

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 4, Episode 52: The Men of the Rock

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

Somewhere Beneath the Mountains of Pennsylvania

1941

The man known to some folks as Mr. J.T. Fields of Paradise, but to one and all as simply Jack, lay shivering on a narrow, lumpy cot, in a dark place surrounded by walls of rough stone and damp earth. He strained his eyes, but could see nothing in the heavy gloom. From somewhere above, he could hear the faint dripping of water. His head ached. He felt feverish and thirsty. He thought at that moment he might murder a man for a cold drink — if he'd been in any shape for murdering, at any rate, which he clearly was not. Licking his dry lips, he called out.

JACK: Huh... Hello? Is there anybody there?

To his surprise, a familiar voice came to him through the darkness.

RACHEL: *[stage whisper]* SHHHH! They'll hear you!

Jack knew that voice. His faculties might be a bit muddled at the moment, but he had not laid so long in a stupor that he would forget the tones of his recent traveling companion.

JACK: Rachel? Is that you, girl?

RACHEL: Yes! Now hush! Just... just give me a minute here.

There followed a few moments of shuffling and clanking outside the door to his cell, followed by the bright, clear ringing of a bell. Then the massive iron slab began to creak and groan, and ever so slowly, scraping against the stone floor, it swung open. Jack winced and covered his eyes as the glow of a candle's flame pierced the darkness, searing his retinas and casting brightly

colored spots over his field of vision. As his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, he could make out the shining eyes and thin frame of the girl who called herself Rachel Harlow. Jack opened his mouth to speak, but she pressed her lips together and shook her head fiercely, and he subsided, content to wait and watch.

She wore a simple, shapeless homespun garment that fell to her ankles, the hem damp and blackened with the grime that coated the stones down here, and carried under one arm a heavy basket, which she settled on the floor next to the candle. Catching Jack's eye and holding a finger to her lips to forestall any comment, she stepped back outside the door for a moment, and returned lugging a heavy bucket that sloshed as she set it down next to the basket and knelt at his side. As Jack watched, she began humming — softly, but louder than he would have expected — as she pulled clean rags and a bar of soap and whatnot from the basket. She dropped the bar of soap into the bucket with a splash and a thump, then dipped a washcloth into the bucket and held it high as she wrung it out, so the drops splashed back into the water. The volume of the old folksong she hummed rose as she shuffled about, making a hell of a racket for the task at hand. Finally she paused, raising a hand to quiet him, her ear cocked toward the door, listening. After a moment, she relaxed.

RACHEL: *[softly]* All right, sorry about that. Folks around this place got big ears, if you catch my meaning, and I thought you might want to talk in private before they find out you're awake.

Jack licked his dry, cracked lips and opened his mouth to speak, but his words drowned in a phlegmy cough. Rachel pulled an ancient looking mug from the basket and scooped some water into it from the bucket.

RACHEL: It's clean,

she assured him as she pressed the cup to his lips. Jack drank greedily, his throat working as he drained the cup dry. He gave another dry cough and tried again.

JACK: Thank you, young'un. Do you... did they give you the key to this godforsaken place? Can we—

RACHEL: *[sighs]* No. I don't have no key. They got some kinda mechanism that opens your door when I ring the bell outside. They been letting me look after you — and I got a little more freedom to walk around than you — but not much.

Rachel stuck one foot out from beneath the folds of the shift she wore and gave it a little jiggle. Jack heard the unmistakable clank of some sort of leg iron. Jesus, did they have that poor girl fitted with an honest-to-god ball and chain? Jack peered down at the girl's ankle, and she lifted the candlestick to give him better light. Sure enough, a heavy iron ball was attached by a chain to a metal cuff clamped around her skinny leg. Even in the dim light, he could see the scrapes where it wore against her skin.

JACK: How long have we been here?

RACHEL: It's hard to tell the days down here — they don't let me go up top; they keep us both underground like it's some dungeon in a fairy story. But near as I can reckon... 'bout a month?

JACK: That seems about right. Are you all right, girl? Have they hurt you?

Rachel shook her head.

RACHEL: I mean, they ain't exactly been friendly — whole lotta muttering under their breath about “thou shalt not suffer witch to live” and all, but I've heard that sort of bullshit my whole life. They don't scare me.

JACK: Well, they should. They take that bullshit a lot more serious than anybody you ever met. Don't you doubt it for a second.

RACHEL: Who *are* they? And what the hell do they want with us?

JACK: Well, right about now I can think of a mighty long list of things I'd like to call them. High and mighty dirt worshippers; stiff necked, self righteous buggy-riders; and if I were feeling more of myself, I might get right creative in the questioning of the virtue and perhaps species of their collective parentage, but they call themselves the Men of the Rock.

[“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 Men of the Rock made their home somewhere in Pennsylvania. They were a reclusive lot — so much so that nobody outside their community knew for certain precisely where they made their home — but that much, at least, most folks agreed on. They were, to all outward appearances, a highly structured congregation of one flavor of patriarchal god-botherers or another — a deduction most folks made based on their old-timey fashion sense, disdain for modern conveniences such as the automobile and telephone, and the fact that nobody had ever laid eyes on one of their womenfolk. When questioned on this point — either by concerned members of one of the nearby Ladies Auxiliaries or nosy men of the law — the Men of the Rock would reply placidly that women in their community dedicated their days to study and quiet contemplation of scripture rather than risk the dangers found on the roads of this godless land.

These sentiments were met with many an “Amen, brother,” from the men they encountered out in the world, who assumed that “study and contemplation” consisted primarily of the rearing of children, cooking, cleaning, and otherwise looking after their husbands. As Jack understood it, they could not have been more wrong.

The man who currently styled himself J.T. Fields of Paradise had not, in point of fact, had many dealings with the isolated community its residents called the Rock. Folks who lived under such rigid strictures as theirs didn’t often seek out a man of his talents and resources. Circumstances at the Rock had been truly desperate on the rare occasion they had sought him out — an

outbreak of influenza about a decade back, yellow fever some long time before that. At that last meeting, Jack had suggested they might benefit from adding a doctor to their community, a recommendation met with stony, offended silence.

“Of course,” Jack had conceded, smoothly moving the conversation past this awkward moment, “it’s not my place to tell you folks how to run your town.”

“The Rock provides,” had been their only answer. There had been a lot of these sorts of sentiments expressed in the limited contact Jack had with them. The Rock provides. The Rock sees all. The Rock smiles on us. And so forth. It was unclear whether this rock of theirs was a feature of the topography or a religious designation of some kind. It was this question more than anything that had piqued Jack’s curiosity. As he had gathered snippets of information here and there — from snatches of conversation during unguarded moments overheard by his contacts, to the personal experiences of peddlers and other travelers confided over pours of his own special brew — he had come to believe that, to them, the Rock was all that and even more.

Most folks who encountered the Men of the Rock believed them to be some splinter sect that had originated in one of the larger Amish or Mennonite communities of the region. While there was some truth to that — their ranks did include folks who had once been part of those congregations — in point of fact, the town consisted largely of the rejects of society. Convicts and con men, fallen women and orphans and the legions of poor folks unhoused during the ravages of the Depression — the Rock welcomed them with open arms, just so long as they obeyed their laws and followed their customs.

Precisely what those customs were was a topic of some debate. The stories Jack heard were often conflicting, or so extraordinary they would try the imagination of even the most credulous listener. Rumors of both cannibalism and wine-soaked orgies abounded — each of which he dismissed out of hand as the products of xenophobia and wishful thinking, respectively. Jack was personally acquainted with how tales about folks can get all twisted up and stretched into new shapes that barely resemble the actual events. He wanted to know more about these strangers and their ways, so some years ago *he* had decided to seek *them* out. It had been long enough that most of those who’d had dealings with him personally should have shuffled off this old mortal coil so he didn’t anticipate running into any old acquaintances.

He'd begun to ask questions amongst his more specialized clientele. A couple of witches over on the West Virginia side of things had heard rumors of a patch of land where all forms of divination, enchantment, binding, and other such gifts just fizzled, or flat out didn't work. Old Bloody-Under-The Bridge described a place where h'aunts and boogers like him couldn't roam without being picked off as easily as deer in season by the folks who homesteaded there. He'd barely gotten away himself, Bloody admitted. These tales intrigued Jack. The list of folks that would gladly claim his hide as a trophy was long, and such a parcel of land would be a real strategic spot to build himself a little safehouse. He'd just need to acquire that land.

Jack took the opportunity to put on a whole new face and voice and then traveled out to a little town he'd heard might be in the vicinity of the place he sought. After doing a little more investigating, he came upon a flyer advertising job openings for harvest laborers. Per the instructions on the posting, Jack turned up just before dawn the next day in the town square. Jack blended in with the small crowd of perhaps a dozen or so other applicants and waited. Before long, three big horse-drawn wagons rolled up, and the men were ushered into them.

Bags were placed over each man's head and cinched tight around their necks. Jack's senses were such that a blindfold wasn't usually much of an impediment. This time however, all of his perceptions were stricken as dark and quiet as the inside of the meal sack that had been thrown over his head. For the first time in a long time, Jack began to feel a little uneasy. He relied on his many gifts, particularly one that allowed him to examine a situation from every possible angle, and right then he couldn't see a damn thing. A trickle of sweat ran down his neck beneath the sack, and he began to fidget.

"Don't worry," murmured a man to his left, his voice muffled by his own hood. "They do this every time."

"They think we're gonna find our way back and steal their apple butter or something," a man to his right chuckled. "They feed us well and the pay's decent, so just sit tight, buddy. It'll all be fine so long as you come to work hard."

Jack smiled. This might be a little bit of a challenge. He loved a challenge.

When the wagon rolled to a stop, the group of laborers was directed to remove the bags from their heads. Upon following this instruction, Jack beheld one of the largest, loveliest, and most orderly farms he'd ever had the fortune to visit. Every field was sown in perfectly straight lines that positively burst with healthy crops. Harvest teams moved like well oiled machinery as they gathered and hauled fruits, vegetables, and grain of all sorts. Tall, sturdy barns and storehouses were laid out on a precise grid centered around a stout brick building that he heard one of the bearded men refer to as a "stonehaus."

When a woman with round, gold-framed spectacles perched on the end of her nose and a thick ledger in her arms approached Jack and asked his name and what kind of work he'd done before, Jack turned on the old charm. He put that special note in his voice that won over hearts and minds and usually helped him help himself to whatever he wanted from his newly won friends, be it the contents of their purse, pockets or pensions. He'd got his name and his hand out when two very large, very bearded men stepped up to flank the pretty supervisor he'd been chatting up and informed him that the name he had given was a lie. If he was not there to work, he was told, he was not welcome. Jack had reached again for the old razzle-dazzle, confessing with a sheepish grin that "Aw shucks, boys, you got me there." In point of fact, he was interested in buying some land, and it would be ever so helpful if they would be so kind as to introduce him to the head man.

The two men were neither razzled nor dazzled, but one of them had a mean left hook and the other knew how to swing a blackjack. A sharp crack to the back of the head, and it was lights out for Jack again. He had woken on a park bench in the town where the wagon had picked him up that morning. He spent the rest of the day trying to find his way back to that farm, but every attempt to find the beautiful farm led Jack right back to that park bench. At the end of the day, the only thing he had to show for his efforts was the knot on the back of his head. Jack might love a challenge, but he could also take a hint. He made a mental note to do a little more digging and moved on. But he had not forgotten the Men of the Rock, and clearly they had not forgotten him.

JACK: Most folks think they know 'em. They take one look at the horse and buggy and old-timey clothes and assume they belong to one bunch of holy rollers or another. That ain't it, though.

There's something else to 'em. I ain't quite put my finger on it yet. One thing I've been told by enough folks whose judgment and word I trust to believe it is this: they don't welcome your kind here, young'un. I'm pleased to see you're all right, kid, but if I'm honest, I'm kind of surprised.

RACHEL: *[amused]* My kind, huh?

JACK: Hear me and hear me well, Miss Rachel Harlow. The way I hear it, the Men of the Rock defer to women in just about all things, but you gotta understand — to them, you are not a woman. Not even a girl child. You're a witch. And for them—

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by a cacophonous boom, followed by the clanking of what sounded like heavy chains. There was a harsh grating, the grinding of stone against iron, and the clomp of thick-soled boots proceeding purposefully toward the door of Jack's cell. Rachel hastily pulled a clean rag from the basket she'd carried in with her and began to rebind his wounds. Behind her, the door scraped open a few more inches to reveal the scarred, craggy face of a stranger, illuminated by the flickering light of an oil lamp he clutched in one meaty fist. He looked like a hard man, and at one time he was. In some ways he still was.

Rachel squinted over her shoulder at this new arrival, her lips pursed in annoyance.

RACHEL: He's awake now — no thanks to y'all. I've been telling you, he needs a doctor. This looks infected, and I don't have the—

GOODMAN WINSTON: Well enough him you have made. The man Jack lives, and no longer slumbers. Up him make.

RACHEL: I'm telling you, he's not in the shape to—

GOODMAN WINSTON: Silent, witch, and do as you're bid!

the newcomer snapped.

GOODMAN WINSTON: Drag him I will if walk he cannot.

Jack raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture.

JACK: Now let's... let's all just calm down here. Give me a minute to get my bearings. Rachel, give me your arm. I'm sure I can stand. I just need a little help is all.

Rachel knelt down to loop one of Jack's arms over her narrow shoulders, and helped him rise as gently as she could. She made a show of the effort it took, but her grip was strong and her legs surprisingly steady. When Jack caught her eye, a fleeting smile crossed her lips — there and gone almost before he even registered it. Clever girl.

JACK: Now son, what's this all about?

Jack demanded once he'd gained his feet.

GOODMAN WINSTON: Your tongue shall you mind, trickster — your questions for those above should you save. Now, come.

JACK: Now hold on a minute! I believe you got us confused with somebody else. There's a lot of fellers out there who look like—

GOODMAN WINSTON: Split open your face I would, be I a younger man. Your black-tongued lies will naught but pain and sorrow bring you here.

JACK: All right, all right, no need to get hostile about it.

With Rachel's assistance, Jack began moving toward the cell door, but the guard suddenly barred their way.

GOODMAN WINSTON: Not for the likes of you is this. Back to your own cell, girl!

RACHEL: He can't! I tell you, he's not well!

JACK: It hurts my pride to admit, but the girl ain't wrong. I'm not sure I can make it all the way to... wherever you're taking me... on my own.

GOODMAN WINSTON: Fine, fine.

The guard sighed with a long-suffering attitude that made it clear he did not get paid enough to argue with them. He waved them toward the cell door with one meaty arm, the opposite rising above their heads to light the way with his lantern.

GOODMAN WINSTON: Through yon door, and up yon stairs. And on your own heads be Her displeasure.

["Atonement" by Jon Charles Dwyer]

Well hey there, family. Looks like our boy Jack has gotten himself into maybe the stickiest situation he's ever been stuck in. What do you think waits for our boy at the top of them stairs there? I guess you'll have to join us next time and find out, won't you? Will you come back, family? I think you might.

We want to thank everybody who's come along for the ride here in season four. Had no idea we'd come this far. Had no idea so many of y'all would want to tag along, and we appreciate each and every one of you. If you want to keep up with our comings and goings, you want to head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and follow us on all the appropriate social media platforms. Complete that social media ritual, y'all, it's the best way to know when we're going to be in your town with a live show or when the next Patreon episode is going to drop.

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This is your every-so-often 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. Our intro music is by Brother Landon Blood and our outro music, "Atonement," is by Jon Charles Dwyer. The voice of Rachel Harlow is Sarah Doreen MacPhee. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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