

CHOCOLATE SPONGE

BY EMILY CLARK

CROSS-LEGGED on the floor of her room, Anne was sewing big crimson hearts on the diminutive black garment which she was to wear to a costume party that night. Her slim fingers moved with a lovely swiftness, while her smooth little face of coffee and cream was motionless in its concentration. The interlude between Anne's departure from her native jungle and her arrival at her present home had been spent in a boarding-house which could be accurately described as rough, and she had been sufficiently enlightened and depraved thereby to make of her a bewildering combination of original innocence and extreme sophistication. On the evening of her arrival in the house where she now lived she looked more gamin than girl, in her shabby, short, slightly disreputable black frock, with a soft hat pulled over one eye. But even then the grace and distinction of her body were evident to a not too casual observer. Her enormous black eyes efficiently took stock of the room while she answered questions, and, according to lamentable latter-day custom, also asked them. Her voice was lusciously, softly ingratiating, and her vocabulary appalling. Naturally, she was irresistible when a breath-taking phrase turned almost to a caress on her lips, and her mode of dress was a daily amazement in its complete *sans gêne*.

Had she arrived fresh from her cabin in one of the Virginia counties she would have had much to learn. Her boarding-house term furnished her with even more to forget. Anne was equally facile at learning and forgetting. Her possibilities were various, for she was as flexible as butter

in competent hands. Enticing to everything masculine and charmingly innocent of moral sense, she might have had an early career of joyous abandonment had she not, in her boarding-house entr'acte, fallen in love with the married driver of a fruit-wagon. Her abandonment, in this case, was complete but unsatisfying, for Anne's charms were not intended for the monopoly of one man. She was built, plainly, for the oldest and most reliable of feminine careers. Planned for gayety, gold and dancing, her association with John Henry brought her little but unhappiness. She was obliged, incongruously, to give him money, when nothing could be clearer, in every line of her figure, every inflection of her voice, every glance of her eyes, than that money was made to be given to Anne; a lady of joy, turned temporarily, through the very flexibility which was her chief asset, into a lady of sorrows.

The sorrows with which John Henry made her acquainted were various, and in part more tangible than mere emotional disturbances. His wife, whom he did not dare, or perhaps care, to divorce, had an unpleasant habit of waiting in alleys, and was of the uncomplex temperament which scorns neither hair-pulling nor face-scratching. Anne would never have used these methods except in self-defence. It was rumored through the world of alleys and back-yards that Lucinda had lately mentioned a razor as a possible prop to her domestic security; a weapon which, while serving a monotonous, utilitarian end in masculine hands, is, among females of Lucinda's race, frequently used for social purposes. And here Anne began to break.

She became timid about venturing out in the evenings, a timidity which was encouraged by her employers, who tried to reinforce it with arguments and entreaties in favor of deserting John Henry, who was showing himself a hopeless poltroon. He was a man only in all the more pitiable aspects of his sex; unwilling to relinquish Anne and preserve the sanctity of his home, equally reluctant to force his wife to abandon all talk of razors.

In vain Anne wept and entreated protection from John Henry. Her gift of tears would have been invaluable on the silver sheet. Without the assistance of an onion, or any artificial stimulus, she could produce large, round, crystal tears, resulting in no facial writhings, or reddening of eyes or nose. "I cry so healthy," she sometimes said, and indeed her tears could make of her, while they lasted, a lyric lament. She once informally burst into weeping while serving lunch, because of a necessary rebuke, and rushed from the room explaining that she was not angry, never angry, only "badly hurted." Lunch was quite spoiled for everyone because of the heart-tearing picture she made. But John Henry was æsthetically anæsthetic, save in the matter of such obvious advantages as lovely ankles, a seductive voice and almost unendurably wistful eyes, attractions which inevitably draw even the most uneducated attention. Although he, no doubt, used the orthodox method of drying her tears, he made no attempt to dam their source, nor did he arrive at a decision in either direction. While her employer and guardian urged a safe marriage or an honorable career as the most accomplished of waitresses—she rapidly developed skill in everything she did—at least one member of the household used often to wonder if she were not fitted for a more spectacular future than either of these courses promised.

When Anne brought the breakfast tray in the morning she would drop down on a couch with the slightest encouragement to relate in detail the events of the evening

before, including storms of tears, violent emotional excitement, masculine selfishness and denseness, and feminine intrigue and jealousy. Her one listener would ponder what she had heard, and on one occasion asked Anne if, had she encountered John Henry after her graduation from the boarding-house, her surrender would have been so unreserved. As it was, taken by him in her earliest and most plastic state, the contents of her little brain had been churned into a condition both feverish and morbid. While other women in her situation are supposed to know the step of one man, Anne knew the rattle of his wagon and became tense at the sound, which assuredly surpassed anything that her entranced listener had ever heard or experienced.

II

Surely, it was dangerous for such emotional capacity to have no other outlet than one man, with or without the bonds of matrimony. No man would appreciate it, and most of them would take advantage of it. It should be cheerfully distributed among a number of men, for their pleasure, of a genuinely rarefied order, and Anne's profit. Most of the qualifications were there. She received impressions with the complaisance of hot sealing-wax, and stainless as she was of moral prejudice, day by day her manners improved until she was as nearly perfect as a servant could be. She would have been equally proficient in any other rôle to which she set herself. Her cleverness was especially evident in that she elected to remain endearingly African in spite of her undeniable *chic*. She retained the trick of servility, which is at this time, even in the South, only a mask, but a mask which those of Anne's color possessing the highest degree of acumen are careful never to let slip. Her aristocracy was baffling, for it was not of the uncomplicated African species. There was an understanding at times startling; an atavistic grasp of certain matters never discussed in Virginia cabins. Anne had not simply the

unconscious aristocracy of a savage, the utter lack of self-consciousness which is the equivalent of breeding. She possessed, absurdly enough, an air of rawing-rooms, and her little figure, in its black and white, usually drew the half-puzzled gaze of visitors; a scrutiny of which she was completely aware.

"Anne, how did you learn to be such a *lady*?" escaped an observer.

"Because," came the unguarded, quick reply, "my grandfather was Colonel Ashton Wycherley."

"Strange," commented the embarrassed questioner later. "I didn't realize they knew such things. How dreadful! It makes them frightfully uncomfortable to have around. But she shouldn't have mentioned it anyway. It was rather impertinent of her."

But Anne, who knew her place quite well, would not have dreamed of leaving it except to answer a direct question. She was simply, with her unfailing instinct to oblige, solving the enigma of her really exquisite being. Because she absorbed her atmosphere with the unconscious, effortless facility of a sponge she became each day more distinguished in appearance and manner, but her emotions still turned toward her own race for their satisfaction. The situation between her and John Henry increased daily in its intensity, in a tautness felt throughout the house.

Then, on a glittering June morning, Anne did not appear with a breakfast tray to relate the tale of the evening before. Her habitual listener realized that she had slept too long, and imagined that Anne had done likewise. The latter was often half stupefied in the early morning after a night in which every nerve had been tight drawn. A tap at Anne's closed door dropped into a black pool of stillness, and when the knob was turned a flood of gas rushed out into the passage. Anne's little figure, stark and terribly unfamiliar on her narrow bed, had apparently been overcome

by the fumes. Only the jerky quivering of her small breasts showed that she was not yet dead. After several hours with a hastily summoned doctor and nurse it became clear that Anne would live, for an incredible vitality had always informed her delicate frame. There followed a hospital experience during which she was disinclined to discuss her heart affairs. It was never clearly known, even to the person of undefined moral views and secret, half-shamed ambitions for Anne, just what had happened on the night that Anne decided it was not worth while to awaken in the morning. This was a matter only for limitless and horrible conjecture.

This much only was certain: the hand-to-hand tilt with death had made her avid of life. It awakened her to her own peculiar talent for a dazzlingly variegated and exciting life. Never again would Anne be possessed by one man. Her night of suffocation left her with a thirst which, it seemed, could not be quenched. Her breakfast-tray confidante knew that she had taken her predestined road; the road that does not turn back. A possible marriage would not stay or bind her. Callers of all ages and stages of desirability pressed upon her. John Henry found her more and more inaccessible, and impossible to surprise alone.

His determination crystallized and his courage soared on an especially fluid Fourth of July morning, when, almost without his own volition, on a burning tide of corn whisky he floated to Anne's kitchen, where she sat, demurely solitary, scouring a sky-blue pan. Seizing her slight shoulders he shouted, "I'se free, Anne, free today!" Anne, with a single motion, kitten-wise, lithely twisted herself clear of him. "So is I, John Henry," she replied, in a voice that was almost a song. And that night she danced through the Fourth of July and into the next morning in a black dress spattered with hearts.

AMERICANA

ALABAMA

THE intellectual life in Montgomery, as reported by the eminent *Journal*:

The meeting of the Pilot Club was held in the Philathea room of the Court Street Methodist Church. . . . A unique feature of the meeting was an oration on Woodrow Wilson by little Vaughn Robison, son of Mr. and Mrs. E. V. Robison. He also gave "The Alabaman's Creed," by Judge Walter B. Jones. Miss Lucy Dowe made an interesting talk on "Coca-Cola." Miss Dowe also donated a case of coca-cola, which was won by Miss Ellen Jackson.

ARIZONA

WHAT happens when the vices of Babylon penetrate to the open spaces, as disclosed by a Winkelman dispatch:

Over-devotion to the radio is said to have been a contributing cause for the suicide of Russell Baker, who tied a heavy iron bar to his neck and then jumped into a deep pool. He is said to have become a nervous wreck through loss of sleep. At his work he talked incessantly of the radio and apparently forgot his wife and three small children.

ARKANSAS

ANNOUNCEMENT of a favorite physician of Cleveland county, as reported by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*:

Notice

To the Public:

The reason I have hitherto been able to practice medicine so much cheaper than the other doctors did was because I am a widower and have no children to support.

It's now my duty to inform the public that this advantage will shortly be withdrawn. You will therefore do well to send in your choice cases at once for the old rate.

Office at Prof. Tisdale's home, East Fourth street, Rison, Ark.

Fraternally,
DR. J. L. COOPER

CALIFORNIA

THE awakening of conscience in Los Angeles, as reported by the eminent *Times*:

"To try in every legitimate way to get back to the homely virtues and ideals of our forefathers," is the announced purpose of the newly

organized Loyal Defenders of Pure American Girlhood, articles of incorporation for which were filed yesterday with the Secretary of State at Sacramento. Los Angeles will be the principal place of business of the corporation.

MATURE conclusion of Miss Barbara La Marr, eminent screen star, as set forth in the intellectual *Movie Weekly*:

I think that Elbert Hubbard is the greatest philosopher that ever lived.

COLORADO

How the lawmakers of this great State are inspired in their deliberations, as set forth in a current press dispatch:

To strains of music that might have emanated from a midnight cabaret, the members of the lower house of the State Assembly went through their first night session. When the solons entered the chamber an orchestra was grinding out lively tunes. Popular airs continued until adjournment at midnight. The moaning of a saxophone and the singing of several members of a chorus of a musical revue apparently mingled well with the serious business of legislating, the members continuing the introduction of scores of bills without interruption.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

STEALTHY approach of the Pope to the White House, as described by one of the leading Washington dailies:

A fragment of the bone of the right arm of St. Francis Xavier, known for his miracles in the Far East, will be exhibited tonight at the Church of St. Francis Xavier, Twenty-seventh and Pennsylvania avenue. The Rev. Joseph V. Buckley, pastor of the church, said that each night after the novena the relic will be venerated. "Since we have had the relic in the church," Father Buckley declared today, "we have had a remarkable cure reported. A boy in the parish was suffering with double mastoids and doctors gave up all hope for him. He touched the relic and now the boy is cured. There is no trace of the mastoids."

FLORIDA

How the Fourteenth Amendment is enforced among the Nordic Blond Baptists of rural Florida, as reported by the *Florida*