

Old Gods of Appalachia

Season 2 Episode 23: A Bad Night for Hollow Men

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and therefore may contain material not suitable for all audiences, and family, I'm here to tell you right now: this one's going to be a rough ride. Refer to the content warnings in the show notes and listen responsibly because, as always, listener discretion is advised.

Switchbend, West Virginia—1913.

There had been a house of ill repute in Switchbend for years. Now, you had to know somebody who knew somebody to get an invite, but it was a house of ecstasy and agony that was only spoken of in whispers. Located a respectable distance outside the den of sin and iniquity of Ash Bottom, West Virginia, which boasted the largest red-light district in all of Appalachia, McQueen's Grocery and Sundry Goods catered to a very limited clientele. You see, the McQueen family, being the hood-wearing, blood-oath-swearing kind of folks that they were—well, they kept their trade in the ways of the flesh exclusive to the very rich and the very white. Well, over in the Bottom, Blacks and whites were co-mingling and laying down with whoever they wanted, and ain't hardly nobody said boo. There was whole houses that Black folks owned and run themselves. "The free state of McDowell County," somebody had called it. If you'd asked Jimmy McQueen—not that anybody did, and not that that ever stopped him—the whole world was falling apart and going to hell in a handbasket. Now, this outlook might stem from the fact that Jimmy McQueen had been a small-minded, hateful little bigot for most of his 47 years. Or it might be because at this given moment, as he stood on the street, Jimmy McQueen's grocery store and the parlor house upstairs were being ransacked and destroyed by company men. oh, and that his throat was in the vice-like grip of a behemoth in a tweed suit they called Mr. White.

"Now, Jimmy," Mr. White began, the Pennsylvania Dutch of his long-forgotten childhood leaking out a little like it did, "it wonders me how you'uns thought this would be all right now. We send you a very important person for the entertainin'—show him a little drink, a little pink. Let him do that thing we lets him do from time to time, and he eats himself full, and you get paid. we take care of the mess. You get a new girl or three, and things go by, just an ye do."

"Please, Mr. W, I didn't—"

Mr. White squeezed, lifting Jimmy McQueen into the air like a child. “Mr. White, now once—mind your manners yet.”

“Mr. White, I didn't know anything had happened, I, I didn't know, Mr.—” Mr. White squeezed harder still.

“Don't you say his name.” Jimmy saw stars, then white. Then the world hove back into view as the giant man let air back into his lungs.

“I didn't know anything happened to him—he always likes to sleep with, with, with whatever's left of ‘em, you know how he is, he's, he's like a, he's like a pig in shit.”

Mr. White drew back a fist the size of a ham, but stopped as long, thin, bony fingers gripped his enormous shoulder.

“Easy now, Mr. White,” came a voice that felt like a whole flock of geese taking their evening constitutional through a graveyard.

Mr. White did not release Jimmy McQueen but shifted his eyes back to the tall, thin shadow of his partner. “Mr. Erskine. I did not see you return.”

“Of course, you didn't, Mr. White. Put the greengrocer down. We're not done with him yet, but I need to speak with you in private.” Mr. White let the gasping little man fall the considerable drop to the ground, where he looked set to run for the hills. “Stay where ya are, James, we might have a few more questions for you.”

Mr. Erskine pulled his partner away and into a nearby shadow so not to be overheard. “The others are heading west into Kentucky. We're heading south. She's nowhere near. We don't know how long Mr.—” Mr. White flinched. Erskine rolled his eyes. “How long *he* has been dead.”

Mr. White breathed out a slow, shaky breath. “You were that scared of him, were you?” Erskine chuckled, the sound of rotting teeth swirling in a teacup.

“I seen him eat three men now, once. They couldn't do nothing to him—big, strong men, they were. Hollow Men. And he just, he just opened up and—”

“‘And ate himself full.’ Yes, you’ve told me the story. Relax,” Erskine snorted. “His form has already dissipated. Nothing left up there but a pond-sized pool of sulfur, sick, and shit. They’ll never get the smell out—we’re doing them a favor.”

“Did they find his—”

“No—no, they did not. It and his wallet are gone. she must have robbed him,” said Mr. Erskine, shaking his head. “She probably thinks she’s rich.”

“Who was she? How did she get by him?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“If she opens it—”

“She dies, which she’s going to do, anyway. Touching it would be enough over time. But what she has is company property, and that makes it our business. Come now, Mr. White. Let us away.”

“What about Jimmy?”

“Oh, right. James!” Jimmy McQueen looked up, and Erskine gestured lazily with his forefinger, and Jimmy McQueen’s throat split open as if sliced with a very sharp razor. “No more questions, son.” And with that Mr. Erskine and Mr. White, of Barrow Mineral Resources, slipped into the night, as a cold, smokeless flame began to flicker from the upstairs window, and McQueen’s Grocery and Sundry Goods began to burn. And by morning, in that regard, the world would be a better place.

[“The Land Unknown: Hollow Heart Version” by Landon Blood]

Flat Top, Virginia—the very next day.

Vera Blevins had never been so scared in her whole life, and with the life she’d lived, that was saying a lot. See, she had been traveling and selling what the good Lord gave her since she was old enough to have run from her daddy’s house in Baker’s Gap. She’d seen men do every form of kindness and cruelty you could imagine. She’d seen sweet, nervous boys from the camps turn into liquor-soaked demons in a matter of weeks. She’d seen men, cold and dead-eyed, move like

machines as they took what they bought and paid for from some working girls. She'd seen women who'd been kept like courtesans for years by bosses and men with money, and she'd seen girls barely in their moons torn up and buried behind houses with no names. She'd seen bad. She'd seen worse. She'd had both done to her in time. She'd come to Ash Bottom because she heard it was different—the girls were treated kindly 'cause the ones who run them understood that kept goods sold better than damaged ones. That was partly true—most of the houses were integrated, run by Black and white folk alike, who actually treated girls like they was people. But as was the custom, with her rotten luck, Vera had landed at a saloon called Milton's. Word was that it was owned wholesale by the B&L Combine—private parties and such. Didn't seem that bad the first week or two she was there, until a girl named Polly asked to go home to Kentucky to see her mama buried, and a bull named Calhoun broke her jaw for asking.

It soon became clear that once you were broken in and known to be company property, you didn't get to leave Milton's Saloon and Comfort Palace, unless it was to be paraded around to show off the wares—or in a pine box. Three hots and a cot, sure, and a little money to spend on your room, but that was about it. Otherwise, you were to shut up, show up, and put out on command. There were girls who tried to run—Vera had been one. But there wasn't nobody in all the Bottom that was willing to help a girl from one of the company houses, no sir. First time, they cracked two of her ribs and still made her work—no visible bruising allowed, mind. The second time she'd run, they brought her to see the manager, the owner's boy. Bruce Milton barely looked up at her as Calhoun told him what Vera had done and what she had stolen from the house when she left. Vera had tried to protest—she didn't steal anything. She just wanted to go; she didn't want no trouble. They could keep all her pay, just please, let her go.

Bruce Milton had smiled that flat little smile of his and told Vera she could go. In fact, he had a brand-new job for her—over McQueen's Grocery and Sundry Goods in Switchbend. Vera felt like she was dead already. All the girls knew McQueen's. There were terrible rumors about what went on above that grocery store. It was said that when men from the home office up in Barrow, Pennsylvania came to visit, that was where they went to blow off steam. It was the executive parlor house, where darker appetites were satisfied in ways that Vera could not imagine.

She was moved out of Milton's that very day. They'd marched her right through the storefront downstairs, past folks buying flour and eggs and produce, to the back corner of the store right by the loading dock. There was a staircase hidden behind the high shelf in the dry goods section. a

clerk would have to open the door after a customer asked, “What meat's on special today?” So that they might ascend to more private environs upstairs. Now, the grocery store downstairs wasn't nothing special, but the rooms up above were lavishly furnished with fine furniture brought from the old country. The front rooms were your standard affair—a dresser, washstand, and the biggest, nicest beds Vera had ever laid and worked in. It was the back rooms you tried not to think about.

Behind the facade of the parlor house, the building opened up more into a warehouse—high-ceilinged rooms with black, stone walls and floors made of a steel mesh that could be hosed out to clean up. Girls who got sent to the back were not usually seen again, and if they were, they were... they were not the same. Last night, Vera's turn had come. Even after they'd already chosen a girl for that job, they needed one more, as the customer—a VIP for sure—was still peckish, they said. So, they'd sent her to the back.

Mr. McQueen himself had called for her, took her by the arm, and led her to the hall, gesturing, “Just right back there on the left, sugar. You don't even have to go all the way to the back. He's got his own private room right there on the edge. Hell, he might be sleeping, if you're lucky. He don't usually ask for seconds.” Jimmy had laughed, barely looking up from going back to counting the night's receipts. Vera walked, as if in a dream, down the hall, and looked into the last room on the left. The man's underclothes were folded neatly on a fancy chair. His shirt, jacket, and britches hung on a brass hook on the wall. His watch and wallet rested on the dresser. There was a lamp burning low. The customer was indeed sleeping—his snores confirmed that easily. He wasn't a small man. His hairy back was turned to her, and it looked like he was spooned around Marianne, the first girl who'd been sent to him. Oh, that was just nasty—at Milton's, even the highest rollers weren't allowed to sleep in the rooms, and no girl she knowed would ever go to sleep with a johnny in her bed. Marianne was probably just playing possum. She was about to call quietly to Marianne, when the man rolled over, still asleep, and brought Marianne with him, as if she were a teddy bear. It was then Vera realized that it wasn't *all* of Marianne.

Marianne was dead. Huge chunks had been torn out of her neck and shoulder, her face with a frozen scream of agony and fear. The space between her ribs and hips was a vacant cavern of gore. The crimson shroud that poured from that wound had covered her nethers in a mockery of modesty. Most of her right leg, bones and foot included, were just gone. Blood painted the walls

and the bedclothes and the customer's inhuman face that she could now clearly see. He was pig-like in his appearance—full snout and maw with a boar's tusks, covered in viscera, his blood-spattered, piggy ears twitching in his dreaming. His eyes were closed, and his mouth hung open as he snored softly. A scream threatened to rise from her throat, but Vera covered her mouth. She knew this was going to be her last night at McQueen's one way or another, so she went to the dresser where she'd seen the man's wallet and a heavy pocket watch cast from something that looked like silver but didn't feel like it. And she was about to bolt from the room when a slurred voice rose from the bed.

[Oinking, snuffling pig noises]

“What are you d-d-doing, girl? P-p-put that down. That's not—that's not yours.” Vera turned to see the Thing that had killed Marianne trying to rise, but he was sluggish and slow. His voice dragged and bled from man to beast and back again. “That... is not yours. It must st—it must *[oinking]* it must STAY.” Vera took two steps back toward the door, and the creature tried to lunge, but Marianne's body and his own bloated form got in the way, and it rolled pitifully back onto the bed. *[Oinking escalates to squealing]* “No, it must—must stay—STAY!!” the thing's voice slurred until it degenerated into the guttural squeals of a hog. He sagged back onto the bed, despairing, unable to get free of the bloody slop he laid in, and Vera Blevins bolted down the hall to the staircase, down the stairs, and out the loading dock door.

She spent the night running through the woods and staying off the road. She didn't know if anybody had seen her run, and she didn't know what she'd left behind in that room, but now that she was out, she didn't know where she could go. When she first started out, she'd met a girl named Aggie working out of the same house out past the Pocahontas coal field. They'd become fast friends. They'd run across each other here and there over the years, and the last time she'd seen her, Aggie told her she was getting married and settling down in Hazel County, Virginia. She gave Vera her address and told her to write and look her up if she ever got down that way. They'd written, and she'd heard all about Aggie's daughter June being born, and how hard her husband Kevin had worked for them. They had a little farm, and she was welcome there anytime. It'd been a little over a year since they'd written, but Vera was sure the invitation still stood. She just had to make it over the state line.

A bartered truck ride or two later, she found herself standing at the gate of the Norris farm out on Blue Falls Road. It was a modest place with a small house, a couple of cows, chickens—and

thankfully, no pigs. The man who greeted her at the door was, in fact, Kevin Norris, husband to Agnes, but Agnes was not there.

“Aggie died last spring,” Kevin told her as they stood on the porch. “Something went wrong with her liver, and there wasn't nothing they could do. It's just me and Junie out here now.” The skinny blonde girl who looked out over her daddy's shoulder was the spitting image of Aggie. She couldn't have been more than 14. “Huh. I can probably guess who you are, though,” Kevin sighed. “I found all Aggie's letters. she kept up with a few of y'all from—from—from that time in her life. I met her at church, right after she decided to get out of the business, you know. So, are you Vera or Kate? there's plenty of letters to both of y'all.”

“I'm—I'm Vera,” she managed. Aggie was gone. could this hole get dug any deeper? the man nodded. “Aggie's mama was the one who got her started. Never liked that woman. She never liked me. I don't want—I don't want none of y'all around me or my daughter, so you just get on, now.”

“DADDY.” came the girl's voice from the door.

“Junie, you get in the house now, girl.”

“I will NOT,” the girl stated with the same stubborn expression Vera knew from her mommy's face a thousand times over. “Now, I've read them letters too, and if this is Vera Blevins, this is Mama's best friend, and you will not turn her out, 'cause I'm betting that she's turning up here looking half-starved and scared to death like she is, it's 'cause she ain't got no other place to go. I-i-is that right, ma'am?” Vera could only nod. “Then, you get in this house and have supper with us, right now!” her father opened his mouth to protest further, but June Norris would suffer no arguments. “You look me in the face and tell me Mama would turn her away. Tell me. Tell me, Daddy.”

Kevin Norris looked down and conceded, “All right, you can stay tonight. but you gotta go in the morning. I'll drive you to the train station myself. What's for supper, then, Junie?”

As the Norris family and their guest settled into an awkward supper that at least gave Vera a moment to catch her breath, darkness gathered outside in more ways than one.

Mr. White and Mr. Erskine stared down at the Norris' farm from the tree line. They'd been here a while, waiting for the girl to arrive. Vera Blevins had had no time to gather her things, so the two had found and read their fair share of correspondence between Vera and Agnes Norris, and the address was right there on the envelopes. They would wait until full dark, shed these ridiculous shapes they wore during daylight hours, and tie up these loose ends.

Now, Mr. White, who, in his former life, had been nearly as violent and murderous as he was now, was running out of patience. The further from the Home Office they got, the more of his old self crept back in. When a man was hollowed by the Barrow family, he was emptied of himself, his soul and mind scourged clean by the black dust that hangs in the air of Barrow, Pennsylvania. The husk would be filled with new power and a new darkness. By light of day, and under control of their masters, well, the Hollow Men were precise killers, cleaners, enforcers, and foot soldiers—but if they traveled too far from home without a minder, or they slipped the leash entirely, there had been tornadoes known to do less damage.

“Are you ready yet?” Mr. White called over to Mr. Erskine, who had just removed his fine, tweed jacket and hung it, neat as you please, over a tree branch and was unbuttoning his shirt.

“Easy, lad—enjoy it. Let it slip away. Don't tear it off.”

Mr. White snorted. “Let's get *on* with it, Abel!”

Mr. Erskine chuckled dryly to himself, and his body began to change. His skin darkened to the unnatural black of a lightning-struck tree. His already-thin body emaciated even more as he grew to his full height of around nine feet. His fingers flexed, lengthened obscenely, and split open, revealing long straight razors where there should be bone. His entire face vanished into a featureless mask of shadow and burnt skin.

Mr. White roared, seeming to fold in on himself as his body bent and cracked, and his thick skin grew even thicker, his forehead even heavier. He did not grow larger so much as he hardened, his skin shedding dust like dry concrete. His eyes became narrow slits, lit by a pale orange glow, and a crown of short, blunt horns blossomed from his forehead. When he walked, the earth shook—just a little.

Without further delay, the two Hollow Men left the bush and crossed the property line to the Norris farm, bent on murder. Once they crossed that fence line, though, they found themselves

confused. Now, they'd watched the farm all day, and they'd seen livestock and chickens and people, but now in the dark, the farm looked abandoned. The barn was rife with rotten hay, and the doors swung wide and brittle. The chicken coop was empty, and the fence, sagging and broken. There was no sign of any sort of life—animal or man. The farmhouse stood on a slight hill in the middle of the property, and despite something feeling off, the two nightmares charged in, where they'd presumably catch their quarry and her new companions having an after-supper coffee, or a snort of whiskey, but the house was just empty. Just one narrow room that smelled like waste and wet earth.

“What the hell is this, now, once?” Mr. White, as he punched a wall, his boulder-like fist passing through it like paper. “Where ARE they!?”

Mr. Erskine was trying to keep his cool—that was his job. Whitey knocked things down, but he cut them up nice and neat and kept everything tidy. He drifted back outside the building and looked around at the desolate farm. “We've been here all day... this doesn't make any SENSE!” He roared, striking the front door with his razors, the soft wood splintering under the impact. “I am tired, I am hungry, and I have had enough, and WHY does it smell like SHIT in here!?” And with that, Mr. Erskine also lost his composure completely and began slashing and striking the house, losing himself in the glorious oblivion that was being a Hollow Man.

From the window of the actual farmhouse, Kevin Norris, his daughter, and their guest watched the monsters fall into a state of frenzy.

Kevin Norris turned to Vera. “I'm guessing you've seen things like this before?”

“Not till last night... but yes, sir,” said Vera. “Why are they busting up your outhouse though? Why don't they just come in here and get me?”

June answered her, watching the display with a slightly bored expression. “They can't see us, I don't think. When I was little, Mamaw came out and buried jars around the edge of the yard and the house. Usually, they pass right by, but sometimes things get inside the fence, and they get real confused. Never had one bust up the outhouse before, though.”

“I never liked that woman, but she did do a good job at that,” Kevin muttered as he sipped his coffee.

“Well, should we do anything? try to run, or—” Vera asked.

“Nah, they'll tire themselves out. Most anything that gets confused by—well, by that kind of thing, will have to be gone by sunrise, I found. Let's just try to get some sleep now. You can bunk with Junie in the other room.”

Despite the thunderous sounds of the destruction of the Norris outhouse, tool shed, and one unfortunate wheelbarrow, Vera found she was too tired to be scared anymore, and eventually fell to sleep.

The next morning, the farmyard was a mess, but there were no monsters to be found. Sunrise had, in fact, done its job well. Kevin and June drove Vera to the Hazel Train Station, where she could buy a ticket that would get her back to Tennessee. Junie had given her an old suitcase and some of her mother's clothes. Vera packed these, along with the stolen wallet and the strange pocket watch she'd taken from McQueen's what felt like a lifetime ago. Junie also provided her with the address of another woman that her mama had kept up with, who might be able to give her a place to stay if she didn't want to go home to her daddy.

Vera had tried to pay the family for their damaged property, but Kevin was adamant that he wasn't taking no money that had been stolen from people who could do that to an outhouse with a clear conscience. The last car of Vera Blevins's train left the station just as two tired men in tweed suits pushed their way onto the boarding platform.

Mr. White, who was very sore, very tired, and smelled very much like an outhouse, cursed in a vein of Pennsylvania Dutch that we will not try to replicate here, family, so just... use your imagination. Mr. Erskine put a long-fingered hand on his shoulder once again to soothe him. “We have the letters. we know where she's going, or at least where her family is. We can follow her in due time.”

Mr. White had no patience for this. “Can ye wonder it, ye old fool? We are too far abroad! We need to call for assistance! We need a Barrow here who can ground us—Mr. Carlisle perhaps, or Mr. Werden. If we try to go farther, it will not end well for either of us, and you know this to be true. Do not give me that look! I saw you last night, Abel. You lost control. You almost——”

Before Mr. White could finish that thought, a man stepped from the ticket counter and made a beeline to the place where they stood. He smiled wide and extended his hand, shaking both men's before they could even react.

“Gentlemen! I could not help but overhear your conversation.” The man's smile and the tone of his voice caught both Erskine and White off-guard. He was dressed like one of the bosses. From his highly polished patent leather shoes, the immaculate fit of the charcoal gray suit he wore, Mr. Erskine almost thought he knew him at first glance, but realized he did not.

“My friend,” Erskine hissed, “you will do well to step back and forget that you ever—”

The man cut him off as if he'd not breathed a word. “Oho, Hollow Men! Oh, my, very impressive, indeed! Look at you! one strong and one wise—both just as deadly, yes?”

Erskine's voice picked up a pound of menace as he started to lean in on the man. “I shan't ask again, friend. move along.”

The man breathed in deeply, as if he were a hound scenting another hound, chuckling at himself a little bit. “Oh, and on an errand from the higher-ups, or those from further beneath, as it may be? [Laughter]mmyesss?”

“I tried to tell you, friend,” said Mr. Erskine, raising his left hand to dispatch this disturbingly familiar stranger before he could draw any more attention to them.

The man met Abel Erskine's eyes before he could act. “Ah-ah-ah... That would be a *very* bad idea, my friend. Look at me. *See* me.”

Erskine and White did look, and they did see. What they saw would have stopped their hearts if they'd still been beating, would have baptized them anew in darkness, if baptism could wash away what was already inside them. They saw the land split by iron tongues. They saw men work to pull up driving spikes and laying rail. they saw the avarice and greed and the ever-growing power of the railroad in this man's eyes.

“We understand each other, now, yes?” The two monsters, dressed for the moment as men, nodded dumbly. “Now, then! It seems you are in need of assistance. I happen to be quite gifted when it comes to finding things and people who do not wish to be found, especially if they are

riding the old iron rails, yes? So, let us join together in this enterprise, my new friends! I'm sure we can all profit greatly in the end. Ever onward, ever forward, yes?"

["I Cannot Escape The Darkness" by Those Poor Bastards]

Well, hey there, family. Thank you for joining us for this, the second installment of our flashback journey to find out what happened with the Local Magistrate and the Railroad Man. Hope you've enjoyed getting to know Mr. White and Mr. Erskine as much as I have, and I hope you'll join us next time around to find out where they end up with their new friend.

Family, it's come that time when I advise you to make sure you have completed your social media ritual and have followed us on all the relevant social medias. You can find all those—Facebook, Instagram, tweet into the void with us at Twitter, including a link to our Discord server, which is the happening place to be right now—over at OldGodsofAppalachia.com. If you would like to support us, you can do one of two things. Actually, there's a lot you can do, but the two easiest ones—you can buy something from us from our merch store over on Teepublic, also linked over at OldGodsofAppalachia.com. There are t-shirts, mugs, stickers, prints—tons of art from artists that we have paid and commissioned to make fantastic things for you to wear on your person or to drink your morning grog from, I highly advise going over to pick that up. We get a small piece of that, and it helps keep the lights on. The other way you can support us is to become a patron on Patreon, and that is becoming an increasingly good deal by the day. Go over to patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia. If you go five dollars a month, you get access to the brand-new, live panel discussion of the Red Thread Society, where you can hear members of our Discord community positing their theories and being very, very clever and charming. Say hey to those folks over on Discord—shout out to the Red Thread. And if you step that up to 10 dollars or higher, oh sweet darkness, you get access to Build Mama a Coffin—all 17 episodes; the two-part extravaganza, horror, peanut butter, and death smoothie that is Door Under the Floor, written by Cam Collins, performed by yours truly and a few fantastic actors from the Old Gods family; as well as a whole bunch of post-Season 2 programming that we just started cooking up not that long ago that we'll be announcing very, very soon. It's about to get real exciting over on Patreon, and there are so many new projects that we are just shaking in our boots to share with you, family, so I'm just going to whet your appetite and tell you there's stuff coming down the pipe that's going to answer a lot of questions involving things like tabletop role-playing games, and maybe a few other things y'all have been

asking for in terms of music. It's all in the works, it's all in the pipes, but you gotta listen, you gotta be alert and stay vigilant, because you know the shadows come when you're not looking, and the best way to find out about that stuff first, be a patron on Patreon—I tell them everything first. Occasionally, I let stuff slip over on Discord when I stop by there and hang out, but, uh—patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia is the number-one way to give us your support and get the newest information first.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of Deep Nerd Media. our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood. Our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell, and the voice of the Railroad Man was Yuri Lowenthal. See you soon, family. See you real soon.