

A Dream Begins to Grow

Martin had some grand times with his friends. But sometimes he said, "No, not now," when they came to play. For he also needed time to think and daydream and read.

Books were a kind of magic for Martin. They took him so many places. They told him so many new things. Most important, they introduced him to so many people who became heroes in his life. For Martin's favorite books were about black history, and the men and women who had made it.

He read about Harriet Tubman, the slave who escaped to freedom in the North before the Civil War, and yet returned South again and again to lead other slaves to freedom.

He read about Frederick Douglass, another slave who escaped to freedom but never forgot his people. Douglass was a great speaker. For years he traveled around the northern states and England telling audiences about what it felt like to be a slave. And after the Civil War he continued to work for basic human rights for all.

Martin read about the great teacher Booker T. Washington, who in the late 1800's founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama—the first college for black people.

He read about George Washington Carver, the scientist who worked at Tuskegee and found ways to make many useful products out of such plants as sweet potatoes and soybeans and peanuts.

And he read about people who were doing exciting things right that minute. He read about the singer and actor Paul



Robeson, who became famous around the world. He read about people like the boxer Joe Louis—the Brown Bomber, as many people were calling him—who in 1937 became heavyweight champion of the world. And the track star Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals for the United States in the 1936 Olympic games.

As Martin read about these men and women who had done such big things, a dream began to grow inside him. He wanted to do something big, something important with his life, too.

But what? Martin wasn't sure. Not yet. But he did know one thing. Whatever he grew up to be, he wanted to help his people. He wanted to make their lives better.

Once Martin's mother had said that segregation meant separate. But Martin was old enough now to know it meant

Among the black men Martin admired were track star Jesse Owens, educator Booker T. Washington, scientist George Washington Carver, and singer Paul Robeson (dressed here in his costume for the opera Othello).

more than that. It meant unequal, too. For in almost every way a Negro's life was made less by it.

Martin had plenty to eat and wear. His family owned a nice house. His father was a respected minister. But Martin knew that most others were not so lucky.

Usually, black children went to the worst schools. They lived in the most run-down houses. When they grew up they had to take the hard jobs, the dirty jobs that no one else wanted. And they were paid far less money than whites, too.

Martin was protected from some of the worst effects of segregation. But it touched his life all the same. He was in high school when his English teacher picked him to represent the school in a statewide speech contest.

On the day of the contest he and the teacher, Miss Sarah Bradley, traveled several hundred miles by bus to the town of Valdosta. There Martin gave his speech and won second prize in the whole state.

After the contest he and Miss Bradley got back on the bus and headed for home. They sat toward the back, for that was the law. Blacks sat in the back of any bus, and whites sat in the front.

Martin and his teacher had a lot to talk about—his speech and all the others that had been given. They didn't notice when the bus stopped to pick up more passengers. They didn't notice when all the seats filled up and some white people had to stand in the aisle. But the bus driver did. He stopped the bus and came back to where Martin and Miss Bradley were sitting. "Come on, get up," he said gruffly. "Give those seats over."

Martin stared up at him. *Why should I?* he thought. *I paid for this seat. And I was here first.*

The bus driver saw that Martin wasn't planning to move. And he turned ugly. "Listen, you," he snarled. "You get out of that seat or I call the cops!"

Martin felt Miss Bradley pluck at his

sleeve. "Come on, Martin," she said quietly. "I don't want you to get hurt. Besides, it's the law."

"It's a bad law!" Martin snapped.

He didn't mind bringing trouble on himself, but he didn't want to bring it on Miss Bradley. So finally he stood up. He stood for ninety long and bitter miles before the bus finally pulled into Atlanta. "That night will never leave my mind," Martin Luther King was to say many times later. "It was the angriest I have ever been in my life."

Martin was such a good student that he skipped several grades in school. So he was only 15 when he entered Atlanta's Morehouse College. Most of the students entering college were 18 or 19.

Martin loved college life. Morehouse was a tough school and he had to work hard. But as usual he found time to enjoy himself as well. He belonged to a number of clubs. His favorite was the glee club,

Start
here where he could let his rich baritone voice soar. He tried out for the football team. And he never had any trouble getting a date. "That Martin," his brother A.D. said later. "He sure had a way with girls. They just loved all that smooth talk of his. And he was the best dancer in town."

One of the clubs Martin joined was a discussion club—a place to talk about your ideas and listen to the ideas of others. Morehouse was a black college, but white students from other nearby colleges belonged to the club, too.

For the first time since he'd been a boy of six, Martin got to know some white people as friends. He admitted later that he had come close to turning his back on the whole white race. "But as I got to see more of white people in this club," he said, "my anger softened. I began to see that they weren't the enemy. The evil was segregation itself."

Martin began to think more and more about his future. He knew he wanted to

make a difference in people's lives. But how? *Maybe I'll become a doctor*, he thought at first. *That would be a good way to help poor people.*

Next he thought he might be a lawyer. Then he could fight for his people's rights in the courts.

There was one thing he did *not* want to become—a minister.

Of course his father was a minister and Martin respected his father. And he always felt a sense of coming home whenever he was in church. But many other black ministers in the South had no education. All they had was emotion. So they shouted and yelled and stamped their feet instead of using their minds. Martin worshipped words and the ideas behind words, so this sort of thing made him very uncomfortable. He didn't want to be like them.

But then Martin thought of his teachers at Morehouse. Many of them were ministers, too. *They* were educated. *They* talked about interesting and important things. Maybe being a minister wasn't so bad. . . .

One of these men was Dr. Benjamin Mays, President of Morehouse. He watched this bright student who was struggling so hard trying to decide what his life work would be. "Look, Martin," he finally said. "There's nothing wrong with emotion—if it goes hand in hand with solid thinking. Besides, you say you want to help your people. Where can you help them more? The church is the heart of our community. It's where you can reach the most people at one time."

Martin knew this was true. *Is this what I'm meant to be?* he asked himself now. And the answer came back loud and clear—yes.

Daddy King was pleased with Martin's decision. But he wanted Martin to be sure he had a true calling. "Are you sure you can stir people, M.L.?" he asked. "Are you sure you really have a gift?"

"I'll show you by preaching a sermon," 17-year-old Martin answered.

Martin was going to deliver that sermon in one of the smaller meeting rooms

at Ebenezer. But word had got around the church that Daddy King's son was going to preach his first sermon.

More and more people poured into the little room. Soon it was packed to overflowing. Finally everyone had to move to the main part of the church.

Martin stood behind the pulpit, looking down at all those faces. Many of those people had known him all his life. For a moment he felt nervous. Then he took a deep breath and began to speak. And the words he had always loved did not fail him.

He spoke about his vision of God. "God isn't just some distant figure, high on a throne in the sky," he said. "God is *here*. God is *now*. God is in each and every one of you. And because God is inside you, you have *value*. You *matter*."

"Amen!" someone said.

"You tell them, M.L.!" another person exclaimed.

Daddy King began to smile. No doubt about it—his boy had the gift.