

The Day of the Clockwork Peelers

It's London in the Nineteenth Century, but something, you feel, has gone very wrong. Law and Order is being handed over to machines, and nobody seems quite able to understand the how and why of the business.

The five of you are folk who don't like this, and you've all shown up for a meeting called by someone as seems to think that he might have a clue what's going on these days. He might even have an idea what to do about it. Trouble is, today may just be the day when the machines stop pretending they answer to human beings for what they do – and you may end up being the ones who stand against the Law of Clockwork.

A street-level steampunk adventure of resistance to the iron hand of oppression.

GM's Background

The year is 1878, and the place is London – but this is an alternate timeline within the **Infinite Worlds** framework. Technically, it's a *close parallel* (or possibly actually an *echo* which has suffered destabilization), but one which Centrum discovered in 1862, and which they decided to use for an experimental intervention.

So what they did was infiltrate the higher echelons of the British Empire and secondarily the USA, brought a number of industrialists and mid-level politicians partially into the secret, and started a very controlled release of advanced technology to these catspaws. Because they are only releasing a very little knowledge and some black box gadgets, and insisting on tight secrecy, they are ensuring that the locals remain utterly dependent on them; a side-effect is that the locals are developing weird hybrid technologies with a distinctly steampunk look – except that, of course, no one locally knows the word “steampunk”. Notable organisations under Centrum's control include **The London Automaton Company**, **Walton Steam & Carriage Limited**, and **The Imperial Consolidation League** (whose definition of “consolidation” is distinctly aggressive); significant individuals include industrialists **Sir Thomas Dane** (“the King of the Clockwork Peelers”), **Peter Walton** (who is obsessed with technology and who thinks that people should just do as they're told and let machines work properly, but who is increasingly frustrated by Centrum's secrecy), and Prime Minister **Sir Henry Westonwood** (a high-placed member of the Consolidation League with a strong sense of upper-class entitlement – really a total puppet of the industrialists and the League's shadowy backers, i.e. of Centrum, but very much at second hand). **Disraeli** was sidelined some time ago and now leads a moderate faction within the Conservative party – he sees that he needs to play a long game, but is painfully aware that he may not have enough time. **Gladstone** is seen as a “too popular” leader of the Liberal opposition, and will be arrested on the night of the scenario.

But now the catspaws' plans are moving ahead with increasing speed, and Centrum are having difficulty controlling their minions. The minions believe that British military dominance is assured, when actually a lot of resentful local powers are making plans to try and catch up, are being forced into alliances, and sometimes just don't know they're beaten; the Centrum-brokered alliance between Britain and the USA isn't as solid as Centrum would like either. Meanwhile, the minions have been introducing remote-controlled steam-powered robot/drone automatons into local law enforcement, especially in London, in order to keep a lid on popular unrest, and have been rather clumsy about it. The general population dislikes this development, the lower classes and political radicals *hate* it, and even the human police are more likely to regard the automatons with suspicion, as threats to their jobs if nothing else, than they are to appreciate the help.

On the night of the scenario, the minions, recognising just how much resentment and clandestine resistance they've stirred up, especially in London, decide to clamp down on it hard – and their handlers, caught by surprise as their plans leapfrog forward, are unable to hold them back. (The catspaws are smart enough to realise that they aren't being given full information about their handlers' plans, and would quite like better control of some resources, to save them from being stuck in quite such a subservient position.) Some trusted members of the conspiracy have been given direct access to the computer which controls the Clockwork Peelers, and have semi-experimentally instructed it to drop various safeguards and move to arrest various recognised problematic individuals and clamp down on assorted threats. The computer has interpreted these instructions with gratifying enthusiasm, and by the time Centrum regain control of their facilities in Scotland Yard, it will be too late to cancel the ensuing operations.

PC Involvement

The PCs represent some those resentful resisting locals, gathered together by **Dr Theodore Aston**, one of the many local scientists and engineers who've been excluded from the conspiracy and who are wondering how the heck some of these new technological feats are accomplished. Aston has been studying the Clockwork Peelers, and especially reports about the rare occasions of them losing function, and has drawn a few tentative conclusions. He's also deeply offended by the anti-scientific secrecy of the new technology, and realises that anyone preserving such a monopoly on such useful knowledge probably wants to abuse it. So he's been reaching out to a radical faction and one or two individuals who he thinks might be able to help him – and he's called a meeting at which to discuss this. Unfortunately, on the very evening he's chosen, the conspiracy makes their move.

So Aston hastily recruits the PCs into a scheme which takes down one of the Clockwork Peelers and allows him to confirm some of his ideas, and then gets them out of the immediate area via the sewers. But a quick review of the situation, once the PCs have surfaced again, shows that the Clockwork Peelers have apparently decided to take over the human world – or at least London – entirely. (Actually, the catspaws' plan involved a degree of plausible deniability at the outset, the computer ran away with its instructions, and now there's a bit of a struggle going on between the local conspiracy and the Centrum agents as to how to handle the situation.) Plus, Aston and the PCs are now likely to be wanted criminals. On the other hand, Aston thinks that, now he has a better idea of how the Clockwork Peelers work, he may have a clue as to how they can be stopped.

So the PCs launch a desperate raid on Scotland Yard itself, with the intention to bring down the "Flag Mast" – actually the radio transmission mast which controls all the Clockwork Peelers in London. They may need to recruit some help for this, but if they succeed, they might even shift to confront the leading conspirators (though they'll really need some backup for that), perhaps after releasing its key opponents from prison. Of course, they can then suffer the mysterious concluding sight of the conspirators' strange allies disappearing as they bug out in what's actually a conveyor.

Player Intro

*Basic greetings, check **GURPS** familiarity, etc. The scenario concept:*

"This is London, in the year 1878, but it's an alternate timeline that's gone a bit steampunk. For about the last ten or fifteen years, technological development has been accelerating at a runaway pace, with advanced steam engines that are even good enough to power steam automobiles, increasingly powerful and accurate firearms, and recently even steam-powered humanoid automatons – all mostly in Britain. However, this being the Victorian age, and rather a worst-case version, this development has fallen under the control of the existing ruling classes – both the aristocracy and the industrial capitalists – and they've taken full advantage of what it offers. Most of

the new machines come out of the workshops of a clutch of new companies which are tightly managed by a small clique of industrialists, and new basic technologies tend to come from those companies' laboratories, which are even more tightly controlled. The steam engines and automobiles are fairly widely available to buyers who can afford the patent fees, but the firearms are being supplied to the army and used to expand and consolidate the Empire, and those automatons, apart from a few mechanical servants for the rich, all take the form of *Clockwork Peelers* – big mechanical policemen, which are about as robotically unsympathetic to human concerns as you may expect.

“You will be playing rather ordinary people who are, for whatever various reasons, increasingly very unhappy about this, and who've been brought together by someone who apparently thinks he has some idea what's going on. You don't know each other very well, and you may have some problems trusting each other...”

Five characters are available:

Black Bonnet Betsy: An anarchist labour organiser and dedicated revolutionary.

Jenny Jones: An East End costermonger, turning to rebellion.

Fergus Rotherman: A freelance journalist with an interest in science.

Constable Barker: A policeman who really wishes to serve the public.

Malcolm Dray: A soldier who's left the army because he may be needed more at home.

Note at this point that this game may occasionally use the *Fright Checks From Social Disorder* rules (*Steampunk 1*, pp. 40-43), flexibly interpreted, so it's important to note what each character finds offensive to their view of society. To Black Bonnet Betsy, it's evidence that people *need* order, or that hierarchy and even injustice may be inevitable; to Jenny Jones, it's people enforcing orderliness or respectability on her; for Fergus Rotherman, it's the idea of necessary secrets or the utterly inexplicable; for Constable Barker, it's gross abuses of power by “respectable” citizens; and for Malcolm Dray, it's the idea of Britons submitting to alien dominance without even a fight.

Note also that Betsy, Jenny, and Barker have pistols (the first two rather illicitly, Barker because they're available to the Night Patrols, especially these days), and Barker has his truncheon, but Malcolm doesn't have a rifle – it's on his character sheet because it's the weapon he trained to use in the army.

Scene 1: A Meeting

Things begin in the vicinity of Covent Garden, where the old buildings – mostly warehouses – around Seven Dials have become shady underworld rookeries, and the backstreets around and about, running up to St. Giles and New Oxford Street, feature plenty of garrets and small rented apartments which have seen better days. Each of the PCs has received a message or invitation from **Dr Theodore Aston**, or heard that Ashton is organising some kind of meeting, and that he claims to have learned something about the Clockwork Peelers:

Black Bonnet Betsy: Aston has apparently reached out to the Anarchist League with whom you work. The League has asked around, and has no reason to think that he's a State agent – and you were available this evening to see what he wanted to say.

Jenny Jones: Aston managed to find some acquaintances of acquaintances in the rookeries when he was reaching out to the Anarchists, and you heard that he claims to have some ideas about dealing

with the Clockwork Peelers; he's certainly been asking for stories about them, which is risky enough to show that he's serious. You may also be here to watch Betsy's back.

Fergus Rotherman: You've run into Aston in the course of your scientific journalism work; he's been working as a freelance consultant, outside the establishment but clever enough to sometimes have some interesting things to say about how the New Technology seems to work. He wrote to you inviting you to this evening's meeting, and he made it sound important.

Constable Barker: You *really* don't like the way that things seem to be going with the Clockwork Peelers and the shadowy bunch behind them, so when you hear mutters on the street about ways to oppose them, well, you have more serious things to do than investigate wild talk, don't you? So when someone who thought it might be clever to be your informer told you about this scientist-fellow organising a meeting 'cause he has something to say about that subject, you decided to go off-duty and out of uniform.

Malcolm Dray: Since you left the army, you've been renting a room on the tatty edge of Covent Garden, taking odd jobs, and looking for something better. But one of the odd jobs was carrying deliveries of science stuff for Dr Aston, and he chatted with you a bit and you let slip that you don't much like the Clockwork Peelers. So he invited you to drop by this meeting – says he knows something about them, and maybe word should get out.

Throw that out to the players, ask about order of arrival at the meeting, and roleplay out the first encounters. Betsy and Jenny will recognise each other and Barker, who will himself recognise Betsy; otherwise, these people don't know each other. Aston will do his best to avoid blazing arguments, but doesn't have any great social skills. Worst case, if anyone leaves in a huff, they'll run into the Clockwork Peelers and be effectively driven back.

Aston, incidentally, is a middle aged man, bespectacled, clean-shaven, balding, and wearing tweeds.

The Location

The meeting is in Aston's rooms; he's cleared back what would normally be a dining room to make it into a laboratory/workshop, and although he's been able to afford a fair amount of space in a consulting engineer's income by renting in a downmarket neighbourhood, it still gets moderately cosy with six people and a workbench.

Rotherman gets a Per-based Scientific Theorising roll at +4 (i.e. at 15) to recognise both mechanical and electrical scientific tools and instruments around the place. This fellow must have broad interests.

Everyone gets a Per roll on arrival, at +2, to notice some oddities. For one thing, the door from the hall is rigged with a crude pulley; knocking a hefty lead weight off a ledge will make it swing shut quite hard. But even more eccentrically, Aston appears to have lined the walls and even the ceiling of the room with something, and then nailed quilted paper over that; the doors have simply had sheets of fine woven metal fitted over them. Peeking underneath the quilted paper (a rather *obvious* thing to do) would note more of the metal fabric; close inspection of the doors would note that the fabric will overlap the adjacent frame, and the metal mesh is connected to the stuff on the walls by a number of wires; further checking will show that there's more of the metal fabric on the floor, under a fresh sheet of linoleum. Physics at default (IQ-6) or Expert Skill (Scientific Theorising) will remind and character observing this of the concept of the Faraday Cage, but in slightly vague 19th century terms. If asked, Aston will get all hand-wavy and promise to explain in a moment. "It is a precaution. I can explain, but first, I must provide you with other information..."

However, before he can start explaining, the PCs will hear shouts and screams from the street outside...

The Rise of Clockwork

The PCs suddenly hear a lot of clanking and steam-hissing noises from the street outside. Looking out, they see two whole squads of Clockwork Peelers – larger groups than anyone has seen on the streets before – arriving at either end of the street, openly carrying military-standard rifles. The automatons begin marching down this and adjacent streets, neatly splitting up into smaller groups as they head down side-alleys; sometimes, individuals take up stationary positions. One or two passers-by have to dodge aside as the machines come on, seemingly regardless of these human beings. Then they all come to a simultaneous halt, and announce, in perfect echoing mechanical union –

“This city is now subject to the control of the legal authorities. All citizens must obey the legal authorities or be subject to legal penalty. Remain indoors during this period of correction. One warning will be issued when possible disobedience is identified. Lethal force may be employed to prevent illegality.”

As the PCs watch, one man comes to the door of a house to remonstrate; the nearest Clockwork Peeler simply stomps up to the door pushes him back into the house – all but throwing him – and pulls the door shut. Another pair of passers-by scurry past, tracked by two Clockwork Peelers pointing rifles, until they find shelter in a public house.

Then a deathly hush falls on the streets. The Clockwork Peelers are spread thin now; one is stationed near to Aston’s house, and others are visible in the distance in either direction.

Dr Aston’s Reaction

Aston will be as anxious as anyone to dissuade anyone else from confronting the Clockwork Peelers; he’ll point out that anyone who tries tackling them head on will lose, but he believes that there may be a way to stop them, or at least give organised opposition a chance.

Once he gets the chance, he’ll explain. He’s a scientist himself, but he’s never sought a place in the industrial companies that work for the government; he doesn’t like their compulsive secrecy – “it’s anti-scientific”. He makes a living these days as an independent consultant for smaller enterprises, which allows him the time and resources to conduct some independent research into matters that interest him. One such subject was the Clockwork Peelers.

Although independent engineers sometimes try to avoid thinking about the fact, the Peelers rather obviously have capabilities far beyond anything built by anyone else. They are not only walking, talking machines, they display *intelligence*, and a range of senses comparable to the human. Furthermore, the secrets behind this are extremely jealously guarded. The Peelers are built and maintained in secret workshops by mechanics selected more for reliability than for skill, who live on site, no one is permitted access to the workings of the things outside of those places, and on the very rare occasions when one is badly damaged or disabled while in action, other Peelers and trusted constables guard it and recover it as quickly as possible.

However, some stories are in circulation about such events. Piecing them together, the first thing that Aston determined was that the thinking part of the Peelers must be, strangely enough, in the head; the torso evidently holds a powerful steam engine, because damage there causes release of steam and loss of power, whereas damage to one of the things’ head instantly disables it. Secondly, Aston heard stories of glimpses of *wires* within damaged Peelers, which makes him guess that

electricity may be involved somehow. Then, when he investigated other stories, one or two anomalies emerged. Not only could very minor damage to the head *sometimes* disable a Peeler, at least temporarily, but there were occasions when some of them suddenly became immobile. Notably, stories from the docks mentioned Peelers going below decks on large modern ships, and suddenly stopping dead, sometimes very inconveniently for the police they were supposed to be assisting. And they never operate more than a few miles from the centre of London or the few other big cities where they are in use, and the limit seems to be purely one of distance, not administration.

(Rotherman can confirm some of the science-related background on all this; the Peelers are a great enigma and a well-guarded secret. Barker can say that Aston's stories match some things he's heard in the force; the Peelers are certainly oddly under-utilised down on the dockside beats.)

This led Dr Aston to recall the theory of *electromagnetic waves*, as discovered by Michael Faraday some years since. Knowing that such waves can be blocked by a correctly constructed metal cage or enclosure, he wonders if the Clockwork Peelers are being in some way controlled or influenced by means of such waves. So he spent some time creating instruments that can detect electromagnetic waves, small enough to carry in a case, and spent a further little while running tests from small hotel rooms around London.

"My results are tentative but strongly indicative – there appears to be a source of electromagnetic waves in the West End of London, somewhere in the Whitehall district."

The intention of this meeting was to bring this hypothesis to the attention of possible interested parties, and to discuss what could be done with the information – but now, it seems that matters have become more urgent. He really needs confirmation of this theory, though, and ideally more detailed information.

Fortunately, he is not entirely unprepared for emergencies; he suspected that he his research into the nature of the Peelers might make him a suspected person, and he prepared both a defence of sorts and a rapid escape route from the house. Now, if people are prepared to take a risk by his side, he may have a way to improve his knowledge – which may in turn *offer* a way to nip this revolt of the machines in the bud.

He won't described the escape route until asked directly, but then he'll say *"One thing that the hurried progress of these last few years did accomplish was to bring Mr Bazalgette's great plan to fruition. But some of the work in these parts was conveniently hasty."* Most of the characters will catch the reference to the great project of constructing London's modern sewerage system.

As to what he wants to do next – he'll explain that another thing that he's determined in his scientific study of the Clockwork Peelers is that, while they are fast and aggressive in response to setbacks in combat, they sometimes take a few minutes to respond when one of them is disabled by chance. Anyway, looking out of the window, there appears to be just the one automaton stationed near to the house; others are some way off at the closest. The laboratory is, as the PCs may have noticed, set up as a Faraday cage; if the automaton can be drawn into it, and the door closed, then by all the reports and information available to Aston, it may be disabled – after which, he has the wherewithal to remove the parts he needs to confirm his theory.

The Fight Scene

1. The Clockwork Peeler outside is susceptible to Fast-Talk, or if needs be to other tactics designed to draw it in. (The controlling computer is a pretty basic AI, and won't escalate issues for human intervention very fast.) Make the PCs work for this, but not too hard.

Incidentally, the house has a sturdy front door which can of course be locked, hopefully slowing pursuit by a crucial few minutes.

2. Deploying people in the lab to take advantage of the machine's immobilisation is a Tactics+2 task; on a failure, it may be necessary to provoke the machine to violence in order to get it away from the door so that can be closed. When the door is shut, the Peeler will bring its rifle to a firing position, but then freeze up. A Good shove will knock it over, after which the rifle can be removed. Yes, it's the same type that Malcolm knows how to use.
3. Aston will then produce a crowbar and a mallet, and say "Quickly – fracture its neck!" A couple of well-placed blows will open a gap, at which Aston will say "No – I can deal with it now!", produce a small vial of liquid from a drawer which he handles with nervous caution, and say "Stand well back, please." Betsy can have an explosives roll at +3 there, and Fergus a Scientific Theorising roll; success on either guesses that this is nitro-glycerine, which may be worth a Fright Check. Aston pours the liquid into the machine, takes a long-handled mallet, and applies a sharp tap. When everyone recovers their nerves, the machine's head is separated from its body; Aston gathers it up in one hand, takes another vial from the drawer, and says "I suggest that we leave now."

Scene 2: Flight and Recruitment

Aston's escape route is via stairs down to the cellar, where he directs the PCs to remove boards that conceal a section where he's removed just enough bricks to allow one person at a time to squeeze through, and leads them through, last one through to replace those boards. Then he hands two people carbide lamps which he keeps down here, *carefully* balances the vial on a loose piece of rubble – a successful Explosives roll can suggest the best place to put it to bring the brickwork down – and says "Now, where next?"

It turns out at this point that this is the limit of Aston's plans. He realised that an escape route might be a good idea, and the nitro was a little bit of inspired planning, but now he just wants to get somewhere that he can dismantle the automaton head in peace. The best bet is probably for Jenny to lead the others into a nearby rookery; finding a quick way there is Area Knowledge (Central London) – broader London or specific Rookeries knowledge can substitute at -2, and may spot a failure on the initial roll. Once there, a Streetwise Influence roll can get the party in; Jenny is best equipped, and may get complementary rolls from some of the others. However, if the players come up with alternatives, run with them. When any NPCs get a clear view of the fact that Aston is carrying a Clockwork Peeler's head, mighty oaths may well be issued; good roleplaying to make this a reason to admit people rather than exclude them should be worth a bonus. Note also that posher party members should be struck by the sordidness (but also the liveliness) of a rookery; it's very Dickensian.

In Hiding

Technical Research: Once he gets the chance, Aston will need to acquire, borrow, or scrounge up some tools – Scrounging skill will help with that – and begin dismantling that head. Once he gets it open, he'll issue some mighty, if polite, oaths of his own.

The mechanism is, to his eyes, incomprehensible. A whole bundle of implausibly slim electrical wires run through the neck, but what he has to assume is the brain is basically a lot of black – resin? – with what appear to be fins attached. It's attached directly to the eyes, which are more solid lumps, but with lenses on the front, and to what appear to be ears and a voicebox – well, he can at least puzzle out the idea of a microphone and loudspeaker [*telephone invented 1875, our timeline*]. There's also a connection to a pair of metal rods on the exterior of the head, which always puzzled him, but now

he can grasp the concept of an antenna. So at least this thing isn't pure black magic, and his theories about electromagnetic wave communication are confirmed.

Plans

But what to do with all this information?

Aston points out that these electromagnetic waves must be quite powerful to be received all over London, and he has indeed detected them as emanating from somewhere around Whitehall. He thinks that the transmitting antenna would have to be quite tall...

Constable Barker can come up with an instant answer; if he's not around, try Area Knowledge (London) at -2 or Current Affairs (Headline News) at -2; if all else fails, someone in the rookeries will have a bright idea. "*The Flag Mast!*"

It was a couple of years ago that a giant mast was erected on the roof of Scotland Yard, supposedly to fly a nice big Union Flag, as part of the Westonwood administration's great surge of patriotism. People who thought it was ugly and disproportionate, or who asked why a metal lattice-work structure was needed for a simple flag, were ignored. Barker will also recall that there was some odd discussion of boxes and cables being attached to the structure, which was never properly explained. The timings check out; that must be where the signals governing the Clockwork Peelers emanate.

So that's a possible weak point in the enemy's system...

Scene 3: Assault on the Oppressors

It should be fairly clear that something needs to be done *quickly* about the Clockwork Peelers and their shadowy controllers, before they can embed themselves in the centres of power and arrest all the opponents on whom they have, notoriously, been accumulating masses of data these last few years. Word on the street is that Mr Gladstone, the respected veteran liberal politician, has already been arrested and taken to the Bow Street cells...

Assistance: The PCs can muster a fair number of somewhat sympathetic street-level supporters by use of Public Speaking, and keep them in line with Leadership – but these aren't necessarily the most reliable or steady characters. They're better for distracting crowd scenes than mass assaults. If Betsy or Jenny take the time to track down some anarchist sympathisers, they'll be a bit more reliable, but fewer and with more fixed ideas. However, if they have prior warning that the Clockwork Peelers may be disabled for at least a few minutes, it's just possible that these groups can be persuaded to take action.

Human Coppers: While few human policemen share Constable Barker's idealism, very few of them are too happy at the highly illegal acts of the Clockwork Peelers. Approached with Savoir-Faire (Police) and carefully persuaded, some of them might just come around.

Mobility: Dr Aston should have given the PCs one idea; the Clockwork Peelers aren't exactly designed for getting around in the sewers, and the rookeries contain a fair number of toshers, who know the layout intimately. A bit of Stealth to reach the right manholes, a lot of putting up with bad smells, and our heroes can get fairly close to most parts of the city.

Bringing Down the Mast: Scotland Yard is in some degree of confusion, and most adjacent and nearby buildings, being government offices, are largely empty. A sniper can get within 70 yards of the mast with some sneakiness (-9 to hit), and then find that there are enough lights on the roof of Scotland Yard to compensate for any darkness penalties; the junction box at the base of the mast is size 0, and putting a rifle bullet through it would take the mast offline for at least a few minutes.

Alternatively, if someone can get into the building and bluff their way through, well, certain people in the rookeries have access to small, valuable supplies of explosive, and Betsy can advise on setting a demolition charge...

Mass Revolt: This will all work better if the PCs are prepared to follow up the temporary disabling of the Clockwork Peelers. Having people in place around Bow Street to free some possible popular leaders would be good (even if the anarchists aren't that keen on giving that position to a bunch of *liberals*). An improvised assault on Scotland Yard may discover a bunch of technicians and politicians arguing about the wisdom or lack thereof of the whole plan, before they suddenly say "*Where are they? The advisors?*" The PCs should ideally be just in time to see a strange carriage-like structure in the basement *disappear*... Or if they do actually manage to capture any Centrum agents, well, they'll clam up in the (probably justified) expectation of rescue later.

Aftermath

Many of the conspirators think that they've been receiving assistance from people from the future, though others of them point out that even the "advisors" themselves denied that, saying they were somehow from "another time". Others again think that they were from Atlantis or Mars or something.

Of course, there's now a lot of conspiratorial cells to root out, other nests of Clockwork Peelers in other cities, and foreign forces will be doing their best to take advantage of the confusion...