

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 53: Due Process

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast, and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

The Rock: it is a place that has been the subject of speculation, of suspicion, of superstition, of reflection and reverence. Some folks say there is no rock, that the name is symbolic rather than topographic, a metaphor for the faith of a small and insular religious sect. Others insist that there is a rock, but that its location is a secret so closely guarded that the folks who live there will die — or kill — to protect it. A few more irreverent types even suggest it's little more than a dirty joke. They are all of them at least partially right — well, all but those last few, bless their hearts, although to be fair nobody outside the community centered around the Rock knows any of those folks well enough to say what passes for humor amongst them. For all we know, family, we may be missing out on the finest bawdy jokes the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has to offer.

The man known as Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise had always been a virtual connoisseur of this and all forms of humor. The question — what do the Men of the Rock find funny? — might even have motivated him to pay those folks a visit, once upon a time. But today was not that day. As a guard armed with a polished, heavy-looking baton directed him up a damp, narrow stone staircase that wound up through the earth — the young traveling companion who was still virtually a stranger supporting him on the slick steps with a gentle hand at his elbow — even Jack found the well of levity running just about dry.

He was tired and sore, his body taking a disconcertingly long time to heal from the wounds inflicted on him by that damned overfed deer, curse his eyes. What business did *he* even have with the Lockes, of all things? It was a question for another day, he supposed. He had more immediate and personal concerns to occupy his mind at the moment, such as what, precisely, the Rock really was — or who. The old fool who'd come to taunt him in his suffering had spoken of the Rock almost as if it were a person — and not some mysterious wizard in the sky, neither, but an actual, flesh-and-blood person with real power in the here and now.

He was about to find out that the Rock was all that and more.

[“The Land Unknown (The Bloody Roots Verses)” by Landon Blood]

*These old roots run
into a ground so bloody
Full of broken dreams and dusty bones
They feed a tree so dark and hungry
where its branches split and new blood flows
And the ghosts of a past you thought long-buried
rise to haunt the young
The shadow falls as judgment comes
Tread soft, my friend, amongst your fellows
Make your bond your word
Lest you get what you deserve*

The chamber they led him into was vast and very cold. Benches lined the walls in great arcing rows carved from the stone of the mountain and secured with finely worked wood rails and banisters. At the center of each section, there was a set of heavy double doors that led out into some place Jack could not see. These high seats apparently were for spectators and observers, as the floor of the cavern — which was similarly appointed with finely carved benches that spanned the width and breadth of the massive chamber — seemed reserved for the actual participants of whatever was about to happen here. Men in official-looking garb — white sashes embroidered in gold worn over the plain black suits common to the Men of the Rock — patrolled these lower rows, answering questions here, shushing voices speaking too loudly there.

The space was dominated by a towering slab of granite that thrust up from the center of the room, casting its shadow over the five women assembled before it upon a platform draped in dark velvet and decorated with a diorama of bushes and low trees. It was as if someone lifted a set-piece of a woodland scene from a play and dropped it into the audience of an opera house. Among these artificial flora had been placed ornately-carved chairs of heavy oak with high backs upon which the women were seated. The central figure wore a hooded cloak of snowy white velvet chased in the same intricate gold embroidery as the sashes of the men moving

amongst the crowd, and her chair had been set above the others, placed on a smaller platform that raised it another foot or so above the stone floor.

Between the dais and the gallery had been placed two small tables, each with a pair of chairs placed behind it facing the platform. To either side of these, a group of workers spread dark earth over the floor in a neat rectangular patch, lining the edges of it with a delicate white powder. Jack had no idea who or what was going to occupy those spaces, nor did he intend to be here to find out.

His eyes roamed over the arena of a room looking for any opening, any unattended portal that he might be able to slip through, but found nothing. His usual gift for finding ways in and out of places seemed to be blunted and dull. His head felt heavy and every time he tried to call upon the things that made him who and what he was, he felt like passing out. The rumors passed to him ages ago by witches in West Virginia returned to his mind: “a patch of land where all forms of divination, enchantment, binding, and other such gifts just fizzled, or flat out didn’t work.” So it was true. The Rock was just as the workers of the Green and the walkers of the Dark said it was, a place where all the magic and wonder of the unseen world did not or could not answer the call of those who were gifted with their use.

Still holding out hope he could find some means of secret egress, Jack turned his gaze skyward. He found that up was often a good choice of direction, particularly when one wished to avoid notice, because nobody ever looks up. Above him, he found immense beams of oiled wood lining the stone ceiling overhead, each one intricately carved with sigils and symbols that Jack did not recognize. The beams had clearly been placed there to provide stability to the cavern. But the sigils... those he didn’t recognize, and dang it, that should be impossible. He was Jack. He’d been over every inch of this sorry world. He could speak any language, read any word laid down by hand, crack any cipher. And yet here were slabs of good oak and pine covered in symbols that Jack could not fathom. His mind reeled at the implications. He could sense there was power in the intricate tracings, but it was not a power he knew.

“Goodman Fields,” boomed a voice behind him, and Jack flinched in spite of himself.

He turned to find an older woman with tidy, close-cropped steel gray hair peering at him through tiny gold spectacles. She wore a sash similar to that of the men over a plain, ankle-length black dress with tiny buttons running from its high collar to the waist, and carried a polished wooden staff carved of gleaming white holly.

“Uh... yes, ma'am?” he responded politely.

“I am the bailiff,” she explained. “Come. You will sit there.” She gestured him forward to one of the tables facing the dais. Jack noticed that, in spite of the size of the space and its smooth stone walls and floors, her voice — though loud when she first spoke to him — had not echoed. It was almost as though the cavern had been treated for acoustics, like in the recording studio he'd visited when that Cash boy come to Paradise. He supposed that could be one function of the unknown symbols carved into the beams overhead.

Jack lowered himself gingerly into one of the chairs, and Rachel moved to take the seat beside him.

“No, girl,” the woman said. “This is no place for you.”

RACHEL: But he needs me!

Rachel protested.

RACHEL: He's not well!

“In all fairness, I could use her assistance,” Jack admitted.

The bailiff sighed, impatience writ clear on her face. “One moment,” she said grudgingly, and stepped toward the dais, leaning forward to speak quietly to the woman in the center, who nodded and whispered back. The bailiff turned sharply on one heel and addressed the room at large. “The accused's companion will be permitted to stay, provided she remains silent.”

RACHEL: Thank y— *[choking sounds]*

At the sound of Rachel's voice, the woman in the white cloak raised her left hand and snapped her fingers. The girl's words died on her lips, and she sputtered, coughing and choking as her throat closed and her breath caught. Jack lunged for her, patting her back as she wheezed, slowly refilling her lungs. Glaring, he turned back to the bailiff and the women assembled before the massive stone.

"There's no call for that! What's this all about?" he demanded.

The bailiff pounded her staff on the ground. "The accused will also hold his tongue until he is spoken to," she intoned, once again to the chamber itself. She didn't so much as spare him a glance. "Or he too will be silenced."

Jack began to open his mouth again, but Rachel squeezed his hand. When he met her eyes, she shook her head and smiled encouragingly. Slowly and clearly, she mouthed silently, *I'm ok*.

"You sure?" Jack whispered, glancing up at the bailiff again, anger clear in his eyes. But Rachel nodded vigorously and patted his hand, repeating her pantomime: *I'm ok*.

Jack returned the nod, clearly unhappy about it, as he eyed the crowd still filing into the chamber. Jack saw many faces he recognized, others not so much, but all eyes searched him out as they shuffled to their seats.

There were many representatives of powerful witching families from all across Appalachia — Glory Ann Boggs' grandchildren, the Hubbard girl and that ungifted lout of a cousin of hers, Jack noted sourly. A pair of middle-aged Sargent women bent their heads together to gossip just a few rows from them. Old Ambrose Hurley was clearly bending the ear of Emory Ellison, a talented young transplant from up north. A sullen looking group of young witches Jack had never seen before stood with a skinny boy in glasses. They all had that lean, hungry look Jack recognized in those just getting their first taste of a gift. Was the boy carrying a banjo case? Had they hired a band?

There were also several empty seats marked off with white ribbons, the words “RESERVED FOR WITNESS” stenciled neatly onto white cards that hung from each one. Folk had come from far and wide for whatever was set to happen here, and the Men of the Rock seemed determined that all would have their say.

If the power of the Green was on full display, the Inner Dark was not to be outdone. Men in suits as black as a moonless night hovered around a short, thick man in a long white coat with a neat, frost-white beard trimmed to a sharp point. His bright emerald eyes scanned the crowd before coming to rest on Jack. He smiled and mimed finger guns at him before his eyes returned to their perusal of the crowd, as if to say, “Wait til my friends get a load of you! You stay right there, Jackie boy.” Jack didn’t recognize the man, but he was more than familiar with Locke Rail’s security detail. Could this be Nathaniel Locke’s successor? Huh. He couldn’t know. On the other side of the gallery, occupying a front-row seat, Pretty Polly Barrow sat flanked by her two closest associates, Churchman and Crain. She acknowledged him with a smirk and a little wave.

Jack turned from the representatives of B&L when a flutter of sudden movement distracted him. His eyes began to water as the scent of rancid meat and burned flesh filled the air. Blood began to well from the patch of earth nearest the table where he sat, creating a mud puddle of foul-smelling sludge that began to slowly roil. Hideous creatures began to claw their way to the surface as if the floor opened into quicksand instead of a solid sheet of stone. From this miniature swamp slowly rose three monstrosities whose true forms had struck madness and fear into the hearts of men for generations. All eyes and teeth and crusted talons, they screeched and writhed, the bloody clay slicking their bodies like some unholy caul until their forms solidified and the cocoon of ichor fell away, revealing three beautiful women of varying heights and ages, all dressed in gray: The First, the Second and The Last.

Behind them, something immense loomed, blood and earth gliding smoothly from its animal shape. Its glowing antlers cast a poisonous amber glow over the three women. The Thing Whose Name Sounded Like Hornèd Head But Was Not settled back on its haunches as if to take a pleasant little nap as the floor re-solidified beneath its form and its daughters lounged about like adoring children at a picnic. Eyes the color of blood pulsed with a fel glow as it stared out at the crowd, who for their part acknowledged the dramatic display for a moment and then resumed their conversations as if this was nothing much out of the ordinary.

“Showy bastard,” muttered a young man in a hooded cloak, his ill-fitting face deep in shadow as his hands twitched toward the hunting knife at his belt. “Always has to make an entrance.”

“Mmhmm,” agreed the disembodied pair of green eyes floating within a patch of dark haze beside him. “To be fair, if I got a new body like that, I’d want to show it off too,” Old Green Eyes said with a grim chuckle.

“Well shit, Greenie,” the man in the cloak grated. “I get new faces all the time, and you don’t see me rising up out of the floor like Lucifer on corn night.”

The two locked eyes for a tense moment and then broke into a low, companionable fit of quiet laughter, like two boys making jokes about the pastor’s haircut in the back of Sunday service.

There were other witches and h’aunts and even regular folk gathered about the gallery, all who had their own Jack tales to tell, and none of them were likely to be flattering. Jack almost chuckled out loud. Who would have ever dreamed that he would bring all these poor suckers together under one roof? This was the social event of the year — hell, maybe the century.

A booming beat suddenly filled the room as the bailiff struck her staff against the floor in an official-sounding cadence — a sound, Jack noticed, that bounced off the walls and resonated through the chamber in a way quite unlike their voices.

“Oyez! Oyez!” the older woman called, her voice also carrying as one would expect in a chamber such as this. Jack glanced up at the beams overhead again and nodded, his suspicions about their relationship to the sound of the room growing ever more certain. “So opens the Tribunal of the Rock, may her justice and mercy see us all through another day. The Rock provides.”

“The Rock provides,” the local citizenry echoed automatically.

“We have assembled here to render judgment on the one who calls himself J.T. Fields, of the city of Paradise, but is more widely known as Jack. Goodman Fields is well known as a thief and a liar and a killer when it suits his purpose. His acts of treachery are without number, and neither

the Green nor the Inner Dark can lay claim to him. His inconstancy upsets the balance of our world. He is a sower of chaos and a disturber of the peace. Those who have been summoned to this proceeding are called upon to bear witness to his acts. Speak the truth of him as you know it, for good or for ill, so that the council may decide his fate.” The bailiff half-turned toward the group of women assembled on the dais. “The full council is present and accounted for. The Harbinger herself oversees these proceedings.”

She bowed her head respectfully, and the woman in the white cloak dipped her head to the bailiff in acknowledgment, then waved her hand in a gesture that invited her to proceed.

The bailiff turned back to the assembled onlookers. “Who will represent the Green in these matters?” she intoned.

A scrawny beanpole of a man, near six foot five, all knees and elbows, rose to his feet somewhere in the third row, removing his hat. “I will,” he said. “Hiram Cook, ma’am, of Mavisdale, Virginia. I’ve been asked to stand up for the Green by the folks who serve it and those who’ve been terrorized by this menace.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. The Cooks were the sort of folks who sold moonshine out the back of their papaw’s old Ford on Saturday nights then sat next to you in church, wringing their hands about the sinful ways of the big city corrupting the youth. They had been furious when Jack’s application for a proper distilling license had been approved after the repeal of prohibition, and he had been forced to put an end to his association with their unlicensed endeavors. They were also a family of busybodies whose inability to mind their own damn business had never endeared them to their neighbors, be they of the Green or the Dark. Jack had to wonder just whose palms they had greased and with what to put ole Hiram forward.

Apparently he was not alone in this opinion. From somewhere up near the rafters, another man shouted, “Your girlfriend was terrorizing half of Hazel County ‘fore you locked her up in the cellar, Hiram Cook! Who said you could speak for us?”

“There was a vote, Virgil Gentry, and you know it!” Hiram snapped, glaring up at him. “Just because you—”

The bailiff pounded her staff against the stones beneath her feet again. “Silence in the gallery, or you will *be* silenced!”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am,” Hiram Cook said contritely. The bailiff motioned toward the table across from Jack and Rachel with a pointed gesture of her staff, and he hustled forward to take his seat.

“Thank you, Goodman Cook,” the bailiff said. “Who will speak in the interest of the Dark?”

The crowd of onlookers parted like the sea before a tall, statuesque woman dressed in a beaded dove gray dress and gray leather t-strap heels that looked costly. Her skin was bloodless, her silver and iron curls trimmed in a neat, modern cut, her eyes like mercury. “I will,” she answered simply.

The bailiff tapped her staff on the ground again as hushed whispers swept through the rows of benches, and the gallery quieted. “We’ll need a name, Goodwoman. For the record.”

The gray lady smiled. “For those among you who know my family —” the lovely woman gestured to the tableau made by the black stag and his three attendants “— I am the Third. As for the rest of you, you may call me Miss Gray.”

From the corner of his eye, Jack noticed a dark mass floating over to whisper to the grandmotherly-looking woman who sat knitting at the stag’s right hand. “I thought that was you,” Old Green Eyes whispered. All three gray ladies tittered.

“Oh no,” said the first. “She—”

“— is the Last,” explained the second.

The eldest cackled. “I was once the third, and then the second. But I will always be the Last.”

The bailiff glanced their way with a warning expression in her eyes, and all four fell silent, Old Green Eyes drifting back to his place by Tom. Unperturbed, Miss Gray stepped forward to take her seat at the table opposite Jack, acknowledging Hiram with a nod as she dropped into the chair next to him.

“The balance is so ensured,” the bailiff announced. “Both the Green and the Dark have chosen their speakers.” She turned back to face the five women seated on the dais — the council, Jack surmised. “If it please the Rock, the speakers may summon their first—”

“Excuse me!” an unfamiliar, feminine voice rang out from the back of the room.

Jack and Rachel both turned to watch as a wave of disgruntled muttering swept through the mob of late arrivals crowded at the back of the room, forced to stand once the benches had been filled. A pair of women were shouldering their way through their ranks, hastily murmuring “excuse me” and “beg your pardon” as they forced their way to the front. The older of the two walked with a slight limp, leaning on a sturdy oak walking stick, her long hair secured at the back of her head in two thick braids. She walked with no less confidence than she ever did, limp or no limp, her broad shoulders moving those in her way to one side as she came to stand, clad in a crisp men’s dress shirt and string tie and — scandalously — a pair of well made denim trousers and hunting boots.

The younger wore a fashionably cut skirt and vest of cobalt blue over a white silk blouse with a velvet ribbon tie, her heavy red hair pinned up neatly beneath a gray hat trimmed in vibrant blue feathers. It was she who spoke as they emerged from the crowd and approached the bailiff. “Excuse me. But who will speak for the accused?”

The bailiff regarded her with an expression that was a mix of bewilderment and outrage that was almost funny. *Not used to having your little kangaroo court disrupted, are ye?* Jack thought with amusement.

Before the bailiff could answer, Hiram Cook turned to the older of the two women and snapped, “Marcie Walker, you have not been called upon to speak yet!” He regarded the redhead with a scowl. “As for you, miss, nobody asked for you.”

The young woman grinned. “No you didn’t, Hiram, and that tells me pretty much all I need to know about these proceedings.”

Hiram sputtered, and the whispers circulating through the gallery grew in volume until the bailiff banged her staff on the floor again, hollering for order. As the onlookers quieted, she fixed her gaze on the woman in blue and said stiffly, “You were not summoned. Explain your presence here.”

The redhead favored her with a brief smile before her gaze settled unflinchingly upon the woman in the white cloak seated upon the dais. Unlike most of the folks here, she didn’t appear the least bit intimidated by her. In fact, it almost seemed like she was having fun. Jack didn’t know her — though he suspected he knew well enough who she was — but he was starting to like this lady already as she addressed the woman in charge. “Well you see, Harbinger, in this ‘godless land’ as y’all like to call it, folks accused of a crime have the right to a defense. D.L. Walker, attorney at law. I’ve come to represent Mr. Fields.”

[“Atonement” by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well, hey there, family. Y’all didn’t think we were going to leave our man Jack out there on that chessboard as a piece all alone, do you, with all those kings and queens and bishops moving into position? Don’t think our man Jack’s going to get checkmated that quickly, so y’all have to come back next time and see what’s happening.

Speaking of things happening, lord knows we got enough happening here in the world of Old Gods of Appalachia. Over on Patreon right now, you have a completed, brand new story arc from the *Familiar and Beloved* series, “Return to Death Island.” That bad boy is done, all three pieces complete and waiting for you. And that’s in addition to the hours of other programming like *Build Mama a Coffin*, “Door Under the Floor,” *Black Mouth Dog*, “Steve Reads,” “Cam Reads,” and who knows, there might be some special stuff that you’re not expecting at all coming your way real soon. [Patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://www.patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia).

And if you want to keep up with our coming and going, you'll do well to complete your social media ritual and follow us on Instagram, even over on Facebook. Join us at the Facebook group if you're over a certain age, and you're always welcome to stand up on the bones of the thing that was Twitter and shout into the void with us over there as well. We're easy to find y'all, the Discord server's linked right off oldgodsofappalachia.com which is where you can find links to all of our social media platforms. We have so much coming for you this season, y'all, stories you're not expecting, and if you think we're staying in this courtroom the whole time when there are tales to tell, well, y'all got another thing coming.

And this is your every dang time reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and Steve Shell, was narrated by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music, "Atonement," is by Brother John Charles Dwyer. The voice of Rachel Harlow is Sarah Doreen MacPhee. The voice of D.L. Walker is now Cam Collins. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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