

The Man and the Movement Meet

On a warm June day in 1953 Martin and Coretta were married. During the next year they finished their studies in Boston. Now Martin was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was time to make a big decision. What next?

Martin had been offered a number of different jobs. Three churches wanted him to preach. Three colleges asked him to come and teach. The world of ideas would always attract Martin. "I'd love to be a

teacher someday," he told Coretta. "But for now I want to be a pastor."

Where, though? Two of the churches that offered him a job were in the North. The third was in the deep South. Did they want to go south again—south to where segregation was still a way of life?

Still, the South was their home, and they loved it in spite of everything. Besides, Martin felt that something was stirring in the South. The United States Supreme Court had just ruled that separate schools for blacks and whites were unconstitutional—they were against the law of the land. The Court was saying what Martin had known all his life—*separate is unequal*.

Martin thought of segregation as a wall—a wall separating the lives of blacks and whites. This Supreme Court ruling was the first break in that wall. Martin wanted to be there to help take down more of it. So he accepted the offer of the

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Now it was the morning of December 2, 1955. Martin and Coretta had been in Montgomery for a little over a year—a happy year of settling into a new marriage and a new life. And they had just become parents. They named the baby Yolanda. But from the first they called her Yoki. She was now just two weeks old.

Martin was sitting in his study working on next Sunday's sermon when the phone rang. As he reached for it he could hear Coretta in the kitchen. She was singing softly while she finished the breakfast dishes. He could hear Yoki fussing a little in the back bedroom. Everything was so normal. There was nothing to tell him that this telephone call would change his life forever.

It was Ed Nixon, one of Montgomery's black leaders. "Martin," he said, "they just arrested another of our people for not

standing up. I say we should do something about it this time."

Martin knew exactly what Ed Nixon was talking about. Montgomery was one of the most segregated cities in America. The two races did almost nothing together. There was even a city law that said blacks and whites could not play cards or checkers with each other. And one of the worst parts of this segregated life-style was the Montgomery bus system.

Negroes sat in the back of the bus and whites sat in the front. The first four rows of any bus were for white passengers only. Even if these seats were empty, no black could sit in them. If a bus was full and more whites got on, blacks had to give up their seats and stand.

But on Thursday, December 1, 1955, a woman named Rosa Parks refused. She had worked hard all day at her job in a downtown department store. After work she'd done some shopping. Now she was finally on her way home. Sighing with re-

lief, she sank into one of the seats right behind the “Whites Only” section.

A few blocks later the bus stopped and more passengers got on, most of them white. But all the seats were taken. “Get up,” the bus driver said to the black passengers sitting around Rosa Parks.

Everyone obeyed—except Rosa Parks. She just sat there. The driver told her to get up again. And still she sat. “Look, I’m going to have to call the cops if you don’t get up,” the driver threatened. But even this didn’t work. So Rosa Parks was arrested and fined fourteen dollars for breaking one of Montgomery’s segregation laws.

“I don’t know why I wouldn’t move,” Mrs. Parks said later. “There was no plan at all. I was just tired. My feet hurt.”

But Martin Luther King had another explanation. He said that Rosa Parks had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times. What he didn’t realize was that the *Zeitgeist* had tracked him down, too. The civil rights movement was about to begin.



*Rosa Parks speaks to a reporter after her arrest.
She was arrested because she refused to give her
seat to a white person on a crowded bus.*

That evening Martin and a number of other black leaders gathered together at Martin's church. They decided to call for a boycott on Monday, December 5. On that day they wanted all black riders to stay off the buses.

But how could they get this message to

the 50,000 Negroes who lived in so many different parts of town? Church women volunteered to print and hand out leaflets which said:

“Don’t ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place Monday, December 5. Another Negro woman has been arrested because she refused to give up her bus seat. Come to a mass meeting, Monday at seven at the Holt Street Baptist Church for further instructions.”

The ministers also agreed to talk about the boycott in their Sunday sermons. But all weekend Martin and Coretta worried. They knew that many Negroes were afraid to do anything that might anger white people. Others might simply not care enough to take a stand.

“I think we should be happy if half of the riders stay off the buses,” Martin said to Coretta on Sunday evening. “Any more than that will be a truly great victory.”

Martin and Coretta were up before dawn the next day. The first bus of the day was due to pass their house at six. Coretta stood at the living room window, peering out into the gloom. Martin was in the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee.

Suddenly, "Martin, Martin, come quickly!" she called. He got to her side just as a completely empty bus rolled past—a bus that was usually packed with blacks going to work. Fifteen minutes later the next bus appeared. It, too, was empty. There were two people on the third bus—both of them white.

Martin and Coretta hugged each other. "Corrie, it's a miracle!" Martin Luther King kept saying. "A miracle is happening in this town today!"

And so it was. All day long people walked—some as many as fourteen miles. And the buses stayed empty. Someone saw a very old woman hobbling down the street. "Why didn't you stay home today, Granny?" he asked her. "It wouldn't have made much difference."

"I'm not walking for myself," she answered. "I'm walking for my children and grandchildren."

Late that afternoon Martin and the other leaders gathered together once more. The one-day boycott was a complete success. Should they be satisfied with that? Or should they continue it until something really changed? The answer came quickly—continue!

At the meeting they formed an organization to direct the boycott. It was called the Montgomery Improvement Association—MIA for short. But who would lead it?

They needed someone who could talk to *all* the black people of Montgomery—educated and ignorant alike. Martin had only been in Montgomery for a year. But already he was known as "the friendly pastor" because he treated everyone the same way.

"I nominate the Reverend King," a voice called out. A vote was taken, and

everyone agreed. Martin would be their new leader.

As soon as he got home he told Coretta what had happened. His days were already very busy. This would mean much more time spent away from her and the baby. "And I must be truthful," he said. "This could become dangerous."

But Coretta didn't hesitate. "Martin, you know that whatever you do, you have my backing," she said.

Martin's first duty as president of the MIA was to give a speech at the mass meeting that night. So now he went into his study and closed the door. He looked at the clock. It said six-thirty—and the meeting was due to start at seven. It often took him fifteen or twenty hours to prepare a single Sunday sermon. Now he had fifteen or twenty minutes to prepare what he somehow knew was going to be the most important speech of his life.

In those few minutes, he had to work out a way to stir the people to action and



yet quiet the anger they must be feeling. Anger that could so easily lead to violence.

All too soon it was time to go. Martin was still five blocks away from the church when he realized something amazing was going on. Cars were jamming the road. The sidewalks were filled with people. *They're all going to the meeting!* he thought.

The leaders had expected four or five hundred. But at least a thousand people packed the church that evening. Four thousand more stood outside, waiting to hear his speech. Loudspeakers were quickly set up for these people.

The meeting began with all five thousand singing, "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Martin said later, "The roar of their voices was like an echo of Heaven itself."

Then it was time for him to speak. And from somewhere deep inside himself he found just the right words. First he told the story of Rosa Parks. Then he spoke

Martin accepts the presidency of the newly-formed Montgomery Improvement Association.

about the treatment all Negroes so often got on the buses.

"But there comes a time when people get tired," he said. "We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us so long that we are *tired*—*tired* of being segregated and humiliated; *tired* of being kicked about. . . ."

His deep voice rolled out powerfully as he spoke about self-respect. "For many years we have shown amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we come here tonight to be saved—saved from patience that makes us patient with *anything* less than freedom and justice."

People started to stamp their feet and cheer. "Tell it to them, Doc!" one voice called. "Amen!" another shouted.

Martin waited until they grew quiet again and then he spoke about love and nonviolence. "Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the cen-

turies: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.' In spite of the mistreatment that we have confronted, we must not become bitter, and end up hating our white brothers. As Booker T. Washington said, 'Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him.'"

And finally, "If we protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'There lived a race of people—of black people—who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization.'"

For a moment there was silence. Then all across the church, and in the street outside, people clapped and shouted and cheered and wept for joy.

One of the men who had voted for Martin that afternoon summed up what everyone was feeling. "My God," he said, "I

thought we were just electing an agreeable guy. Instead we got Moses!”

Moses—the Old Testament prophet who led his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land.