

Billy Bowlegs and the Seminole War



BILLY BOWLEGS IN NEW ORLEANS. May, 1853.

Billy Bowlegs, the King of the Everglades, has been with us. For a week he was our Lion-in-Chief. He has left us, and we now have leisure to think and talk of the crevasse, the British outrages, the cotton crop, filibustering, and other matters of secondary interest. When the news reached us, a fortnight ago, that Billy was actually taken, and, on the way to his new home in Arkansas, would honor our city with a brief visit, I felt that it was my duty to “take” him in another way, so that his royal features might be handed down to posterity in the pages of Harper’s Weekly. I little knew the difficulty of the task I had undertaken; but having attempted it, I resolved to succeed, cost what it might.

Our admirable photographer, Clark, placed the whole of his apparatus, together with the capital operator, Carden, at my disposal for this purpose. The kettle thus prepared, and the fire kindled, I set myself at work to catch my fish. In due time King Billy made his appearance. I took possession of him the moment he arrived, and never left him till I saw him on board the steamer Quapaw, en route for the Arkansas reservation. Brother never stuck to brother, creditor to debtor, limpet to rock, or office-seeker to a new President, as I did to Billy. It was a hard week’s work; but perseverance conquers all things, and I send you—with my little bill annexed—the result of my efforts, in the shape of the portraits of his Majesty of the Everglades, his two brothers-in-law, his young wife, and last, but not least, his “guide, philosopher, and friend,” the negro slave Ben Bruno.

Billy Bowlegs—his Indian name is Halpatter-Micco—is a rather good-looking Indian of about fifty years. He has a fine forehead, a keen, black eye; is somewhat above the medium height, and weighs about 160 pounds. His name of “Bowlegs” is a family appellation, and does not imply any parenthetical curvature of his lower limbs. When he is sober, which, I am sorry to say, is by no means his normal state, his legs are as straight as yours or mine. He has two wives, one son, five daughters, fifty slaves, and a hundred thousand dollars in hard cash. He wears his native costume; the two medals upon his breast, of which he is not a little proud, bear the likenesses of Presidents Van Buren and Fillmore.

Kush-Inspector and the his “old as fine fellow as care to wears his Indian garb grace of of a Greek and, with circlet his head, along our an air that imply that the pale-
condescending to walk through their brick-and-mortar city.



No-Adjo, his General, brother of wife,” is a young you would see. He picturesque with the the drapery statue, his silver around stalked streets with seemed to he honored faces by

Long Jack, Billy’s Lieutenant, and the brother of his young wife, is much less prepossessing. The unflattering photograph gives a perfect representation of his figure, features, and dress, even to the night-gown of gaudy calico, in which he evidently flattered himself that he was making a decided sensation. He is a perfect representative of those lazy, lounging savages who are sometimes seen in our villages, ready to shoot at a mark for the sake of a drink.

Billy’s young wife, who has no name, as far as I could learn, is a quiet, modest squaw, though her features bear a striking resemblance to those of her rakish brother, Long Jack. I was very desirous to add to my collection the portraits of Billy’s “old wife” and her daughters, especially that of the elder, the “Lady Elizabeth Bowlegs,” a good-looking lass of eighteen. But they “kept themselves to themselves,” and very stoutly refused to have any thing to do with me or any body else.

Ben Bruno, the interpreter, adviser, confidant, and special favorite of King Billy, is a fine, intelligent looking negro. Unlike his master, he shows a decided predilection for civilized life, and an early visit to a ready-made clothing establishment speedily transformed him into a very creditable imitation of a “white man’s nigger.” He has

more brains than Billy and all his tribe, and exercises almost unbounded influence over his master. The negro slaves are, in fact, the masters of their red owners, who seem fully conscious of their own mental inferiority. If a Seminole wishes to convey a high idea of his own cunning, he will say, "Ah, you no cheat me. I got real nigger wit." The negroes were the master spirits, as well as the immediate occasion, of the Florida war. They openly refused to follow their masters if they removed to Arkansas; and it was not till they capitulated that the Seminoles thought of emigrating. The friendship of a man who has a hundred thousand dollars in cash, and two marriageable daughters, is worth cultivating. I would advise any one who wishes to get into the good graces of Billy Bowlegs to pay special attention to Ben Bruno.

Billy Bowlegs is a direct descendant of the founder of the Seminole nation. A little more than a century ago, a noted Creek chief, named Secoffee, broke away from his tribe, and, with many followers, settled in the central part of the peninsula of Florida. They were followed by other bands, and all received the name of Seminoles, or "Runaways." The Mickasukies, the legitimate owners of the country, at first opposed these emigrations, but they were too feeble to make any effectual resistance. In a short time all the Indians amalgamated, and joined in efforts to resist the white men—the common foe of all.

Secoffee was a bitter enemy of the Spaniards, and a firm ally of the English. When Florida was re-ceded to the Spaniards, in 1784, he took the field against them. He died the next year, at the age of seventy, and was buried near the site of the present Fort King. When he felt that his end was near, he called his two sons, Payne and Bowlegs, and exhorted them to carry out his plans. The Great Spirit, he said, had revealed to him that, if he would be happy in a future state, he must cause the death of a hundred Spaniards. Fourteen of this number were still wanting; and he adjured his sons to make up the deficiency.

In 1821 Florida was ceded to the United States. Emigrants began to pour in who demanded possession of the lands. The Indians were estimated at about four thousand, men, women, and children, with eight hundred negro slaves. Their villages were scattered from St. Augustine to the Appalachian River. They consisted of log-huts, surrounded by cleared fields. It was vain for them to urge their claim to the country. Our Government recognizes no such title in the Indians. In 1823 they were compelled to enter into a treaty making over to the whites the greater part of their lands, and restricting themselves within narrow bounds formally laid down.

Still the white settlers pressed upon the Indians. A thousand pretexts for quarrels arose. Slaves ran away and joined the Indians, who refused to surrender them. The

property of the whites was plundered, reprisals were made, and a border war seemed imminent, which must involve the extermination of the Indians. In 1832 Mr. Cass, then Secretary of War, directed Colonel Gadsden to negotiate with the Florida Indians for a total relinquishment of their lands in exchange for others west of the Mississippi River. With much difficulty Mr. Gadsden succeeded in inducing some of the Seminole chiefs to sign a treaty empowering a delegation to visit the country proposed to be allotted to them, and in case they were satisfied with it, the nation should cede all their Florida lands, and remove west of the Mississippi. This was the famous "Treaty of Payne's Landing," made on the 9th of May, 1832. The delegation visited the country, made their marks to a paper expressing themselves satisfied with it, and agreed that their nation should commence their removal as soon as satisfactory arrangements could be made. In this treaty the name of Halpatter-Micco appears for the first time in history. He was then a young man, a sub-chief of the band of Arpiucki, or "Sam Jones." It is noticeable that the names of the leading Seminole chiefs, especially that of Micanopy, the recognized head of the nation, were wanting in this treaty.

The Seminoles refused to sanction this proceeding of a few of their chiefs. The delegation themselves denied their own act, and declared that they had not signed any paper which required them to relinquish their lands or remove from Florida. They were assured that they would nevertheless be forced to carry out the treaty. Micanopy, old and inert, was little more than a tool in the hands of the bold and crafty halfbreed, Oseola, who, though not a chief himself, exerted a controlling influence. The Indians resolved to negotiate, gain time to place their wives and children in safety, secure their crops, and lay in ammunition, but in no case to leave the country. They showed themselves adepts in the arts of diplomacy, and succeeded in putting off any decided action till the spring of 1835. A council was then held, Oseola and eight others agreed to abide by the treaty, and the opening of the next year was fixed upon as the time when the removal should commence. Micanopy, Sam Jones, and three other leading chiefs, refused to agree to this. General Thompson, the Indian agent, therefore struck their names off from the roll of chiefs, declaring them to be no longer counselors of the nation.

Nothing was farther from the intention of Oseola than to fulfill his agreement to emigrate. He wished to gain time, and above all things, by a display of friendship, to procure arms, powder, and lead. Thompson refused to sell these. Oseola, for a moment forgetting himself, broke out into fierce passion. "Am I a negro," he said; "a slave? I am an Indian. The white man shall not make me black. I will make the white man red with blood, and then blacken him in the sun and rain, where the wolf shall smell

his bones and the vulture live upon his flesh.” He abused the agent, defied the power of the Government, and was put into irons. A week’s confinement gave him time to recollect himself. He professed penitence, and promised to comply with the treaty. All difficulties were now supposed to be ended; the opening of the year 1836 was looked upon as the time when Florida was to be freed from the Indians, and crowds of emigrants stood ready to rush in upon the vacant lands.

But as summer and autumn wore on abundant proofs appeared that the Indians had no intention of leaving. It afterward appeared that they had solemnly resolved that any one who prepared to remove should die. Charley-e-Mathla, a leading chief, had begun to dispose of his cattle. He was waylaid and shot down. In his handkerchief was a sum of money, which he had received for his cattle. Oseola would not suffer it to be touched. “It is the blood of the red men,” he said, as he flung it away.

Late in December the Indians were ready for action; yet so cunningly were their plans laid that no one suspected an immediate outbreak. Two companies, under Major Dade, had been dispatched from Fort Brooke to reinforce the garrison at Fort King. The Indians resolved to capture Fort King before their arrival, and then turn upon these reinforcements. Oseola had not forgotten his imprisonment by General Thompson. “He is my friend,” said he, significantly; “I’ll take care of him.” For two days he lay, with sixty warriors, hidden among the palmettos, in full view of the fort, yet no one suspected their presence. On the afternoon of the 28th of December, General Thompson and Lieutenant Smith walked out from the fort, quietly smoking their cigars. They approached the ambush, and were fired upon. Thompson fell dead, pierced with four-and-twenty bullets; Smith received thirteen. Their scalps were stripped off and divided into minute pieces that each warrior might have a part. Oseola had taken vengeance for the indignity which he had suffered. Meanwhile the main body of the savages had been dogging Dade, who was on his march to the fort. Twice had they postponed their attack to await the return of Oseola, who was watching for his “friend” Thompson. At last they determined to act without him. Before daybreak on the morning of the 28th, 180 warriors were posted on the road by which the troops would soon advance. Every Indian was concealed behind a tree, and nothing indicated their presence. At nine o’clock the soldiers approached; every man was suffered to pass the extremity of the ambush before the signal was given to fire. Half of the men fell at the first discharge. The soldiers, utterly surprised, fired at random, and did no execution, while the Indians from their coverts picked them off man by man. Of the eight officers and one hundred and two men composing the detachment, every officer and ninety-eight men fell upon

the spot; another was killed the next day. Only three, all sorely wounded, made their escape. The Indians lost only four or five.

Great rejoicings were held that night by the Indians. The scalps of the victims were suspended upon a high pole, around which the drunken savages danced until daylight. Oseola had joined his comrades, bringing the trophies of his exploit. Songs were sung ridiculing the whites, and the Indians made themselves merry over laughable imitations of the somewhat peculiar manner and gestures of Thompson.

Such was the opening scene of the Florida war, which was to cost so much blood and treasure, and to task so severely the skill and energy of our ablest officers. Generals Gaines, Clinch, Scott, Call, Jesup, Macomb, Taylor, Armistead, and Worth, were successively placed in command. For a time it seemed as though a few hundred savages would successfully defy the whole power of the United States. The Indians, indeed, soon found that in open fight they were wholly unable to cope with the whites. They adopted the true policy of scattering themselves in small detachments, striking a sudden blow upon some exposed point, and then taking refuge in the almost inaccessible swamps.

Against such a foe regular military operations were of no avail. The only course was to track them to their fastnesses, burn their villages, destroy their crops, and reduce them by starvation. Again and again it seemed as though this end was attained. The Indians would then beg for peace, promise to surrender, gather at the appointed posts, and receive the promised presents. It would be announced that the "Florida war was ended;" the volunteers would be disbanded, and the regulars sent away from the unhealthy swamps. Then all at once the Indians would decamp, and the work of hunting them out was to be done over again.

Still, year by year something was gained. One chief after another was killed or captured, and their bands surrendered, and were sent to Arkansas. Oseola, coming into the camp of General Hernandez, on pretense of treating, was made prisoner, sent to Fort Moultrie, where he died of a broken heart. He had broken truce more than once, and had no right to complain of any want of faith. Coacoochee, or Wild Cat, next after Oseola the most formidable warrior, surrendered. "I am leaving Florida," he said; "it was my home; I loved it; to leave it is like burying my wife and child. But I have thrown away my rifle and taken the hand of the white man, and said to him,

Take care of me.'" So band after band had been broken up and sent to Arkansas. The remaining Indians were slowly forced southward toward the impassable Everglades, where they were sorely pressed upon by the enemy.

The name of Billy Bowlegs appears only rarely during the first three years of the war, and then only incidentally as a sub-chief under Sam Jones. His first notable exploit took place in July, 1839. General Macomb, then the commander in Florida, had made an arrangement with Sam Jones, who was by this time considered a leading chief, in virtue of which certain limits were temporarily assigned beyond which the Indians should not pass, and within which they should be protected. Colonel Harney was sent to establish a trading-post for their convenience. His company, of thirty men, was encamped in an open barren near the Cooelosahatchee River. The Indians visited the camp day after day in the most friendly manner. All suspicion was disarmed, and not even a sentinel was posted to guard against treachery. At daybreak on the morning of the 22d of July two hundred Indians, headed by Bowlegs, attacked the camp. The surprise was complete. The men, suddenly aroused from sleep, made no resistance. Those who were not murdered in their beds fled to the river, and were shot down in the water. Harney himself escaped by swimming off to a fishing-smack anchored some distance down the river. Of his thirty men twenty-four were slain.

From this time the influence of Bowlegs began to increase. Sam Jones, who was said to be ninety years old, was feeble and inert. He was formally deposed from the chieftainship, and Bowlegs was put in his place. The dignity was hardly worth the having. The band now numbered scarcely two hundred and fifty souls, of whom only eighty were warriors. The new chief saw that further resistance was useless, and, after sending an emissary to ascertain that proposals for peace would be favorably received, he made his appearance at headquarters, fully authorized to treat.

Our Government had in the mean while grown weary of employing an army to hunt down a few scattered savages. President Tyler, in his Message of May 10, 1842, had said that "the further pursuit of these miserable beings by a large military force seems to be as injudicious as it is unavailing. Notwithstanding the vigorous exertions of our troops, the Indian mode of warfare, their dispersed condition, and the very smallness of their number, which increases the difficulty of finding them in the abundant and almost inaccessible hiding-places, render any further attempts to secure them by force impracticable, except by the employment of the most expensive means."

Both parties being weary of the contest, terms were soon agreed upon. A narrow district was temporarily assigned to the Indians as a planting and hunting ground, and on the 14th of August, 1842, it was formally announced that the war in Florida was at an end, and Billy Bowlegs was recognized as the head chief of the Seminoles remaining in Florida.

This seven years' inglorious war had cost much blood and treasure. The regular troops engaged had averaged something more than three thousand men during the whole period. More than twenty thousand volunteers had been brought into the field from the different States. The records of the War Department contain the names of fifteen hundred and fifty-eight officers and soldiers of the regular army who were killed in action or died of wounds received or diseases contracted in Florida. The losses of the volunteers can not be known. Besides the cost of the regular army, nineteen and a half millions of dollars were paid to the militia and volunteers, and as indemnity for losses sustained by citizens. The whole cost of the war can not be estimated at less than forty millions of dollars, and three thousand lives. The number of Indian warriors killed and sent to Arkansas hardly exceeded fifteen hundred. Each of these, therefore, must have cost the country two lives, and more than twenty-five thousand dollars.

The peace thus concluded between King Billy and the United States continued unbroken for a dozen years and more. At length, something more than eighteen months ago, paragraphs began to make their appearance in the papers announcing the re-opening of the Florida war. Hostilities had again broken out between the King of the Everglades and the Model Republic. The General Harney was sent to meet his old opponent: but before any thing serious had taken place, we find him transferred to more important duties in the Northwest. Then came news of obscure skirmishes and loss of life. Then it was reported that our new President, Buchanan, reversing the policy of the farmer who "found a rude boy in his appletree," after exhausting the force of grass, tried what virtue there was in stones, had resolved to try what effect fair words, money, and whisky would have in inducing the indomitable Billy to leave his Florida home. At last, under date of May 8, 1858, came "General Orders, No. 4," from the "Head-quarters of the Department of Florida," announcing that the war was closed. "You have," says Colonel Loomis, in mustering the volunteers out of the service of the United States, "with untiring zeal and energy, penetrated in every direction the swamps and everglades of the country, driving the enemy from their strong-holds and hiding-places; you have engaged them in several skirmishes and action, killing more than forty of their warriors, as acknowledged by the chief, Billy Bowlegs; you have destroyed their magazines of stores and provisions; you have captured more than forty of their men, women, and children; you have rendered them hopeless of remaining any longer with safety in the country, thereby preparing them for, and greatly facilitating, their peaceful emigration, by the delegation under Colonel Elias Rector, Superintendent of Indian Affairs."

Then came the intelligence that Billy Bowlegs, with 33 warriors and 80 women and children, had actually embarked for New Orleans, on their way to Arkansas; but that the old chief, Sam Jones, with 38 warriors and their women and children, still refused to come in at any price; that he declared he would not emigrate for two wagon-loads of money; that his women followed King Billy's men, jeering them for selling themselves to the pale-faces; and that King Billy said Sam was a fool, and he did not care what became of him. At last, on the 14th of May, we learned that Billy Bowlegs had reached the Crescent City.

Alas for our lion! It soon appeared that the King of the Everglades was bent upon having a "big drunk" in New Orleans. How he succeeded no one knows better than your correspondent, who had special reasons for keeping his company, which turned out to be far from creditable. In his cups he was sometimes boisterous and sometimes maudlin. Now he boasted that he had killed a hundred white men in a day; then he thanked his white brothers for their "much friendship," and swore that he would never leave them as long as they gave him as much punch as he wanted. The enterprising proprietor of our Museum invited him to visit his establishment, announced his acceptance, and reaped a golden harvest in consequence. Billy drank the punch provided for him, perambulated the rooms, closely attended by three faithful braves, who fanned him when heated, and kept themselves sober that they might watch over him. The wax figures seemed to possess the chief attraction for him. Scott and Taylor, he said, were "great men, and fought him mighty hard;" as for Harney, he had made him "run like hell."

But why go on to narrate his drunken speeches? He was a sorry lion at the best. At last your correspondent succeeded in bringing him to Clark's Photographic Gallery. A janitor kept the crowd at the foot of the stairs, and finally induced them to disperse, by the assurance that King Billy would not come down for three hours. Thanks to Carden and the camera, his royal features were transferred to the sensitive plate, and here you have them.

My object was attained; but in the mean while my zealous devotion to his Majesty of the Everglades had exposed me to no little misapprehension on the part of my friends. This is a censorious world, very loath to believe in disinterested attachments of any sort. A plausible motive for my proceedings as easily suggested.

Billy, as I have said, is no beggarly German prince, without money to support his hereditary dignity. He has, moreover, a marriageable daughter, whom, it was currently reported, he was anxious to bestow upon some "white brother," with a comfortable dowry of ten thousand dollars in hard cash, besides "expectations" for the future. It

was reported that I was to be the happy man. I was overwhelmed with congratulations, pronounced a lucky fellow, and forced to “stand” cocktails and juleps without number.

It is due to all parties that the matter should be properly represented. It is true, then, that King Billy did me the honor to propose an alliance between myself and his eldest daughter. “Betsey,” he said, “good squaw—never married—you have her—come with me—I make you great chief—next after me.” I was forced to decline this flattering offer for private reasons, which I am not at liberty to explain at present. Suffice it to say that they were perfectly satisfactory to His Majesty, who was graciously pleased to present me, in token of his perfect consideration, with his own royal autograph, a fac-simile of which I send you. The original, of course, I shall carefully preserve, to be handed down to my posterity. I only wish it was appended to an I O U for a few thousands. It would be considered “first-class paper,” and I do not doubt that I could have got it “done” at a very moderate shave.

I am ever,

Your New Orleans Correspondent.