

KING OF THE AMAZONS

FRANK G. CARPENTER'S TALK WITH BEHANZIN, WHO RECENTLY DIED AT BLIDAH, ALGERIA

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B LIDAH, Algeria.—Long before this letter is published the cable dispatches will have announced the death of Behanzin, the famous king of Dahomey, whose army of Amazons sent cold shivers of terror down the backs of the best soldiers of France until about 12 years ago. He fought battle after battle with the French and caused them no end of trouble. His wars with them cost millions and at one time the chamber of deputies at Paris made a single appropriation of \$600,000 to carry them on. He made treaty after treaty with France only to break them, and it was long before they were able to subdue him and take possession of his kingdom. This was done in 1893, and since then they have held the king in captivity and prevented his having any connection with his country and people.

They first carried him off to the West Indies and imprisoned him in Martinique, a little island belonging to France. Later he was given a villa there and allowed to drive about with his favorite wife and one of his sons, and it was just about one year ago that he was brought from Martinique to this place. The cause of his transfer was largely due to his ill-health and his fear of the volcano Mont Pelée. When the eruption occurred Behanzin became terribly excited, and every earth tremor thereafter sent him into fits of fear that the volcanic disturbances might extend to his home. His nerves became so shattered that the French feared he would die, and it was ordered that he be transferred to Algeria and kept under surveillance here at Blidah, about 20 miles from Algiers.

BEHANZIN'S PRISON IN ALGERIA.

Blidah is a military station with barracks inside and a great fort on the foothills of the Atlas mountains nearby. It has the chief army stud of the Algerian cavalry and its surroundings are such that it would have been too easy for the king to have tried to escape. He was given a villa outside the city walls, but he was always surrounded by spies and police. The king very well knew that it was useless for him to think of making his way off to the sea, and also that the 2,000 miles of desert between him and Dahomey were patrolled by French soldiers on camels. While in Martinique he had made all sorts of promises of good behavior if he were allowed to go back to his own country. He continued to make such promises here, and it is believed that the chief cause of his death was his homesickness for the land of the Amazons.

KING BEHANZIN'S LAST INTERVIEW.

I have the honor of having had the last newspaper interview with this notorious monarch. The interview was not full of news for the king was too sick to talk much, and as to the honor, I doubt much if that term applies to the meeting with one who had probably offered up human sacrifices, who had killed many Christians and who had likely often sharpened his ivory teeth upon the human flesh of the Caucasian race. At any rate, I saw and talked with the king in his prison villa within the walls. The audience took place several weeks since. My way to the villa was over a road fenced in by high walls, above which the green branches of olive and orange trees waved. We passed gardens filled with roses, vineyards loaded with fat blue grapes, and by enough fig trees. I verily believe, to have had the 6,000 Eves of Behanzin's Amazon army.

Finally we came to a gate labeled "La Paisible"—"The Peaceable." It was indeed a factitious name for the dwelling place of this, the bloodthirstiest of kings. Nevertheless, it was there that Behanzin was living with his four wives and his numerous children. The villa is a large two-story structure, surrounded by a veranda 12 feet wide, with the rooms opening out upon it. The house stands in an orange grove of several acres, and as I went up the walk I passed the two pet donkeys of this king's little ebony princess, which were feeding under the trees.

As I neared the house I was met by the king's aide-de-camp, or the man who came nearest to being his high court chamberlain. He was dressed in white duck and he spoke French fluently. He is a negro of Martinique, who has been with Behanzin for some years. He took my card and asked me to stay outside while he learned whether his majesty would receive us. Within a few moments he returned and let us upstairs to the veranda. Here we waited while the "high court chamber-

lain" crawled in through one of the windows and passed out several cane-seated chairs for us, asking us to rest upon them until his majesty was ready. This he did.

A WORD WITH THE CROWN PRINCE.

As we waited, the crown prince, Oualimo, came around the corner and we chatted with him. He is a young fellow of about 15, as black as your boots and with full negro features. He is intelligent, has been educated in the schools of Martinique and has also gone to school here. He speaks French well and understands a few words of English. He was only six years old when his father was carried away from his kingdom, less than 12 years ago, and, like the old king, he desires to go back to Dahomey. He is quite dignified and has what might be called an imperial air. He told me that Behanzin had been ill ever since he came to Algeria, that the weather did not agree with him, nor his four wives, and that they all wanted to go with him back to Martinique or on to Dahomey. He said he feared his father would die if a change was not made, and prophesied his early death, which has since taken place.

THE KING IN EXILE.

After a few moments word came that the king would receive us, and we went with Prince Oualimo around the veranda to the other side of the house and were admitted to the imperial presence. The room in which the ex-king of Dahomey was lying opened on the porch, and we came right upon him as we entered the door. He rested on a sort of a cot, with a white pillow under his head. His naked black body was covered with only a gray-blue cape, which fell back as he half rose and showed his skin almost to the waist. He had on a curious black velvet cap, which he touched with his right hand, and which was covered with gold embroidery. This cap fitted his head closely, coming low down over the forehead and covering the ears, falling almost to the shoulders. As he talked with me he now and then pulled his gown up, but it kept falling back, exposing four or five square feet of oily black skin. Upon my presentation he reached out a naked black arm and shook my hand while he said in French, "Bon jour!"

As we chatted I could see two of his wives waiting upon him. One of these seemed to be undergoing some kind of punishment. She was on her knees, leaning over a chair in the back of the room while the other sat crouched down flat on the floor on the other side of the cot from where I stood. Both were jet black and of the most profane type. They were both wearing white skirts fitted up close to the armpits, where they were tied by twisted white bands which were knotted over the knees. The king at his death had only four wives, a paltry allowance in comparison with the days of his prime, when he had three-fourths of his young women at his disposal. He had chosen from all of the Amazons were at his command, and thousands of them were young girls of 18 or more years of age. The king was 62 years old at his death, and the women I saw with him were, I should judge, each 40 or 50 years old. No one knows how many children he had. He had left several little ones here and some in Martinique, and he had in his family also several good-sized girls and the crown prince, whom I have described. I have a photograph of the king, and it includes the whole outfit, but this contains only 12.

HE WOULD RETURN TO DAHOMEY.

One of my first questions to the king was as to his health. He replied that he was ill and that he desired to go back to Dahomey, his own native country. He said he was tired of being here and that he could not keep warm. He asserted that he was not dangerous to the French; that his army was long since disbanded; that he would make no further wars, and that there was no reason why he should not go home.

I asked the king to tell me what kind of a country Dahomey was. He replied that it was a beautiful land, rich in its resources, and one where the tropical sun shone all day long. His eyes lighted as he spoke of it, and it seemed to me I saw his thick lips quiver.

I asked him how the people were getting along in his absence. He said he did not know, that he had been away 12 years and that his captors gave him no means of communication.

I then referred to the stories which have been published of his Amazons, and asked him whether those girl-soldiers were as brave as they had been painted. At this the king's lips tightened and methought I could see the lust of battle come into his heavy old eyes. He replied that the Amazons were brave and faithful, but that the

How the King was Guarded—His Four Black Wives and his Numerous Children—Killed by Homesickness—Something About his Amazon Warriors—He Said they were Brave but were Outnumbered by the French—How the King Trained Them—The Great Changes in Dahomey Made Since its Conquest.



French had outnumbered and overpowered them and that now he was only a captive in the hands of his enemies. I told him that I was a journalist, and that I would tell the American people that I had spoken with him, and that I could carry a greeting from him to them if he wished. He replied: "Ami des amis." "Friends, we are, all friends." He then reached out from under the cape his naked black arm, again exposing his skin to the waist, and shook hands with me as I said good-bye.

HOW KING BEHANZIN WAS GUARDED.

As I went down the steps upon leaving, I saw the French white guard watching me, and I was told that his majesty was never alone for a moment. If he drove out with his wives a soldier or a policeman went with them to prevent any possible attempt at escape. His captivity was, in fact, always before him, and he was warned again and again that he would surely be recaptured if he attempted to run away, and that although there were in Algeria many Sidanese negroes as black as himself, there was none like Behanzin. He was warned that the news of his less would put the army, the police and the spies on the lookout, and at the same time his guards kept him always in sight.

Outside this surveillance the king was fairly well treated by his French captors. He had all his expenses paid by the government. His villa was free, his French cooks cost him nothing and his provisions and his scanty clothing were supplied without charge. He had in addition to all this an allowance of money of 18,000 francs a year, which means about \$2,600 of our money, or just about \$10 a day. This certainly ought to have sufficed to keep him in tobacco and to have furnished new and then a new car plug for each of his wives.

DAHOMEY UNDER THE FRENCH.

Everything goes by contrast, however, and this allowance was as nothing to this negro king who once numbered his assets by millions of francs and his subjects by hundreds of thousands. His kingdom, as it now is under the French, is bigger than the state of Illinois, and

its population is estimated at more than a million. Its seat of government and chief business center, Porto Novo, has 50,000 inhabitants and Abomey, where the king formerly lived, has 15,000.

Since the conquest of Dahomey the French have turned things upside down. They have established schools in all the villages, and at Porto Novo there is an experimental farm. I understand they expect to put out cotton plantations, and that they are exploiting the country. Between 400 and 500 vessels now call there annually and the commerce is growing. Two railroads have been opened up. One of these starts at the port of Kotonou and has been pushed inland as far as Toffo, a distance of 64 miles. It is to be extended 200 miles farther. A telegraph line now joins Kotonou with Behanzin's old capital, and that seaport is also connected with the River Niger, Timbuktu, and the Senegal. There are a hundred and twenty miles of telephone in the colony and 1,725 miles of telegraph lines.

These Dahomey people are of the same race as our negroes. Their country is on the Gulf of Guinea, from where the most of the slaves were taken in early days. They are of pure negro stock, and belong to the Fan branch of the Ewe family. The people go about half naked, and they believe in witches and have their witch doctors.

Along in about 1890, when Behanzin was in the height of his power, travelers who passed through Dahomey gave vivid pictures of him and his army. They say that he sprinkled his ancestors' graves once every year with human blood. He was so great at that time that when his people approached him they had to crawl up to him with their faces in the dust. The annual grave sprinkling took place in October, and it lasted several weeks. The Amazons then acted as the executioners, and the victims who supplied the blood, were usually captives taken in war. When the time for the killing took place these unfortunate wretches were dressed in white shirts, tied hand and foot and placed in baskets on the top of a platform. The king first made a speech, and then the Amazons hurled the victims down into a crowd, where they met with a horrible death. I have seen

better than the male warriors in the wars with the French. It is said that after a woman joined the army she was shut off from marriage, and that the virginism among them was bound to perpetual maidenhood except they were desired by the king. The Amazons were trained to ferocity, and the French say that in the war of 1893 their recklessness was increased by a liberal allowance of gin. The girls had but enough liquor to make them devilish without interfering with their fighting.

THE BELLS.

These famous black women warriors had a uniform of their own. They wore tips of horns on their heads and had sleeveless shirts of blue and white cloth which fell to the knees. Under these were short trousers, which made it easy to distinguish them from the half-naked male warriors. In times of peace they also wore bells around their necks as a warning to all men not in the army to keep out of their way. The other sex was afraid of them too, and fled upon their approach, as it was death to be caught paying them special attentions. The women took vows of chastity upon entering the army, and they were, in fact, looked upon somewhat as were the vestal virgins of old Rome. I have heard that many of the Amazons were beautiful, but if so they must have been far different from the African queens I saw during

my audience with their former commander and king. It is said that these famed warriors were at their best during the war with the French in 1893. During that struggle he caused a number of them to be headed on a charge of cowardice, and he tried in every way to make them perfectly fearless and indifferent to pain. Among the most terrible trials of their courage was the climbing up walls of cactus bushes 16 feet high to a roof carpeted with cactus several hundred feet long. These barefooted and bandaged girls climbed the cactus walls and passed over the roofs carpeted with cactus thorns and as the story goes, then ran back and showed themselves to the king, their faces wreathed with smiles, although their feet and legs were covered with blood.

One of the French officers tells me that the Amazons always planned to take their enemy by surprise, and that they made forced marches at night so as to fall upon them early in the morning. They would dash in upon their enemies before they were fully awake, and then, with a terrible cry, would spring to the fray. This man says that he once saw 4,000 Amazons grouped around King Behanzin, and that they were as muscular as the male warriors and quite as military in appearance.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

The Greatest of Frenchmen.

PETT PARISIAN has been taking a vote to determine whom the average Frenchman regards as the most eminent of his countrymen. No less than 15,000,000 expressed themselves. The result of the contest is thus described by the Paris correspondent of the London Times:

Only those observers who have had the privilege of studying the evolution of the French mind and feeling over an unbroken series of years on the spot were aware of the profound transformation which the republican school system in general have effected in the points of view of the present generation of Frenchmen.

The winner of the recent contest is Pasteur. Victor Hugo runs him close, having received 1,227,103 votes against 1,338,425 for the world-renowned man of science. But it is characteristic that this king had a sleeping chamber served with the heads of his enemies. ABOUT THE AMAZONS. The army of Amazons was one of the strangest features of King Behanzin's outfit. The most of them were young women of from 18 to 25 years of age, and many had been trained to fight from their childhood. Others were wives who had been found faithful to their husbands and others women who had been divorced on account of their bad temper or their failure to have children or for some other reason which caused their husbands to want to get rid of them. They were then handed them over to the king, and if they had the requisite physical vigor they were drilled for the Amazon corps.

The Amazons were armed with swords, battle-axes and guns. They were wonderfully brave and were trained to endure pain of all kinds. A traveler who visited Dahomey when Behanzin's power was at its height says they had one exercise of climbing walls of thorn bushes made for the purpose, and that they would go over them without flinching and pretend to take the army on the opposite side. These Amazons were the king's special guard, and they fought

fishmen; Dr. Roux, the inventor of the diphtheritic serum; Farmentier, the introducer of the potato into France; then Ampere, the father of dynamic electricity; Braza, the founder of French West Africa; Zola, whose place here, thirteenth on the list, shows how slavishly what France now thinks of his courageous deed as author of "Le Capitaine Corcoran," a consoling fiction for those who have always regarded the author of "The Ladies' Man" as the most seductive Frenchman of the nineteenth century, and Francois Arago, the astronomer and physicist.

This brings us to the sixteenth place, which is held gloriously by Marie, St. Bernhardt. But immediately afterward comes M. Waldeck-Rousseau, MacMahon, the hero of the famous J'y suis, J'y reste; President Carnot, who certainly incarnates here a very characteristic conception of civic duty; Chevreul, the chemist; and Chateaubriand, the most eloquent French of all the writers of the last century, unless excepted by the author of "Le Capitaine Corcoran," who figures twenty-third on the list after De Lesseps. This is a victory which shows how short-lived is French rancor. Ten years ago no politician in France would have given such a result, the stupendous energy of the creator of the Suez canal having been forgotten amid the tempest of the Panama scandals. The next four names are Jacques, the inventor of the weaving machine; Jules Verne, President Loubet and Denfert-Rochereau. The list is to be continued until we have before us 502 names. These results constitute a lesson full of instruction not only for the rulers of France, but for foreigners curious as to the temperament and ideals of contemporary Frenchmen.

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