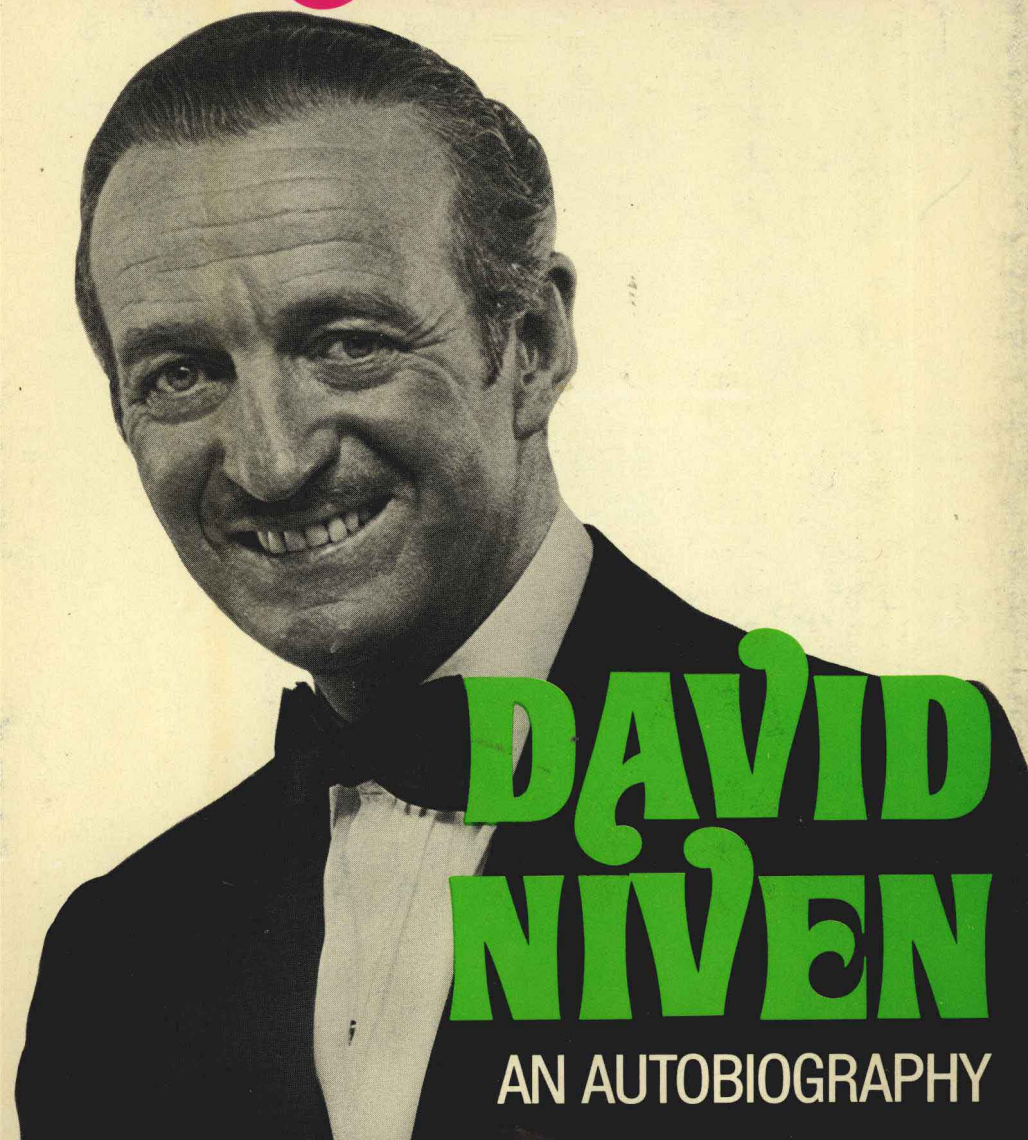


THE MOON'S A BALLOON



**DAVID
NIVEN**

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THE MOON'S A BALLOON

THE MOON'S

David Niven
A BALLOON



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For Kira Kanuphyladafodilos

THE MOON'S A BALLOON

*who knows if the moon's
a balloon, coming out of a keen city
in the sky—filled with pretty people?
(and if you and I should*

*get into it, if they
should take me and take you into their balloon
why then
we'd go up higher with all the pretty people*

*than houses and steeples and clouds:
go sailing
away and away sailing into a keen
city which nobody's ever visited, where
always*

*it's
Spring) and everyone's
in love and flowers pick themselves.*

E. E. CUMMINGS

Introduction

ELVELYN WAUGH penned these words: "Only when one has lost all curiosity about the future has one reached the age to write an autobiography."

It is daunting to consider the sudden wave of disillusionment that must have swept over such a brilliant man and caused him to write such balls.

Nearer the mark, it seems to me, is my friend, Professor John Kenneth Galbraith of Harvard University, who wrote: "Books can be broken broadly into two classes: those written to please the reader and those written for the greater pleasure of the writer. Subject to numerous and distinguished exceptions, the second class is rightly suspect and especially if the writer himself appears in the story. Doubtless, it is best to have one's vanity served by others; but when all else fails, it is something men do for themselves. Political memoirs, biographies of great business tycoons *and the annals of aging actors* sufficiently illustrate the point." The italics are mine.

I apologize for the name-dropping. It was hard to avoid it. People in my profession, who, like myself, have the good fortune to parlay a minimal talent into a long career, find all sorts of doors opened that would otherwise have remained closed. Once behind those doors, it makes little sense to write about the butler if Chairman Mao is sitting down to dinner.

My offering is a period piece. I hope you may enjoy looking back over my shoulder.

DAVID NIVEN
Cap-Ferrat A.M.

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ESSIE, when I first saw her, was nineteen, honey-blond, pretty rather than beautiful, a figure like a two-armed Venus de Milo who had been on a sensible diet, had a pair of legs that went on forever, and a glorious sense of the ridiculous. She was a Piccadilly whore. I was a fourteen-year-old heterosexual schoolboy and I met her thanks to my stepfather. (If you would like to skip on and meet Nessie more fully, she reappears on page 42.)

I had a stepfather because my French mother had married a second time. This she did because my father, along with 90 per cent of his comrades in the Berkshire Yeomanry, had landed with immense panache at Suvla Bay in 1915. Unfortunately, the Turks were given ample time to prepare to receive them. For days, sweltering in their troopships, the Berkshire Yeomanry had ridden at anchor off Suvla Bay while the high command in London argued as to the best way to get them ashore. Finally, they arrived at their decision. The troops embarked in the ship's whalers and on arrival held their rifles above heads and gallantly leaped into the dark waist-high water. A combination of barbed wire beneath the surface and machine guns to cover the barbed wire provided a devastating welcome.

Wood pigeons were calling on a warm summer evening, and my sister, Grizel (that's a hell of a name for a girl, incidentally), and I were swapping cigarette cards on an old tree trunk in the paddock when a red-eyed maid came and told us our mother wanted to see us and that we were not to stay too long.

The house was near Cirencester, and after a rather incoherent interview with my mother, who displayed a telegram and tried to explain what "missing" meant, we returned to the swapping of cigarette cards and resumed our perusal of endless trains lumbering along a distant embankment loaded with guns and cheering young men . . . 1915.

I am afraid my father's death meant little or nothing to me at the time; later it meant a great deal. I was just five years old and had not seen him much except when I was brought down to be shown off before arriving dinner guests or departing fox-hunting companions. I could always tell which were which because although they all pinched and chucked and clucked in the same hearty manner, the former smelled of soap and perfume and the latter of sweat and spirits.

I lived with Grizel in a nursery presided over by a warm enveloping creature, Whitty.

Rainy days were spent being taught Highland reels by a wounded piper of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and listening to an "His Master's Voice" gramophone equipped with an immense horn. Our favorite record had "The Ride of the Valkyrie" on one side and, on the other, a jolly little number for those days called "The Wreck of the Troopship." We were specially fascinated by the whinnying of the horses as the sharks moved in (the troops were on the way to the South African War), the horses on the "Valkyrie" sounded very much the same as the ones on the "Troopship," and if I had known as much about show business then as I do now, I might have been suspicious of the entire production.

Occasionally, I was taken to the hospital in Cirencester to "do my bit." This entailed trying not to fidget or jump while young VAD's practiced bandaging any part of me they fancied.

The war days sped by and the house in Gloucestershire was sold. So, too, was one we had in Argyllshire. Everyone, my mother included, thought that my father was very rich. As a part-time lieutenant in his part-time regiment, he had cheerfully gone off to war like a knight of old, taking with him as troopers his valet, his undergardener and two grooms. He also

took his hunters, but these were exchanged for rifles in Egypt en route, and my father and his valet and one groom were duly slaughtered—cavalrymen ordered to land as infantry, at night, on a strongly defended beach without any training whatsoever for it.

He was hugely in debt at the time.

We soon moved to London to a large, damp house in Cadogan Place, and the sweaty, hearty, red-faced country squires were replaced by pale, gay young men who recited poetry and sang to my mother. She was very beautiful, very musical, very sad and lived on cloud nine.

A character called Uncle Tommy* soon made his appearance and became a permanent member of her entourage. Gradually the pale, gay young men gave way to pale, sad, older men.

Uncle Tommy was a second-line politician who did not fight in the war. A tall ramrod-straight creature with immensely high white collars, a bluish nose and a very noisy cuff-link combination which he rattled at me when I made an eating error at mealtime.

I don't believe he was very healthy really. Anyway he got knighted for something to do with the Conservative Party and the Nineteen Hundred Club, and Cadogan Place became a rendezvous for people like Lord Willoughby de Broke, Sir Edward Carson, KC, and Sir E. Marshall Hall, KC. I suppose it bubbled with the sort of brilliant conversation into which children these days would be encouraged to join, but as soon as it started, Grizel and I were removed to a nursery upstairs. It had a linoleum floor and a bag of apples hanging outside the window during the winter. Grizel, who was two years older, became very interested during this period in the shape and form of my private parts; but when after a particularly painful inspection, I claimed my right to see hers too, she covered up sharply and dodged the issue by saying, "Well, it's a sort of flat arrangement."

* Sir Thomas Comyn-Platt. Liked to be known as the mystery man of the Conservative Party. Contested Portsmouth Central in the election of 1926 . . . soundly beaten by Miss Jenny Lee, wife of Aneurin Bevan.

At about this time, the Germans began their air raids on London. High in the night sky, I saw a Zeppelin go down in flames near Shepherds Bush. The airplanes were to come next. On the day my mother took me down Sloane Street to buy a pair of warm gloves I saw my first Fokkers. Everyone rushed into the street to point them out to each other. Then as the possibility of what might be about to drop out of the Fokkers dawned on them, they rushed back indoors again.

My mother never left the glove shop. She was busy giving a splendid discourse on the superior quality of French gloves when the manager said, "This place will come down like a pack of cards." By that time the Fokkers must have been fifty miles away, but I was nevertheless lugged across the street and we joined the undignified Gadarene swine movement down the steps of the Knightsbridge Tube Station. One woman had a parrot. Another had hysterics and, between screams, ate handfuls of marmalade out of a stone jar, a spectacle I found highly enjoyable.

After sufficient time had elapsed for the Fokkers to be cozily bedded down at their home base outside Hamburg, we all emerged well equipped to tell long dull stories about our experience in air raids during World War I. I suppose we gave these up about September, 1940.

Uncle Tommy's marriage to my mother coincided with my sixth birthday. The wedding took place at All Saints, Sloane Street. Purple with embarrassment, I was press-ganged into being a page and pressure-fed into a primrose-colored suit with mother-of-pearl buttons, a white lace collar, shorts and socks.

I did everything I could to wreck the show and fidgeted and picked my nose till an aquiline creature, later identified as the famous Lady Oxford and Asquith, came and knelt in the aisle to comfort me. I decided she was a witch and again and again informed the congregation of this discovery in a shrill treble.

I was removed, and Uncle Tommy, forever politically sensitive, treated me from that moment on with frosty distaste.

My eldest brother, Henri (known as Max), was a naval cadet at Dartmouth, longing to get into the war. My eldest sister,

Joyce, was at home helping my mother, and Grizel had gone away to boarding school in Norfolk. I was the youngest.

Cadogan Place we soon could not afford to live in, so it was sold and a smaller house on Sloane Street, across on the unchic side of the garden, was purchased.

A pink Gawblimy cap was obtained for me and I was sent to Mr. Gibb's day school down the street. It became clear to me very early that I was not going to be long in the house on Sloane Street.

The little room which my mother had set aside for me was appropriated by Uncle Tommy as his dressing room and I was packed off to boarding school at Elstree.

I can't say I was miserable at being snatched away from the bosom of my family because the bosom had not seemed, so far, to be a particularly warm and cozy place.

Apart from the Chinese, the only people in the world who pack their sons off to the tender care of unknown and often homosexual schoolmasters at the exact moment when they are most in need of parental love and influence are the British so-called upper and middle classes.

I don't suppose I particularly minded going away, but I had not been long at Elstree before I discovered that life could be hell.

There was a great deal of bullying, and for a six-year-old, the spectacle of a gang of twelve-year-olds bearing down, cracking wet towels like whips, can be terrifying.

For the most part, the masters were even more frightening. It would be charitable to think that they were all shell-shocked heroes returned from the hell of Mons and Vimy, but it seems more probable that they were sadistic perverts who had been found at the bottom of the educational barrel and dredged up at a time of acute manpower shortage.

One, a Mr. Christie, when he tired of pulling ears halfway out of our heads (I still have one that sticks out almost at right angles thanks to this son of a bitch) and delivering, for the smallest mistake in declension, backhanded slaps that knocked one off one's bench, delighted in saying, "Show me the hand

that wrote this," and then bringing down the sharp edge of a heavy ruler across the offending wrist.

He took the last form on Friday evening, and I remember praying every week that he would die before then so that I could somehow reach the haven of Saturday and Sunday and the comparative safety of the weekend.

I don't think I have ever been so frightened of a human being in my life. Once he made me lean out of a fourth-floor window—a stupefying height for a little boy—then he shut the window across the small of my back, ordered two other equally terrified boys to hold my feet, and laid into me mightily with a cane. All this for some mistake in "*common are sacerdos dux vates parens et conjux. . .*."

Years later, when I was at Sandhurst and playing in the Rugby football fifteen, big enough and by then ugly enough to take care of myself, I had an overpowering urge to see the bastard again, face-to-face.

I went down to Elstree, filled with vindictiveness. I don't know what I intended to do really, and when I got there I found the school empty. The prisonlike exercise yard was full of rubbish and old newspapers. The fourth-floor window, out of which I had dangled, was broken and open to the rain—it didn't even look very high.

My mother, at that time, would not believe my tales of woe or rather Uncle Tommy persuaded her that they were nonsense, telling her that all boys exaggerated and that anyway she could not be expected to know anything about English schools.

After two years of this purgatory, I got a huge boil as a result of the bad food. "Oh!" said the matron. "That's nothing. Don't make such a fuss!" and lopped off the top of it with a pair of scissors.

The ensuing infection was pretty horrible and put me in the sanatorium.

Finally, greatly urged on by my brother, who believed me, my mother saw the light and at the end of term gave me the