

Episode 1 – Doctor McClown

By Lou Sutcliffe

Content warnings:

Clowns.

Illness, mentions of fatal illness.

Supernatural threat

Dismemberment

Puppets

SFX: Busy public spaces (outdoor, hospital), screaming, cracking, bird noises, ominous strings

THE RACONTEUREUSE:

My ladies, gentles, in you come
(And those who're neither, all or some)
Come hither all such tales to hear
Of misrule, magic, flight and fear
Of things that unleash pandemonium
And heroes to defend us from them
And for those who thusly need informing
In the show notes you'll find content warnings
So cautioned, audience, come with me
To the Pantaloon Society...

[THEME MUSIC PLAYS]

Episode 1 – Doctor McClown

[SOUNDS OF BUSY STREET]

THE RACONTEUREUSE: London....the sprawling metropolis, the Old Smoke. Not always the capital of the English, of course. Prior to the Norman Conquest, under Alfred of Wessex Winchester held that particular honour. But it is to London we go now to a leafy street arrayed with the city's usual jumble of architectural styles – warm yellow sandstone, the bright white Portland lime so beloved of Sir Christopher Wren, and the pale tan many-windowed institutional brickwork of the cardiology ward of the children's hospital.

Let us swoop in like a tiny bird through the open window of the fourth floor...

[BIRD SINGS]

....where we find ourselves in a playroom.

[SOUNDS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS TALKING]

A very clean, institutional playroom, a room that perhaps was once a ward or a theatre and could be very easily converted back to into one or the other if the brightly coloured sofas and

the tables with crayons neatly tidied away and the jolly stickers of various woodland animals were to be removed. Here we find a group of children gathered in the playroom. Some are in their pyjamas, some not, some are with their parents, and there are some whose parents have taken the opportunity to get a coffee and some food. Some are very sick, pale, and dark-eyed, with cannulas in situ held to their arms by white surgical tape, their smiles and their laughter weak like the twittering of starlings. Some are well, or seem so, and their laughter is strong and bright.

JEN: Oh dear me, what a palaver. All my balls have gone everywhere! However shall I find them all now?

THE RACONTEUREUSE: At the front of this room, a jaunty figure holds court, clad in multi-coloured patchwork and with a red nose upon their face. This is Jen, our hero. They are a short person, perhaps five foot four, or one hundred and sixty-three centimetres, or if she were a horse and thus, measured at the withers, around fourteen hands. A reasonably sized pony. Jen is not a pony, though. Jen is a clown. As well as short, she is plump, gently curved in a way that might put one in mind of a friendly gnome or some other benevolent creature that might be found in a forest dancing in a fairy ring by a lost traveller. If asked to give their age an observer would say “young” but might have difficulty saying whether they were in their teens or their twenties.

JEN: Where has the last one gone?

THE RACONTEUREUSE: At the time we observe them, they are wearing a well-worn pair of bright-red oversize trousers and a baggy shirt made of many patches in purple, yellow and white, hand-stitched together. Her face is painted in white greasepaint with purple and yellow hearts scattered across the cheeks and a big red smile across the mouth. A sparkly wig in the same colours as the shirt completes the outfit. Atop this ensemble is a white lab coat, into the pockets of which have been placed, and then occasionally produced and juggled, a child’s plastic stethoscope, a series of handkerchiefs all tied together at the corners, several balls, a pack of cards, a hand-puppet frog named Harry, also wearing a lab coat, and an apple. Only one item of clothing she wears is entirely sensible – her shoes. They are, in accordance with hospital policy, not enormous and red, but black, sensible, without a heel in excess of one inch, and have a good grip on the sole.

JEN: Well, look at this? Oliver, why are you hiding my juggling ball behind your ear?

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Jen has just finished a delightful display of sleight of hand, producing and juggling the scarves, the balls and the apple whilst chatting in a friendly way with the children. Now, having previously misdirected the audience while they pulled him out of their pocket and popped him on their hand, they address the assembled children as Harry the Frog.

JEN (AS HARRY THE FROG): Come come. That’s enough silliness for now.

JEN: You’re quite right Dr Harry, now it’s time for learning.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Some of the children sigh. The fun could only last for so long.

JEN: Learning how to make puppets! Gather round...

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The children are much happier about the prospect of learning to make puppets. Jen opens her case, which she has placed on the low table surrounded by child-sized plastic chairs. It is an old-fashioned battered brown leather suitcase of the sort often seen in period dramas when the doctor arrives to attend to some ailing heroine. They had found it in a charity shop. The words “Doctor McClown” are painted on it in spidery white writing. Inside there is a selection of puppets, both hand and string-operated and a pile of craft supplies and ping-pong balls. Jen cheerfully empties the craft supplies and balls all over the table. Felt and fabric slides around. Pens roll everywhere, ping pong balls bounce off the table and skitter to various places around the room, pursued by laughing children and to the disapproval of at least one mother. Jen tells the children that ping pong balls often try to escape so they may return to their native land of Ping where all creatures are entirely spherical and any that can't be found will probably have gone home. Eventually every child has a ping pong ball and is happily drawing some sort of face on it, some quite horrific, or cutting out finger-sized felt clothes to glue onto it. Several different puppets appear from the case and attempt to have conversations with the gradually forming ping-pong ball people, often commenting on how lovely their faces, or indeed lack of faces are. Harry the Frog is lent to a small redheaded child who reaches for him and hugs his little wooden head very hard while squeaking:

CHILD: Fwog! Fwog!

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Part way through the play session a woman appears to watch the proceedings – it is to be assumed she is a medical professional of some kind as she has a hospital pass and the stethoscope around her neck is absolutely not made of red and green plastic. She is not particularly tall, but she is taller than Jen, and she is quite thin. It is the thinness of age, the thinness of a dignified heron observing a pond in case some doomed frog should show its face and be rapidly speared. She is dressed very sensibly indeed, in a black skirt and a green blouse, with the sleeves rolled up to facilitate the careful washing of hands. She leans against the doorframe just inside the playroom, watching curiously.

Alas, all good things must end, particularly when dinnertime approaches and small people's stomachs begin to grumble.

[SOUNDS OF CHILDREN TALKING FADES AWAY]

When the time comes, the children are collected by parents who have returned from getting their coffee or their sandwich or some other brief respite from worry and childcare. Jen remains behind to clean up the detritus of the puppet-making, retrieve errant felt tip pens and pack them all away in their case. As she gathers up a handful of felt, she looks up and realises one of the children has not gone yet.

JEN: Hello!? Is your mum not back yet? Or your dad?”

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The child, who is in Spider Man pyjamas, does not answer this question, instead holding up a puppet, and announcing:

CHARLIE: I've got a puppet too!

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The child's parent will probably return for...him? Yes, probably him... soon. He is one of the children who is visibly not well. Jen can see a pallor under his dark complexion and his tightly-curved hair is thin in places.

JEN: So you have, and a fine fellow he is too!

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The puppet was indeed a fine fellow. He was large, large enough that the boy's arms were beginning to droop holding him up. And, Jen suspected, quite old. His paint was worn and chipped in places showing aged wood underneath, and his clothes – a stripy green shirt and red trousers - were faded. His eyes were painted with a blank expression, and he stared vacantly past Jen's shoulder. He had once been a string marionette, they thought, because they could see the holes for their attachment points in his feet and round fingerless hands. Once upon a time he must have danced, but now he was this little boy's doll. Jen's fingers itched to make him dance. She held them behind her back and leaned down, not very far because, as has been explained before, she was quite short.

JEN: Can I take you back to your mammy and daddy? They must be missing you.

CHARLIE: Got work. Gonna be back later. M'Charlie. I'm in here a lot. I have a VSD.

JEN: I don't know what that is.

CHARLIE: Hole in m'heart.

JEN: Oh dear. Can they not just pop a little cork in it?

THE RACONTEUREUSE: This question appeared to bewilder Charlie entirely and he held the puppet close to his chest and regarded her curiously.

CHARLIE: Dunno.

JEN: Well, if you're going to stay, you'll have to help me tidy up.

CHARLIE: No thanks. Bye bye Dr Clown.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: With that, Charlie tottered off towards the door, presumably to return to his bed in the ward next door. Jen gave him a little wave.

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

For a second, Jen could have sworn the head of the puppet looking over his shoulder twitched upwards to fix her with a blank gaze that chilled her to her very bones. They blinked and shook their head, dispelling such curious thoughts. A trick of the light perhaps, or how the puppet was being carried by the boy.

[OMINOUS STRINGS FADE AWAY]

DR HARRINGTON: They can sort of pop a cork in it.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The doctor who had been stood by the door had left her position leaning against the wall and come to join Jen. She began to help pick up discarded toys and ping-pong balls, but somewhat stiffly and slowly.

DR HARRINGTON: There's a device that we can put in - with a catheter - to plug it up. Otherwise, it takes open heart surgery. Normally Charlie would have had that by now, but he was doing fine until recently, so his doctors thought the VSD had closed on its own. I know the family. I cared for his uncle years ago when he was in with the same thing. He passed away, sadly. Veronica Harrington.

JEN: Jen McIntyre, or Dr McClown if you prefer. She/they pronouns. Do you not need to be back in the wards?"

DR HARRINGTON: Oh no. I'm retired. I'm on the bank staff now, I take the odd shift to help out. And I'm done for the day. I haven't seen you here before?

JEN: First time here. I moved down from Glasgow a month ago.

DR HARRINGTON: Well, welcome to London.

JEN: Thanks!

[STINGER]

THE RACONTEUREUSE: It is good clown etiquette to remove one's makeup as soon as possible after performing, to reduce the likelihood of anything happening whilst wearing it that might bring shame upon the clown. In the hospital toilets Jen was carefully adhering to this rule. A small pile of greasepaint-coated makeup wipes were building up beside the sink. She had already removed her purple and yellow wig, revealing, like a sort of trick or Russian nesting doll, yet more purple hair underneath. This purple hair was their own, however and it was wavy and shaved into an undercut, except for the top which was longer and swept to one side to fall just below the ear. It was also damp and slick from being under the wig for several hours. The skin revealed as the makeup wipes were drawn across it was coppery and the roots at the base of the purple waves were a very dark brown. Once the last of the red and white and the small hearts were gone, they fluffed up their hair and packed the wig and wig cap carefully away in bags. Opening their suitcase, they paused. There was something missing. Lab coat, stethoscope, craft supplies, apple, puppets....no frog. She had never got him back from the red-headed child, who was still hugging him happily the last time she had looked across the table. Well, he would survive until she could reclaim him tomorrow, he was made of robust enough wood to weather the attentions of a small child. They knew because they had carved him themselves, carefully whittled the finger-operated jaw and cut the jolly smile into his froggy face. They packed away the rest of the tools of their trade and headed out of the hospital to go home.

[QUIET AMBIENT HOSPITAL NOISE]

Up in the paediatric cardiology ward, the red-headed child was indeed still hugging Harry the Frog. The children, full of hospital dinner and worn out by an afternoon's excitement, were beginning to get ready for bed. Many had their parents with them reading them stories or ensuring they had all blankets teddy bears or other items necessary for sleeping. As time went on, all the children went to bed and the nurses switched out the lights. Charlie's father sat in the chair beside his bed, napping, with a fantasy novel with a dragon on the cover lying discarded on his lap. Charlie himself was curled up with the puppet beneath the blanket next to him.

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

In the darkness of the ward, the puppet's head twitched and began to lift up. Stiffly, the jaw opened and the puppet shuffled towards the boy and fastened it onto his wrist, so gently as not to wake him. Charlie moved, fretting in his sleep. His father half woke up and reached over to stroke his head, soothing him. The puppet quickly returned to stillness.

[OMINOUS STRINGS FADE AWAY]

[STINGER]

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Bright and early on the morning of the next day, Jen pattered into the ward, waved cheerily to the clerk at the desk and opened the door to the playroom. A terrible site greeted them. There had been a murder.

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

Upon the table lay a gruesome scene. Splinters were strewn about. Torn cloth lay on the floor. And in the centre of it all, the head of Harry the Frog, his jaw torn out of the housing and the rest of his head cleaved neatly in two. Jen's hand flew to her mouth in horror, and she ran to the table to inspect the damage. Picking up the pieces, they could see that one side of his head was splintered entirely, as if he had been smashed onto a hard surface. Someone had hit him so hard against something that it was split along the line of the open mouth. The cloth of his body had been ripped away and lay on the floor. Jen sadly picked it up and wrapped it around Harry's poor cleaved head, concealing his painted face in case one of the children should see.

They brought the sad corpse of the puppet to the ward clerk at the desk and mutely showed it to him.

[OMINOUS STRINGS/DARK BACKGROUND FADE AWAY]

WARD CLERK: Oh my goodness, what happened to your little frog?"

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Jen simply shrugged, their clown smile incongruously at odds with the sadness in their eyes.

Nobody in the ward knew who could have committed the dreadful frog-murder. The ward sister was horrified. The red-headed girl, whose name it transpired was Elsie,

had woken up to find Harry no longer on the bedside table and immediately started crying. Whatever had happened to him had happened during the night, it appeared. Elsie was not a suspect. There was no way such a small girl could have had the strength to do that sort of damage, even if she had wanted to, which seemed highly unlikely. Worse still, there was another unhappy child. Charlie's puppet was also missing during the night. It was the talk of the ward – clearly someone who did not like puppets had been sneaking around at night with nefarious purpose. The sad pieces of Harry the Frog were carefully tidied away into Jen's suitcase and with a heavy heart and glad of the big smile painted on their face, they launched into today's play session.

[SOUNDS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS]

Today the more active children had been encouraged to put on plays with their toys for the more unwell ones. The audience gamely clapped as army dolls rode around on the back of plush dogs, and teddies wrapped in felt cloaks took bows for them. Charlie did not attend. When Jen asked one of the parents where he was, she said she thought he had gone to surgery today, but she wasn't sure - he might equally have gone home. Once again, the children filed out and Jen was left to tidy up and reorganise the room. As they replaced chairs and sofas to their correct positions, they fretted that their lack of enthusiasm had been noticed.

[SOUNDS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS FADE AWAY]

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Out of the corner of their eye they spotted an errant ping pong ball from yesterday, half concealed under a stack of chairs. They knelt on the floor and peered underneath to fish it out. At floor level they were suddenly met with a blank stare. Charlie's puppet was under there as well, eerily peering out at them.

[OMINOUS STRINGS FADE AWAY]

JEN: Och, it's only you. You gave me a fright."

THE RACONTEUREUSE: They reached underneath to pull the puppet out and held him up. There was a slight resistance as if the puppet was stuck on something, but they managed to get him out with a little force.

JEN: Charlie's been missing you my fine lad.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: She sat him down on the table. He stared at her still, blankly, making her feel inexplicably uneasy. She patted him on the head.

JEN: I'll go find a nurse so at least somebody gets their little man back today.

[HOSPITAL SOUNDS]

THE RACONTEUREUSE: It was dinner time, so the ward was busy. A healthcare assistant Jen managed to catch confirmed that Charlie had indeed gone to theatre

and therefore could not have his puppet returned to him just yet, and suggested she leave the puppet on his bedside table. This seemed entirely sensible, so Jen returned to the playroom to fetch said puppet. But when they did, the puppet was not there anymore.

[HOSPITAL SOUNDS FADE AWAY]

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

Jen paused to swallow their heart, which felt like it had made quite a spirited attempt to exit via their throat. There was bound to be some perfectly sensible explanation for this. One of the nurses had come in and seen the puppet and taken him to be returned to his owner, no doubt.

Behind them, the door clicked shut.

[DOOR CLICKS]

Jen did not turn around. Instead, they walked over to the table.

JEN: Goodness me. Where has that little man gone? I could have sworn I put him down right here.

THE PUPPET : *You're not wanted here. You don't belong.*

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Jen spun around. Charlie's puppet was stood before the closed door.

[OMINOUS STRINGS]

Nothing was keeping it upright. It stood by itself. The blank stare was fixed upon her, and despite the painted face looking precisely as it did before, it exuded malevolence. One painted wooden foot stepped forwards.

THE PUPPET : *I will drink you down and leave nothing but a husk.*

JEN: Did you hurt my Harry, you little monster?

[THE PUPPET LAUGHS, WHEEZILY]

THE PUPPET : *I was warning you. To get out.*

JEN: And what are you doing to that little laddie?

THE PUPPET : *I will consume him as I have consumed his kin before him.*

JEN: Did ye aye?

THE PUPPET : *First I will consume you.*

JEN: Will ye aye.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: The puppet took another step towards them. Jen glanced across the room. They took a deep breath and reached towards the toybox. They closed their eyes.

The toybox began to shake. The top popped open. A teddy bear with glittering glass eyes climbed out. It was followed by several action figures and a doll. The toys ambled casually towards the puppet, who swivelled from side to side in surprise.

JEN: There's only one toy here. Who disnae belong. And it's ye laddie."

THE RACONTEUREUSE: They smiled. The case on the table popped open, and the two halves of Harry the Frog's head rolled out, off the table and along the floor towards the puppet. They stared at him, accusingly. A rocking horse stepped off its wooden rockers and appeared behind him. It kicked him to the floor and stepped on him, holding him down. One of the action figures tied a scarf from Jen's suitcase onto each of his limbs and around his neck. They took hold of one, and the teddy bear another. Then the toys braced and began to pull. The thing in the puppet howled. [UNEARTHLY SCREAM] The toys pulled harder, straining their small bodies. Jen watched. Harry the Frog watched. The howl mounted in intensity. With a nasty tearing sound, the puppet's left arm came loose, [CRACK] followed by the rest of his limbs and finally his head, which rolled uselessly away [ROLLING SOUND].

Jen slumped to the floor, exhausted. As, a second later, did all the toys. The dismembered head of Harry the Frog rolled back and regarded the ceiling.

[OMINOUS STRINGS/DARK BACKGROUND FALLS AWAY]

DR HARRINGTON: Mx McIntyre?"

THE RACONTEUREUSE: It was the kindly doctor from before. When had she come in?

JEN: I can definitely explain.

DR HARRINGTON: I assure you, there is no need for that. Thank you for dealing with...whatever it was.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Dr Harrington offered Jen a hand up, which they gratefully accepted. The pile of toys lay on the floor. Charlie's puppet was still in pieces and still unmoving. Dr Harrington poked at its head with her sensible shoe.

DR HARRINGTON: Awful creepy thing. Gave me the willies the moment the boy brought it in. Didn't realise it was possessed though.

JEN: [LAUGHS, NERVOUSLY] Neither did I.

DR HARRINGTON: [PAUSE] I'm sorry about your frog.

JEN: Och he'll be right wi a bit of wood glue. Although he shall e'er bear the scars of

his brave battle against evil...

[PAUSE]

DR HARRINGTON: Mx McIntyre..

JEN: Jen.

DR HARRINGTON: Jen. I will clear up here. You seem exhausted. And I will dispose of that... thing. Carefully. It shall be a missing victim of the phantom puppet murderer, I think.

JEN: Dr...

DR HARRINGTON: Please listen to me. I must tell you about some things for context then I will ask something of you.

JEN: All right. Go on.

DR HARRINGTON: I am a great believer in the healing power of laughter. Indeed, it is because of my influence at this hospital that there is funding for entertainers like you to come here. I have been a clown here in the past myself - I realise I may not seem like the type, but I assure you I was, and I adored it. Therefore, I sincerely hope that this experience will not prevent you from continuing to work here with these children. Furthermore – I saw what you did here, and I promise you I will not speak a word of it, even if you choose never to return. Your secret is safe with me. Now, the request. I would like to talk to you more about this, but I cannot do so here where we might be interrupted at any time. There is something I would like to show you.

THE RACONTEUREUSE: Jenn nodded, relieved, and somewhat intrigued.

DR HARRINGTON: Good. Gather your things, take off your makeup, take a while to compose yourself. Then meet me at Covent Garden Station. At seven, tonight....

[STINGER]

[THEME MUSIC PLAYS]

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Acknowledgements

Immense gratitude is owed to:

Helen Gould (@Alecto101) (he/she/they) for feedback and encouragement on Episode 1...

Nathan Lunsford (he/him) and Jeremy Enfinger (he/him) at The Storage Papers (@StoragePapers) for editing advice and moral support..

...and to myriad other kind folks across the audio drama community who have allowed me to pick their brains, froth joyously at them about their work, practice voice acting on their scripts, participate in their fan projects and occasionally, to my utter astonishment, contribute words to their shows.