

The Good Soldier Abernathy *SWN 11/2/89*

GOOD FRIENDS don't choose to spark controversy over your sex life. God only knows what the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy originally meant to do with his book, "And the Walls Came Tum-

By Garland L. Thompson

bling Down," but what he did do has hurt him as much as anybody.

People who were there at the thick of the conflict over black enfranchisement in the South say Mr. Abernathy is dead wrong on facts such as dates, times and places of the events he recounts, and some historians agree with them. People who were not there, some journalists among them, point out that the women allegedly cavorting with King on some of those tense nights have not come forward to say "Yeah, that was me. We did all those things."

And many people, white as well as black, are incensed at Mr. Abernathy. Writers across the nation

chewed over the issue of whether the book had diminished the image of King, but most concluded it hadn't. Actually, it couldn't. Dead heroes are hard to dislodge from the popular consciousness, once enshrined, and this particular hero created a record unmatched by anyone while he lived. So as many people observed, the legend lives on.

What the book did to King's widow and his family, however, is another story.

But let's get this part straight: Ralph Abernathy had as much right as anybody to write a book about his days in the civil-rights movement, and more authenticity than most people who might try. He was excoordinated by the *Montgomery Advertiser* as a non-leader and an improper pretender shortly after King was killed, and he was humiliated several times by the rest of the civil-rights leadership, but it is true that he compiled a record of great courage. If he was not a leader of vision and power, he was no less a soldier than many others who fought the good

fight, and he risked his life many times in the struggle.

What's troubling about this whole episode is that Ralph Abernathy is not Taylor Branch, chronicler and truth-seeker, but Ralph Abernathy, supposed friend and confidant. Protestations that the story of King and his female admirers is such a small part of the book beg the question: Was it really necessary to spell out King's peccadilloes at all? And if it was, how about drawing the connections that make it relevant?

Watching Coretta Scott King live out her years maintaining the beacon King set up, talking to those who know her well, you get a sense that she's still married to the man. What pain to inflict on her, on her children, for such a small part of a book allegedly written to tell the whole truth about the civil-rights era.

And was the whole truth told? Perhaps no one else was struck by the notion that Mr. Abernathy was holding back, but the seamy details of King's alleged escapades are

not matched by details of his trusted friend's behavior. "We all did such things" is not the same as telling what your part was. One can't help wondering what Mr. Abernathy's response would be to someone coming out of the woodwork to say, "Why Ralph, I was there and you didn't put me in the book. Remember when we were in such-and-such a place, doing such-and-such?" Somehow, that would seem fitting.

At bottom, however, there has to be a sadness. Ralph David Abernathy is a man whose own, unembellished record is worth lifelong honors and remembrance decades after his death. Yet he has published memoirs that almost demand other memoirs from other soldiers of the movement, so that the rest of us can sift and compare to find the real truth. If he was bidding for final respect among the blacks on whose behalf he worked so hard, he has probably lost it for the rest of his life. People rarely honor a betrayer, even if later historians vindicate his judgments. Too bad for him.