

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 41: Return to Paradise

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 Land Unknown (The Pound of Flesh Verses)” by Landon Blood]

*These old hills call
For the blood of my body
A pound of flesh for a ton of coal
So down I go
Into a dark hell waiting
Where lungs turn black and hearts grow cold*

*And I'll take to the hills and run from the devil
Into the dying sun
Something wicked my way comes
And tread soft, my friend, into these shadows
Where the old ones roam
For in these hills we die alone*

Paradise, VA

1935

Tommy Adkins pulled the beat-up old Model T that had once belonged to his Papaw around the back of the nondescript building near the train station where his part time employer, Mr. J.T. Fields, had recently established a business that for eighteen long years had been illegal in the commonwealth, Virginia having enacted prohibition four years before the nation. Though the ratification of the 21st amendment brought everyone a bit of holiday cheer in late 1933, her legislators had taken another six months to return liquor to her citizens, via the establishment of the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control. Mr. Fields had applied for and been granted a distiller's license in the summer of 1934, and quietly opened his bottling operation. A number of

the good Baptist citizens of Paradise were still vocally — and loudly — opposed to the sale and consumption of hard liquor, the opinions of their fellow voters be damned. It never failed to amuse Tommy how many of those same folk had come knocking at Mr. Fields' back door over the years, looking to buy a bottle of Jack's Special Brew while it was still being discreetly distilled in the basement of his old office on the Tennessee side of town.

Part of the work Tommy did for Jack was delivering bottles of that now-legal spirit to state-run liquor stores around the region — once it had been duly inspected by the agents of the ABC board, of course. He typically made these deliveries on Monday evenings, after he'd finished his shift at the Paradise offices of Barrow & Locke, where he worked as a personal assistant to Nathaniel Locke, heir apparent to the Locke half of that equation. This was not a Monday evening. Tonight, Tommy had come round to Jack's office on other business — that of spy and informant, a service he'd provided Jack for seven long years now.

Reluctant as Tommy had been to take up that unwelcome role — and little as he still liked working for the man at the helm of Locke Rail — it had turned out to be a stroke of luck for the Adkins family. The stock market crash of '29 had cost a lot of folks their jobs, and even B&L had not been immune to the cascading economic woes that had ground business nearly to a halt for many of the industries whose wares Locke Rail transported around the country. But a man of Mr. Locke's status certainly couldn't be expected to answer his own phones and keep his own calendar, and thus, Tommy Adkins retained his position.

The coal industry was hit especially hard by the country's hardships, as demand for those precious black diamonds plummeted. Many mines laid folks off, or split the work between men so nobody got a full week's pay. The mine where Boyd Adkins worked shut down completely. Tommy's Daddy and his brothers managed to carve out a little doghole mine on the back side of the family property, where they scratched out just about enough coal to keep warm in the winter. Usually. With the help of Tommy's old friend Greenie, Emma Boyd had doubled up her efforts on the family's small farm to keep food on the table, but the drought of the following year all but destroyed her crops.

The work Tommy did for both Mr. Locke and Jack had allowed him to provide for his family. His Daddy was too proud to accept charity, but Tommy's mama was a practical woman with kids to

feed, and she never let pride interfere with that priority. So each time he visited, after he'd accepted Boyd's polite but firm refusal, Tommy would quietly tuck an envelope filled with as much cash as he could spare into his mama's apron pocket as he kissed her cheek on the front porch step. It wasn't much, but it had kept the wolves from their door.

Tommy parked the Model T next to Jack's shiny new Buick, and walked around the side of the building to Jack's private office entrance. He rapped three times to announce his presence, and then opened the door and poked his head in. Mr. J.T. Fields was situated in a plush leather chair behind a heavy oak desk, a sheaf of invoices awaiting his signature laid out before him, a glass of his own Special Brew at his elbow. His office was relatively modest, appointed with furnishings that were not new, though comfortable and of fine quality. A carved mantle on the wall behind him took pride of place — it all but glowed with polish, and depicted creatures out of myth frolicking amidst a wooded backdrop. Atop this centerpiece sat a number of knick knacks and curios that Jack had collected over time. A stoppered glass bottle filled with delicate bones, bleached bright white, that one might mistake for finger bones, were they shorter and less jointed. A shadow box in which was pinned and preserved a large and beautiful moth with delicate, iridescent wings whose color seemed impossible to pin down with the naked eye. One minute it appeared a vibrant green, the next a radiant fuschia, shifting to inky black. It was of no species Tommy had ever found described in any entomologist's guidebook. There were aged photos featuring men who bore a striking resemblance to Jack — surely a grandfather or great grandfather. The most recent addition was a set of decorative combs, carved from some sort of animal bone, that Jack had been pleased to receive in the mail some years back.

Jack glanced up from his work as Tommy stepped inside. "Tommy! Come in, boy. Have a seat. I'll be with you shortly," Jack gestured to a slightly less cushy chair upholstered in matching, deep brown leather, across the desk from his own. "I've got the papers for you there on the corner of the desk, if you want to give them a look."

Jack had been procuring newspapers and industry magazines from Los Angeles for Tommy for the last few years. In the winter of 1928, his sweetheart, Ginny Estep, had gone west to seek her fortune in Hollywood, where Jack had helped her find a position in the secretarial pool at a movie studio. It had taken a few years of seemingly endless casting calls and walk-on roles that didn't amount to much, but in 1932, Ginny finally caught her big break. She'd landed a small part

in a musical, and while the role did not rocket her to stardom, her talent was noticed. Ginny had been signed to a contract with Frontier Productions, and finally began working her way up the ladder.

And it had been work. Acting lessons and dance rehearsals and sessions with a voice coach — Ginny's dream was to land a starring role that gave her a solo. She was constantly preparing for one audition or another. It seemed she barely had time to sleep, and her letters slowed to a trickle, albeit an affectionate one. Thus, they had established a routine phone call on Sunday evenings — the only time Ginny ever seemed to have free. She often sounded tired — though excited for whatever latest opportunity presented itself, and determined to leap the next hurdle in her path — and Tommy worried for her, but ultimately her efforts paid off.

Ginny's mentions in the papers moved beyond a mere “bridesmaid #3 will be played by Miss Virginia Estep” or “the part of dress shop clerk was awarded to Virginia Estep” to heftier roles playing characters with actual names and more than a handful of lines. Gradually, the critics began to notice, and her performances received warm reviews. Tommy's heart nearly burst with pride to read his sweetheart described as “an emerging talent Hollywood would do well to take note of.”

Hollywood did take note — and not entirely in ways that either Tommy or Ginny were happy with. One day, as Tommy scanned the latest round of Hollywood papers for some mention of “the radiant Miss Estep,” he stumbled upon a photo of Ginny on the arm of a handsome actor — another rising talent Tommy recognized from other Frontier films. The two posed, smiling, outside the premier of Ginny's latest film, Ginny decked in a diamond necklace and a mink stole, her companion in a sleek tuxedo.

Numb with shock, Tommy had simply stared at the photo until Jack took note of his expression.

“Something wrong, son?” Jack had asked, and Tommy mutely handed him the newspaper, folded open to the short piece about Ginny's upcoming movie.

Jack eyed the photo and shook his head. “Now, Tommy, I get why you’re upset, but this may not be what it looks like. You gotta understand how Hollywood works, son — it’s all about appearances, understand?”

“Oh, I see how it *appears*, all right.”

“No, you don’t. It’s like...” Jack cast about for an example, and seized quickly on an apt comparison. “You know how you go to some weddings, they have the groomsmen walk the bridesmaids down the aisle?”

Tommy frowned, not quite understanding, but nodded.

“It’s just like that, son. It don’t *mean* nothing — those folks aren’t courting or anything. The groomsmen are just doing the gentlemanly thing of escorting the ladies down the aisle to take their places up front. They do that sort of thing out in Hollywood — how does it look if they send one of their young ingenues out on the town alone? People talk. So they pair her up with another actor who works for the same studio to escort her to this and that event. Helps keep a lid on the gossip — or if nothing else, generates the sort of gossip the studios can control,” Jack explained.

“I don’t know,” Tommy said doubtfully, gazing back down at the incriminating photograph. “How do you know all this?”

“I told you I spent some time out there,” Jack said with a shrug. “Trust me, it’s probably nothing to worry about. What you need to do is talk to your girl. Get Ginny on the phone, and ask her about it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Tommy agreed. “I should at least give her a chance to explain herself.”

“Now don’t run home and call her with a bunch of accusations while you’re all hot,” Jack admonished. “Give it some time, think about what I said. Then when you calm down, dial her up and have a conversation.”

It was good advice, and Tommy saw the wisdom in heeding it. So he had resisted the urge to phone Ginny immediately and demand an explanation. Instead, he'd waited for their usual Sunday evening call. As they chatted about their week's activities, Tommy raised the topic of Ginny's new movie.

"So how did the premier go? I saw your picture in the papers, with that actor fella."

Ginny was quiet for a moment. She knew him too well, and wasn't fooled by his attempt to circumnavigate the question. "That's Roger Holland," she explained hesitantly. "He plays the lead in the movie we're shooting now. It's a romantic comedy, and the studio..." Ginny sighed. "The studio wants us to be seen together to help sell the picture. They've set up some 'dates' for us, which will conveniently be leaked to the press. They'll show up, take some photos, and speculate about our 'relationship.' But it's all for show."

"Is it?" Tommy couldn't hide the bitter edge in his voice.

"Of course it is," Ginny chided him. "Tommy, you know you're the only one for me. And Roger Holland knows that too. I made it very clear to him that I'm spoken for, although honestly I... well, I get the feeling he doesn't *like* girls, in that way. I think that's part of why Frontier wants to make such a public spectacle of things. They can't let that sort of talk get around, you know?"

Tommy chewed his lip thoughtfully. That did make sense, and it certainly squared with the picture Jack had painted for him. "You sure there's nothing... between you and this fella?" he asked finally.

"I promise," Ginny said gently. "I love you, Tommy. And I wish *you* could be here to take me all around to these silly parties."

"Soon, Ginny," Tommy had told her. "I'll be with you soon." But of course, he'd been making that promise for years, hadn't he? That was part of the problem. He could hardly blame her if she found someone else, after all this time. All these years he'd spent working towards what he hoped would be some sort of future with Ginny, but he'd come no closer to that goal than the day he'd put her on the train. Would Jack ever consider his debt paid? Would he even be *allowed*

to leave Barrow & Locke? The darkness he'd sensed swirling around Nathaniel Locke had only grown stronger over the years. Folks who disappointed the man had an unsettling habit of getting into accidents... or just disappearing altogether.

The conversation had turned to other, more pleasant topics, but Tommy couldn't entirely dismiss the nagging worry that, sooner or later, Ginny Estep would grow tired of waiting for him. He'd never grown used to seeing her on the arm of this actor or that director, much less reading the romantic speculations of gossip columnists. It seemed every time a new part came along, Ginny was linked in the papers with someone new. But the studio often came back to Roger Holland. Ginny insisted they were merely friends and colleagues, and Tommy trusted her... but the stories ate at him all the same.

As he sat waiting for Jack on this particular evening in 1935, Tommy flipped through the latest delivery of newspapers and industry magazines, idly scanning for some mention of Ginny. There was a brief note about a new part she'd just landed in a spy thriller, replacing another actress who'd been injured shortly before shooting began. It was a more serious, dramatic turn than most of Ginny's roles so far, and Tommy knew she was both excited and a little nervous, as the film's director was known to be demanding.

Tommy turned the page, and his attention was immediately drawn to a photo of Ginny in the upper right corner, above the bold heading:

Wedding bells for Holland and Estep?

Rumors have swirled around the on again, off again romance of Tinseltown's most eligible bachelor, Roger Holland, and bright young newcomer Virginia Estep. Sources inside Frontier Productions say the pair are ready to make things official. Holland has recently been spotted visiting jewelers, and a little bird tells this reporter that Elsa Schiaparelli has been commissioned by the studio to design a wedding dress. Frontier's press secretary declined to comment at this time.

Jack Fields finally put his signature to the last invoice on his desk, pushed the sheaf of papers aside, and leaned back in his chair, reaching for the glass of his very own whiskey resting on the

corner of the desk. “Well, Tommy, what do you got for—” He broke off mid-sentence as he took in the look of shock painted on the Adkins boy’s face. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Tommy silently passed the magazine he held across the desk. Jack could hardly miss the headline that had caught the kid’s attention. For all he had learned about the games these Hollywood folks liked to play during his time out west, even Jack was a bit taken aback. He took a moment to skim the brief paragraph, and cleared his throat. “The last time we discussed this, I know I advised you to take a moment before you spoke to Miss Ginny. But in this case, I’d suggest you call her right now, son. Here. You can use my phone. I’ll step outside.”

Tommy picked up the heavy receiver with numb fingers, and asked the operator to connect him to Ginny’s line. He was somewhat surprised to find she was at home — it was still early on the west coast — but as soon as she heard his voice, Ginny burst into tears. As upset and hurt as he was, he couldn’t ignore the anguish in her voice, and he did his best to comfort her.

“You’ve seen the stories, haven’t you? Tommy, I... I want to tell you it’s not true, but it is! They really think they can make us get married,” Ginny wailed.

“Shh. Hush now,” Tommy crooned. “Just tell me what happened. Start at the beginning.”

There wasn’t much to tell. Ginny and her costar, Roger Holland, had recently filmed a comedic mystery in which they played a young couple on their honeymoon who discover a dead body, and hijinks ensue. Shooting had wrapped, and everyone was excited — the studio really thought they had a hit on their hands, and Ginny felt like the role would prove to be the next big stepping stone in her career. Then the president of Frontier Productions had called Ginny and Roger into his office to inform them that, in the leadup to the film’s release, their relationship should publicly mirror that of their characters, building excitement for a picture based on the perception of true romance — they would announce their engagement, and shortly before the film’s premier, they would wed.

It was an outrageous demand, and unsurprisingly, both Ginny and Roger had balked. Being seen attending awards ceremonies and dinners and parties was one thing, but surely the studio head didn’t think he could actually compel them to marry? But indeed he did. And he’d called one of

Frontier's legion of attorneys into the office to explain to them exactly what the studio could do to them if they refused. They could be fired. They could be blackballed. They might never find work in Hollywood again. The litany of threats went on and on.

"What are you going to do?" Tommy asked. "Are you really—"

"Of course I'm not!" Ginny's voice was infused with shock. "How can you even ask that? I can't marry a man because Frontier Productions says so. I... I only want to marry you, Tommy. Are you ever going to come out here?" The hopelessness in her voice tore at Tommy's heart, though he knew she had every right to it. What had he done to give her reason to believe in him? It had been seven long years. In that time, he'd only seen her at Christmas, when both their schedules allowed them to go home for the holidays to visit family.

"I am," Tommy said. "I promise you. I'll find a way. Just... just let me look into some things." Tommy didn't know what things he meant to look into as he set the receiver back in its cradle. The obstacles in their path seemed insurmountable. Frontier Productions controlled Ginny's life just as surely as Jack Fields and Nathaniel Locke controlled his, and none of those folks appeared too willing to let go of the stranglehold they had on either of their futures.

Jack Fields waited in the parking lot, leaning against the lamppost and sipping on the glass of fine spirits he had not neglected to carry with him as he'd stepped out back to give Tommy a little privacy for his telephone call. After a respectful time period had passed — and his glass had run dry — Jack poked his head back inside to see if the young'un had finished his call. When he spotted the phone resting silently on the corner of his desk, he stepped back into the office and settled back into his comfy chair. "Well?" he prompted, reaching for a second glass to pour them both a measure of Jack's Special Brew.

"It's true," Tommy said despondently. "The movie studio thinks it can force her to marry that fella. They threatened them both. Ginny..." He looked up and met Jack's eyes. "Ginny wants me to come to California. She says it's time we got married."

The being currently known as Mr. J.T. Fields did not often feel obligation, and even more rarely guilt. But as the boy stared into his eyes, he felt a growing sense of something he disliked even

more. Tommy Adkins had served him well and faithfully for far longer than Jack had led him to believe he would require. He had set aside his anger and his fear and accepted his role in Jack's world without complaint. He had done what was asked of him — and sometimes a great deal more — and had even become something of a friend to Jack, for whom true friends were few and far between. The debt Tommy owed him had been paid ten times over, and Jack found, to his immense discomfort, that he now felt *he* owed the boy.

And that would simply not do. Other people owed Jack. That was just the way his world worked, and he did not at all enjoy the sensation of finding that shoe on the other foot. The situation would have to be remedied.

“Well then,” he said matter-of-factly. “I suppose it's time we sent you on your way.”

Tommy blinked. “What? Just like that?”

“Tommy, you've done fine work for me. Great work. But one thing you'll learn as you grow older is that nothing lasts forever. To everything there is a season, etc. etc. It's time for you to spread your wings and fly across this great country to rescue Miss Ginny from the clutches of fate.”

“But what about...” Tommy lowered his voice. “What about Mr. Locke? I don't think he's going to be happy when I hand in my resignation. I don't know if you've noticed, but folks don't really seem to, um... retire from B&L.”

Jack leaned back and stroked his chin thoughtfully. “That is the question, ain't it?” he mused. It was an excellent question, and Jack felt sure he could find some answer to it that would benefit him just as much as it did Tommy. He just needed awhile to think on it. Tommy started to speak up, but Jack waved off any further questions. “Let me worry about the specifics. You just head on home, get some rest, and telephone Miss Ginny in the morning to tell her you'll be on your way as soon as it can be arranged.”

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Well, hey there, family. Welcome to Act III of Season 3 of Old Gods of Appalachia: As Above, So Below. And again we find ourselves keeping familiar company as the man they call J.T. Fields, or Jack or Jack of the Wood or Jack of the Green, or Jack of the Jack Tales is back with us, and we get to see where our own Mistress of the Cauldron Cam Collins takes that lovely young couple as Jack seeks to continue to lend them his own special kind of assistance. Are y'all worried about how this is gonna go? I'm not worried. No, I'm totally worried. Ain't gonna lie. Pray for them young'uns, y'all. Pray. For. Them. Young'uns.

Listen, we have so much exciting stuff planned for y'all in the very near future, from upcoming live shows, to special programming, to new characters and locations that are still coming in Season 3. And the best way to keep up with all that is to head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and complete your social media ritual by following us on the Twitter, Facebook and the Instagram. There's a link to the Discord server, if you feel like sharing your thoughts and ruminations with the rest of the family.

But if you truly — and I mean truly — want to enter into the bonds of unholy non-monogamous matrimony with us, you can make a pledge over at patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia, where seventeen episodes of *Build Mama a Coffin*, ten episodes of *Black Mouthed Dog* and two parts of “Door Under the Floor” lie waiting for those of you pledging \$10 or more a month. Patreon patrons also get ad-free episodes, special advance notice on live show tickets, special programming like the adorable Steve Reads and Cam Reads, as well as a ton of fun stuff — it all varies by patreon tier. All the details are over there. And we work hard to make our Patreon worth it, because without y'all, we're pretty sure we'd be living in an alley behind a pizza place somewhere in Dungannon, and we love and appreciate all y'all for preventing that.

So this is your every-so-often reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by Rusty Quill. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Talk to you soon, Family. Talk to you real soon.