



*Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,
an American Slave*
(1849)

Henry Bibb was born into slavery in Kentucky. As a young adult, he escaped to Canada but then returned to the United States, intending to help his wife and daughter escape. He was recaptured and eventually enslaved to a Cherokee farmer in the Indian Territory, west of the Mississippi River. After another escape, without his family, Bibb made his way to Detroit and became an abolitionist lecturer. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, in 1850, prompted him to flee to Ontario, accompanied by his second wife, Mary Miles, who was freeborn. In Ontario, the couple founded an abolitionist newspaper that also encouraged African American emigration to Canada.

In the following selections from his autobiography, Bibb describes how, during his teenage years, he consulted practitioners of magic traditions that likely had African roots. At least three of the four practitioners he tells about were male; the gender of the fourth is unspecified.

There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call “conjuration,” tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them. The remedy is most generally some kind of bitter root; they are directed to chew it and spit towards their masters when they are angry with their slaves. At other times, they prepare certain kinds of powders to sprinkle about their masters’ dwellings. This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue at all in it. I have tried it to perfection when I was a slave at the South. I was then a young man, full of life and vigor, and was very fond of visiting our neighbors’ slaves, but had no time to visit [except] Sundays, when I could get a permit to go, or after night, when I could slip off without being seen. If it was found out, the next morning I was called up to give an account of myself for going off without permission and would very often get a flogging for it.

I got myself into a scrape at a certain time by going off in this way, and I expected to be severely punished for it. I had a strong notion of running off to escape being flogged but was advised by a friend to go to one of those conjurers, who could prevent me from being flogged. I went and informed him of the difficulty. He said if I would pay him a small sum, he would prevent my being flogged. After I had paid him, he mixed up some alum, salt, and other stuff into a powder and said I must sprinkle it about my master if he should offer to strike me; this would prevent him. He also gave me some kind of bitter root to chew and spit towards him, which would certainly prevent my being flogged. According to order, I used his remedy; and for some cause, I was let pass without being flogged that time.

I had then great faith in conjuration and witchcraft. I was led to believe that I could do almost as I pleased, without being flogged. So on the next Sabbath, my conjuration was fully tested by my going off and staying away until Monday morning without permission. When I returned home, my master declared that he would punish me for going off; but I did not believe that he could do it while I had this root and dust, and as he approached me, I commenced talking saucy to him. But he soon convinced me that there was no virtue in them. He became so enraged at me for

saucing him that he grasped a handful of switches and punished me severely, in spite of all my roots and powders.

But there was another old slave in that neighborhood who professed to understand all about conjuration, and I thought I would try his skill. He told me that the first one was only a quack, and if I would only pay him a certain amount in cash, that he would tell me how to prevent any person from striking me. After I had paid him his charge, he told me to go to the cow pen after night, and get some fresh cow manure, and mix it with red pepper and white people's hair, all to be put into a pot over the fire and scorched until it could be ground into snuff. I was then to sprinkle it about my master's bedroom [and] in his hat and boots, and it would prevent him from ever abusing me in any way. After I got it all ready prepared, the smallest pinch of it, scattered over a room, was enough to make a horse sneeze from the strength of it; but it did no good. I tried it to my satisfaction. It was my business to make fires in my master's chamber, night and morning. Whenever I could get a chance, I sprinkled a little of this dust about the linen of the bed, where they would breathe it on retiring. This was to act upon them as what is called a kind of love powder, to change their sentiments of anger to those of love towards me; but this all proved to be vain imagination. The old man had my money, and I was treated no better for it.

One night when I went in to make a fire, I availed myself of the opportunity of sprinkling a very heavy charge of this powder about my master's bed. Soon after their going to bed, they began to cough and sneeze. Being close around the house, watching and listening to know what the effect would be, I heard them ask each other what in the world it could be that made them cough and sneeze so. All the while, I was trembling with fear, expecting every moment I should be called and asked if I knew anything about it. After this, for fear they might find me out in my dangerous experiments upon them, I had to give them up for the time being. I was then convinced that running away was the most effectual way by which a slave could escape cruel punishment. [...]

But my attention was gradually turned, in a measure, from this subject by being introduced into the society of young women. This, for the time being, took my attention from running away, as waiting on the girls appeared to be perfectly congenial to my nature. I wanted to be well thought of by them and would go to great lengths to gain their affection. I had been taught by the old superstitious slaves to believe in conjuration, and it was hard for me to give up the notion, for all I had been deceived by them. One of these conjurers, for a small sum, agreed to teach me to make any girl love me that I wished. After I had paid him, he told me to get a bullfrog and take a certain bone out of the frog, dry it, and, when I got a chance, I must step up to any girl whom I wished to make love me and scratch her somewhere on her naked skin with this bone, and she would be certain to love me and would follow me in spite of herself, no matter who she might be engaged to nor who she might be walking with. So I got me a bone for a certain girl, whom I knew to be under the influence of another young man. I happened to meet her in the company of her lover one Sunday evening, walking out; so when I got a chance, I fetched her a tremendous rasp across her neck with this bone, which made her jump. But in place of making her love me, it only made her angry with me. She felt more like running after me to retaliate on me for thus abusing her than she felt like loving me.

After I found there was no virtue in the bone of a frog, I thought I would try some other way to carry out my object. I then sought another counselor among the old superstitious influential

slaves. One who professed to be a great friend of mine told me to get a lock of hair from the head of any girl and wear it in my shoes; this would cause her to love me above all other persons. As there was another girl whose affections I was anxious to gain—but could not succeed, I thought, without trying the experiment of this hair—I slipped off one night to see the girl and asked her for a lock of her hair; but she refused to give it. Believing that my success depended greatly upon this bunch of hair, I was bent on having a lock before I left that night, let it cost what it might. As it was time for me to start home in order to get any sleep that night, I grasped hold of a lock of her hair, which caused her to screech, but I never let go until I had pulled it out. This, of course, made the girl mad with me, and I accomplished nothing but gained her displeasure.

Such are the superstitious notions of the great masses of southern slaves. It is given to them by tradition and can never be erased while the doors of education are bolted and barred against them. But there is a prohibition by law of mental and religious instruction.

Source: Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Published by the author, 1849), 25-31, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044011301801>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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