

# A. S. DOC YOUNG

## Martin and Memphis

December 4, 1955, was a wearying day for Mrs. Rosa Parks. Having worked all that day on clothes worn by the white folk of Montgomery, Alabama, she was in no mood for the meanness and sheer foolishness of racial segregation when she took a seat in the "colored section" of that now-famous bus. But, the white bus driver didn't know that, nor would he have given a cussword if he had. The local custom was for Negroes to move back in the bus when white folk boarded it.

When Mrs. Parks got aboard, the bus was, perhaps, two-thirds full of Negroes. When some white folks came aboard, the bus driver, following local custom, asked the Negroes to move back. Mrs. Parks, normally a quiet and reserved woman who had in the past moved back, although she had hated it and had pondered the question of "when and how will we ever determine our rights as human beings?" — refused to budge. She just wasn't in the mood for standing: Her feet hurt. There was nothing pre-arranged about her refusal to obey the orders of the "boss" bus-driver. It was just one of those things; like: the time was ripe and Destiny was ready.

The bus-driver, his authority "insulted" in this unusual (for Montgomery) manner, sought out a cop and had Mrs. Parks arrested. The cop took Mrs. Parks to jail, where she remained until her release was arranged on \$100 bond. Mrs. Parks was brought to trial on December 5, 1955. And, this was the day on which 42,000 Montgomery Negroes — never before noted for stick-togetherness — decided that they would prefer walking to work to riding in segregated buses. This was the beginning of the legendary Montgomery Bus Boycott which lasted for 381 days, ending in victory when the bus-line operators, capitulating to a U. S. Supreme Court ruling that bus segregation was illegal, desegregated. This was the beginning of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s career as an internationally-renowned leader of the race.

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## A Baptist Preacher

Martin Luther King, Jr., was the son of Martin Luther King, Sr. Like father like son: Both were Baptist ministers. Although he was Southern-born, young King was more accustomed to privilege, such as it was, than he was to poverty. He was well-educated. He was a strong personality, a visionary sort of man. He was a forceful articulate, dynamic — and dramatic — man.

Up to this point, his future was pretty well determined: Like his father, he would pastor an influential church or teach Theology or both. He was well-read in Hegel and he was a keen student of Mahatmi Gandhi, the revered Indian leader. But, his emergence as a Civil Rights leader was, like Mrs. Rosa Parks' refusal to give her seat to a white bus-rider, unrehearsed.

The fact is that there was a little bit of default involved with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He was something of an outsider, if not a stranger, in Montgomery. When the idea of the boycott mushroomed, some of the older ministers in town were a bit shy about leading it. The reluctant ones at least half-way believed that they were exploiting a possible patsy when they shoved young King up front as President of the Montgomery Improvement Association and, thus, the leader of the bus boycott.

When they made a success of the boycott, Montgomery Negroes astounded themselves; and the nation, if not the world, was astounded by them. When they began the boycott, they took the first decisive step toward the non-violent mass action which King was henceforth to employ with simply amazing results. Preaching non-violence all the way, King led subsequent protest marches from coast to coast. The technique of non-violent resistance came into large-scale use in the early '60s.

In his book, "Stride Toward Freedom," published by Harper & Brothers, Inc., King detailed the basic aspects of this philosophy:

"(1) . . . it must be emphasized that non-violent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist . . .

"(2) . . . It does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding . . .

"(3) . . . the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil . . .

"(4) A fourth point that characterizes non-violent resistance is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from the opponent without striking back . . .

"(5) . . . it avoids not only external violence but also internal violence of spirit. The non-violent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but he also refuses to hate him . . ."

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## America's Most Powerful Leader

Employing these concepts, following his stated philosophy to the letter, Martin Luther King became the most powerful leader in America. The white bigots of the South fell bewildered before his modus operandi. Every time a white cop assaulted a protest marcher, America was ashamed and that feeling of shame was a "plus" for Negroes. Legions of followers, Negro and white alike, flocked to King's banner. Desegregation laws were passed in many areas and the Supreme Court smashed down Jim Crow at virtually every turn. As Negroes watched King win battles with bigots who, not long before, had seemed unbeatable, their pride swelled, and they exalted him into the ranks of near-deity. As King addressed an audience of some 200,000 people of all races in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1963, he thrilled the nation with his great speech: "I have a dream . . ." There are some who say that even the bigots cried that day.

The greatness of Martin Luther King was exemplified by his conferences with Presidents in the White House, the great demand for him as a lecturer, the Nobel Peace Prize. It is probable that King reached the peak of his influence on the night when President Johnson addressed the nation via television and promised emotionally: "We shall overcome!"

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## He Misplaced His Magic

But, now, it seems, Dr. Martin Luther King misplaced his magic somewhere along the way from 1963 to 1968. I asked a Negro bookseller for

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a book about King the other night and he said, "Negroes have been shying away from King." The book I wanted, the bookseller said, just wouldn't sell in his store.

King "lost" several other prominent Negro Civil Rights campaigners when he attempted to tie up the Civil Rights movement with the war in Vietnam. The emergence of such radicals as Stokely ("We want black power!") Carmichael and H. Rap Brown — who began grabbing off headlines once reserved for King alone — seemed to have set King off in publicity competition which, it seemed, sometimes placed talk in front of thought. Even as early as the Watts Riots of 1965, certain so-called "militant, young Negroes" were putting King and his non-violent movement down. But, King kept doggedly on. There were times, to be sure, when he flirted with threats of violence on the part of others — if his non-violent program proved ineffectual; but, in the main, he maintained his course in a near-straight line.

He maintained it, that is, until the other day in Memphis, when a protest march he was leading fell apart. A small number of hoodlum-minded "militants" suddenly decided to get violent, to loot, and to riot. Staging a mini-version of the Watts Riots, they put Martin Luther King to rout. He fled the scene like a defeated warrior. There was a suggestion that the riot had been planned by radicals who want to wipe out King and his non-violent philosophy, all of its merits and gains be damned. There is fear in Washington, D.C., that the same will happen when (if) King stages his "Poor People's" protest demonstration. It has been said, in fact, that Carmichael is counting on just such a fiasco, after which he will seek to "take over" as "the No. 1 Negro leader." Reader's Digest reveals, quoting King-aide Rev. Andrew Young, that King has begged "extremists": "If you can't adopt non-violence and join us, let us try our way until the first of August. And if we fail, then you can take over with another approach."

In any event, Martin Luther King said the day after the Memphis blow-up, "Riots are a part of today's society."

What a terribly-horrible thing for the champion of non-violence to say! Did Mahatma Gandhi ever cop out like that?