

**WE ARE ALL
HIS CREATURES**



WE ARE ALL HIS CREATURES

— — — — —
TALES OF P. T. BARNUM,
THE GREATEST SHOWMAN

DEBORAH NOYES



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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and incidents are either products of the author's
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THE MERMAID



The animal was an ugly, dried-up, black-looking, and diminutive specimen, about three feet long. Its mouth was open, its tail turned over, and its arms thrown up, giving it the appearance of having died in great agony.

— P. T. Barnum

AUGUST 1842, NEW YORK CITY

Mother snored on the daybed. There was a mermaid swimming just upstairs somewhere, in the museum, and Mother snored.

Caroline lifted her mother's heavy arm to tug out the news sheet, letting it drop again. The mermaid was in the paper today. Daddy's museum was often in the news, but more so since the ladyfish arrived.

Her father had read the article aloud over breakfast. An engraving showed the creature at rest on a rock beside two elegant sister mermaids. She stared into a hand mirror, and her breasts were bare. Caroline knew Mother was scandalized by the set of her mouth and the way she blew on her tea to avoid their eyes. "Questions?" she chirped, in a tone that warned, *don't ask*.

Caroline shrugged. Though she was nine and Helen two, they saw breasts all the time—Mother's, while baby Frances sucked.

When their mother fed Frances right at the breakfast table that morning, Daddy had called her a "fish-wife." At first, this confused Caroline. Did he mean Charity Barnum was the ladyfish, the same mermaid on display upstairs? But how? Mother mostly stood by the window or dozed on the daybed, as now, but she never left their sight. And when she unfastened her dressing gown to feed Frances, her bosom did not in any way resemble the graceful mermaids'.

Caroline knew to guard her questions. She would rather solve them herself when she could, and Madge had used the same word last week, only differently. *Fishwife* meant “common,” Caroline deduced with pride.

But this morning she had another question, one she couldn’t answer herself.

Daddy replied with his back to her, riffling through a pile of contracts. “It’s the medicine.”

Answers made more questions sometimes, especially Daddy’s answers, but with his back to her, he couldn’t see her furrowed brow. He had found the page he was looking for and scanned it triumphantly, crushing the paper in his hands. “That’s what makes her sleep so much.” He looked up sympathetically. “The medicine.”

Whatever was on the paper had brightened his mood. Daddy felt sorry for his “wild three,” he confided, kneeling by them, but “for the old girl’s sake”—he pointed his dimpled chin at Mother on the lounge—“you’ll have to keep your voices down today.”

He paused over the cradle to fuss with Frances’s blanket. Daddy hated baby talk (there was altogether too much “pootsy-wootsy mamby-pamby” spoken to children, he maintained) but resorted to it now to make his point. “Let my girls be doves”—he looked back at them—“and coo like this—*coo, coo, coo*—until she wakes.”

Two of three Barnum daughters cooed on

command until Helen broke off, boldly asking the real question: "But *when* will Mother get up?"

A Helen question was a thorn lodged in your thumb. You carried it around until someone saw your discomfort and removed it. Daddy admired her candor—yet another reason Caroline often itched to slap Helen or shake her; however clever she might be, Helen was young enough to fall for the same games over and over. *Look into my hand*, Caroline would coax, opening a fist. *Closer . . . see? You trust me, right?*

Slap, slap.

Daddy tied a silk cravat at his throat. The hired girl would be here soon, he said. Madge came mornings to tidy and heat broth for their lunch. Sometimes, when Frances wailed for no reason and Mother shut herself in her room after Daddy left for the day, Madge bounced the furious infant round the house on her hip. "Colic," she'd say, scowling at Mother's door.

"You said after this week we would never drink broth again," Helen observed with her air of being disappointed in advance. Daddy said it made her sound more like the old men who played chess outside Philosophers' Hall, his favorite barbershop, than a child. "You said we'd dine with the Astors."

"And I am a man of my word."

He chucked Helen's chin—dimpled, like his. Everyone said they looked alike, while Caroline had Mother's sleepy eyes if not her underwater

slowness—no mermaid moved like Mother. Mermaids were bullet swift.

Unless you had Daddy's promises in writing, Mother said, he rarely kept them, and anyway he made everything up. Unlike those of the boys in school stories—who tied your braid to the back of your chair—his jokes were on whole cities. All of New York suffered Daddy's whims and hoaxes, and he had crowned himself the Prince of Humbug.

"Receipts tripled this week, my girls." With his document tucked under an arm, he bent to kiss their foreheads. Caroline winced when he gave the cradle a shove so sleeping Frances tipped on roily seas. "Our ladyfish will extend her stay."

Caroline sat on her hands. It did not do to betray enthusiasm. "Please let me see the mermaid?" she blurted. "Is she beautiful like the picture?" She had other questions, too. Were the mermaid's scales as sharp as steel blades? Did you have to cover your ears when she sang or be deafened?

But Mr. Barnum was needed at the office. "Proceeds will not count themselves." He tipped his hat.

"I would like to see the mermaid also," Helen added, almost too quietly to be heard.

Caroline gasped. The audacity. Daddy despised repetition.

But he turned his wrath on *her*, not Helen. He leaned on Caroline's chair arms and nearly knocked

his forehead against hers while she held admirably still. “Nownownow,” he teased with a mean twinkle in his eye—in the same *tsk* voice he sometimes used on Mother, who withdrew into herself like a duck into its feathers—and out he went, the hall door clicking shut behind him.

Patience is a virtue.

The first-floor apartment, which had once been a billiard hall, felt profoundly hot and stuffy. Caroline scowled at Helen.

In the sitting room, where they waited for Madge while Mother snored, it might have been day or it might have been night.

Caroline put a hand to her heart, as Mother often did, concentrating.

It would be a long morning.

Patience is a virtue.

When the lump in the cradle began to stir, the girls exchanged looks, united in dread.

Caroline rocked Frances with her right hand and lifted the newspaper with her left. The engraved advertisement said the city had “mermaid fever.”

Closing her eyes, she imagined the world past the long hallway with its hollow ticking grandfather clock, past the filmy glass of the entryway window.

The street would be full of steaming manure and spit, and a snuffing pig or two. Pretty ladies in bustles

and tall bonnets were stepping from carriages, too many to count, with their escorts—one after another, like paper dolls tipping forth from a fathomless black. The museum lived between two worlds, Daddy liked to say. It lured fashionable customers from uptown right alongside people from the Bowery tenements and Five Points.

She could hear his brass band making a clamor on the balcony. Above that, on the roof of the museum, people would be lining up for ice cream. But inside—oh, inside!—there were serpent charmers, ropedancers, glassblowers, and industrious fleas. There was a Gypsy fortune-teller and a professor of phrenology who read your skull by feeling the bumps on your head. This and a ladyfish . . . right upstairs. Yet Caroline Cordelia Barnum (and Helen), the proprietor's own flesh and blood, had never even been inside.

Daddy had no trouble boasting about everything they were missing, especially at bedtime, though the evening ritual of parting was more satisfying than the morning's.

Daddy always tucked them in at night, and his excuses were better than a storybook. "You will kindly forgive Mr. Barnum," he would say, "proprietor of the American Museum, who must now slip away to see to the important work of lighting up the night sky."

While she and Helen waited to fall asleep each night, they watched the beam of his Drummond light

circle Broadway, sweeping the street below and the front and sides of the museum. It crept in their window, slashed the ceiling, and turned dizzy circles before retreating again.

Mr. Barnum's other important work, he reminded them — covering first Helen and then Caroline to the chin with their blankets — was to tuck in the animals.

There were huge placards all around the outside of the museum, and it was Helen's job, at this point in the ritual, to make Daddy list the animals they advertised: orangutan and polar bear, elephant and ostrich, camel leopard, tapir, pelican, eagle, gnu, lion, kangaroo, peacock, elk, rattlesnake, tiger, fur seal, and cormorant.

She had memorized the menagerie in a particular order, every animal, and made him start over if he omitted anyone.

When Daddy didn't have time for a proper good-night, he would tuck them in with the museum catalog for their bedtime book, inviting them to imagine, in their dreams, the midnight snuffling and turning of creatures and the soft bickering of giants and dwarfs playing cards. "And when you wake up," he would say with his big laugh, "I'll be at the table waiting."

He was.

And he promised that on the day they finally got upstairs to visit his "wilderness of realities," they would have the whole of five floors to themselves, and the mermaid, too.

They would watch the sun go down from the roof deck.

They would be served cake with buttercream icing and dishes of cherry ice cream.

They would cheer the fireworks.

But not today.

Today they were stuck at home again, with baby Frances fixing to wake up and wail.

Caroline set down the newspaper and rocked the cradle even harder, with all her might, but the bundle now thrashing in slow motion began to whimper.

That's how it started, as if someone were plucking its lip (Caroline still thought of Frances as an "it") like a string on a guitar. Then came a soft sputter that escalated into an alarming, mind-numbing yowl from which there was no escape until Mother stuffed a nipple in its mouth.

It couldn't hold up the head lolling on the pile of rolled fat that was its neck. It had a red face and, under downy hair, a scabby scalp. Frances wasn't an *entirely* ugly baby, not anymore. She had grown into herself and had an elfin, pretty form. Mother called her a sprite. But she—it—was shiftless and greedy like all babies, and there was something growing up in her eyes that Caroline didn't like.

As little sisters went, Helen was a nuisance, but she could keep still and occupy herself. Frances always

seemed hungry—all sucking mouth and beady eyes—and unsatisfied, no matter how often she was fed or changed. Her infant hunger was in her whole being, not just her belly, and now the sputtering became gasps, the urgent little lungs sucking in air. Any moment, that air would exit as a wail.

“Your turn, Helen,” Caroline snapped, and let the cradle fall still as the wailing began. They both stared down helplessly.

Helen lifted the tin of matches from the mantel and dropped it in the cradle. Two red fists caught the makeshift rattle and shook, spilling wooden matches all over the crocheted blanket. The sputtering escalated.

“Don’t!” Caroline seized the tin. “She’ll burn the museum down!”

The little fists flailed, knocking Caroline’s wrists and knuckles. She sighed, pinching matches from the fabric. “Mother,” she said coolly, “Frances is awake.”

Caroline returned the matchbox to the mantel, crossed her arms, and waited for their mother to stir from her stupor. “I know you hear me,” she added under her breath.

Helen’s eyes widened.

Mother rolled toward them, her banana curls shamelessly flattened on one side. Her face looked old, and there was a painful crease from the upholstery on her cheek. “Hand her,” she murmured.

Loosening her gown, Mother took Frances and rolled over with her.

There was a mermaid upstairs.

Caroline (and Helen) wanted to see it.

Caroline wanted to see all that the catalog called “monstrous, scaly, and strange,” from the trained chickens and the dog that operated a knitting machine to the puppets and the python.

It was their own museum, and Daddy had promised, repeatedly, but he was too busy.

Mother must have felt them both at her back, cooing in their thoughts, bidding their time until Madge arrived to fix lunch. “Thank you, girls,” she murmured to the wall, and Caroline had never heard a voice so hoarse and thick with sorrow.

Frances would suck and sleep.

Mother, who evaded the topic of the museum altogether, would sleep.

The arrows of the hands would move round and round the face of the sun on the grandfather clock.

On the hour, the clock’s bell would chime and fall silent.

Caroline walked back to Helen and took her by the hand. She tugged her out to the kitchen. “I have a plan.” She knelt to whisper.

* * *

She had to give Helen credit for stealth and daring. They were as quiet as pantry mice. Helen did as she was told and took the coins from the milkman's can, then tucked them into her slipper. It was hot and bright and loud out on the street. Once they were through the door, Helen gripped Caroline's hand so hard her bones creaked, but her big, bright eyes darted everywhere, looking for the animals. Caroline felt her sister's leaping pulse in the hollow between her thumb and pointer finger.

It was a Saturday, and the entrance line wound around the block.

Hot sun beat down on them — she had rushed them out without even their bonnets — as they huddled together listening to the murmur of conversations all around, families, mainly, with rough Bowery boys hanging on the rail and a few lone men, one of whom — a fellow with a meaty nose and a stain on his lapel — eyed them grimly.

A sheen of sweat shone over Helen's freckles, and Caroline itched in her indoor gown, too warm for open sunlight. They had no parasol, but at least she had thought to bring the exhibition catalog. She kept it tucked under an arm until she could no longer ignore the feeling that everyone, not just Mr. Meaty Nose, was staring at them, at which point she opened the program and flipped through, pointing things out to Helen, the secret things they would see and hear and touch and smell.

They were collared just inside the door. *Collared* was a word Caroline especially liked and had always wanted to use in a sentence. But she was too nervous, just now, to enjoy it.

"I know you." The man laughed and waved them over to his seat on a tall stool by the ticket counter, where he waited for the early-morning receipts to be bagged. It was Daddy's partner-in-crime, as Mother called him, Mr. Lyman.

Stepping closer to the counter, Caroline held out their coins in a trembling hand.

"I don't want your money." Mr. Lyman leaned forward and hooked a thumb toward the mysterious expanse behind them. "*He* might. But I don't."

Caroline laughed because he seemed to require it of her. Helen laughed because Caroline did.

"No chaperone today?" Mr. Lyman asked, eyeing Mr. Meaty Nose in line behind them.

"Mother was . . . sleeping," Caroline explained in a small voice.

A woman behind them began to complain that they were taking too long. They were holding up the line, and what were two little girls doing out alone like that, anyway? The two rough boys who had been hanging on the rail whistled through their fingers. Mr. Lyman was forced to walk round and take both girls by the hand. He excused himself to the man in the ticket booth, then led them upstairs to Daddy's office.

As Mr. Lyman pulled them through the crowds, Caroline's heart beat so hard she thought it would deafen her. Her limbs felt quavery, and she couldn't see Helen on the other side. Seeing Helen, meeting her steady gaze, always gave Caroline nerve, but her nerves were failing now. She was done for.

Daddy glanced up from his ledger.

"Mother was asleep." It was all Caroline could think to say. She stared at her shoes, pigeon-toed.

Helen did likewise, in house slippers.

"I'm sorry," Caroline offered. They had never in their lives gone out unattended or stolen milk money or any money, much less employed deceit.

She knew he was cross, because he said nothing. Not one word. He kept scribbling in his ledger.

They were wasting his valuable time.

He should be counting receipts.

She felt a moment's terror and trembling, but he didn't shout or scold or cuff them. He stood up slowly, walked round the desk, and knelt—Daddy was very tall—to lift her chin. He asked, "What took you so long?"

"Levi!" he called, and Mr. Lyman, who had been hovering outside the office door, returned with peaked eyebrows. Daddy nudged them forward, a hand on the back of each girl's neck. "As you know, these are chips off the old block. I'll take them up to see the mermaid after I'm through here. Please escort them to the sitting room to wait."

Even Helen knew not to speak at so sacred a time. Caroline felt wise and very old, though Mr. Lyman again took her hand like a baby's—and Helen's in the other. "Brace yourselves, girls," he said, laughing over a shoulder.

Daddy winked before they walked away, brushing at a splatter of ink from his pen. "We reward initiative here."

The sofa they waited on had supported numberless backsides. The quiet room had high ceilings and exotic landscapes, fruits, and birds painted on the walls. They could see the main entrance hall through a wide threshold, and the lumbering flow of visitors bumping and jostling. Caroline thought she saw one of the rough boys go by, but in that crush of humanity there were no faces, only hats and bonnets, sharp elbows and shoulders.

At first, the girls observed propriety, their backs straight, hands folded (though gloveless and exposed) on their knees, ankles tucked under long skirts. It was hard for Caroline to judge the passing of time with no grandfather clock to help. Moments became hours. She missed Mother. She even missed Frances.

Helen shifted onto her side and pulled her legs up in unladylike fashion. She laid her head in Caroline's lap to nap, forcing Caroline to smooth her sister's dress down and down for modesty's sake. Helen was not heavy, but Caroline's legs grew numb and tingling

under her weight. Defiance plagued her again. This was what Mother would do. Sit by and sigh and close her eyes, watching the magic lantern show inside her skull.

Helen whimpered in a dream.

What if they went up on their own?

But the memory of Daddy's face as he knelt to lift her chin, his pride in their adventurousness, gave Caroline pause. His pride would become irritation or anger if they suffered a mishap or disappointed him in one of countless ways. Caroline couldn't let him down after pleasing him so well without quite understanding how.

Just as she, too, was beginning to doze off, Madge appeared above her like a harpy from a nightmare, jostling them awake.

"Your mother is worried sick!"

Both girls sat up and stretched. Everything hurt.

"Your *poor* mother," Madge droned on.

"He forgot us, didn't he?" Caroline asked with as much dignity as she could muster.

"He was detained. He sent for me. Come now; look sharp. I have babies of my own to tend."

Caroline wanted to say *I am not a baby*, but that would be sass. Instead, in a voice even more proud and disinterested than before, she repeated, "We only wanted to see the mermaid."

"Yes, I know. It's on the way out." Madge sniffed and seized and released Helen's wrist. "Let's go."

They hurried through the halls after Madge. In her drab brown coat, she was like a bird in an autumn bush, easy to lose sight of among such color and pattern. Their legs were short, and it took only a few moments to lose sight of Madge altogether. Everything was loud and bright, and Caroline had to stop and let it go by, let everything go by.

Helen stopped short, clasping her leader's hand so hard it hurt. Mirror tears streamed down her round face. Caroline wrested her hand free, and Helen sank to the floor. She seized Caroline's leg as if it were the trunk of a tree. "Stop, Helen! Let me think!"

"Are you lost, young lady?"

Another voice, leaning close with peppermint breath: "What's your name, dear?"

I am Barnum, Caroline Cordelia Barnum! This is my very own museum, all five floors. Every seashell and tiger belongs to me, and so does the one-and-only club that killed Captain Cook...

But her mouth only moved like a fish's.

A small crowd had gathered, as if she and Helen were human oddities in their own right, and the ruckus brought Madge back to them. Huffing, she caught them up by the sleeves and steered them past the gawkers, out of one hall and into the next, and from there it went by in a sickening blur, the Tattooed Man and the Highland Mammoth Boys. A loud voice narrated the manner in which Mr. Nellis, the Armless Wonder, used his feet to load and fire a pistol and shoot with a

bow and arrow (or, “in the season of Cupid,” called the barker, cut paper “valentines”) . . .

Madge steered them here and there, not gently, until they came to a small viewing room with a sign reading *The Fejee Mermaid*. Caroline wanted to pause reverently and compose herself, but Madge and Helen had no such impulse, and no right to see the mermaid first, so Caroline swiped at a stray tear, and in they went.

The creature was in a tall glass dome on a stand. She would never again comb her curls or skim the waves or shoot like a bullet through the depths.

“There is your mermaid,” Madge said in her sour, scolding voice; there was also a hint of satisfaction, which frightened Caroline—that a grown person in charge of their well-being should despise them so. What had they done to deserve it?

The creature looked starved and shrunken, like blackened earwax, carved into the shape of a fish below and a monkey, or a tiny old woman with shriveled breasts, above.

“You may as well know sooner than late.” Madge leveled her gaze on Caroline, *someone else’s spoiled child*. “There are no mermaids.”

Helen had stepped very close, her nose almost to the glass, or what she could reach of it. Caroline kept her distance, and one eye on the ugly beast, trying to think what it reminded her of.

Mother. It reminded her of their mother, curled

toward the wall, frozen in her pose like a cursed thing from a fairy story.

Caroline felt no fear, no pity for the ladyfish, only amazement, as her father intended. This was, after all, Daddy's mermaid. A rush of good cheer overcame her. Pugnacious optimism was a trait she and her father shared. Caroline took Helen by the hand before they could be bullied forward again, and cupped her other to her sister's seashell ear. "Let's go home," she said with a disdainful glance at Madge. "There are no *real* mermaids here."

THE MYSTERIOUS ARM



I took great pains to train my diminutive prodigy, devoting many hours to that purpose, by day and by night, and succeeded, because he had native talent and an intense love of the ludicrous. He became very fond of me. I was, and yet am, sincerely attached to him.

—P. T. Barnum

1842, BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT

Once upon a time there was a tiny man who sold kisses.

That tiny man grew rich beyond imagining, but on this day he wasn't special yet. He was an ordinary if very little boy in a saltbox house marching a tin soldier along a windowsill.

Charlie could see over the sill but just. His mouth fogged the glass, but he made out his ma and Mrs. Fairchild, huddled in their cloaks. Father set down his wheelbarrow and joined them. All their lips moved at once, breathing frost.

Ma looked back at Charlie in the window, where he was playing the game of crossing and uncrossing his eyes—focusing first on his own pale reflection and then on his elders—to and fro in a kind of struggle.

It was so cold in Albany that November day that the Hudson River froze. All river transport stopped, and the showman who would change Charlie Stratton's life had to take the rattling Housatonic Railroad instead.

The train stopped in Bridgeport, where Barnum lodged the night with his half brother, Philo, who kept the Franklin House. Over supper, talk turned to an extraordinarily small boy in town. The showman made inquiries and sent Philo to fetch the specimen from his family's little saltbox house at the edge of the village near the Pequannock River.

When Charlie entered the smoky tavern with his parents, Mr. Barnum stood to greet them. Charlie didn't reach the man's knees.

With the showman regarding them intensely and all eyes staring, Ma began to stammer and wring her hands. Their son had stopped growing when he was seven months old, she told the tavern, though all the locals knew already. The doctor didn't know why.

The tiny boy with bright eyes hid behind his mother's skirts as they followed Philo Barnum to a table.

"Say hello to Mr. Barnum, Charlie," Sherwood Stratton urged his son.

The rascal emerged by degrees and shook hands all around.

It fast became apparent that while the parents were dullards, young Stratton was both clever and charming. The showman couldn't believe his luck.

Food arrived, and the party ate quietly. After smacking his lips and folding his napkin, the weary youngster climbed into his ma's lap. There he sat for the rest of the interview, enjoying the clack of his heels against her chair leg.

Cynthia Stratton tried to muffle the noise in her palms, even tried trapping her son's tiny knees between her own, bunching her plaid skirts, but Charlie kicked all the harder until the showman leaned close. Would Charlie like to go for a walk? Just the two of them?

Happily bewildered, the boy let himself be led to the door without a coat. He hopped down the tavern steps at the big man's side, admiring a snow squall and tipping his head back to catch feathery flakes on his tongue.

"Would you like to be large one day, young man? Far and away larger than life? With your name shouted on posters around the world?"

"Charlie?"

The showman stopped in his snow tracks. "Why, no," he admitted. "That won't do. But a rose by any other name . . ."

Charlie pinched his nose, enjoying how it changed his voice. "I don't want to be a rose."

"Fussy things," the big man agreed. "But a general? You'd like to be a general?"

Charlie shook the outstretched thumb while snow tumbled around the mismatched pair, and the deal was struck.

Charles Stratton was no more.

"We'll count the venture an experiment for now," Mr. Barnum told Pa, who saw his only son as an embarrassment.

With Mrs. Stratton's blessing, Sherwood Stratton agreed to lease the fruit of his loins for three dollars a week plus room, board, and traveling expenses, to give the youngster the life and "stature" (Mr. Barnum

winked down at Charlie, as if the word marked a secret between them) he wouldn't otherwise enjoy.

In early December, the showman and his discovery, parents in tow, boarded the steamship *Nimrod* and chugged through Long Island Sound. With no pillow to sit on, the tiny man could only look up at clouds hurtling past. His size often made his surroundings a mystery. Sometimes he tugged Ma's sleeve, and she lifted him into her lap. But when distracted, as now, she set her jaw against him, and the world above remained a puzzle.

At New York Harbor, in a swirl of rigging, shouts, and burly longshoremen heaving sacks and trunks, they hailed a hackney cab.

After the dirt and drab of provincial Bridgeport, New York—or what Charlie could see of it—was a teeming carnival. It shocked him that such a place existed, making his mind turn and turn. What else lay hidden?

The family's new home, the American Museum, sat on wide, bustling Broadway. Damp paving stone polished by the tread of feet shone in the gaslight. Brick made a velvet curtain behind all the movement: omnibuses, hackney cabs, coaches, carriages, and people—far too many to count, in all sizes, shapes, and colors.

But none his size.

Charlie and his parents would lodge on the fifth floor of the museum with the other performers. The

rooms were well equipped and comfortable, Ma pronounced, inspecting each fork and teacup twice.

Pa sat on gnarled carpenter's hands on the bed while their neighbors squabbled behind thin walls. They were giants (or more-than-usually giant)—one French and one Arabian—who lived on either side of the hall and, the family had been warned, liked a boisterous game of cards. Reportedly there were “little people,” too, folks closer to Charlie's size.

Their sponsor and his “esteemed brood” lived in a converted billiard hall below the museum, where the tiny man's education would commence the following morning.

While Pa contemplated his worn boots, Ma watched the night-lit city and the slashing beam of Mr. Barnum's Drummond light through the window.

The Strattons were a long way from home, and the tiny man was not sorry.

They were, as Mr. Barnum had predicted in his sidelong whisper in the Bridgeport tavern, on the brink of a great adventure.

“We'll get to the point, you and I,” the showman said in the morning. He laid a mirror on the floor beside the roaring hearth. “That's for you. To observe your progress,” he said. “Call me Mr. B., and I'll call you Tom.”

That day, Tom learned that his new name came from a story. Tom Thumb was a knight of King Arthur's

Round Table, one so tiny he rode a mouse and battled spiders. There were other performers in New York and vaudeville who went by the name, Mr. B. explained, some nearly as tiny as he was, but none were generals.

General Tom Thumb liked to be read to, and it became the custom for Mr. B. to share tales and verse and bits of whimsy before rehearsals. He studied Tom's face while he absorbed it all, the rhythm and the color; soon Tom would feel the words changing him as hot air changes the shape and prospects of a balloon.

But that first morning, Tom accepted a plum and a biscuit on a saucer and took his seat by the fire, kicking the chair legs nervously. He had what Ma called "the butterflies" until a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror on the floor calmed him. He stuck out his tongue at the other Tom and bit into his plum, slurping sweet juice.

After breakfast, Mr. B. taught him to strut and salute. Tom filled himself with wind and marched so stoutly that his knees brushed his chin. He jutted chest and elbows and sang a sea shanty while Mr. B. smiled. The teacher's bright eyes tracked him, distant as stars but comforting, too, as only stars can be.

"Try this." Mr. B. lifted Tom onto a table and fetched an ivory-tipped walking cane. "Grab hold."

Tom seized the cane below the hook and felt a dizzy rapture as Mr. B. lifted him off the table into the air. The showman marched a dangling Tom round the room, and the big man and the tiny one cackled in unison.

"You raised the roof," Mrs. B. complained during a lunch of cold beef sandwiches that day. It was just the three of them, and Mr. B. couldn't stop smiling.

In weeks to come, Tom would learn to play dress-up and dance, dash off quips and comebacks, and sing "Yankee Doodle" in his piping treble. Mr. B. coached him hour after hour, day after day, sometimes long into the night. "Say when you tire," he offered, but he didn't mean it, and Tom had plenty of practice appearing brighter and bigger and faster than he was. You had no choice, at his size, but to look sharp and keep pace.

Tom trailed the merry showman like a puppy, imitating his swagger. He could copy Mr. B.'s voice exactly (or even, he learned, mock the sorrowful harping of Mrs. B. and not earn a scolding for it). The mischief he liked best brought him only applause, and soon, Mr. B. said, they would all profit from it.

On the best days—before Mr. B. noticed and dispatched them—the Barnum daughters crowded behind the door and peeked through the crack. Tom didn't know their names, only that there were three.

When their father left the room to accept a caller or a letter, the girls sometimes spilled in. The oldest was given to fits of giggling at the slightest provocation and easily spooked by footfalls. ("If I ran a smithy shop," her father had barked at her the first day, "would you lurk

by the forge? You would not. Nor will you disrupt my business now.”)

The “*enfant terrible*,” as Mr. B. called his youngest, was only slightly larger than Tom and reminded him of the hummingbird that used to come suck the red flowers in his ma’s garden. She was small and impish, like him, with a pert nose and mischievous eyes, and seemed to vibrate in a way you couldn’t see but only feel.

The middle sister, still and watchful, was the puzzle Tom liked best. He couldn’t help stealing glances at her—her name was Helen, he would learn—and her cool, unflinching eyes stared back. She always looked alert but with a queenly dignity, even in a dress much plainer than her older sister’s. Because Tom couldn’t guess how to make her laugh, Mr. B.’s middle daughter was a mystery.

One day, as Tom was being fitted for costumes in the sitting room, he looked up at just the right moment. The door to the hall was open a crack, and through it he glimpsed an arm, a stealthy blue arm, and the blue let in a flash of pink that streaked to the far wall and wriggled behind a tapestry.

While the tailor circled, taking Tom’s measurements, Frances stayed hidden, but with the man’s back to her, she peeped out and thumbed her nose at Tom, glancing toward the hall for approval.

Standing tall on the tabletop, Tom tried to maintain the manly pose Mr. B. favored for the French general

Napoleon. It would become Tom's most famous role. (For Romulus, Tom would have a helmet and spear, for Cupid a bow and arrow, and for Cain a club to slay Abel with, but it was the general's wide hat Tom fancied most.)

He was disappointed to learn that his opening-day schedule excluded singing and jesting. Mr. B. approved just one routine. Tom could dance a Highland fling as a Scottish chieftain (dirk and claymore with powder horn and deer knife). That was all.

Tom wouldn't be playing a hero, Mr. B. explained, but the *statue* of a hero. His goal, for now, was to stand perfectly still on a stone pillar. If he showed discipline, active roles would follow.

Frances bobbed out from behind the tapestry, and Tom's mouth twitched. This was his chance to prove his discipline, but the *enfant terrible* began a clumsy dance, lifting her skirts and kicking her little feet high, only to get a boot tangled in the drapery. The heavy curtain and rod crashed down, burying Frances in a heap. At the same moment, Tom moved, and the tailor stuck him with a pin.

Mr. B. left his writing desk in the alcove to pull the squirming intruder out from the velvet. He set her in the now empty hall, clapped the door closed, and turned the lock.

Frances was known for her tempers, and something out there, a vase or planter, crashed to the parquet.

"The inmates are running the asylum," Mr. B. complained to the tailor, who asked through the line of thread between his lips, "How ever did she reach the doorknob?"

It was a tall door, Tom conceded, with an ornate brass knob. He had been let through it like a lapdog.

"Frances has her ways."

There was a hint of pride in the father's voice, but Tom had seen the blue arm. He knew better.

Tom should have been relieved. He could practice being a block of stone in peace. But Frances and the mysterious arm had left a hollow in the room. Tom had never had friends his own age. Other children didn't trust him, but the Misses B. were not ordinary children.

That night Tom was invited with his parents and some of Mr. B.'s associates to dine with the Barnums in their apartment.

At the other end of the table, over custard and shortbread, Mr. B. caught Tom's parents up on their progress. "I've taken the boy under my wing," he boasted, "but the credit is Tom's." That a young child should learn so much so quickly, the showman admitted—with lightning wit, comic timing, and muscle control to boot—was astonishing even to him.

Pa coughed into his fist. He was happy to celebrate Tom's "deformity" now that it turned a profit, but in

Bridgeport he'd been indifferent at best . . . mortified at worst.

Mr. B. reached back for a pile of broadsheets, advertisements for Tom's exhibition. They were "rolling off the presses," he said, circulating the pages though none had asked him to. "ONLY FIFTEEN POUNDS!" he recited. "Perfectly symmetrical in all his proportions! Intelligent and graceful beyond belief, and SMALLER THAN ANY INFANT that ever walked alone!"

He spoke the exclamation points, and his associates murmured agreement. Caroline, at her father's left elbow, glared down at her plate while Frances (who usually took her meals in the kitchen with Cook) clapped wildly in her high chair, delighted by her father's manic energy. The excitement was wearing on her and her oldest sister equally, though at opposite extremes.

Over the past week, with Tom's debut drawing near, Caroline had grown hostile. This evening alone, she had gone out of her way to criticize his table manners. Tom had worked hard to hold his fork just so—such a large fork!—and winced at her words, but Helen leaned in beside him, and her blue sleeve brushed his. "Caro's just jealous of all the attention you get," she soothed. "Pay no mind."

Helen's sleeve was powder blue with a royal sheen.

Tom turned his face to smile at no one, a ridiculous toothy grin. He was glad there was no mirror here, as

there was on the floor in the sitting room when they rehearsed.

Farther down the table, Mrs. B. fanned herself with her napkin. Helen cupped her hand to his ear again. "Caro sounds more like Mother every day," she said, "and I'll say so at bedtime. Don't worry. I tell her every chance I get."

After that, as usual, she remained queenly and aloof, but her hazel eyes brimmed with pleasure.

The Strattons gaped at the type on the advertisements bearing their son's likeness:

P. T. BARNUM OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM, BROADWAY AT ANN STREET, IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THAT HE HAS IMPORTED FROM LONDON TO ADD TO HIS COLLECTION OF EXTRAORDINARY CURIOSITIES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, THE RAREST, TINIEST, THE MOST DIMINUTIVE DWARF IMAGINABLE, ENGAGED AT EXTRAORDINARY EXPENSE — TOM THUMB, ELEVEN YEARS OLD AND ONLY TWENTY-FIVE INCHES HIGH!

"E-le-ven?" stammered Tom's ma. "*London? Why on earth?*"

Mr. B. explained that all four-year-olds are small, things being relative. Without a bit of "puff," the true wonder of Tom's person would escape the public. "Not to mention," he said, "we'll profit from the American fancy for all things exotic."

Egged on by the Strattons, who took it all in

hungrily, Mr. B. read aloud from the pamphlet that would accompany their son's exhibition: "When General Tom Thumb was just a babe," he read, "Nature put a veto on his further upward progress."

It was his favorite line, Tom knew, and Mr. B. laughed out loud, bushy eyebrows peaking. "Most people can't fathom he's just e-le-ven"—he glanced wryly at Ma—"much less younger. Here's to our general." He raised his glass, and a hearty clinking began.

Tom would remember the toasts and salutations around the table that night (even Caroline clapped, once and grudgingly) for years—long after the applause of the masses grew faint and mundane.

When General Tom Thumb took the stage in the museum's Hall of Living Curiosities over the winter holidays, New York went wild.

Reviewers fueled Mr. B.'s publicity machine: with hands the size of half-dollars, they wrote, and feet just three inches long, Tom was "the greatest little mortal alive," a "perfect little gentleman."

Their star was on the rise, and the museum hummed with excitement. As business boomed, Mr. B. and his cronies, the other performers, Tom's parents, and even Caroline began to treat him differently, though Tom couldn't have explained how. He knew only that he felt more at ease in the little sitting room in the apartment than anywhere else.