

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 39: The Blood of the Mountain

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

Belle Calloway had been sitting in silence for awhile now. She'd managed to tear her eyes away from the story pouring like spilt molasses from her Mamaw Sheila's diary for a moment so she could try to sort through the feelings warring within her. It seemed that there had always been some form of darkness crossing paths with the women of her line. The sounds of quiet feet and gray dresses slithering over stone floors called to her from somewhere deep in her memory, but she shook it off. The echoes of her family's past surrounded her here. Hell, this house *was* their past, their legacy — their place of origin as a family. The cleft in the mountain where the spring of Walker blood poured forth like a green-blessed river was an old condemned parlor house in a dead town less than a day from being razed to the ground. If that wasn't some sort of statement about the nature of blood and kin, she didn't know what was.

The house had accepted her, granted her passage into her Mamaw's inner sanctum, but she could still feel it watching her, waiting for her to do something that would threaten the family or the memory of its mistress. Belle smiled a little at that. The Walker family's collective gift had always been wherever they put up a roof, it became a haven — a stout bulwark against any and all that would seek to do harm to those seeking refuge within its walls. The Charm School was no different. The wards at the Walker House back in Baker's Gap felt like friendly watch dogs greeting her whenever she came to call. Her mamaw's wards were much the same, but the dogs here didn't know her just yet, so they were keeping careful eyes on her.

Belle could hear the tall house groaning above her as the wind picked up outside. She hoped it didn't come a storm while she was still here. She'd hate to have to make her way out through the rain and the muck — or worse, be trapped here overnight. And God forbid Melvin get worried and try to come in looking for her. She needed to finish this business and get on home, but the diary was warm in her hands, and she couldn't just leave the story there.

She thought it was strange that she didn't feel guilty about poring through Mamaw Sheila's private thoughts and recollections, but the way the memories unfolded in her mind as if she was present in those moments made her feel like she was meant to discover the little book. This part of her family's history, dark and shameful as it might be, felt important. Belle never had the chance to know her mama's mama, and this was the closest she was likely to get. Before anything else could distract her, Belle Calloway, once called Sarah Avery, daughter of Carol Anne and Pinky, granddaughter of Sheila, settled back into her mamaw's comfortable old chair and continued to read.

["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

From the diary of Sheila Marietta Walker:

July 11, 1874

I met with the girls today. I didn't offer no explanation beyond that I found her with her throat cut and there wasn't no money missing. Plenty of men had threatened Patty in the past. Coulda been anybody, really. After that I wasn't good for much. Greta and Tina made the arrangements to get Aunt Patty buried. Ain't no preacher gonna come out here, but we bought her a casket and got it in the ground last night. Greta said she'd helped run a house before, and she'd make sure nobody tried to step in on me. Sweet girl, but I don't think the Colonel's gonna let anybody step anywhere outside of where he wants.

August 9, 1874

I've spent the past month attending to that thing. He has me call on him every night to keep him company while his daughters are away. They haven't been happy with the number or the quality of girls that I've been bringing him, so they set out to find their own. I fear what they might do, or how many they might come back with. I bring him whiskey and fresh bread, and he just sits there and breathes it in. Don't drink it, don't eat it. Just stares at it and breathes that rattly breath of his as the bread gets moldy and crumbles and the whiskey glass slowly goes dry as if someone's been sipping on it, but he don't never touch either one. He rambles on about how the world burns so much brighter through "this body" — whatever that means. He spent an hour last night holding forth on how he can tell every person in this house apart by their scent — and not the scent of their body, nothing as "vulgar" as that, he says. He claims he's able to smell who someone is. Maybe it's their blood? Hell, maybe it's their immortal soul. He said he didn't expect me to understand. He says he can always tell when I'm near by my scent. It intrigues him, puzzles him. He says it's like sitting by a tree that's been kissed by lightning — warm and somehow alive, but also sharp and dangerous. He said he finds that alluring. Thinks he'll keep me a while, he says. Like he was talking about a pet. Ain't I the lucky one?

August 16, 1874

The daughters come back. They only brought one girl, and she ain't no working girl, nor anyone from around here. She looks like she come from money based on her clothes — real fine quality duds. They called me in and made me watch while the Colonel had her sing "Amazing Grace" to him over and over — all the verses, especially the one about "ten thousand years." He made her repeat that one. I watched him siphon whatever gift she had right out of her. He just sat there breathing her in as she sang. Right before my eyes, her hair streaked with gray and the meat just wilted off her bones til she was barely alive, all crumpled up on the floor like a bundle of sticks tied together. Two of the daughters hustled her away — to get her fattened back up, they said, but I don't expect we'll see her again. The one that stayed told me they expected better from me in the future, and that unless I wanted to sing for my supper, I'd keep their father's larder full. He can drink a common, simple thing like me as easy as he can a witch, or so they claim. They're leaving in the morning to fetch another, and said I'd better be able to match their haul in kind when they come back. The Colonel didn't say nothing — just laid back and snoozed like my daddy at the dinner table when mama put on a proper Sunday spread. I can't live like this. Something has to change.

The entries in Sheila Walker's diary ran on this way for the next few weeks. Sheila was desperate and scared. The Colonel never realized that he had what was probably the tastiest morsel in the whole house sitting with him for his nightly whiskey, as the young woman's gift played hide and seek, shielding her from the beast's strange senses. And then quite suddenly, in the fall of 1874, all mention of the Colonel and his terrifying daughters simply ceased.

There had been a mine explosion not far from Tourniquet. You'll recall, family, that the coal around that part of West Virginia was... wrong. It came from the earth dry and dead — devoid of the fuel needed to quicken a flame — or else it came soft, in tarry smears so rich with petroleum that it burned hotter than six of the devil's hells and gave the seventh a run for its money. The asphalt mines of West Virginia provided a goodly portion of the world's street paving materials in that time, but it was dangerous work. It was rapidly proving to be cost prohibitive when the same product could be pulled in more safety and in greater quantity from the sand wells just around the mountain in King's Valley without sending men down beneath the earth.

It was here, deep within the darkness under the West Virginia mountains, that something had gone horribly wrong. Somehow, despite all their care and precautions, something had caught fire and the mountain and the men it held like offerings burned for days without stopping. The explosion had shaken and cracked the earth. Structures collapsed, and twelve men died on the surface of the jobsite before any attempt at rescue or recovery could be made for those still inside. In the end, they managed to pull twenty men from the wreckage of Fairmont Coal's Number 8. Half those died, and half were put up in makeshift hospitals hastily organized in the private parlor houses. The company wasn't about to disrupt business in the big houses, so they commandeered Patty's Place and Old Harper's both.

The girls stepped up admirably to play nurse-maids and helpers to the handful of company docs that basically came by every day to watch the men die. There wasn't much they could do for them beyond keeping them clean and doped up and waiting to see who made it out the other side. The Colonel did not call for her in the first week of the fallout from the Number 8 disaster, and Sheila threw herself into caring for the injured men. Some were unable to speak, their faces and upper bodies wrapped in thick bandages. Others were shocked into a deep silence after witnessing so much death and destruction, on top of the pain of their own wounds.

There was one man, though, who never seemed to shut up. Otis Harlan had been with Fairmont since they opened the asphalt mines — or grahamite, as most men called it. He would wake screaming in the middle of the night, his eyes bound tight in cotton gauze, screaming for his men and his mama and all the other things a man who wakes missing the light he's lost might cry for. Most nights it would be Sheila who went to comfort his agitated heart.

Otis was not a superstitious man, and he was not a foolish man. Through his tears and his pain, he poured out his fears and shame to Sheila. The mines had never been safe, he said. Working with that soft, sludgy coal, wading through knee-deep muck, was like being sucked down to hell every day. He also told her about the strange dream that all the men who worked in Number 8 shared. New men would have it within their first week on the job. They'd usually break down and tell somebody about it once, before the suffocating blanket of "things men don't talk about" stilled their tongues and choked the words off in their throats.

It was always the same dream. The man would dream of coming to work and being lowered down into the mine, where he would dig and dig and dig at the soft coal, cautiously — his head all full of the horror stories he'd heard of what could happen if you didn't do it just right. Then, without warning, the walls around him would crack open, and the dreaming man would find that he'd broken through the heart of the earth, into a great pitch-black sea of oil. Hot, steaming oil that bubbled forth from the mountain in a great flood, swallowing flesh and bone, cooking the men around him while the air filled with their screams. He would wake in a cold sweat and not find sleep again that night — not out of fear, but from the unsettling realization that he wanted to go back, wanted to bathe in that molten shadow and be consumed by the blood of the mountain.

Those were the words Otis used — the blood of the mountain. Sheila would ask the man questions, drawing out the full story. She let him tell her all about the mine and its dangers and that great dark sea beneath the surface of both the earth and his mind. And soon she had the answers she needed. For the first time since the Colonel and his girls darkened her door, Sheila Walker felt something like hope.

October 20, 1874

I got one of the boys from the Diamond to run me up to where the mine is still burning, and I have to say Mr. Harlan might be onto something. That place ain't right. The air up there is greasy and wrong. Breathing that stuff would give any man strange dreams, I imagine. Probably rot his brain right out of his head if he breathed it long enough. I managed to slip by the guards posted there to keep people out and to do what I needed to do. This will either work, or he'll kill me. At least I hope he will, if it don't work. Either way, I ain't having him in Aunt Patty's house, sleeping in the room she died in, doing his foul business up there. I won't be party to it no more.

Belle Calloway eagerly flipped to the next page of her mamaw's diary, and had the sensation of that scratchy black handwriting unfolding before her again, drawing her into the scene, allowing her to bear witness to the life Sheila had led before she ever bore her first daughter, before she took up the reins of her own parlor house, when she was just a young girl facing down the darkness. She watched as her mamaw walked to the door of the Colonel's room and knocked three times.

"Enter, Miss Sheila Walker, and be welcome," came the rich, honeyed snakeskin voice.

Sheila opened the door and walked in, bearing the Colonel's evening whiskey on a tray, and almost dropped it when she saw him standing by the window, looking out into the distance.

"Oh my, sir... you're up?" Sheila managed. This was a new development, one that could either hinder or greatly assist the plan she had laid.

"My strength grows, child. My daughters are out procuring new stock for me that may be just the thing I need to feel my old self again."

Stock, Sheila thought with disgust. *As if they're animals*. But she tamped down her anger and smiled as the thing hiding inside the body of an old soldier limped across the room to her and took the glass of whiskey from the tray she carried.

To her horror, he took a sip. "Oh my. That's different," he chuckled. "Oh my, yes." And then he took a longer draft. "The taste is just as magnificent as I imagined. I've had to be cautious,

walking around in literal flesh and bones, but my... has the risk been worth it.” The Colonel swirled the amber liquid in the tumbler and sniffed deeply. “Is this how it always is for your kind? The little things — the scents, the tastes.” He ran his hand along the wood of the windowsill. “The... textures... of this world?”

“I... I suppose so, sir.”

“I cannot wait to be made fully whole, dear girl, so that I might drink deep of this world and tear its meat from the bone, so to speak.”

His eyes roamed over Sheila, and his brow furrowed slightly.

“Do you wish to tell me something, Miss Sheila?” His eyes narrowed — not in anger, but more in playful consternation. “It is a mystery as to why I cannot fully perceive you, child, but I must say, it is refreshing. It is another exciting mystery that this form brings me. Shall I guess? Do you have news of my daughters that I do not know? Have you found a new girl for me? I can sense your excitement, child. Please, speak freely, let us be open with each other.”

Sheila knew this was her moment. She could not falter here, so she charged ahead. “I— I think I’ve found a way to make you whole again, sir, but we need to do it now — tonight.”

The beast’s eyes flew wide, and Sheila Walker could have sworn she saw them surge with the faintest red glow for a moment. “What did you say, child? Do not trifle with me.”

“You’ve heard about the explosion in the mine nearby, sir?” Sheila strove to keep her voice even. He might not be able to read her, but he wasn’t stupid.

“I have. I can feel that things within the earth have shifted. There is much I cannot see, but... what of it? What do the mines matter to me?”

“I met a man who had worked deep in that mine for many years. He spoke of a power there, a black sea beneath the earth of what he called ‘the blood of the mountain.’ I think he had partaken of it, and it had granted him power he could not contain. He was blinded and

maddened by it. And I went to fetch him for you tonight, but he had died from his injuries in the mine, sir. But there was a... a power about him, sir. A great and terrible power, like what I feel in your presence. I thought perhaps this 'blood of the mountain' inside him might make you well much faster than these little girls you been sipping on."

The Colonel polished off the last of his whiskey in short order. "What good is this man to me dead? Speak plainly, girl." His good mood was fading and seemed. Hunger had a way of doing that to a man, she supposed.

Sheila continued, in her very best J.C. Walker altar call impression. "He said that the mine had broken open, that the very lifeblood of the world lay naked and exposed, ready to be drunk up by one who could handle such a power — and he told me where to find it. I believe that person must be you, sir. I've seen the great and terrible things you've done. I can only guess at the price you've paid in your quest to regain what you once were. I want to help you as you have helped me. Please, sir, let me serve you. I have a cart ready to take us there. You can heal yourself, and greet your daughters as their father in his full strength and glory when they return at the end of the week. But we have to go tonight. They're planning to seal off the mine in the morning, and then all will be lost."

Sheila Walker had watched her daddy work a crowd her whole life — watched him pick out the sinningest sinners under the whole tent and lead them down to the altar, where he could offer them salvation through his god's only begotten son... for a small donation to the ministry, of course. She could always see the moment in their eyes when they made their choice to shuffle out into the aisle and take those first steps towards salvation. She saw that same, desperate gleam in the Colonel's eyes now, and she knew she had him.

"Then by all means, lead the way, child. Take me to claim what is mine."

Sheila smiled broadly. She even managed to squeeze out a few crocodile tears of joy.

"Thy will be done, sir."

Through her mamaw's words, Belle Calloway observed as Sheila helped the thing that called itself the Colonel down the stairs and out the front door in the twilight. A young man helped get the old soldier into the back of his wagon, and Sheila followed. She covered his skinny, twisted legs with a blanket, and the young man clicked his horses into motion, heading up the road and around the mountain to the still-smoldering site of the Number 8 grahamite mine outside of Tourniquet.

When they drew near the mine, Sheila bade the young man to stop the cart, and began to help the Colonel down, into the shadows on the side of the road. The boy made as if to protest — how could he leave them alone out here in the dark? But Sheila reassured him they would be fine, and paid him enough for his time to still his curiosity. Then she and the old soldier followed a circuitous path through the woods, skirting around the perimeter of the mine — the same path she had scouted out the night before, the two of them slipping quietly past the guards onto the abandoned jobsite.

Sheila led the Colonel into the mine, where she found a pair of lanterns. Once she was certain they would be out of sight of the guards, she lit them both and handed one to the thing that limped along beside her. "This way," she told him. "The man told me the signs to look for, and I came last night to be sure he wasn't lying. I didn't want to waste your time, sir. He spoke true."

"Then lead on, Miss Sheila, and I will follow."

"I... I can only go so far, sir, puny thing that I am," Sheila lied. "But you'll see the way once we get as far as I can go — and of course I'll wait for you."

"Fine, fine. Hurry, child. I'm eager to feel myself again after all this time," the Colonel said, an avaricious light in his eyes.

Sheila suppressed a smile and bobbed her head obediently. "Yes, sir. Come, it's just this way."

And so the thing that called itself the Colonel followed Sheila Walker down a series of switchback tunnels into the heart of the mountain, the air around them growing hotter and more foul the longer they walked. Sheila had begun to cough by the time they stepped onto a

wide, square ledge that ended suddenly at a steep drop down, deep into the earth. A faint, orangey glow from somewhere deep below cast a faint light on the walls. By the light of their lanterns, they could see a narrow, twisting ramp to the left that led down, around the outer edge of the wall.

“This... this is as far as I can go, sir,” Sheila gasped, clutching at her chest. “You’ll be all right to go down alone?”

“Yes, yes, girl,” the Colonel said dismissively. Sheila could definitely see a red glow to his eyes, here deep inside the mountain, and his face was lit with a feral smile. He limped toward the sloping ramp, and began to descend. Soon he was out of sight, though Sheila could still hear his shuffling steps echoing through the cavernous passage. Once she was certain he’d gone deep enough that he wouldn’t notice the absence of the light from her lamp, she slowly backed off the ledge, into the tunnel behind them.

Sheila turned then, and proceeded up a much more direct route, back to the mouth of the mine. When she reached the top, she turned back to face the way she’d come. She reached into her left hand pocket, and pulled out a handful of... something — that much wasn’t clear to Belle’s vision. Then Sheila lifted her lamp to eye level with her right hand, and gently blew what looked like little more than a handful of dust directly into the flame. And then she dropped her lamp and ran, as a roar of fury split the night.

October 24, 1874

I learned that trick at my daddy’s knee. All the folks at the tent revival would be amazed when all around the altar, the candles would light themselves. It was easy as pie to make it work with the lanterns I carried down into the mine last night. It was a little trickier to make it blaze up the way I wanted, but I figured it out. I imagine the bosses at Fairmont didn’t expect another explosion so soon, what with the mine cleared out and all, but nobody seems to be asking questions neither. Even outside, I could hear that thing screaming. I think I may hear that sound in my soul til the day I die. Word is the asphalt seam is just ... gone. They just can’t find it again. The last explosion brought everything down in such a way that they’re saying the whole operation might not be salvageable. That’s too bad.

I ran all the way home. It was a long way, and I was wore out by the time I got back to Aunt Patty's, but I couldn't sleep. Not yet. I don't know what the Colonel's daughters might be able to sense, or from how far away. So I stayed up the rest of that night warding the house. We should be safe, me and the girls. At least for now. I ain't seen hide nor hair of the Colonel nor his girls. Hopefully, I think maybe they think I died in the fire with their daddy? I don't know.

That was the last entry in the diary. Belle slumped back into her mamaw's chair in shock. Her thoughts surged forward like snakes from the high weeds, curling into the den of her mind. Her grandmother's story haunted her. The Colonel and his dark, hypnotic voice. His strange daughters, all dressed in gray.

And all at once, the halls of an orphanage in the middle of nowhere loomed unbidden from her memory. She recalled the whispering footsteps of strange women you did not want to catch you out of bed. The disfigured face of a creature passing itself off as an old miner who'd been left maimed and disabled by the mines. The things he'd eaten to regain his strength. And what he'd asked her. Belle might have never met Mamaw Sheila, but it seemed they had more in common than she could have ever imagined.

But there would be time to think more on this — and to study the diary in greater depth — once she got back to Baker's Gap. Belle had lingered far too long in this deserted place. Her watch told her it was near sundown. Working quickly, she gathered her family's forgotten treasures into her satchel — the hand carved combs made of bone and the diary stacked neatly on top of the other books and trinkets she'd gathered — and made her way upstairs to the main floor. It seemed the house had little interest in her egress, as there were no groaning timbers or ominous smells wafting through the air.

Belle had stepped onto the porch and was locking the door behind her when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. The house's wards hummed softly beneath her feet in warning, and she turned to see a group of folks making their way up the concrete walkway. The clerk had told her another family had been out this way to clear out a building they owned. This must be them, Belle reasoned. She didn't have the time or the energy for small talk, so she readied her most polite excuses and turned to face the people, who had come more clearly into view — three tall,

thin women. Belle's blood turned to ice as she registered their matching clothing, their perfectly coiffed hair... and their cold, dead gray eyes.

“Well, well well...” said the first of the Gray Ladies. “What have we—”

“—here?” finished the second. “You're not the one we expected. We—”

“—were hoping for the one with the pretty bone-handled knife. We—”

“—would have liked to get a closer look at that one for sure. Oh, but we remember you, sweetheart. Don't we, girls?”

[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. What? What are y'all looking so mad about? No, what? Oh, yeah. We did it again. We did it again. Go ahead. Curse the name, ill wishes. Take to social media, rage. We appreciate it. Also, I'm real bad at math — I told y'all last time we had one more episode to go in act two of season three, when in fact we had two more to go. We have wrapped up our walk back in time to visit with Miss Sheila Walker, and now we find ourselves back where we started with a certain young lady face to face with things that nobody should ever have to face alone. We'll have to see how Miss Belle and all these things shake out in the finale of act two of season three next time around. All right? Promise me you're gonna come back. That's what I thought.

Y'all, big things are happening in our holler right now. We have announced the three live shows that will be happening in the month of October in Asheville, NC, Wise County, VA, and Radford VA. If you follow us on social media, you know that we're calling this little venture “Unknown Roads.” Sorry to our family at Palimpsest for accidentally for like a day choosing the name they had chosen for their live show. Check out Palimpsest, by the way — great show produced here in Asheville, NC. But “Unknown Roads” is going to feature some special guests that are going to blow your mind — so if you want to stay ahead of the game and know who's coming when we

release that information — and when tickets go on sale — head on over to oldgodsofappalachia.com and complete your social media ritual a. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Come hang out on the Discord server.

But if you really want first dibs on tickets for the live shows, you can always join us on Patreon. If you pledge at the \$15 Blood Kin level or higher, you get advance presale access when it's available. Some of these shows have some different ticketing policies that we'll be announcing in the very near future.

We have even more exciting things in development. We actually are gonna tag this on this episode — we found out we're nominated for a World Fantasy Award today, Cam and myself, and we're kind of stunned by that. That's a huge thing. We've won some awards for this show and we're very grateful for them, but the World Fantasy award is kind up there at the same dinner table with the Hugo and the Locus. We're kind of flabbergasted by that, so we're just gonna take a minute.

This is your ever so often reminder that Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media, distributed by our friends at Rusty Quill. Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood and the outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. We'll talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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