One Million Lightbulbs

Lawrence Watt-Evans

John Chester Glatfelter stared at the newspaper in astonishment. “Is this right?” he demanded. “It’s not a typesetting error?”

Charlie Beckett, Glatfelter’s personal secretary, glanced over Glatfelter’s shoulder to see where his employer was pointing.

“One million electric lights,” he read aloud, “illuminate the splendors of Dreamland.”

“One million? They can’t really mean that.”

“I think they do, sir,” Beckett murmured. “I’ve heard the figure before.”

“Twenty years ago there weren’t a million light bulbs in the entire city of New York! Now they’ve got that many in this one silly playland?”

“So it seems, Mr. Glatfelter.”

“How can they afford it?”

Beckett shrugged—not obviously, more to himself than to his employer. “I understand that Mr. Reynolds raised a considerable sum of money for the construction of Dreamland,” he said. “I believe it was more than three millions of dollars.”

“Reynolds?” Glatfelter turned to glare at his secretary. “Bill Reynolds? Is that scoundrel behind this?”

Beckett pointed to the fine print at the bottom of the newspaper advertisement. “Mr. William H. Reynolds,” he said.

“If that don’t beat all,” Glatfelter said, squinting at the tiny type. “What’s Bill Reynolds doing, messing around with playgrounds out the hind end of Brooklyn?”

“Well, sir,” Beckett explained, “Mr. Tilyou’s Steeplechase Park has been such a success that it’s inspired others. Last year it was those two showmen, Thompson and Dundy, with their so-called Luna Park—they spent a million dollars and used two hundred and fifty thousand electric lights. So this year Mr. Reynolds has gone them one better, and opened Dreamland, for more than three million dollars, and with a hundred thousand lights on the central tower alone, a million in all.” He hesitated, then added, “It’s quite a spectacle, sir.”

Glatfelter turned again. “You’ve been there?”

Beckett cleared his throat. “Yes, sir. I’ve taken my girl Polly out there three or four times now.”

“I’ll be damned,” Glatfelter muttered. “A sensible fellow like you, wasting your nickels on Coney Island?”

“Yes, sir. It’s really quite enjoyable.”

“Amazing.” He stared at the newspaper for a long moment, then announced, “Beckett, if they’re even getting people like you out there, then there’s money to be made—and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let that fool Reynolds make it all, while I’m left out!”

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“Noisy,” Glatfelter said. He looked around critically. “Is this the best place you could find?”

“Yes, sir,” Beckett said, nodding, and trying not to stare at the stranger Glatfelter had brought along. “You’ll understand, most of the owners on Coney Island aren’t interested in selling; they find it quite profitable. This is the only location where I could put together a decent parcel of land.”

“Well, it’ll have to do, then. Not the best spot, but when we’re done it’ll look like a glimpse of heaven.” He frowned. “We can dig a channel to the sea there,” he said, pointing, “and put our lagoon just there, with the tower behind it.”

“Ah... you’re planning a lagoon and tower, sir?”

Glatfelter turned and glared at him.

“Beckett,” he said, “does Luna Park have a lagoon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does it have a tower?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does it make pots of money?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And does Dreamland have a tower?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And does Dreamland make pots of money?”

Beckett hesitated, and Glatfelter continued without waiting for an answer. “Of course we’ll have a lagoon, and a tower, and everything the other parks have, and we’ll make it all bigger and better! That scalawag Reynolds probably thought he’d topped Luna Park so completely he’d put it right out of business, with his million lightbulbs, but he ain’t seen nothing yet, my boy! Dr. Petworthy and I will show him a thing or two!”

“Dr. Petworthy?”

Glatfelter gestured at his silent companion, a cadaverous man wearing a worn black frock coat and a flamboyant black mustache. “This,” Glatfelter explained, “is Dr. Emil Petworthy, the world’s foremost expert in the physiology of fun!”

Beckett blinked.

“Good heavens, boy, you didn’t think I’d come out here blind, did you?” Glatfelter shouted. “I’m planning to invest ten millions of dollars in Miracle Park—I’m not going to just throw that away!”

“Well, no...”

“So I went to the University—to Columbia—and I asked ’em who was the top man in the science of enjoyment, whatever the hell they called it, and they talked for awhile, and then they sent me to Dr. Petworthy, here, the world’s top authority on phallicology...”

“Felixology,” Petworthy corrected, in a nasal squeak.

“Whatever.”

“I see,” Beckett said. He stared in dismay at the self-proclaimed felixologist, with the horrible suspicion that the faculty at Columbia had played a cruel joke on his employer firmly embedded in his mind.

“Dr. Petworthy,” Glatfelter explained, “has determined that it’s the electrical machinery that makes these parks so much fun for the lower classes.”

“What?” Beckett’s stare shifted briefly to his employer, then back to Petworthy.

“Yes,” Petworthy explained, “it’s the electrical fields. They affect the brain, you see. All those electric lights create what I call a euphorogenic field—they create a feeling of lightness, a pleasurable sensation. Naturally, the more refined and trained senses of the educated classes are less susceptible, but the working classes obviously enjoy it very much indeed.”

“Right,” Glatfelter said. “It makes ’em happy. So we’ll put our tower right there, with a million lightbulbs on it, and Dr. Petworthy will wire it up to make the biggest, strongest you-forget- it field in history...”

“Euphorogenic.”

“Whatever. Those others, Tilyou and Thompson and Reynolds, they did it by accident, whatever they may think; they still don’t know that these electrical fields are the real reason their customers are so happy. We will do it on purpose, we’ll give the customers a taste of paradise, and as for those others, we’ll run ’em all into bankruptcy court!” Glatfelter chuckled.

Petworthy grinned, a hideous, skeletal grin.

Beckett licked his lips nervously and didn’t say a word.

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“You don’t need all that stuff,” the electrician said, pointing at the tangle of brown-cloth-wrapped wire, the chunky solenoids, the oddly-wound coils.

“I know,” Beckett said. “But follow the plans.”

“It’s a waste,” the electrician insisted. “That dope Petworthy, he don’t know anything about wiring. Thinks he’s Dr. Tesla or somebody.”

“I know,” Beckett repeated. “But Mr. Glatfelter wants it done just the way Dr. Petworthy says.”

“It’s gonna pull current like nobody’s business,” the electrician warned.

Beckett rubbed his head, which was starting to ache. “Just do it, will you?”

“Putting a million lights on this tower—you know, the way it is now, when the micks come to America and sail into the harbor, first thing they see is the light from Coney Island. Mr. Beckett, I swear, when you get this thing working they’ll be able to see it without leaving Ireland. Mr. Edison’s gonna be rolling in dough. You’ll need a half-dozen men working full-time just to replace the ones that burn out.”

“Just do it and shut up,” Beckett said.

The electrician shrugged. “You’re the boss,” he said, turning away.

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“But Mr. Glatfelter,” Beckett said, “you can’t open with the place like this!” He waved one arm in a sweeping gesture that took in the half-finished cyclorama of “Moses in Sinai,” the “Palaces of Babylon” scenic railway that had yet to make a run without a car jumping the track, the workmen repainting the facade on the House of A Thousand Delights for the fifth time.

“Sure we can,” Glatfelter said. “The season’s starting. We don’t want to miss Memorial Day.”

“But Miracle Park is not finished!” Beckett insisted. “The customers will be disappointed.”

“No, they won’t,” Glatfelter gloated. “Dr. Petworthy says the tower’s all ready to go.”

“But the rides aren’t, the exhibits—you’ve had everyone working on that tower and the lagoon, and...”

“That tower’s all we need to make Miracle Park the biggest money-maker in America!”

“Mr. Glatfelter, nobody’s going to pay money just to see a million lightbulbs!”

“They’ll pay their dimes to feel good, boy, for something that’ll take them away from their worries for a little while, and that’s what Petworthy’s machine will do for them!”

“Have you tested it? What if Dr. Petworthy’s theories don’t work?”

“Of course they work!”

“Have you tested it?”

Glatfelter glared angrily at his subordinate. “No, we haven’t tested it,” he said, “because how can we test it, without a crowd of customers?”

“You could see how it looks,” Beckett suggested desperately. “The sun’s setting, you could see how it looks. You could see how it affects the workmen.”

Glatfelter rubbed his chin, considering that. He threw a glance sideways at the tower—a replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, built somewhat larger than the original, painted every color of the rainbow, and with a steeper slant that Petworthy claimed would enhance the effects of the euphorogenic field. Every visible surface was covered with lightbulbs, and Beckett knew that the interior was jammed full of wiring and machinery, most of which, the electricians all agreed, would do nothing except draw current and maybe overheat.

In fact, three electricians had walked off the job, claiming the thing wasn’t safe, and the fire marshal had needed a bribe almost three times the going rate.

“Sure,” Glatfelter said. “Turn it on and let’s see how it looks.” He grinned. “It’ll look like a little bit of heaven, Beckett—all that light, those colors—you’ll see.”

Beckett smiled with relief. He was sure that Miracle Park could work, could make money—but as a legitimate amusement park, not because of Petworthy’s crackpot theories or crazy machinery. Probably the best thing that could happen would be if the tower burned itself down right now.

“Joe,” he called, “turn on the tower lights, would you?”

The foreman, who had been lounging a few paces behind the big shots, looked up. He turned and looked at the tower, leaning out over the lagoon, bristling with clear glass spheres and brightly- painted arches.

“Not my job, Mr. Beckett,” he said nervously.

Beckett’s smile vanished. “Do it anyway. Or you won’t have any job.”

Joe sighed, and headed for the switch-house by the main gate.

A moment later, he called back, “Here she goes!”

A low whine sounded, and with a sudden blaze of incandescent brilliance, one million lightbulbs flared into life; light and color exploded across the lagoon and courtyard of the unfinished Miracle Park.

Everyone blinked, closing their eyes against the sudden glare. Hands flew up to shield eyes, and the men squinted.

“Bright,” Beckett said. It seemed, in fact, much brighter than even a million lightbulbs ought to be.

“We just weren’t expecting it,” Glatfelter said, but for the first time in the four years since he had met Mr. Glatfelter, Charlie Beckett heard a tinge of doubt in the millionaire’s voice.

Something popped, and hot glass sprinkled on the flagstones as a lightbulb exploded. The whine rose slightly in pitch. Cautiously, Beckett turned to look at the tower through the slit between his fingers.

Bands of color seemed to be moving up and down the diagonal cylinder, and the overall glow was pulsing rhythmically.

“Mr. Glatfelter...” Beckett began.

The whine suddenly soared madly upward in both pitch and volume, becoming an ear-splitting scream; instinctively, Beckett closed his eyes and turned away.

The sound went up into the ultrasonic, where it could not be heard, only felt as a painful pressure in the ear; more lightbulbs burst, and a fine spray of glass particles spewed out across the lagoon. The tower shimmered.

And no one saw what happened next; everyone there, from J.C. Glatfelter down to the merest workman in Miracle Park, had turned away from that unbearable brilliance. All they saw, through closed eyelids and shielding hands, was a sudden dimming.

And the pressure in their ears was gone; the sound had stopped.

Slowly, cautiously, Charlie Beckett uncovered his eyes and turned to look.

The tower was gone, and in its place...

He didn’t really have words for it. It was like a bubble, or maybe a hole. It wasn’t really there at all, in a way, and what he saw was not what had replaced the tower, but what he could see of what lay beyond it.

And what lay beyond it was a street—not one of the rowdy, cluttered streets of Coney Island, or any of the crowded streets of 1905 New York, but a gleaming black band between towering buildings that shone pink in the light of the setting sun. Women in strange tight clothing walked on one side of the street, and a glittering red machine drifted down the center. Flying things that were not birds sparkled far overhead.

And then it vanished, with a pop like another lightbulb exploding, and the lagoon and courtyard were back, dim and pale in the gathering gloom of early evening.

“How’d it look?” Joe called from the door of the switch-house. “I know you didn’t say, but the switch was getting hot and sparking, so I figured I’d better turn it off... Hey!”

Glatfelter stared at the empty foundation beside the lagoon where a moment before his tower had stood, and then slowly turned to face Joe.

“Where’d the tower go?” Joe asked.

Glatfelter glowered for a moment; then he turned to Dr. Petworthy.

“All right, Petworthy,” he said, “where did my tower go?”

Petworthy just shook his head and continued staring.

Beckett cleared his throat.

“Mr. Glatfelter,” he asked, “did you see it, before Joe turned it off?”

“I saw it,” Glatfelter admitted. “I don’t know what the heck it was, but yes, I saw it.”

Beckett’s mouth twisted wryly.

“Well, Mr. Glatfelter,” he said, “you said that tower would show folks a glimpse of heaven...”

Glatfelter threw Beckett a startled glance. “That?” he said. “Ha! A glimpse of heaven? Some damn fool electrical mirage, like those nickelodeon shows.” His eyes narrowed. “But you just might have something, at that. Petworthy, if Joe hadn’t shut the electricity off, would we still be able to see whatever it was?”

“I don’t know,” Petworthy said, staring at the empty foundation.

“Well, why not?” Glatfelter demanded. “Wasn’t that your you-forget-it field at work?”

No one bothered correcting Glatfelter’s mispronunciation this time. Petworthy slowly shook his head. “No, sir,” he said, “I don’t know what that was.”

“Well, whatever it was, I want you to build me another one, and this time we won’t let it disappear on us!”

“Sir...” Petworthy struggled to get the words out. “Mr. Glatfelter...I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Mr. Glatfelter—I made it up as I went along, to impress you. I thought the million electric lights would create the euphorogenic field all by themselves; the rest was just for show, so it wouldn’t look too easy.”

For a moment Glatfelter was utterly speechless, rising up on his toes and dropping back, rising up and dropping, blowing air out through his mustache. Beckett fought down laughter.

“Well, then,” Glatfelter said at last, “you can make it up as you go along again, damn it, and you can do it until you get it right. And when you’ve got it right, we’ll open Miracle Park.” He rose up on his toes again, and a smile began to spread beneath his whiskers. “And we’ll have an attraction like nothing else,” he said. “We’ll show them all how it’s done, we will—we’ll make George Tilyou look like an amateur, Thompson and Dundy like dabblers, Reynolds and his flunky Gumpertz like fools. A glimpse of heaven!” He grinned. “One million lightbulbs, illuminating a glimpse of heaven!”

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Throughout the 1906 summer season Miracle Park stood closed and dark while workmen rebuilt the tower, and only incidentally continued work on the other rides and exhibits. Steeplechase Park and Luna Park and Dreamland took in millions of dollars, while Miracle Park earned not a single cent on Glatfelter’s seven million dollar investment.

In 1907 Elmer Dundy died, and his long-time partner, Frederic Thompson, began to lose interest in Luna Park. Thompson’s drinking problem worsened, but Luna continued to earn money.

That same year Steeplechase Park burned to the ground; George C. Tilyou, undaunted, charged a dime admission to the smoldering ruins and immediately began rebuilding. The new Steeplechase was bigger and better, but still, in its way, just as tacky—and more profitable than ever.

Miracle Park did not open; Dr. Petworthy spent the entire year experimenting with the wiring in the tower, but all that happened was that the lightbulbs blazed brightly while the coils and solenoids soaked up incredible quantities of electricity without doing anything. The rest of the park was complete, but J.C. Glatfelter wanted his tower and its vision of Heaven, or the future, or Mars, or whatever it was.

“Miracle Park could make money without it,” Beckett pointed out one afternoon, as Glatfelter glared up at the brightly-painted tower. “Steeplechase never had any towers.”

“The hell with the money,” Glatfelter replied. “I want it to work!”

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By 1908 attendance had dropped off at Dreamland, the spectacular wonderland with its million lightbulbs. In fact, Glatfelter’s investigators reported that it was losing money steadily.

“How do you explain that?” Glatfelter demanded, shaking the report under Petworthy’s nose. “Your euphemisms aren’t working!”

Petworthy frowned, then glanced up at the tower; a tangle of bare wire was woven through the upper tiers now. “It’s not the lights that do it, after all,” he said. “My earlier theory wasn’t complete. It’s something about the metal. It’s that steel racetrack around Steeplechase that keeps it popular.”

Glatfelter stared for a moment; Petworthy wandered off, back toward his tower, looking rather dazed.

Glatfelter let him go, then turned to Beckett. “You,” he said. “I want you to go to Steeplechase, and Luna, and I want you to find out what makes them so much fun.”

“Dr. Petworthy says it’s the metal,” Beckett pointed out mildly.

“Dr. Petworthy is a complete loon,” Glatfelter snapped. “What does he know about fun? But he knows electricity, and he made that tower thing work once, so maybe he can do it again. And meanwhile, I want you to learn about fun.”

“Well, I don’t know, it isn’t part of my job and I don’t see how I could do it alone...”

Glatfelter snorted. “I know what you’re doing, boy. State your terms, then.”

The haggling didn’t last long. Glatfelter paid Charlie Beckett and his girl Polly five dollars a day to explore Steeplechase and Luna, trying to figure out what made them fun.

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Dr. Emil Petworthy disappeared mysteriously from his laboratory in 1909, and his whereabouts thereafter remain a mystery to this day. John C. Glatfelter, convinced that Dr. Petworthy had somehow once again opened an electrical gateway to another world, spent the rest of his life and his fortune hiring electrical experimenters in unsuccessful attempts to duplicate the feat.

Charlie and Polly Beckett tried for three years to convince Glatfelter to open Miracle Park, but eventually gave up. With the money they had saved and the knowledge of what makes people laugh that they had acquired at Coney they moved to Los Angeles, where they made a fortune in the movies.

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In 1911 Dreamland burned to the ground, putting an end to Coney Island’s spectacular era. No one ever seriously considered rebuilding; the manager, Samuel Gumpertz, instead opened a freak show on the site. Where Dreamland once stood is now the New York Aquarium.

Luna Park closed in 1946; Steeplechase went in 1964.

Miracle Park, John Chester Glatfelter’s stupendous experiment in euphorogenics, never opened; the unfinished buildings eventually weathered away, and today an apartment complex stands on the site.