

## ***The Poor People's March***

**B**ecause of what happened in Selma, President Johnson asked Congress to pass a bill that would truly protect the Negro's right to vote. And before the summer was over they did. This bill became the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

"Today is a triumph for freedom as great as any victory that's ever been won on any battlefield," President Johnson said as he signed the bill into law.

He was right. A great battle had been won. But the war was far from over. For



*Every year Martin traveled hundreds of thousands of miles. "Sometimes I get so tired," he told friends, "but I can't stop."*

10 years Martin had been working to end segregation. Now, in the mid-1960's, he began to think more and more about poverty. Segregation was mainly a Southern problem. But poverty crippled the lives of black people all across America.

"What good does it do to be able to sit at a lunch counter, if you don't have the money to pay for a hamburger?" he asked.



It was true. In cities across the land blacks lived in terrible slums. Their homes were tumbledown. Many could not find work. Many went hungry. Yet they knew that there *was* a better life—for other people. And this was making them more and more angry.

One hot August night in 1965 that anger exploded. It became a bloody riot in a place called Watts—a black neighborhood in Los Angeles.

It began when a white policeman tried to arrest a black man. A crowd began to gather. The man fought back a little. The policeman was a little too rough. Someone threw a bottle at him. Someone else set fire to a nearby car. And the riot was on.

It raged for days. Before it was over 34 people were dead. Almost a thousand were badly hurt. Millions of dollars worth of property—homes and cars and stores—had been destroyed. It was one of the worst race riots in American history.

Martin flew out to Watts. He walked

the streets and tried to calm people. He tried to make them understand that rioting was not the answer to their problems. "Violence only leads to violence," he said again and again. "Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

But most people would not listen. "Burn, baby, burn!" they shouted. And one teenager announced, "We won!"

Martin was stunned. "How can you say you *won*, when 34 Negroes are dead? How can you say you won, when your community is destroyed?"

"We won," the youngster answered, "because we made people pay attention to us."

A number of black leaders agreed. "If America doesn't come around, we're going to burn America down," one announced. Another said, "I'm not for that nonviolent stuff anymore. The time for peaceful marches is over."

Martin spoke out against this sort of thinking with all his strength. "If every

Negro in the United States turns to violence, I will be the one lone voice preaching that this is the wrong way," he said. "We must continue to work for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second-class methods to gain it."

But sometimes he got so worn out. How nice it would be to stop struggling, to stop fighting for what he knew was right. "I don't mind saying, I'm tired of marching," he admitted. "I'm tired of marching for something that should have been mine at birth. I don't mind saying to you, I'm tired of living every day under the threat of death. I want to live as long as anybody. And sometimes I begin to doubt whether I'm going to make it. So I'll tell anybody, I'm willing to stop marching. I don't march because I like it. I march because I must."

Martin knew how dangerous his work was. He began to talk more and more about dying. "If anything happens to me, you must be prepared to continue," he told his SCLC staff.



One day he sent Coretta some flowers. They were beautiful red carnations. But when she touched them she realized they were not real. It was strange—Martin had never done anything like this before.

When he came home she kissed him and thanked him for the flowers. “They’re beautiful, and they’re plastic,” she said.

“Yes,” Martin answered, “I wanted to give you something you could always keep.” Those were the last flowers she ever got from him.

But Martin didn’t let the threat of death stop him. Early in 1968 he began to plan for the biggest march of all—a poor people’s march on Washington, D.C.

“We’re going to reach out to poor people all across the United States,” he said. “We’re going to ask American Indians to come to Washington and stay there until something is done to make their lives better. We’re going to ask Spanish-Americans to come . . . and poor whites . . . for poverty isn’t just a black problem. It’s a *human* problem that must be solved.”