

P. T. Barnum

Barnum in Paris! What an odd idea—the searcher-out of suckers and rubes in a town that, by its own account, produces none. Phineas T. Barnum (1810–1891), the master American showman, was the inventor of most of what's wonderful and a lot of what's phony (and almost all of what's wonderfully phony) in American pop culture. Since he played that role in part by importing European “culture” to America, what was more natural than that he should run back to show the Europeans what the Americans had done with what they'd borrowed? In 1844, when he brought his educated dwarf “General” Tom Thumb to Paris, he had the kind of sensation that later would be caused by Josephine Baker and for some of the same reasons. American oddity = proof of American naturalness. Even the freaks in America were natural gentlemen. First published in his 1869 autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs*, his account of the diplomatic tact with which he finessed the question of Tom Thumb's appearing to the arch anti-Bonapartist King Louis Philippe in his normal impersonation of Napoleon is a byway and, given recent circumstances, maybe even a high-water mark in Franco-American diplomacy.

In France

from

Struggles and Triumphs; or, Forty Years' Recollections

I stopped at the Hotel Bedford, and securing an interpreter, began to make my arrangements. The first difficulty in the way was the government tax for exhibiting natural curiosities, which was no less than one-fourth of the gross receipts, while theatres paid only eleven per cent. This tax was appropriated to the benefit of the city hospitals. Now, I knew from my experience in London, that my receipts would be so large as to make twenty-five per cent of them a far more serious tax than I thought I ought to pay to the French government, even for the benefit of the admirable hospitals of Paris. Accordingly, I went to the license bureau and had an interview with the chief. I told him I was anxious to bring a “dwarf” to

Paris, but that the percentage to be paid for a license was so large as to deter me from bringing him; but letting the usual rule go, what should I give him in advance for a two months' license?

"My dear sir," he answered, "you had better not come at all; these things never draw, and you will do nothing, or so little that the percentage need not trouble you."

I expressed my willingness to try the experiment and offered one thousand francs in advance for a license. The chief would not consent and I then offered two thousand francs. This opened his eyes to a chance for a speculation and he jumped at my offer; he would do it on his own account, he said, and pay the amount of one-quarter of my receipts to the hospitals; he was perfectly safe in making such a contract, he thought, for he had 15,000 francs in bank.

But I declined to arrange this with him individually, so he called his associates together and presented the matter in such a way that the board took my offer on behalf of the government. I paid down the 2,000 francs and received a good, strong contract and license. The chief was quite elated and handed me the license with the remark:

"Now we have made an agreement, and if you do not exhibit, or if your dwarf dies during the two months you shall not get back your money."

"All right," thought I; "if you are satisfied I am sure I have every reason to be so." I then hired at a large rent, the Salle Musard, Rue Vivienne, in a central and fashionable quarter close by the boulevards, and engaged an interpreter, ticket-seller, and a small but excellent orchestra. In fact, I made the most complete arrangements, even to starting the preliminary paragraphs in the Paris papers; and after calling on the Honorable William Rufus King, the United States Minister at the Court of France—who assured me that after my success in London there would be no difficulty whatever in my presentation to King Louis Philippe and family—I returned to England.

I went back to Paris with General Tom Thumb and party some time before I intended to begin my exhibitions, and on the very day after my arrival I received a special command to appear at the Tuileries on the following Sunday evening. It will be remembered that Louis Philippe's daughter, the wife of King Leopold, of Belgium, had seen the General at Buckingham Palace—a fact that had been duly chronicled in the French as well as English papers, and I have no doubt that she had privately

expressed her gratification at seeing him. With this advantage, and with the prestige of our receptions by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, we went to the Tuileries with full confidence that our visit and reception would be entirely satisfactory.

At the appointed hour the General and I, arrayed in the conventional court costume, were ushered into a grand saloon of the palace where we were introduced to the King, the Queen, Princess Adelaide, the Duchess d'Orleans and her son the Count de Paris, Prince de Joinville, Duke and Duchess de Nemours, the Duchess d'Aumale, and a dozen or more distinguished persons, among whom was the editor of the official *Journal des Debats*. The court circle entered into conversation with us without restraint, and were greatly delighted with the little General. King Louis Philippe was minute in his inquiries about my country and talked freely about his experiences when he wandered as an exile in America. He playfully alluded to the time when he earned his living as a tutor, and said he had roughed it generally and had even slept in Indian wigwams. General Tom Thumb then went through with his various performances to the manifest pleasure of all who were present, and at the close the King presented to him a large emerald brooch set with diamonds. The General expressed his gratitude, and the King, turning to me, said: "you may put it on the General, if you please," which I did, to the evident gratification of the King as well as the General.

King Louis Philippe was so condescending and courteous that I felt quite at home in the royal presence, and ventured upon a bit of diplomacy. The Longchamps celebration was coming—a day once devoted to religious ceremony, but now conspicuous for the display of court and fashionable equipages in the Champs Élysées and the Bois de Boulogne, and as the King was familiarly conversing with me, I ventured to say that I had hurried over to Paris to take part in the Longchamps display and I asked him if the General's carriage could not be permitted to appear in the avenue reserved for the court and the diplomatic corps, representing that the General's small but elegant establishment, with its ponies and little coachman and footman, would be in danger of damage in the general throng unless the special privilege I asked was accorded.

The King smilingly turned to one of the officers of his household and after conversing with him for a few moments he said to me:

"Call on the Prefect of Police to-morrow afternoon and you will find a permit ready for you."

Our visit occupied two hours, and when we went away the General was loaded with fine presents. The next morning all the newspapers noticed the visit, and the *Journal des Debats* gave a minute account of the interview and of the General's performances, taking occasion to say, in speaking of the character parts, that "there was one costume which the General wisely kept at the bottom of his box." That costume, however,—the uniform of Bonaparte—was once exhibited, by particular request, as will be seen anon.

Longchamps day arrived, and among the many splendid equipages on the grand avenue, none attracted more attention than the superb little carriage with four ponies and liveried and powdered coachman and footman, belonging to the General, and conspicuous in the line of carriages containing the Ambassadors to the Court of France. Thousands upon thousands rent the air with cheers for "General Tom Pouce." There never was such an advertisement; the journals next day made elaborate notices of the "turnout," and thereafter whenever the General's carriage appeared on the boulevards, as it did daily, the people flocked to the doors of the cafés and shops to see it pass.

Thus, before I opened the exhibition all Paris knew that General Tom Thumb was in the city. The French are exceedingly impressible; and what in London is only excitement, in Paris becomes furor. Under this pressure, with the prestige of my first visit to the Tuileries and the numberless paragraphs in the papers, I opened my doors to an eager throng. The élite of the city came to the exhibition; the first day's receipts were 5,500 francs, which would have been doubled if I could have made room for more patrons. There were afternoon and evening performances and from that day secured seats at an extra price were engaged in advance for the entire two months. The season was more than a success, it was a triumph.

It seemed, too, as if the whole city was advertising me. The papers were profuse in their praises of the General and his performances. *Figaro*, the *Punch* of Paris, gave a picture of an immense mastiff running away with the General's carriage and horses in his mouth. Statuettes of "Tom Pouce" appeared in all the windows, in plaster, Parian, sugar and chocolate; songs were written about him and his lithograph was seen everywhere. A fine café on one of the boulevards took the name of "Tom Pouce" and displayed over the door a life-size statue of the General. In Paris, as in London, several eminent painters expressed their desire to paint his portrait,

but the General's engagements were so pressing that he found little time to sit to artists. All the leading actors and actresses came to the General's levees and petted him and made him many presents. Meanwhile, the daily receipts continued to swell, and I was compelled to take a cab to carry my bag of silver home at night.

The official, who had compromised with me for a two months' license at 2,000 francs, was amazed as well as annoyed at the success of my "dwarf." He came, or sent a man, to the levees to take account of the receipts and every additional thousand francs gave him an additional twinge. He seriously appealed to me to give him more money, but when I reminded him of the excellent bargain he supposed he was making, especially when he added the conditional clause that I should forfeit the 2,000 francs if I did not exhibit or if the General died, he smiled faintly and said something about a "Yankee trick." I asked him if he would renew our agreement for two months more on the same terms; and he shrugged his shoulders and said:

"No, Monsieur Barnum; you will pay me twenty-five per cent of your receipts when the two months of our contract expires."

But I did not; for I appealed to the authorities, claiming that I should pay only the ordinary theatrical tax, since the General's exhibition consisted chiefly of character imitations in various costumes, and he was more attractive as an actor than as a natural curiosity. My view of the case was decided to be correct, and thereafter, in Paris and throughout France, with few exceptions, I paid only the eleven per cent theatrical tax.

Indeed, in Paris, the General made a great hit as an actor and was elected a member of the French Dramatic Society. Besides holding his levees, he appeared every night at the Vaudeville Theatre in a French play, entitled "Petit Poucet," and written expressly for him, and he afterwards repeated the part with great success in other cities. The demands upon our time were incessant. We were invited everywhere to dinners and entertainments, and as many of these were understood to be private performances of the General, we were most liberally remunerated therefor. M. Galignani invited us to a soiree and introduced us to some of the most prominent personages, including artists, actors and editors, in Paris. The General was frequently engaged at a large price to show himself for a quarter of an hour at some fancy or charitable fair, and much money was made in this way. On Sundays, he was employed at one or another of the great gardens in the outskirts, and thus was seen by thousands of working

people who could not attend his levees. All classes became acquainted with "Tom Pouce."

We were commanded to appear twice more at the Tuileries, and we were also invited to the palace on the King's birthday to witness the display of fireworks in honor of the anniversary. Our fourth and last visit to the royal family was by special invitation at St. Cloud. On each occasion we met nearly the same persons, but the visit to St. Cloud was by far the most interesting of our interviews. On this one occasion, and by the special request of the King, the General personated Napoleon Bonaparte in full costume. Louis Philippe had heard of the General in this character, and particularly desired to see him; but the affair was quite "on the sly," and no mention was made of it in the papers, particularly in the *Journal des Debats*, which thought, no doubt, that costume was still "at the bottom of the General's box." We remained an hour, and at parting, each of the royal company gave the General a splendid present, almost smothered him with kisses, wished him a safe journey through France, and a long and happy life.