

## CHAPTER VIII.

### *A MISSIONARY IN LOUISA COUNTY.*

(June, 1846—June, 1847.)

DISINCLINATION TO UNDERTAKE THE WORK.—WANTED BY THE PEOPLE.—PLEASURE IN HIS WORK AND ACCEPTANCE WITH HIS PEOPLE.—VARIED AND EXTENSIVE CORRESPONDENCE.—CONTINUED ILL-HEALTH.—TRIP TO THE WHITE SULPHUR AND TO THE HOT SPRINGS.—INVITATIONS TO OTHER FIELDS.—THE ADVICE OF DR. MEREDITH AND THE INVITATION TO VISIT TINKLING SPRING.—THE CALL AND DECISION TO ACCEPT IT.

**M**R. DABNEY, on some accounts, was naturally drawn to the Louisa field. He would be able, while working in the field, to make his home with his widowed mother, who had long leaned on him in a peculiar way. On his going to the Seminary, his mother had written :

"I knew I should miss you very much, but it is worse than I expected, even. Francis is as kind and attentive to his business as he can be, but still you are wanting here for my comfort; but I know that I have to give you up, and I will not complain, but live in the hope of seeing you in four months from this dark morning. . . . Your room here looks like there had been a death in it. Indeed, I know not what we shall do without you."<sup>1</sup>

Of warm, generous affections, disposed to bear the burdens of the weak all about, his home folks naturally leaned on him; nor did time efface the sense of their loss. When the Louisa field was offered, he knew that his going there would comport with his mother's happiness and comfort. The destitutions of the field also appealed to him. There was little worthy preaching at the time in the county. The Baptists and Campbellites, then holding forth there, were, for the most part, but poorly furnished to teach the way of life. There seemed to be an advantageous opening for a preacher of his faith; so, at any rate, thought West Hanover Presbytery; but there were other reasons why Mr. Dabney was strongly disinclined to take the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, dated December 2, 1844.

work. The chief of these was that "No prophet is accepted in his own country." This was the people among whom he had grown up. Many of them were related to him by ties of blood. His connections were still more widely ramified. By nature he was modest and shrinking. He distrusted himself as equal to the task of doing his proper work as preacher and pastor in this place.

But this people, amongst whom he had grown up, desired him, and some of them very much. On the very heels of the Presbyterial Committee's determination to construct the Louisa field, the session of Providence Church had held an informal meeting, and desired the Rev. William S. White to call Mr. Dabney's attention to that field, and ask him "to visit them" as soon as his licensure should be over, "with a view to settling among them." It was, in part, in recognition of this known desire that the Presbytery assigned him to the field as a missionary licentiate. That the congregation of Providence would have given him an early call to the pastorate, had he been disposed to cut short the period of his licentiate-ship, there can be little doubt. This fact is made clear, as well as the general esteem in which Mr. Dabney was held, by such proofs as the following letter from Mr. Launcelot Minor, an elder in the Providence Church :

"LOUISA, May 29, '46.

"REVEREND AND DEAR FRIEND: I take this mode of saying something more to you in regard to your accepting the invitation to preach in our Providence field, which will be very certainly extended to you, lest I should not have an opportunity of saying it verbally.

"Your only objection seems to be the fear that you will not be able to do good, on account of your being "in your own country," and, on the first view of the subject, it would seem to be well-nigh an insuperable objection. I mean, it would appear thus to a stranger to all the circumstances. As I said to you the other day, you would begin your ministry, I am convinced, under much more favorable auspices than usual. As the son of a man to whom the people of Louisa, and all, indeed, who knew him, delighted to do honor, you will stand on higher ground than any stranger could; your being but little known *personally* to the people of the field, but most favorably known as a young man of learning and sense, would give you much stronger claims than others; and your being known as one who was sound on all the questions which seem to be separating the various sects of Christians, would, in my esteem, be a very strong lever in your favor. But all, all these sink into perfect insignificance compared with the acknowledgment of

our utter dependence on a Higher Power; to do his work acceptably to himself, or indeed with any success, 'tis *absolutely* necessary that we should be conformed to his likeness. We must be *lowly and meek in spirit*; we must be kind and forgiving and courteous to all; finally, we must say nothing or do nothing that will militate against our gaining the confidence of the community, or which will lead men to speak lightly of the religion of our Master as set forth in us. The minister's is truly a life of crosses; he must expect to be crossed every hour of his existence. He must expect to have his sermons found fault with because of their being too plain—and because they are not plain enough; because he writes them—and because he does not write them; because he reads them—and because he does not read them; and at last, after being covered with abuses of this kind, he will find himself charged with seeking a livelihood, or fortune, under the guise of the blessed religion of Jesus Christ, so fickle and vain is this “stiff-necked and gainsaying people” with whom the minister of Jesus Christ has to do; but, thanks to a merciful and gracious God, there is in this world some relief to this dark picture. I have never yet seen the humble, devoted Christian, I have never yet seen the individual—private or public, rich or poor, male or female—whose life was devoted to deeds such as are the fruit of the Spirit, but in the end assumed such an influence over those he had to do with as most effectually checked and overawed vice and obtained the admiration of all. . . .

“With the advantages you possess over young men starting in the ministry in their native neighborhoods, together with a *faithful* and entire dependence on God, I cannot myself see an objection to your taking the field with the utmost confidence of being successful. Faith! faith! is, I think, in religion, pretty much what action is said to be in an orator—it is to be asked for first, and asked for last; with it we can do anything, and without it we can do nothing. The next thing to be sought in prayer is, I think, the constant presence of the desire to do all that we do to the glory of God, that we may be divested of self, and be actuated only by supreme love to him and desire to glorify his name; to count all things but dung, so that the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus is won. . . . I think I have shown satisfactorily that in regard to temporal or worldly qualifications you are all that the people could desire. As to the rest, yourself and your God only can answer. I hope, my dear friend, you will forgive my having spoken thus freely to you; be assured the whole is prompted by the ardent desire to see you useful in the service of God and his church. May he, by the power of his Holy Spirit, guide and direct us, the church, in the choice of a pastor! and may he direct you in the decision which you may make! and may it all redound greatly to his glory, I do most sincerely pray. Believe me,

“Yours affectionately,

“L. MINOR, JR.”

The issue showed that the people of Providence Church were not mistaken in Mr. Dabney. He was happy in his work. At least, he was as happy as a man in such a precarious state of health could well be. His field was a large one; it took him about a month to get around. He could use the same sermon several times. He thus had ample time to prepare his sermons, and was able to sustain the reputation, with which he came from the Seminary, of being a powerful preacher. He loved to preach to these first people of his. When Providence made it his duty to be elsewhere, and to preach to strange people, he wrote, "I hunger for the opportunity of preaching to my own congregation."<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterwards, he wrote, "I am sick for an opportunity to preach to my own people."<sup>3</sup> His preaching was duly appreciated by the little flocks to which he ministered. Moreover, he commended himself to all classes, by his blood earnestness, and uncommon honesty of word and behavior, by his unaffected and thorough-going interest in the well-being, both temporal and spiritual, of his parishioners, and by his genuine sympathy for all the weak and the suffering. His labors were so acceptable to his people that when the time came for him to go to another field, many of them could hardly see that he ought to go. At that time, Mr. Launcelot Minor voiced again the views and wishes of the people of the field, in a long and eloquent letter to Mr. Dabney, toward the close of which he says:

"I have come to the deliberate and sincere conclusion that, taking all the circumstances into consideration, there is not a man of my acquaintance in the church of God who, with a tolerable show of health, could do so much toward the establishment of religion as you in Louisa—such an assertion to be qualified with the sentence, which is always understood by Christians, when this labor is bestowed with an eye single to the glory of God. What I mean is this, that as the son of Col. Charles Dabney, and being what you are in qualifications, with an humble dependence on God for his blessing, no other man could do in Louisa what you could."<sup>4</sup>

He affirms his competence to decide this question quite as well as the Presbytery.

While winning these golden opinions as a preacher and min-

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from White Sulphur, dated September 5, 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from the Hot Springs, September 14, 1846.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from L. Minor, Jr., dated May 4, 1847.

ister in Louisa, Mr. Dabney was as devoted to correspondence as ever. He was in steady correspondence with William T. Richardson, Alexander L. Hogshead, Stephen A. Stanfield, William Stoddert, Clement Read Vaughan, and William Henry Ruffner, and others, in addition to previous correspondents. At the same time, he indulged, with still others, in correspondence of a more fugitive character. There were two or three very bright men in this number, and in them "Bob Dabney," as some of them call him, must have found peculiar delight. Ruffner went to Princeton for the session of 1846 to 1847. He sketches for his friend Dabney the Princeton professors, when Princeton was in her very zenith. Here is the sketch which the eager-minded Louisa missionary got one day in November, 1846, out of the post, by paying five cents therefor:

"Dr. Alexander is just what he appears to be in his books, a man of wonderful sagacity and acquaintance with the human heart. In private, his manners are not as affectionate as one would be led to suppose; but he never cuts but to remove an excrescence. His powers of managing and trimming into shape all sorts of characters, such as come here, are remarkable. His lectures would be considered able were he in an ordinary faculty.

"Dr. Miller is a cheerful, polished, rather formal and pompous old gentleman of seventy-seven; very affectionate towards the students, and a man of great learning and piety. He is commonly spoken of as 'tedious' and 'prolix,' etc., in his lectures. I am inclined to think that such a manner of speech about Dr. Miller is one of those hereditary fashions which are often perpetuated in a public institution, without anybody's, or but few, going to the trouble of comparing the opinion with the fact. Dr. Miller delivers lectures on Church History supplementary to Mosheim, which are rich with most valuable and interesting information (*me judice*). He uses circumlocution always, rather than employ cant, or inelegant phrases, but that is a trifle compared with the facts of a rare and improving nature which his words convey.

"Dr. Hodge is the theological Polyphemus. He gives us a lecture once a week on theology, and presents a subject in a stronger manner than we can find it treated in any text-book; but I will defer particulars for a future communication. We use no particular text-book on theology. Dr. Hodge gives us about twenty-four questions a week, on which we read and write. *Turretin* is the principal book used. Hill stands next in repute, and Dick at least third or fourth. Knapp is considered valuable. . . .

"The ablest speaker in the Faculty is Dr. Addison Alexander. He keeps an audience feeling like a stream of galvanism was running

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."<sup>5</sup>

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."

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

He soon found agreeable society, as his later letters show. However, his sojourn at the White, and his similar sojourn at the Hot, both failed to do him any real good. He suffered an attack of his old malady while at the Hot, and returned home in late September in very low spirits, so that his friends were much worried. Vaughan, hearing how matters were, wrote:

"I do not think that you have cause for despondency. I'll tell you the reason I think so, and beg, at the same time, that you will not think me a flatterer when I say I cannot believe that God will take from his vineyard a laborer so well prepared by his creative hand and his providential superintendence of your education before the blood of a single cluster of grapes has stained his hand at the wine-press. So cheer up. Don't let a relaxing and stupefying foreboding settle upon your mind; but if you feel disposed to give up, call to your aid the resources of your own healthy intellect, and if evils come, meet them with a cheerful front, and measure the length of infliction by the strength of a faithful endurance. You may read with a smile this homily from your blue-devilishly disposed friend and pitcher; but, I tell you, avoid depression of spirits as much as possible, because I know, by a sad experience, how bad the effects are upon the mind, the body and the heart. It starves and clogs the energies of all these, prevents close and accurate thinking by dissipating the mind in wild and dreary reveries, sours the temper, makes one careless of health and the means of preserving it, and, in fine, is the very worst state of mind in its practical influence on a man's usefulness of anything I know."\*

Such words were hardly much needed by a man whose character was so strong as Mr. Dabney's, but they could hardly fail to be helpful.

It makes little difference where a young minister goes to work; if he has learning, talents, and character fitting for a wider sphere of usefulness, and is not bound by something very peculiar in his circumstances and accidents, representatives of the wider spheres will very soon have their eyes on him. So Robert L. Dabney found it. He had hardly begun his labors in Louisa before the session of the Presbyterian Church in Norfolk invited him to become stated supply, for a period of six months, at the rate of six hundred dollars per annum, alleging their unanimous view that he would probably be called as pastor as a result of this term of service. Six months later the church in

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\* Letter from C. R. Vaughan, dated October 3, 1846.

Danville was making overtures for his services; but he preferred some place where the work would not press so heavily, where there would not be so many sermons to prepare, and where he would be assured of opportunity for a more satisfying development. He preferred old Louisa. Dr. Dabney, in his old days, gave the following account of his removal from Louisa:

"Matthew Henry says, 'He that notes providences shall have providences to note.' What does this look like? Returning from preaching about the first of April, 1847, I met in the road Dr. William Meredith, my mother's physician, then out of practice. He was a man of great experience and sagacity. He said, 'You look badly. I hear of your colic. What do you take? Calomel and opium, I suppose. Now, Mr. Dabney, you will never be cured by taking medicine. Your hope is in a change of climate and water. You must get into a region entirely free from malaria, and drink limestone water. I wish you could have a year in Staunton, and drink out of the well at Mrs. Garber's tavern. No one ever had a chill, *i. e.*, a native-born chill, in Staunton. This will cure you.'

"I said, 'No doubt, Doctor; but my living and work is here. I know of no opening whatever to such a region. I might as well expect to marry a princess.'

"Within ten days I got a serious overture from Tinkling Spring Church, of Augusta county, seven miles from Staunton. This was chiefly through the Rev. David Humphrys, of Augusta county, an intimate Seminary friend. I visited the church, staying a fortnight; had no colic symptoms while on limestone water. I accepted a call from them, and went there July 1, 1847. I left my dear mother and sister, and my nursing churches, with deep regret, but all justified me."

Dr. Dabney's memory must have played him false in regard to the date of his talk with Dr. Meredith. It was probably six weeks or two months earlier in the year, for his friend, Rev. William T. Richardson, then at Waynesboro, had written him, on the 12th of February, asking whether he was movable, and begging to be permitted to press his name as a suitable man for the Tinkling Spring pastorate.<sup>7</sup> On the 12th of March he writes again, telling Mr. Dabney that the congregation will certainly, on the next Sunday, take steps to invite him to come and preach to them, with a view to a call.<sup>8</sup> On the 15th of March, 1847, Messrs. John McCue, David Gilkeson, Jacob

<sup>7</sup> Letter of Rev. Wm. T. Richardson, dated February 12, 1847.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of Rev. Wm. T. Richardson, dated March 12, 1847.

Van Lear, and H. G. Guthrie write to the Rev. Robert L. Dabney:

"The old church and congregation of Tinkling Spring have instructed us to invite you to visit them at an early day, so that they can have an opportunity of hearing you preach, and becoming acquainted with you, and you with them, with a view to your becoming the future pastor of this church, should each party be equally well pleased."

They further informed him that the session of the church had "appointed a communion season for the second Sabbath in April, next," and expressed the desire that he should be present on that occasion. This invitation Mr. Dabney accepted. On his return he stopped at the home of his aunt, Mrs. Mildred Lewis, with whom he had lived during his course at the University. From that point he wrote to his mother, on the 17th of April, 1847:

"I returned to Aunt Mildred's last night (Friday), well and hearty. I spent a week in Augusta, and preached four times, and visited twelve or fifteen families connected with the church. The Tinkling Spring Church had appointed a communion for Sunday. A Mr. Love preached in the morning and I in the evening. This was the largest congregation I ever preached to, and one of the most orderly—at least four hundred people. I have addressed more immortal souls this week than I had the whole of last winter all put together.

"The result of my visit, I believe, will be a very flattering and prompt call from the church. What to do with it I am as much at a loss as ever. The prospect of immediate usefulness there is immeasurably greater than in Louisa, for I should reach as many minds there on every Sunday as I would in Louisa in a whole month, with all my laborious peripatations and at all my different preaching places, and that under more favorable circumstances. But in Louisa the destitution is greater, and unless some one is contented to stay there, and be satisfied with the day of small things, the destitution must continue."

On the Sunday following, this church gave Mr. Dabney a practically unanimous call. Of this call he received notice in the following letter, which deserves a place in these memoirs as descriptive of the field in which he labored for about six years:

"AUGUSTA COUNTY, April 19, 1847.

"To the Rev. R. L. Dabney.

"DEAR SIR: It affords us great pleasure to inform you that you were on yesterday, by an almost unanimous vote of the congregation

of Tinkling Spring, elected pastor of that church, only two dissenting. The cause of their disagreement, being wholly political, should never be permitted to enter the church of God. A call was prepared in the usual form, and signed by a large committee of the congregation, and the blank filled with the sum of six hundred dollars. This will be sent to you by mail after the meeting of the Lexington Presbytery, or carried by a commissioner to be appointed for that purpose, to the meeting of the West Hanover Presbytery. We do sincerely hope that when the call is presented to your Presbytery, that body will place it in your hands, and will throw no obstacle in the way to your accepting it, provided it may be your wish to do so. The field to which we call you is a very interesting one in very many respects, and holds out many strong inducements for you to come and occupy it, viz., its geographical position, the large and very interesting groups of young people growing up in the midst, most of whom are out of the fold of the Good Shepherd, a large and floating population who have no identity with any particular church, many of whom we think may be brought within the fold of Christ, and that we have been without a pastor for eighteen months, that this is the fourth effort we have made to secure one, and that you have been *elected* with almost *unprecedented unanimity*. Should you *fail* or *refuse* to *accept* the *call*, owing to the opposition stated, it is the opinion of the more intelligent and discreet members of this church, Mr. Calhoun uniting with them in that opinion, that it would be attended with the most disastrous results to the peace and amity of this ancient congregation. . . . That the great Head of the Church may guide you to a correct decision of the all-important question presented for your consideration is the sincere prayer of your friends and well-wishers,

“JOHN McCUE,  
 “DAVID GILKERSON,  
 “JACOB VAN LEAR,  
 “H. G. GUTHRIE.

“*Rev. R. L. Dabney.*”

The call from Tinkling Springs was reinforced by letters from many quarters. Mr. Richardson argued, urged and pled. He predicted disaster to this important church in case Mr. Dabney should not accept the call. Rev. B. M. Smith, then pastor at Staunton, united his voice with that of this church, whose members “cover fifty square miles of fine land,” are most substantial in character, almost entirely devoted to the Presbyterian faith, so far as they have ecclesiastical predilections.” He tells him that his “specimens of preaching have given universal satisfaction, and produced deep impressions on the minds of some young people, of whom there are fifty or sixty, that

have knowledge of the truth, but have hesitated to avow a faith in the Lord Jesus."

Mr. Dabney was perfectly open in dealing with his people in Louisa as soon as he began to contemplate the probability of change of work, and won their hearts still further by this thorough honesty. He was much perplexed, but, with the aid of his Presbytery, decided to go to Augusta.

Many men would have decided quickly on the simple question of salary. He had worked all the year in Louisa, travelling through sunshine and storm, and had received only the pittance of three hundred dollars; but he was not much affected by this consideration, for he lived in Louisa in his mother's home. Moreover, he was not moved by greed.

In our next chapter we shall present him in his pastoral care of Tinkling Spring.