

THE
LIFE AND LETTERS
OF
Robert Lewis Dabney.

BY
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*Fraternally Yours,
R. D. Dabney.*



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OF

Robert Lewis Dabney, D. D., LL. D.

CHAPTER I.

PARENTAGE AND BIRTH.

INTRODUCTION.—THE DABNEYS.—IMMEDIATE ANCESTRAL LINES.—HIS FATHER'S OCCUPATION, TRAITS, CHARACTER, STANDING IN SOCIAL, CIVIL AND ECCLESIASTICAL RELATIONS, AND HIS EARLY DEATH.—HIS MOTHER'S LINEAGE, CHARACTERISTICS AND INFLUENCE ON HER SON, ROBERT LEWIS.—BROTHERS AND SISTERS.—PRODUCT OF ANTE-BELLUM VIRGINIA CIVILIZATION.—BOYHOOD HOME.

UNDER the forms of a republican government, and in an age of advanced civilization, every man ought to be tested by his own personal merits, and with little reference to the character and the reputation of his ancestors. The readers of this biography are, accordingly, invited to test its subject by what he was and did, and not by the lines of which he sprang. Nevertheless, being mindful of the facts of heredity, and that the beginning of what he was and did was made far back of the time when his individual existence began, we must give a brief account of his parentage.

Without offending against a just theory of republican equality, Robert Lewis Dabney could cherish an honest pride in the character of his ancestry. That ancestry had not been marked by great riches, nor by preferment, which, because they are so often acquired by crooked and indirect means, are equivocal evidences of merit at best, but it had been marked by very much the same moral and religious traits that appeared in him. The Rev. John Blair Dabney, a second cousin to our subject, said to his sons, "Among your numerous connections you can count but few, if any, of the great ones of earth, but you may boast of many who were exemplary in all the relations of private life—honored and respected in their generations, beloved by their friends and kindred, useful to their fellow-men,

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.