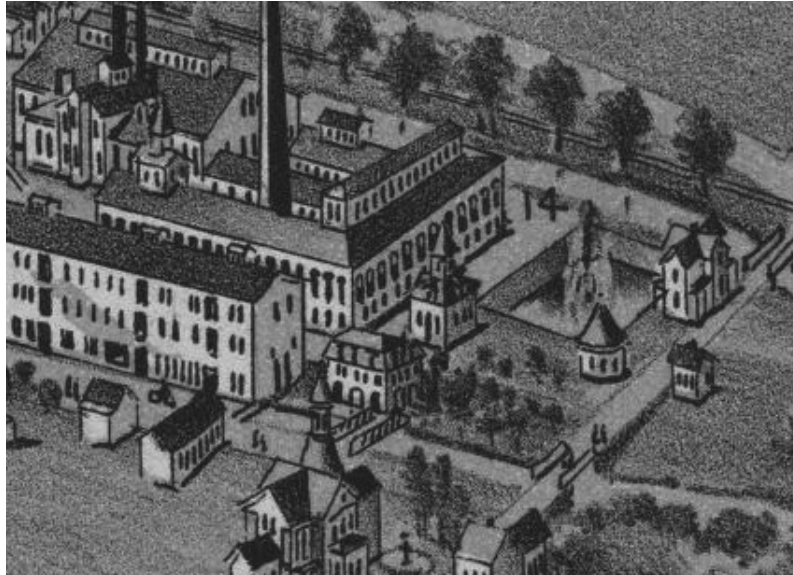


Tom Thumb at Chambersburg



Chambursburg,
Pennsylvania, 1894.

TOWARD THE END OF JULY, on the last leg of our tour, Bleeker brought us up into Pennsylvania. We were three nights in Pittsburgh, then briefly in McKeesport, Donegal, and Manns Choice. And then, on a warm Friday afternoon, we arrived in Chambersburg and made our way to the Franklin Hotel.

It was a pleasant little town with handsome buildings, many with fancy façades and stone columns, and rows of stores along Main Street with colorful awnings.

Before the battle of Gettysburg, Robert E. Lee had camped his army in the neighboring fields and hills, a sprawling corps of more than sixty thousand. The hotel owner, a stout, black-haired man with an egg-shaped growth on his forehead, told us what a mess it had been having all those soldiers around. “You never know what’s on the way,” the proprietor said, sounding as if he was looking forward to the next bit of excitement. He was proud of his town and proud of its long history, and he urged us to stop in the cemetery before we left, for a look at the old headstones. And I, after a day’s travel, was thinking sure, why not, just what I need, an old graveyard.

We performed that evening in the Masonic Hall, and were scheduled to appear again the following afternoon—Vinny and I, with her sister Minnie, and Commodore Nutt, billed as *Barnum's Quartet of Dwarfs*—doing our songs and dances, and a few jokes and impersonations, our usual fare.

After the evening performance, we returned to our hotel rooms exhausted, except for Kellogg and Richardson and Harry Nobbs, who lingered at the bar. When Vinny and I reached our room, Vinny turned to me with a slow, needful look and said what she would really like, at that moment, was a macaroon.

I winced. "In this town? You think they have macaroons?"

"Char-lie," she said, pleading.

"But nothing's open."

"Up the block," she said. "I saw a place. We passed it just now, coming back from the hall."

I went down into the night, small me, thirty-six inches tall, Charlie Stratton, known to the world as Tom Thumb. Looking around, I spotted a shop with its lamps still lit. They sold crackers, bread, walnuts, and incidentals. The girl behind the counter was mesmerized by my smallness, couldn't take her eyes off me. She had no idea what a macaroon might be.

"We have lemon drops," she said.

"Nothing else?"

"Chocolate pound cake, but it's stale."

I bought the lemon drops.

Back at the room, Vinny's face sagged with disappointment. "I can't eat these," she said. "They'll ruin my teeth."

I took one, and, as lemon drops go, it wasn't half bad.

"They had some beef jerky. You would have liked some of that?"

"Don't be silly," she said.

She took a lemon drop and put it in her mouth. "They could have put more lemon in it," she said.

I took another, and she took another, and we did that for a while, sitting on the bed, crunching lemon drops, she in her nightshift and I in my street clothes. And before long, fatigue set in. She leaned back upon her pillow, and, faster than I knew, she was swallowed up in sleep. And the same with me, soon after. So tired, I just passed out, in my shirt and pants.

I don't recall that I had any dreams that night, though I know there are people—Barnum is one—who say we always dream, and when we seem not to, it's because the dream was too deeply buried to be remembered. In any case, I was wrenched awake by the sound of a big gun firing. Vinny too—yanked out of sleep. And no doubt everyone in town.

It was half past three in the morning, and when I went to the window, a thin slice of the moon was up and the sky was full of stars. And again the sound of that gun. I stepped into the corridor, and Minnie and the Commodore came out of their rooms, and some of the others, in nightshifts. Bleeker was up and dressed already—or, like me, had never changed out of his day clothes. He went down to see what he could learn.

Moments later he was back, saying a Confederate force had arrived in the night and was bivouacked on the hills west of town. The firing was from a gun that General Crouch's men had set up on the Pittsburgh Pike, to hold them off. But it was hopeless. All he had was fifty men. The regiments that had been based in the town had been siphoned off to bolster the defenses around Washington.

"Pack your things," he told everybody. "Better to be ready."

I went back to the room, and while Vinny dressed, I stashed our things into the luggage. Through the window I saw wagons and buckboards pulling up to the stores along the street and lights coming on—shopkeepers rushing in and pulling merchandise out of their stores, riding off with as much as they could. At the bank there were two coaches and five or six guards with rifles, the bank people filling the coaches with sacks of money.

Vinny left to help her sister, and I found Bleeker in his room, buckling up his bags. His wife, Julia, had gone to help the Commodore.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered.

His mind was racing. So was mine.

We went down to the lobby, and the others followed. The lobby crowded up, and the night clerk was telling people there was a room in the cellar where they could store their luggage and valuables. And we knew what he was saying—that the Rebs would grab anything they could carry.

Ben Kellogg had the box with the jewelry and the cash receipts. He never went anywhere without it. Under his long jacket, he carried a pistol on his hip. "I think I'll just keep the box with me," he said.

Bleeker was busy thinking, eyes darting, intense, fierce. And suddenly he was all decision.

"I need a wagon and a coach," he said, stepping over to the night clerk, a slim, dull-eyed fellow with sideburns, thirtyish, in black pants, a blue vest over his white shirt. His necktie was a black shoelace tied in a bow.

"Impossible," he answered. "You see how it is. The ones with wagons, they're carting their valuables into the hills. It's routine, whenever the rebs come near."



P. T. Barnum and General Tom Thumb. At age five, Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838–1883) was close to the same height as when he was six months old (25 inches). P. T. Barnum, a distant relative of Stratton's family, became interested in the small boy. Barnum taught Stratton how to perform and gave him the stage name of Tom Thumb. At the age of five, Stratton made his first tour of America with Barnum, eventually becoming an international celebrity. At age nine, he began to grow slowly, reaching 3 feet, 4 inches high by the time of his death at the age of forty-five.

Bleeker took out a roll of bills, peeled off two fifties, and stuffed them into the fellow's vest pocket. And that did it. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

He darted out of the lobby, and while he was gone, we were out front, on the portico, waiting. When he returned, he pulled up with a wagon drawn by a scraggly horse.

"That the best you can find?" Bleeker said, unhappy with the horse.

"Beggars can't be choosers," the clerk said. He had thin lips with an odd curl at the corners that seemed almost a sneer. "And you better just forget about getting that coach you were hopin' for."

"Then find another wagon."

"Already paid everything you give me for this one and offered my solemn promise you would bring it back," he said. "I don't think you appreciate the big favor I just done you."

Bleeker stared at the clerk, and I could see that he didn't trust him. Nor did I. Still, he took out two more fifties and offered them.

"I'll be back," the fellow said, with a slick nod, grabbing the cash, and, on foot, he disappeared up the street. The sky was brightening, the faintest glimmer of dawn.

Bleeker told the luggage boys to fetch the trunks and baggage from the rooms and to load them onto the wagon. He sent Sam, the groom, to get the ponies and the dwarf coach from the stable. He told Kellogg to stay by the wagon and guard it with his life.

We went inside to check on the women, and they were already on their way down. The Commodore was fidgety, asking when and where to pick up some breakfast.

Julia rummaged in her carryall and came up with a muffin wrapped in a napkin from last night's dinner and offered it to the Commodore. He took it and stepped away, not wanting us to watch as he ate it.

We waited on the portico for the night clerk. The boys had all the luggage aboard the wagon, with the dwarf carriage lashed down on top and the ponies tethered to the rear.

The night clerk wasn't back yet. "I gave him too much," Bleeker said. "He never spent a damn nickel for that nag and the wagon. Stole it from some back alley and took what else I gave him and got his ass out of here."

But still we waited.

Then the hotel proprietor rode up on a black mare.

“Looks bad,” he said.

“How bad?” Bleeker asked.

“They’ll for sure sack the town and do damage. Bastard rebs are hungry, and they forage for what they can get. Better for you to get out while you can.”

“That’s what we’re trying to do,” Bleeker said.

It was going on half past five, and just then three cannon shots were fired into the town, one ball smashing into a shop just up the street. The proprietor rushed off, riding fast, and Bleeker, like a man possessed, swiftly sent the two baggage boys off with the wagon, pointing them to the road that would take them to Fayetteville and then on to Gettysburg. “We’ll catch up with you there,” he said, and sent the groom with them, and Richardson too, the pianist, since there was room for one more. He kept Kellogg and the jewelry box with us.

We were braced for more cannon fire, but there was none. Moments after the wagon disappeared from view, a heap of Confederate cavalry came thundering in, arriving on many different streets from different directions, and foot soldiers, too, appearing to our left and right.

“Inside, inside,” Bleeker shouted, herding us back into the lobby.

Then we waited, and it seemed forever. A few officers appeared on the portico, talking animatedly. Then more officers. One, grim-faced, stepped inside, glanced about at the mob, and stepped back out.



Stratton married Lavinia Warren in 1863 at Grace Episcopal Church in New York City followed by a reception for 2,000 guests. The wedding made the front-page of newspapers across the world. The best man (far left) was George Washington Morrison (“Commodore Nutt”), who also performed with Barnum. The maid of honor was Minnie Warren, Lavinia’s sister. The newlyweds were received by President Lincoln at the White House after the wedding.

Julia took a bag of peanuts out of her mesh carryall and passed them around, and we sat there, cracking open the soft shells and crunching on the nuts. A woman was humming to her baby. A tall man blew his nose. A bearded man paced by the door.

When the proprietor returned, he was puffy-faced and swollen, the anger inside him simmering. He stood by the desk and in a strong, tense voice told what he knew.

The officer in charge, he said, was General McCausland, with orders from Jubal Early to collect a tribute from the town or burn it to the ground. "They want a hundred thousand in gold coin or half a million in Union currency."

A low moan limped through the lobby.

"Will they pay it?" the man with the beard called out.

The manager rubbed his hands together and swung his head from side to side, as if struggling to avoid the bad news he was here to give us. "It doesn't seem likely or even possible," he said, and again the low, restless moan, folding and unfolding. "The town elders say there ain't near enough cash in the town, which is true. The bank moved its reserves up to Harrisburg soon as they learned of the troops on the hill. Right now the parties are still talking, but frankly folks, it don't look good. People in town are gathering what they can and going off to the fields and hills. And I would urge all of you to do the same."

He warned us that looting had already begun. They were breaking into homes and shops and taking whiskey and whatever caught their fancy. Some were already drunk. He told us to stay in groups because it was getting wild out there, soldiers grabbing hats and purses, pulling rings off fingers. He told the women to hide their jewelry.

"Why?" someone called out, the woman with the baby. "Why are they doing this awful thing?"

"For compensation, that's what they say."

"For what?"

Again he swung his head from side to side, with obvious discomfort. "Well, it's tit for tat, you see. General Hunter, right or wrong, burned a bunch of houses in the valley, in the Shenandoah. The local farmers were killing his men in the night, and the big landowners and the governor were encouraging it. So Hunter torched some big houses in the vicinity of the murders. A few of those houses belonged to folks with close ties to Jeff Davis."

The proprietor stepped over and told Bleeker to swaddle us in towels and carry us out as if we were babies. "Some of them out there are crazy drunk—you want nothing that will catch their attention. If they see the dwarfs, they'll be on you for sure."

Bleeker held Vinny in one arm and me in the other, and, many steps behind us, Harry Nobbs carried Minnie and the Commodore, each of us wrapped in a blue towel the proprietor had found for us, only our faces showing.

A soldier stopped Bleeker, a bottle of whiskey in one hand, a pistol in the other, wanting to know what Bleeker was carrying. When he saw our faces, Vinny's and mine, he laughed and stepped away. "Two of 'em huh? Been keepin' your woman busy, I see. Where is she? She got another in the oven?"

While the soldier was talking, Harry Nobbs went right past and waited for us up ahead. Then on we went, all of us, with Julia and the wardrobe woman, Mabel, and Kellogg with the cash box. We saw soldiers kicking doors in, entering houses and breaking up the furniture, creating piles of splintered wood ready to be torched.

Some though, I saw, were unhappy with the goings-on, and they were helping the families in whatever ways they could. One lugged an old woman's sewing machine to a safe spot away from the houses. Two soldiers carried a corpse out of a house where it was being waked and buried it in a shallow grave in the garden, so the fire wouldn't get to it. But many were looting, coming out of houses with things they'd taken—a fancy pillow, a copper kettle, a bearskin rug, a crystal chandelier. One wore a calico dress over his uniform, with a cigar in his mouth, his carbine in one hand and a bottle of rum in the other.

We turned a corner, and I saw a soldier knock a man down and take the satchel he was carrying, but it held nothing, only some clothes, and he pulled them out and threw them around on the street. Farther along, a woman was screaming and wailing in front of her house—a soldier slapped her in the face and shoved her to the ground. "Keep movin', keep movin'," a sergeant shouted at Bleeker, and soon we were out of it, away from the grid of streets, the brick buildings and wooden houses, and Bleeker carried us up a hill and into a cemetery, where many of the townspeople were gathering.

General McCausland had the main body of his force on the fairgrounds by the Pittsburgh Pike. I saw them out there, in the morning light, about a mile or two off. And, all around us, people talking, murmuring, coughing, sobbing. Somebody said it was about two thousand troops out there, on the fairgrounds.

We sat on the grass, on somebody's grave, looking down at the town. Vinny leaned against me, my arm around her waist, and Minnie leaned against her. The Commodore sat a few feet away, huddled, clutching himself, his back against a gravestone.

People were scattered across the hill and neighboring fields, standing, sitting, holding each other, some just arriving out of the town, with satchels, blankets, and baggage filled with any of the little

things they'd been able to rescue. The sun was low and rising, the air warm, no clouds, a few horses wandering free. From where we were, we saw right down into the town—the houses, shops, livery stables, the square brick bank close by the Franklin Hotel. The courthouse with its tall columns. The streets at right angles to each other, dividing the town into large square blocks, like a quilt blanket, with low trees along some of the streets, and McCausland's soldiers running about and doing their worst. Dogs and goats loose on the streets, and pigs. Chickens out of their coops.

Suddenly a massive flash of flame from the town hall, and smoke rising. Then flame exploding through the open windows of the courthouse, and then a warehouse, and houses and shops all around, to the east and west of Main Street, soldiers at key points lighting the fires simultaneously. Long black columns of smoke rose in the morning sky, hundreds of them, weaving and snaking about. The air filled with the hissing and crackling of flames and with the woeful moaning of animals trapped and dying. How fast and sudden it was, win-

Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, located about twenty miles north of the Mason-Dixon line, was always in close proximity to the war. In 1864, Brigadier General John McCausland and his two cavalry brigades reached Chambersburg about 3 AM on July 30, where they joined Colonel William Peters and his 21st Virginia Cavalry.

A year after the Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederacy was close to defeat. Chambersburg was to become the place for retaliation.

Lieutenant General Jubal Anderson Early of the Confederate Army ordered McCausland to march into Chambersburg, demand \$100,000 in gold or \$500,000 in greenbacks as compensation for houses that General Hunter's Union troops had burned in Virginia.

Union soldiers tried to hold off the Confederates, but they were greatly outnumbered.



dows bursting and rifle cartridges in cabinets and bottom drawers exploding, and the roar of roofs and brick walls collapsing. And then the many columns of smoke bending, coming together into a single huge column, black and dense, and, at the very top, the column flattened and spread out weirdly, in a mushroom shape, blocking the sun and bringing on an eerie darkness.

The thick stem of the mushroom turning now like a twister, sucking things up from below—bedsheets, burning shingles, sheets of newspaper, anything loose that it touched, pieces of clothing, lifting things then letting them fall away. And the sound of it, a hum, a buzz, a hiss, and the stink catching at the back of my throat, smell of tar and wood burning, leather, cardboard, silk. It hovered over the town square, and then it roved east along Market Street, a swirling funnel of smoke and flame. It seemed, somehow, the end of the world, and that's what it was for the people on the hill. The town was gone; they had lost everything.



Then I was aware that I was standing, but couldn't remember getting up. Vinny was still on the grass, holding Minnie, both arms around her, and Minnie looking away from the fire, her head on Vinny's shoulder. Vinny was stroking her back. The Commodore was where he'd been, crouched against a gravestone. There was a boulder nearby, and I went to it and climbed up for a better look. The funnel was dissipating, but the houses and buildings still burned, and, high above the town, the cloud of smoke and haze lingered, and the sky remained dark.

All that was left of the bank was part of a stone wall and the four columns that had supported the portico. And much the same with the courthouse, the columns remaining, rising amid the scattered bricks and stones from the walls that had fallen, smoke wafting from the smoldering interior. Where the homes and shops had stood, brick chimneys rose like long, blackened fingers. As I scanned the streets and avenues, it seemed about two-thirds of the town had burned, homes, shops, stables, sheds, the hall where we had performed last evening and were to perform today. It was worst in the downtown area, by the bank and the courthouse, the destruction spreading over some ten square blocks. The hotel where we slept and the restaurant



*Bank of Chambersburg
after the town's burning.*

across the street where we had eaten. And the shop where I had bought lemon drops for Vinny.

It was eleven o'clock, and only then did I notice that the hill to the west was deserted. McCausland and his cavalry had pulled out. A few soldiers were still in the town, stragglers, or rear guard, some moving down Market Street, inspecting the ruins, others darting about, in and out of the homes that had escaped damage, taking whatever they could carry.

People began to move off the hill, back into town, for a closer look at the devastation. And us, we too were up, but not moving, just standing, looking. "I hate all this," Vinny said. "I hate it. Hate it." She was weeping. Minnie, facing the town now, was frozen, as in a trance, the knuckle of one of her fingers anchored in her mouth.

The Commodore was also up, gazing at the ruins, seeming dazed and confused, and frightened. "I want to go home," he said, looking down into the smoldering town, and when he said that, I realized that I didn't know where home was for him. I knew he was from New Hampshire, but from a village or a city, in the mountains or by the ocean, I had no idea.

"Take me home, please," he said, to no one in particular, sounding not at all like himself. His eyes were still fastened on the ruins, and he was motionless, gazing like a child who was lost and didn't know where he was.

NICHOLAS RINALDI offers courses in literature and creative writing at Fairfield University in Connecticut. His poems and short stories have appeared widely. Three of his novels and three collections of his poetry have been published. His most recent novel is *Between Two Rivers* (Harper-Collins, New York, and Bantam, London). The present story is part of a work-in-progress, a work of historical fiction. Tom Thumb, in fact, was not present at the burning of Chambersburg. The event was real, however, and the details about the burning and about the behavior of the soldiers have been taken from eyewitness accounts.