen name. One of the articles which he published at the time was on "The Probable Sum of the Numbers of All the Generations since Adam." This came out in the *Watchman of the South*, about the spring of 1843. Amongst his unpublished manuscripts of the period are "Jehoshaphat: A Sacred Drama," translated from the Italian of Metastasio; "North Wind's Autobiography," in fifteen stanzas of nine lines each, and a "Valentine," in four stanzas of four lines each. These papers show that he had the itch for versification in his early days, as well as in his old age. Indeed, throughout life he was wont to employ odd moments of leisure in this fashion. His translation of Metastasio makes easy reading.

He was a man capable of success in any one of many fields, and efforts were made to secure him for other work than that which he had cut out for himself. Mr. Thomas Ritchie, the distinguished editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, and one of the dominating men in the councils of the Virginia Democrats of his day, and the Richmond Campaign Committee, offered Mr. Dabney a salary of twelve hundred dollars a year, with a contingent interest in the net profits, on condition of his becoming editor of the party organ in Petersburg. This gives color to the view that Mr. Dabney had shown his skill already in newspaper debate. His friend, John S. Caskie, of Richmond, strongly urged him to accept this work. He writes, in a letter of September 23rd (year is not given) :

“Dabney, depend upon it, you can do this great service to your party and yourself. I am no flatterer, but must be permitted to say that in my estimation there is no man of your age in the Union your superior as a writer. In the editorial chair you would powerfully aid a great and glorious cause, and in so doing would win for yourself a reputation wide and high. Nature meant you for an editor. If you be a Calhoun man, I know your heart is glowing in his behalf, and now here is an opportunity to do him and your country service.”

In the summer of 1843, Mr. Dabney had the pleasure of declining another offer of employment of a more peaceful kind. Dr. S. Maupin needed some one to fill the place of the classical teacher in his school in Richmond. Certain gentlemen called his attention to Robert L. Dabney, of Louisa. The salary offered to this post seems to have been seven hundred dollars per annum. This place, though possessing certain incidental advantages, Mr. Dabney could not accept without sacrifice. At home he was educating his sister, giving a very helpful, if general, supervision to his mother's business, and, in addition, taking in for his teaching of outsiders four hundred dollars in the course of a session. But this, as well as the other offer, shows the general esteem in which he was held, and that he had at the early age of twenty-three won an enviable reputation.

This reputation was deserved. He had developed himself on many sides, and was competent to distinguished work in many different departments of life; but he was fixed in his resolution to be a preacher of the gospel, and with a mind at ease concerning his mother's family, he repaired, during the early days of November, 1844, to Hampden-Sidney, to be ready

for the work of the Seminary on its opening. Soon after, he presented the following introductory letter to the Faculty:

"RICHMOND, VA., November 7, 1844.

*"To the Faculty of Union Seminary.*

"DEAR BRETHREN: Although the bearer, Mr. Robert Dabney, has been introduced to all of you, yet you may not remember him. At all events, I take great pleasure in saying to you that he has my entire confidence as a gentleman, Christian and scholar. I have known him for some time, and have always highly esteemed him and all his family. I hope you will give him your confidence from the first. He is a candidate for the ministry under the care of West Hanover Presbytery. I trust his time at the Seminary will be spent pleasantly.

"Accept my kind regards for yourselves and your families.

"Very truly yours,

"WM. S. PLUMMER."