

The Composer of "Carmen"

By Charles Willeby

WHAT little has been written about poor Bizet is not the sort to satisfy. The men who have told of him cannot have written with their best pen. Even those who, one can see, have started well, albeit impelled rather than inspired by a profound admiration for the artist and the man, have fallen all too short of the mark, and ultimately drifted into the dullest of all dull things—the compilation of mere dates and doings. I know of no pamphlet devoted to him in this country. He was much misunderstood in life; he has been, I think, as much sinned against in death. The symbol of posthumous appreciation which asserts itself to the visitor to Père Lachaise, is exponential of compliment only when reckoned by *avoirdupois*. Neglected in life, they have in death weighed him down with an edifice that would have been obnoxious to every instinct in his sprightly soul—a memorial befitting perhaps to such an one as Johannes Brahms, but repugnant as a memento of the spirit that created "Carmen." It is an emblem of French formalism in its most determined aspect. And in truth—as Sainte-Beuve said of the Abbé Galiani—"they owed to him an honourable, choice, and purely delicate burial; *urna brevis*, a little urn which should not be larger than he." The previous inappreciation of his genius has given place to posthumous laudation,

tion, zealous indeed, but so indiscriminating as to be vulgar. Like many another man, he had to take "a thrashing from life"; and although he stood up to it unflinchingly, it was only in his death certificate that he acquired passport to fame.

Just eighteen years before it was that Bizet had written from Rome: "We are indeed sad, for there come to us the tidings of the death of Léon Benouville. Really, one works oneself half crazy to gain this Prix de Rome; then comes the huge struggle for position; and after all, perchance to end by dying at thirty-eight! Truly, the picture is the reverse of encouraging." Here was his own destiny, *nu comme la main*, save that the fates begrudged him even the thirty-eight years of his brother artist—called him when he could not but

"contrast

The petty done—the undone vast."

But his early life was not unhappy. He had no pitiful struggle with poverty in childhood, at all events. Some tell us he was precocious—terribly so; but I had rather take my cue from his own words, "Je ne me suis donné qu'à contre-cœur à la musique," than dwell upon his precocity, real or fictional. It was only hereditarily consistent that he should have a musical organisation. His father was a teacher of music, not without repute; his mother was a sister of François Delsarte, who, although unknown to Grove, has two columns and more devoted to him by Fetis, by whom he is described as an "artiste un peu étrange, quoique d'un mérite incontestable, doué de facultés très diverses et de toutes les qualités nécessaires à l'enseignement." What there was of music in their son the parents sought to encourage assiduously, and Bizet himself has shown us in his work, more clearly than aught else could, that the true dramatic sense was innate in him. And that
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he loved his literature too, was well proved by a glance at the little *appartement* in the Rue de Douai, which he continued to occupy until well-nigh the end.

In 1849—he was just over his tenth year—Delsarte took him to Marmontel of the Conservatoire. “Without being in any sense of the word a prodigy,” says the old pianoforte master, “he played his Mozart with an unusual amount of taste. From the moment I heard him I recognised his individuality, and I made it my object to preserve it.” Then Zimmerman, with whom *l’enseignement* was a disease, heard of him and sought him for pupil. But Zimmerman seems to have tired of him as he tired of so many and ended by passing him on to Gounod. From entry to exit—an interval of eight years—Bizet’s academic career was a series of *premiers et deuxièmes prix*. They were to him but so many stepping-stones to the coveted Grand Prix de Rome. He longed to secure this—to fly the crowded town and seek the secluded shelter of the Villa Medici. And in the end he had his way. In effect, he commenced to live only after he had taken up his abode on the little Pincian Hill. Even there life was a trifle close to him, and some time passed before he really fixed his focus.

In Italy, more than in any other part of the world, the life of the present rests upon the strata of successive past lives. And although Bizet was no student, carrying in his knapsack a superfluity of culture, this place appealed to him from the moment that he came to it, and the memory of it lingered long in after days.

The villa itself was a revelation to him. The masterpiece of Renaissance façade over which the artist would seem to have exhausted a veritable mine of Greek and Roman bas-reliefs; the garden with its lawns surrounded by hedges breast-high, trimmed to the evenness of a stone-wall; the green alleys overshadowed by ilex trees; the marble statues looking forlornly regretful at Time’s defacing

defacing treatment ; the terrace with its oaks gnarled and twisted with age ; the fountains ; the roses ; the flower-beds ; and in the distance, "over the dumb Campagna-sea," the hills melting into light under the evening sky—all these made an *intaglio* upon him such as was not readily to be effaced, and which he learned to love. Perhaps because, after all, Italy is even more the land of beauty than of what is venerable in art, he did not feel the want of what Mr. Symonds calls the "mythopœic sense." It is a land ever young, in spite of age. Its monuments, assertive as they are, so blend with the landscape, are so in harmony with the surroundings, that the yawning gulf of years that would separate us from them is made to vanish, and they come to live with us.

And the place was teeming with tradition. From the time, 1540, when it had been designed by Hannibal Lippi for Cardinal Ricci, passing thence into the hands of Alexandro de' Medici, and later into those of Leo XI., it had been the home of art ; and then, on its acquisition by the French Academy in 1804, it became the home of artists. Here had lived and worked and dreamed David, Ingres, Delaroche, Vernet, Hérold, Benoist, Halévy, Berlioz, Thomas, Gounod, and the minor host of them. In truth the list awed Bizet not a little, and had he needed an incentive here it was. For the rest, he was supremely content. As a *pensionnaire* of the Academy he had two hundred francs a month, and he apportioned them in this wise : *Nourriture*, 75fr. ; *vin*, 25fr. ; *retenue*, 25fr. ; *location de piano*, 15fr. ; *blanchissage*, 5fr. ; *bois, chandelles, timbre-poste, &c.*, 10fr. ; *gants*, 5fr. ; *perte sur le change de la monnaie*, 5fr. Even then he wrote : "I have more than thirty francs *pour faire le grand garçon*." In another letter he says : "I seem to cling to Rome more than ever. The longer I know it, the more I love it. Everything is so beautiful. Each street—even the filthiest of them—has its own charm for me. And perhaps
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what is most astonishing of all, is that those very things which startled me most on my arrival, have now become a part of and necessary to my very existence—the madonnas with their little lamps at every corner; the linen hanging out to dry from the windows; the very refuse of the streets; the beggars—all these things really divert me, and I should cry out if so much as a dung-heap were removed. . . . More too, every day, do I pity those imbeciles who have not been more fully able to appreciate their good fortune in being *pensionnaires* of the Academy. But then one cannot help observing that they are the very ones who have achieved nothing. Halévy, Thomas, Gounod, Berlioz, Massé—they all loved and adored their Rome.”

Then on the last day of the same year: “I seem to incline more definitely towards the theatre, for I feel a certain sense of drama, which, if I possessed it, I knew not of till now. So I hope for the best. But that is not all. Hitherto I have vacillated between Mozart and Beethoven, between Rossini and Meyerbeer, and suddenly I know upon what, upon whom to fix my faith. To me there are two distinct kinds of genius: the inspirational and the purely rational, I mean the genius of nature and the genius of erudition; and whilst I have an immense admiration for the second, I cannot deny that the first has all my sympathies. So, *mon cher*, I have the courage to prefer, and to say I prefer, Raphael to Michael Angelo, Mozart to Beethoven, Rossini to Meyerbeer, which is, I suppose, much the same as saying that if I had heard Rubini I would have preferred him to Duprez. Do not think for a moment that I place one above the other—that would be absurd. All I maintain is that the matter is one of taste, and that the one exercises upon my nature a stronger influence than does the other. When I hear the ‘Symphonie Héroïque,’ or the fourth act of the ‘Huguenots,’ I am spell-bound,

bound, aghast as it were; I have not eyes, ears, intelligence, enough even to admire. But when I see 'L'École D'Athènes,' or 'La Vierge de Foligno,' when I hear 'Les Noces de Figaro,' or the second act of 'Guillaume Tell,' I am completely happy; I experience a sense of comfort, a complete satisfaction: in effect, I forget everything."

This, then, is what Rome did for Bizet; but, be it said, for Bizet *très jeune encore*. For a time the result is patent in his work, but afterwards there comes, although no revulsion, a distinct variation of feeling, which has in it something of compromise. The genius innate in him was inspirational before it was—if it ever was—erudite. Even in his later days there was for him no cowering before his culture. In 1867 he wrote in the *Revue Nationale*—the only critique, by the way, he ever wrote—under the pseudonym of Gaston de Betzi: "The artist has no name, no nationality. He is inspired or he is not. He has genius or he has not. If he has, we welcome him; if he has not, we can at most respect him, if we do not pity and forget him."

He was the same in all things: "I have no comrades," he said, "only friends." And there is one sentence that he wrote from Rome that might well be held up to the *gamins* of the French Conservatoire. "Je ne veux rien faire *de chic*; je veux avoir des *idées* avant de commencer un morceau."

In August of his second year Bizet left Rome on a visit to Naples. He carried a letter to Mercadente. On his return good news and bad awaited him. Ernest Guiraud, his good friend and quondam fellow-student in the class of Marmontel, has just been proclaimed Prix de Rome. And this at the very moment Bizet was to leave the Villa; for the Academy would have it that their musical *pensionnaires* should pass the third year in Germany. The prospect was entirely repugnant to Bizet. So he went to
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work against it, directing his energies in the first place against Schnetz, "the dear old director" as they called him. Schnetz, owing to a soft spot for his young *pensionnaire*, was overcome, and through him I fancy the powers that were in Paris. However, Bizet was permitted to remain in his beloved Rome. Delighted, he wrote off to Marmontel: "I am daily expecting Guiraud, and words cannot express how glad I shall be to see him. Would you believe it, it is two years since I have spoken with an intelligent musician? My colleague Z—— bores me frightfully. He speaks to me of Donizetti, of Fesca even, and I reply to him with Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Gounod."

This last year spent with Guiraud was perhaps the happiest of his life. At the close of it the two set off together on a ramble through the land, with fancy for their only guide. They had got so far as Venice when news of his mother's dangerous illness called Bizet to her side. He arrived in time to say farewell, and he never returned to Italy.

Of work done at the Villa, "Vasco de Gama" is the only tangible sample; "but I have not wasted my time," he wrote, "I have read a good many volumes of history, and ever so much more literature of all kinds. I have travelled, I have learned something of the history of art, and I really am a bit of a connoisseur in painting and sculpture. All I want now, on my return, are *trois jolis actes* for the Théâtre Lyrique."

And shortly we find him in full swing with "Les Pêcheurs des Perles." It was produced on the 30th September of 1863, and had some eighteen representations. "La Jolie Fille de Perth," which followed it four years later, had, I think, twenty-one. In between these two works, we are told, Bizet, in a fit of violent admiration for Verdi, strove to emulate him in an opera entitled "Ivan le Terrible." It is said to have been completed and

handed to the management of the Théâtre Lyrique. Then Bizet, recognising as suddenly that he had made a mistake, withdrew the score and burned it.

M. Charles Pigot, who is chiefly responsible for this story, goes on to say that the libretto was the work of MM. Louis Gallet and Edouard Blau. But in that he is not correct, for Gallet himself tells us that he knew Bizet only ever so slightly at the time, and that neither to him nor to Blau is due a single line of this "Ivan."

Then there were "Griselidis," of which, in a letter dated February of 1871, Bizet speaks as *très avancée*; "Clarisse Harlowe"; and the "Calendal" of M. Sardou, to each of which he referred in the same year as *à peine commencée*. There was also an opera in one act written by M. Carvalho, and actually put into rehearsal at the Opéra Comique. But none of these saw the light, and I have little doubt they all met their fate on a certain eventful day, shortly before he died, when Bizet remorselessly destroyed a whole pile of manuscript. And in truth these early works had little value of themselves. They were but so many rungs of the ladder by which he climbed to the heights of "Djamileh," of "L'Arlésienne," and of "Carmen." No musician ever took longer to know himself than did Georges Bizet. His period of hesitation, of vacillation, was unduly protracted. For why, it is hard to tell; but one cannot help feeling that the terrible *lutte pour la vie* had a deal to do with it. Those early years in Paris were very hard ones. "Believe me," he wrote from le Vésinet (always a favourite spot with him), "believe me, it is exasperating to have one's work interrupted for days to write *solos de piston*. But what would you? I must live. I have just rushed off at a gallop half-a-dozen melodies for Heugel. I trust you may like them. At least I have carefully chosen the verses.

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. . . My opera and my symphony are both of them *en train*. But when, oh when, shall I finish them? Yet I do nothing but work, and I come only once a week to Paris. Here I am well out of the way of all *flaneurs, raseurs, diseurs de riens, du monde enfin, hélas.*" Then a few days later: "I am completely prostrate with fatigue. I can do nothing. I have even been obliged to give up orchestrating my symphony; and now I feel it will be too late for this winter. I am going to lie down, for I have not slept for three nights, and all seems so dark to me. To-morrow, too, I have *la musique gaie* to write."

Just then time was pressing him hard. He was under contract to produce "La Jolie Fille de Perth" by the end of the year, and he was already well into October. It became a matter of fifteen and sixteen hours work a day; for there were lessons to be given, proofs to be corrected, piano transcriptions to be made, and the rest. And, truth to tell, he was terribly lacking in method. He was choke-full of ideas, he was indeed borne along by a very torrent of them; and if only he could have stopped to collect himself it would have been well for him. But no; before he realised it, "La Jolie Fille" was finished and in rehearsal. Then for the time he was able to put enough distance between himself and his work to value it. And it seems to have pleased him. "The final rehearsal," he writes to Galabert (by this time his confidant in most things), "has produced a great effect. The piece is really highly interesting, the interpretation is excellent, and the costumes are splendid. The scenery is new and the orchestra and the artists are full of enthusiasm. But more than all this, *cher ami*, the score of 'La Jolie Fille' is *une bonne chose*. The orchestra lends to all a colour and relief for which, I confess, I never dared to hope. I think I have arrived this time. Now, *il faut monter, monter, monter, toujours.*"

Shortly

Shortly after this he married Geneviève Halévy, the daughter of the composer of "La Juive," and lived almost exclusively at le Vésinet. There, at 8, Rue des Cultures, a rustic place enough, one might find Georges Bizet, seated in his favourite corner of the lovely garden, *en chapeau de canotier*, smoking his pipe and chatting to his friends. It had been the home of Jacques Halévy, and Bizet had been wont to do his courting there. Now the old man was no more, and in the long summer days, the daughter and the son—for Halévy had been as a father to Bizet—missed sorely the familiar figure hard at work with rake or hoe at his beloved flowerbeds. They were the passion of his later days, and they well repaid his care. Even in the middle of a lesson—and he taught up to well-nigh the last weeks of his life—would he rush out to uproot a noxious weed that might chance to catch his eye. "How well I remember my first day there," says Louis Gallet. "The war was not long finished, and the traces of it were with us yet. True, Paris had resumed her lovely girdle of green; but beneath this verdure reflected in the tardy waters of the Seine, there was enough still to tell the terrible tale of ruin. One could not go to Pecq or le Vésinet without some difficulty. Bizet, to save me trouble, had taken care to meet me at Rueil, whence we made for the little place where he was staying for the summer. The day was lovely, and 'Djamileh' made great strides as we talked and paced the pretty garden walks. This habit of discussing while walking, what was uppermost in his mind, was always, to me, a powerful characteristic of Georges Bizet. I do not remember any important discussion between us that did not take place during a stroll, or at all events whilst walking, if only to and from his study. We talked long that afternoon—of the influence of Wagner on the future of musical art, of the reception in store for 'Djamileh,' both by the public and by the Opéra Comique itself.

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This latter, indeed, was no light matter. The Direction was then undertaken by two parties: that of Du Locle, tending towards advancement in every form; that of De Leuven, clinging with all the force of tradition to the past.

“Then in the evening nothing would do but Bizet should see me well on my way to Paris. The bridges were not yet restored. So we set off on foot, in company with Madame Bizet, to find the ferry-boat. How delicious was that walk by the little islets in the cool of the twilight; along the towing-path so narrow and overrun with growth that we were obliged to proceed in Indian file. And how merry we were, until perchance we stumbled on the fragment of a shell lying hidden in the grass, or came face to face with some majestic tree, still smarting from its wounds, when there would rise before us in all its vividness the terrible scene so recently enacted on that spot. Then we talked of the war and all its sorrows; and we tried to descry there on the right, in the shade of Mount Valerien, the spot where Henri Regnault fell.

“At length we found the ferry, and reached the other bank. There at the end of the path we could see the lights of the station; so we separated. And although I made many after visits, none remained so firmly fixed in my memory, or left me so happy an impression as did this, my first to Bizet’s summer home.”

During the siege itself, he had been forced to remain in Paris. But it was much against his will, and he seems to have chafed sorely at it. Yet it is difficult to picture Bizet bellicose. “Dear friend,” he writes to Guiraud, who was stationed at some outpost, “the description you give of the palace you are living in makes us all believe that luck is with you. But every day we think of the cold, the damp, the ice, the Prussians, and all the other horrors

horrors that surround you. As for me, I continue to reproach myself with my inaction, for in truth my conscience is anything but at rest; but you know well what keeps me here. We really cannot be said to eat any longer. Suzanne has just brought in some horse bones, which I believe are to form our meal. Geneviève dreams nightly of chickens and lobsters."

Not till the following year, during the days of the Commune, do we find him at le Vésinet. Then he writes (also to Guiraud): "Here we are without half our things, without our books, without anything in fact, and absolutely there are no means of getting into Paris. . . . So, dear friend, if you have any news, do, I pray you, let us have it. I read the Versailles papers, but they tell their wretched readers (and expect them to believe it) that France is 'très tranquille,' Paris alone excepted (*sic*). The day before yesterday was anything but tranquil. For twelve hours there was nothing but a continuous cannonade. . . . But *we* are safe enough, for although the Prussian patrols continue to increase in number we are not inconvenienced by them, and they will not, in all probability, occupy le Vésinet. But it seems quite impossible to say how all this is going to end. I am absolutely discouraged, and what is more, I fear, dear friend, there is worse trouble ahead of us. I am off now to the village to look at a piano; I must work and try to forget it all."

He finished "Djamileh" at le Vésinet. It was produced at the Opéra Comique in May of 1872. Gallet tells us that he did not write the book specially for Bizet. Under the title of "Nammouna," it had been given by M. du Locle to Jules Duprato, a musician and a "prix de Rome." But Duprato *paraissait agréablement*, and never got much further with it than the composition of a certain *air de danse* to the verses commencing: "Indolente, grave et lente," which are to be found also in Bizet's score.

score. Then there came a time when the Opéra Comique, truly one of the most good-natured of institutions in its own peculiar way, so far belied its reputation as to tire of this idling on the part of M. Duprato. So the work passed on to Bizet. He suggested change of title, and "Namouna" became "Djamileh." But it remained nevertheless the poem of Musset.

"Je vous dirais qu' Hassan racheta Namouna

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Qu'on reconnut trop tard cette tête adorée
Et cette douce nuit qu'elle avait espérée
Que pour prix de ses maux le ciel la lui donna.

Je vous dirais surtout qu' Hassan dans cette affaire
Sentit que tôt ou tard la femme avait son tour
Et que l'amour de soi ne vaut pas l'autre amour."

There you have the whole story. It is but an *état d'âme*—a little love scene, simple enough in a way, yet so delicate and so full of colour. It was a matter of "atmosphere," not of structure, a masterpiece of style rather than of situation; and from its first rehearsal as an opera it was doomed. In truth, these rehearsals were amusing. There was old Avocat—they used to call him Victor—the typical *régisseur* of tradition; a man who could tell of the *premières* of "Pré-aux-Clercs" and "La Dame Blanche," and, what is more, expected to be asked to tell of them. From his corner in the wings he listened to the music of this "Djamileh," his face expressive of a pity far too keen for words. But it was a matter of minutes only before his pity turned to rage, and eventually he stumped off to his sanctum, banging his door behind him with a vehemence that augured badly for poor Bizet. As for De Leuven, his co-director: had he not written "Postillon de Lonjumeau"?

Lonjumeau"? and was it not the most successful work of Boileddieu's successor? The fact had altered his whole life. Ever after, all he sought in opera was some similarity with *Le Postillon*. And there was nothing of Adam in this music, still less anything of De Leuven in the poem. That was sufficient for him. "Allons," said he one day to Gallet, who arrived at rehearsal just as Djamiléh was about to sing her *lamento*: "allons, vous arrivez pour le De Profundis."

As for the public, they understood it not at all, this charming miniature. "C'est indigne," cried one; "c'est odieux," from another; "c'est très drôle," said a third. "Quelle cacophonie, quelle audace, c'est se moquer du monde. Voilà, où mène le culte de Wagner à la folie. Ni tonalité, ni mesure, ni rythme; ce n'est plus de la musique," and the rest. The press itself was no better, no whit more rational. Yet this "Djamiléh" was rich in premonition of those very qualities that go to make "Carmen" the immortal work it is. It so glows with true Oriental colour, is so saturate with the true Eastern spirit, as to make us wonder for the moment—as did Mr. Henry James about Théophile Gautier—whether the natural attitude of the man was not to recline in the perfumed dusk of a Turkish divan, puffing a chibouque. Here the tints are stronger, mellower, and more carefully laid on than in "Les Pêcheurs des Perles." There is, too, all the *bizarrierie*, as well as all the sensuousness of the East. Yet there is no obliteration of the human element for sake of the picturesque. Wagnerism was the cry raised against it on all sides; yet, if it be anything but Bizet, it is surely Schumann. It was, in effect, all too good for the public—too fine for their vulgar gaze, their indiscriminating comment. And Reyer, farseeing amongst his fellows, spoke truth when he said in the *Débats*: "I feel sure that if M. Bizet knows that his work has been appreciated

appreciated by a small number of musicians—being *cognoscenti*—he will be more proud of that fact than he would be of a popular success. ‘Djamileh,’ whatever be its fortunes, heralds a new epoch in the career of this young master.”

Then came “L’Arlésienne,” as all the world knows, a dismal failure enough. It was to Bizet a true labour of love. From the day that Carvalho came to him proposing that he should add *des mélodrames* to this tale of fair Provence, to the day of its production some four months later, he was absorbed in it. The score as it now stands represents about half the music that he wrote. The prelude to the third act of “Carmen,” and the chorus, “Quant aux douaniers,” both belonged originally to “L’Arlésienne.” The rest was blue pencilled at rehearsal. And of all the care he lavished on it, perhaps the finest, certainly the fondest, was given to his orchestra. Every instrument is ministered to with loving care. Luckily for him, fortunately too for us, he knew not then what sort of lot awaited this scrupulous score of his. He knew he wrote for Carvalho—for the Vaudeville; but that was all. And they gave him twenty-five musicians—a couple of flutes and an oboe (this latter to do duty too for the cor-anglais); one clarinet, a couple of bassoons, a saxophone, two horns, a kettle-drum, seven violins, one solitary alto, five celli, two bass, and his choice of one other. The poor fellow chose a piano; but they never saw the irony of it. All credit to his little band, they did their best. But the most that they could do was to cull the tunes from out his score. The consolation that we have is, that, so far as the piece as a piece is concerned, no orchestra in the world could have saved it. It was doomed to failure for all sorts of reasons. Daudet himself goes very near the mark when he says that “it was unreasonable to suppose that in the middle of the boulevard, in that coquettish corner of the Chaussée d’Antin,

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right in the pathway of the fashions, the whims of the hour, the flashing and changing vortex of all Paris, people could be interested in this drama of love taking place in the farmyard in the plain of Camargue, full of the odour of well-plenished granaries and lavender in flower. It was a splendid failure; clothed in the prettiest music possible, with costumes of silk and velvet in the centre of comic opera scenery." Then he goes on to tell us: "I came away discouraged and sickened, the silly laughter with which the emotional scenes were greeted still ringing in my ears; and without attempting to defend myself in the papers, where on all sides the attack was led against this play, wanting in surprises—this painting in three acts of manners and events of which I alone could appreciate the absolute fidelity. I resolved to write no more plays, and heaped one upon the other all the hostile notices as a rampart around my determination."

At this time Bizet seems to have come a good deal into contact with Jean Baptiste Faure. They met frequently at the Opéra. "You really must do something more for Bizet," said the baritone to Louis Gallet. "Put your heads together, you and Blau, and write something that shall be *bien pour moi*." "Lorenzaccio," perhaps the strongest of De Musset's dramatic efforts, first came up. But Faure was not at all in touch with it. The rôle of Brutus—fawning Judas that he is—revolted him. He had no fancy to distort as *menteur à triple étage*; so the subject was put by. Then came Bizet one morning with an old issue of *Le Journal pour tous* in his pocket. "Here is the very thing for us: 'Le Jeunesse du Cid' of Guilhem de Castro; not, mark you, the Cid of Corneille alone, but the inceptive Cid in all the glory of its pristine colour—the Cid, Don Rodrigue de Bivar, in the words of Sainte-Beuve 'the immortal flower of honour and of love.'" The *scène du mendiant* held Bizet completely. It was to
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him simple, touching, and great. It showed Don Rodrigue in a new light. Those—and there were many of them—who had already cast their choice upon this legend, had recognised—but recognised merely—in their hero, the son prepared to sacrifice his love for filial duty, and to yield his life for love. But they had not seen in him the Christian, the true and godly soul, the Good Samaritan that De Castro represents. The scene of Rodrigue with the leper, disdained and done away with by Corneille, with which De Castro too was so reproached, was full of attraction for Bizet. His whole interest centred round it. He was impatient and hungered to get at it; and “Carmen,” on which he was already well at work, was even laid aside the while. Faure, too, had expressed a sound approval and a hearty interest, and this alone meant much. So Bizet once again was full of hope. There follows a long and detailed correspondence on the subject with Gallet, with which I have not space to deal; but it shows up splendidly the extreme nicety of the musician’s dramatic sense.

In the summer of 1873 “Don Rodrigue” was really finished, and one evening Bizet called his friends to come and listen. Around the piano were Edouard Blau, Louis Gallet, and Jean Faure. Bizet had his score before him—to common gaze a skeleton thing enough, for of “accompaniment” there was but little. But to its creator it was well alive, and he sang—in the poorest possible voice, it is true—the whole thing through from beginning to end. Chorus, soprano, tenor, bass, yea, even the choicer “bits” for orchestra—all came alike to him; all were infused with life from the spirit that created them. It was long past midnight when he ceased, and then they sat and talked till dawn. All were enthusiastic, and in the opinion of Faure (given three years later) this score was more than the equal of “Carmen.” His word is all we have for it, but it carries with it something of conviction.

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He was no bad judge of a work. Anyway, no sooner had he heard it than he set about securing its speedy production at the Opéra. And he succeeded in so far that it was put down early on the list. But Fate had yet to be reckoned with. She was not thus to be balked of her prey: she had dogged the footsteps of poor Bizet far too zealously for that; and on the 28th October (less than a week after he had put *finis* to his work), she stepped in. On that day the Opéra was burned down.

As for the score, it was laid aside, and of its ultimate lot we are in ignorance. Inquiry on the part of Gallet seems to have elicited nothing more definite than a courteous letter from M. Ludovic Halévy, to the effect that he was quite free to dispose of the book to another composer. "It was George's favourite," wrote his brother-in-law, "and he had great hopes for it; but it was not to be."

Perhaps of all his powers Bizet's greatest was that of recuperation. It would be wrong to say he did not know defeat; he knew it all too well, but he never let it get the better of him. He was never without his irons upon the fire, never without a project to fall back upon. And perhaps it is not too much to say that he had no life outside his art. This too may in truth be told of him: that in all the struggle and the scramble, in all his fight with fortune, it was the sweeter qualities of his nature that came uppermost. His strength of purpose stood on a sound basis—a basis of confidence in, though not arrogance of, his own power. Where he was most handicapped was in carrying on his artistic progress *coram populo*. Had it been as gradual as most men's—had it been but the acquiring of an ordinary experience—all might have been well; he would probably have been accorded his niche and would have occupied it. But he progressed by leaps and bounds, and even then his ideal kept steadily miles ahead
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of his achievement. It was for long a very will-o'-the-wisp for him. Now and again he caught it, and it is at such moments that we have him at his best; but he can be said only to have captured it completely—so far as we are in a position to tell—in “L’Arlésienne” and certain parts of “Carmen.” His faculty of self-criticism was developed in such an extraordinary degree as to baulk him. He loved this Don Rodrigue and thought it was his masterwork, and that too at the time when “Carmen” must have been well forward. We know then that the loss is not a small one.

It had not been alone the fate of the Opéra House that had stood in the way. That institution had in course taken up its quarters at the Salle Ventadour, and once installed there had proceeded with the *répertoire*. But Bizet’s “Rodrigue,” although well backed by Faure, was pushed aside for others. The three names that it bore were all too impotent; and when a new work was announced, it was “L’Esclave” of Membreée that was seen to grace the bills, and not “Don Rodrigue.”

Poor Bizet, disappointed and sore at heart, vanished to hide himself once more by his beloved Seine. This time it was to Bougival he went.

M. Massenet had recently produced his “Marie Madeleine” and, curiously enough, it had been successful. This seems to have spurred Bizet on to emulation. With his usual happy knack of hitting on a subject, he wrote off to Gallet, requesting him to do a book with Geneviève de Paris—the holy Geneviève of legendary lore—for heroine. And Gallet, accommodating creature that he was, forthwith proceeded to construct his tableaux. Together they went off to Lamoureux and read the synopsis to him. He approved it heartily, and Bizet got to work. “Carmen” was then finished and was undergoing the usual stage of adjournment

sine die. Three times it had been put into rehearsal, only to be withdrawn for apparently no reason, and poor Bizet was wearying of opera and its ways. This sacred work was relief to him. But hardly had he settled down to it when up came "Carmen" once again, this time in good earnest. He was forced to leave "Geneviève" and come to Paris for rehearsals. It was much against his inclination that he did so, for his health was failing fast. For long he had suffered from an abscess which had made his life a burden to him. Nor had his terrible industry been without its effect upon his physique. He did not know it, but he had sacrificed to his work the very things he had worked for. He felt exhausted, enfeebled, shattered. Probably the excitement of rehearsing "Carmen" kept him up the while; but it had its after-effect, and the strain proved all the more disastrous. A profound melancholy, too, had come over him; and do what he would he could not beat it off. A young singer (some aspirant for lyric fame) came one day to sing to him. "Ich grölle nicht" and "Aus der Heimath" were chosen. "Quel chef-d'œuvre," said he, "mais quelle désolation, c'est à vous donner la nostalgie de la mort." Then he sat down to the piano and played the "Marche Funèbre" of Chopin. That was the frame of mind he was in.

In his gayer moments he would often long for Italy. He had never forgotten the happy days passed there with Guiraud. "I dreamed last night" (he is writing to Guiraud) "that we were all at Naples, installed in a most lovely villa, and living under a government purely artistic. The Senate was made up by Beethoven, Michael Angelo, Shakespeare, Giorgione, *e tutti quanti*. The National Guard was no more. In place of it there was a huge orchestra of which Litolff was the conductor. All suffrage was denied to idiots, humbugs, schemers, and ignoramuses—that

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is to say, suffrage was cut down to the smallest proportions imaginable. Geneviève was a little too amiable for Goethe, but despite this trifling circumstance the awakening was terribly bitter."

"Carmen" was produced at last, on the 3rd of March in that year (1875). The Habanera—of which, by the way, he wrote for Mme. Galli-Marié no less than thirteen versions before he came across, in an old book, the one we know—the prelude to the second act, the toreador song, and the quintett were encored. The rest fell absolutely flat.

The blow was a terrific one to Bizet. He had dreamed of such a different lot for "Carmen." Arm in arm with Guiraud he left the theatre, and together they paced the streets of Paris until dawn. Small wonder he felt bitter; and in vain the kindly Guiraud did his best to comfort him. Had not "Don Juan," he argued, been accorded a reception no whit better when it was produced in Vienna? and had not poor Mozart said "I have written 'Don Juan' for myself and two of my friends"? But he found no consolation in the fact. The press, too, cut him to the quick. This "Carmen," said they, was immoral, *banale*; it was all head and no heart; the composer had made up his mind to show how learned he was, with the result that he was only dull and obscure. Then again, the gipsy girl whose liaisons formed the subject of the story was at best an odious creature; the actress's gestures were the very incarnation of vice, there was something licentious even in the tones of her voice; the composer evidently belonged to the school of *civet sans lièvre*; there was no unity of style; it was not dramatic, and could never live; in a word, there was no health in it.

Even Du Locle—who of all men should have supported it—played him false. A minister of the Government wrote personally

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to the director for a box for his family. Du Locle replied with an invitation to the rehearsal, adding that he had rather that the minister came himself before he brought his daughters.

Prostrate with it all, poor Bizet returned to Bougival. When forced to give up "Geneviève," he had written to Gallet: "I shall give the whole of May, June, and July to it." And now May was already come, and he was in his bed. "Angine colossale," were the words he sent to Guiraud, who was to have been with him the following Sunday. "Do not come as we arranged; imagine, if you can, a double pedal, A flat, E flat, straight through your head from left to right. This is how I am just now."

He never wrote more than a few pages of "Geneviève." He got worse and worse. But even so, the end came all too suddenly, and on the night of the 2nd of June he died—died as nearly as possible at the exact moment when Galli-Marié at the Opéra Comique was singing her song of fate in the card scene of the third act of his "Carmen." The coincidence was true enough. That night it was with difficulty that she sung her song. Her nervousness, from some cause or another, was so great that it was with the utmost effort she pronounced the words: "La carte impitoyable; répétera la mort; encor, toujours la mort." On finishing the scene, she fainted at the wings. Next morning came the news of Bizet's death. And some friends said—because it was not meet for them to see the body—that the poor fellow had killed himself. Small wonder if it were so!