

Still a Lot of Vim in the Vamp

By SIDNEY FIELDS

Whatever Nita Naldi lacks in her pocket she tries to make up with her rich memories, and richer humor. And she succeeds—up to a point.

Miss Naldi was one of Hollywood's original "vampires" 30 odd years ago, a tall, wild beauty, who lived in the grand manner when Hollywood believed in its own fantasy.

We met the other day and Miss Naldi said she had starred in 40 or 50 films. She was Rudolph Valentino's leading lady, a job that made her the desire of men and the envy of women around the world. Valentino was famous for a narrow-eyed gleam that melted even grandmothers. How did she resist it?

"It was a squint, my dear," she said. "He was so near-sighted he had to squint so he could see his leading lady. On him the squint just looked irresistible."

Miss Naldi remembered how he loathed his most famous role, "The Sheik," how Valentino called it a stupid thing written by a frustrated old maid for other frustrated old maids, and how she added: "Old maids who had to use their imagination because they had nothing else to use."

"But he was a charming man, brilliantly educated, and with a beautiful speaking voice," she said. "People forget his father was a doctor and his grandfather worked with Pasteur."

HER VOICE is beautiful too, and her speech perfect.

"They always hated me in Hollywood because I speak

ONLY HUMAN

English correctly," she said. "Now they all take diction lessons but still speak like Marlon Brando." She paused, and apologized: "I do say vile things. And then they say, 'Oh, the poor soul's plastered.' The fact is I'm just telling the truth. Besides, I don't drink. I have a heart condition."

Miss Naldi began as a show girl at the Winter Garden in musicals with the Astaires and Willie and Eugene Howard. John Barrymore picked her for his "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." "And taught me what little



NITA NALDI: Today

I began to know then," she said. "When I couldn't get a job in a play I'd be a showgirl. Before I went to the Coast in 1922 I did make a movie for Selznick in Fort Lee, N. J. No bridges then. We had to migrate across the river in canoes."

Her life in Hollywood was lush, always in the sky, being with the great, the famous, and learning that nothing in this life is permanent, least of all an acting career. When she left Hollywood in 1926 she worked in Europe for about four years, then married Searle Barclay, a rich man who lost his money before he died.

"I had a good career," Miss Naldi said. "No complaints, though I could never keep a nickel."

She must have earned a lot of money. Not too long ago she filed a petition for bankruptcy, admitting her only assets were two pawn tickets. She and her husband were then living at the plush Plaza. She now lives in what she calls "a wretched little hotel."

"In one room," she said, "and they're raising the rents to make more cubicles for the transients. This should be taken up in Washington. I'd like to turn Radio City into a Roman arena and throw all the avaricious landlords to the lions."

For a while Miss Naldi did some TV work, dramatic shows, interviews, even the Jack Paar show.

"Then I became passe," she sighed. "I always seem to put my foot in it and say the wrong things. They began treating me like Typhoid Mary. Well, I'm not married to an agent or a producer, which would help. And they still remember me as a



NITA NALDI: Yesterday

vampire. You know, the routine of seduction, when I was attired like the madam of a Chinese bordello, with a head-dress and not much else. That would frighten any man to death, instead of making him amorous. I do wish they'd forget that."

SHE'S A WIDOW, but not a merry one. "One exists — periodically," she said. And then added with a wry smile: "Living today is like trying to cross a New York Street. It's a miracle if you make it."

She brightened when I asked to take her picture. "I'm glad I put the cement face on. It's easy to put on, but takes years to get off."

After the photos, I helped her on with her coat. It was a top-pper, a half coat, and threadbare. She put on glasses. On the way out she bumped into a man, excused herself.

"I hope he doesn't think I'm drunk," she said.

I searched her eyes. It seemed as if she could barely see.