

Bizet's "Carmen"—and Merrimee's.

By ENID CRUICKSHANK.

A few years ago, while I was touring in the provinces, a fellow-singer who was talking about audiences and the power they unconsciously wield over artists, said to me—"Ah! you must sing at the Old Vic. to realise what genuine enthusiasm means. One just *must* work there; no slacking, no taking it easy; the audiences are so much in sympathy that one craves to give of one's best." In that moment was born my great desire to sing at the Old Vic., and three weeks ago it was fulfilled. I sang "Carmen"; but woman-like I'm not satisfied; I want to sing again; and I hope it won't be long before I do!

When, after the first performance, Lilian Baylis paid me the great honour of suggesting that I should write a few words for this journal, I thought I'd love to do so; but I'm finding it more difficult than I thought. I have no literary powers, and I certainly don't want the people who were so kind to me in person to laugh at me in print; however, here are the few words offered very humbly in the hope that they will be acceptable.

Often I am asked—"How do you manage to sing such a trying rôle as 'Carmen' and act it at the same time? Is it not difficult? Opera singers are not supposed to act."

My answer is—"You see, I think that to many women, acting (of a sort) comes naturally, and upon the psychology of the artist depends the ultimate quality of the acting." To act, to me, is to feel that I convince with my interpretation—so much is required of an artist playing this rôle—and to my mind, the first essential, taking for granted an adequate voice—is a striking personality added to, if the fates have been kind, great physical beauty and grace. In a nutshell, the artist must look the part. The rôle will always be one of the most difficult to portray, first because of the many qualities from which the character

may be regarded; secondly, because of the difference between the Carmen created by Prosper Merrimee and the remoulded Carmen of Bizet; and thirdly, because of the difficulty of getting away from the "traditional" Carmen which has been made more or less to conform to our love of respectability.

I have been accused by certain critics of turning my back upon Bizet because I endeavour to adhere to certain traits of the Merrimee character not apparent in the opera, but which I consider necessary. Might not the same be said of Bizet, who gave us an idealised person—subtle, alluring, passionate even in going to her death, instead of the cool, calculating, smuggling gipsy who calmly "paid her debts" and who at the end was almost stoical in her cold refusal to accompany Jose, despite that which was glittering in his hand.

I must confess to a feeling of contempt for the passionate, half-mad creature in the opera, who rushes excitedly toward the arena, bent on eluding Jose—only to meet the knife—but I cannot help admiring the woman who calmly goes to her death after having vainly reasoned with her erstwhile lover, to me much the nobler character of the two.

That I should have been so fortunate as to have gained the approval of the London press for my reading of the character fills me with gladness (oh yes! I always read my press notices—I regard them as part of my education; and let me whisper, never believe the prima donna who tells you she disdains Press criticisms). That I have succeeded in so complex a rôle gives me much gratification.

I can't finish these few words without telling you that I think it was all due to the ripping atmosphere of sincerity created by audience and artists alike.

I am looking forward eagerly to my next performance at the famous Old Vic.