



### Love in Miniature: Mr. and Mrs. Tom Thumb<sup>1</sup>

In 1863, America was embroiled in the bloody Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln had just signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The war was not going well for the North, and Americans had a lot on their minds. Despite all of that, on February 10 the nation's attention focused on, of all things, a wedding between two dwarfs.

The wedding diverted attention from the war, if only for a day. One full page of the eight-page New York Times was devoted to it ("Loving Lilliputians"). Indeed, the lavish wedding, the publicity it generated, and the public's fascination with the couple were a testimonial to the manipulative powers of the great showman P.T. Barnum.

The groom, 25 years old and two feet eleven inches tall, was Charles Sherwood Stratton, who had been charming freak show audiences in the United States and Europe for over 20 years. Born in Connecticut in 1838, Stratton had stopped growing before he was a year old. Barnum, who was recruiting him for his American Museum, visited the boy and liked what he saw. The boy's parents were of modest means—his father was a carpenter and his mother worked at a local inn—and Barnum convinced them to bring him to New York.

Yet when his mother arrived with her son, she was incredulous to find out that on handbills promoting Charles, Barnum had changed his age from four to eleven, his place of birth from Bridgeport to London, and his name to General Tom Thumb. Audiences might not readily believe that the four-year-old was truly a dwarf. The rationale for changing the place of birth was that Barnum had observed Americans' fancy for European attractions. Stratton's title, "General," added a nice twist. "Tom Thumb" was borrowed from the legendary dwarf knight in King Arthur's court.

In his early appearances Tom did imitations of Napoleon Bonaparte, Cupid, and a Revolutionary War soldier, dressed in appropriate costumes. Mock battles were staged between him, posing as the biblical David, and the American Museum's giants, representing Goliath. He marched around the stage dressed as a soldier waving a ten-inch sword and performing military drills. He was a fantastic hit, the talk of New York. Twice a day he performed his routine in the museum's lecture room, and between shows he was displayed along with giants, armless wonders, and other exhibits in the Hall of Living Curiosities. On and off the stage, he presented the appearance of a well-mannered gentleman of status.

As Charles Stratton's fame grew, so did his salary and the distance he traveled from home. He appeared for six weeks at Kimball's Museum in Boston and did a similar stint in Philadelphia. Barnum advertised extensively, using "true life" stories, handbills, and lithographs—all trumpeting the talents and demeanor of Tom Thumb, the gentleman in miniature.

In 1844, Barnum and Tom Thumb left for an immensely successful European tour that opened in London and lasted three years, with visits to France, Belgium, the English provinces, Scotland, and Ireland. From the beginning of Stratton's career, Barnum embellished Tom Thumb's status with endorsements from dignitaries. Now Barnum used Stratton's appearances before European kings and queens to fuel the fire of fame. Queen Victoria saw the prodigy three times and presented him with gifts that he displayed on exhibit. To promote his appearances, he would drive about in a miniature carriage pulled by ponies that Barnum had bought for him.

In 1847, General Tom Thumb returned to the United States. Capitalizing on the publicity generated by his stunning European accomplishments and his visits with royalty, he promptly set a new American Museum attendance record.

By the time of his wedding Charles Stratton was a wealthy man. He owned property in Bridgeport, pedigree horses, and a yacht that he sailed on Long Island Sound. When Barnum lost all of his money in an ill-fated business deal, Stratton rescued him by volunteering for another European tour. Yet Tom's generosity and his display of wealth did not mean that he had the control and skill to manage his fortune. He looked like a millionaire because he spent like one, not because he invested wisely.

Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump was Stratton's bride to be. Born on October 31, 1841, in Middleboro, Massachusetts, she was 21 years old when they met. Her growth had ceased at the age of ten and the height of 32 inches. She came from a churchgoing, respectable New England family. She had been a good student at school, so good that at the age of 16 she was asked to teach at a local primary school.

A visit from her cousin, Colonel Wood, changed her life. Wood owned a museum that traveled up and down the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Lavinia and the colonel persuaded her parents to allow her to join the troupe. Thus, in 1858, she started her career as a curiosity.

In 1862, Barnum heard of the pretty Miss Bump and sent an agent to interview her. Her parents were reluctant to have their daughter join Barnum, but she agreed to visit him in Bridgeport and accepted his offer of employment. Barnum brought her to New York for her big-time debut. Thinking that her name was too cumbersome for the public to remember, he shortened it to Lavinia Warren.

On January 2, 1863, Lavinia gave her first formal reception at the American Museum. It was during the first few weeks of her appearances that she met Charles Stratton.

How much of the marriage and the wedding arrangements were Barnum's doing and how much of his involvement was motivated by showmanship are unknown. While acknowledging that Barnum reaped untold publicity from the wedding, Lavinia was adamant that her and Tom's motives were not mercenary.

The announcement of the engagement and the wedding plans created immense excitement. Barnum engaged General Tom Thumb to appear with his fiancée, help sell her photos, and add his own to the inventory. They remained on exhibit until three days before the wedding.

Held at Grace Church in New York City, the wedding was described by one observer as a pageant. Barnum controlled the invitation list and stacked the audience with governors, members of Congress, generals, and New York's richest and most distinguished citizens. Attendance was limited to 2,000 guests.

The wedding reception was held at the Metropolitan Hotel. The couple had a difficult time getting through the crowds that mobbed the streets.

On December 5, 1863, it was publicized that the couple had given birth to a daughter. Photographs of the child taken with the parents at the Brady studio were captioned "Tom Thumb, Wife and Child." Lavinia and Tom appeared with "their" daughter on exhibit. Lavinia would later admit that she never had a child. The child shown with them was borrowed from a home for abandoned children and exchanged for a smaller one when it grew too large.

Following the wedding, Tom Thumb and his wife toured the world under the title "General Tom Thumb Company."

Charles Stratton died on July 15, 1883. Through a combination of frivolous spending, poor management, and the financial climate at the time, Tom and Lavinia's immense fortune had dwindled. Lavinia was left with an estate valued at only \$16,000, plus some modest real estate.

Two years after Stratton's death, Lavinia married Count Primo Magri, another small person performer. Together with his dwarf brother, Lavinia and her husband formed the Lilliputian Opera Company.

Lavinia Warren died in Middleboro, Massachusetts at the age of 78 in 1919. In her later years, when asked the question, "Don't you get tired of this public life?," she would respond, "I belong to the public. The appearing before audiences has been my life. I've hardly known any

other.” At her request, she was buried next to Tom Thumb. A large crowd of mourners attended the funeral.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Robert Bogdan, Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988. Used with permission.