



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:15:00

## There's No Peace for the Wicked

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The Peelers were chasing me. I hid in an alley doorway, catching my breath. I listened as they shouted to each other. I heard one say “I think Higgins went this way. Come on!” I held my breath as they came closer and I backed into the nearby closed door falling through an entrance and landing on my back. My wits were still about me so I quickly got to my feet, closed the door and ensured this time it was firmly shut.

Inside the building I became acutely aware of the smell of oil and metal. Whatever this building was used for was hidden behind huge eruptions of steam. I looked up to where the clouds were rising to. The roof was made up of hundreds of glass panes, shimmering like surface water under the sun's rays thereby allowing natural light into the building. Some panes were open to let the steam out, obvious even to me.

So far no-one had seen me. My first thoughts were on what I could nick, so I looked about to take in more of my surroundings. I didn't get much of a chance to do that as suddenly this almighty claxon began to sound. I thought war was breaking out. Behind the siren I could hear machinery moving and to my surprise when looking up I saw the roof split into four quarters, each quarter

withdrawing into the wall to leave no cover at all, only an open sky. Then a huge shadow darkened the sky above and to my amazement I saw one of those huge airships, I think they call them Zeppelins, a familiar sight here in 2109. It began to descend, carefully slowing to settle on the floor of the building. I didn't noticed the claxon stopping as I stood there dumbstruck. However I did hear the roof close. While this was happening, having realised I was standing where I could be seen, I moved towards a corridor running alongside the green painted building walls, hoping I wouldn't meet anyone.

Slowly I worked my way along the corridor and on hearing voices approach I opened the nearest door to me and went in, silently closing the door. I was in another big room. The oil lamps lit it well and I could make out what seemed to be hundreds of glass cabinets, all about seven feet tall and a couple wide. They were everywhere. Against walls and back-to-back in three rows down the centre of the room. Out of each cabinet came a host of brass pipes all connected together, running along the length of the room. That interested me, because if I could find out where they stored the brass I could make a few bob, selling them to a bloke I know. Like outside, the room seemed to live in a steam bath.

I couldn't see anyone so I ventured to investigate what they kept in the cabinets. The one closest to me was quite steamed-up on the outside, so using my sleeve I wiped the glass. I jumped back on seeing an aged face, all glassy-eyed and motionless. There were leather restraints across his chest, arms and legs. This poor fellow couldn't move even if he wanted to. He didn't look well at all. This was strange so I cleaned off the front of the next cabinet to find another held the same way. The next one I opened was empty, except for pools of water on the cabinet base. I stood wondering

what on earth this was all about when I heard the door to the corridor opening. Without hesitation I quickly climbed in the empty cabinet and closed the door. Suddenly, leather straps shot from either side across my body and legs. I raised my arms quickly as two more came out to hold my arms. Whoever it was, was coming closer, I took a chance and lowered my arms. Thank the devil there was no response from the straps.

There were two people coming, both dressed in white laboratory coats. By their voices I worked out one was a male, the other female. The male said: "Check all the pods to see how many are empty and whether any have completed draining the essence out of these bodies. That airship has just delivered another two hundred 'guests' for the pods and we need to 'house' them tonight." There was no doubt about it, he was obviously one of those Cyberpunk eggheads I'd heard about.

The female responded with total assurance. "Yes Doctor. No problem. I will have my 'pod' nurses clear the cabinets. I have arranged for the guests to have a supper, to give them strength." She added, "Of course the sleeping draught in the food should keep them docile before we 'house' them." She laughed as they walked back into the corridor.

I began wondering 'what is the purpose of this place?' I carry a knife, so I used it to cut through the leather straps and quickly, with a shiver, climbed out of the cabinet. Standing there I wondered what to do next. My instincts said, find the brass and get out of here. It was then I heard a muffled voice coming out of a cabinet opposite. Should I or shouldn't I check this out? My sensible self said "no way", but curiosity got the better of me and I opened it.

There was a young woman inside, wearing a leather corset and the shortest skirt I have ever seen. Without hesitation she cried “Help me, help me get out of here, they are killing me!” I could of course have done that no problem, but she had all kinds of tubes coming out of her head and body and I didn’t know what to do with them. I cut through the leather straps then asked her what I should do about the tubes. Without waiting for an answer, she just pulled them out. I winced I can tell you. Pulling the last one she fainted. I caught her, just, and lay her on the wooden floor expecting her to die. I walked back down the aisle and I saw that most of the cabinets had inhabitants.

My thinking was “I’d better get out of here before they put me in one.” I turned to retrace my steps, but I was blocked by the young lady, now standing upright.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“”Don’t really know” she replied. “I’m still a little light-headed. They were trying to suck something out of me, but I resisted. Come on! Give me a hand and we will let everyone out.”

“Hold on a moment. I don’t want to get caught and end up in one of those. If you want to open all the cabinets then do it by yourself. I’m off,” I declared.

“Go on coward. Look after yourself, but first let me have your knife so I cut through their bonds.”

“I ain’t giving you my knife I might need it. Okay, I will stay ten minutes, that’s all, and cut through as many bonds as I can, then I’m going to scarper. Okay with you?”

She didn't hesitate but started swinging open doors. I followed. The next cabinet looked like it housed an old woman. I shouted to the girl, "This one looks nearly dead. Is it worth releasing her?"

The girl returned to the cabinet and again looked like she might faint. "That's my best friend Lisa. I can tell by the clothes she is wearing. We're only twenty. Look how they've aged her."

I closed the door. "Sorry there's not much we can do for her. Only leave the doors open on anyone who still looks young and I will cut them free. Hurry up."

In the end there were only thirteen people in this aisle we could free. I cut the straps and the girl pulled out the tubes. Men, women, young boys and girls, fell out on to the floor once they were released, and took time, time I didn't have, to revive themselves.

Next thing I noticed was the girl opening doors in the next aisle. I shouted to her, then realised I needed to keep the noise down. "Hang on. I don't have time to do any more." I looked up at a giant clock on the wall. "You've had your ten minutes I'm off." I moved towards the corridor door and heard footsteps approaching. "Quick hide, I think someone is coming."

There wasn't much we could do about those on the floor but me and the girl hid behind some mechanical machinery close to the door. The door opened and in came the two who were here earlier. I heard the doctor say "Oh no. Some of our patients have fallen out of their cabinets. Let's get them back in before the governor finds out. He'll have our guts for garters if we don't deliver enough essence for his "Fountain of Youth" products."

The pair of them rushed to the bodies just waking up on the floor.

"Right", I said. "Time for me to get out of here. See you." I moved towards the door, but the girl held on to me by my arm.

"You can't go yet. They will put them back in the cabinets and they will die. Help me stop them."

Reluctantly I followed her as she crept up behind the intruders. They turned on hearing our approach. "What the..." was all I heard from the doctor before I hit him hard on the jaw. Oh that did hurt me, I recall. He landed flat on his back. The girl, taking the hint from me, hit the nurse, but not so hard, but hard enough to daze her. Without speaking to each other, we worked out the safest place to keep them out of our way, was to put them in cabinets. And this we did. Those we had released were gradually gaining strength and asking what had happened.

"I've got to go" I said. "Here, take my knife and do what you have to. By the way, I never caught your name?" I handed it to the girl.

All I heard as I rushed to the door was "Thanks. My names Roxanne." I closed the door behind me, in case anyone else came along, and hurried along the corridor myself.

Funnily enough, I could smell food. I made my way towards the door I thought might lead to a kitchen, where I could grab a pie or something. I opened the door and to my surprise it was the largest dining room I had ever seen. There were hundreds of people sitting down at tables tucking into a meal. "Oh no" I thought. "These are the people from the Zeppelin, and they're eating the drugged food."

I turned to go and rough hands held me by my arms. "And where are you off to my fine friend? Come along, we have set out this lovely grub for you. Be a good lad and return to your table." I looked up at a

huge man with a beard, with brown teeth much like a rabid dog's, dressed in some form of military uniform. I didn't argue but walked over to the nearest table and sat down.

"This food is great" said the amiable chap next to me. "Get tucked in, there's plenty for everyone."

"It's drugged with a sleeping draught," I replied. "Whoever runs this place is trying to put everyone to sleep."

"I don't believe you," said the man opposite. "They promised a decent meal in return for us answering some simple questions. This meal is as good as any my missus makes at home." The rest of the table laughed.

How could I convince them? I looked around and saw some tables where people had laid their heads on the table to rest. "Look!" I pointed. "There are people who have finished their meals and already fallen asleep." I heard a clatter of utensils as my message reached those I shared a table with.

A young woman dressed similarly to Roxanne, in leather corset and coat, a fancy topper and short skirt looked horrified, but even though stood on the table and yelled at the top of her voice. "Don't eat the food. It's drugged to make us sleep. Look around you, some have already gone to sleep."

I saw my bearded guard heading towards us. "Run" I shouted. "Everyone, wake up your neighbours and run for the exits."

Half of the dining guests rose to their feet. Some looked lethargic and couldn't stand. Others were obviously already asleep and I watched as they tried to wake them up. This all looked to no avail. My thoughts travelled to once place. How was I going to escape? There were guards everywhere trying to stop people fleeing

the dining room. In the chaos that had erupted I dodged the guards and once again reached my favourite corridor. This had now become too much for me. I turned around and a dozen diners had also reached the door. “How do we get out of this place?” they probed. I was no leader, but I suggested they follow me. I headed back towards the cabinet room, just in time to see dozens of ex-cabinet inhabitants join us in the corridor. They all looked to me for an answer on how to get out. I didn’t have a clue.

I tried another door and looked in and discovered I was looking at the landing place for the airship. Easy to tell, as it was still parked there, surrounded by half a dozen military attired guards. They saw me and rushed in my direction. I dodged out of the way of the first guy and he ran straight into the mob behind me. They soon sorted him out and came forward to envelope the other guards, who by now were outnumbered ten to one.

‘Cor Blimey. I really questioned what I had gotten myself into. A thought came into my head. “Could we fly out of here?” My legs ruled my head and I found myself running towards the airship. It was huge. It must have been all of a hundred yards long, all silver and glistening under the oil lamps on the walls. I found a set of steps and began climbing them. I caught sight of another guard, in the airship, who was about to try and stop me getting on board. I really don’t know what came over me. I ducked as he swung an arm towards me. I grabbed it and hurled him down the stairs. So unlike me. I’m not a violent man. I heard an almighty cheer as the ex-diners jumped all over him. My head was getting bigger. I began thinking I could do anything. I wandered on board. It had small rooms running along the outer skin of the airship. Goodness knows what they were for. In the

centre of the airship was a huge empty space. No doubt where they kept all those people they had gathered up.

I continued to where I thought the front of the airship was and found a man sitting in a chair, shaking. "Don't hurt me. Don't hurt me" he cried.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The man was dressed in typical green military flying overalls, leather jacket and on the top of his head, flying glasses and goggles. It wasn't a sight I expected to see. "I am ze pilot" he gasped, in what I realised was a foreign accent. "I am not part of zis military organisation. I am being forced to fly zis machine, or zey will bring my family here."

I didn't know whether to believe him or not, but I took a chance. "Can you fly us out of here?" I asked.

He looked more scared than ever. "I could" he said, "if ze skylight was retracted."

"How do we do that?" I asked him.

He pointed to a machine, he called an Automotan, near the door we had come through. "You have to press ze levers in the right order to open ze roof, izerwise it can become stuck and not leave enough room for ze airship to manoeuvre."

That meant that whoever operated the levers, might not have enough time to climb on board. I needed to find a volunteer. I walked back to the steps and spoke to the ex-diners who were increasing in numbers by the minute. "Listen everyone. We have one chance to escape and that is in the airship. I have spoken with the pilot and he will fly us out. Quickly everyone, climb aboard. Some of

you, jam the doors to the corridor so they won't open. We don't want the guards stopping us do we?"

I watched as some enthusiastically climbed up the steps, but most of them were no doubt feeling the effects of the drug and had that glazed-over look. I noticed those who had jammed the doors soon climbed up the steps. How was I to find a volunteer out of that lot? The last to come up the steps was Roxanne, herding everyone along. As we walked together towards the pilot's area I explained to Roxanne my plan. She volunteered to pull the levers and take her chance, but that nasty side of me called chivalry intervened. I couldn't let her do it. Reluctantly I agreed to throw the levers and Roxanne promised to keep the entrance clear so I could get back on board quickly. I spoke to the pilot and told him once the roof was completely open to take off straight away.

I climbed down the airship's steps and approached the Automotan. I didn't have a background in mechanics and wasn't too confident in my ability. It appeared to be a big mechanical clockwork robot to me and like everything around, it looked steam driven. On the wall someone had put up a sign saying "DANGER! Do not leave the steam pump on for more than five minutes at a time."

There were four levers, which I assumed moved each quarter of the roof. I pulled one of them but nothing happened. I began to perspire. What if this didn't work? I could end up in one of those cabinets, or worse still, the military guards would kill me, possibly quite painfully. I looked again at the controls and noticed a green button. That normally means go I thought. I pressed it and heard the steam begin to enter the apparatus. I quickly pulled on a lever and watched as part of the roof moved. I pulled the next one and so on. I watched as the glass pane roof separated and stood there watching

to make sure it fully opened. I could hear the guards in the corridor hammering at the doors. They would be in soon.

Before I could move, I saw the airship lifting off without me, and I rushed towards it. I saw Roxanne shouting something but the noise of the airship drowned it out. I watched as the Zeppelin rose. Suddenly Roxanne threw out a rope and I stretched to reach it. I held on to it as the airship manoeuvred its way through the open roof. As it began to move forward I realised I was too low down on the rope and would hit the outer rim of the aperture. I managed to climb up enough, but then became stuck on the roof tiles. I had no alternative but to let go of the rope and remain on the rooftop. At least I was free of those cabinet killers. As I sat there, watching the airship rise in the sky, I heard an explosion down below. Oops! I thought. I didn't turn the steam pump off.

I found a fire escape running down the side of the building and breathed a sigh of relief as I descended. As I reached the bottom, two hands grabbed my shoulders. "Ah. Higgins. Got you at last. You'll be doing time for stealing that knife from the market stall." It was one of those Peelers who had chased me earlier. I realised then that 'there's no peace for the wicked,' or heroes. They never believed me when I told them what I had just done. I don't think he even noticed the huge shadow cast by the departing airship overhead. Mind you, given a choice, prison was better than death in a cabinet.