

Chapter I

The Decision



CHAPTER I

THE DECISION

Tropic breezes cooled the environment on that late afternoon in June, 1939. Shadows cast by a retiring sun crept over the valley below and made the shade of the palm tree a place to be desired.

My parents, Edward and Mildred Fawkes, settled in their rocking chairs on the front porch of our home high on Fort Fincastle in New Providence Island. From there they greeted workers and children on their journeys homeward.



Mr. and Mrs. Edward Fawkes and family in front of our Fort Fincastle home in the 1920s.



The young Randol

Interspersed between their greetings, Dad and Mother talked about professional careers for their children.

“A good lawyer!” my father said, his eyes staring me in the face.

“Think of it,” he exulted, “if you were to become a lawyer, you will make plenty money and people will respect you. You can ... you can indeed.”

“Eddie!” my mother interrupted, springing from her rocking chair and pointing to the open road. “That’s Coral; she’s ... she’s crying!”

Coral, my senior by one year, was sixteen. With book flung over her right shoulder, she lumbered toward us. Upon attaining the security of the porch, she tried hard to hold back the tears as she embraced Mother.

“What’s the trouble, Coral?” asked Mother.

“Mr. Woods, the Headmaster,” she sobbed, “he... he insulted me today before the whole class.”

“What did Mr. Woods say? What did he do?” My father’s questions came with bullet-like speed.

“Mr. Woods said,” Coral quoted inconsolably, “‘Fawkes, you are a duffer. You cannot learn. It is typical of you and your breed.’”

There was an audible silence. A minute later Dad was pacing the floor as he pondered the full meaning, intent and effect of the words he had just heard. “Fawkes,” he said slowly to himself, “you are a duffer. You cannot learn. This is typical of you and your breed.”

Dad relapsed into a more somber mood than before. Mr. Woods had hit him where it hurts most—his children.

I had seen my father with this “go-to-hell” expression on his face before. It was three years ago when Asa Pritchard, a member of the House of Assembly for Eleuthera, advised him to encourage my sister, Gertrude, to become a domestic servant rather than a chemist in The Bahamas General Hospital. In the parliamentarian’s words, “The commercial and professional fields are too small to accommodate both white and black.”

“Millie,” my father blurted out, “the time has come for us black folk to put a stop to this sort of thing. All my life I have slaved as a stonemason to send our children to high school. Is this the kind of treatment we can expect? Dammit! I



The Fawkes family is shown during a picture-taking moment in the 1940s. Seated are parents Edward and Mildred Fawkes. Standing from left are the children: Bloneva, Bill, Coral, Randol (author) and Gertrude.

am getting tired of this.”

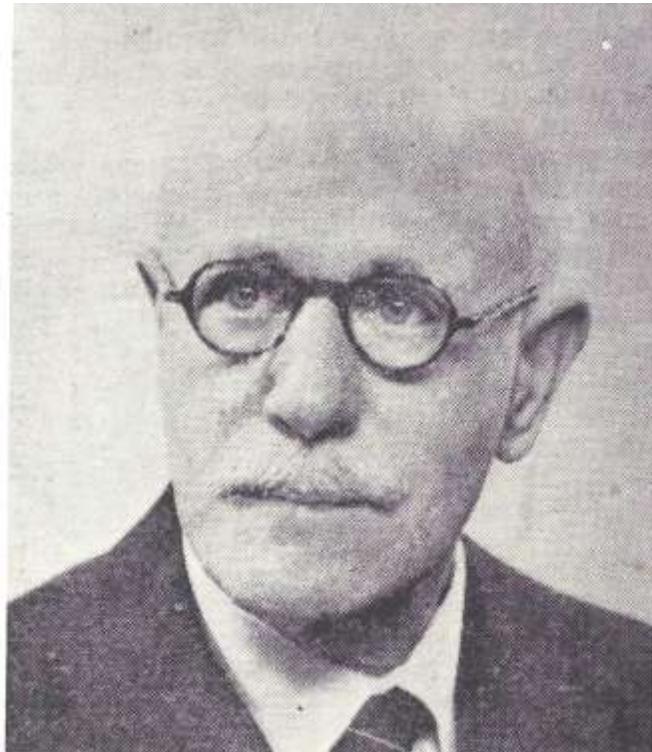
At that very moment, a middle-aged cousin of ours, Leon Walton Young, joined us on the porch. He was a civic leader of Fox Hill, a backwoods village. Young’s thick lips, broad nose and woolly hair left no doubt about his African descent. Some called him Frederick Douglass, for both in physique, broad shoulders and a broad nose, and powerful intellect, he resembled that freedom fighter of black America. Sensing uneasiness among us, Cousin Leon asked, “What’s wrong Eddie? Has the world gone out of business?”

“You’re damn right! The world will go out of business unless this Englishman, Mr. Woods, stops fooling with my children.”

Dad then related Coral’s experience to Cousin Leon. While those two discussed how to handle this problem, Mother and Coral withdrew into the dining room. I remained on the porch with the rest.

Albert Woods, the first headmaster of the Government High School, was a product of English colonial snobbery. He was recruited and brought to The Bahamas in April 1925 by the white minority government to appease the persistent demands of the black majority for secondary education for their children. Since his arrival, his main preoccupation was extolling the Englishmen’s civilization and lampooning the cultures of Africa. In 1939, there was only one other high school in the colony, the Methodist Queen’s College, but to gain entrance there, one needed nature’s passport—a white skin.

Finally Dad and Cousin Leon agreed to send a letter of protest to Mr. Woods. Who would write it? Who would tell the chosen one that he was wrong?



*Albert Woods
First headmaster at G.H.S.*

Dad’s literary knowledge extended only to the political backchat of the evening newspaper, *The Nassau Daily Tribune*. Leon Walton Young, however, was a seasoned politician. Although only a carpenter, he was reputed to have read the whole of the Bible and all twelve volumes of *The American Educator*. In November,



L. Walton Young

1928, when Marcus Garvey was denied entrance into The Bahamas by the white minority government, it was Cousin Leon who successfully intervened on his behalf and assisted him in launching his “Back to Africa Movement” at a mass rally on the Southern Recreation Grounds.

Dad and Cousin Leon combined their talents and after much travail, the following letter was born:

*A. Woods Esquire,
Headmaster,
Government High School,
Nassau, Bahamas.*

Sir,

My daughter, Coral, came home from school yesterday in a very fretful condition as a result of unkind remarks addressed to her by you in school because of her failure to at once understand certain instructions you gave her.

She feels that she was not deserving of this treatment by you, and although our information of the matter must be second-hand, our feelings are the same as hers, as we have confidence in our children that they will at all times conduct themselves in a satisfactory and proper manner with all whom they may come in contact, and especially so, with the Headmaster of the Government High School where they are in attendance. They are very anxious to make good in their studies and in every way to be pleasing to you and to gain your favour, for only so, can they bring satisfaction to their mother and myself.

As this is the only school in the country of its kind where such children as ours are admitted, we have to send them to you. We can have no choice otherwise, and therefore we respectfully request of you such reasonable treatment of our children as will enable us to wholeheartedly co-operate with you in obtaining the maximum results. We have had both of our eldest children at your school and I am sure their conduct in every way has been good as was seen by their reports from you, and there is no reason why the two that are there now should not be the same.

I desire to take this opportunity of thanking you for your past favours and in anticipation of the future.

*I am, Sir, Very Respectfully,
Edward R. Fawkes.*

This letter was handed to Coral for delivery to Mr. Woods. At six on the following evening, Dad called the family together and read Mr. Woods' reply:

A. WOODS, B.A.
HEADMASTER

THE GOVERNMENT HIGH SCHOOL
Nassau, N. P., Bahamas

22-6-1939

E.R. Dawkes Esq

Dear Sir,

I am very glad that you brought this matter to my notice. No doubt your daughter was justified in feeling as she did; but there was no intention to produce any such effect, and I regret to learn that, in fact, such was the case.

The records of your children here have, as you suggest, been most favourable.

I am
Yours faithfully
A. Woods

In the past, many a parent had been rebuffed by Mr. Woods when they complained about his highly uncomplimentary remarks to their children. Therefore, it was easy for Dad to regard this letter as an apology. Many hours, months and years later, however, I pondered the implications of the whole incident.

“Could it be that Mr. Woods’ opinion of Coral’s intelligence was based on racial prejudice? But are we not all God’s children? Did not God make of one blood all nations of men?”

While searching for answers, other questions persisted: **“Why could not people of our own kind eat at the city’s Grand Central Restaurant? Why were my friends and I required to sit on the southern aisle of the Kirk Presbyterian Sunday School and the white children on the northern? Why was there in Marsh Harbour, Abaco, one graveyard for the whites and another for the blacks? Why were there no black faces employed by the Royal Bank of Canada? Is the worth of a person really determined by the colour of his skin? Why? Why?”**

As these questions raced through my mind, they built up in me a boiling resentment against a system that would assault the sensitivities of one so young as my sister.

Hitherto, I had no idea what the future held in store for me, but at that very moment of Coral’s insult, I caught a vision of what my life should mean to the Bahamian masses.

On retiring that night, I confided in my brother, Bill, that on becoming a lawyer I would fight for a just society in which each child could grow up in self-confidence and dignity, secure in the knowledge that the colour of his or her skin would make no difference.

Before I fell asleep I prayed, **“Lord, help me to keep my eyes on my goal and to overcome the obstacles along the way.”**

