A dramatic retelling of events in the life of the American icon, including his adoption of nonviolence and the famous march on Washington

Martin Luther King Jr. was in trouble. He had been arrested in Birmingham, Ala., for leading a freedom march. Now he was in jail. No one could visit him. He could not make a telephone call. This was "solitary."
King's wife, Coretta, was home in Atlanta, Ga. She had not heard from her husband in two days. Finally, she felt she had to do something. Once before, King had been in "solitary." At that time, John F. Kennedy was running for president. He had called Coretta and told her he would try to help her husband. And the next day, King got out of jail.

Now, in April of 1963, Coretta called President Kennedy in Washington. The President was away, but she spoke to his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. She told him she was afraid her husband was not safe. He told her he would do everything he could to help King.

Later, Coretta's phone rang. It was the President calling from Florida. He told her he would look into her husband's trouble right away.

Both the President and his brother called Birmingham. Soon King was allowed to call Coretta. He was also allowed a visit from his lawyer. Before long, he was out of jail.

King was out of danger – for now. But the truth was, he lived with danger almost all the time. His home had been bombed twice. He had gotten hundreds of calls and letters from people who said they would kill him. Leading the civil rights movement was a dangerous job. Why had King chosen it? Perhaps there was something in his early life that made it all happen.

Martin's Childhood

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Ga. His father was the pastor of a Baptist church there. King Sr. hated the South's segregation laws. These laws kept white and black people separated. African Americans were kept out of "white" schools, parks, theaters, hotels, and eating places. They had to sit in separate sections in trains and buses.

"I don't care how long I have to live with this system," King Sr. said. "I will never accept it." He was a fighter and his son, Martin, took after him.

One day, Martin was riding with his father in the family car. Mr. King drove past a "Stop" sign by accident. A policeman told him to pull over. Then he said, "All right, boy, let me see your license."

No man likes to be called a "boy." This was a way of insulting African Americans in the South. Mr. King got very angry. He pointed to his son and said to the policeman:

"This is a boy. I'm a man. Until you call me one, I will not listen to you."

The policeman was so surprised, he wrote out the ticket in a hurry and left.

It was no wonder that Martin also grew up to hate segregation. The whole system, he thought, was unfair and stupid. Even more, he hated the violence that grew out of segregation. He had seen the Ku Klux Klan riding at night. It meant that an African American would be beaten or killed for going against the system. These things almost made Martin turn against all white people.

Seeking a Career

In school, Martin was a bright student and skipped two grades. He entered Morehouse College in Atlanta when he was only 15. At this time, Martin wasn't sure what he wanted to be. But he knew he wanted to help his people in some way. Religion, he felt, was "out of touch" with the real problems of his people – segregation and poverty. For a while, he thought he would become a lawyer.

But two of the leading teachers at Morehouse were ministers. And they showed him that a minister could care about things like segregation and hunger. Martin knew then that he wanted to be a minister. At 18, Martin became his father's assistant.

Martin graduated from Morehouse when he was 19. But he wanted to study even more. So he entered a school of religion in Pennsylvania. The school had 100 students. Only six were black. Now Martin set out to prove what his mother had always told him: "You are as good as anybody."

Martin studied hard and became an "A" student. What about his wish to help his people? He was beginning to find a way.

In college, Martin had read an essay by Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was an American writer who lived more than 100 years ago. He believed that a man had the right to disobey any law he thought was evil or unjust. Once Thoreau did not pay his taxes as a protest against slavery. He was put in jail. A friend came to visit him.

"Why are you in jail?" the friend asked.

"Why are you out of jail?" he answered.

Thoreau and Gandhi

King liked Thoreau's idea – that men should not obey evil or unjust laws. And he began to search harder for a way to fight against evil. He read books by the world's great thinkers and writers. Then one day he heard a speech about the great leader of India, Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi had won freedom for his country from British rule (1947). And he had done it in a very unusual way. From the start, he told his people not to use violence against the British. He told them to resist the British by peaceful means only. They would march. They would sit down or lie down in the streets. They would strike. They would boycott (refuse to buy) British goods.

Gandhi had also read Thoreau's essay. He, too, believed that men had the right to disobey unjust laws. Like Thoreau, he believed that men should gladly go to jail when they break such laws.

"Fill the jails," Gandhi said. But – never use violence. Violence only brings about more hate and more violence. Gandhi told his people to meet body force with soul force. He told them to meet hate with love. Gandhi called this "war without violence." And it helped India gain its freedom.

King Adopts Nonviolence

Martin Luther King Jr. began to think that black Americans could use Gandhi's way to win their freedom. Wasn't Gandhi's way also the way of Jesus Christ? Hadn't Christ told his people to "turn the other cheek" if someone struck them?

This idea of fighting peacefully against evil was called nonviolence. Was it the coward's way? No, said King. It took more courage not to hit back when struck.

In the next few years, many good things happened to King. He graduated at the top of his class, with "A's" in all his subjects. He met and married Coretta Scott. And, in 1954, he got the job he really wanted. He became minister of a very good Baptist church in Montgomery, Ala.

King's life was now busy and full. But he wanted to do more than care for the souls of his church members. He wanted his church to help young people to go to college. He wanted it to help black people to register and vote – a tough job in the South. Religion, King said, must care about heaven and earth, souls and slums.

The members of King's church liked his ideas. They soon put them into action. King saw his church grow day by day. Meanwhile, he was also studying for another degree. He would soon be Dr. King. These were probably the happiest months of his life.

Turning Point for King

Then, on December 1, 1955, something happened in Montgomery that changed King's life. Within a few years, it would help change the lives of most black Americans, and the lives of many white Americans, too.

What happened in Montgomery that day? A black woman, Rosa Parks, was seated just behind the "white" section on a bus. (By law, whites sat up front, blacks in the back.) Mrs. Parks was going home from her job as a seamstress. When some white people got on the bus, there were no seats left in the "white" section. So the bus driver told Mrs. Parks, and three other African Americans, to move to the back of the bus. The bus was now full, and Mrs. Parks would have to stand. The three other African Americans obeyed the driver. But Mrs. Parks said she would not give up her seat.

Why was this so unusual? When Mrs. Parks said "no" to the bus driver, she was breaking the law. She was arrested on the spot.

The news of her arrest spread like wildfire among Montgomery's black people.

Until now, they had not challenged the anti-black laws in Montgomery. It was dangerous, and it seemed hopeless. But now they were angry and ready to act.

The next night, there was a meeting of Montgomery's black leaders. It took place in Martin Luther King's church. The leaders agreed to call a one-day boycott of the buses as a protest.

The Bus Boycott Begins

The next day, leaflets were handed out among the town's African Americans. The leaflets asked them not to ride the buses on Monday.

Sunday night, King began to worry. Would the boycott work? Would the people have the courage to protest? King wasn't sure.

The next morning, King got his answer. From his window, he could see a bus stop. The first bus was empty! So was the second. The third bus had just two white riders. It was the same story all over town. Black people were not riding the buses. They were walking, taking cabs, or driving their cars to work. Some were riding on mules or on wagons pulled by horses. *"A miracle has taken place,"* King said.

That afternoon, black leaders formed an organization to head the protest movement. Before King could say "no," they elected him president of the organization. King felt he needed more time for his church work. But it was too late to turn down this job. So King became a civil rights leader.

That night, there was a meeting of Montgomery African Americans. Thousands came. They heard speeches by King and other black leaders. Then they voted to keep up the boycott until:

1. Bus drivers treated black riders politely.
2. Black riders would not have to give up their seats to whites.
3. Some black bus drivers were hired.

That day, King said, was Montgomery's moment in history. The black people there had started a movement that would bring new hope to black people everywhere.

The bus boycott was supposed to last one day. Yet it lasted more than a year. Why?

Whites Fight Back

At first, most African Americans rode to work in cabs owned by Negro taxi companies. These cabs charged them only 10 cents a ride – the same as the buses. But the police told the taxi companies they had to charge at least 45 cents a ride. That was the law.

Then King asked the people for cars and drivers to take the place of the cabs. A car pool was set up, and it worked better than the old bus system. But then the police began to arrest car-pool drivers for almost any reason. Some drivers quit, but most kept going.

King himself was arrested for "speeding" and thrown into jail. Afterward, he and Coretta began getting phone calls day and night. The callers warned them to "get out of town – or else." One night, a bomb was thrown on the porch of King's house. Luckily, no one was hurt.

Then King and more than 100 other African Americans were arrested under an old state law. King was found guilty and fined $500. Many people in the courtroom cried. But King walked out with a smile.

"I was proud of my crime," he said later. *"It was the crime of joining my people in a nonviolent protest against injustice."*

King's group now took their case to a high court. They asked the judges to end bus segregation in Alabama. They said it was against the U.S. Constitution. The judges agreed. But Montgomery white lawyers said they would take the case to the Supreme Court to argue that bus segregation was legal.

Meanwhile, city officials asked a local court to stop the black car pool. The car pool, they said, was an "unlawful business." King was sure the Montgomery court would order an end to the car pool. How could the boycott go on without the cars? It was, King said, *"our darkest hour."*

Nonviolence Wins

On November 13, 1956, King and his lawyers were in court to defend the car pool. Around noon, there was a lot of noise in the courtroom. Newspaper reporters were running in and out. Suddenly, one of them handed King a piece of paper. "This is what you have been waiting for," the reporter said.

King read that the U.S. Supreme Court had agreed that Alabama's bus segregation laws were against the Constitution. He rushed around the courtroom, spreading the happy news. His friends in court shared his joy.

Later that day, the Montgomery court ordered an end to the car pool. But in a few days, the Supreme Court order would reach Montgomery. Then bus segregation would be a thing of the past. In the meantime, African Americans would not ride the buses.

On December 20, 1956, the Supreme Court order arrived. The next morning, King rode on the first integrated bus. Later, he said, *"The skies did not fall when integrated buses finally traveled the streets of Montgomery."*

King was only 27 years old when the Montgomery protest ended. Yet he already stood high in the world. He was written about in newspapers and magazines. He was called "a modern Moses." He was offered many jobs, some with very high pay.

King didn't let any of these things go to his head. And he didn't take any of the jobs that were offered him. He would stay as the pastor of his Montgomery church. But the fight for justice would go on.

The Movement Grows

In the next few years, King fought hard for African American rights. He led other bus boycotts. He made speeches around the country. He led demonstrations. And he was not unhappy when he was arrested.

In 1960, King moved back to his father's church in Atlanta, Ga. With his father's help, he could do more to fight for civil rights. At this time, the movement began to pick up speed. Black and white students started "sit-ins" at lunch counters in the South. They would sit together at "white" lunch counters. If they weren't served, they wouldn't leave. The sit-ins spread all over. Many of the students were put in jail.

Soon after, the "freedom rides" began. Black and white students rode buses in the South. At bus stations, they used lunch counters, waiting rooms, and rest rooms that were for "whites" only. Many of them, too, were put in jail. Martin Luther King joined many of the sit-ins and freedom rides. He, too, went to jail.

In 1963, King took on his hardest job. What city, he asked, was toughest on black people? King felt it was Birmingham, Ala. Almost everything was still segregated there. Even water fountains were marked "colored" or "white." Birmingham's police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor, boasted that he knew how to keep African Americans "in their place." Suppose that public places in Birmingham could be desegregated. That, King felt, would be a big defeat for segregation everywhere.

The Battle of Birmingham

King led Birmingham's African Americans in marches, sit-ins, and kneel-ins. They also refused to buy at downtown stores with segregated lunch counters and washrooms. The protests grew larger, day by day. The jails began to fill up. King himself was thrown into "solitary." It was then that his wife got help from President Kennedy.

Now "Bull" Connor "got tough." Police began using their clubs on marchers. Police dogs were turned on them. Water from powerful fire hoses knocked them to the ground. Pictures of this brutality appeared in newspapers all over the country. People were shocked. Many began to help the protesters with money. In Birmingham, some whites also began to boycott the downtown stores.

Before long, King and his people won almost all their demands. These were:

1. Desegregated lunch counters and rest rooms in stores;
2. More and better jobs for blacks;
3. A group of blacks and whites to work out a plan for desegregating Birmingham even further.

Some white racists in Birmingham did not give up easily. They bombed the motel where King was staying. They also bombed the home of King's brother, Reverend A.D. King. Neither of the Kings was hurt.

The Birmingham battle had a great effect on black people everywhere. They rose up in hundreds of cities to demand "Freedom now!" They were tired of suffering and waiting. They wanted an end to segregation. They wanted good jobs and the right to vote. So they marched in the streets and held sit-ins in government buildings. They picketed stores. There were protests everywhere, every day. King called the summer of 1963 the beginning of the Negro Revolution. And everyone knew that King was the leader of that revolution.

The Famous March on Washington

The protests that summer were felt by all Americans. President Kennedy asked Congress for a civil rights bill to end segregation. But the protests were already getting results. Thousands of schools, parks, hotels, and lunch counters were integrated. Many companies began to hire African Americans for the first time. But the biggest change was in black people themselves. They had a new pride in their race.

The events of 1963 reached their peak in the famous March on Washington. The idea of the march was to demand "jobs and freedom." On August 28, 1963, about 250,000 Americans arrived in Washington, D.C. They were black and white, old and young, and of every religion. At the Lincoln Memorial, this "army without guns" listened to speeches by many civil rights leaders. But the one they had really come to hear was Martin Luther King. And King did not let them down. The speech he made that day will always be remembered.

"I have a dream," King said. *"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and 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, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

"I have a dream that one day my four children 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 King finished, many men and women in the crowd were crying. Millions of Americans heard King's speech on television. They knew this was a rare moment in history.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

That summer, African Americans moved forward faster than at any time since the Civil War. But this did not mean that white racists had given up their fight. There were still many shocking acts of violence.

On November 22, 1963, another act of violence shocked the country. President Kennedy was killed by a sniper. Five days later, the new President, Lyndon B. Johnson, spoke to Congress. He asked Congress to pass the civil rights bill that Kennedy had wanted. He said it would be the best way to honor the memory of John F. Kennedy.

On July 2, 1964, Congress passed a strong civil rights bill. Martin Luther King was present when President Johnson signed it. This bill went a long way toward making the African-American a first-class citizen. It said:

1. No one can be kept out of places like hotels, lunch counters, gas stations, and theaters because of his race.
2. No one can be kept out of public places like parks, swimming pools, beaches, or libraries because of his race.

By now, King's name was known all over the world. He had won many honors. In late 1964, King won the highest honor of all, the Nobel Peace Prize. The award, King said, spoke for people who followed nonviolent ways in seeking justice. He was sure it would give him "new courage" to carry on the fight.

The Alabama Freedom March

The fight for justice soon took King to Selma, Ala. In Alabama and other states, black people were still kept from voting. Those who tried to register to vote were given a hard time. Almost any excuse was used to keep them from voting. In 1965, King started a drive to register voters in Selma. He led large groups to the courthouses to register. In seven weeks, 2,000 African Americans were put in jail. One of them was King.

Then, one night, a black marcher was shot and killed in a nearby town. King called for a protest march from Selma to the state capitol at Montgomery, 50 miles away. Governor George Wallace of Alabama said the march could not be held. But about 650 blacks and a few whites started for Montgomery anyway. They were met by a wall of Alabama state troopers and sheriff's men. The marchers were ordered back. They stayed where they were. The police used clubs, whips, and tear gas on them. More than 70 marchers were hurt and had to go to hospitals.

Many Americans became very angry. There were protest marches in many cities. More than 400 white ministers, priests, and rabbis went to Selma to join the marchers.

A United States Judge ordered Governor Wallace not to stop the march. President Johnson sent troops to protect the marchers. This time, more than 3,000 started out for Montgomery, led by King. The march took five days. At the end, King made a speech. *"We must have our freedom now,"* he said. *"We must have the right to vote. We're saying, 'We ain't going to let nobody turn us around.'"*

Just before the march began, President Johnson had asked Congress to pass a new voting rights bill. The bill was passed. It did away with "literacy" tests for voters in places where less than half the people had voted in 1964. It was a great victory for the Selma freedom marchers.

The Problem of Poverty

But King's dream of nonviolence was being challenged. In the summer of 1964, riots broke out in black ghettos in several northern cities. The next three summers, the riots got much worse. There was great damage, and many people died.

The causes of these riots were plain. Civil rights had helped black people in many ways. But most people in the ghettos were still very poor. Many had no jobs. Life was a daily struggle to pay the landlord, the butcher, the grocer. Houses were old and rundown. There was sickness and hunger. And out of this misery came drug addiction and crime. For many people, there seemed to be no way out of these dark ghettos. In despair and anger, they began to burn them down.

Martin Luther King understood the riots. He had always said that segregation and poverty were *"twin evils."* The aim of segregation, he said, was to keep blacks poor.

Until 1965, King had fought mainly for an end to segregation. But the ghetto riots upset him deeply. More and more, he turned to the problem of poverty. King led more marches, but now they were usually for better homes, schools, and jobs for ghetto people.

As 1968 began, King was planning another march on Washington. It was to be a march of poor people, black and white. Its aim was to get Congress to pass laws to help all poor people. He wanted "jobs or income" for everyone. The march was to take place in April.

The Last Days

But in March, King went to Memphis, Tenn. Black garbage workers were on strike there. King wanted to help them win a pay raise. He planned to lead a march. But after the march began, some black teenagers began looting. A riot ended the march.

This saddened King. He felt it was bad for the cause of nonviolence. He went home to Atlanta. But then he felt he was giving in to violence.

So King went back to Memphis to start another march. On April 3, he made a speech there. Toward the end, he talked about death. He had been warned he would be killed in Memphis, he said.

"But death doesn't matter with me now," he said. *"Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."*

It was King's last speech. The next day, King met with his helpers in his room. It was on the second floor of a motel. King told his friends that nonviolence was the only hope of saving the soul of this nation.

Later, King went out on the balcony outside his room. He wanted to relax before dinner. Suddenly, there was the sound of a rifle shot. It came from a rooming house across the way. The bullet ripped into King's face and slammed him against the wall. Then he fell to the floor. Less than an hour later, he died in a hospital.

"Free at Last"

King's body was brought home to Atlanta. It was placed in the Baptist church where he had been co-pastor with his father. Everywhere in the nation there was shock and grief. Jacqueline Kennedy, widow of John F. Kennedy, wrote to Coretta King. She asked, "When will our country learn that to live by the sword is to perish by the sword?"

On Tuesday, April 9, the funeral began. Many words were said in honor of Martin Luther King. But the words that touched people the most were spoken by King himself. A tape recording was played of part of the last sermon King made in his church:

> *"If any of you are around when I meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. If you get somebody to talk, tell him not to talk too long. Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize. That isn't important.*
>
> *"I'd like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others...I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that I did try in my life to clothe the naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."*

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