

A Visit to Dahomey.

THE Abbe Borghero, Superior of the Dahomey Mission of the Church of Rome, gives an account of a recent visit to the court of Dahomey. We extract a few passages, descriptive of scenes which he witnessed. The following is a view of a grand military display, in which the 'Amazons' took a prominent part:—

'The king gave the signal for attack, and the first part of the performance began. The entire army examined the position of the town they were about to besiege; they advanced, creeping on their hands and knees, so as not to be perceived by the enemy, their arms lowered, and preserving a rigorous silence.

'In the second part of the performance, our amazons advanced with head erect. Of the three thousand women, two hundred, instead of carrying guns, were supplied with great cutlasses like razors, welded with both hands, a single blow of which is sufficient to cut a man in two; these were sheathed at the time.

'In the third act all were at their post ready for the fight, with arms shouldered and cutlasses drawn. Defiling before the king, some of the troops wished to give him special assurance of devotion and promises of success. At last they were all massed in battle array, drawn up before the point of attack. The king arose, placed himself at the head of the column, harangued the warriors, inflamed their courage, and at a given signal they threw themselves with indescribable fury on the mound of thorns, fell back as if repulsed by the enemy, and returned three times to the charge, effecting all these manœuvres with incredible precipitation.—They sprang upon the thorn-covered rampart with the ease and agility of a stage dancer, and crushed beneath their naked feet the sharp points of the cactus.

'On the first assault, when the most valiant had already gained the summit of the house, a female soldier, who was at one end of it, fell to the ground from a height of five metres. She dislocated her arm, and sat down despondingly; the other amazons were striving to excite her courage, when the king unexpectedly came up, looked at her, and uttered an expression of indignation, whereupon she jumped up as if electrified, went through the manœuvres once more, and distinguished herself so much as to carry off the first prize. It is impossible to describe the whole scene. A storm that raged at the time, and the lurid aspect of the heavens obscured by a thunder-cloud, gave a still more animated and somewhat ideal effect to the whole spectacle.

'In Dahomey, the principal posts are occupied simultaneously by two individuals: the old officer who is in possession, and his successor, who serves a sort of novitiate pre-

vious to the dismissal or the death of the former. It is the same with the generalship of the amazons. The old commander, whose thoroughly military appearance reminds one of our own veterans, made a short but impressive speech to the assembly, on the duties of the female troops, which have been more than once the safeguard of the throne. After the harangue, she addressed some flattering remarks to me, and then retired. By her side was the young general, who is already in command of the army, and, in fact, led the action during the day. She is a woman about thirty years of age. Her striking figure and the quickness of her movements might cause her to be taken for one of Virgil's huntresses, all the more for the colour of her face, which conceals beneath a deep black the outline of European features. Assuming an easy and dignified attitude, without, however, any tinge of affectation, she stepped into the semicircle left vacant between the king's hut and the ranks of her military companions, and addressing herself directly to me, offered her congratulations on my arrival, and went on speaking for more than half an hour. She chose for the subject of her discourse the excellence of the white soldiers and the valour of the Dahomean female warriors, the good relations that ought to subsist between nations equally distinguished for their bravery, and who are rich enough in glory to covet no other conquests but such as spring from mutual friendship.—In bringing the harangue to a conclusion, she proclaimed me grand cabecere of her troops, and sent me the baton of command amidst the vociferous applause of the army. The baton is about two feet long, terminating in the figure of a shark, signifying that as that fish destroys men, so likewise do these female warriors in battle.

'When the evolutions and harangues had come to an end, the women repaired to the palace, their legs all torn and bleeding, each carrying a bundle of thorns. The most distinguished among them had the thorns round their head in the form of a crown, and twined about their waist like a girdle. After these customary ceremonies, they retired to rid themselves of their thorny trophies.'

He thus describes the rude minstrelsy:—

'Some days after this grand military display, the king had me summoned once more to assist at a sort of academic assembly. One of the court poets had composed by heart (the Dahomese are ignorant of the art of writing) a long epic poem, in celebration of the exploits of the reigning sovereign and his father king Ghezo. Ten chanters had learned it according as the poet composed it, and they knew their part so well, that during the three hours they were declaiming they went on in perfect accord. These performers wore long robes, and were covered in front with the skins of wild animals; they held in their