

DAVID NIVEN'S OWN STORY OF HIS LIFE AND LOVES

THE STORY SO FAR

Born in England in 1910, David Niven was a soldier before he became an actor. After graduating from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he joined the Highland Light Infantry, but resigned his commission when his mother died, and went to New York. Jobs were scarce because of the Depression. David moved on to Hollywood and got a screen test — not a success. He eked out his pay as a film extra by working on a fishing boat. Then Samuel Goldwyn gave him a seven-year contract which opened Hollywood's doors. Painfully he learned the actor's craft in small roles, but within four years had several starring roles to his credit.

World War II broke out and he went to England and joined the Rifle Brigade, transferring to the Commandos when this tough assault corps was formed.

He fell in love with a WAAF he saw in a London nightclub, met her later by chance, and married her within ten days.

Promoted to major, he was seconded to "Phantom," a frontline communications corps. His first son was born. Just before the Normandy landings he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel and sent to work for U.S. General Ray Barker during the Allied invasion of Europe.

IN May, 1945, the war in Europe was officially over, but Hitler's werewolves were still on the prowl.

After the Normandy landings, in June, 1944, and the Belgian campaign, the last great German offensive of the war erupted.

General Skorzeny's German "Trojan Horse Brigade" — American-speaking and wearing American uniforms — infiltrated behind U.S. Army lines, killing and sabotaging as they went.

I was still under direct orders from U.S. General Ray Barker, though I was in the British Army. I had been sent to work for General Barker on liaison in the field between the Allied armies.

In my British uniform and jeep, I had some anxious moments at the hands of understandably trigger-happy GIs, as the Allies advanced.

Identification papers meant nothing. "Hands above your head, buddy — all right — so who won the World Series in 1940?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I do know I made a picture with Ginger Rogers in 1938."

"OK. Beat it, Dave, but watch your step . . ."

Time and again I was stopped, and, thanks entirely to Sam Goldwyn having made my face familiar, I survived.

I crossed the Rhine at Wesel and I had never seen such destruction — the smoking town had ceased to exist. At Munster nothing

was left standing except a bronze statue of a horse.

Hitler had started the whole horrible shambles, but, looking at the places where his chickens had come home to roost, I watched the miserable survivors picking around in the ruins of their towns and was unable to raise a glimmer of a gloat.

I cannot claim to have exerted much pressure on squabbling field-marshals and generals, but way down the scale, attached to various units, I must have done what General Barker wanted. At any rate, in September, 1945, he pinned the American Legion of Merit on me, and the British Army gave me 1 suit, worsted grey 1 hat, Homburg, brown 2 shirts, poplin, with collars 1 tie, striped 1 pair shoes, walking, black — and, above all, my FREEDOM.

It was an unbelievable feeling to be free again.

Primmie, my wife, was due to have a second baby in November, so we took little David, our first child, then nearly three, and treated ourselves to a holiday.

Then I sent a cable to America to Samuel Goldwyn, who had me under contract up to the outbreak of war, to the effect that I was "available."

Huge relief

Goldwyn generously replied that he was giving me a new five-year contract at a mouth-watering figure, and meanwhile was loaning me to Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger to star in "A Matter of Life and Death" in England.

This was a huge relief because although I had been disguising it from Primmie I was extremely nervous about my future.

It was six years since I had left Hollywood. Six months is too long for an actor to be out of business —



DAVID NIVEN and his second wife, Hjordis, a top model in Sweden before marriage.

six years is almost certain disaster.

A whole new breed of stars had taken over movie audiences, and at 35 I had good reason to be worried.

Powell and Pressburger wrote a brilliant screenplay. Their picture was a big success on both sides of the Atlantic, and in Britain was chosen as the first Royal Command Film.

Primmie produced our second son, Jamie, and we set about planning our new life.

She was wildly excited at the prospect of going to Hollywood, but nervous about the people she would meet.

"I'm not nearly beautiful enough," she would say. "I'll be lost in all that glamor."

She knew exactly what she wanted — "an old house, falling down, that we can do over, a big rambling garden for the children and dogs, and a view of the mountains or the ocean."

She started buying old furniture, Regency, mostly,

generals, privates, hospital nurses, taxi-drivers, country squires, and Mrs. Wisden, an evacuee from the London docks who had been billeted on Primmie at our cottage.

I took a sadistic delight in standing at the door and personally winking out the gatecrashers.

"Please go away . . . you've never been nice to me in your life."

The evening cost a fortune — but no matter, we could save later.

Next morning I went to collect my sailing permit.

"Sorry, old man," said the official, "can't give you that till you show us your income tax clearance."

Off I went to another office.

The man who interviewed me was a thin, self-important civil servant with a particularly active Adam's apple.

"Now, let's see, you want

come back to Britain during that time. But it cost me several thousand pounds for my six years in the British Army.

I caught the ship — packed like a sardine-tin with 15,000 troops.

From New York, I took a sleeper on the transcontinental train for California. I was very tired.

New stars

David Selznick was on the train and he brought me up to date on Hollywood. David was a friend who never minced words.

"It's going to be tough for you," he said. "It's a whole new ball game now — a lot of new stars and new directors have come up. You're lucky to have Goldwyn behind you."

At Chicago, a telegram was delivered from Edmund Goulding (the film director who got me my first Hollywood contract) saying that he was giving me a welcome-home bachelor party. Another came from Goldwyn saying there was to be a big Press luncheon.

I looked forward to it all, but I also dreaded it — I really was very tired and coughed a lot.

"WELCOME HOME, DAVID!!"

A big banner was strung across the studio gate. Stage 8 had been transformed into a restaurant and several hundred employees and members of the Press listened to speeches of welcome by Goldwyn, columnist Hedda Hopper, head prop man Dave Chasen, and others.

The room was spinning, I was sweating, and I had a terrible headache. I wondered how I was going to get through it.

After luncheon, actor Nigel Bruce said, "I'm taking you home, putting you to bed, and getting you a doctor — you look awful."

"I can't let Goulding down," I said. "He's asked a hundred people tonight."

"Nonsense. If the doctor says you can go — all right — otherwise, bed."

The doctor took my temperature — it was 104 degrees — and said I had bronchial pneumonia.

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DAVID with his two sons, Jamie (foreground) and David, shortly after his first wife's accident.