



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

WE last saw the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King early last August, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—a red brick building on the corner of Jackson Street and Auburn Avenue. His office, in the Sunday-school annex, to the left of the church, smelled of paraffin and linoleum glue. On the bulletin board, children's prayer cards of Jesus pointing at his heart were pinned above Southern Christian Leadership Conference posters proclaiming the summer's theme: "Black Is Beautiful." A broken Crayola popped underfoot. In the course of our conversation, Dr. King told of a recent threat against his life, in Cleveland. "It has been given to me to die when the Lord calls me," he said, digressing from his narrative. "The Lord called me into life and He will call me into death. I've known the fear of dying. Yes, I lived with that fear in Montgomery and in Birmingham, down in the State of Alabama, when brother fell upon brother in 1963." His voice was rich as his sentences rolled inexorably toward their conclusions. It had a kind of patience that was hard to distinguish from fatigue. "Since then, I've stood on the banks of the Jordan and I've looked into the promised land," he went on. "Maybe I won't make the journey, but I know that my *people* are going to make the journey, because I've stood and looked. So it doesn't *particularly* matter anymore. I've conquered the fear of dying, and a man that's conquered the fear of dying has conquered everything. I don't have to fear *any* man." He reached for a leather-bound Bible, worn to a dull shine, like an old watch, and turned to the fourth chapter of II Timothy. "I have fought a good fight," he read. "I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." He paused, and closed the book. (When we returned to the passage later, we noticed that it continued, "Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.") Dr.

King seemed embarrassed at ending the conversation there, but he had to catch a plane. As we stood with him on Auburn Avenue while he waited for his car, he mentioned that he was born "down the block." Along the avenue, modern cinder-block offices, their windows smeared with palm prints, stood beside clapboard houses. Cast-iron washtubs and rusting automobile parts lay scattered in yards. We remember that a young black girl in a stiff organdie dress was spinning a hubcap on the hot pavement.

WE find ourself now, as after any disaster, investing small things with an urgent, outsize relevance. The girl in the organdie dress keeps returning to our mind; somehow she must bear for us the meaning of Dr. King's death. We haven't looked to our memory of her for meaning; her picture simply appears to us, as if through some short circuit of our intelligence. One can no longer clearly grasp the relevance of new events. They involve us all, we talk about them all day, soon we find them squeezing everything else out of our lives, but we're not sure how to weight them. This is not because one can't foresee in detail where they're leading; one never could. The frightening thing is that one can no longer *imagine* what forms the solutions to our problems will assume. One isn't even sure what a solution would look like. Ordinarily, the news media might give us clues. But the relevances we seek now aren't buried in news stories. Friday, the *Times* ran an eight-column headline on Dr. King's death. It ran eight-column headlines Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, too. Tucked inside Friday's paper were many stories about Dr. King's career. Their assumption seemed to be that by reëntering his past we might get a running start into our future without him.

The pell-mell events of the previous weeks no doubt undermined our response to Dr. King's death. Over the past several years, we have learned to

accept the fact that our destiny is not entirely what we make of ourselves. But in these last weeks, perhaps for the first time since the Second World War, we've had a sense of being submerged in history, and of becoming inured to its stupefactions. About the time of the Tet offensive, one was close to despair. Then, with Eugene McCarthy's victory in New Hampshire and Robert Kennedy's announcement that he would run for the Presidency, with President Johnson's announcement of a bombing halt and then his announcement that he would not run again, followed by a direct peace overture from North Vietnam, one began to feel that suddenly, just when things were darkest, America had found her way back to the path. Now Dr. King's death comes to us as a reproach. We had let ourselves drift away from the reality of our trouble. Finding the path will not be so easy.

Word of the assassination reached us while we were working late at our office, and we immediately switched on a television-network special report. Perhaps because we received each piece of news minutes after it happened, we came to feel that we were at the eye of a historical hurricane. Our national leaders appeared before us to guide our responses. "America is shocked and saddened by the brutal slaying tonight of Dr. Martin Luther King," the President said, in measured tones. "I know that every American of good will joins me in mourning the death of this outstanding leader and in praying for peace and understanding throughout this land." We sat, it seemed dumbly, in the gray haze of our television screen. Other notables—we can't remember which—expressed dismay. Several, staring sternly into the camera, urged viewers to "keep their cool." The argot, unfamiliar to their mouths, made it plain to whom the admonitions were addressed. Curiously, what gave us a stronger sense of tragedy than anything our leaders said was the disorder on the networks: the missed cues and fades,

the A.B.C. technician who walked behind Bob Young reading a sheet of teletype paper, Keith McBee stuttering when he suddenly realized he was on camera. When our leaders did appear, their eyes glassy and focussed above the camera, we felt a strange sense of identification with the poverty of their response, and with the way they underscored one another. Too much had happened in the last week. They had been called upon too often. They could, with honor, fail to help us.

After watching the news for more than an hour, we walked out into the office corridor. The cleaning woman, an elderly Negro woman in a green shift and stretch socks, was sitting in the broom closet weeping and muttering to herself, "They're going to get him, and they're going to get everybody." We had nothing we could say to her, and, to judge by her reluctance to notice us, there was nothing she wanted to hear. When we returned to our office, Vice-President Humphrey was in the midst of dismissing predictions of violence, because, he said, no one could respond with anything but grief on this sad occasion. Even as he spoke, we could hear the wail of sirens rising through the long canyon of Sixth Avenue. Shortly afterward, we heard loud shouts and the splintering of glass. We walked onto a balcony outside our office, on the nineteenth floor, and, below, on Forty-fourth Street, saw a crowd of black youths ambling toward Times Square. One, holding a flap of his torn shirt, skipped ahead of the others and, from time to time, spun around to yell at them. We stared (we hadn't yet heard reports of trouble in New York), and said to ourselves, "Now it has happened." We shut off the television set and sat in silence. The dreamy ululation of police cars racing toward Harlem continued into the night. After a while, we called a friend. If we could not define our feelings, we could at least share them, undefined. As we talked with our friend, we discovered that although in 1963 the mystery of who assassinated President Kennedy had fascinated us, there was nothing we cared to learn about the man who shot Dr. King. We knew who he was.

John Kennedy's death came like lightning from a clear sky. Dr. King's was something that for a long time we'd been hoping wouldn't happen. We would have been alarmed if Kennedy, or any President, had prophesied his own murder, yet we have grown accustomed to such predictions from civil-rights leaders. Dr. King spoke reluc-

tantly of what he suspected would be his destiny, and most often at the prompting of journalists. Dark premonitions can easily become obsessive, as they did for Malcolm X; they never preoccupied Dr. King. Yet he was the most important example of a new kind of political leader in America—one who cannot exercise leadership without first coming to terms with the probability of his own violent death. A speech that Dr. King delivered on Wednesday evening, scarcely twenty hours before his assassination, and that the networks televised on Thursday night was notable, then, but not surprising. He spoke of having (like Moses) "been to the mountaintop" and there become reconciled.

"And then I got into Memphis, and some began to talk about the threats that were out," Dr. King said. "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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 tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land." Dr. King's prophetic speech was striking only in retrospect, perhaps because we had not been duly conscious of one of his most urgent tasks: *preparing* his apostles, and his public, for their loss of him. On Tuesday night, his flight from Atlanta to Memphis was delayed by a baggage search that airline officials said resulted from threats on his life. But, as most of us have no room in our lives for much else, so Dr. King had no room for worry about himself.

MANY of Dr. King's people had lately grown discontented with him. They saw him standing in the doorway he had opened, an old champion become an obstruction. He wished to solidify old gains, they imagined, while they wanted to push through the doorway. Some ridiculed the basis of his work because it was ethical and religious rather than strategic. They referred to him as "De Lawd" and spoke mockingly of his "meetin' body force with *soul* force." Some others derided what they took for rigid, irrelevant platitudes and florid plagiarisms. The week after we saw Dr. King in his office, he returned to Atlanta to address a convention of the National Association of Radio Announcers at the Regency Hyatt House. Nearly every sentence of his conversation with us recurred somewhere in that speech. Like the politicians who lamented his death, Dr. King often

gave the impression of having a kind of fixed inventory of responses. His speeches, with few exceptions, seemed repetitive; they drew their resonance from the occasion that prompted them. But the inventory was a necessity. It relieved him of the distracting obligation of responding freshly, uniquely, to every new situation. It was also a source of his enormous restraint, shielding him from the temptation to vent the hot and—he thought—unconsidered feelings that were aroused in him by the whites' most dramatic outrages, such as the Birmingham bombings of 1963. Dr. King did not have to change his responses, because, from the Montgomery boycott of 1956 to the Detroit riots, the problems remained the same: hatred and fear—what he called, perhaps too abstractly, "sin." The problems were not peculiar to the White Citizens Councils or the Ku Klux Klan, he said in a famous letter from the Birmingham prison; they also afflicted "the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice." The continuing irony of Dr. King's life was that although his simplicity sprang from the very depth at which he confronted the problems, it alienated him from many of his brothers, black and white.

The broad "coalition of conscience" with which Dr. King hoped to work was too broad, in the end, to satisfy those blacks who rejected the goal of "working into" a white society they considered malignant. A coalition that included the churches, the unions, the N.A.A.C.P., and the Liberal Democrats might effect gradual reforms, they conceded, but they, or many of them, had grown indifferent to any kind of "progress" short of radical social upheaval. Reforms did not come thick and fast enough to hold black leadership in line behind him. During the summer of 1964—which culminated, at the Democratic National Convention, in the Atlantic City compromise over the Mississippi Freedom Democrats—it became clear that the movement that Martin Luther King had fostered and unified was now polycentric. Yet large numbers of even the most militant Negroes continued to revere Dr. King. People knew that he could not be bought. Even if they themselves saw a different reality, they knew that he was true to his own vision. They knew that his caution was also tranquillity, that his arrogance came from deep within him, and that its source was the source of



his humility as well. In a struggle in which hatred is often met with hatred, they knew he was genuine in loving the human being, however he deplored the deed. To the last, Dr. King assumed that when the legal and extra-legal barriers to communication between races were hewn down, people would begin to see their brotherhood beneath the skin and begin to know "the majestic heights of being obedient to the unenforceable." In recent years, many blacks came to lose faith in this theory altogether. Others simply grew impatient waiting for it to come true in their own lives. But even Stokely Carmichael, who on the night of the assassination urged "retaliation by the black community," in the kind of rhetoric that Dr. King most deplored, called him the only member of the older generation whom young blacks still heard.

When Dr. King was scheduled to take part in a conference or a rally, black people of every persuasion knew it would be honest. They knew he wouldn't try to trick them. White people believed in his honesty, too. He never "told it like it is," the way Malcolm X and, later, Stokely Carmichael did—he was perhaps the most courteous revolutionary who has ever lived—but neither did he misrepresent situations by telling audiences what they wanted to hear. Radicals sometimes tried, without success, to lump Dr. King with the placators among his colleagues. A refined civility ran through him to the core; he didn't need to dissemble, to conceal hatreds, for none smoldered within him—except the hatred of evil. This is why Dr. King never frightened whites; however radical his remarks may have seemed ideologically, they were never venomous. It was a failure that cost him admiration within his own flock, perhaps, but never among those who understood that he confronted problems head on, in their total enormity, without wasting an ounce of energy on blame or vengeance. Whites could listen to him because he managed to attack evil without attacking *them*—because he always made evil seem something they could separate themselves from and join with him against.

Dr. King was a radical in the truest sense: he insisted at the same time upon the terrible reality of our problems and upon their solubility, and he rejected everything that was irrelevant to their solution. Could his death be a radicalizing event, in this same sense, for both races? Perhaps no one was completely happy with him—what he finally did was always a little different from what anyone wanted him to do—but he came

closer to being a national hero for both blacks and whites than any other figure in history. Last April, when Dr. King became the first prominent American to oppose the war in Vietnam publicly, he became more than a "black leader." He made himself a leader of all men who care for peace and justice, and reluctantly estranged those of his colleagues who had focussed single-mindedly on the issue of civil rights. He served a complicated cause in a complicated time. In his life, no faction could ever fully claim him as an ally. But with his death every faction—from ghetto blacks tossing brickbats to the Administration of the United States government—loses an ally. His death is difficult for us because it deprives us of the embodiment of the cause he represented for all Americans—the more difficult because of the threat inherent in that deprivation. Incidents of arson and other violence were reported from over forty cities within twenty-four hours of his murder, and on Friday lootings occurred two blocks from the White House. Before the weekend was over, twenty-eight were dead and more than six thousand arrested across the country. But his death also forces upon us the possibility that our common need to avoid the danger of losing touch with his ideals can bring us together in a kind of desperate symbiosis. Perhaps that desperation might even draw us close enough together to see that, as one of Dr. King's annoying plagiarisms insisted, the same things make us laugh and cry and bleed.

ONE tends to forget, under the pressure of events and of the fashions of political vocabulary, that most men, black or white, are essentially non-violent, and that Dr. King was trying to marshal this non-violence—to inspire and direct it, and make it count for something in the affairs of men. He brought about a sense of a black-and-white community of decent men, and until the Mississippi march of 1966 he shakily maintained it. On the day after Dr. King's death, we went to a small, dispiriting rally for him on the Mall in Central Park. As the ideologues dwelled too long and too stridently on the irony of his murder, it began to seem that the course of events would again be determined by that diffuse community of the deranged—black and white, Right and Left and apolitical—which Dr. King, at the time of his death, was again forming a community to overcome. But by Sunday—Palm Sunday—things had changed. As marchers gathered, twenty abreast and eventually seven dense

blocks long, at 145th Street and Seventh Avenue, and as they marched—with few signs, and, for the most part, silently—black and white, arms linked, down Seventh Avenue, there was a sense that the non-violent, freed ever so slightly by the President's speech of last week from the dividing pressure of Vietnam, were returning in force to civil rights. It seemed that Dr. King's people, of both races, were assembling again from everywhere, to resume where they left off after Mississippi. They marched past cars whose headlights were on out of respect for Dr. King. They marched over the splinters of broken glass lining the streets of Harlem, past the churches, the abandoned houses, the stores, and the funeral homes. Some carried palm fronds; others wore armbands that read "Our King will never die." A group of the ultra-militant young Five Percenters took their places at the front of the march. No one questioned them. They were as quiet as the rest. The march was informal—no marshals and no leaders. Bystanders on Seventh Avenue joined at the front or the sides or the rear, or did not choose to join. It was completely reflective and completely orderly. At 110th Street, the march paused, and a siren was audible in the distance. A jet passed overhead. Little boys standing at the entrance to the Park put their feet in the line of march, as though testing the water, and then joined in. Photographers were scattered on overhanging rocks. Reporters for various radio news services spoke very quietly, in their several languages, into microphones. Children gathered around them. The march entered the Park, and walked past cyclists, past very good-natured police, past players on a baseball diamond (an integrated game) near Ninety-sixth Street. Mayor Lindsay and Governor Rockefeller joined it there, and people from all over the Park, some with dogs or balloons, began to drift toward the march, inquire what it was, and then join it. The Mall, by the time the marchers got to it, was filled with a crowd several times the size of the march itself. There were hippies, two Great Danes, and several hot-dog stands, but mainly the crowd looked citywide, very mixed. We stood on the hill in back of the Mall and watched the two crowds merge. They did so almost silently, and totally, in great waves, so there was no way of knowing, from that distance, who had marched and who had been standing on the Mall waiting, and it was hard to tell who was black and who was white.

