

The Walking City

In the beginning the Montgomery Improvement Association asked for only three things. They wanted seating on a first-come, first-serve basis. This meant putting an end to the hated "Whites Only" section. They wanted drivers to treat black passengers politely. And they wanted some black drivers hired to drive buses in mainly black parts of town.

But the city and the bus company would not agree even to these simple demands. So the boycott continued. One of

the first things the MIA did was organize a car-pool—a group of drivers willing to take people where they needed to go. Almost overnight 300 people volunteered their cars and time. But still many, many people had to walk.

Martin was amazed by their spirit. “Now listen,” he said one day to an old woman called Mother Pollard, “you’ve been with us from the beginning. But you’re too old to keep walking, so I want you to start riding the bus again.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m gonna walk just as long as everybody else walks. I’m gonna walk till it’s over.”

“But aren’t your feet tired?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest.”

City officials didn’t understand this spirit. At first they treated the boycott like some kind of a joke. After all, it was December now and the weather was gray and chill. “Just you wait until the first day it rains,” they said. “That will get them

back on the buses." The next day it rained, and the people still walked.

So little by little it began to sink in—these people were serious. The city began to fight back. First they tried trickery. They simply announced that the MIA had called the boycott off. It was all right to go back on the buses. They planned to run this story on page one of the city's biggest newspaper.

Luckily Martin and the other MIA leaders heard about this fake story. But how could they get word to their people before the newspaper appeared?

It happened to be Saturday night—an evening many people spent out having a good time. So Martin and his aides, the people who worked most closely with him, got in their cars and visited as many restaurants, social clubs, dance halls, and bars as they could. It was almost dawn before Martin got home—dog-tired. But the long night's effort had been worth it. The buses remained empty.

Next the city officials tried to turn the

people against Martin. By now the boycott was national news. Contributions to keep it going were coming in from all over the country. So the city said that Martin Luther King was putting much of this money into his own pocket. He was getting rich off the movement.

This false rumor really hurt Martin. What if even some of the people believed it? It could be the end of the movement. "I almost broke down under it," he said. Finally, at one of the mass meetings that the MIA held every week, he offered to resign.

All around the church people were suddenly on their feet. "No! No!" they shouted. "You're our man!"

So trickery hadn't worked. Neither had false rumors. Now the city turned tough. The mayor went on television and warned that from now on they were going to "stop pussyfooting around with this boycott."

Next day the police began arresting car-pool drivers for any reason they could

think of. Before long Martin was arrested, too—for going thirty in a twenty-five-mile-an-hour zone. He was taken to the city jail and thrown in a filthy, smelly cell with drunks and thieves and murderers.

Martin felt stunned by what he saw and felt. All his life he'd been told only bad people went to jail. Now, as he said, "Strange gusts of emotion swept through me like cold winds." He could not know how many times he would have to go to jail in the years to come.

He didn't stay there long this time. News of his arrest spread quickly, and people began to gather at the jail. Soon a huge crowd was milling around in front of it. When the jailer saw how angry they were, he panicked. He personally escorted this troublemaking preacher out of the building.

That evening at still another mass meeting Martin spoke about his experience. "If we are arrested every day, if we are exploited every day, if we are tram-



Martin is arrested for the first time.

pled over every day, don't ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them. We must realize so many people are taught to hate us that they are not totally responsible for their hate."

But hate *was* getting him down. Every day thirty to forty ugly letters arrived at his home. They contained messages like, "If you think you are as good as white people you are sadly mistaken," and, "Get out of town before it's too late."

The letters were bad. The telephone

calls were worse. All day and into the night the phone would ring. Often when Martin or Coretta picked it up they simply heard the sound of someone spitting into the receiver. Other times callers spewed out long strings of curse words. Still others threatened to kill not only Martin, but Coretta and baby Yoki, too.

Often he looked at his wife and tiny child—the daughter he called “the darling of my life”—and thought, *Some people out there want them to die. They can be taken away from me at any moment. Or I can be taken from them.*

Later Martin told a friend how he felt then. “I was so tired. And cold fingers of fear were creeping up my soul.”

Late one night the phone rang. Martin snatched it up before it could wake Coretta. He wasn’t surprised when an ugly voice whispered in his ear, “If you aren’t out of this town in three days we gonna blow your brains out.”

Martin slipped out of bed and went to the kitchen. *I can’t take it anymore*, he

thought as he poured himself a cup of coffee. *I'll have to quit. There is no other choice.* He had never felt so alone.

Now he began to pray out loud. "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak. I'm afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership. If I stand before them without strength or courage, they, too, will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face it alone."

Then suddenly, at this lowest moment of his life, he seemed to hear a voice. A voice so clear that it seemed to come from everywhere. "Martin Luther," the voice said, "stand up for right. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And I will be with you, even unto the end of the world."

Suddenly Martin was filled with an inner calm and strength he had never felt before. *I can face anything, he thought. I can stand up without fear.* All because of a voice that had promised "never to leave me, never to leave me alone."