



The Land of the Storytellers: Evening Falls on Teelin, Donegal

A poor, wild land. A poor, proud people. A straggle of cottages, their heads between their shoulders, their roofs lashed down with ropes against the wind. Tonight there will be a storytelling. Tonight the fisherfolk will forget their poverty. They will rub shoulders with the glittering kings and queens of fairyland.

The Irish Storyteller

Three symbols dominate the poverty-stricken lives of the people of Teelin : the net, the spade, and the hearth. And chief of these is the hearth, round which, of a night-time, the tales of wonder are told.

Photographed by HAYWOOD MAGEE

WHEN the sun is in, the west of Donegal is a grey, uneven land of rains and mist. When the sun is out, the rocks turn purple and the delicate oat-fields come to life, and the country shines like the rainbow-world of an Irish tale. Then the sun hides again, the fields turn dark, and what you see is the wet stones and the black bog and the cottages huddled behind hillocks, their roofs lashed down by ropes against the screaming wind.

Life hereabouts is like that, too—a day of hard work and grinding poverty: a brief escape of an evening, into the coloured land of fairy-tales: and then, the grey old round again.

The whitewashed village of Teelin straggles along an inlet at the sloping foot of Slieve League. The village is poor; and 'poor' in Ireland means really poor. There is no pig; for what should a pig be

fed on? There is no plough; for who has money for a horse? If a man wants to grow a crop, he digs. Mostly, he prefers to fish. But fishing is a poor living now, and for years the English and French steam-trawlers have worked so often within the three-mile limit of the Donegal coast that the spawning grounds are disturbed and it is hardly worth the Teelin man's time to shove his boat out. Mainly, the villagers live on what their sons and nephews send from America; and partly they live on assistance from the Government of Eire.

The Teelin folk speak Gaelic; and they have all the gracious and imaginative qualities associated with the Gaelic world. But there is nothing of twilight about them; you feel they are a people who have no liking for mist. It is worth remarking that when they do speak English, their conversation has

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*Turf for the Storyteller's Fire
Storyteller Mary Donnegan prepares for the evening of romance*



The Scene That Has Remained Unchanged Since Time Immemorial: The Traditional. They are Gaelic fishermen, and the wives and children of fishermen. The life they live has changed they strike deep. Recreations are scarce, but they are enjoyed whole-heartedly. Favourite escape

not that moony-poetic double-talk which Synge worked so hard in his plays. They are a simple but astute people; sensitive but friendly; imaginative but not fey. And they have a vitality which lets them work hard all day and stay up all night, storytelling, fiddling, dancing.

Walk through Teelin of a winter night, and you will pass one dark cottage after another, because everyone is gathered into two or three kitchens where some fun is afoot. Favourite at such gatherings is the shanachie, the teller of traditional fireside tales, the recounter of dreams and visions and glittering escapades.

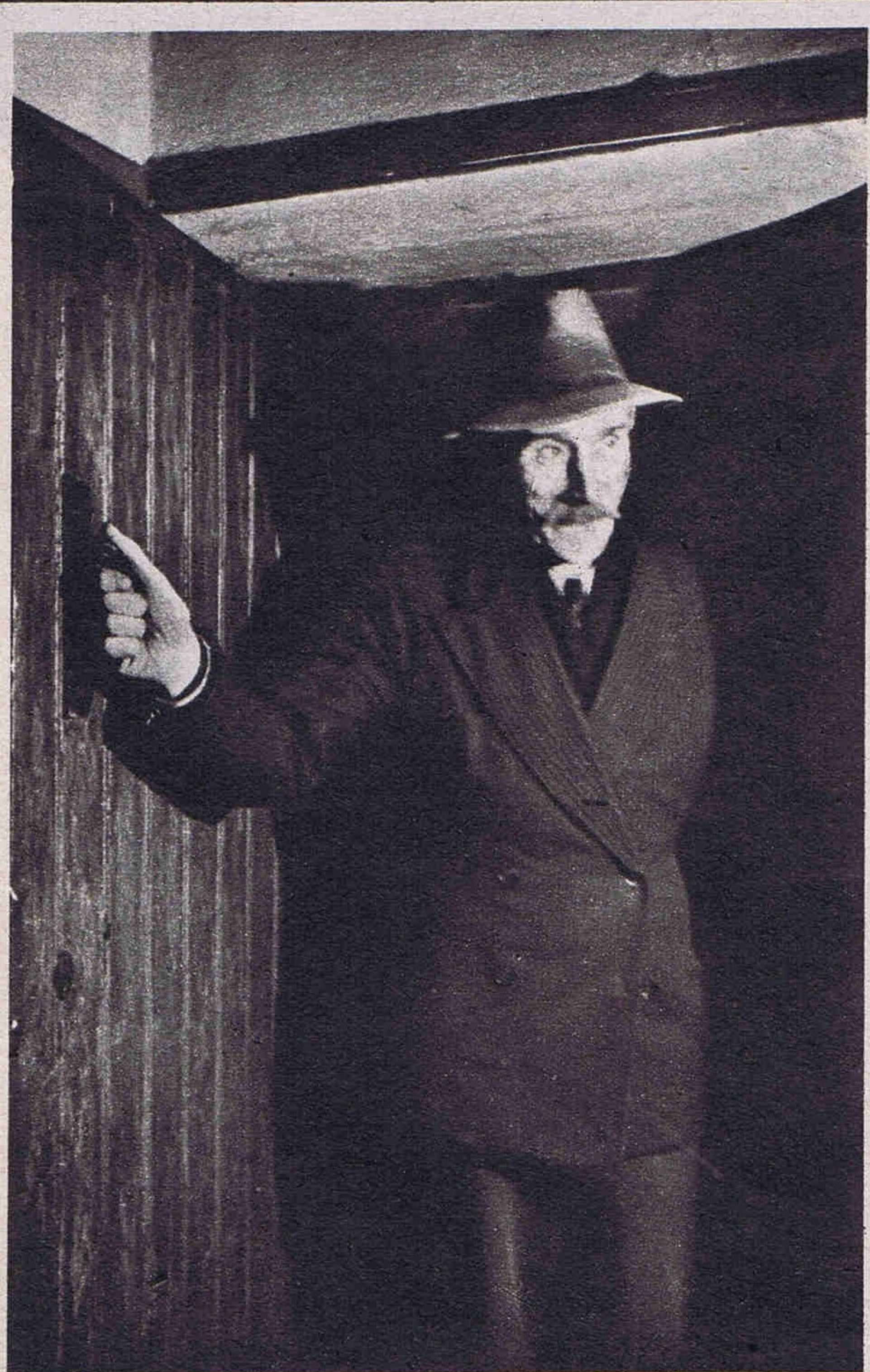
While the storytelling goes on in the firelight, the folk who sit round on forms or stools or sacks of salt, can forget the herring that have left the bay, the oats that lay rotting in the summer rain, the money from America that hasn't arrived. Every man of them can stroll through halls hung with purple; he can dine with kings and win the favours of princesses; and whatever comes against him—the elements in fury, or a seven-headed beast, or the craftiest trickster of the Eastern World—he is the master. To such people, the wonder tales are 'escape literature.' They are more than the movies are to us; and where you and I have Crosby or Bogart or Miss Bergman or Danny Kaye, the Teelin fisherman has Finn MacCumhaill and Oisín and the wild Fenian fighters of legends older than Christ.

Most, but not all, of the Irish traditional story-

tellers are old men. There are still plenty of them scattered down the west coast from Donegal to Kerry and round the bend to Cork; but nowadays, in most parts, the shanachie lacks an audience: and if he wants to keep his hand in, he must tell his tales to a stone wall as he herds his cattle, or to the tail of his cart on the road from market. Where the tradition flourishes, is in villages like Teelin, which has half-a-dozen skilled shanachies, all fishermen or fishermen's wives. There, on any night from September to mid-March, you are likely to find at least two kitchens where storytelling goes on for hours to an audience of perhaps a dozen, perhaps a score, of villagers.

Not that the tales are told only round the turf-fire. Fishermen mending their nets will send for a storyteller to come and help the dull time pass. Quarrymen, finding a shanachie in their midst, have been known to down tools, post a look-out for the foreman, and set the storyteller to work. The Teelin fishermen, out after salmon in the black shadow of Slieve League, will cast their nets, say their night-prayers, and get the shanachie going with his tales till it is time to haul again.

Best loved, but nowadays least heard, are the hero-tales of Finn and his warriors. A wide godlike procession moves through these stories, and as the shanachies tell them, they have the swirl and harshness of a sheepskin cloak, and the clangour of two-handed swords, and the gold-and-crimson glitter of an Erin-that-never-was.



The Latecomer From Over the Bog. The road was rough. The night, dark. But a good story is well worth a winter walk.



obliged them to mingle with the common people, often as casual labourers. There was no great gulf between the learned poetry and the folk poetry of the Gaelic world. The cultured poet took much of the common people's sense of values; the peasant poet absorbed much of the cultured man's skill in language and expression. Nowadays, when you hear a good modern shanachie like 70-year-old Michael Heaney, of Teelin, you get an idea of what the great court storytellers of the Middle Ages must have been like; for all that Mickey spent part of his life in the copper-mines of Butte, Montana.

Heaney is probably the best storyteller in a village of storytellers. He knows many Fenian tales, and he prefers to tell them in the homes of others. But 76-year-old Mary Donnegan, the subject of the pictures that go with this article, always tells her tales round her own hearth. As is usual with women, she tells no hero tales ('a woman teller of Fenian tales and a crowing hen!' is a proverb hereabouts). Most of her stories are rather shorter affairs, of rich and poor people, of sober fathers and wild sons, of murderers and hangmen sometimes, or of women with soft words for seals, or of fishermen and fishermen's wives and what the sea has done to them.

Mary Donnegan has little English; but as is usual in these parts, she has a vast Irish vocabulary, though she cannot read a word of the language. All her life she has known bitter poverty. At five, she lost her father. She was an orphan at eleven. For a while she worked in the fish-curing station set up by the Congested Districts Board ('Congested District' is good; you could walk half the day and never see a soul; but in the sense that the country can't support the few who live on it, it is 'congested' right enough). She married a quiet, hawk-faced fisherman named Magnus Donnegan and had three

sons. Two of them died young, and the third, Conall, was drowned while herring fishing one Christmas, sixteen years ago. "And ever since that day I am going down," she says.

While she was still a little orphan girl, she learned scores of stories, for her grandmother's cottage was a famous house of story-telling. And now, Mary Donnegan sits in the chimney corner of the cottage where she was born; and, blinking in the turf smoke, she tells her stories to the assembled neighbours, with all the Celtic partiality for esoteric and gorgeous phrases, and with that golden-mouthed Irish eloquence that still lingers (if Sean O'Casey is to be believed) even in the tenement-talk of Dublin—a kind of oratory that dates back to the old aristocratic bardic schools and beyond.

Her hands flicker in the lamplight. Her pale face shines out of the obscurity of her black shawl. Her firm old voice goes on unshaking, though her tale may have all the coloured twists and curleycues you find in Gaelic art. The audience, while the tale is on, make no sound except to draw their breath at some hellish happening, or suddenly laugh at a vivid and hilarious turn of plot.

It is strange to hear these tellers, reckoned ignorant, recounting tales full of the old culture of half the races of Europe—tales with something of Boccaccio in them, or of French fable, or of the wonder-stories of Byzantium and beyond; tales with all the heights and depths to be found in Shakespeare.

If you've anything of the Irishman's quick eye for a symbol, you may see something striking in the picture of that once-glittering tapestry of Gaelic culture, long since worn threadbare and trodden underfoot, whose remnants are still displayed in the firelight by a ghostly old woman in a black shawl and muddy shoes.

A. L. LLOYD.

Irish Storyteller and Her Audience
little through the centuries. Events are few, but is in the old tales of wonder and heroism.

Though the intricate and bloodstained old Fenian tales find few tellers now, there are still many shanachies who know long stories of a more international kind—the bright-hued tales of how the King's son searched for an Eastern Princess in a magic boat, or how Jack came back in triumph across the River of Death, with the answer to the three riddles on which the world depended.

They tell such tales, at an even and unflinching pace, in great detail, and with every grace and flash of colour that centuries of tradition has devised. Some of the stories are very long (one tale, *Eochair, the King of Ireland's Son*, taken down a few years ago from a Galway man named Eamonn Burc, runs into 34,000 words), and a good shanachie will commonly claim he has a different tale for every night of the year. Some, the teller will have learned from his parents; others, he will have picked up from neighbours or from the wandering beggar-men who, in the not-so-distant days of the evictions, were to be met with everywhere in the West of Ireland. The usual boast, and not an idle one, is: "No matter how long the story, I have but to hear it and I've got it!"

The chances are that the melancholy facts of Irish history have much to do with the high achievement of the shanachie's art. Waves of invasion and repression, from long before Norman times till long after the unforgotten days of Cromwell, repeatedly drove the aristocratic Gaelic poets and scholars out of the castles and the manors, and



The Mounting Excitement as the Tale of Wonder Unfolds
The stories are recounted in Gaelic. The audience is rapt. The teller believes every word. Most of her stories are fairy tales or embroidered accounts of local incident. Women rarely tell hero-tales.



The Climax of a Tale That Comes Out of the Blue Mists of the Past

THIS IS THE TALE THE OLD WOMAN TOLD:

There was a King then, and he had but one son. When hunting past the graveyard, he saw four men and a corpse. There was a debt on the corpse, and the man was not willing to bury the body till the debt was paid. The King's son gave five pounds, and the body was buried. He went on hunting in the snow, killed a black raven. He looked at it and said in his own mind he would only marry a woman whose hair was black as the bird's wing, whose skin was white as snow, and whose cheeks were red as the blood that was on the snow.

On the morning of the morrow he went away to find the woman. When he was going for some time he met with a red-haired young man, and hired him for half of all they should gain to the end of a year and a day.

The red man went down to the house of a giant, who was his kinsman. He said, "Uncle dear, the King of the prodigious Eastern World is coming to

kill you!" "I have an iron house outside there. Lock me into it," said the giant. So the red man locked the giant in, and he and his master had supper and rested in the giant's house. This was the giant's cry in the morning: "I am ready to perish with hunger. Let them open!" "I'll not let you out," said the red man, "till you tell me where the dark cloak is." The giant told him, but still the red man would not open.

The giant took a jump out between two bars of the iron house. Two halves were made of him. Half fell outside, half inside. The red man and his master rode on. They had the dark cloak.

That night the red man served another giant the same, and got from him the slippery shoes. And the next night, they met a third giant; and the red man did to him as to the others and took from him the sword of light.

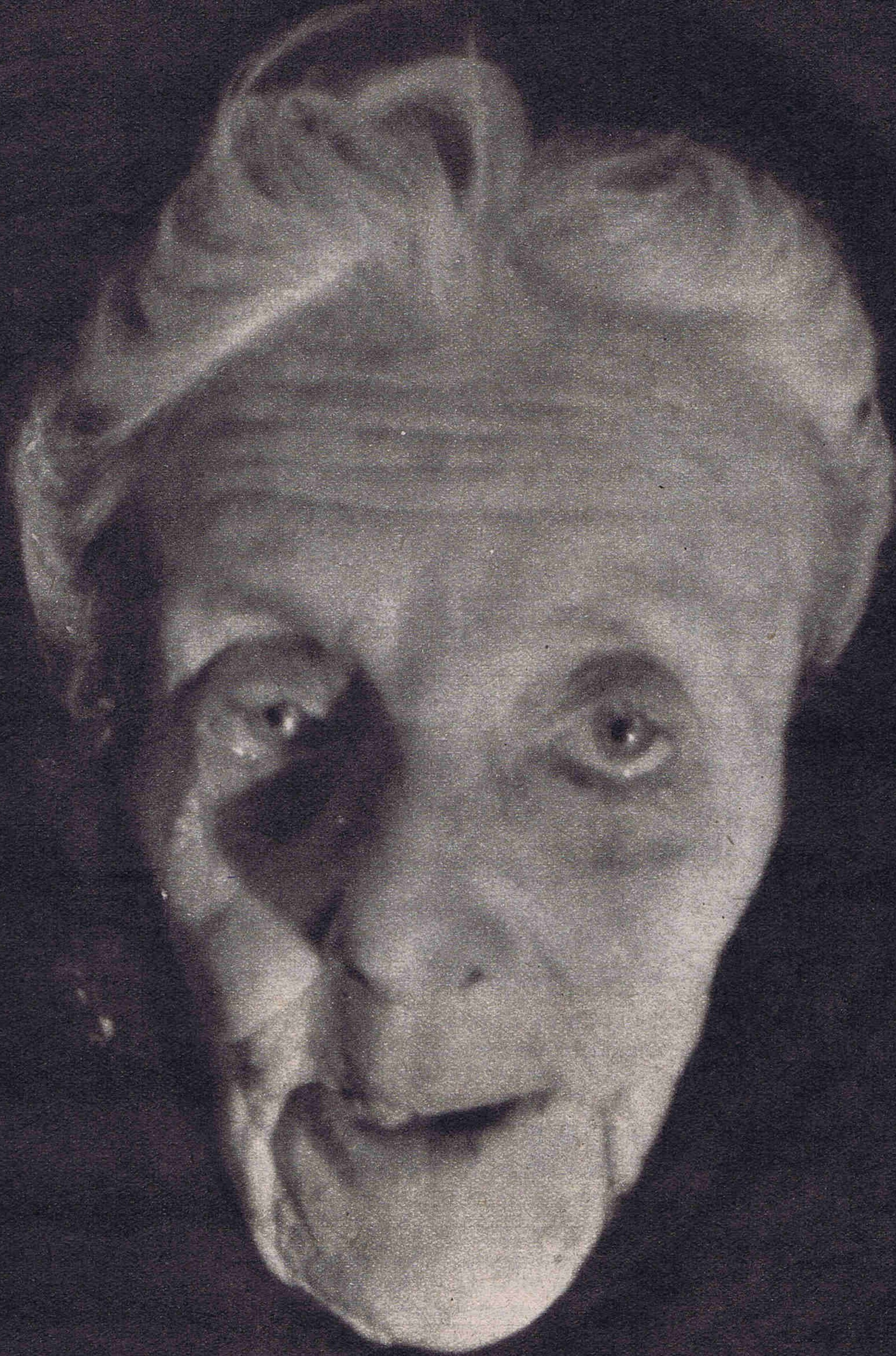
"Now," said the red man, "we shall be going home. There is not a tree in the wood on which a man's head is not hung except one tree that is

waiting for your head." "I will never go home," said the King's son, "till I get one sight of the woman I'm searching for."

They went forward to the house of the foreign King. While they were sitting to their supper, she came down from the top of the house. Her hair was black as the bird's wing, her skin as white as snow, her cheeks as red as blood. She came to the place they were eating and threw the King's son a comb. Said she, "If you have not the comb tomorrow, I will cut your head from you."

When they were going to bed, he found he had not the comb. His tears fell. The red man put on the dark cloak, and took with him the slippery shoes and sword of light. He followed the princess through the back yard down to the sea. She threw a shell in the sea, made a boat of it, and paddled across to an island. There was a great giant on the shore. "Have you got anything for me tonight?"

"I have not," she said, "but I'll have it tomorrow night. The son of the King of Erin is with me



The Look of the Storyteller Whose Life is Confined, but Whose Imagination Has No Horizon

tonight. Here is the comb I gave him : it is yours."

The giant threw the comb in a chest. Unseen, the red man took it, put it in his pocket. The princess milked the goats that filled the giant's house, one part of milk, one part of blood. That was their supper. The giant drew out an iron harrow and the skin of a white mare. They lay on that till morning.

When the day arose she went back, and the unseen red man with her. He gave the comb to the King's son. And when the princess saw he had the comb, she went by with one sweep and broke half the crockery that was on the table. "I have a third of your daughter won," said the son of the King of Erin.

The next night, the same play; this time with the princess's scissors. The red man followed her, got back the scissors from the giant and brought them to the son of the King of Erin. The princess asked him had he the scissors to give her. He threw her the scissors. She gave one sweep, and did not leave a bit of delf on the table she did not break in her

rage. The King's son said to the King he had two-thirds of his daughter won.

The next night she came down with a flight. "Unless you have the last lips I shall kiss this night, I'll have your head." "It's hard for me," said the King's son, "to know what are the last lips you kiss." The red man followed her to the giant's island. In the morning she rose and she went home. When she went, the red man whisked the head off the giant, put a knot in the ear, threw it over his shoulder, and he was on the shore as soon as she was. Unseen, he went home with her.

The red man came to his master in bed. "Here are the last lips she kissed last night." He took the head and threw it under the bed.

When breakfast was ready she came down in a flight. "Where are the last lips I kissed?" He put his hand under the bed, took hold of the giant's head, and threw it at her feet. When she saw the giant was dead, she gave a great sweep, and she left not a chair nor a table nor anything that was on

the table she did not make a smash of, so great was her anger.

"I have your daughter all won now," says the son of the King of Erin.

"Tie her hands and feet," says the red man, "and leave her lying there." He gave each a flail. "Strike you the first blow," he said to the King. The three were striking her for a long time till three blue flames came out of her mouth. "Loose her now," said the red man, "she is as quiet as any woman in the world."

The priest of the patterns and the clerk of the bells came. The pair were married. The red man stayed with them a year and a day, then said it was time for him to be going. Said he, "You remember the day you hunted past the graveyard? There were four men and a corpse, and a debt on the corpse, and the man not willing to bury the body till the debt was paid. You gave five pounds. It was I was in the coffin that day. Health be with you and blessing. You will set eyes upon me no more."