

THE DARK LADY OF THE MOVIES

By Prosper Buranelli.



BLACK, the color of night, of the lurking pirate and the cloistered nun, is no less the symbol of the vampire of motion pictures. It was an apotheosis of the glooming hue that I found when I called upon Nita Naldi, latest favorite among the evil seductresses of the screen—black hair, black eyes, black garb and a canticle in praise of blackness.

"I hate all that is light, pale colors, pink, lavender and cream," she said. "Give me the profound and subtle darkness of jet and the sable, and, next to that, the heavy scarlet of a misty morning sun—red and black as in roulette."

She blasphemed mirthfully, this enemy of the rainbow.

In the library of Nita Naldi's house on East 62d Street there were shelves of well-used books half way to the ceiling and along two walls, and at one side a piano stood with much music on it. The slender, graceful young woman with her deep eyes half reclined on a bench and smiled with a serene expression. Do you remember the heavy, oval frames long favored for the photographs of grandparents and revered uncles and aunts? Her face was just as oval in its contour, the line of the Renaissance Madonna. She said her parents were Florentines.

I inquired of the origin of her vampire career, which had brought her such high fortune in wealth and theatrical fame.

"My destiny has been black," she said. "To black I owe everything."

She continued with clear expressiveness and occasional gay and eloquent flights into backstage colloquialism.

"I GREW up in New York and was a ssp. I didn't know ham from eggs. I had just brains enough to be a cloak model, and that's what I became. After modelling for a season I got on as a chorus girl. They looked me over, saw that I was an exotic type, and for a costume gave me a gown that was the deepest shade of night. They thought that was the color for me, and it was. I made a hit, and right there fell in love with abysmal darkness."

This was an intelligent girl who knew how to read the cards that destiny had given her for a hand. She understood that she must be a slave of black. The depths of shadow were her sunlight. In the caverns of dusk played the beams of her fortune, which were not of rose color but of inky gloom. So she put away the charm of springtime and daisies, of tinted laces and all pretty blondness.

"I cannot bear a frock of white chiffon," she said, "or pretty spangles and merry ribbons, or the fluttering bright dress of the merry girl who dances over emerald meadows. I am a mediæval type—I hope that's the way you pronounce it—and I saw that I could never be a tripping, blond-wigged ingenue."

She schooled herself in the stately and mysterious enchantment of the woman in black, whose step is slow, whose gestures are scornful and languid, whose eyes are shaded with many enigmas and in the startling whiteness of whose hands and face lies an elegy of love and miseries past and to come. In these gulleful appearances Nita Naldi made her studies and kept as faithful to black as Orestes to his vengeance.

"I never wore even a bright hued fringe of lace, though perhaps a blood red rose," she said. "In shows for several seasons, and finally in the Follies, I was the black garbed girl. With experience I learned more and more of the ways of darkness."

She was not content to be sombre merely in the physical. She read many books. But were they little volumes of laughter and joyous elevation where life was gay and dulcet and even marriage endlessly serene? She read in the works of many authors, through literature widely, but her love centred in a certain school of writing. This was a school that has achieved some fame for not varnishing the world too thickly with hues of gold for fortune or of heavenly azure for happiness.

"I AM crazy about Russian literature," Nita Naldi said. "Dostoevsky and Gorky, they are my favorites. I love their immense gloom, their black tragedy. They are the ones that make a hit with me, and I read them all the time. They understand existence, and they understand the beauty of black."

Ardently she pored in the melancholy pages of the Russians, filled herself with the despairing clouds of their souls, tempering her violent Italian mood with the apathy of the Muscovite Oriental. With this regime it was not long before she had achieved a high mastery of the sombre manner and a reputation as "The Lady in Black." It was now that splendid destiny overtook her.

On the screen of motion pictures a large place is held for the vampire, the terrible, seductive woman whose incomprehensible smile hides a gulf of peridies and destructions. She snarls good men, this wife of Satan, catches them in the net of her fearful lure



Nita Naldi, the latest favorite among the vamps of moviedom.

and flings them down toward a pit of ruin and passion from which they are rescued in the wild stress of the last second by the angelic girl, usually a blond, who by the very might of her purity can confound and charm away the cruellest traps of evil. In the holy exaltation of this drama the virtuous souls of the movie-going public find their righteous delight. This, of course, gave the vampire lady as important a place in the pictures as the devil has in theology. Presently came a situation which has no counterpart in orthodox theology: the vamp became a personage in her own right. A cult of vamps grew under way. In this newer sort of film drama the vamp was the leading lady. She worked her evil as before, led the hero almost to perdition, but, instead of the interposition of the swarthy heroine, it was the white angel in the vamp's own soul that intervened. In the last reel the vamp turned good. No doubt, in the evolution of things the glory of the vamp will rise still higher. She will not have to renounce her wickedness but in the last scene of the picture will stand in a triumph of evil, with her broken victims bent in worship at her feet, while the movie fans will gasp in exultation over her victory. Then civilization in America will have begun.

NOW, though affairs have not come quite to this bright pass, it was not to be expected that a girl so cultivated in dark and subtle graces as Nita Naldi should escape the sharp eyes of motion picture directors on the watch for the most sinful of vamps. It was not long before she was playing in front of the camera. She made a fearfully vampish figure, with her fifteenth century type of beauty, her insidious and tigerish gestures and the elegant, funereal garb she wore—of colors that show black on the screen. She made a quick success, passing from one picture to another until she climbed onto a pinnacle in "Blood and Sand," where she appears with the devastating Valentino and reigns and ruins in diabolical enchantment.

What new dark things has she learned in her career as a vamp? I asked her.

"The most curious things are the mash notes,"

she said. "These are, of course, an inevitable phase of a motion picture actress's life. We all get them, but the vamp's mash notes are different from the ingenue's. I don't get letters of proposal from the general run of citizens. These seem to prefer the fluffly, innocent damsel who is wronged but still loves and forgives and is the living personification of the true, the good and the beautiful. My mash notes come from out-of-the-way places, most of them from Latin-America and—you might or might not expect it—Japan. They are stately epistles written in excellent English or in the native languages, and they are full of melancholy fire. The Japanese especially seem to be captivated by the wicked vamp."

The Spanish-American and the Jap in love with the American movie vamp! There is something almost too appropriate in that. The one reared to the tradition of the deep and fiery senorita, and the other with the traditional inscrutability of the Oriental, both find in the rampant vampire of the American movies the sort of tie that makes nations kin.

HOW TO SPEAK PROPERLY

THERE is no reason why Americans should be ridiculed for mistakes in speech. The ideas that inherited defects in the throat or that climatic conditions are the cause of erroneous enunciation is ridiculous and unfounded. The American throats are as good as any others."

Thus speaks Mrs. Clare Tree Major, Director of the School of the Theatre and one of the leaders in a crusade to stamp out New England twang, Southern drawls, Middle Western nasal gymnastics and other varieties of improper intonation.

"I have formulated several rules," said Mrs. Major, "which can easily be understood by the layman, and which if practised, lead to surprising results."

"First—One should breathe deeply from the very base of the lungs, around the waistline. This will give resonance, always a pleasing quality, to the voice."

"Second—Speak with the front part of the mouth, using mainly the tongue, the lips and the teeth. No tones can be good which remain in the back of the throat."

"Third—Keep the tongue well back, so that only the tip is used for articulation."

"Fourth—Do not make a labor of speech by speaking with the back of the tongue and the jaws. Speak delicately; you will find it much easier for yourself and much better for the listener."

"Fifth—Listen carefully to good speech, whether it be from the stage, the pulpit or the public platform. Then try to imitate what you hear."

"If these rules are followed, there is no twang or drawl that cannot be cured."

"Sound is the same with every one until it passes the throat. It is what the speaker does afterward with the teeth, tongue and lips that produces the differences in quality of speech. It is here that Americans are chiefly at fault. They do not use their lips sufficiently and as a result their speech often has a muffled, unmusical sound with no carrying power. Fine speech, on the other hand, is always characterized by a crispness and at the same time a resonance that could never be produced unless these organs of articulation were brought into use."

According to Mrs. Major, it is very difficult to find teachers in America who are capable of imparting the knowledge of proper speech. Most American teachers of voice, she says, are unable to detect mistakes because their ears are not attuned to hear the errors that are so common among our speakers. On that account there has been little attempt at making corrections. Mrs. Major says that the best teachers of speech are found in England, probably because the English people are much more careful in such matters than we are and have acquired through long usage a delightful roundness of tone.

"Probably the most important of all the rules," says Mrs. Major, "is the last. This is a subject that can never be mastered unless we are willing to imitate speakers whom we hear and know to be correct. There are plenty of places where one may hear the English language spoken correctly. The better class of theatres offer an excellent example. Producers and directors know that in seeking for perfection they must begin with the most important thing of all—the words spoken by the actors. Consequently, they have made these demands upon the actors, and the excellent diction of many of our present-day performers has proved the wisdom of their contentions."

Mrs. Major learned the art of correct speech from the eminent English actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Later, as director of the Washington Square Players, she had great success in teaching the clever amateurs of that organization the way to make themselves heard over the footlights.