

**ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR**  
**BY PAUL WORTS**

With the fiery autumnal sunset smouldering through its timber limbs, the Scenic Railway looked like the elongated skeleton of some long-since fallen wooden dinosaur. Seagulls hovered vulture-like over the remains as if waiting for the beast's final death throes before swooping to devour whatever scraps could be scavenged.

Such were the prosaic thoughts of Medway's youngest and possibly most disconsolate reporter as he sat on a crumbling Dreamland wall waiting for the Scenic's final bow. The story he was there to cover was straightforward enough. Tonight was to be the last time the Scenic Railway's graceful timber curves would convey pleasure seekers after 86 candyfloss and toffee apple years. To commemorate this moment, a group of campaigners and roller coaster enthusiasts were going to dress up in 1920s costume and grab their last ever chance to ride the Scenic with a night time ride session. With the men's glued on moustaches flapping and the ladies skirts rustling in the breeze, they were to pay homage to those first thrill seekers who braved Dreamland's centrepiece attraction all those years before them. The Gazette's chief editor had sent his 'sorcerer's apprentice' to capture a few final pictures and collect a smattering of snappy yet poignant quotes from the assembled riders for a nostalgia piece.

*"Hardly a Pulitzer Prize opportunity Ant, but I'm sure you'll dress it up in that nice way you have with words,"* cajoled Anton's boss. *"The Scenic's a grand old lady. At her time of life she deserves to be paid a bit of proper respect, and I reckon you're just the man to do her proud".*

Perhaps it was the way the boss had referred to what appeared on first sight to be just a heap of rotten old wood as a 'grand old lady', or perhaps it was the faint hint of wistfulness in his eyes for just a brief moment – but something had made Anton think there might be more to this story than just the demolition of an old roller coaster...

But bracing himself against the sharpening sea chills he sat alone and was rapidly beginning to revise this opinion. *Where is everyone? Have I got the date wrong, did the grand finale happen last night?* Not for the first time Anton's doubts about his chosen career began to creep upon him as shadows began to emerge across the concrete.

And then something extraordinary occurred.

The Scenic Railway appeared instantaneously covered in thousands of white fireflies glowing and flickering in unison, stretching all along its structure. Like that sweet moment when dad - who had toyed for what seemed like hours methodically stringing the chain of fairy lights through the bows and around the baubles on the Christmas tree - finally stretched across to the plug socket and flicked the switch with the flourish of a ringmaster. Whether it's an 8ft real pine or a 4ft fake, it makes no odds: when the lights come on every tree in every living room is transformed. Anton gasped as he had done on many Christmases past. Here before him was a majestic mirage of light. As if a *thousand* glowing Christmas trees had intricately entwined themselves amongst the wooden waves perpetually crashing against the darkening sea of dusk.

He very nearly dropped his camera in the moment.

Then a mighty whoop of joy rose from behind him.

He dropped the camera.

Coming towards him were a large group of men and women interspersed with a smattering of children, all adorned in what appeared at first glance at least, remarkably convincing 1920s outfits. They cheered and applauded the illumination before them. It made Anton think of the closing scene from ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’ when the alien mother ship’s hatch lowers releasing its cargo of bewildered abductees from its inner sanctum. The only difference here was that the crowd were heading *toward* their ‘mother ship’ rather than out of it.

*How did this lot sneak up on me?*

As the crowd rushed past him toward the Scenic Railway Anton began to pick out small details such as the round white badges pinned to lapels all proclaiming: “Save Dreamland”. A further cheer rose into the sea air as a coaster train started its ascent up the lift hill.

*You have to hand it to these guys they certainly know how to stage a show. First things first though, make sure the camera isn’t busted. Should’ve brought the tripod, I’ll never be able to capture the ride in these lighting conditions without a timed exposure.*

The enthusiasts gathered in front of the Scenic’s station. Two figures appeared on the platform above them. As Anton approached he could gather from their words caught on the breeze that tonight was intended to be a night of celebration. Despite a momentous effort by all concerned, tonight really would be the last time Dreamland’s one remaining attraction would run for the delight of its public. He scribbled these words down in his notepad and scurried closer to get within range for his Dictaphone. In truth Anton wasn’t too worried about getting every word down verbatim. Like any conscientious reporter he’d done his homework prior to the evening. His research had provided him with a potted history of Dreamland and its jewel in the crown – the Scenic. He was more interested in capturing the flavour of the occasion. The factual (and not so factual) reporting on how and why events had led up to this evening had been well documented in the pages of both his employer’s paper and in other titles further afield. It was a long and protracted case. For the ‘Save Dreamland Campaign Team’ it was a well-fought but ultimately futile fight. The Dreamland site was set to become a leisure retail complex (which locals had derogatively dubbed ‘Seawater’: a reference to the Bluewater centre in Greenhithe).

Anton recognised one of the speakers on the platform as being Nick Laister; the planning consultant who’d successfully gained Grade II listed status for the ride. His co-speaker was Sarah Vickery, the owner of the Shell Grotto (being relatively new to Margate, Anton had originally thought this was some sort of souvenir retail outlet for a large oil company). Together they were two of the original key players who had spearheaded the campaign. Anton made a mental note to get direct quotes from both of them. They wouldn’t be hard to pick out in the crowd for neither had chosen to adopt the themed 20’s attire.

*Perhaps they both feel they’ve worn the campaign t-shirts and badges for so long now that tonight they’d come as themselves, and instead wear their hearts on their sleeves...*

Again with almost rehearsed timing, Nick and Sarah’s address concluded just as the coaster train entered the station. The crowd needed no second invitation and clambered up the stairs onto the platform and into the welcoming empty seats on the train. Anton followed close behind. Upon closer inspection he estimated the gathering probably numbered nearer a hundred or so. A fair few less than he had been originally led to believe would attend. Perhaps some simply couldn’t bear to be present on this

night? If seeing is believing, then perhaps *not* seeing would somehow make it all seem a bad dream?

*Now now, mustn't attribute opinions before we've done the interviews.*

And with this thought in mind, the Gazette's intrepid reporter mounted the wooden stairs to the platform and began to gather memories.

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The sun peeked through the veil of mist the following morning. Anton sat at his laptop, fingers hovering over the keyboard, staring out of the frosted bedsit window.

He had absolutely no idea where to begin.

Random sound bites swam round his head; echoes of conversations all gently nudging and vying for attention. He pressed the play button on the Dictaphone and began to fast forward through snatches of the interviews he'd conducted the previous night:

"The first thing we always looked out for on the train to Margate was whether the cows in the fields were sitting or standing"

*"Why?"*

"To see if it was going to rain of course"

*"Of course"*

"The Scenic Railway was the first and only roller coaster my old mum ever rode."

"I proposed to my girlfriend just as we came to the final double-dip and she didn't give me an answer till the train had come to a standstill in the station. She said yes, but only if we could stay on and ride again!"

*"Can I ask you sir what's made you brave the cold to come down to Dreamland tonight?"*

Anton winced as his voice pierced through the mini headphones. As always, he'd managed to capture his own voice with ear-splitting clarity, but had failed to hold the machine close enough to his subject. Anton smirked. Hearing his own voice never failed to amuse and faintly embarrass him, particularly when over-amplified through headphones! Still, the rising and lowering voice levels somehow seemed appropriate when discussing a roller coaster. With one finger on the volume control, ready to adjust down when necessary, Anton pressed play again.

"Why how could I not be here on such a night young sir?"

*Ah yes, the dapper grey haired American.* Although there were people of all ages in the crowd, this particular gentleman had caught Anton's eye for he was the only male participant who had not felt the need to suspend a fake moustache below his nostrils.

*"Do I detect an American accent there sir?" Ouch, lower the volume you'll burst your damn eardrums! "Surely you haven't come all the way across the pond just for tonight's festivities?"*

Anton recalled how 'Mr 1920' had smiled graciously at this slightly incredulous question before answering.

"Indeed I have. May I know to whom do I have the pleasure in conversing with?" *Such a wordsmith. And an American one at that!* Anton had introduced himself and given the guy a quick bit of spiel as to why he was there.

"I see. Well I'm sure you will find rich-pickings amongst these fine ladies and gentlemen!" He offered his right hand, "My friends and colleagues call me LA."

*"Would that be where you're from sir?"*

LA smiled.

“Surprisingly no. I’m from Jersey, Ohio. Do you know this coaster was originally built from Canadian Douglas fir? Of course that was way back in 1920. I’d wager that every single piece of wood has probably been replaced many times over since then. Tell me young Anton, do your parents enjoy riding coasters by any chance?”

Anton had visibly bristled at this personal enquiry.

“I’m sorry, I meant no offence. It’s just because *Anton* is a rather unusual name, and it also happens to be the first name of a very significant roller coaster designer: Anton Schwarkopf. I thought perhaps they may have named you after him?”

*“I very much doubt my mum would ever have allowed my father to do something like that.”*

“As someone who has always taken a keen interest in roller coaster design and manufacture, personally I would feel privileged to be named after one of the modern pioneers of such a noble endeavour.”

*“I take it this Anton whatever his name is – sounds like my mum’s hairspray – was a big name in roller coasters?”*

“Actually they are both spelt the same way. But I assure you the man I’m talking about did not have a sideline in hair accessories! Ironically he started out as a carpenter and ended up designing some of the most magnificent tubular *steel* coasters ever seen. Forerunners of those monster rides that seem to practically touch the clouds these days. However the sad irony is that even though his time was long after that of the Scenic Railway’s, his creations are also disappearing at an alarming rate these days. Such a tragedy.”

It turned out that although LA had ridden numerous coasters he had never before visited the Scenic Railway.

“Tonight will be my inaugural ride, and unfortunately also my final one it would appear.”

*“Well we have one thing in common at least,”* said Anton, *“in fact this will be my first ride on ANY roller coaster!”*

Anton stopped the recorder and glanced out of the window. The sun had obviously decided there was nothing much worth getting up for and had once more slipped behind the clouds. *I wonder how many of those campaigners feel the same way this morning?*

Anton had figured it would probably be over-ambitious to record an interview whilst on the ride itself, and sure enough the recordings he’d made were all distorted and largely undecipherable. However, he didn’t need a tape recording to recall how wonderful it had felt riding the Scenic. His cheeks still faintly glowed with windburn. It was the most colour his face had displayed in ages. Once he’d mastered his initial butterflies it had proved addictive to ‘coast away’ again and again. LA had sat next to him for his first ride, and it had probably been the old gentleman’s calming presence which had stopped Anton from bolting from the train just before the lap bar had come down. By the end of the night Anton had lost count how many times he had ridden that wonderful old thrill-machine but it was enough for the ride to be indelibly etched on his memory. Closing his eyes he could feel the train tentatively edge itself out of the station and awkwardly nudge round the corner before smoothly ascending the first lift hill. The joyful first dip followed by the pop of ‘airtime’ (as the coaster lot had called it), when you felt you were about to be forcibly ejected out of your seat. The vulnerability of sitting so high up on what felt like a bench somehow added to the thrill. As LA had so eloquently put it:

“How can anything that is so purely pleasurable, so life-affirming, be so undervalued and appreciated? How can anyone destroy something which has given so much joy and happiness for so long, merely to build shops on its grave?”

That was the last quote Anton had recorded from LA as he'd exited that very first ride. The old gentleman had mingled into the crowd and Anton had rushed to rejoin the queue, all pretence of being merely a reporter covering a story totally gone by this point. Still at least he had managed to get a decent picture of the old chap, along with some great cheerful reaction shots of riders returning to the station ecstatically clapping and cheering.

Anton loaded the images onto his laptop and scanned through the set. He hoped the photos would stand up to close scrutiny in the cold light of day. *There's old LA smiling serenely in his costume. Add a nice sepia tint and you could be fooled into thinking it REALLY was a 1920s image.* At least a few of the photos had come out clear enough to be considered by the gazette's eagle-eyed editor for inclusion. All the on-ride attempts however were blurred. This came as no surprise to Anton, an unsteady hand coupled with a damp foggy atmosphere were not usually conducive to crystal sharp photography. It was just such a shame that he hadn't managed to capture the eerie quality of the sea mist as it had steadily enshrouded the ride during the evening. The train's silhouette had cut through the fog, casting weird shadows against the track lighting. On more than one circuit Anton had almost sworn he'd glimpsed other fairground rides just beyond the veil of mist. Of course this had to be a trick of the light, for apart from the Scenic; the former Dreamland site was now just barren concrete. Perhaps Anton had seen distant echoes from a time when Dreamland had throbbled and thrived as a pleasure haven for thrill seeking day-trippers. Perhaps the location had somehow absorbed the essence of all the years of concentrated fun and amusement and for one last night these potent emotions has seeped through to the surface.

Anton fired up the Net browser, his new found enthusiasm for roller coasters leading him to scan through numerous websites devoted to this thrilling pastime. He came upon a potted history of roller coasters tracing the origins right back to Russian ice-slides. The site then moved its focus to Coney Island, New York and the Switchback Railway in 1884. From there it progressed onto the first example of a scenic railway which opened in 1887 in Atlantic City. This construction was a collaboration between a designer by the name of James A. Griffiths and an inventor referred to as the “Father of the Gravity ride”. A photo accompanied the article.

In hindsight Anton thought his reaction was commendably restrained for a young man who had shared a roller coaster ride with a ghost.

The caption alongside the image read:

“Thompson, La Marcus, in full LA MARCUS ADNA THOMPSON (born March 8, 1848, Jersey, Ohio, U.S. – died May 8, 1919, Glen Cove, N.Y.”

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Several days later Anton phoned Nick Laister on the pretence of following up to see if there'd been any developments on the fate of the Scenic Railway. Of course his real motive was to share his experience and to try and gain some understanding as to what exactly had happened that night at Dreamland.

In years to come Anton would always recall how remarkably unsurprised Nick had sounded when Anton had tentatively thrown the subject of attendees into the conversation. He had barely started to describe the American gentleman known as 'LA' when Nick halted him in mid-sentence:

“So he *did* turn up after all! We all wondered. None of *us* had seen him – which we thought very unusual considering the significance of the event. How funny that he chose to introduce himself to you. He normally appears to one of the more seasoned enthusiasts. Perhaps he saw a potential coaster-buff in the making. Old LA is something of a regular in our circles. Whenever a coaster is about to be pulled down you will usually find the old boy somewhere in the crowd. A spectral mourner at a coaster's funeral. Every ride is like a distant relative to him. Therefore, when one's in trouble – usually *terminal* trouble unfortunately – then there he is by his offspring's side when the end is in sight. It's become something of a badge of honour amongst us if you can say you've met LA. *My* moment came at Southport when the Cyclone was chain sawed. I suppose it was fate that conspired to place me in Southport that day for a conference. By chance I sneaked out at lunchtime and headed for Pleasureland. And as it turned out I wasn't the only one there that day...”

Nick went on to enquire what Anton intended to do with his afterlife experience. He'd correctly surmised that the photo Anton had taken of LA had mysteriously disappeared from both his memory stick and his PC's hard drive. (This was par for the course with LA, apparently). And the Dictaphone only played back static when Anton reached the section that had previously contained sound bites from him.

Anton's final submission to the gazette contained not one single reference to his ghost-riding companion.

As he explained it to Nick, he'd just become a member of not only the coaster enthusiasts, but also a member of a far more exclusive and privileged club - and he intended to honour the tradition and keep the secret within coaster circles.

Besides as it turned out, Anton had been extraordinarily lucky to meet LA that foggy night, as the Scenic Railway's reportedly imminent demise had proved somewhat premature.

There was plenty of life in the 'grand old lady' yet.

The End.

Dedicated to all involved in the Save Dreamland Campaign, and for Isabel and Aura

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