

## ***“Bloody Sunday”***

**A**fter dinner Martin rose to say a few words. “These past few weeks I have been on a mountaintop,” he said. “And I really wish I could just stay on that mountain. But I must go back to the valley. I must go back because there are people who can’t vote in the valley, and people who are starving, and people who don’t have jobs. . . .”

For Martin Luther King the next valley was a place called Selma, Alabama. He and the SCLC staff had decided to hold a

voting rights drive there. Half the people in Selma were black. But only one out of a hundred of them could vote. Officials used any excuse to keep them from registering—hard tests, tricks, threats, anything. One man was even rejected because he forgot to cross a “t” on his registration form.

Martin was determined to change all this. At the first mass meeting held at Browns Chapel Church, he said, “Our cry is a simple one. Give us the ballot! We’re not on our knees begging for the ballot. We are demanding the ballot!”

The next day he led the first group to the county courthouse. But there was a law in Selma that no more than 20 people could march together at a time. And the city was determined to enforce this law. “I’ve been keeping blacks in their place for years,” Sheriff Jim Clark bragged, “and I don’t aim to stop now.”

So most of the marchers were arrested and thrown in jail. But the next day more

people took their place. After a few weeks the protest began to spread to nearby towns. Then tragedy struck. On one of these peaceful marches a teenage boy named Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed.

When Martin heard about Jimmie Lee's death he called for another march—a march from Selma all the way to the State Capitol in Montgomery, to protest this senseless murder.

“I can't promise you that it won't get your house bombed,” Martin told his people. “I can't promise you that it won't get you beaten up. But we must stand up for what is right!”

Governor George Wallace didn't agree. He issued an order to stop the march. And he told his state police to see that the order was enforced “any way you have to.”

Martin was not in Selma on the day of the march. He was in Atlanta taking care of some important SCLC business. Early



that Sunday morning more than 500 people gathered in front of Browns Chapel Church to start the 50-mile trip.

They walked through the streets of Selma until they came to the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the edge of town. On the far side of the bridge stood a group of state troopers, blocking the highway.

"Halt!" one of the troopers called out, as the others put on gas masks. "You have two minutes to turn around and go back to your church."

The seconds ticked by—and nobody moved. Then came the order, "Troopers, advance!"

Some of the troopers hurled tear gas. Others charged, swinging nightsticks. Still others rode on horseback through the helpless crowd, slashing at them with heavy whips.

The marchers had no choice. They were forced back to the safety of the Browns Chapel Church. But seventy of them didn't

make it—they were in the hospital instead. Soon people began to call that day “Bloody Sunday.”

When Martin heard what had happened he raced back to Selma. He called for a second march to Montgomery. But this time, he said, it was not to be just a local march. He sent out a call for religious leaders from across the nation to join them in Selma. “The black people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of America,” he said. “But it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden.”

And many Americans were willing. Before the week was out more than 400 ministers, nuns, priests, and rabbis—almost all of them white—had arrived in Selma. They were all eager to join the march for justice.

But before this march could take place, tragedy struck once more. Three white ministers had eaten dinner in one of Selma’s black restaurants. As they were leaving, they were attacked. The Reverend

James Reeb of Boston was struck on the head with a club. Two days later he was dead.

This death shocked the whole nation. In cities and towns across the land blacks and whites marched to protest the bloody events taking place in Selma. And President Lyndon Johnson voiced what many were now feeling.

"The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety, and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation."

A few days later more than 3,000 people gathered at Browns Chapel Church. The Selma-to-Montgomery March was about to begin once more.

Martin marched in the front row as they set out. Some of the others in that first row were a rabbi, a priest, a nun, and a representative of the United Nations.

Singing "We Shall Overcome," they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and



headed down Highway 80 toward Montgomery. On either side of the highway were members of the Alabama National Guard and the United States Army—ordered by the President to protect the marchers.

They marched seven miles that day before they set up camp for the night. As Martin drifted off to sleep in his tent, he listened to a group of young people, black and white, from all across America. They were singing, "Many good men have lived and died, so we could be marching side by side. . . ."

Late the next day they came to a dusty little Negro town called Trickem Crossroads. Standing in front of a tumbledown school were some grown-ups and a few children. Martin walked over to talk with them. An old woman reached up and kissed him. "God will keep His arms around you," she whispered.

"Yes," Martin said. "And you, too."

As they left town an old man hobbled

along beside them. "I just want to walk a little ways with you," he said. "I figure I been called 'boy' long enough."

On the morning of the fifth day the journey ended. With Coretta by his side, Martin led 25,000 people through the familiar streets of Montgomery to the State Capitol.

*Here's where it all started, he thought. So much has happened in the ten years since the bus boycott. Since the day Rosa Parks decided not to get up. We've come such a long way. . . .*

Standing on the steps of the Capitol, Martin looked out across the people before him. Many of them had just finished a march of 50 miles. Fifty miles didn't sound like much—unless you knew that it stood for years of struggle and danger and suffering.

Now Martin began to speak. "They told us we wouldn't get here," he said. "And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies. But





all the world today knows that we are here, and standing before the forces of power in the State of Alabama saying, 'We ain't goin' let *nobody* turn us around.' So I stand before you today with the conviction that segregation is on its death bed."



*Martin, with Coretta by his side, leads 25,000 people through the streets at the end of the five-day Selma-to-Montgomery march.*

As usual after one of Martin's speeches everyone joined hands to sing "We Shall Overcome." Except that now they changed one word. Today they sang "We *Have* Overcome."