

The Children's Crusade

The wall of segregation, as Martin called it, was beginning to crack a little in the early nineteen-sixties. A few lunch counters and restaurants started to serve both blacks and whites. Here and there a school or a park or a movie theater opened quietly to everyone. Every once in a while a company began to hire black workers for the first time. But in most places the wall still stood strong and high.

Martin Luther King decided it was time to meet that wall head on. "We want freedom now," he said. "We do not want

freedom fed to us in teaspoons over another 150 years."

After thinking a long time, Martin decided to take his nonviolent protest to the city of Birmingham, Alabama. Almost everything was segregated in Birmingham. And its police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor was determined to see that it stayed that way. "Let anybody just *try* to start something," he threatened, "and blood will run in the streets."

This was no empty threat. But Birmingham was where Martin knew he had to go. If the SCLC could win in Birmingham, Martin was sure they could win anywhere. "As Birmingham goes, so goes the South," he wrote.

The plan was simple. The SCLC wanted all lunch counters, washrooms, elevators, and drinking fountains in the big downtown stores to be open to everyone. And they wanted more jobs for Negroes in those stores. That was all.

Until these demands were met all Negroes would boycott the stores. They would

also hold sit-ins. Most important, every day more and more people would protest by marching through the streets of Birmingham.

These marches were against city law. Many of the marchers would be arrested and thrown in jail. This was part of Martin's plan. He wanted to fill the jails. "I want this city to face itself," he said at one of the first mass meetings. "So come and



serve in our nonviolent army. Make going to jail your badge of honor."

And many of the Negro people of Birmingham did. They marched singing through the streets until they were stopped by Bull Connor and his police. "Jail 'em all!" Connor would shout. And the police would cart them away.

Martin marched with them and went to jail, too. The other protesters were



Martin leads a long line of demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama.

placed together in large cells. But Martin was put in solitary—not even his close friend Ralph Abernathy was allowed to be with him.

Martin loved and needed people. It hurt to be so alone. For several days he was sunk in gloom. But then he pulled himself together. “I can never truly be in solitary,” he told himself. “God’s companionship doesn’t stop at the door of a jail cell.”

That afternoon a friendly guard slipped him a local newspaper. In it was a letter written by eight white ministers. It criticized Martin and everything he was trying to do.

The ministers said that he was an outsider and never should have come to Birmingham. They said that this was not the right time for such a protest. He should have waited for another, better time. They said it was dangerous.

Now, on any scraps of paper he could find, Martin began to answer their charges.

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," he wrote. "Nobody is an outsider in such a fight." And, "For years now I have heard the word, 'Wait!' It rings in the ears of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never'." And, "We are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with."

*Martin, shortly before
he wrote "A Letter
from a Birmingham
Jail."*



Martin wrote and wrote until he felt he had answered every one of the ministers' complaints and doubts. This 9,000-word "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" would soon become the bible of the civil rights movement.

A few days later Martin's lawyers managed to get him out of jail. But now he faced a new problem. Birmingham was a mean, tough city. Bull Connor and the other city officials were holding firm, no matter what. And little by little the people were growing tired of marching and going to jail when nothing seemed to change. "I'm afraid that this movement is faltering," Martin said. "We're in real trouble unless we can think of a different way to do this."

"Why not get college students to march?" one of his aides suggested. "Maybe even high-school kids."

That seemed like a wonderful idea. There was only one problem. The high-school and college students weren't the

only ones who wanted to march. Their little brothers and sisters did, too. At first Martin ordered his aides to turn them away. "You're too young to go to jail," they were told.

But the children kept coming back—some as young as six. "We want to march with the big kids," they said. "It's our fight, too!"

Was it? This was a hard decision for Martin to make. He hated to think of children so young marching through Birmingham's dangerous streets.

But then he remembered. He remembered a time when *he* was only six and had to ask his mother, "Why can't my two best friends play with me anymore?" And he remembered how much her answer had hurt him.

Finally Martin decided to let all the children march. "I knew that they could be hurt. But I also knew that every day their minds were being hurt by segregation—and so were their spirits and souls."

So early one May morning more than a thousand children gathered at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Martin talked to them before they started out. "Be calm," he said. "And whatever happens, don't fight back." Then, singing "We Shall Overcome," they filed out of the church and into the streets.

They got only a few blocks before they came to a line of policemen. Bull Connor was standing there, too, chewing on a big, fat cigar. "Turn back," he shouted. But the children kept coming.

"Arrest 'em! Arrest 'em all!" Connor yelled. The police tried. But there were so many children that they soon ran out of police vans. They had to send for school buses to take the rest of the children to jail.

Martin saw a policeman talking to one of the marchers—a little eight-year-old girl. "What do you *want*?" he asked, as if he really wanted to know.

The little girl looked him straight in the eye. "Freedom," she answered.

This made Martin very proud. That night he told a mass meeting, "I remember an old woman in Montgomery who explained why she would continue to walk, no matter what. 'I'm doing it for my children and for my grandchildren,' she said. Now, only seven years later, the grandchildren are doing it for themselves. What we have seen in Birmingham today is a crusade—a real children's crusade!"

He was right. Nine hundred fifty-nine girls and boys were arrested that first day. But the next day 2,500 more turned up at the 16th Street Baptist Church.

"Don't get bitter," Martin told them. "Don't get tired." Now he leaned forward, smiling a little. "Are you tired?"

"No!" the children thundered back. Then they, too, began to march.

Bull Connor and the police were waiting for them. Some of the police had dogs, straining at their leashes. Nearby stood a group of firemen, carrying huge water hoses.

"Freedom! We want freedom!" the

children shouted. And Bull Connor answered them. But this time he didn't yell, "Lock 'em up!" This time he bellowed, "Let 'em have it!"

Suddenly policemen charged into the crowd, clubbing anyone they could reach. The firemen turned on the big hoses and powerful streams of water surged into the crowd—so powerful they knocked many to the ground. Others were smashed against the sides of buildings, their clothes almost ripped off by the force of the water.

Then the police dogs were set free. They ran wild through the children, snarling and snapping. Three marchers were badly bitten before the battle was over.

The children tried desperately to get back to the 16th Street Church. "Look at them run," Bull Connor sneered. "We sure won this one."

How wrong he was. That evening an angry Martin Luther King stood before still another mass meeting. "We are going on despite the dogs and fire hoses," he cried. "We're going on because we have

started a *fire* in Birmingham that water can't put out. We're going on because we love America. And don't worry about your children who are in jail. The eyes of the world are on Birmingham!"

And they were. Millions of Americans—and more millions around the world—were shocked and disgusted by what they saw on their TV sets and read in their newspapers.

President John F. Kennedy was angry, too. "What has just happened in Birmingham makes me sick," he said. "I can well understand why Negroes are tired of being asked to be patient."

The next day more children marched and were beaten and taken to jail. By now the jails were full. And still more children volunteered to march.

Then it was Sunday, May 5th. Three thousand young people gathered at the church. They were going to march to the Birmingham jail. There they would kneel and pray—if they got there at all.

One of Birmingham's young ministers,



Reverend Charles Billups, led the march. Before long they came to the line of police and firemen. The children knelt in front of them and began to pray.

"Get up! Go back!" Bull Connor screamed. "Or you'll get everything we got!" But the children still knelt.

Now Reverend Billups stood and spoke quietly to the police and firemen. "We're not turning back. We haven't done anything wrong. All we want is our freedom. How do you feel doing these things?" Then he took a deep breath. "So bring on your dogs. Beat us up. Turn on your hoses. We're not going to retreat."

Reverend Billups started forward. Behind him came the children. "Turn on the hoses!" Bull Connor shouted. But the firemen just stood there. "Turn the dogs loose," he yelled. But the police just stood there, too. A number of these grown men

Many people in different parts of the country demonstrated in sympathy for the young civil rights marchers in Birmingham, Alabama. This group in New York City wanted to "bury" the Jim Crow laws, laws which made segregation and discrimination legal.

were openly crying as the children passed. Not a finger was raised against them.

"It was one of the most fantastic things I have ever seen," Martin Luther King said. "I was there. I felt the pride and the *power* of nonviolence." Later he added, "The last few days mark the nonviolent movement's coming of age."

The spirit of segregated Birmingham had been broken. Several days later the business leaders met with the SCLC. They agreed to every one of its demands.

The Birmingham Movement was proof indeed that soul-force was stronger than body-force. And it did what Martin hoped for most. It stirred the conscience of America.