

THE
LIFE AND LETTERS
OF
Robert Lewis Dabney.

BY
THOMAS CARY JOHNSON.



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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."⁵

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."

⁵ Letter from William H. Ruffner, dated November 13, 1846.