

BOOK OF THE MONTH.

LUMMOX.*

The definition to be found in Webster's Dictionary of the word "lummox" is—a clumsy stupid person, an awkward bungler.

The book under consideration is the history of a general servant, and incidentally also of many of the employers whom she served in turn.

"Years before a young fledgling, who walked in beauty, and whose Sonatas had not yet been published but whose melodies were to wind down the centuries, had pursued a girl with flax-coloured braids like Bertha's across a plushy field in South of Hungary, capturing her finally and kissing her. At first she beat him off, and then, because his lips were rich and his young head defiant like a child's, it was she who held him. Broodily and close to her heart in the harvest moonlight . . . at dawn he was still singing softly to a great-great grandmother of Bertha troubled wisps of melody that were not quite born to him yet—precious groping old songs that were now locked in the heart of Bertha."

This extract explains why the great clumsy stupid servant girl had yearnings after beauty and an idealism as to which she was wholly inarticulate.

She herself was born under discreditable circumstances. Nobody quite knew just what Baltic bloods flowed in sullen and alien rivers through Bertha's veins—or cared. Bertha least of all.

She was five feet nine and a half of flat-breasted bigness, and her cheekbones were pitched like horns.

She had worked "by the day." Odd jobs, corners to be scraped out with a knife. Scrub-water that became livid. Stench. Yet Bertha, with her lips held very tightly it is true, scraped and scraped, until actually standing there at the sink, poking webby stuff through the drainhole, chimes came through to her from the forest—the forest that was Baltic and Western Teutonic. Sometimes even the chimes arrived dimly. Muted melodies. Wanting-to-be-born thoughts. Bertha's prisoners.

She liked after her day's work was done to sit with them. Words. "Lyric" was a beautiful word. Rollo Farley had used it to a young girl one day at dinner. It had come to Bertha peering through the pantry door. "Lyric," a golden word shaped like a heart.

It was now six years since she had lived as cook with Rollo's mother. She had seen the magnolia tree heavy with bud six beautiful times.

Bertha was "a good plain cook" Mrs. Farley apologised in her invitations to the more informal of her dinner parties. "She's a great unresponsive hunky sort of girl, but she knows Rollo's diet." Rollo had a frail digestion and was a poet.

In her big body lay beauty, and one evening Rollo became aware of it. After she had gone to her room after her manifold duties that left pain in the back of her legs as if the muscles were screwing. Afterwards the eternal yearning of love. Rollo! He on his part decided he must have been beastly drunk. Then the advent of his child. First Rollo must be told. Then hearing of his impending marriage she decided he must never know, and went silently from the house. It was at the Farley's that she first knew Helga, the parlour-maid; pretty Helga, with her love of finery, and her floating kidney, and her resentment of her lot, whom Bertha met afterwards in a house of ill-fame where she had a scrubbing job.

Helga had told Mrs. Farley: "There's nothing right about the way the world's run nohow. Those that's got the drudgery to do get the hard beds to sleep on. Those whose

bones are rested from easy living get the soft beds—where's the right of it I ask you?"

In due time Bertha's child was born, and when he was two-and-a-half weeks' old she signed him away. Then the moans came. The unwetted sobbings of one who does not know how to cry.

The little nurse who was left alone with her was kind and soothed her with chirruping noises and poured her out some spirits of ammonia. The nurse was very young and the doctor too, and Bertha's kind of story was very old, and so they did the properly sedative kind of things, but their eyes kept curving round the dull reality of their charge.

Wonder of Bertha. Her skirts were sour with bilgewater, but her son, choir-faced, with the wisps of old music that were so lovely to her tranced in his eyes, was of her and yet not hers—of her and yet not hers.

There was a spell of work at the Musliners, where Bertha was happy and mended the breach between the husband and wife. Bertha's clumsy footsteps made trails of glory as she passed.

There was the time at Wallenstein's, where the old heart-broken Jewess died in Bertha's arms, heart-broken because her boy had married out of his religion, which was held up to scorn by his young wife. "It was so quiet with her cheek on Mrs. Wallenstein's dead heart."

Most pathetic is her acquaintance with Willy, the foolish serving-man, whose duties were in the home where her boy was adopted. Shared a room with him in order that her mother-hunger could be appeased by the crumbs of information that silly Willy let fall from his lips.

The rescue of little Chita from infamy and the placing of her under proper protection is another poignant incident in this remarkable book—Chita, who had satisfied some of the hunger of Bertha's heart, and whom unselfishness had parted from her.

"Chita," cried Bertha, and plunged her brush into the pail. "O God, my Chita—gone."

There are many histories within these two covers, wonderful sketches and portraiture. Curiously different people in different circumstances of life, on each of which this great hulking woman left her mark of healing and comfort. The Oessetriche family cannot be passed over without a word. Mathilde Oessetriche, who managed her daughters into lunatic asylums and runaway marriages, who received Bertha into her family with terrifying efficiency: "I am the alarm clock in this family."

Miss Hurst keeps the best till last, and Bertha found what should be a permanent anchorage with a German baker and his motherless children.

"The confusion is bad. I need a woman. We would treat you like one of the family."

Family. A snug kind of word. Like a new reefer that buttoned you up in front. Family. A snug kind of word. Meyerbogen was coming up the stairs. You could tell by the little vibrations. He carried a tray of cinnamon buns. You could almost hear their soft breath and get the whiff of the currants.

"Bertha, is dot you?"

Yah.

"Dot's good," he said.

"Gladnesses here with dimension. The treble shrilling of the children. Pretty leafage of peas up stick. Chermmie must be awake. Meyerbogen disappearing around the house, with a sack of flour on his back. The tawny smell of the bread."

Thus the book ends abruptly, leaving with true artistry the sense of peace about Bertha—Bertha, who was already styled "Old Bertha too old for a job," and who had already a crescent of white in her beautiful hair.

A notable book that all should read.

H. H.

* By Fannie Hurst. (Jonathan Cape.)

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