

HE HAD A DREAM

Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr.'s own story of
the years of struggle, hope, success and foreboding

by Coretta Scott King

The life of Martin Luther King Jr. was marked by drama and ended in tragedy. The full story of his extraordinary career, of his steady determination to find justice for his race, lies not only in the great events he inspired but in the character of the man. In this article, the first of two excerpts from her book *My Life with Martin Luther King Jr.* to be published on Sept. 25 by Holt Rinehart and Winston, Mrs. King describes some of the crucial episodes in her husband's life, and his relationship with two other men who would die by assassins' bullets—John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert.

The sit-in movement caught on in Atlanta in the fall of 1960. By that time the buses had already been desegregated, but none of the city's restaurants and lunch counters. There was hardly a place outside our own neighborhoods where a Negro could get even a soda except by going to the side door of a drugstore and having it handed out.

It was against such discrimination that the students in Atlanta began to organize protest demonstrations. Their main target was Rich's Department Store, one of the largest in the South. They invited Martin to sit in at the lunch counter with them, and of course he accepted.

There were about 75 students in the group on that particular day and they were all arrested, Martin with them. It had been agreed in advance that if they were arrested they would not put up bail, and most of them stayed in jail. Martin said, "I'll stay in jail one year or 10 years if it takes that long to desegregate Rich's."

As it turned out, Martin was in jail for about a week before an agreement was reached. I was pregnant at the time, but I went to see him almost every day. The rules allowed visiting only once a week, but Daddy King knew the sheriff, a decent man, who arranged that I could come.

Finally news spread through Atlanta that a settlement had been reached and that Martin and the students were going to be released. Jesse Hill, one of the leaders, telephoned me at 9 o'clock that evening, inviting me to a celebration at Paschal's, a fine integrated restaurant. As I got dressed, I had such a good feeling because I was going to see my husband.

When I got to Paschal's I looked around. Though many of the students who had been in jail were present, Martin was not. I somehow did not want to ask about him, having a premonition of something wrong. It was so strange to sit there, amid the celebration, afraid of what I would hear. Then someone told me, "They

kept Dr. King in jail." Later I discovered what had happened.

A few months before, Martin, who had neglected to change his Alabama driver's license for one from Georgia, had been arrested for driving with an invalid license.

It had happened one night when we had dinner and spent the evening with Lillian Smith, the eminent writer. Afterward we took her back to Emory University Hospital, where she was undergoing treatment for cancer. On the way a policeman stopped Martin simply because he had a white woman in his car. Then, when he saw that he was dealing with that well-known "troublemaker," the policeman issued a summons.

This had happened in nearby De Kalb County, a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan. The next day, Martin and Daddy King had gone to answer the summons. Martin had been fined \$25, given a suspended sentence and released on probation. Somehow he was not aware at the time

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From the family album, the man as minister and father



Outside Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he was co-pastor with his father, Martin chats with parishioners



In the Kings' Atlanta home, Martin and a pregnant Coretta join their son Marty (bottom) and daughter Yoki at the piano in 1960.



Martin tosses daughter Bunny in his Atlanta backyard



In a post-bath lineup, the children stand still briefly for this 1965 portrait. From bottom: Bunny, 2; Dexter, 4; Marty, 7; Yoki, 9.

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of the suspended sentence. Now, when he was being released on the sit-in charges in Atlanta, De Kalb County officials came and asked for his custody on the grounds that he had violated his probation by the sit-in.

This was Saturday night. A hearing was set for Tuesday, and Martin stayed in jail.

At the end of the hearing, which I attended, Judge J. Oscar Mitchell announced, "I find the defendant guilty and sentence him to four months' hard labor in the state penitentiary at Reidsville."

The viciously unjust sentence for a traffic violation was a horrible shock to us all. I was five months pregnant and emotionally overwrought. I felt so alone and helpless. Martin had already been in jail for eight days, and I was tired out from anxiety and from my trips to visit him. Also, such a long sentence meant that our baby would arrive while he was in jail and I would have to have the child alone, without him. I could not help feeling sorry for myself.

Martin was immediately taken back to a jail cell, Daddy King and I were allowed to see him. I was trying not to cry when we went into the cell, but the tears were streaming down my face. When Martin saw me he said, "Corrie, dear, you have to be strong. You have to be strong for me. I think we must prepare ourselves for the fact that I am going to have to serve this time."

Then I realized that Martin had been weakened by his days in jail and was greatly depressed by this new and unexpected shock. He was relying on the deep reservoir of strength which I had always drawn from in crisis situations, but I, too, was totally unprepared for the dreadful decision I tried hard though, and finally felt that I had taken myself in hand.

Meanwhile, our lawyers had asked the judge not to send Martin to Reidsville immediately, as they were going to prepare a writ of habeas corpus. The judge promised he would not. But at about 8:30 the next morning, A.D., Martin's brother, called and said, "Coretta they

took Martin to Reidsville." This seemed more than I could bear.

Later Martin told me that at 4:30 that morning, several men had come into the jail cell where he was sleeping with the other prisoners. They played a flashlight on his face and called, "King! King! Wake up!"

It was very frightening. He knew the awful history of such midnight visits. They made him dress and handcuffed him tightly and put chains around his legs. He rode the 300 miles to Reidsville in those painful handcuffs and chains, without knowing what his fate would be. When he got there, exhausted and humiliated, he was thrown into a very narrow cell where hardened criminals were kept, and was made to put on a prison uniform.

When I got the news, I felt so helpless! I started to think about how Martin must feel. My husband hated being alone. He needed and depended upon the support of people he loved. It was always hard for Martin to be in prison, and this would be such a long stay, without Ralph Abernathy or any of his other companions in the struggle with him.

I said to Daddy King, "We must go to Reidsville today. Someone must see Martin today." But Daddy King was thinking in terms of practical things—of finding lawyers who could get Martin out of jail. He asked me to go with him to see the well-known and respected lawyer Morris Abram, who had become a friend of ours during our struggle and who had been very helpful with civil rights cases.

As I was getting dressed to

go to see Mr. Abram, the telephone rang. The person at the other end said, "May I speak to Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr.?" Just a minute, Mrs. King, for Senator Kennedy."

Senator John F. Kennedy was in the final days of his campaign for the Presidency of the United States. I waited a few seconds and a voice said, "Good morning, Mrs. King. This is Senator Kennedy."

We exchanged greetings, and then Senator Kennedy said, "I want to express to you my concern about your husband. I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me."

"I certainly appreciate your concern," I said. "I would appreciate anything you could do to help."

This was the gist of the conversation that has been said to have changed history and elected a President of the United States. At the time I did not know quite how to react, because I realized that the phone call could be used to political advantage. My husband had a policy of not endorsing presidential candidates and at this point I did not want to get him or myself identified with either party. I heard later that the Kennedy strategists had discussed having the candidate make a public statement—which, of course, politicians from Georgia opposed because, I am told, they felt it might

cause him to lose the South. I understand that one prominent Georgia politician had said something like, "If you leave this to me, I'll get King out of jail." But Senator Kennedy decided that at least he would call me.

Well, things began to happen pretty fast after that. I learned that Robert Kennedy called the judge to learn why Martin couldn't be released on bail pending appeal. The story leaked out to the press and evidently the judge had a change of heart; he said now that Martin would be released on bail.

I received the news of Martin's release around noon the next day and I was very, very happy. We all went to the airport to meet his plane.

A mass meeting was held that night at Ebenezer Church. People from all over town came. Martin told about his experiences in jail, but said nothing political. However, Daddy King who had been planning to vote for Nixon, had no such inhibitions. He roared out to the crowd, "If I had a suitcase full of votes, I'd take them all and place them at Senator Kennedy's feet."

A few days later, John Kennedy was elected President of the United States by only about 100,000 votes. It is my belief that historians are right when they say that his intervention in Martin's case won the Presidency for him. That seemed significant to me because of what happened later in the civil rights struggle and the relationship of the Kennedys to what Martin was trying to accomplish.

In January 1963, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth (another key rights leader) and my husband had a conference with President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy at the White House to urge the federal government to initiate civil rights legislation. The Kennedys were, as always, sympathetic, but they said they had no plans for such legislation that year. The President feared that anything in the civil rights area would divide the Congress and imperil other domestic bills he intended to propose.

Naturally, Martin was very disappointed. He felt he had

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Jailed in Atlanta after a 1960 sit-in, Dr. King reads a newspaper



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no choice but to go ahead with his plans to force a confrontation in Birmingham, so that the federal government would have to act on segregation there. He frankly told the President his intentions, because if white violence erupted we would need the support and help of the federal government. He wanted the President to be informed in advance.

We were expecting the arrival of our fourth child in March. I had been afraid Martin would have to go to Birmingham just before my baby came, but Bernice Albertine—Bunny, as we all call her—was born on March 28. Martin was there to take me to the hospital, but the next day, after the baby was born, he left for Birmingham.

The Birmingham protest started on April 2, 1963 with lunch counter sit-ins. In the first three days alone, 35 people were arrested, but the demonstrations were staged every day with increasing strength. So far the police, under Eugene (Bull) Connor, had behaved very well while making the arrests. Between 400 and 500 black people were arrested and, though some got out on bail, about 300 remained in jail.

During this time Martin was trying to get the merchants and the Birmingham city officials to negotiate our very moderate demands—desegregation of store facilities, upgrading and hiring of Negroes on a nondiscriminatory basis, dropping of charges against the imprisoned protesters, and the creation of a biracial committee to work out a timetable for further desegregation. The businessmen were willing to negotiate; the city officials were not.

On Wednesday these city officials obtained an injunction against the demonstrators, but it was issued by an Alabama state court, not a federal court. Martin promptly announced that the injunction would be disobeyed. He pointed out that the Negroes were not "anarchists advocating lawlessness," and that the courts of Alabama had misused the judicial process. He said that "we could not in good conscience obey their mandate."

Martin set Good Friday, April

12, as the day that he and some of the other leaders would provoke arrest by breaking the injunction. Early that morning a tempestuous meeting of the leaders took place. Several of the ministers felt that they should obey the injunction, and after a long discussion Martin finally said, "I want to meditate about this decision."

For half an hour the others waited while Martin thought and prayed alone in his room. When he came out, he was wearing work clothes—blue jeans and a shirt—and his face was set in the stern lines of his resolve. "I've decided to take a leap of faith. I've decided to go to jail. I don't know what's going to happen; I don't know whether this Movement will continue to build up or whether it will collapse. If enough people are willing to go to jail, I believe it will force the city officials to act or force the federal government to act. So I'm going today."

Then Martin turned to Ralph Abernathy and said, "I know you want to be in your pulpit on Easter Sunday, Ralph, but I am asking you to go with me."

Ralph said, "Well, you know, I have always been in jail with you, Martin, and I can't leave you at this point."

The 25 men at the meeting all linked hands and sang "We Shall Overcome." Then Martin embraced his father and they all drove to the Zion Hill Church, where the march was scheduled to start. As they came into the church, the people were singing and praying. Martin went directly to the pulpit to tell them of his decision. When he finished and started to leave, people poured out into the aisle and followed him. It was tremendously moving.

Martin wrote of what happened next: "It seemed that every Birmingham police officer had been sent into the area. Leaving the church . . . we started down the forbidden streets that lead to the downtown sector. It was a beautiful march. We were allowed to walk farther than the police had ever permitted before. . . . All along the way Negroes lined the streets. We were singing, and they were joining in. Occasionally the singing from the



After a 54-mile march from Selma, Ala. to the state capitol in Montgomery in 1965, Dr. and Mrs. King read aloud a statement to the marchers.

sidewalks was interspersed with applause. As we neared the downtown area, Bull Connor ordered his men to arrest us. Ralph and I were hauled off by two muscular policemen, clutching the backs of our shirts in handfuls. All the others were promptly arrested."

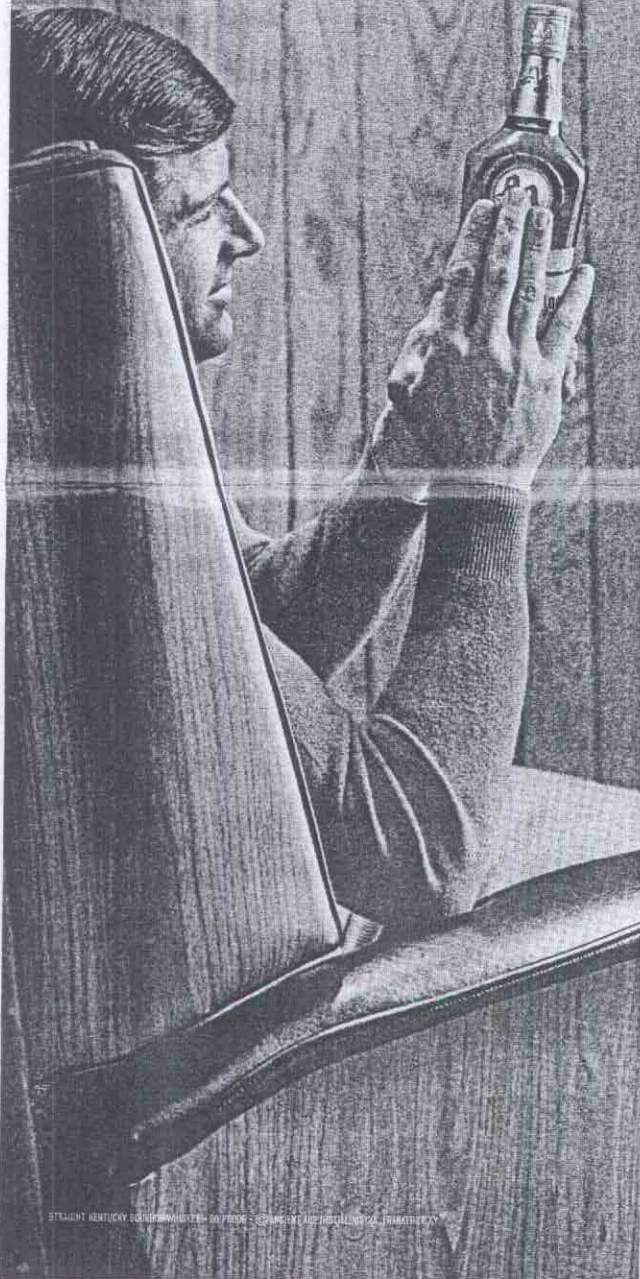
For the first time, Ralph and Martin were separated after their arrest. Each of them was held in solitary confinement. Not even the lawyers were permitted to see them. "Those hours," Martin said later, "were the longest and most frustrating and bewildering of my life." He was besieged with worry about his friends and about the fate of the Movement, worry about me and our brand-new baby, and about the other children at home.

Back in Atlanta, I waited anxiously to hear from Martin. When I got the news that he had been arrested that Friday afternoon, I just knew he would telephone me from jail, which was always the first thing he did after he was arrested. No call came. All the next day I waited. Still I heard nothing. Finally, I telephoned Wyatt Walker, one of SCLC's key aides, in Birmingham. Wyatt said, "Coretta, I haven't been able to get a phone message through to Martin. I've been trying all day. They're not even allowing his lawyers to see him now. They're holding him incommunicado."

I asked, "Wyatt, what do you think? If I made a statement to the press about this situation, would it help matters any?"

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Wyatt answered, "Do you know what I think you should do? I think you ought to call the President."

I thought about it and said, "I will try if you think I should, but first I wish you would try to check with Martin to see if it's all right with him, because I wouldn't want to do it if he didn't approve."

I was terribly anxious about Martin's safety and wondered what was happening to him. I waited and waited for Wyatt to call back. Finally he did. He said, "It's no use, Coretta. I can't get through to Martin. You have no alternative but to call the President."

I called the White House several times to see if I could get a number in West Palm Beach, where President Kennedy was reportedly staying, but each time the operator said, "I have no number for the President or members of his family at West Palm Beach."

Finally I asked the operator to try Vice President Johnson, but he too was out of the city. Quite frantically I said, "There must be someone I could call who would be able to help me get to the President."

Since she was a kind and sympathetic woman, the operator said, "What about calling Pierre Salinger?"

Immediately I reached Pierre Salinger, who told me that he

would make every effort to get in touch with the President and have him call me.

While we were talking my other telephone rang and when I answered, a familiar voice said, "Mrs. King, this is Attorney General Robert Kennedy. I am returning your call to my brother. The President wasn't able to talk to you because he's with my father who is quite ill. He wanted me to call you to find out what we can do for you."

I poured out a rush of words: "I was calling because I am concerned about my husband. As you probably know, he is in jail in Birmingham, and he's been there since Friday. At this point, no one is able to see him. Usually they let him telephone me, but I have heard nothing from him directly. I understand that he and Reverend Ralph Abernathy are being held incommunicado, and I am awfully worried. I wondered if the President could check into the situation and see if they are all right."

I tried to make it clear to him that I was concerned about Martin's safety, that I was not asking for his release.

Attorney General Kennedy said, "Well, I'm sorry you have not been able to talk to your husband, but I'll tell you, Mrs. King, we have a difficult problem with the local officials. Bull Connor is very hard to deal with. Maybe after the new city government takes over we can

In Washington in 1963, King and NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins met Attorney General Kennedy on White House grounds.





1963 Washington March; King, other rights leaders with J.F.K.

get something done in Birmingham. But I promise you I will look into the situation and let you know something."

The Attorney General seemed deeply concerned and I felt better after I hung up, because there seemed some chance that something might be done.

But it was not until the next afternoon that I heard anything more. At about 5 o'clock the telephone rang and, as I picked up the receiver, I heard little Dexter babbling away on the extension. The operator said, "Will you get your child off the phone, please." I had someone take him away and waited until a voice came on saying, "Hello, Mrs. King. I'm sorry I wasn't able to talk to you yesterday. I understand my brother called you. I just wanted you to know that I was with my father, who is ill, and couldn't leave him."

By that time I realized it was President Kennedy. In the confusion about Dexter I had not heard the operator announce him. I told him I was sorry that his father was ill, and the President asked how I was and explained that he knew I'd just had a baby.

I answered, "I'm all right, but I'm terribly concerned about my husband."

The President said, "I know you'll be interested in knowing that we sent the FBI into Birmingham last night. We checked on your husband, and he's all right." And he added,

"Of course, Birmingham is a very difficult place."

He talked a little while about the situation there and the city officials. Then he said, "I want you to know we are doing everything we can. I have just talked to Birmingham and your husband will be calling you shortly. If you have any further worries about your husband or about Birmingham in the next few days, I want you to feel free to call me. You can get me or my brother or Mr. Salinger. You know how to get me now."

I could hardly thank him enough. Within 15 minutes Martin called.

"Are you all right, my dear?" I asked.

Martin told me he was all right, but he sounded so tired—he usually fasted when he was in jail. There was no energy in his voice.

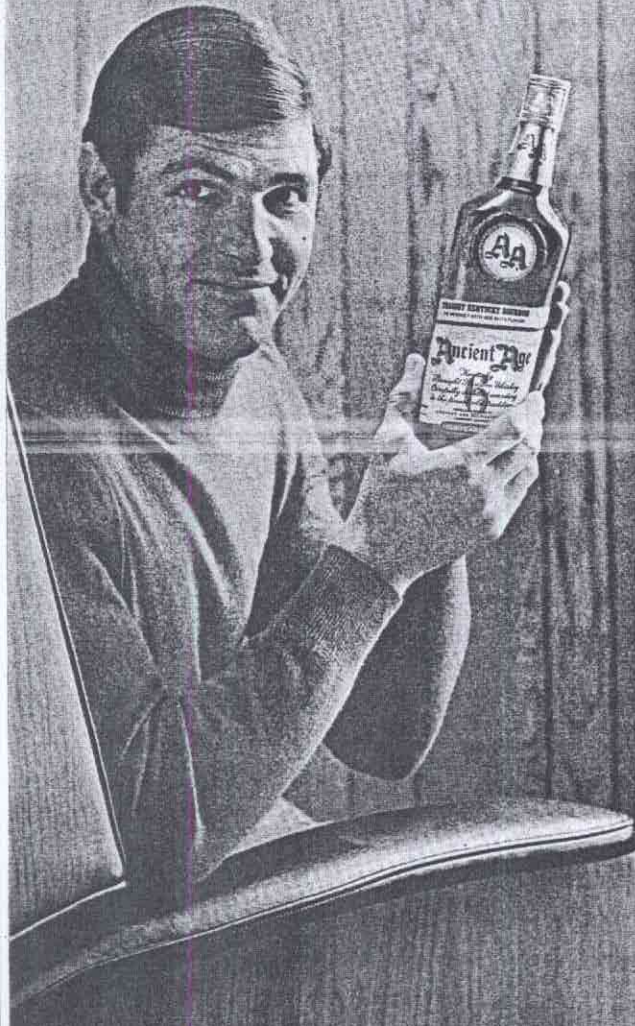
We talked a little before I told Martin about my phone conversation with the President. There was a sort of smile in Martin's voice as he said, "So that's why everybody is suddenly being so polite. This is good to know."

I learned later that Martin had suddenly been taken from his cell for exercise and allowed to take a shower, and he had been given a mattress and a pillow.

I believe that President Kennedy's intervention gave real momentum to the Birmingham Movement. The fact that he was concerned and wanted justice done heartened our people. As

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for me, even though I understood that there were political overtones I believed President Kennedy sincerely cared about what happened to us. There was an amazing warmth about him.

With the spotlight of the nation on him, Bull Connor was becoming desperate. On Sunday afternoon the Reverend Charles Billups, another SCLC member, led a group of adults from the New Pilgrim Baptist Church to the police barricade. They knelt in the street and prayed. Then they walked forward. Bull Connor himself arrived and ordered Reverend Billups to turn back. Billups refused, and his people shouted, "Turn on the water! Loose the dogs! We ain't going back. Forgive them, O Lord."

In a fury, Bull Connor shouted, "Turn on the hoses, dammit!"

But a miraculous thing happened. As the black people rose from their knees and moved forward, Connor's men, with the hoses in their hands, fell back

to each side. The moral pressure of a watching world and the spiritual force of that little band of blacks broke their discipline and disarmed them. Between their ranks, past the leashed dogs, Billups led his people. They held a prayer meeting in a nearby park and marched back to their church singing freedom songs.

On May 4 President Kennedy sent Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to Birmingham. Six days later an agreement was announced. It was almost word for word an acceptance of the original demands made by the Movement.

Martin came home to me that night and we rejoiced. The victory had broad implications. Martin's long-range strategy in going to Birmingham was to focus national attention on the grave injustices endured by Negroes and to bring about federal legislation. To this end he deliberately chose a very tough city, because in that setting the evil of the system was highlighted and the world could see it for what it is.

My husband had written that Birmingham was the colossus of segregation, that a victory there would radiate across the South, cracking the whole edifice of discrimination. And it happened as he had predicted. Within a few months, nearly a thousand cities were engulfed in the turmoil of change. The fall of Birmingham was a turning point almost too significant to be fully grasped at the time of its happening.

Politically, as a result of the struggles there, President Kennedy reassessed the position of his administration and decided to propose a civil rights bill in 1963. It was eventually passed by Congress in 1964.

At a conference on the proposed bill at the White House, President Kennedy said to Martin with a wry grin, "Bull Connor has done as much for civil rights as Abraham Lincoln."

I remember saying to Martin after the success in Birmingham, "People all over the nation have been so aroused by the impact of Birmingham that you should

call for a march on Washington to further dramatize the need for legislation to completely integrate the black man into American society. I believe a hundred thousand people would come to the nation's capital at your invitation."

A conference was held with the heads of other organizations—A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Roy Wilkins of NAACP, John Lewis of SNCC, Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women, James Farmer of CORE and Whitney Young of the Urban League. It was Mr. Randolph who made the proposal of a massive march on Washington for "Jobs and Freedom."

It was set for Aug. 28, 1963. On Aug. 27, Martin and I went to Washington from Atlanta with members of the SCLC staff. In our hotel suite Martin began revising his speech, trying to condense it to the eight minutes allotted to him. I fell asleep at about three, but Martin

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worked on his speech all night, not sleeping a wink. When he finished it, he was bone-weary and almost in a state of collapse from exhaustion.

The sound of typewriters and voices in the next room awakened me early. I found my husband watching the crowds from the window of our hotel suite. As the time approached for the march to begin, we became anxious about how large the turnout would be. The reports on television were discouraging. "A very small number of people have assembled," they said. "About 25,000." It was a far cry from the 100,000 we had been hoping for.

Then, when we reached the Mall, our spirits soared. The reporters had grossly underestimated the crowd—by 10 o'clock 90,000 had assembled and by the time we arrived that whole vast, green concourse was alive with 250,000 people. It was a beautiful sight.

I sat on the platform at the Lincoln Memorial and looked

out over the great assemblage. It was the biggest crowd I had ever seen. And in addition, there were millions watching on television, including President Kennedy in the White House.

When A. Philip Randolph rose to introduce Martin, he called him the moral leader of the nation. Then a quarter of a million people applauded thunderously and voiced, in a sort of chant: "MARTIN . . . LUTHER . . . KING!"

Clearly, Martin was tremendously moved. I could tell by the line of his back and the sound of his voice—a little husky at first, then going out in a strong and beautifully resonant tone that always came when he was inspired to his best. He started out with his written speech, delivering it with great eloquence. When he got to the rhythmic part of demanding freedom now, and wanting jobs now, the crowd caught the timing and shouted "now!" in a cadence. Their response lifted Martin in a surge of emotion. Abandoning his written speech, he spoke from

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King delivers his "I have a dream" speech from the Lincoln Memorial

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his heart, his voice soaring magnificently out over that great crowd and to all the world.

He said, "I say to you today, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream that is deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with people's injustices, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

"I have a dream that my four little children one day will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their

skin but by the content of their character.

"When we allow freedom to ring from every town and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Great God A-mighty, we are free at last!'"

As Martin ended his speech, there was the awed silence that is the very greatest tribute an orator can be paid. And then came a tremendous crash of sound as 250,000 people shouted in ecstatic accord with his words. The feeling that they had of oneness and unity was complete. They kept on shouting in one thunderous voice, and for that brief moment the Kingdom of God seemed to have come on earth.

Only three months later, on Nov. 22, there occurred a tragedy that we shared with all the

people of the world. Martin was upstairs in our house attending to some things, with the television set on in the background. I was downstairs talking on the telephone.

Martin called to me. "Corrie, I just heard that President Kennedy has been shot—maybe killed."

I rushed up to be with Martin, and we sat there hoping and praying that John Kennedy would not die. We thought of the great national tragedy, and of the effect his death might have on the Black Movement. We felt that President Kennedy had been a friend of the Cause

and that with him as President we could continue to move forward. We watched and prayed for him.

Then it was announced that the President was dead. Martin had been very quiet during this period. Finally he said, "This is what is going to happen to me also. I keep telling you, this is a sick society."

I was not able to say anything. I had no word to comfort my husband. I could not say, "It won't happen to you." I felt he was right. It was a painfully agonizing silence. I moved closer to him and gripped his hand in mine.

NEXT WEEK: PART TWO

TRAGEDY IN MEMPHIS

The Assassination
of Martin Luther King Jr.

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