

ONE

Many people worked on the first production of a play called Hooper's Follies. A number of others became interested in it even before it opened. The next few pages tell about its origins in the minds of two people.

"It's about time you did something with your life," Sophie Freeman said to her daughter Loretta, who'd come to see her at the office Sophie shared with her husband at the Olympia Theatre in downtown Botolph. "Stop mooning around."

"Who's mooning?" Loretta replied, indignant, writhing under the injustice of her mother's reproaches, knowing that she exaggerated. "I'm gathering information and experience. An idea will come soon. Didn't I give Dad the idea for our contest?"

"You need to do more than sit around in the library and come up with ideas. Dad won't support you forever. Make yourself useful. You don't even have a boyfriend."

After she broke free and left the Olympia, Loretta called her friend Bruce Drayton. "Ma had another of her explosions. She wants me to settle down and do something."

"Don't despair," Drayton urged her.

"Who's despairing?" She raised her voice a decibel.

"We could probably come up with a project to work on together," Drayton suggested. "Something good, not just to get your ma off your back."

"What sort of project?" Loretta asked doubtfully. "I want to wake the city up."

"I can't say for sure," Drayton replied. "The idea will have to come from you." He knew the strength of her mind. "In the meantime, I have something you might be interested in."

"What?" Loretta asked with an edge to her voice. "Tell me."

She loved Botolph and claimed that it was one of the pinnacles of the North American way of life. She reveled in her city's energy and its grainy feel, its intellectual heritage, and its wealth. She disliked the slowness to change that was its chief feature in the early 1950's when she and Bruce Drayton and countless others were about to come into their own. She foresaw that the situation would be different in a few years, however, and enjoyed thinking in advance about the discomfiture of those who loved to fight new ways.

"What's your big idea?" she asked insistently. "Tell me."

"I have two free tickets to a recital at the Conservatory."

"Is that all?"

He told her what was on the program. Most of it was outside the range of her interests. "It'll be different after the intermission. American things. Just what we like."

Something – was it the tone of his voice? – stirred Loretta to think. Cloud traces of a notion that had flitted through her thoughts since the beginning of the year now seemed more substantial and sturdy in the chill of Valentine's Day, about which Drayton said not a word. It was likely that their friendship would never blossom into romance.

“The concert might do more for us than we imagine,” Drayton said.

“What on earth do you mean?”

“New ideas sometimes come,” Drayton said, “when we spend an hour or two in a place we’ve never been before.”

No wonder he gets nowhere, she sighed. *Top-heavy with pedantry*. “I don’t have anything else planned,” she said. “The evening won’t kill us.”

The first part of the program bored her, mostly songs from before the American Revolution in languages she didn’t know. Her interest picked up in the second half when a tenor who lived in the same apartment building as Drayton introduced the songs of Bosworth Hooper. “A 19th century comic no one remembers now – ballads, romantic tunes, character pieces that are almost dark and despairing – even advanced for our day.”

While the tenor and a soprano, with piano accompaniment, sang half of Hooper’s output, Loretta’s brain seized a notion that came to her like a sunburst after a blizzard. “This is what we should do,” she said to Drayton after the concert was over and they walked through a slanting, stinging, pestering snowstorm to the subway. “You’ll write a play about Hooper. I’ll promote it.”

Loretta loved one thing more than the country and the city that nourished her: the legitimate theater, to which her parents introduced her when she was young, because they were stage professionals and founded a repertory company, where she went to work as soon as she finished college.

Now it was Drayton who balked. “How can I ever do that?”

“Work hard. I’ll bring your script to my father when you’re done. I talked him into sponsoring a contest for new plays. He’s received a hundred entries and hasn’t seen anything that excites him.”

“I work ten hours a day running a movie theater,” Drayton fretted.

“I’ll help with research,” Loretta said as they bent into a gust of wind that pushed snowflakes into their mouths.

She spent evenings in the library for the next two weeks while winter held on with the tenacity of a cougar, after which she brought Drayton scores of file cards covered with scratchy notes.

“Yes,” he said, sighing, as if he’d just come upon an unexpected mountain. “I can do something with that.”

“Don’t think too much,” Loretta admonished him. Another bribe would do no harm. “You remember we went to a revival my parents put on of J. B. L. Thornton’s The Sandman of Montauk Point. You said at the time that he was the greatest ever American playwright. You probably know that he lives in Botolph and battles a nervous ailment.”

“Of course I know that. He’s been at my theater with his wife.”

“I didn’t tell you at the time so you wouldn’t feel outclassed but I’m friendly with him. I can arrange for us to meet him as soon as you finish it.”

Almost for the first time since a class in contemporary thought excited him, Drayton wore the blinders of a work horse. After a month went by, he brought her a two hundred page rough draft.

Drayton's script told the story of Bosworth Hooper, a man with a varied nature – a rough, crude carnival performer, a meditative artist who wrote a score of songs, the offspring of privilege who was hungry, driving, insecure and brought misfortune upon himself and the family to which he was devoted.

"The best I can do," Drayton said with a sigh and a fretful look.

"J. B. L. will know how to fix it," Loretta said.

She loved to say that the world abounds with unused talent because the power of society distorts our natures. She admired J. B. L. Thornton almost to the point of idolatry because he used society's power against itself and created half a dozen works that would be remembered for decades. Drayton would never grow to Thornton's stature, she supposed, but he could turn out to be useful.

On the way to Thornton's apartment on Dinwiddie Street between Botolph University and the Papoiset River, she favored Drayton with an outline of the legendary man's background, most of which he already knew. Thornton's grandfather was an actor-manager. His father took over the business and toured the country in an array of forgotten melodramas. In the last decades of the 19th century Thornton grew up next to the stage, then, where his father's employees flattered him. He worked with small theater companies on the east coast. A fire started in his soul when he learned firsthand what old Mr. Thornton meant when he said that the most respectable elements of society will never accept theater people, no matter how good they were or how much the public loved them. As a result, Thornton pushed himself to expose the shallow hypocrisy of America's ruling elite. Now he was an old man, rigid, in pain, besieged by memories, solitary, on the edge of bitterness, out-of-date and marginalized, but he persisted.

Thornton brought his two visitors to his work room and showed them the half-dozen scripts he kept rewriting, even when arthritis snapped viciously, in hopes of turning his disappointments – including three failed marriages and at least one son a noisy drunk – into vivid words and lively stage pictures.

"It's a privilege to see your works in progress," Drayton said. "An inspiration."

"I've read your screed," Thornton replied. "The way it is now, it will die on the stage before you get to the first intermission. But you started long and it's better to cut than to tear your hair out struggling to put in. You've come to me in the nick of time. Study the Greeks – composition, concision, language. Of course, with Bosworth Hooper – my grampa knew him when Hooper was trying to pull himself back together. He said that Bosworth was a brave but stupid man. Didn't understand himself or human nature. Went mad at the end. Why don't you show us that?"

Loretta and Drayton exchanged questioning glances. "We never saw that in the written record," Drayton said.

Thornton glared at him. “Never mind what you read,” he barked before they could pry into the rumor. “Listen to what I’m telling you! It’s time for my nap. I hardly sleep at all these days. Of course, everyone’s mad and it comes out in later life. You, too, my friends, though you don’t see it now.”

“I knew all along I’d have to shorten it,” Drayton said as they hiked to the subway, glad they could feel spring coming.

“I hope you listened to what he said,” Loretta admonished him. “I want something that will wake this city up – or at least a corner of it. I want a brilliant start.”

Bruce Drayton boasted in the days after he met with Thornton that the great old man would be a godfather to his script. Puffery didn’t rule him for long, however. He worked for hours and hours on his revisions and hardly noticed that the only other favor Thornton granted the play was to attend the opening with Loretta and his fourth wife.

In the meantime, Loretta hovered over the script and the production her parents agreed to stage. She goaded her father into firing the first director and persuaded him to dig into his cash reserves to hire a man from London who promised to polish the show without rubbing out the original rough glow. She didn’t complain that many in the company considered her a mildly charming nuisance as she put out a number of backstage conflagrations. The disappearance of the actor who played Bosworth Hooper’s son gave her a sour stomach and kept her awake and reminded her of what cynics often said about Botolph – that it was impossible to do anything there because as soon as you began digging your foundation, a demon raised up a horde of malignant adversaries. This was the early 1950’s, please remember, and the situation in Botolph has changed since then. Super-cynics say it’s worse.

Loretta also abided the interference of national politics and the heavy hand of her mother who she thought wanted to crush her ambitions to promote local theater. Her efforts did wake up parts of Botolph, however, and mostly in ways she never foresaw.

