

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

# WHAT MANNER OF MAN

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

"Is you the one?" That question has been asked for centuries and by numerous groups of people. It might have been phrased differently, but the basic meaning has always been the same. It has been asked most by those who have been oppressed. The "black people" waited for centuries for a savior who would deliver them from the throes of slavery and into the "Promised land." Throughout the period of American slavery, the oppressed waited for deliverance. At those times when their optimism was put to the test, their anticipatory concerns were vocalized in song:

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den

Saved Jopah from the belly of a whale

And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, then

Why not deliver poor me

The question continued — "Is you the one?" Who would be the one to deliver Black people from the fiery furnace of their oppressors? Through the seventeenth, eighteenth and on into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they waited. From time to time, there appeared some who initiated the journey. Harriett Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Becket T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey and a few others were among those who tried. They all set out for the destination of citizenship but, while they were in the target area, they did not hit the "bull's eye." It would not be until beyond the half-way mark of the twentieth century that "yes" would become the answer.

It didn't just happen.

Had he lived, he would have been fifty-one years old today.

At the time when ominous economic rumblings were being made and when Las Vegas was busily preparing for initiating the construction of the Boulder Dam, Martin Luther

King, Jr. was born in Atlanta, Georgia where, even today, the lives of young Black boys are being brutally assaulted. It was the place of his birth. At a time when the KKK was running rampant throughout the country and the life of a Black Person was not valued, "Daddy kicked" Martin Luther King, Jr. began his thirty-nine year trek through life.

Centuries earlier, Alexander of Macedonia, who became known as Alexander the Great, had been born in that part of the Balkan Peninsula which we know as Greece. As a young man, it is said that he was asked by the famed Oracle if he would prefer a long and uneventful life or a short and glorious one? He responded in favor of the latter. His dream came to pass. He conquered all of the known world and his name was known throughout the land. Martin was given no such choices. He merely played the hand dealt him. The end results were similar to those of Alexander. Martin was asked, "He would over. But, as many who gain some degree of fame are wont to do, he had to 'pay his dues'."

"He who shuns the dust of the Arena, shall not sit in the shade of the olive tree." This short statement, which I am about to make, shall address only his preparation for the arena and not the conflict. We know what he did. This is a small bit about who he was and what made him tick.

He had a sheltered life. His father was a minister and, for the times, his family was fairly well off. They lived in a nice home and the children were well-mannered. Throughout his life, Martin abhorred violence. While in elementary school, the "bully" walloned him but he did not fight back. Even as a child he did not subscribe to the belief of "an eye for an eye." In the common conflicts between siblings, he never actively participated. He was a good boy and

everybody liked him — he thought.

He was first made aware of the differences in races when he was six. Two white boys, with whom he had played, were told by their mothers not to play with him anymore. (In the South, Blacks and whites lived closer together than they did in the North, East and West). He could not understand what happened. His mother only told him "not to ever forget that he was just as good as anyone else". When he was eight, while on a shopping trip to a shoe store with his father, they were told to go the back of the store. His father, a proud man who had probably suffered these indignities before, did not want his son to have those kinds of experiences as part of his "daily bread". They left without making a purchase. There were many other incidents which occurred in his life, as they occurred in the lives of all Black people, which painted a vivid picture of the abundance of injustices which he and other people like him, had to endure. All of these prepared him for a rendezvous with destiny which he did not know awaited him.

As was the case in most southern towns, there was very little recreational outlets and even fewer for Black people. There were no bowling alleys, golf courses, YMCAs, or supervised swimming facilities available to Martin. Because his father was a minister, he could not hang out around the pool hall and other "juke joints". His time was spent at home and at home he studied. He was an exemplary student and his grades were always superior. Because of his talents, he "skipped" several grades and completed high school in two years. All of these events were comparable to the shuffling of a deck of cards. Each movement rearranged the order in which they would ultimately fall.

At the age of fifteen, he entered Morehouse College. It was there that he decided upon a

life in the ministry. Previously, he had had negative feelings about it in spite of the fact that his father was a minister. "I had doubts that religion was intellectually respectable. I had revolted against the emotionalism of Negro religion, the shouting and stamping. I didn't understand it and it embarrassed me."

At Morehouse, he met Dr. Benjamin Mays and Dr. George Kelsey, who was professor of religion and philosophy. Those two men gave him a deeper understanding of social philosophy and religion. Because of their influence, he decided that perhaps the ministry would be respectable after all.

Four years later he graduated with honors. He was offered several scholarships to attend seminaries. He turned them down because his father felt that those scholarships should go to students whose families could ill afford to send them to college. His father used his savings to send Martin to Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. He learned an important lesson during that exchange — just because help is available, it should not be taken unless it is needed.

His arrival at Crozer placed him in an environment unlike any in which he had ever lived — integration. He had a great deal of difficulty in adjusting. There were no problems with his white classmates. The problems were a result of the way in which he had been programmed after nineteen years of living in an oppressed, stagnant and demeaning society. He was aware of all of the old stereotypes of Black people and he was determined that he would not manifest any of them. To counteract his anxieties, he went to the opposite extreme. He was never late, he never laughed, he was always neatly dressed, clean shaven, never sloppy and once, during a class outing, he avoided eating a piece of watermelon.

Perhaps more than anything else, he over-

came those fears which causes one not to live but to simply follow a script. He did very well at the seminary. He was class president and graduated at the top of his class. "When you're hot, you're hot." The awards kept rolling in. He received a fellowship to study for a Ph.D. at Boston University. It was there that everything, which would ultimately become him, came together. In reading Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Locke and Hegel, he began to appreciate such thoughts as "strength through struggle, harmony out of

was to become the force by which he would live — and die.

It was near the end of his work at Boston University that he met Coretta Scott. The usually quiet, reserved young theology student fell madly in love. He realized, after their first date, that she was the girl for him. It might have been called a "whirlwind" romance. He never knew whether he would ever to determine if you like someone or not. They were married in Marion, Alabama, at her parents home, on June 18, 1953. They returned



gain." He also read Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' and understood the cause of the peaceful protest against the Fugitive Slave Laws which led to Thoreau's arrest. He also discovered Mahatma Gandhi. More than any other, Gandhi influenced the approach to life, which he would take. Satyagraha — truth force or love force — was profoundly significant to him. Passive resistance

to Boston to complete their degrees. She had trained to become a concert singer. She had always wanted to be a singer but, for reasons not too clearly understood by her, she gave up her possible career and opted to be with Martin.

And then there was the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church with Shakespeare, Socrates, Galileo and others. White citizens looked