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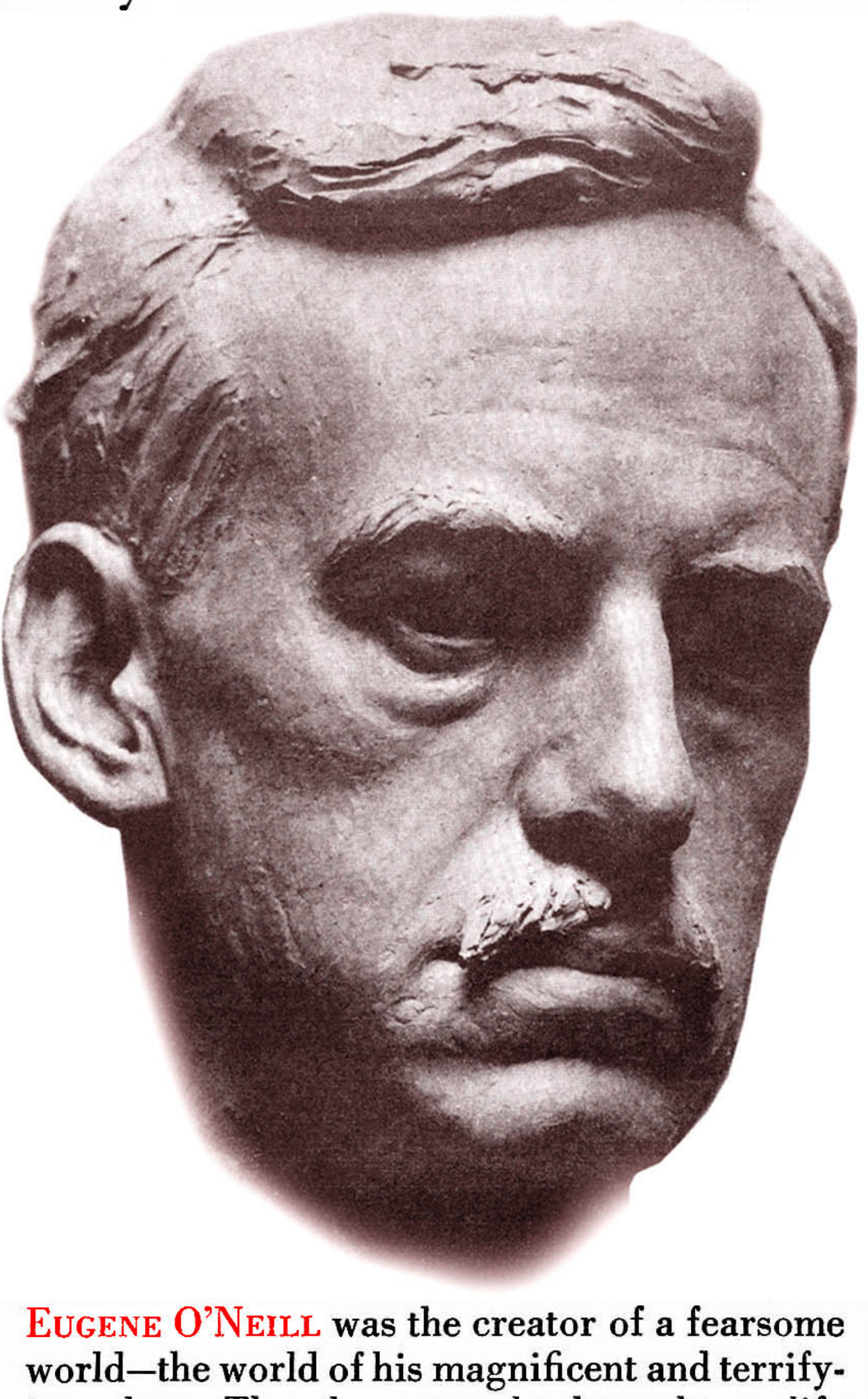
THE GREATEST TRAGEDY OF EUGENE O'NEILL

By CROSWELL BOWEN

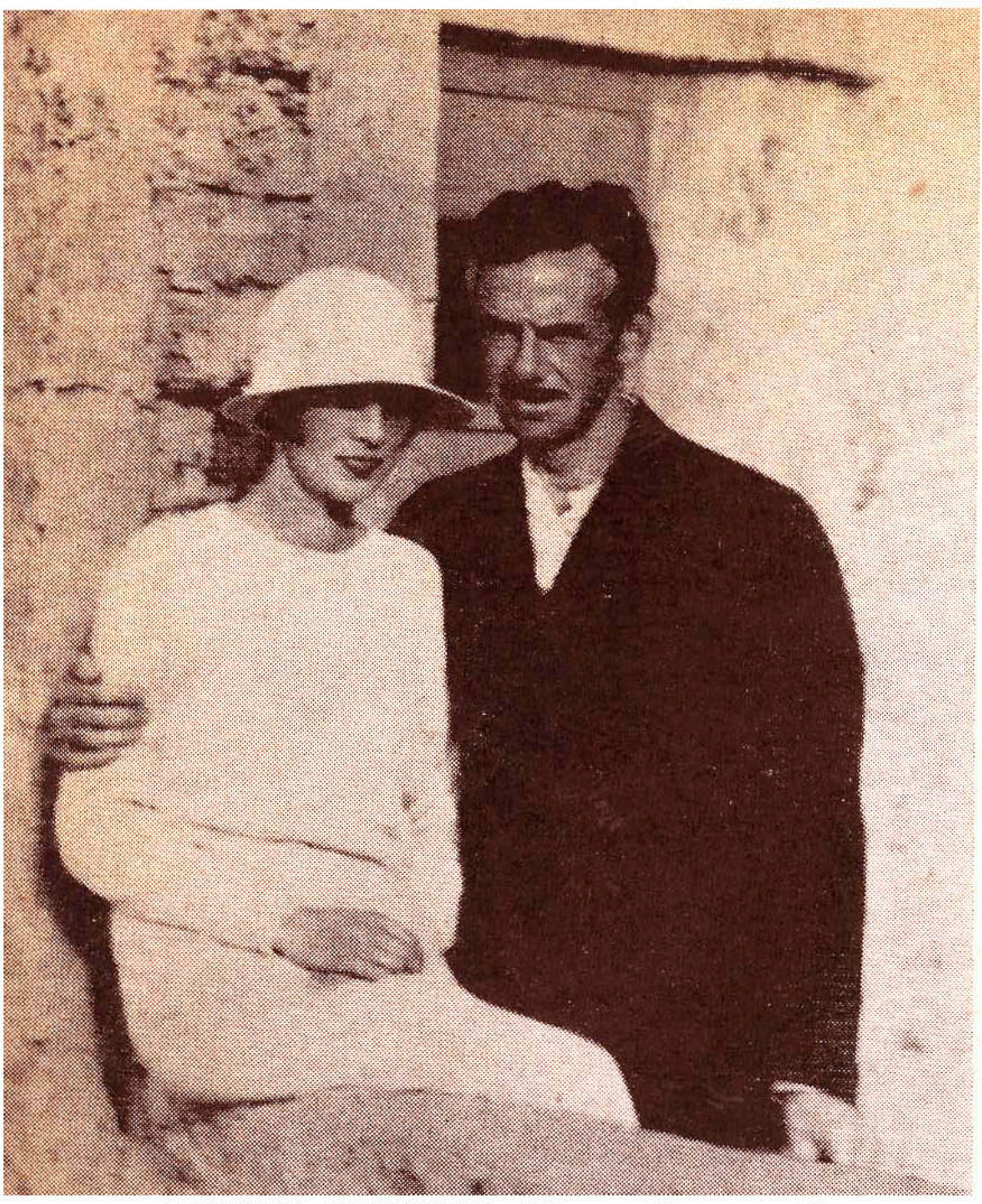


EUGENE O'NEILL was the creator of a fearsome world—the world of his magnificent and terrifying plays. The characters he brought to life were shrouded in tragedy. They were, it has been said, souls speaking to one another, souls that lived and suffered and died.

His other world—the world of his private life—was no less doomed.

O'Neill was reared in the Roman Catholic faith. Early in life, he acquired the Catholic conscience that runs so strongly through his plays. He was taught that man possesses free will and freedom of choice, but he also was told that God knows the future of all His creatures. The conflict of predestination and free will was an essential element in his development as a playwright. Ultimately, he came to believe that, free will or no, man is doomed, and most members of his family strengthened his belief as each in his own way moved inexorably to destruction.

Eugene's grandparents and their 10 children left Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century. They sailed to the New World by steerage and settled in Buffalo, N. Y. When theatrical companies came to Buffalo, the stage man-



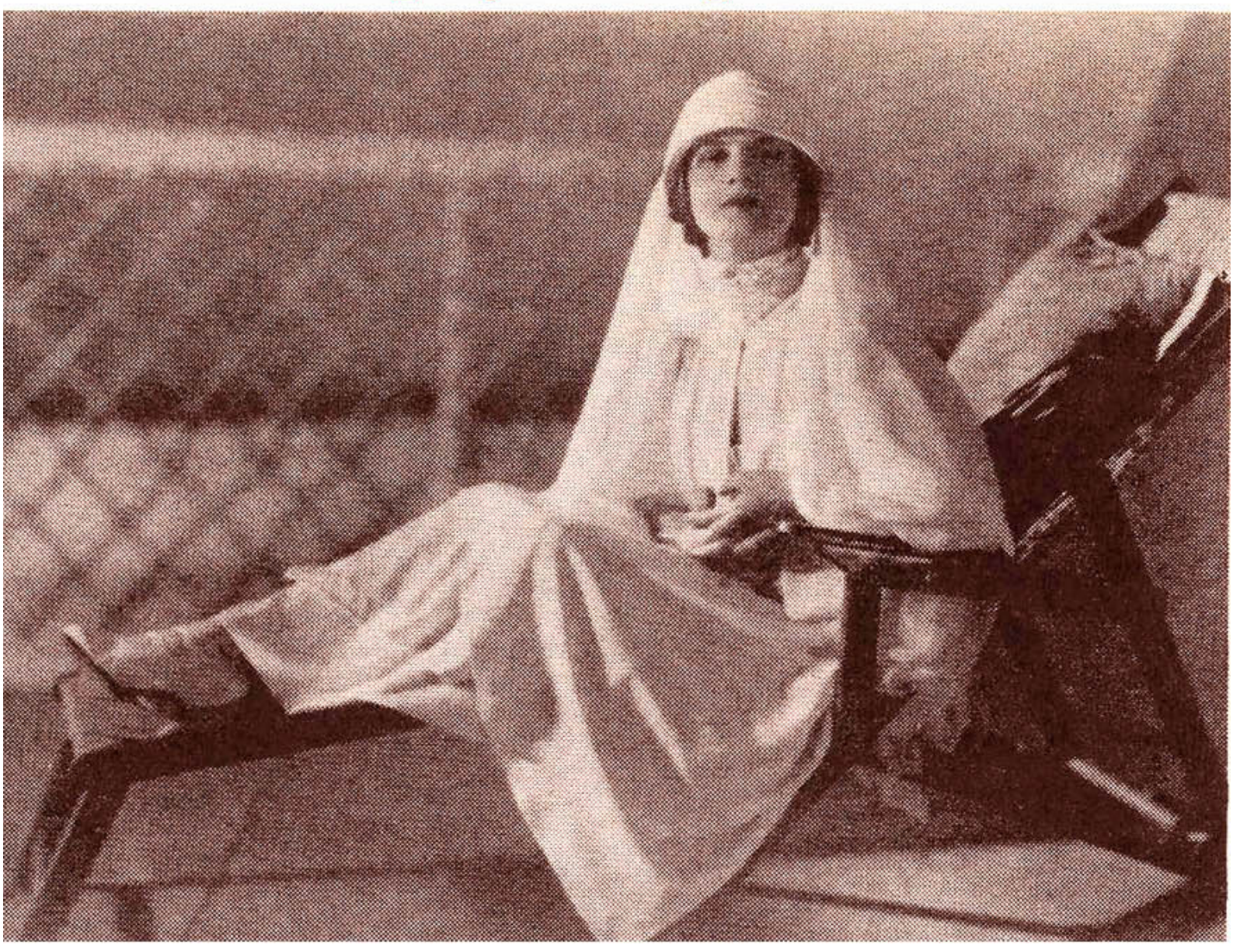
AGNES O'NEILL, Eugene's second wife, shared the lean years of his early career. His jealousy and sadistic violence marred this marriage.

agers would hire supernumeraries out of the pool hall. James O'Neill, who was to become Eugene's father, was always present and available, and soon became a permanent member of a touring company.

In 1875, Ella Quinlan, a girl from New Haven, Conn., who had planned to become a nun, fell in love with James the first time she saw him. After two years, she chose marriage instead of the convent.

Their first son, James O'Neill II, who was called Jamie, was born in San Francisco in 1878. The "II" was James Senior's tacit — and perhaps penitent — acknowledgment of an illegitimate son he sired early in his theatrical career. This boy, who died in early childhood, had been christened James O'Neill, Jr.

In 1882, James O'Neill played *The Count of Monte Cristo* for the first time at Booth's Theater in New York. The role of Dantes and the play were to bring him wealth and fame, but, paradoxically, they would embitter not only his own life, but also the life of his dramatist son years later. (Eugene was to hate the false sentiments that the play represented. James shared his feelings. He knew that the play was inferior, yet, according to reports, played Dantes 6,000 times. He got up to $40,000 a year by playing the part. But, though excessively frugal in family matters, he squandered most of the money in ridiculous speculations and unwise investments. Before he died, he told Eugene that the play had been his "curse" and had ruined what might have been an impressive theatrical career.)



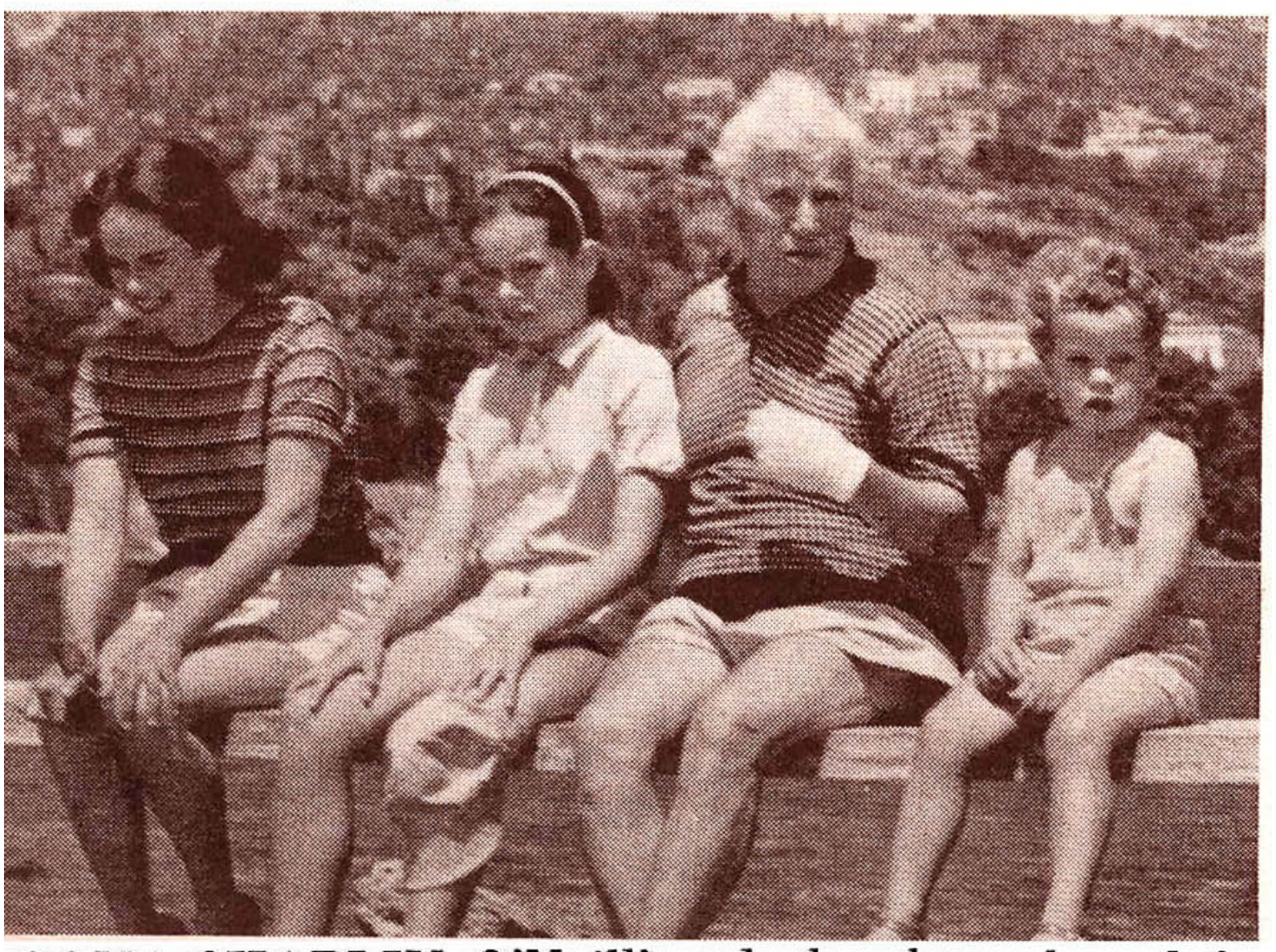
CARLOTTA MONTEREY, who became O'Neill's third wife, starred in one of his early stage successes, *The Hairy Ape*. After their marriage in 1929, she introduced him to a life of glamour such as he had never known. She told friends she encouraged her tough Irishman to "live like a duke."

A second son, Edmund, born in 1883, lived only two years. After Edmund's death, seven-year-old Jamie was deposited at the elementary school of Notre Dame University, where he remained for nine years. There was never time in the life of James O'Neill for paternal concern.

Ella's third child, it was said repeatedly in the family, was conceived "to replace Edmund." Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888, in a third-floor corner room of a family hotel on 43rd Street and Broadway. Eugene's birth was a difficult one, and the hotel doctor prescribed morphine. This was the start of his mother's drug addiction. That, at least, was the guilt-provoking story young Eugene grew up with and eventually woye into his autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

IN 1906, with a long, lonely childhood behind him, Eugene entered Princeton University. Academically, he was well prepared; emotionally, he was not. Released from the domination of his father and from convent-school disciplines, he did as little studying and as much drinking as possible—and he lasted one year. The older O'Neill decided it was time for Eugene to go to work, and arranged to get the boy a job in a mail-order house. Then, Eugene fell in love.

The girl, Kathleen Jenkins, lived with her divorced mother, a member of an old New York family. Both families strongly disapproved of the romance. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the opposition, Kathleen and Eugene were married at Trinity Episcopal Church in Hoboken, N. J., in 1909. James O'Neill took immediate steps to have the marriage annulled. Failing that, it is believed, he arranged to get Eugene out of the



OONA CHAPLIN, O'Neill's only daughter, above, left, was cut off by her father after her marriage to Charlie Chaplin in 1943. She was 18; Chaplin, 54. Oona later renounced her U. S. citizenship. At Cap Ferrat, France, Chaplin sits between Geraldine and Eugene, two of their six children.

country. In any case, shortly after the wedding, Eugene left on a gold-mining expedition to Honduras.

On May 10, 1910, while Eugene was still away, Kathleen bore him a son, whom she named Eugene Gladstone O'Neill, Jr. The Honduras venture was a financial failure. Eugene returned to New York debilitated physically and emotionally. Only his haunting feeling of inadequacy had been strengthened. He did not get in touch with his wife, but went to the apartment when Kathleen was out and asked her mother to allow him to see his son. He held the baby in his arms and cried. Then, he went to the room he had rented above a water-front saloon, took an overdose of sleeping medicine and lay down to die.

In this suicide attempt, from which he was rescued by friends, O'Neill was giving expression to an inner drive toward self-destruction that was repeated at many stages in his life. Freudian analysts call it the "death wish." Drama critic Brooks Atkinson, a few years after O'Neill's death, described it as "an infatuation with oblivion." In 1946, a literary statistician ascertained that, in the world of O'Neill plays, there had been 12 murders, eight suicides, 22 other deaths and seven cases of insanity.

A divorce, financed by Kathleen's mother, became final on October 11, 1912. Kathleen was given custody of Eugene O'Neill, Jr., but no provision was made for his support. It was not until the boy was 11 that the dramatist again saw his first-born son.

THE summer preceding the divorce, all four members of the O'Neill family were together in their house in New London, Conn. A tense, explosive mood pervaded the reunion, created by the drug addiction of Eugene's mother and the heavy

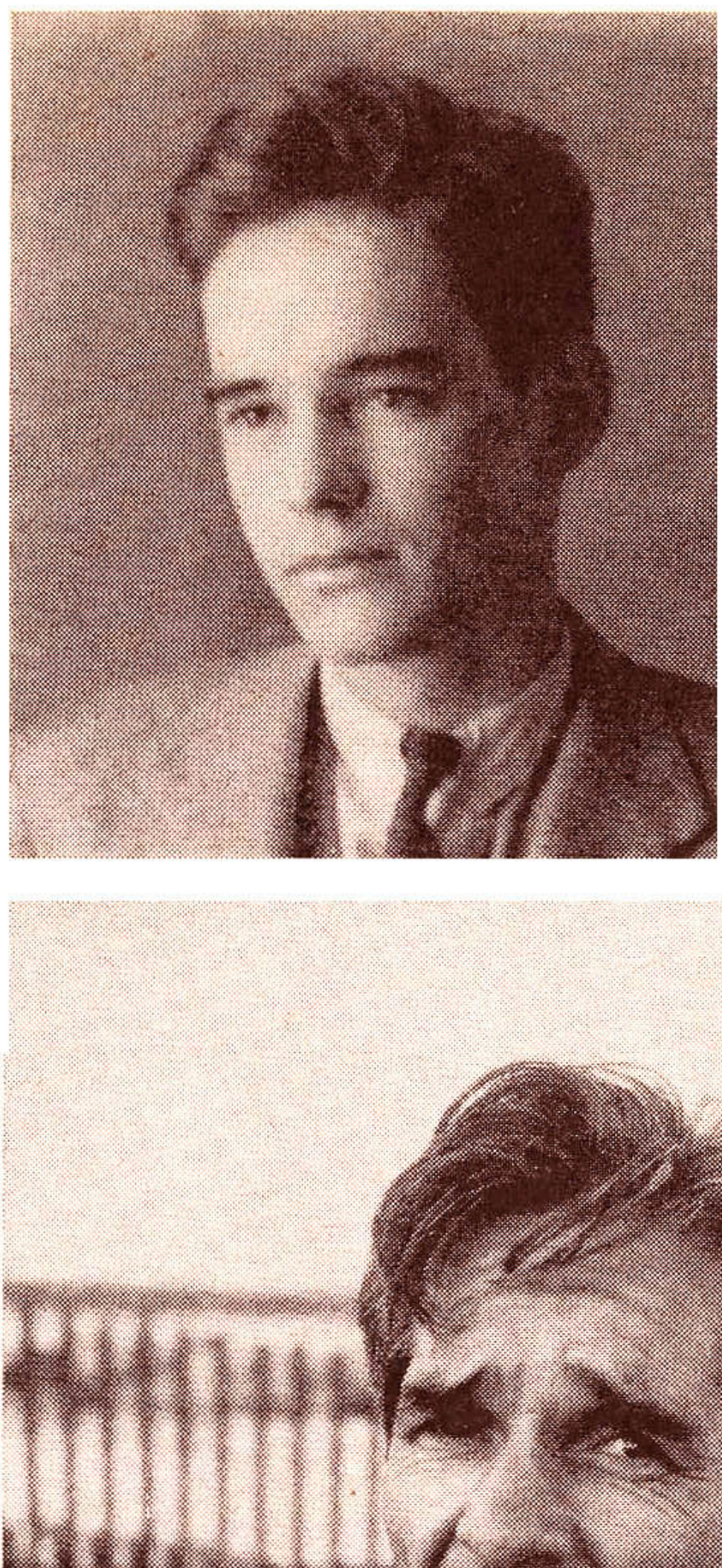
EUGENE, JR., was his father's favorite. Before his suicide in 1950, he had distinguished himself as a Greek scholar, teacher, writer and TV personality.

drinking of the three O'Neill men. Ella O'Neill's addiction isolated her from New London's social group and, indeed, from her family. But drugs were not her only curse. She had never gotten over her girlhood desire to be a nun and, in consequence, had never adjusted to the role of wife and mother; her picture of what she might have been contrasted sharply with what she was.

Jamie was well on his way to becoming a hopeless alcoholic. His father had killed Jamie's ambition to become a newspaperman by forcing him to act in *Monte Cristo*. Jamie had little acting talent and knew it. And he hated the play. He was also openly jealous of Eugene's already apparent writing ability.

Recollections of those who knew Eugene in the summer of 1912 offer an impression of a charming young man whose interests centered in literature. But he found other diversions, mainly girls. One of these girls he later made the heroine of *Ah, Wilderness!*, the tender, poignant story of a boy reaching for manhood. In that play, Nat Miller, the father of the adolescent boy, is wise, understanding and compassionate. Many people thought that O'Neill had written about his own family. "The truth is," O'Neill readily admitted, "*Ah, Wilderness!* was nostalgia for a youth I never had."

About the middle of 1915, O'Neill discovered a Greenwich Village barroom, commonly called the Hell Hole, that was to become his headquarters for one long year of sustained drinking. Thirty years later, he re-created this establishment as Harry Hope's saloon in *The Iceman Cometh*. The title refers to death; for death, the sudden and the lingering, was never far from the Hell Hole. "They manage to get drunk by hook or crook



SHANE O'NEILL worshiped his father, but as a young man (top) was too shy to make friends with him. At 39 (above), he is withdrawn and indifferent about work.

and keep their pipe dreams," O'Neill wrote of his companions, "and that's all they ask of life. I've never known more contented men." They were, he said, the best friends he ever had.

THAT liquor ever had a serious hold on O'Neill is unlikely in the face of his work record. He liked to drink with other men who were drinking. He liked the companionship. But he always returned to his writing after he recovered from the physical devastation of his hang-overs and the anguish of his guilt. Giving up drinking meant giving up the one world where he felt he "belonged." Nevertheless, that is what he did when the time came to get his work done.

In the fall of 1917, O'Neill met the woman who was to become his second wife: Agnes Boulton Burton, a 24-year-old widow with a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Agnes had come to the Village to see a friend.

Agnes, who came from a highly successful family of writers, poets and artists, had already established herself as a writer of fiction. Shortly

after their meeting. O'Neill told her, "You are the only one who can make me sure of myself—sure about everything. . . . I want you alone—in an aloneness broken by nothing. Not even children. I don't understand children; they make me uneasy and I don't know how to act with them." On the evening of April 12, 1918, in the home of a Presbyterian minister in Provincetown, Mass., Eugene and Agnes were married.

When Agnes learned that she was pregnant, a year after their marriage, she remembered that Eugene wanted her without children. She did not rush home to tell him the news; she told him the next day. "His first reaction was that the doctor had made a mistake; his second reaction was silence."

On October 30, Agnes gave birth to a 10-pound boy, who was christened Shane Rudraighe O'Neill. If Eugene thought of his first son, Eugene, Jr., at this time, he never mentioned it to anyone. Agnes was still unaware that an older son existed.

The ailing, aging James O'Neill, Sr., made a great to-do over Shane. "Remember, lad," he said, "you are a descendant of Irish kings. You'll carry the line on and on into the future." He could not know that Shane would indeed follow the footsteps of the O'Neills — through alcoholism, drug addiction and despair.

When James O'Neill died in 1920, Eugene and Jamie went on one of the most protracted benders that has ever been seen in New London. Eugene later revealed something of what he felt for his father in *The Great God Brown:* "What aliens we were to each other! When he lay dead, his face looked so familiar that I wondered where I had met that man before. Only at the second of my conception. After that, we grew hostile with concealed shame." Unfortunately, Eugene achieved no closer bond with his own children.

Early in 1922, when O'Neill's play *Anna Christie* became a hit, a lawyer friend of Eugene's first wife suggested she have O'Neill pay for their son's education. It was a hard decision for Kathleen since she had remarried and it would mean telling young Eugene who his real father was; but she agreed.

O'Neill, friendly to the lawyer's overtures, asked to meet his son. Kathleen took the boy to the entrance of an apartment building, told him that he was not Richard Pitt-Smith, as he had grown up believing, but that his real father was a famous

man. She told him to ask for Eugene O'Neill's apartment and said he would meet his father. Then, she left him.

Agnes has recalled that the meeting went off well, although O'Neill was shy and embarrassed. She was surprised to learn that O'Neill had been married before, but delighted at the prospect of welcoming a second son into the group. Eugene decided that his first son had an excellent mind and should go to a first-rate school. He paid his way at Horace Mann School for Boys, and almost overnight the lad turned into a serious, hard-working student. But one of the masters noted, "He was touchy about references to his father. I had the feeling that he was convinced he was illegitimate."

O'Neill's mother died of a brain tumor on the last day of February, 1922, in Los Angeles. Jamie, who had been her constant companion, sent word that he was bringing her body back to New York. When Eugene and Agnes met the train, Jamie was roaring drunk. He told his brother that when their mother had fallen into unconsciousness, he had been beside himself with grief and had gone out and ended a two-year period of sobriety. When he returned, he had stood at the foot of her bed. She had opened her eyes, he said, just long enough to see that he was drunk again. Then, she closed her eyes and died—"glad to die," Jamie was sure.

Jamie had been inordinately fond of his mother and never married. After her death, he had nothing to live for, except drinking. In November, Jamie suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died at the age of 45.

Now, for the first time in his life, O'Neill found himself financially secure. He had the money from his mother's and Jamie's estates, and the royalties on his plays amounted to approximately $850 a week. But money could not help his marriage. He and Agnes were encountering serious difficulties. There were many pressures. Both were strong-minded and temperamental. Both were writers. And both were very much in love. There were frequent quarrels, and at times O'Neill went at his wife with his fists. Ugly as these disputes were, the remorse he suffered after them was worse.

In December, 1924, the O'Neill's took a cottage in Bermuda. Shane was five years old, and his lonely life was showing a startling parallel to that of his father at the same age. His parents were constantly moving,

and there was very little family harmony. On May 25, 1925, a daughter, Oona, was born. O'Neill decided he wanted to live permanently in Bermuda. Wherever he lived, the houses he bought were always big, as if their very size would insure stability and permanence. They never did.

They spent the summer of 1926 at Belgrade Lakes in Maine. O'Neill was finishing the second half of his *Strange Interlude*, which will probably always stand out as one of his truly great plays. His work schedule was exhausting, but there was some social life too. One of the O'Neills' neighbors had as her guest that summer the actress Carlotta Monterey.

THIS was O'Neill's second meeting with Carlotta. She had starred in his play *The Hairy Ape*. She was the same age as O'Neill, 38; she was a successful actress of stage and screen; she was remarkably beautiful and had been married three times. Agnes was unaware that Carlotta had made any particular impression on her husband. The children, however, were more observant (Eugene, Jr., was there too). They buzzed among themselves about the beautiful lady who wore a bathing suit that was one piece; there was "so little of it." To them, Father had seemed quite taken with her.

It was not long before all New York knew O'Neill was in love with Carlotta. Carlotta has said, "He didn't say, 'I love you. I think you are wonderful. I think you are grand.' He kept saying, 'I need you. I need you.' And he did need me, I discovered." Evidently, O'Neill saw in Carlotta, among other things, a woman who could understand and requite his desperate need for maternal affection.

In February, 1928, O'Neill went to London. He had made his decision to leave his wife and children. Agnes received the news in a wire from the New York *World* which asked her about a report of divorce between herself and O'Neill.

In his farewell letter to Shane, O'Neill asked him to "write me a long letter sometime soon and tell me everything that you and Oona are doing because it will probably be a long, long time before I will be able to see you both again. But I will often think of you, and I will miss you both very much. I often lie in bed before I go to sleep—or when I don't go to sleep—and I picture to myself all about Spithead [the house in Ber-

muda] and what you both have been doing all day and I wonder how you are—and then I feel very sad and life seems to me a silly, stupid thing, even at best, when one lives it according to the truth that is in one. But you are not old enough to know what that feeling is—and I hope to God you never will know, but that your life will always be simple and contented! But always remember that I loved you and Oona an awful lot—and please don't ever forget your Daddy. . . ."

To Shane, this letter was a shattering experience, perhaps as cruel a letter, for all its expressions of affection, as any child has ever received from a father fleeing from his responsibilities. To adult eyes, the self-pity is transparent. Here again, life merged with plot, for O'Neill was passing along to his own children a heritage of insecurity similar to the one his own parents had given him.

A divorce was granted Agnes on July 2, 1929. Three weeks later, O'Neill and Carlotta were married in a civil ceremony in Paris. They stayed in Europe for two years.

Shane and Oona went to live at Point Pleasant, N. J., in the home of Agnes's parents. Shane worshiped his father and wrote him long letters, but answers became less and less frequent. When O'Neill did write, he dwelt at length on the activities of Eugene, Jr. The constant reminders of how well his older brother was doing in his studies and in sports at Yale tended to destroy Shane's already pitiful view of his own importance. O'Neill had always seemed partial to his first-born son. Young Gene had none of Shane's shyness, and he shared with his father an interest in literature, especially drama and poetry.

For O'Neill, life with Carlotta was far different from anything he had experienced previously. She told friends she encouraged her tough Irishman to "live like a duke." The two returned to the United States on May 17, 1931. O'Neill was now completely isolated not only from Agnes, but from his children as well. Carlotta had become, in effect, a protective screen between O'Neill and the enervating distractions of the outside world.

Shane came out of his shell during four years at the Florida Military Academy, to which Agnes sent him in 1934. In fact, he became a "character." Drinking, he discovered,

eased his painful shyness. When he finished school and enrolled at the Art Students League in New York City, he found no difficulty at all making friends with his fellow students, many of whom were habitués of the bars of Greenwich Village. The Village became "home" to Shane, as it once had been to his father.

Oona joined Shane in some of his classes at the League. At 17, and in her senior year at Brearley, Oona was a strikingly beautiful girl. She was dark, and like all the O'Neills, she had that "black Irish" look. Physically, she had matured early. She showed little interest in youths from St. Paul's and Choate—already she was being squired by men in their thirties and even forties. It was apparent she knew pretty much what she was doing and where she was going. It may have been her salvation that she seemed to sail untouched and unperturbed through the maelstroms into which the other O'Neills were always being drawn.

During the winter of 1942-43, Oona saw a great deal of the comedian Charles Chaplin. Agnes reports, "When she told me of her plans to marry him, I asked her if she realized what she was letting herself in for. Chaplin was 54, three times as old as she. . . . I'll never forget how she answered me. Looking me straight in the eyes, she replied, 'Mother, I will never love another man in my life.'"

Oona and Charlie were married on June 16, 1943. It was Chaplin's fourth marriage. O'Neill disapproved of the union, but made no public comment on it. According to a friend of Oona, he wrote his daughter a "very harsh and severing letter." Oona never heard from her father again. Sadly, he had never troubled to establish a close relationship with her. There had been no relationship at all

O'Neill's trail of tragedy lengthened the following year when he had a paralytic stroke and was confined to bed for six months. The stroke left him with "an increasing and incurable palsy." It also left him unable to write, perhaps his only reason for living.

THE closest family bond O'Neill established was with Eugene, Jr. They kept in touch by mail. At 35, Eugene, Jr., had an impressive record as scholar, teacher and writer. He had less success in his marital career. He had already had three marriages —all ending in divorce. In 1944, bored with his teaching job at Yale, he drifted down to Greenwich Vil-

lage, where Shane welcomed him. But the pattern of their childhood roles continued; Shane remained the shy kid brother, and Eugene "took over." They seemed to be on equal footing only in their drinking ability.

The wartime Greenwich Village was much different from the Village of the 1920's. Now it was rough and brassy and honky-tonk. Drinking had become old hat. There were other thrills to be had—Benzedrine and marijuana. The spirit of the Village was one of contempt for society and despair for mankind.

Cathy Given, who became Shane's wife, was, like him, a rebellious child. Thin and Irish-looking, she and Shane were astonishingly alike physically. She also resembled him in lack of competitiveness. Both seemed totally indifferent about survival. They were married on July 31, 1944. Shane was 24, Cathy was 20. At first, they had no home, no place to live. They drifted from one friend to another, staying where they could find a haven.

By the time their first child was born on November 19, 1945, they had a small apartment in the Village and Shane had a job in a factory. The baby, a boy, was to become another link in the O'Neill chain of tragedy. On February 11, Cathy went to look at the baby. He was sleeping in a makeshift crib, a pillow placed at the bottom of a bureau drawer. He seemed too still. Cathy touched his forehead. The child was dead. After an autopsy, the verdict was, "Postural asphyxia from bedclothes. Accidental."

Shane's health declined steadily during the following year. He worked irregularly and had no money. Young Gene tried to talk to him to give him advice, but he seemed unconcerned. At cocktail parties in the Village, it was observed he didn't drink, yet he always looked as if he had a hangover. On August 10, 1948, O'Neill learned that Shane had been arrested and imprisoned by the Federal authorities in New York City for possessing heroin. O'Neill would have nothing to do with the case. Cathy could not raise the $500 bail, and Eugene, Jr., said there was nothing he could do to help. Shane finally went to the Federal hospital at Lexington, Ky., for four months.

O'Neill's apparent inability to face the problem of drug addiction in this instance might be understandable in the light of his earlier experiences with it. His first and perhaps only genuine reaction was horror and

guilt—the horror and guilt he had felt regarding his mother's addiction. Besides, by 1948, O'Neill was seriously ill and had aged horribly, physically and spiritually. He was no longer master of his own destiny.

Eugene, Jr., had his own problems. Along with his teaching schedule, he had embarked on a career in radio and television. He was a panel member of CBS's *Invitation to Learning*, chairman of a series called *Children's Classics* and, from time to time, a panelist on *Author Meets the Critics*. However, early in 1947, he destroyed in a few minutes the new career he had created. He showed up drunk and disheveled for a scheduled TV appearance. In television, a performer appears drunk only once.

His drinking was also responsible for his losing a teaching post at Princeton. For two years, he tried to make a living by teaching or lecturing in small colleges. But he found less and less peace. On September 25, 1950, the O'Neills were notified that Eugene was dead. It was not too difficult to piece together what had taken place on the morning of his death. Knowing that it is easier to bleed to death when one is immersed in hot water—an ancient Roman method of suicide—he had stepped into the bathtub and cut his wrists and ankles. Then, perhaps, he had changed his mind. A trail of blood indicated that he got out of the tub and went to the telephone. It had been cut off. He didn't make it to the front door. A state trooper found a note under an empty whiskey bottle in the bathroom. It read: "Never let it be said of an O'Neill that he failed to empty a bottle. *Ave atque vale.*" His mother, Kathleen, attended the funeral. O'Neill sent a floral piece with a card reading, "Father." Carlotta sent a separate piece.

Eugene O'Neill lived three years and two months after the death of his eldest son. They were probably the most wretched years of his tragedy-scarred life. It was "on or about the first of February, 1951," to quote the bitter words of a legal document, that Carlotta charged O'Neill with being "guilty of cruel and abusive treatment" at that time, as well as on "diverse occasions."

IT was generally known in the neighborhood of Point o' Rocks in Massachusetts, where the O'Neills were living in the winter of 1951, that O'Neill and Carlotta were unwell and that dissension had split the

household. A doctor was keeping both husband and wife under sedation. When the doctor visited the home on February 5, he found O'Neill lying in the front yard, unable to rise. Carlotta, in a highly nervous state, accompanied O'Neill to Salem Hospital. When O'Neill had been put to bed with no one allowed in his room, Carlotta began shouting in the hospital lobby. Alarmed attendants called the police. Later, a psychiatrist, Dr. Merrill Moore, was summoned to attend Carlotta at the police station. After medical examination by a physician, she was admitted to McLean Hospital, Belmont, Mass.

The next day, it was revealed that O'Neill was suffering from Parkinson's disease, in addition to a fractured leg. Carlotta was placed under treatment.

Dr. Moore advised O'Neill that he and Carlotta should be separated. He felt that Carlotta was not at all well. On March 23, O'Neill signed a petition in which he contended that Carlotta was "incapable of taking care of herself." However, an expert in legal psychiatry, retained by the hospital to protect Carlotta's rights, concluded that her behavior was the result of "delirium from bromides." Released from the hospital, she took a room in a Boston hotel and filed a petition for separate support.

Toward the middle of April, Carlotta was able to reach O'Neill by phone. Shortly thereafter, O'Neill announced that he would be going back to Carlotta, and all legal actions were dropped. Eleven days after the reunion, he signed a new will. All of his estate "of whatever nature" he gave, devised and bequeathed to Carlotta. Concerning their reunion, O'Neill made only this comment: "It is my destiny that I go back."

IN the summer of 1952, on their way to Europe for a six-week visit, Oona and Charlie Chaplin stopped off to visit Shane, Cathy and their three children in New York. It had been almost seven years since Shane and Oona had seen each other. The visit was somewhat marred by reports from Washington that the Attorney General was going to investigate Chaplin's alleged subversive activities before allowing him to return to the United States. They never returned to live in America. Oona dropped her citizenship and became a British subject. The Chaplins now

have six children. When her second son was born in 1953, Oona wrote Shane that she was naming him Eugene, but she did not otherwise refer to her father. That same year, 1953, Eugene O'Neill's greatest tragedy, his own life, ended.

He began to sink on the evening of Thursday, November 26. His pulse grew weaker; his breathing, more troubled. At his bedside when he died were his wife, his nurse and his wife's psychiatrist. Carlotta, following O'Neill's request, saw to it that the funeral was private. His family read of his death in the papers.

Late in 1958, after the recent resurgence of interest in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, I took a walk with Shane along the New Jersey shore. "I'm bored with all this talk about me and my father," he said. "It doesn't interest me. . . ." I asked if he didn't think he should pay some attention to money matters on account of Cathy and their four children. His answer was like an echo, bringing back his father's unshakable precepts of destiny and doom. No, he said, they would be taken care of. It didn't matter what he did or anyone did; things turned out just the same. You got by or you didn't. "Maybe I'll get a good job and keep it. In any case, it doesn't matter. It's of great indifference to me."

END