

THE NEXT MRS. REAGAN?



● The San Fernando Valley moon hung like a big, golden grapefruit high in the sky, and out at Agoura—which sounds like an old-fashioned automobile horn, but is a hamlet not far from Hollywood—it bathed the shaggy oaks and whitewashed stables of Ronnie Reagan's ranch in a magically romantic light. To Ronnie and his best girl, Nancy Davis, who had come out after dinner for a peek at the horses, it seemed like a perfect time for a bareback ride in the moonlight.

They backed their favorite black mare, "Baby," out of the stall and started to climb aboard. "Do you think," ventured Nancy, who's a little leery of horses, "that this idea will be all right with Baby?"

"Don't worry about Baby," Ronnie laughed. "She's a lady, through and through."

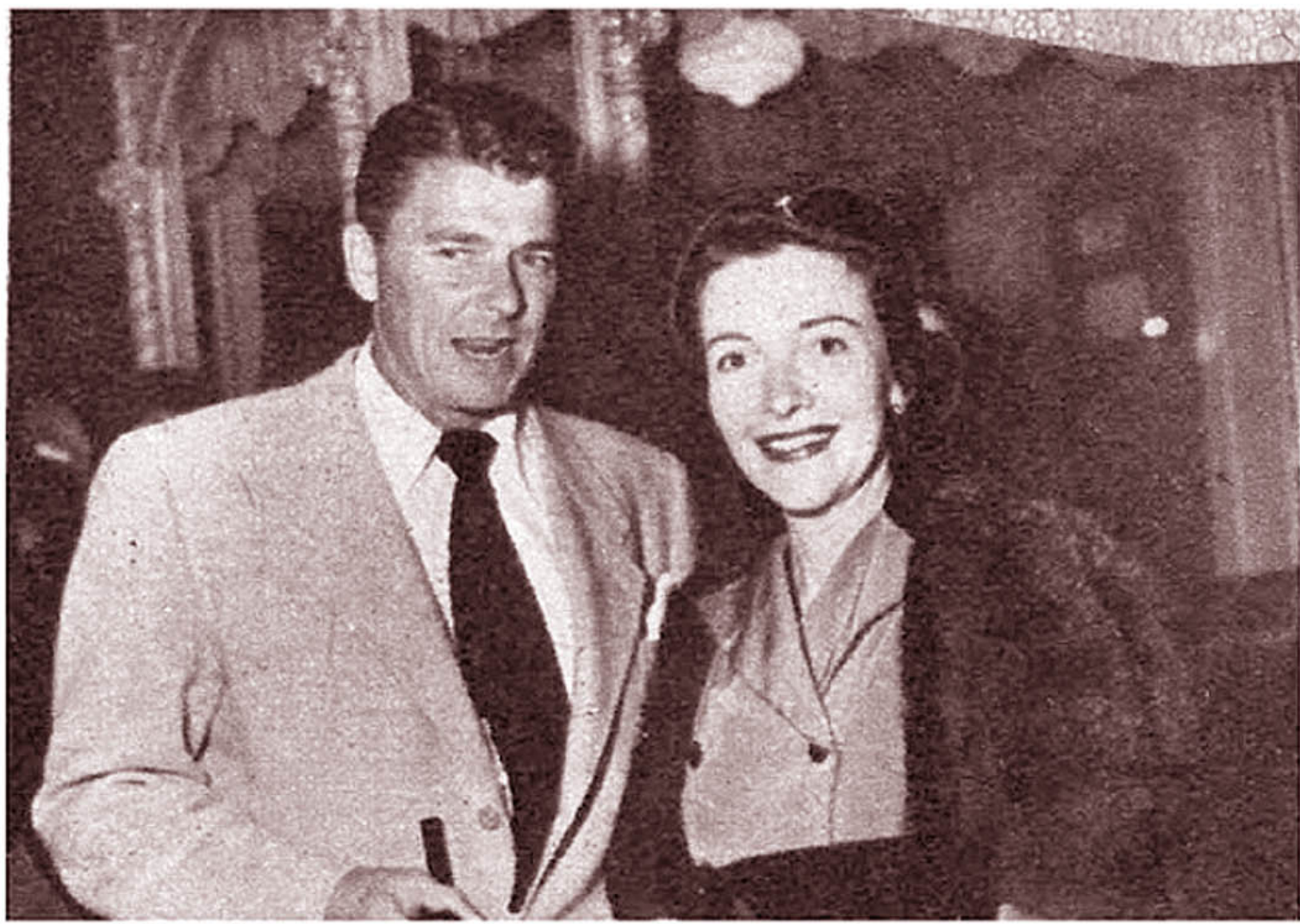
Well, Ronnie was halfway up one side with a leg dangling, and Nancy had the same precarious hitch on the other, when Baby gave a snort and bolted. Ronnie tumbled without harm but Nancy whacked down flat on her spine with the wind knocked out of her. Ronnie lifted her up anxiously, dusted her off and patted back some breath. Nancy grinned gamely and gasped out a familiar line, like this, "Never—underestimate—the power—of a lady!"

Right now, Nancy Davis might well say the very same thing about herself. Because, at this point, the doe-eyed, gentle-voiced, sweet-faced young actress, who has Ronnie Reagan's heart tied up with love knots, is just about the most deceptive doll in Hollywood. To put it bluntly: the current conception of Nancy Davis around town is that she's a decorous, unexciting, and glamorless mouse, built for convention and not for speed. This idea—I can happily report—is about as cockeyed as Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis can sometimes get.

It's true enough that Nancy's a lady, through and through, like Baby. Often she's perfectly



In private they are informal and ranchy. Nancy's been busy, too, has had eight roles in two years of Hollywood.



In public Nancy and Ronald are the picture of civic dignity. Her father is an eminent Chicago surgeon.

lady-like, but often, too, she kicks up her heels. Only you don't hear much about that—because in her quiet, charming way Nancy Davis can handle about whatever situation pops up.

For example, the other morning Nancy was scooting her Chrysler convertible over toward MGM, late for a studio call. It was six o'clock and traffic was clear and she wasn't thinking much about restraining things like speedometers. Les Paul and Mary Ford were swinging out "How High the Moon" on the radio good and loud, and Nancy was trying to drown them out with her bathtub coloratura, as she likes to do when she drives. So naturally she didn't hear the sirens.

The two traffic cops finally flagged her down, stalked over, tilted back their caps and wagged their heads ominously. "Where," demanded one of them, "is *your* driver's license?" Nancy said she was afraid she didn't have it with her. "Do you know how fast you were going?" She shook her head. "Sixty," informed the cop, "and did you see that four-way stop back there?" Nancy shook it again. "I didn't think so—you didn't even slow down. Well, Lady—" he sighed, reaching for his ticket pad.

It suddenly occurred to Nancy Davis that with a triple rap like that she was headed for Alcatraz, or at least San Quentin. She turned up her big, round brown eyes and stared in wounded innocence. Pretty soon the police were speaking in honeyed tones and their anger had melted like butter. A little later Nancy drove away—slower and considerably quieter—but without a ticket.

Now, a girl with persuasive charm like that is obviously going to get along. In fact, for one who has been around Hollywood barely more than two years, Nancy Davis gets along wonderfully. When she hit town, she had never gazed into a movie camera, and she couldn't tell you the name of one eligible Hollywood male. But by now her boss, Dore Shary, calls her, "as fine a young actress as we have on the lot," and Nancy has eight pictures behind her to back that up. In her private life, she's plainly heading for a wedding with Ronald Reagan, one of Hollywood's most attractive and most eminent citizens. But from these twin triumphs, oddly enough, stem the cluster of fuzzy ideas about Nancy.

Careerwise that's not too hard to figure. As Nancy sighs, "In every picture I've done I've either been true blue, noble, or pregnant." In fact, Nancy was wearing "the baby" a bulky contraption of cotton and net, no speck of makeup, and a baggy maternity gown when Ronnie Reagan first saw her on the screen. That was the night she took him to see her in *The Next Voice You Hear*, and after they wobbled out, he gave her a look. "May I make a suggestion?" he grinned. "Send out your laundry and tell them to lose it!"

But the way Hollywood adds up Nancy's romance with Ronnie is a little more curious. Only the other day a gossip columnist who should know better sized them up like this: "Ronnie Reagan and Nancy Davis are still carrying on their romance on a cerebral plane." Cerebral? Applesauce!

The reason Nancy was in such a hurry the morning she got tagged by the motor-bike boys was because she'd overslept. And the reason she'd overslept was because she was out very late with Mister Reagan. In fact, he sees her every night of the world and they don't sit and hold hands. They have fun. Not necessarily the kind that makes headlines, because generally it's far removed from the show-cases where such news is made. "I used to get a charge out of the night club routine," Nancy will admit, "but it's boring now," which may be her way of saying when you're in love you don't like a crowd.

There's only one time when *Ciro's* or *Mocambo's* is a must, and that's when Nancy winds up one of her true blue roles and reverts to type by splurging on a dress. She went for a snaky off-shoulder

red one after *Next Door Neighbor*, her last picture. The gown had a plunging neckline which would make Jane Russell grind her teeth in envy—so of course she had to go dancing to show that off, and at such times Ronnie's reasonable. But what happened this other late date I'm talking about is twice as typical of an enchanted evening with those two.

That night they'd accepted an invitation to a fancy dinner party at Jack's, down on the beach. It was high style, with champagne, caviar, and sparkling conversation to match. When the guests departed politely around 10:30, Nancy and Ronnie trotted off toward their car, with every good intention of getting home at a respectable hour.

But on the way they heard the inviting tinkle of honky-tonk music and spotted the beckoning lights of the Ocean Park Fun Zone down the way. They looked at each other, about-faced, and made tracks for the bright lights. Pretty soon Nancy and Ronnie were banging ducks in the shooting gallery, slamming baseballs at bottles, whirling dizzily on the Caterpillar, and collecting Kewpie dolls, cactus plants, goldfish, and scattered prizes of chance and skill on the pike. When they'd had their pictures taken, smeared their evening clothes with cotton candy, and bumped themselves groggy on the Rat Race, they thought they were ready to leave. But then they met a lonesome soldier just back from Korea, so they joined up with him and did the whole thing over. Nancy pulled in her Westwood apartment when the mockingbirds trilled around three o'clock in the morning.

Now, there are no news photographers prowling the plebian pike at Ocean Park, and you won't find Hollywood reporters hanging around little Los Angeles neighborhood movie houses, and certainly not at Ronnie's valley ranch where Nancy has wrecked a good dozen pairs of Levis painting fences.

Nancy explains, "In town my idea of a big, fat evening is dinner at Chasen's, then a movie—with popcorn." At Dave Chasen's restaurant—where they dine regularly—they don't let photographers in, nor do they come to the Bill Holden's parties. Sometimes when Nancy talks Ronnie into a night baseball game (she's a violent fan, but he's off the game ever since he busted his leg playing an All-Star game two years ago) or the Santa Anita Races, or when she goes for broke with one of those new creations and they show up dancing at a glitter mill, people stare at them as if they'd staggered out of the Maine woods. But actually nobody's been in hiding or hugging a hearth.

THE simple truth is that both Nancy and Ronnie are having their fun as they want to, not as Hollywood expects them to. Anyone who knows Ronald Reagan knows he has a mind of his own, and the girl he'll probably marry stacks up exactly the same way and always has—even though she may not look it.

In fact, Nancy Davis has been somewhat of a surprise from the minute she was born. In an all-Nordic family where everyone has been blond from the roots of the family tree on up, she turned to a black-haired, brown-eyed and with a Latin complexion. This baffled the relatives for years until research turned up the fact that back in the mists of time one great-great-great grandpa had swept a dusky Spanish girl right off her feet. More up-to-date, there was a mixed family deal of another kind to give Nancy Davis a two-toned personality. Her father, Dr. Loyal Davis, is an eminent brain surgeon and a serious man of science; but Nancy's mother was "Lucky" Lockett, a glamorous stage actress of her day.

Nancy's godmother was Alla Nazimova, who cut quite a siren figure in the Hollywood silent epic days. And Walter Houston was "Uncle Walter" to Nancy until the day he died. Her first look at Hollywood was on visits to his house when she was still wearing Mary Janes.

So, while Nancy trotted dutifully off to the Girl's Latin School, where the nice Chicago girls went, she also haunted her mom's dressing room, backstage at the theater where a lot of them wished they could go. Even then it was pretty plain which way the wind would blow. While the pit orchestra tuned up, Nancy would rush dramatically out behind the curtain and take sweeping bows before imaginary throngs and generally ham up the vacant stage until her frantic máma chased her away to get the show started. When she was "a fast 13" she broke out professionally as a junior miss on some Chicago soap opera radio shows, and still sentimentally cherishes her uncashed first \$10 check.

All this time, as today, Miss Nancy Davis preserved the Alice in Wonderland look

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of tender innocence which still gives people such mistaken ideas.

At Smith College, a very genteel ladies' institute in Northampton, Massachusetts, Nancy fitted in perfectly, and eventually graduated. But what really kept her interested those four years was the Dramatic Club. Summers, she took flings at stock around New England, and one season up at Gloucester, Mass., she lodged with the rest of the cast in an ancient, rickety summer resort. The nice old ladies who rocked on the front porch and whispered about those terrible actors upstairs, watched Nancy's innocent face bob in and out. One evening, as she raced down the steps, one of them touched her arm.

"My dear," she breathed in sepulchral tones, "I only hope you won't let this ruin you for the rest of your life!"

That only made Nancy more resolved to dare a fate worse than death in New York. There she almost wore herself out dog-trotting up and down Broadway hunting a job. She knew lots of show people through her mother. "But to them, of course," Nancy remembers disgustedly, "I was still just 'little Nancy.'" She might be chasing up and down yet, although it's doubtful, if one day she hadn't tried the office of Michael Myerberg who was preparing *Lute Song* for Mary Martin. While she gave him her sales talk he stared at her black hair and wide, slightly Oriental features and finally muttered, "You look Chinese!" When she recovered her poise, Nancy found herself promised a job on Broadway that fall and then—as breaks often go—she got another for the summer on the road in *Ramshackle Inn*.

But it wasn't *Lute Song* or the two brief-lived Broadway shows that brought Nancy to Hollywood, it was a TV presentation of *Ramshackle Inn* which she played on New Year's Eve. The Berg-Allenberg talent agency caught her in that and arranged an MGM test in Hollywood the next week. Nancy arrived as green about studios as the Pullman seat that carried her.

FOR instance, Nancy was thrilled to pieces because she thought she'd certainly run into her screen idol, Bing Crosby, the first day. She didn't know Bing worked at Paramount instead of MGM. And at MGM they still have a running rib on the poor girl which started the first day she stepped on the lot. She was ushered then into the office of Jack Dawn, MGM's famous makeup expert. He gave her a long look and finally allowed, "No—I don't think there'll be any particular problem—except, of course, your eyes are way too big for pictures!"

Of course, Jack was kidding—they don't make eyes too big for pictures—but Nancy took it straight, and being an eager beaver at heart, she started doing something about it. Her idea was that if she drooped her eyelids religiously they'd shrink down at heart, she started doing something about it. Her idea was that if she drooped her eyelids religiously they'd shrink down to the right size. That's what she actually did until people began to wonder if she was all there. One day, visiting the set of a Gable picture to see how the big-leaguers did it, Nancy arrived droopy eyed and looking like a chicken with the pip. Merv LeRoy, the director, came up and asked anxiously, "What's the matter, kid—are you sick or something?"

"Why, no," explained Nancy. "You see my eyes are too big for pictures." Merv called Clark over for that one and when they had picked themselves up off the floor and stopped howling, they spread the news around. To this day when she starts a picture the crew gives her a ride about special lighting for those oversize eyes.

But outside of a few tenderfoot trials like that, Nancy has had no trouble whatever getting along in her work. Producer Bob Sisk wandered accidentally into the projection room where they were running off the test she made with Howard Keel, and snapped her up for her first job, *Shadow on the Wall*, without even an interview. Dore Shary picked her for his pet faith film, *The Next Voice You Hear*, and took her into Director Bill Wellman, suggesting a test. Bill took a look and said, "I don't need to make a test." Then Bill, who has small time for lady actresses, scared her half to death by growling, "I want to tell you something. I hate to direct women!" But Nancy's winning ways tamed even Wild Bill, before that was over.

Beyond the studio gates, however, Nancy's adventures in Horrible Hollywood were a little more harrowing, until she found Ronnie Reagan to look after her. Nancy went to her first Hollywood party in a taxi, all by herself—and took one home the same solitary way. She didn't know anybody to take her. And trying to

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find the right place to roost for a respectable bachelor girl was an even more dismal experience.

THE first place Nancy landed was a one room apartment in Beverly Hills where the walls were so thin she had to sleep with a pillow over her head to keep from sharing the intimate secrets of her neighbors. When she got out of there, it was only to move in next door to a middle-aged wolf who kept his door open and invited her in every time she walked past. At the next place she tried, her neighbor had a girl friend who had a husband, and every night there were poundings on the door, hoarse whispers of "Joe—Joe—wake up—it's John!" and hasty exits out windows. With visions of bullets flying right through those flimsy walls, Nancy packed her trunk again. In fact, she moved around so often that half the time she was paying rent on two places and her business manager, Myrt Blunk finally complained, "Nancy, I've never had a client who made less money than you do—but you're the first one I've had who could afford two apartments!"

By now Nancy's snugly settled in a trim, modern studio flat, screened by tropical plants and high, opaque glass with a sunny, private patio of her own in back. Indoors she's surrounded by her own blond, modern furniture she's had shipped out from New York, her own books and family knick-knacks. Her bedroom's tinted lipstick red and gray, and soft greens and yellows make the living room with its big fireplace smart and attractive. This haven is on Sorority Row in Westwood, out by U.C.L.A. and Nancy's neighbors think she's just a rah-rah girl herself. In fact, when a cabbie let her out one day last fall he said, "Well, I guess you girls'll be pretty busy now. School starts this week."

Nancy has left her schoolgirl days well behind—she's 27—but she's still a bachelor girl as this is written. She hasn't been exactly lonesome, though, not since the night almost a year ago when her telephone rang and a voice said, "This is Ronald Reagan calling about the Screen Actors' Guild," of which he was president. Someone had put Nancy's name up as a young board member but there was a little confusion. There were two Nancy Davises around Hollywood, and Ronnie wanted to get the right Nancy, also some facts and figures.

Nancy liked this stranger's voice and apparently Ronnie liked hers, which is low and sexy, and reminds you of Jean Arthur's. So when he suggested they could talk better over a dinner Nancy said, "I'd love it."

"It was a blind date, all right," she confesses, "but it was a lot blinder for Ronnie than it was for me." After all, Nancy had seen Ronald Reagan in pictures; he'd never even glimpsed a still of her face.

From that night on they've been as "steady" a twosome as you'll find anywhere around Hollywood. Nancy knits argyle socks for Ronnie although she doesn't cook him any meals, being the kind of girl who isn't handy with much in the kitchen that isn't canned or frozen.

Since they add up so perfectly as the same kind of character—smart but gay, too—and since their close association has been going on for a long time as Hollywood views courtships, the screen colony cupids have been getting a little more than impatient lately. They've been jumping the gun to get them married.

JUST the other day a newspaper reporter back in Chicago called Dr. Davis' house, and got Nancy's father. Was it true, he asked, that Nancy Davis was getting married to Ronald Reagan on such and such a date as was reported?

"I'm quite sure," replied the doctor calmly, "that if my daughter is getting married to anyone I'd know about it."

The truth is that nobody is going to hustle Nancy Davis and Ronald Reagan into a serious step like marriage. Reason: on Ronnie's part there are the serious considerations of his children, Maureen and Michael, and what his marriage would mean to them. What Jane Wyman does about her life may have some bearing on his thoughts that way, too.

When anyone asks Nancy about wedding plans she still smiles sweetly, "No plans," and tries to change the subject. Nancy is a lady, remember, and in her code keeping quiet about affairs of the heart is simply a matter of good manners and taste.

But in her forthright fashion she isn't cagey or coy. "Sure I want to get married," she'll tell you, "and have children of my own—not just in pictures. I'm ready."

Meanwhile Nancy is leading a whisper-

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ing campaign at MGM to "Get Nancy Davis out of Maternity Clothes" and every time she sees Dore Schary she says, "Good morning—when do I play a comedy?" Meanwhile, too, she is keeping as happy as a clam in her private life, whether she's beside Ronnie Reagan banging nails into one of his corral fences, or flying off to New York by herself, as she recently did, to catch the World Series and the new Broadway shows.

But if and when she does become Mrs. Ronald Reagan one thing seems pretty certain, contrary to some very wrong ideas about a very right gal. There will be few dull moments for anybody including herself, with Nancy Davis around. And—unless everyone who knows a sometimes baffling Irishman named Reagan is a mile off the track—that will suit Ronnie just fine. THE END

IT HAPPENED TO ME

After moving to California I went out to MGM studios one day and joined a crowd of fans who hang around the studio gates hoping to see stars. These fans become so familiar with people going in and out that they know everyone from the big stars on down to the extras.



The day I was there, a starlet who had had no pictures released came out in a convertible and was asked to sign autographs. She signed all around and then offered to ride us all around the block. Naturally we accepted.

I still have the starlet's autograph signed that day when she was not well known. It was Nancy Davis.

Nancy Streebeck
Hollywood, California