

## Four: Clutch

**Ellen:** Even though she says faeries aren't real, Ma has habits she can't stop, things she learned in the old country, from her own ma, I suppose. We aren't ever allowed to use the last of anything; we have to leave it as a gift for "those who walk by moonlight," she says. The last handful of grain you leave in the bag. The last egg in the basket. She knows it's just superstition. But *you* drink the last mouthful of milk and see what kind of tongue-lashing you get.

In the stories Ma used to tell, faeries were the servants of the devil. They lived underground, and they'd run from a crucifix. A priest could say a prayer or sprinkle holy water to make them stay away. They couldn't follow you into a church. Does that feel true to you, Father? Did this place feel safe to you?

I didn't expect you to answer me.

Elves. Angels. Goblins. Devils. Heaven. Hell. Elfland. It's all the same thing, ain't it? Magic. Scary stories. Lies to make children behave. I mean, Jesus was a changeling, right?

It's all a show. Smoke and mirrors. Even now, here, you're not going to offer me absolution. Obviously. And even if you did, it wouldn't be real. It wouldn't matter. Because it's hard to tell who the real devils are. You run to find sanctuary and find yourself in a much worse place. Your savior betrays you. Maybe we're all devils.

My ma is so full of shit.

Dr. DeQuincey plays the faerie card for all the customers. He has charms over all the doors to "keep the denizens captive." Iron crosses, horseshoes. Bells strung across doorways. There's a row of iron nails at the threshold of the front door that he makes sure to point out while folks are buying their tickets. He sells little cloth charms to the customers to protect them from the faeries. I've looked at them; they look like the scapulars Father Froud used to give out. Little cloth

squares on a ribbon you can wear around your neck. Except instead of St. Benedict or the Blessed Virgin, these have a picture of an old beggar woman on one side and a holly leaf on the other. The ribbon is black and there's lace edgework around the image. They smell like something I can't quite place--sort of sweet but with a bitterness underneath. They're pretty. And at a shilling apiece he sells them by the shovelful.

But I've always known that kind of thing is just show. Snake-oil. Or at least I thought that until the night Saoirse took me into the back yard. But then a lot of things changed that night.

Before that, though, I was already scared. Because I had seen something I couldn't explain away as show or mirrors. Something more than just Saoirse's being tiny. I had seen Mr. Clutch change.

**[Theme music; opening credits]**

Dr. DeQuincey never drops his show, and that's one of the things that first unsettled me. If you're not a potential mark, most showmen are happy to brag about how they trick people. My friend Jack has always got some kind of game running, but he doesn't pretend not to be playing people when we talk about it. Part of what he enjoys is getting to brag about how clever he is, and most hucksters are the same. But not the doctor.

After I had seen the charms I asked Dr. DeQuincey what the smell was. It reminded me of something but I didn't know what. Something from the shop? I couldn't place it.

He told me that he couldn't share the secret of what was in the charms, but that it was powerful magic. I laughed, cause it was a joke, right? Had to be. And that was the first time I saw Dr. DeQuincey get angry.

"Is something funny, Miss Sheridan?" he said, and I knew by his face I had made a mistake.

I didn't say anything. I was all of a sudden on ground I didn't know, and I just stood there. Dr. DeQuincey watched me for a moment, like he was waiting for me to answer him. Then he reached out and grabbed my chin between his fingers and thumb, squeezing so hard I thought it might bruise. I tried to pull away, but he had me fast.

"It is better not to mock the protection I extend, Miss Sheridan," he said, and his teeth were clenched. "I am all that stands between you and these horrors."

And then he let me go, and smiled again. He patted my cheek and told me to check on Saoirse's clothes for the evening. The whole thing took less than a minute.

But I still thought that he was bluffing. That for whatever reason he wanted to play pretend with the servants. I don't know, to keep us in line? But then I saw Mr. Clutch.

Mr. Clutch is exhibited as "The Thing Under the Bridge," that's what the plaque on his door says, and underneath, in smaller letters, are some words Saoirse says are Gaelic: "Fir Darrig." I don't know anything about what that means, except he's supposed to be some kind of bogie or clurichan. And he certainly looks the part. I've already said he scares me. O'Donald is scary too, but with O'Donald you get the feeling that as long as you don't get in his way you'll be fine. Mr. Clutch looks for reasons to get in your way.

He plays practical jokes, does Mr. Clutch. He trips Talbot when he's walking up the stairs, and he turns the milk jar upside down so it spills out when Grace picks it up. Mostly harmless, even though it's irritating.

But sometimes he does things that are more...gruesome. The third day I was working in the house, he left a dead cat in my workbox. I have a little wooden box with a drawer in it that I got when I started. It has needle and thread, and a thimble, and some cloth scraps. Most of what I

need to mend for Saoirse if her dresses get torn or she loses a button. That day, some of the lace had come loose on the collar of Saoirse's green gown, and I went to my box to get needle and thread. When I opened the drawer, there was a dead cat--a kitten--that had been stuffed in there. It's belly had been torn out, and there was blood everywhere. I screamed, and dropped the box, and then I heard a chuckle from the hallway.

I stepped out and saw Mr. Clutch sitting at the top of the stairs. He was looking right at me and grinning this wide, ugly grin. He tipped his hat to me, and I could tell he thought it was funny that I was scared. And that made me angry.

"You miserable little goblin!" I said. "Is this all you're good for? Butchering little kittens?"

And then he changed. The smile disappeared, and he rushed toward me. As he did, he...I don't know how to say it. His arms got longer, stretching out like taffy. He had one hand on the bannister and one flat against the wall across the landing, five feet away. Longer and I don't know, braided, like they were woven from thick ropes. His face slid and pulled too, melting off his skull in long drips and strands like wax off a candle. It was so fast, so violent. One second he was sitting still at the top of th stairs and the next he was practically up against me, gibbering and shouting and reaching his ropy arms out for me.

I screamed again and stepped back into the room. He stopped dead at the doorway, lke hitting a wall, and then he was Mr. Clutch again, grinning and still. Not that that was much better, if you see what I mean. We stood looking at each other, each of us on one side of the threshold, and he glanced up and over my shoulder. I thought about the iron cross hanging on the inside of the door, and I wondered if that's why he wouldn't come in. Then I heard a voice from behind me.

"Get back to your room, Clutch," said Saoirse. She stepped up next to me, standing just above Mr. Clutch's belt. He looked down at her, and she looked so small. But she leaned toward

him, and poked his broad chest with her finger. "If you take another step towards her, I'll gut you like this cat!" she said, and she tossed the kitten's corpse at his feet.

Mr. Clutch stepped back, and his grin melted away. If you can credit it, he looked afraid. He looked like he thought Saoirse could really do what she'd said. She stood firm in front of him, and after standing his ground for another ten seconds or so, he grabbed the cat and fled down the stairs.

I stood there with my mouth open. Saoirse went back into the room. Over her shoulder, she said "He's harmless."

I spent the rest of the day sitting in the bedroom. Saoirse wouldn't say much else. I asked her what had happened, or how it had happened. I was already doubting what I had seen. But she only said, "It's only Clutch. What did you expect?" She'd say no more about it.

I managed to get the preparations done for the night's performance, and I sat alone in the dollhouse room while she met customers. I watched out the window for the old woman, who had come two of the three nights I had been there. She always said the same things, and she always wandered away before Saoirse came back. Saoirse refused to talk about her.

That's the only thing that bothered me about her in those first few days. Saoirse was lovely and kind and we sat up til late talking every night. But I realized the second night that we only talked about me. She wanted to know all about Ma, all about them others, and all about the shop and the back room. She even wanted to talk about Father Froud and the little rosary I kept hidden under my shirt. But she never talked about herself.

It wasn't obvious. She never said "I won't tell you that" or "Don't ask me that." But if I did ask about her family, or how she came to be in Dr. DeQuincey's Unseelie Court, we always ended up talking about something else. I don't know exactly how it happened, but a few minutes

later I'd realize she had turned the talk away from her and onto me or the house or the doctor. It didn't take long until all I wanted was to know everything there was to know about Saoirse.

When she came back in the room, I must have looked scared or alone or something. She looked at me, so strange and sad, and she held her hand out to me.

"Help me change," she said, "and then come with me." And I helped her change. And then she led me out the back door of the house into the yard.

Now you may not credit what I'm about to tell you. I seen the back yard of the house through the window, a couple of times, but I had never noticed anything special about it. There was a big black and white striped tent off to one side, about halfway down the fence, and I thought I had seen what looked like a little pond toward the back. But I had never been out there. And I had never seen it at night.

It was well after midnight when we stepped outside. I must have gasped when I saw it, because Saoirse smiled up at me, sort of smug. The whole yard was lit with these tiny little lights. I couldn't understand how they worked--they weren't gas, and there's no such thing as electric lights that small--and who has electric lights outside, anyway? They were strung along the pathway leading from the house, and I could see other paths, lit by the same lights, crossing and twisting away from me, running across each other in a patchwork, like stars in the sky. The big tent was there, still lit up and open even though as far as I knew all the customers had gone home. I didn't know what the other denizens did after the show. It looked like no one was in the whole big yard but me and Saorise. I admit I was a little afraid. I didn't know if Dr. DeQuincey would like Saoirse walking around outside of the house. But there's nothing I could do to stop her.

Saoirse led me away from the house and deeper into the back yard. There were other tents, smaller than the big one on the side, with odd little signs in front of them: "Thorns and Parchment" said one, and another was "New Blood for Old." And trees. There were more trees than I had ever seen outside of the park, some standing alone by the path and others in clusters so you had to walk beneath them. I didn't know trees, growing up in the city. I recognized a few oaks, they're so big. And the sycamores because they have them in the park. Soairse named others as we walked. Elm. Holly. Ash. Thorn. She picked a bluebell beside the path and when I bent to smell it she tucked it behind my ear.

Then she led me back through trees and past more tents, much further back than I thought the yard could go. The lights ran above us, trailing behind and running on before. I still couldn't understand them, but if I didn't look directly at them they seemed to move, like fireflies caught on a string. I thought it was my imagination.

We saw only one other living soul as we had walked, Talbot the butler, who had been coming out from the behind one of the tents carrying a big burlap rucksack over his shoulder. He had looked at us disapprovingly, or maybe that's just how Talbot always looks, and then had loped off toward the house. I had asked Saoirse if it was okay for us to be out here, and she had rolled her eyes.

"Talbot's not going to say anything," she said. "Or else I'll tell what he's doing out here in the dark." And she led me on.

We came eventually to the pond, though it looked larger than it did from the window. I tried to see the house, but it was cut off by a stand of trees we had passed through. Soairse stopped by the water's edge and stood with her hands in her pockets. She had let her hair down, and I remember how it shone in the twinkling lights, casting shadows over her face. I remember how

quiet it was. Even in a posh district away from the heart of the city, and even at night, there's usually some sort of noise--late night walkers or a buggy carrying some gambler home from the dicing halls. But out there, except for the occasional splash or ripple from the water, it was nearly completely silent.

I stepped towards the edge of the pond, I was going to try skimming a stone like Jack had taught me at the fountain in the park, but Saoirse touched my hand and I stopped.

"Don't go too close," she said.

"I'm not going in," I said, "and anyways I can swim." Which wasn't exactly true, I suppose, in that I can't. But she shook her head.

"There are other denizens beyond those who live in the house," she said. "Some are not as forgiving as Clutch." Her eyes were on the water.

"What is he?" I said. "I never saw anything like what he did today. That was no trick."

"There are no tricks, Ellen," she said, still looking at the water. "We are what we are."

"Faeries," I said. And she didn't answer me. The lights were moving above us, flickering like wings.

Saorise pointed and said, "Look." And I looked, and there seemed to be something moving in the water. A rolling wave, as if something much bigger than a fish had swum close to the surface without quite breaking through. "There's Jenny," said Saoirse. And I felt chills on my arms. The shape slid across the pond and sank, trailing bubbles.

I watched a minute longer, but the water was again smooth as glass. When I looked back at Saoirse, she wasn't watching the pond at all. She was looking at me. And that electricity I had felt before, well...



I should probably tell you about my friend Jack, Father. I'm not an innocent. I know Jack is sweet on me. And one time when we were hiding from a copper after Jack had pinched some bread from the market, squeezed down between two barrows in an alley, he had kissed me. It hadn't been anything to write home about, but it wasn't so bad that I minded. It became something I let him do every once in a while. To pass the time, like. But I never felt like, you know, like I just couldn't help myself. I never *had* to kiss him. I had read books where girls were overcome by passion or whatever, but that didn't seem like something I did. I always felt the Bronte sisters were exaggerating. I never got what the big deal was.

When I saw Saoirse looking at me in the flickering lights by the water, us alone under the trees, I didn't have a name for what I was feeling. I mean, I figured it out pretty quick. I'm not simple. But right then, right at the first, I just knew that I felt like something in me was reaching out to something in her, if you see what I mean. Like I had spent my life cut off from something I didn't know I was missing. Her lips parted, and when they did, mine parted too, like I was a mirror.

And then she said: "Ellen, I need your help."

I pulled back from her a little. I don't know why I had leaned so close. "Of course," I told her. "Anything you need. What can I do?"

She glanced over her shoulder, back toward the house. The night hung around us like a painting. Nothing moved. She said, "I need you to help me escape."

**[Theme music; end credits]**