



A young half cast slave girl does not fit in at her plantation. She learns to read at night school, and escapes to the north with her friend, Bucky. With the help of a mysterious bronze bottle, Esther returns to her plantation, as a conductor on the underground railroad, to save her family from danger.

The Bronze Bottle

by Linda Shields Allison

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BOOK 2

The Bronze Bottle



Linda Shields Allison

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Linda Shields Allison*

The Emerald Bottle

The Bronze Bottle

The Amethyst Bottle



Preface

The system known as the Underground Railroad began in earnest in the 1800s and continued until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Runaway slaves fleeing the southern part of the United States escaped by traveling through a series of secret routes that were neither *underground* nor a *railroad*. Those who assisted the slaves in making their way to the northern part of the United States and into Canada were: freed slaves, escaped slaves, and sympathetic white activists called abolitionists. Among the many non-blacks who gave immense assistance to the fleeing slaves were the dedicated Quakers, a religious group also known as the *Society of Friends*.

In 1853, tension between the northern and southern states made civil war appear inevitable. Two small women named Harriet played unique roles in bringing sympathetic public attention to the plight of Negro slaves and helped accelerate the course of war. Historians speculate that Harriet Ross Tubman, an escaped slave, brought over 300 slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Her indisputable bravery and the fact that Harriet never lost a single passenger made her a legend in her own time. Around the same time, Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin ~ or Life Among the Lowly*, changed many people's attitudes about black slaves by humanizing them as persons with feelings and emotions. At the height of the Civil War in 1863, Abraham Lincoln met Mrs. Stowe at the White House and referred to her as "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

Prologue ~ August 1853 – New York City

Seventeen-year-old Esther King stood at the bow of the steamship and looked at the skyline of New York City. The population of the island of Manhattan had grown to nearly 700,000 people since a disastrous fire in 1835 had all but wiped out the business district located near Wall Street. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 had elevated the importance of New York's harbor. The canal linked the Hudson River to the Great Lakes and made New York the center of trade along the east coast and across the Atlantic to Europe. In the distance, Esther could see the top of the Crystal Palace. The gleaming structure made of glass and iron had recently been erected as a showpiece to honor the nation's first World Fair, which had opened earlier that summer. Scores of visitors from near and far flocked to Manhattan to marvel at the many exhibits that demonstrated the modern advances of a young nation. The New York Knickerbockers baseball team was beginning its eighth season as an organized club. Newspapers like the *New York Post*, *New York Times* and *The Liberator* punctuated the energy of the city with headlines that told of excitement and apprehension.

Despite its problems with growing pains, Esther loved New York City. She hoped that Bucky would be waiting at the docks to drive her home to Mrs. Cody's orphanage and school in Seneca Village. The village was located to the north of lower Manhattan on a site that would later become part of Central Park. Seneca Village was Manhattan's first significant community of African American property owners.

Esther had telegraphed Bucky from Boston confirming when her steamship was due to arrive in New York. The voyage

from Prince Edward Island had been a pleasant one, and had given Esther time to reflect on the journey that lay before her. Instinctively, she reached her right hand to grasp a Bronze Bottle, encased in its leather pouch and strapped across her left shoulder and under her right arm. For the hundredth time, she gently removed the bottle from its case and cradled it in her hands. Esther smiled as she recalled the first time she had seen the bottle.

The former slave girl had successfully delivered a group of slaves to a young Irish woman who had answered her advertisement in the newspaper. Tara Maguire and her family had offered to provide employment for the liberated slaves on their farm in Prince Edward Island, Canada. While visiting with Tara and her mother Elsie in their parlor, Esther's eyes had been drawn to a beautiful Emerald Bottle resting in a china cabinet. With the eye of an artist, she asked Tara about its history. The young Irish girl had smiled knowingly and rose to take it out of the cabinet. When placed into her hands, the bottle had given Esther a deep sense of peace and an unusual feeling of inner strength. For the first time in many months Esther did not feel as burdened by the difficult task of working as a guide on the Underground Railroad. Tara had persuaded Esther to keep the bottle in her guestroom to enjoy during her two-week stay on the island. To Esther's amazement, the Emerald Bottle began to gradually change in color. The beautiful shades of greens and gold became overlaid with patches of bronze, ebony, copper, and gold. The colors of the bottle were brilliant and complex, and sparkled unlike anything she had ever seen. Over the next fourteen days, Esther shared many conversations with Tara to find out all that the Irish girl knew about the mysterious bottle.

Esther learned that Tara had received the bottle from an Irish Tinker woman named Diviña, and that the bottle had been a rich shade of sapphire blue mixed with swirls of silver the first

time her eyes had caught sight of it in Diviña's caravan. Tara had explained that the mysterious bottle was very old, and she believed that the bottle had changed colors many times as it had passed through countless hands. The changing overlay of colors signaled to the current owner that the time had come to pass the bottle into the hands of another person in need of its help. Esther had listened in amazement as Tara explained that the bottle appeared to assist each new owner along different journeys. Near the bottom edge of the bottle was an inscription in Latin written in beautiful calligraphy. Translated into English, the words formed a two-line couplet that read:

***Into thy hand I come.
Unto thy spirit as one.***

Esther ran her fingers over the raised letters and sighed. Tara had told her that she believed that the bottle embraced the spirit or energy of its owner. Esther studied the bronze pigment that seemed to form the base-coat of the bottle. Esther knew from an old blacksmith, named Riley who worked on the King Plantation, that bronze was an ancient mixture of alloys made strong by heating copper and tin to the boiling point and forging the molten liquid into lasting shapes. Esther thought about her racial background. Like bronze, she was a mixture - half white and half black African. Esther knew she was the daughter of Master Steidley King, the owner of the plantation where she had been raised. Her birth mother had been sold to another plantation shortly after she had been born. Esther thought about the fate life had cast her. As a half-caste slave girl working on the King Plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland, Esther did not exactly fit in. She learned early on, that to survive she had to become like bronze – strong in body and in spirit. Esther looked down at the Bronze Bottle again. Tiny flecks of gold and other

colors of the rainbow shimmered in the sunlight against the backdrop of ebony and bronze. The brilliant specks of light reminded Esther of the stars that sparkled so brightly at night in the moonless sky. Esther's mind slipped back in time to recall the stars, which had been so important in helping a young slave girl find her passageway to freedom so many years ago.

Chapter 1 ~ May 1846 – Maryland

Ten-year-old Esther King had been sent to the woods to collect kindling for Mammy Naira's fireplace. The ancient fireplace was where the old mammy cooked meals for Esther. Its bricks were blackened from years of constant use. Many other slaves shared the hot embers of the old hearth located inside a small cabin amid rows of identical cabins in the slave quarters on the King Plantation. The young slave girl quickly gathered a large bundle of twigs and branches. Esther knew that her mammy would not expect her back to the quarters just yet, so she rewarded herself with a few stolen moments of peaceful solitude. Life for a slave on a large plantation allowed little time to be alone. Esther slept with her mammy in a cabin that was also home to a dozen other men, women and children. Each night she fell asleep near her mammy's pallet on the ground listening to the sounds of other slaves whispering, laughing, grunting, and sometimes crying in the dark. Privacy was not part of any slave's life. A quiet moment alone was a rare gift.

Esther sat along the edge of the Big Buckwater River near the collected pile of wood drawing a fluffy cloud in the moist earth with a twig. The young half-caste slave-girl captured the sunshine of the low country on her face as the sun dipped in the western sky. Esther studied the wind casting delicate ripples across the surface of the water. The movement distorted the image of the clouds reflecting off its surface. She heard the soft rustling of leaves in the trees, and felt the coarse sticky grains of sand between the toes of her bare feet. The young slave girl sighed with happiness at the intimate beauty of the moment.

You see, Esther observed the details of life. Her unusual green and gold eyes viewed the world, with its varying shapes and dazzling prism of color and light, through an artist's imagination. When others saw a cloud as a white puff in the sky, Esther considered the fragile motion of the vapor – dense gray patches churning against creamy shades of pale pink and ashen white. To Esther, a newly fallen pine branch held the detailed texture of rough bark pocked with complex wormholes, and the sharp piney fragrance of sticky sap. An eagle soaring high above the trees, as its motionless wings imprisoned the wind, intrigued the young artist. Esther noticed the fragile veins in the petals of the pale white water lilies that floated in the marshes and coves of the tidewater country on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Nothing escaped her vision of the intricate landscape around her.

Esther looked down at her foot. A large black ant struggled to carry a torn bit of leaf across the sand. The ant reminded Esther of the master's slaves who worked on the plantation. Like ants, her people knew nothing but work as they marched in silent lines to the fields just as the morning sun rose in the eastern sky – day after day – sunrise to sunset – uninspiring, endless work.

Suddenly, Esther was pulled from her thoughts. She startled at the sound of laughter and footsteps coming up the worn path that ran alongside the river. Quickly, she crouched into a squatting position and scratched her stick into the moist earth to rub out the detailed sketch of the cloud in the sand.

“Hey, *alligator eyes*,” smirked a dark skinned slave-girl named Mandy. “Ya know ya ain't supposed to be makin' dem marks in d'ground with dat stick. Boss Shelby would love to tear at your hide with his whip if'n he was to catch ya.” Mandy and three other slave girls circled Esther. They stood with their legs apart and their arms akimbo. “Look at her, gals. She be

creepin' in d'mud just like an old gator!" taunted Mandy as she cruelly shoved Esther onto her backside with the push of her foot.

Esther quickly scrambled to her feet. She tried to dart away, but a large pocked-faced girl named Bertha grabbed Esther's hair and pulled her back into the circle of hecklers. Esther's heart pounded in her chest, and her mouth felt as dry as the ashes in Mammy Naira's fireplace. She willed herself not to look frightened, but she couldn't stop her body from shaking. Esther had reason to be scared. These girls had tormented her before.

"Look at dis gal's hair," teased Bertha. She grabbed a fistful of Esther's light brown hair streaked with golden strands from the sun. "It look all pale and limp like de corn-silk on d'cob of corn I shucked for my daddy's dinner last night." All four girls laughed, and another slave, named Rowena, reached in and cuffed Esther on the side of her head.

"What did y'all make for yo' daddy's dinner last night, *leather face*?" taunted Mandy. "Oh, dat's right. I plum forgot dat y'all ain't got no daddy. Least no daddy dat claims ya as his-own blood. All you got is an ol' barren mammy who ain't even yo' real birth mammy," Mandy added in a mean-spirited tone. The girls laughed again as Bertha pushed Esther closer to the river's edge.

Esther looked around helplessly at her tormentors and saw no way of escape. She knew that Mandy washed clothes for the King family up at the Big House. She was several years older than Esther and wielded power over the three other girls who worked in the fields.

"I believe dem yeller-green alligator eyes makes y'all look like a slimy ol' reptile," smirked Mandy. "Best y'all go for a swim *gator eyes*." Mandy nodded at Bertha, and the heavy-set girl grabbed the back of Esther's neck and shoved her down the

muddy slope of the riverbank. Esther tumbled forward and landed face down in the churned up water and dirt. Laughter erupted from the four older slave girls as they saw Esther struggle to crawl up the slippery bank of the Big Buckwater.

“You gals best be gettin’ on ‘bout your business,” barked a deep voice coming from the direction of some underbrush. An elderly slave by the name of Old Jed stepped onto the path and stood looking at the muddy Esther. Four rabbits and two squirrels all tied together lay draped over his shoulder.

Old Jed was considered too frail to work in the fields, so he spent his days trapping small animals in the woods to provide extra food for the slaves in the quarters. The overseer of the King Plantation was clever enough to understand that the extra meat kept the Master’s slaves strong and healthy to work the fields. The quiet elderly man caused the overseer no trouble, so he pretty much left the ancient trapper to his own business.

Mandy opened her mouth to say something to Old Jed, but instead, she snorted in disgust and jerking her head motioned to the others. Mandy strutted up the path with the three friends trailing behind and laughed defiantly. But in truth, Mandy did not want her friends to know that she was somewhat afraid of the curious old slave who had only recently come to Master King's plantation. The peculiar trapper, who stayed mostly to himself, was unlike the other slaves in the quarters. Mandy thought he talked and acted different, like maybe he thought he was better than her. His interference in their fun mocking Esther annoyed her. Mandy mumbled something amusing to her friends and laughed a bit too loud as she strolled up the path. She felt if the other girls sensed that she was frightened by the old man, she knew it might lessen her position as leader of their group.

Esther stayed crouched on the muddy bank until the muffled laughter faded in the distance. Old Jed peered down pensively at

Esther and held the green-eyed slave-girl in his gaze. In turn, Esther stared up at Jed's dark ebony skin, which glowed like the color of Mammy's ancient cast iron pan. She saw almost black eyes, a straight broad nose, and snow-white crinkly hair. Esther studied the deep creases in the man's face, and thought the lines gave wisdom to the lean old trapper who had clearly lived a long time. He was medium in build, but as he stretched out his hand to pull her up the bank, Esther thought he moved gracefully with nimble muscles despite his advanced age.

"You best come with me, child," he said kindly. "I'll take you home to your mammy."

Wiping the soggy strands of hair from her eyes, Esther nodded and grabbed her bundle of firewood. She took off after Old Jed whose long strides had already carried him several yards up the path that led to the slave quarters.



Old Jed delivered Esther to the door of her mammy's cabin, a kindly woman known as Naira to the slaves in the quarters and Nancy to the white folks up at the Big House. Naira looked at Esther and frowned. Mud was splattered on Esther's arms, across her face, and in her damp matted hair. The mammy then crossed her large arms over an ample chest, which blended into a sizeable stomach and clucked her tongue as though she were calling chickens to feed. Naira shook her head and stared at her daughter through kindly dark eyes.

"Esther, what happened to ya, child?"

Esther looked at Old Jed and then at her mammy. "I slipped and fell into the muddy shore of the Big Buckwater. Old Jed came along and...well, he helped me out."

Naira looked down at Esther and shook her head again. “Y’all must be more careful, Esther. Ya don’t know how to swim, child. D’spring runoff from de rains can cause dem swift waters of Big Buckwater to suck you downstream like dishwater down a drain. Now ya best git inside and clean yo’self up for dinner.”

Esther looked at the old trapper and mumbled, “Thanks for what ya done for me.”

Old Jed looked as though he wanted to say something to Esther, but he only nodded and watched the young girl scurry inside the cabin. “Naira, I had particular good luck in the forest today. Take this here rabbit and add it to your pot,” said Old Jed as he untied the fattest hare from his catch.

“Why Jed, dat be mighty kind of ya. Dere ain’t nothin’ like a plump ol’ rabbit to flavor-up a pot of stew. Why don’t ya stop back later and join us for a bite to eat?” Naira asked hopefully. The mammy, a widow for seven years come Christmas, was secretly fond of the old trapper who had arrived at the King Plantation last summer, and she had been looking for an excuse to ask him around to dinner.

“I’d like that, Naira,” said Old Jed warmly. He tipped his ragged felt hat and strolled away from the cabin.



Later that night, after a relaxing dinner of rabbit stew with rice and collard greens in the company of Old Jed, Esther cuddled with her mammy under Naira’s colorful handmade quilt. Together, they whispered softly on their pallets in the dark, while watching tiny red embers flicker in the fireplace and listening to the familiar sounds of the other slaves in the cabin.

“Tell me the news from the Big House Mammy. Did ya have a good day?”

Mammy Naira sighed. “Cookin’ for dat family sure do wear me out, child. But that weren’t nothin’ compared to what went on for Ivy in the Big House.”

“Tell me, Mammy!”

“Mistress King was in a powerful bad temper today. I heard it whispered from de servers dat Ivy dropped Miz Wendy’s favorite crystal punch bowl while she was cleaning it, and dat bowl shattered on de floor lookin’ like de tiny chips of ice dat float in de Master’s Bourbon. Dey said dat de Master’s wife thrashed dat young girl with de handle of a broom until Miz Wendy got so tired dat de rage finally left her body. But, child, de slaves dat witnessed de beatin’, said de rage never left dat woman’s face.”

“What will happen to Ivy, Mammy?” asked Esther with a shudder.

“Miz Wendy done told dat poor gal dat she would be sold South, cuz every time she be lookin’ at Ivy, she’d be thinkin’ of her favorite crystal bowl smashed to pieces on her floor. Den, she sent Ivy to Boss Shelby to work in de fields.”

“But, Mammy, Ivy is married to Benjamin and they have four small children,” whispered Esther in a worried tone of voice.

“Dat never stopped Miz Wendy before, child. When she be gettin’ somethin’ in her mind, she be like a vulture waitin’ for a meal, and dere ain’t nothin’ gonna sway her.”

Esther shuddered. She knew that the Master’s wife, a pale pinched-faced woman, had sold Esther’s birth mother to the Deep South two months after Esther had been born. Esther was scared to shivers when she thought of Wendalyn King. She recalled the many times Mistress King had given her a hard stare with eyes that bore into her like the crazed muskrat she

had once found with its paw clamped in a metal trap near the Big Buckwater.

But as terrified as Esther was of the Master's wife, she loved to cuddle with Mammy Naira on their pallet at night and listen to the story of how Naira came to be her mammy. Each time, Naira softly retold Esther's story with the emotion of a narrator from an ancient Greek tragedy.

"I know your tired, Mammy, but would ya tell me the story of how you came to be my Mammy?"

Mammy Naira sighed with pleasure and began the tale. "Master King had been sorely dejected to learn dat his favorite slave, Janet, had been secretly sold south by de jealous wife, Miz Wendalyn King. Many of de slaves took notice dat de Master seemed to wander 'bout his plantation as sad as a dreary winter day for many months after she departed. De graceful fair-skinned Janet, had begged de Master's wife to let her take her baby Esther with her south," Naira's voice always softened to a whisper at this point in the story. "But de mean-spirited wife turned a deaf ear to her slave's courageous plea for mercy. And de baby Esther was given to de barren slave, known as Nancy to de white folk up at de Big House, to raise as her own precious child on dat very day dat de beautiful Janet was dragged away from de plantation in chains."

Naira slowed her pattern of speech at this point in the tale for an added touch of drama. "Now, de barren kitchen slave, known as Naira in de quarters, and Nancy at de Big House had pleaded with Miz Wendy dat she might mother d'child because she had never been blessed by de Lord with children of her own. Miz Wendy snarled dat it mattered naught to her who raised de brat, as long as de task did not interfere with Nancy's chores in de kitchen. So de barren slave, Naira, found a wet nurse for baby Esther and proudly raised de cherished child as her own."

Esther loved Naira's story of her mother, and never tired of hearing it told.

"Would ya tell me what my birth mammy look like again, Mammy Naira?" whispered Esther.

"She was small-boned with warm brown skin de color of pecans, and her face looked a lot like yours, child. She was very beautiful, 'cept dat her eyes were light brown and her hair was darker and curlier."

Naira yawned, "We best git some sleep, Esther, cuz dat rooster be crowin' afore long, and we don't want to give Miz Wendy any excuse to use her switch on us tomorrow."

"Goodnight Mammy. I love you," whispered Esther as she snuggled closer to the only mother she had ever known.



As loved as Esther was by Naira, life was not easy for the half-caste slave girl. She looked different from most of the other children in the slave quarters. They had dark hair that crinkled into tight curls, whereas Esther's hair was golden brown, and her curls fell in soft waves around her face. Some of the children in the quarters teased her, and called her *alligator eyes*, because Esther's eyes were green with tiny flecks of gold that sparkled like dew drops on dried hay. Her skin was the soft tan color of the Master's saddle and some children sniggered and nicknamed her *leather face*. Esther was not tall, but she stood erect and was gracefully proportioned. She endured the taunts of her tormentors with a silent look that held no judgment in the alligator green eyes. Esther might have held herself in low esteem had it not been for Naira, but the mammy so often assured Esther that she was special, that the praise took root in

her heart like the ivy vines that plastered themselves to the tall white columns that surrounded the Big House.



Earlier that spring, Naira had presented Esther with her first bandanna and took her to work with her in the kitchen quarters. The bright red and yellow headscarf and the new work-dress made Esther feel very grown up and far removed from the younger children who ran around the quarters barefoot in one-piece tow-linen shifts. The shapeless white garments were made from the cheapest cotton fabric.

As Esther and Naira walked up the dirt path to the kitchen near the Big House, the excited young slave girl chattered, “Mammy, I think red and yellow are my favorite colors. Thank ya for my bandanna. I’ll work hard and make Master King and y’all proud of me.”

Naira’s breath had caught in her throat. She stopped to look down at the young girl standing by her side. Esther grabbed Naira’s waist and buried her head in her mammy’s ample belly. Naira lifted Esther’s face between her hands and looked down at her daughter. “Yes child, I do believe dat dis scarf be makin’ yo’ eyes look mighty pretty.”

Slowly, Esther dropped her chin on her chest and mumbled, “I don’t like my eyes, Mammy. They’re...colored odd and not like the others...”

Naira raised Esther’s face upward. “Esther, now look here and listen to your ol’ mammy. I hear what dose other children be sayin’. I know dey be callin’ you *alligator eyes* and other such names, but child, yo’ green eyes are special. Esther, your birth mammy was beautiful, and so are you. Be proud of who

you are and where you came from. Don't be tryin' to look and act like everybody else on dis ol' plantation. De Lord made ya just de way *He* wanted ya to look," pronounced Naira as she bent over closer to her daughter, "and de Lord don't make garbage."

Esther looked up at her mammy and smiled. Naira always knew just what to say to make Esther feel cherished. Esther let out a deep sigh. "I love you, Mammy."

"I know dat you do. Now, we best get to work, child. Don't want us to be late on yo' first day. And we don't want to be givin' Miz Wendy any reason to lash out at ya, Esther. Remember what I done said last night? Keep yo'self busy at all times, and keep yo' eyes cast to de ground when she be nearby." Esther nodded her head somberly and clutched her mammy's hand as they walked to the cookhouse.



As with most plantation houses in the south, the cookhouse had been built twenty yards away from the Big House. The constant threat of fire and the stifling humidity of the eternally hot summers made the kitchen arrangement more practical. Three times each day, food was brought in large trays to the dining room to feed Steidley and Wendalyn King, their five children, and the many guests who visited their plantation. Like Esther, the servers who carried the trays to the household staff were trained to whistle in a loud nonstop flow as they walked the twenty yards from the kitchen through an arbor of honeysuckle vines to the French doors that led into the dining area. In this way, the white folks could be assured that the slaves would not taint their food by sneaking a bite from a

platter that would soon be put before them to eat. Esther was never allowed inside. A house slave stood waiting at the French doors to relieve her of her burden. Sometimes she would steal a peek inside.

Once she saw the slave girl, known as Pixie, standing silently in the far corner of the room. Beads of sweat trickled from beneath Pixie's headscarf as she gently tugged on a long cord. The action motivated ostrich feathers to gently sway across the table to fan the heavy humid air and scatter fervent flies. Pixie stared past Esther toward the arbor with a vacant look in her eyes, and for the first time in her young life, Esther had been glad that she was never permitted to enter the Big House.

Esther was certain that Master King knew that she was his daughter. Although he never spoke to her personally, and at times seemed to go out of his way to avoid her, she sometimes noticed him staring at her from a distance when she went about her chores – pulling onions in the garden located behind the cookhouse or fetching buckets of water from the well. Esther thought that she detected a sad look in his eyes, like he was perhaps remembering the past. Once, she smiled at him. He had started to smile back, but the muscles in his face suddenly twitched causing his mouth to set into a stiff frozen stain. Steidley King had held Esther in this granite stare for several seconds before he jerked his head away, turned on his heel, and quickly walked away.

Chapter 2 ~ Summer 1847 – King Plantation

During Esther's eleventh summer on the King Plantation, she boarded wagons with many other men, women, and children and was sent to work miles away in the woods. Only the most trusted slaves were allowed to cut lumber in the forest. The slaves who were chosen to chop trees for the Master considered it an honor to work unchained under the cool canopy of tall trees, and not have to labor in the hot fields with their bare backs glistening with sweat under the burning summer sun.

All that summer, Esther cut branches off large oak and pine trees that had been felled with axes by broad-shouldered slaves who cut the timber so that it could be shipped to the Master's lumberyard in Baltimore. Esther enjoyed the work and became friendly with a tall fourteen-year old boy with soft brown eyes, large white teeth, and a faded scar on his left cheek. His name was Bucky.



Bucky's father, a tall intelligent slave with a reputation for *catchin' on quick*, had been sent to work at the Master's lumberyard when the boy was four-years-old. Young Bucky spent much of his youth with an ache in his heart looking down the oak-lined road that led to the entrance of the King Plantation hoping to see his father walk up the path. Sadly, Bucky never saw his father again. The young boy clung to his mother each

night when she returned to the quarters from scrubbing clothes for the King family up at the Big House.

He became heartbroken when she died from cholera a few years later, but he had no time to mourn. At seven-years-old, the young slave was in charge of his own destiny. The mammies in the quarters looked out after him, but Bucky was just one of many slave-children who had been orphaned by a parent. A displaced family was a common occurrence in the slavery system of the South. The boy quickly learned to wrangle for a spot at the large trough of cornmeal mush set out each evening for the stray children so he wouldn't starve. Bucky worked alongside other young slave children on the plantation. He pulled weeds and killed the aphids in the rose garden near the Big House. He knew that only the slaves who worked were entitled to receive a portion of the monthly food delivered to the slave quarters on *issue day*.

The quiet young boy was exceptionally bright. Bucky had a lot of time to think, as he toiled at meaningless jobs, and he pondered the mysteries of life. He wondered why the moon changed its shape each month. He studied the efficient flight of a hawk as it bore down on a young duck floating on the Master's pond to grab the fowl in its claws with one swooping movement. The graceful action reminded Bucky of the slaves who sang and danced with elegant dipping motions around the large mountain of corn husks that were shucked by the slaves each year in the fall. Corn shucking time was a joyous event for Bucky and the other slaves on the King Plantation. Next to Christmas, when the master's slaves were given new clothes and shoes for the year on *issue day*, it was his favorite event.

The curious young boy was fascinated by the idea of printed words, and the way the master's children would hide their noses in books for hours – reading on the porch or in the hammock,

which was attached to a giant oak tree that grew on the lawn in front of the Big House.

Once, as Bucky squatted over the grass uprooting dandelions in front of the Big House, he noticed an abandoned book lying on the lawn near the hammock. Cautiously, he lifted his head and looked around, but he could see no one nearby. The twelve-year-old boy slowly inched closer to the object, weeding as he crawled, until the book was close enough to touch. Bucky stared in awe at the forbidden object – too scared to pick it up. A picture of a white man in tattered clothing was etched on the front of the brown leather cover. The setting seemed to be a tropical island, like the ones slaves described from their voyages over on slave ships. The image showed a beach with tall mop-shaped trees in the background. The man, in torn clothes, was signaling to a black man who wore a bone in his nose and a necklace made out of shells. There were other strange markings on the cover, which the boy knew to be letters. Bucky had often seen similar symbols on the sides of wooden crates or on signs planted alongside the roads, and he recognized that he was looking at words. Lost in the dream-world of words, Bucky's heart raced with yearning as he sat crouched on his haunches staring at the illicit item in wonder.

All of a sudden, the snap of a riding crop struck him full force across his left cheek, and Bucky fell flat onto the grass. At first, the stunned boy felt nothing, but then a sharp stinging pain, almost like the crack of thunder which crashes a few seconds after a flash of lightning, smacked him full force. Acting on impulse, Bucky smothered the stinging wound with his hands as he stared up into the face of Wendalyn King standing over him. The hand, which held the menacing riding-crop trembled against her hip. The other hand gripped the reins of a small gray mare. Despite his pain, Bucky noticed that she

wore a dark brown-velvet riding outfit and a matching brown hat with a pheasant feather sewn into the side.

Mrs. King looked down at Bucky and sneered at him through thin clinched lips, "I swear, boy, I do believe that you were about to lay your filthy black hands on my son's book. Were you thinking of fouling that book with those black dirty hands, boy?" the angry woman questioned with scorn. Bucky saw her thin lower lip quiver with rage.

Bucky slowly rose to a kneeling position with his heels resting against his bottom. He lowered his head to the grass. "No Ma'am. I was just looking at the picture."

"Look at me, you stupid monkey!"

Bucky fearfully looked up at Mrs. King and observed that her small squinty eyes perfectly matched the dark brown color of her dress. Tears welled in the rim of his eyes as the frightened boy stared up at the mistress of the plantation with both terror and shame.

The Master's wife stood over Bucky for a few moments and not a hint of compassion embraced her soul. Her eyes fixed upon him with a brooding stare. When she spoke again, she measured her words slowly as though she were speaking to someone mentally impaired. "Boy, it is a crime in Maryland for slaves to learn to read. Do you want to go to prison?"

"No, Ma'am."

"It's the law! Books are forbidden to slaves, so you had better get back to work, and stay away from things that will only get you into trouble. Consider this lesson as my favor to you, boy. It will remind you to keep your rightful place amongst the more cultured people in the South. Now with that said, you may attend to the task of pulling dandelions from my lawn."

Bucky felt that he was expected to say something to Mrs. King. So, he lowered his head and watched in fascination as two

large beads of blood fell onto a blade of grass. "Yes'um," he mumbled.

Bucky stayed bent in that position picking weeds until he heard Mrs. King stoop to pick up the book, mount her horse, and ride away. "I want my mammy," he cried.

From that day forward, a small straight scar about two inches long cut a diagonal line across Bucky's left cheek. The incident with Mrs. King taught Bucky to be more cautious, but it did not squelch his spirit.



To nourish his desire to learn, Bucky liked to squat unnoticed behind the woodpile and listen to broad-backed slaves swap stories around the campfire about the personal or legendary tales of slaves on other plantations.

Once he recognized the rich baritone voice of a slave called Tucker talking to the circle of men. "I heard tell 'bout a young slave over near Bucktown who had a powerful yearnin' to run away from his master. First time dat boy got caught, d'overseer cut off his two smallest toes. When he got a notion to run off again, De master's dogs tracked him to d'swamp and tore into him until most of his clothes and skin were in tatters. Slave-catcher's dragged dat poor bleedin' boy back to d'quarters and chopped *all* de toes on his left foot. Now, dat slave don't be goin' nowhere after dat. He be spendin' his days on his knees pullin' weeds in the master's cornfield."

"Why didn't de master just sell dat boy south?" asked someone sitting around the circle of men.

"D'master be wantin' to make an example of dat boy so no other slave be gittin' an idea to be makin' tracks north."



From the stories told in the quarters, Bucky came to know the name of the free Negro known as Denmark Versey who bought his freedom from his master when he was thirty-three, then set out to preach the virtues of freedom for all slaves.

Bucky listened to the men discuss the story of Nat Turner in guarded whispers inside the cabins. A blacksmith named Riley, who used to live on a plantation in Virginia, loved to tell the tale of Nat Turner whenever anyone would listen.

“Now, old Nat Turner was a slave out Virginia-way who claimed to be called-on by the Lord to become a preacher-man. Some folks even called him a prophet. He said dat his mammy told him as a youngin’ dat he would lead slaves, just like Moses done led de Israelites out of Egypt. Each night, his mammy recited chapters from d’Bible, and he memorized her words, ‘specially dose passages from d’Old Testament. Old Nat grew up believin’ that he was born to do somethin’ special.”

Bucky held his breath as he listened in the dark.

“One day, Old Nat decided he weren’t gonna be a slave no more. So Nat Turner ran off to live in some caves where he claimed to have visions from d’Lord. He gathered a cluster of other runaway slaves around him to listen while he preached. He got it in his head to do something, and Nat Turner and six of his followers set out on a mission to kill white folks. He said God told him to deliver his people from bondage by slaying all white people. Soon, other slaves joined Nat and his band of six, until their numbers swelled to nearly seventy. Before Nat and his followers were finally caught and hanged, I heard tell he had killed sixty white men, women and children within a circle of twenty miles.”

Bucky shuddered. He wanted his freedom as much as any slave, but fretted about what Nat Turner did in Virginia. He wondered – *Should unsuspecting people die so that others might be free?* Bucky reasoned that there must be a better way.



Being chosen to work in the forest all summer pleased the fourteen-year-old boy, and he enjoyed getting to know Naira's daughter, Esther, as they trimmed branches off the big logs felled by large-muscled men. One night Bucky woke Esther while she slept under the stars near a makeshift camp and silently motioned her to follow him into the woods. They walked without speaking for twenty minutes until they came to a clearing where Esther saw Old Jed sitting by a small campfire warming his hands. The trapper had been sent to the forest that summer to catch small game like muskrat, squirrel, and rabbit during the day so that the women could turn the rabbit and squirrel into a red bean and rice stew to feed the hungry slaves chopping logs for the master.

"Sit and warm yourself by the fire, Esther," instructed Jed in a serious but gentle tone of voice. With a quiet reverence, Esther sat on a log. "Listen to my words, child, but do not speak. When you have heard all that I have to say, you may stay, or you may walk back to the camp and never utter a word of what has been spoken around this fire to anyone. Do you understand?"

The flecks of gold in Esther's green eyes sparkled as they reflected off the flames in the fire, and slowly she nodded her head.

“I have watched you work. You tend to your job with a steady pace, and stay mostly to yourself. I can see that your character is strong. Naira has done well in raisin’ you as her own child. Bucky tells me that you have a gift for drawin’ critters in the dirt. That is a wonderful and useful gift from the Lord.” Old Jed paused and looked closely into Esther’s eyes. “I have begun to teach Bucky his letters so that he may one day learn to read, and I am willin’ to teach *you* as well. What we do here at Night School in secret is dangerous and forbidden to all slaves. If you would care to stay and learn with Bucky, sit where you are. If you are scared, you may leave now and return to your pallet and allow this night to fade into your memory like a distant dream. There is no shame in the choice you make. Old Jed waited and looked at the green eyes of the girl thoughtfully wrinkling her brows. After a measure of time he said, “Good, Esther. We will begin with the letter A.”



Throughout the summer, Bucky and Esther met in secret with Old Jed at night to learn to read, but he taught them other things besides their letters. The old man convinced the field boss that Esther and Bucky would be useful in helping him hunt for food to keep the workers strong, so part of their day was spent alone with Old Jed setting and retrieving traps in the forest.

There gradually came to Esther a wild and free spirit because of Old Jed. The old trapper showed Bucky and Esther where to look for that one special star, known as the North Star, which stayed fixed in the sky when all the other stars appeared to rise in the east and set in the west. Old Jed pointed out how a

person could tell which way was north when clouds obscured the stars in the sky. “Feel the moss on the bark with your hands,” he instructed. “Moss always grows thicker on the north side of the tree trunk. This knowledge could be useful to you on a rainy night.” He showed his students how the thickness in the coat of a muskrat or squirrel signaled the coming of winter. He taught them how to set traps along the edge of the river to catch the brown muskrat that lived in burrows near its shore. The fur of the river rodent could fetch a little money or could be traded for useful supplies for a slave. Old Jed showed them which berries and roots were good for eating and those that would make them sick. He pointed out the leaves, roots, and bark that could heal a scratch or calm a stomach disorder. Old Jed taught his pupils how to trek through the underbrush like a cat without rustling a leaf or breaking a twig. He trained Esther and Bucky to listen to the sounds of the forest. “A flock of birds startled into flight might signal the approach of a wildcat, or a bear...or a pack of men.” He showed them how to calm a dog with a bit of dried meat. The trapper told them many wondrous things about the world beyond their reach. “The waters from the rivers and creeks of the Eastern Shore run southwest all the way to a large bay called the Chesapeake with water so salty you can taste it by dipping your finger into its shore.”

“Why are you teachin’ us these things?” asked Bucky one day.

Old Jed looked at Bucky and Esther through his almost black eyes, which shaded the depth of wisdom buried beneath them. “You may one day find that you no longer want to be owned by another man. Readin’ the signs of the roads and readin’ the signs of the forest might come to be useful in makin’ your way north where slaves are free.”

“Why don’t you go north, Old Jed?” asked Esther.

“Been north.”

“Why did ya come back?” she asked with surprise.

“When I lived in the north, I learned to read and had many other wonderful experiences. I was mighty content. Then, one night I had a dream. An egret with large white wings spread about its head told me that it was my destiny to fly south to give others the gifts I learned up north – so they might know how it feels to be free. So, I traveled back to the low country of tides and marshes and got myself caught by some bad-tempered slave-catchers who sold me to this plantation for not much cash because I was so old.” Old Jed chuckled softly as if remembering some private joke.

Bucky and Esther looked at each other. Clearly, there was a lot to consider, but Esther couldn’t imagine a life away from her mammy.



All summer long the cicadas hummed while eager dragonflies flickered far above the ground amid the trees, and lazy clouds rolled gently across the sky. The days and weeks pressed forward until the last logs were finally loaded on creaking wagons and bound with heavy rope. All the way back to the slave quarters, the workers sang as they wearily marched behind the weighted wagons, which cut deep wheel ruts in the road.

Esther hugged her mammy with joy. “You’ve changed over de summer, Esther. Let me look at ya. I swear, child, I do believe you have grown like a weed in a cabbage patch. I sorely hate to admit it, but my little girl be growin’ up.”

Chapter 3 ~ April 1848 – The King Plantation

Esther could not remember exactly when, but it seemed from a very early age, that she discovered she had a talent for drawing. Because slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write, any tools for such purposes were banned to slaves. Esther had to feed her intense desire to draw in creative ways. Usually, that meant scratching in the dirt with a stick that had been rubbed hard against a rock until a sharp point formed the needed tool for the task. She found that her best drawing surface appeared after a gentle rain had saturated the earth. Then, the texture of the ground was perfect for creating a butterfly in flight or bringing the image of a water lily to life in the moist soil. Sometimes she would sneak a half charred twig from Mammy Naira's fireplace to sketch the form of a bird on the soft underside of a chunk of bark, or a firefly on one of the smooth flat stones that rested near the river.

On many occasions, while squatting on her haunches scratching a stick in the dirt, Esther had experienced the sting of a slap to her head, or the blow of a kick leveled into her backside by one of the adult slaves or a field foreman.

Naira would wag her finger and warn, "Child, what ya's doing will only lead to misery and heartache."

"I know, Mammy. I've learned my lesson." Esther would cease for a few days, until the powerful desire to draw overtook her pledge to stop. Common sense would yield to her yearning to sketch, and she would resume the act again with furtive caution.

When Esther turned twelve, a scrawny field foreman with buckteeth and crossed eyes, named Jasper, caught her behind

one of the tool sheds. She had been drawing a spider with a fly in its web on an old plank of wood using a thin shard of charcoal she had pulled from the edge of a cold pit-fire that morning. Jasper dragged Esther by the roots of her hair to the overseer, a pitiless person known to the slaves as Boss Shelby, who was sucking on a blade of straw as he watched a dozen slaves stack bails of barley onto flatbed wagons.

Shelby Moss was a large-bellied man with yellowish-brown teeth stained from the mushy wad of tobacco that seemed to always rest inside his left cheek. The ill-tempered taskmaster had worked on the King Plantation as overseer for two years, and he insisted that all the slaves address him as Boss Shelby. Esther, however, had secretly imagined that it would be a lot more interesting to use his last name as part of the demanded title. Then he could be known in the slave quarters as Boss Moss.

The bored overseer swatted a large green horsefly, which was biting into the soft fleshy underside of his chin and looked at the scared half-caste slave who had been dragged before him. He stared at the mulatto girl with disdain. Shelby did not like the fact that some white man had obviously *jumped over the fence* with a black slave-woman to produce the abomination that stood before him. Shelby Moss considered such relationships evil and a sin against maintaining the purity of the white race.

Boss Shelby hawked a jellied glob of brown spit onto Esther's right foot. "What be yer name, gal?"

Esther looked up at the overseer and stared wide-eyed as a slow stream of brown spit oozed down the side of his mouth; painting his lip into a crooked frown. Her throat suddenly felt as though she had swallowed a lump of dried clay. Gulping, she barely choked out, "Esther."

“Jasper, why have you brought this lazy picaninny before me whilst I be busy directing this vital operation?” Shelby asked while picking his nose.

Esther saw one of the slaves, known as Sam, tilt his head toward the overseer and softly grunt, then quickly lower his eyes to pick up a bail of barley from the dirt.

“I caught this gal here using writin’ tools in secret, behind the shed,” announced Jasper. Then, he proudly produced the charcoal drawing of the spider web from behind his back, and beamed as though he was presenting an apple to his teacher.

Esther looked at the realistic illustration she had created on the wooden board with some pride, until it abruptly occurred to her that she was about to become a fly in the trap of the human spider, Boss Shelby Moss. She had witnessed the overseer’s wrath on many occasions, and shuddered with the crushing thought that she was about to become his next prey.

Shelby bent over until he was four inches from Esther’s face. An acrid stench from sour whiskey and wet tobacco hammered Esther, but she willed herself not to pull away in disgust. “Looks like this worthless excuse of a maggot needs a lesson as to where her rightful place might be in this here world!”

Esther, like every other slave on the plantation, knew that the “lesson” was a whipping – carried out by Boss Shelby in front of all the slaves in the quarters as a reminder of what might happen to any one of them if they did not conform to the overseer’s rules for all slaves on the King Plantation. The truth was, Shelby Moss enjoyed using his whip. It excited him and provided a sick form of amusing entertainment from the monotony of his job. “Jasper, remove this abomination from my sight! barked the overseer.

“Yes, boss.”



One hour after the work bell signaled that it was time to quit for the day, every slave on the plantation was called to watch as Boss Shelby made an example of Esther. Naira could hardly contain her anguish. Large tears trickled down her cheeks like rain on a windowpane, and she had to be supported by Old Jed and another woman who stood next to her.

A somber slave bound Esther's hands together with rough hemp. The rope was then pulled through a large metal hook located high on a sturdy whipping pole. Esther wore a coarse tow-linen garment that hung loosely around her body. The slave mumbled something under his breath as he tore the garment from her neck to expose her tender young back. Out of the corner of her eye, Esther was mortified to see Bucky standing off to the side by himself. The skin on his face seemed to have faded to the color of the gray slate that covered the roof on the Big House.

Boss Shelby cracked his large black whip over his head releasing a snapping sound that vibrated menacingly through the air. Smirking broadly, he faced the slaves in the quarter like a preacher addressing his congregation. "We have before us an uppity half-breed who has broke a rule. This good-for-nothing piece of slime seems to have forgot her place in life. She thinks that it be her station in life to be an artist or some other such nonsense."

The overseer placed the whip under his armpit and spit out a glob of tobacco near Esther's feet. He slowly grabbed a small pouch from his shirt-pocket, pulled out a pinch of tobacco, and stuffed the brown shreds into the left side of his mouth. Clearly, Shelby Moss was enjoying the moment before his captive

audience. He wanted to build a measure of drama to the occasion, and took pleasure in making the slaves squirm. “It be the responsibility of yer overseer, Boss Shelby, to teach this sneaky baboon a lesson, so that she might never again believe that she be better than the rest of you slaves.”

Shelby Moss continued to preach. Low murmurs of, “Yes, Mas’r,” “No, sah,” and “Amen, Boss” issued from the slaves as they were forced to hear Shelby sermonize his interpretation of the Bible’s prophecy for the children of Hamm. At its conclusion he pronounced. “This ungrateful gal will receive ten lashes of the whip, which be the punishment for female children under the age of womanhood.”

Esther wanted to be brave and not scream, but the pain was too great. After the whip had cut into her back five times, she remembered being surprised to hear a crack of thunder just before she fainted.



Naira took pork grease from the shelf in the cabin to mix with ashes from the fireplace. She gently spread the mixture on the wounds laid open across Esther’s back like a platter of fresh fish that had been gutted for supper. Esther might have scarred horribly had it not been for Old Jed. He appeared at Naira’s cabin late that night carrying a large burlap sack filled with large wet leaves he had gathered from the marsh. He instructed Naira to abandon the grease and soot, and lay the fresh leaves over the cuts and bind the back with strips of clean cloth. “These leaves will draw out any infection that might’ve formed and will help the scarring.”

Naira looked at Old Jed with even more affection for this gentle friend. “Will she be alright Jed?” Naira whispered as she walked him outside the cabin.

Jed shook his head and sighed. “I don’t know. The scars on her body should heal well enough.” He peeked through the door before turning from Naira to leave and said, “It’ll be up to us to help her mend her spirit.”

Esther could not stand up for three days. It took another week to restore her health so she could resume her job working with Naira in the kitchen. All the slaves in their cabin took turns caring for her. Jed continued to bring the wet leaves to Naira each night, and Bucky stopped by when he could to check on her progress. He tried to cheer his friend by telling her amusing stories that had happened on the plantation during the day. Esther listened to Bucky, but she did not say much.

While the wounds across her back healed, the half-caste slave girl had plenty of time to think. When awake, she recalled the many lessons taught to her by Old Jed. At night, bright shiny stars consumed her dreams.



A young half cast slave girl does not fit in at her plantation. She learns to read at night school, and escapes to the north with her friend, Bucky. With the help of a mysterious bronze bottle, Esther returns to her plantation, as a conductor on the underground railroad, to save her family from danger.

The Bronze Bottle

by Linda Shields Allison

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