

Chapter 5 - DECISIONS, WRONG OR RIGHT

Education Undefined...A Chinese Governor...The President's Friend...The Tactful Professor...The Professor Who Became Senator...Literary Societies...Molasses and Trouble

To an Ohio boy just out of high school in 1910 no paths looked too difficult. With health, energy, a disposition to work and suitable education he could choose his future and set out to gain his goals. The world was at peace. The nation was growing. No impregnable walls stood between youth and wealth if one chose to aim at them, nor between him and any one of a hundred more modest ambitions. Anything seemed attainable.

The key to all achievement, all voices chorused, was education. From teachers, friends and acquaintances the advice was unanimous and continuous, "Get an education!" No one attempted to define an education. All were positive that if one went to college and attended seriously to his studies he would emerge educated, and thereby find himself fitted for some loftier, more profitable and probably easier occupation than his uneducated fellows.

This was agreeable counsel to one who liked books and enjoyed school. Father and Mother had taken it for granted that I would enter college. The facilities of Ohio Northern were at hand in our hometown. So, it came naturally that September of 1910 found me enrolled as a full-fledged student in Ohio Northern University. Once more I was established in the pleasant room at the Povenmire house, and eager to swig at the larger fountains of learning.

Up to this point I had experienced neither the necessity nor the liberty to make many decisions. Once the decision to go to high school had been determined, the only major choice had been between the science and the Latin courses. I had only to follow the prescribed instructions. The university promptly presented variety of choices and those were glorious liberties.

Students who were not seeking degrees were permitted to undertake whatever studies and to enter whatever classes they chose. I determined to pick and choose from the educational menu, rather than to pursue conventional credits and win a probably useless diploma. Whether or not this was wise I no longer had to follow courses of study that academic authority had prescribed. No more mathematics! That was one cheerful prospect.

First of all, I chose Professor Freeman's class in English, then enrolled in Spanish, Greek, economic geography and history of philosophy. I had wanted an American history course, but not badly enough to enroll after finding that it was scheduled to meet at seven a.m., and took the history of philosophy instead. The topic sounded so impressive. A schedule of five classes daily was over-ambitious

as became evident almost immediately, As a result, I dropped out of the Greek class without learning even the alphabet.

Regulations demanded daily chapel attendance at eight a.m.; and all male students were required to drill for a period in one of the four infantry companies or two artillery batteries. I inquired what penalty could be invoked for non-compliance with these requirements. No diploma, the authorities replied. Not being a candidate for a diploma, chapel and military could be crossed off. I did learn the manual of arms with infantry Company B only to find that the process of repetitive drill dissipated the one-time small boy enchantment with military glamour.

The flashing cavalry sabers which "Battery B" possessed, along with an old Civil War cannon, promised a little more interest, but after a transfer the saber drill began to suggest swinging a corn knife without corn stalks to cut; and taking the old cannon apart and putting it together again was not unlike taking the wheels off the old farm wagon to grease the axles. I therefore abandoned the voluntary military hours. After having proved that chapel could also be ignored, I attended only whenever an announced speech by a faculty member or visitor promised to be interesting.

Professor Freeman engaged me to mark and grade the written themes which he assigned daily to his several classes. In return he obtained a remission of the dollar a week tuition, thus reducing expenses by twenty per cent.

Ohio Northern had begun to attract a number of foreign students. Not infrequently these boys arrived with too imperfect a command of our language to understand what was being taught. They entered the English classes without realizing that these were not planned for students who still had to learn the basic elements. Freeman asked me to try tutoring those who wished to pay for such help.

To one of these was S. Y. Lee. English had been baffling and I was equally baffled at teaching him. A Chinese, he had enrolled for engineering; and although he had been in the United States for more than a year, he could understand neither his textbooks nor his professors. He was older than most students; I thought him middle-aged. He had been Governor of a city in western China; he pointed it out on the map. Distressed by their poverty, he wanted to learn how to help his people. A rich aunt who shared his feelings had sent him to America. They had heard of Tuskegee Institute. He had gone there first and had observed much even without knowing English.

Though his earnestness was overwhelming, the language problems had reduced him to the verge of hopelessness. He knew many individual words but no grammar; almost any sentence entangled him in difficulties. While I was still hunting for a way to help him effectively, Lee came one day with an expensive

new camera. Impatient to take pictures immediately, he could not understand the printed directions. We sat down with the booklet and as he read each sentence, I showed him the action it explained. That proved to be his key to English. He had a natural mechanical understanding, and within a week the booklet of instructions for the camera had clarified enough of the mysteries of verb forms and grammar that he was able to progress rapidly.

Before six o'clock on a January morning I answered a peremptory knock to see a blizzard in progress and a snow-covered, agitated S.Y. Lee at the door. He came in but refused to take off his coat. "I must go back to China," he said. "At once. I go this morning. I bring you goodbye gift." He unfolded a silk scarf, delicately hand-embroidered. "I want you to keep and give to your girl."

The manner of his speech made clear that he meant I should keep the scarf until I had chosen a girl for a wife and then give it to her. "One of my wives made it," he added. "Now go. Thank you for so much kindness." "Why must you go so quickly?" I asked. He had shaken my hand and stood at the door. "Dr. Sun Yat Sen send for me to be governor of my old city." With that S.Y. Lee disappeared into the blizzard and into China's 1912 revolution. I never heard from him again.

Acquaintance with students from outside America suggested an idea. There were in all about thirty. With the help of the Y.M.C.A. secretary, Ralph Donnan, a meeting of the whole group was arranged where I presented a plan for forming a Cosmopolitan Club. The plan was accepted on the condition, which I did not resist, that I should be the club's president. We met weekly, usually having one member talk about his country as the principal program feature, and then discussed problems the boys found as students in an unfamiliar land. One day we assembled at Paezler's Studio for a group photograph.

China, Cuba, Japan, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, Norway and Greece were among the countries represented.

The effort to learn some Spanish led to my sole experience as a class instructor. The professor of modern languages, William Groth, was both genial and exacting and most of us liked him. Little was known to the students about his past; all he ever revealed to me was that while performing his term of military duty in Germany he had once served as a sentry before the tent of Bismark, the Iron Chancellor. A whispered half-believed, half-doubted rumor heightened interest in Professor Groth. It was to the effect that he could stand the arid atmosphere of our Methodist town and college for only so long. He would then disappear for a week presumably devoted to alcoholic relaxation.

As class broke up one day he called me to his desk and said, "I want you to teach my Spanish classes a few days. I t'ink I am going to be sick." I protested that the other class was a term ahead of me. "No matter," he said. "You teach until I come back." So, whether I taught or not I did hold classes and assigned

lessons for several days until the professor returned bright-eyed and grateful. He didn't explain his absence.

Nearly all the older professors were regarded as "characters" by the students, probably because they had developed marked individualities which made them seem unlike the home folks in non-university communities. Professor Hufford, a gruff and assertive Civil War Veteran, surprised students and scandalized others on the faculty by his method of conducting examinations. After writing questions on a blackboard, he customarily rode his bicycle down town to pick up a steak for luncheon or to do some personal errand, and returned two minutes before the end of the examination period to pick up the papers.

"Why do you leave the room during examinations?" a student asked in class one day. "So you ladies and gentlemen can't ask me a lot of fool questions about what the questions mean," he snorted. He knew that the student who cheated on examinations cheated only himself and saw no reason to be concerned about those who had failed to work hard enough to pass the moderate grade requirements.

Professor Schoonover walked with a limp but there was no limp in his mentality. He taught Greek, religious subjects, and almost anything else which might be asked of him. One of Schoonover's contemporaries as an early student at Ohio Northern had been the Rev. John Wesley Hill, Jr. Hill had become pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle in New York and for a time had served a church in London. He had accompanied William Howard Taft's campaign train in 1908 and was noted for eloquent political speeches. The story was told that when Hill was still preaching in Ohio he had been chosen to deliver the keynote address at a Republican state convention in Toledo. At the last moment the exigencies of politics forced the state chairman to notify Hill that the keynote address would be made by another person, but that Hill was to deliver the invocation instead. Undaunted, Hill was said to have converted his planned keynote into so moving and eloquent an appeal to God on behalf of the Republican party that after the "Amen" the convocation rose and applauded the prayer.

After an announcement that Dr. Hill was soon to address chapel some one remarked that if I wanted to learn more about Hill I should prod his old fellow-student, Professor Schoonover. Accordingly in a class next day I asked, "When does John Wesley Hill speak in chapel? Wednesday morning or Thursday?" "Thursday morning," Professor Schoonover intoned indifferently. I asked another question. "Professor, how is it that Dr. Hill has achieved so many conspicuous and eminent places – pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle in New York, preacher in London, and intimate friend of President Taft? What particular qualities have enabled him to rise so high?"

Schoonover pushed aside the books on his desk and slammed its lid with a bang. He tipped his chair backward and tilted his head until the tip of his reddish

Van Dyke beard pointed directly at me. In the nasal drawl with which he knew how to be overwhelmingly emphatic he replied:” Pu-u-re bra-s-ss!

Years later when Hill was chancellor of Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee I encountered him one evening in my room in Washington’s Willard Hotel. We spent several hours visiting in my room. I ventured to relate this incident. Hill made no comment at the moment. It shook him a little, and I was sorry for having told the story. Two hours later, as he said goodnight, he turned to remark: “Well, maybe if poor old Schoony had had more of that metal in his composition he might have gone farther in this world.”

Among the old-fashioned gentlemen of the faculty was Professor Whitworth whose specialty was Latin. I had found Virgil on the difficult side, considering my poor grounding in those first year declensions and conjugations, and had therefore taken what seemed at the time to be a highly practical step of acquiring from a small mail order house – no college bookstore dared to carry such an item – a literal line-by-line translation of the kind known among language students and a “pony.” I had sought to ride my pony, apparently the only one in the class, with enough discretion to avoid revealing its existence. One day when Father and I were walking down street, I introduced him to Professor Whitworth. “I hope you find the boy to be a good student,” Father said. “Well,” smiled the professor as he carefully chose his words so as to inform me that he knew more than he was telling my father ,”he always renders a smooth and free translation.”

Father was pleased at the answer and so was I. However I thought Professor Whitworth thereafter tended occasionally to press me a little hard to explain Virgil’s grammatical constructions. On a later occasion I was to become even more indebted to his thoughtful kindness.

In town and on the campus everyone admired the professor of American history, Frank B. Willis. A farm boy, he had come to Ohio Northern because it was the cheapest school he could reach and after working his way through had remained to teach. More than six feet tall, broad-shouldered and erect, usually over-weight even in his unusual proportions, he was handsome, swarthy, black of hair and black-eyed. His features, striking though they were, were less remarkable than his tremendous voice which in ordinary conversation might have shattered a modern public address system.

One warm spring day when classroom windows were opened wide I was late and hurrying across the campus to the history class. Willis was calling the roll. Still far from the building I heard my name. “Here”, I whooped. When I entered the room Willis was explaining an outline on the blackboard. Without waiting to end a sentence he said, “It’s all right, McMillen, just so you’re inside the three-mile limit,” and went on with his explanation.

After serving an apprenticeship in the state legislature, Willis one a second attempt defeated the district Congressman, Ralph D. Cole, one of his O.N.U. classmates, for nomination to the national House of Representatives, and won election. Chosen governor of Ohio in 1914, he later became a United States senator and continued in the Senate until his death from heart failure while making a political address in 1928. His colleague from Ohio in the Senate was another Ohio Northern alumnus, his predecessor as head of the history department, Simeon D. Fess, who in the interval had been president of Antioch College. In the same period Indiana and Kentucky had chosen O.N.U. graduates to represent them in the Senate.

The university library probably was pitiful by modern standards, but I found endless excitement in its shelves. I pored over old files of the *Atlantic* and of *Blackwood's* and devoured scores of English and American essays from Bacon and Addison to De Quincey, Hazlitt and Emerson. The borrowed Macaulay and Carlisle volumes claimed more time than textbooks. I discovered Pepsy and Boswell and through Boswell acquired an addiction to the ferment of the eighteenth century.

Almost as stimulating as the professors and the library, three literary societies added a lively interest to campus life. Called the Philomathean, the Franklin and the Adelphian, the societies had then already flourished for thirty years. Each society had its own allotted hall in the university buildings, and maintained a parliamentary organization to which new officers were elected each term. Their Saturday night programs brought out all the known forensic talent in the school for debates and speeches, all the dramatic talent for skits and recitations, and all the musical talent for instrumental and vocal interludes. If a student could not speak, recite or make music, but could do magic tricks or juggle Indian clubs, he was in demand. The university prohibited dancing so if any hoofers were enrolled they, almost alone, had no offers to develop their talents in the presence of the Saturday night audiences. I was given opportunities to orate and to debate – and to be the Philomathean Washington's Birthday speaker at chapel exercises.

In March 1911, I left school for a six-month work interlude and returned in September. Professor Freeman welcomed me to the old job as his assistant and I settled in with firm purpose to extract whatever Ohio Northern could offer as equipment for the imminent task of making a living. The term turned out to be more turbulent and, in a way, more educational than I had anticipated.

I had found it easy to pick up a few dollars monthly by sending news correspondence from Ada to newspapers in Toledo, Cincinnati and Cleveland. The Cleveland *Press* had taken particular interest in Ada news features and had become my best customer. After a weekend at the farm, one Monday forenoon I was told on the street that long distance was calling from Cleveland. Kemp's drug store had the only long distance telephone in town. When a call came for anyone

whom the store could not reach on the local telephone, the druggist told a few passersby and eventually notice was passed to the recipient of the call.

"Why did you let us get scooped?" The voice of Frank Ryan, the state editor sounded angry. "What about?" I asked. "I just came into town and haven't heard a thing." "The *News* is on the street here with a story that all your chapel seats have been smeared with molasses and that President Smith has ordered the military companies to clean up the mess." I could only reply that I would check the facts and wire them as quickly as possible.

"O.K.," Ryan said, "but in the meantime we'll cover ourselves for our next edition with a re-write of the *News* article." That re-write caused trouble.

I soon discovered what had happened. Hoodlums had entered the chapel auditorium during the previous night and had daubed nearly every seat with New Orleans molasses. They had been careful to spread the sticky stuff extra thick over the faculty chairs on the dais and had been so irreverent as to put a few drops between the pages of the pulpit bible. The university janitors and student volunteers were doing a good job of cleaning up. No order or request had been given to the military companies.

One point was puzzling. The *Cleveland News* had no regular correspondent in Ada. The condition of the chapel would have not been discovered until nearly eight o'clock. Yet the *News* had received the story in time for its early forenoon edition.

The *Cleveland News* sold hardly any papers in Ada, but the *Press* sent a hundred or more copies to Ada. We received the state edition, printed in the middle of one day and delivered in Ada next morning. Unhappily my report did not get to Cleveland in time for the state edition so the copies, which came next morning, carried Ryan's rewrite from the rival *News*.

Only a few people saw the *News* story, but the *Press* re-write was eagerly read. Ryan had not softened the *News*' misstatements. That I was the Ada correspondent for the *Press* was generally known. I was immediately held responsible for false reporting and for denigrating the school and its president. This alone might have been bad enough. The situation was aggravated by the fact that there were two factions on campus, one who supported President Smith on all matters and another, which had criticized many of his positions and pronouncements. I was identified with the rebellious faction. This set the stage. Issues need not be big when a student body gets in the mood for excitement.

The president of Ohio Northern University, Albert Edwin Smith, Ph.D., D.D., was an eloquent and able Methodist preacher who came to head the university after serving his church as a district superintendent. He was a rugged, handsome, dignified gentleman. During his administration, his vigorous efforts had almost

single-handedly raised the school from a few struggling colleges, liberal arts, law, engineering, pharmacy, commerce, and music to something approaching the status of a real though small university. He was not blessed with superior tact to match his superb energy, nor was modesty his most notable trait. One of my offenses had been to mention that by actual count he had used the perpendicular pronoun one hundred and eighteen times during one morning's chapel service.

A week or so before the molasses episode another incident had caused the good president considerable annoyance. Robert M. Lafollette, the progressive senator from Wisconsin, had begun his campaign for the 1912 presidential nomination. I found several students who admired the senator and who were willing to join in forming a Lafollette Club. A dozen or so of us organized the club and I was elected its president. I wired the news to my papers. It got a rather extensive play because no college club of the kind had been previously reported in Ohio.

The commencement speaker in 1910 had been the President of the United States, William Howard Taft. After his election Taft had asked Dr. John Wesley Hill, our eloquent alumnus, what appointment he wanted. Hill replied that he wanted nothing except that Taft should give a commencement address at Ohio Northern. Taft had given the promise and kept it. Ohio Northern received more national publicity than ever before in its history. Dr. Smith was naturally and properly grateful to Taft and distressed for the public to hear that members of the student body had so rudely announced to the world their preference for Taft's opponent, Senator Lafollette. I thought that a student had an independent right to his own political preferences, and that others were free, if they wished to organize a Taft club.

In a rousing chapel speech Dr. Smith regretted the formation of our club and denounced Lafollette as "an Absalom, kissing the cheek of the American public for its favor." His speech was news that I hastened to put on the wires. The Associated Press sent the story across the country.

That night Dr. Smith took a train for Pittsburgh where he had an appointment next morning with a prospective donor to the university. The prospect, according to an account which came to me indirectly, shoved a morning paper across his desk, pointed to the AP story from Ada and inquired whether Dr. Smith had been correctly quoted. Assured that the quotation was correct, the prospect said, "I am a Lafollette man," and rose to close the interview. Dr. Smith was not pleased.

Two or three mornings after the molasses incident my friend Irving Garwood, the only other student who handled news correspondence, banged on my door. I had missed the chapel event of the term. Two students had sent requests to the platform for permission to take the floor. This was customary procedure when announcements were to be made. The first student up, however, did not have an announcement. He read a poem, long and fiery, denouncing in Shakespearian measures those "vile students who would sell the good name of their school for

paltry gold." The second, a respected leader of the pro-administration faction, rose to move that it was the sense of the student body that the faculty should expel those students who were known to have been disseminating news, false or otherwise, about the university through the press of the state and nation, and that such news correspondence from the university should henceforth be prohibited. Dr. Smith being absent on his travels that morning, Dean Whitworth was in charge of chapel. The good dean was so amazed that he stood silent for a moment, whereupon the student put his own motion and, hearing only one or two dissents, declared that it had passed.

Garwood was perturbed. He believed the feeling against us to be general and intense. I told him we should be flattered by so much attention. No one had ever written poems about us before! I did not believe that the faculty would expel us and thought we could endure a little temporary unpopularity. After all, what the boys had proposed was censorship repugnant to the principles of freedom for the press. The more I talked the more I became convinced that the opposition had put themselves squarely in the wrong and that in some way they could be made ridiculous. How? That had to be figured out. Garwood agreed that we two should stand or fall together, and he stood nobly for whatever was to come.

I went out for breakfast and then headed toward a late forenoon class, wondering unhappily what we could do. This was an undesired sort of prominence. After all the thing could turn out to be embarrassing. Professor Whitworth was the first person I encountered. "Looks like you're in trouble, McMillen," was his greeting. "I suppose you have heard what transpired in chapel this morning." "Do you think it's really serious, Professor?" "Well, the mood struck me was quite unpleasant and I sense that it has grown worse as the talk has spread this forenoon. I only hope that they don't try to ride you out of town on a rail." "A mob might try that, Professor, but I don't think they'll fight that way. How about giving Garwood and me the chapel platform tomorrow morning?"

The professor looked startled. "They'll howl you down," he predicted. "But since you have asked, and your opponents have already had the privilege, I don't see what I can do except to give you the chance to reply and," he added thoughtfully, "to advise you not to accept the chance."

That settled it. "I'll be in chapel tomorrow morning, Professor, and thank you for being so fair." "All right," he said, "but don't take your assigned seat. Sit right by the steps to the platform. When I announce that a student wishes to speak, get up there quick and get started. I won't be responsible for what happens after that."

His earnestness was alarming. I wondered whether I had underestimated the campus hostility. That night I sat up late to outline what to say. The first sentences had to capture and hold an unfriendly audience. The story of how the *Press's* inaccurate story came to be printed had to be told in such a manner as to

suggest that the perpetrators of the molasses prank must themselves have sent in the offensive story in order to catch the early edition of the *Cleveland News*. The dangerous impropriety of censorship needed to be asserted. The advantages to the university in having full and accurate news coverage by sympathetic and well-informed local correspondents had to be set forth. Suitable regrets might be expressed that some irresponsible and malicious person had caused the erroneous report to be printed.

The next day, when Professor Whitworth gave me the cue, I leaped the steps two at a time and began talking before reaching the lectern. The college cheer leader, a member of the opposing faction, jumped up and called for the locomotive yell, the best noisemaker in the rooters' repertoire. When only two or three responded he subsided. The students heard me out. Garwood followed with an able and effective statement. After chapel adjourned Professor Whitworth said, "Don't worry about being expelled." The episode was soon forgotten as other events came along to occupy the campus mind.

Only two weeks remained in the first fall term. While university life was pleasant, and at times, exciting, the kind of education it offered left me impatient. I was eager to know what turned the wheels of affairs. A taste of newspaper work had given me a glimpse at human activities not disclosed in the comparative seclusion of our little academic world. However, I didn't want to appear to be leaving school under pressure, so I borrowed twenty-five dollars from the town moneylender and enrolled for another ten weeks. Before they were ended a more realistic life was to begin.