

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 3, Episode 42: A Fool's 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.*

Appalachia is a land that has seen centuries of suffering, all caused in one way or another by men. She has borne witness to some of the worst crimes that men in positions of authority inflict on those without the power to oppose them. And then there are the everyday evils that average folks who generally think of themselves as “good people” carry out every day — acts of bigotry and greed, pettiness and mean-spiritedness. The folks on the receiving end of these injustices, both and great and small, tend to be those who have been pushed to the margins of our society — indigenous folks, black and brown folks, queer folks folks whose bodies or brains work a little differently than most. It is a land where for far too long, too many people have struggled, while those who could choose to do the right thing — to share the wealth they have amassed with those who sacrifice their youth and their bodies and their time to produce the goods that afford them their comfortable lives — look down upon them and... simply turn away.

It is an environment that is ripe for certain kinds of stories. Folks whose talents and hard work have been exploited for generations aren't so partial to your moralistic fables — you can keep your ants and grasshoppers, thanks. Here, tales of folks who make their way through the world not through toil and labor, but through wit and trickery, find their natural home. Give us your sly foxes, your clever rabbits. It is, of course, the perfect place to hear tales of Jack. Little wonder then that here, in the heart of Appalachia, in a pleasant little city by the name of Paradise, you may sometimes find a man who currently goes by the upstanding, civilized moniker of Mr. J.T. Fields.

A sunny afternoon in November of 1935 found this Mr. Fields considering how to best remove his young friend Tommy Adkins from the position he'd placed him in at Locke Rail for the better part of a week. It was a bit of a delicate problem, seeing as how Barrow & Locke didn't offer much by way of a severance package for folks in management, or those who served them... not unless one interpreted the term “severance” in a very literal sense. Tommy had served Jack well in his tenure at Locke Rail. He had been privy to correspondence between B&L executives,

management and other entities, which he had committed to memory, copying them to paper when he had a moment's privacy, or in the evenings at home. He had surreptitiously duplicated the notes he had taken during meetings he attended or telephone calls he overheard. He had excellent recall and could reproduce his employer's schedule from memory on request. All of this information he had discreetly funneled to Jack during their weekly — and sometimes even more frequent — meetings.

Tommy had proven himself an uncommonly valuable tool, and Jack hated to lose him. But at this stage in the game, the boy had mostly served his purpose. If that weren't the case, Jack would have pursued other means of solving the young'uns' problem. He felt certain he could have persuaded Ginny that Hollywood was no place for a nice girl like her, and shouldn't she just come on home and settle down? That would have been the simplest answer, and perhaps Jack should have just called her up and had done with it, but Tommy had sacrificed a lot to support Ginny's dreams of a career in the pictures — far more than she knew. Anyway, the girl had talent, and Jack hated to see potential go unexploited. Besides, Jack had acquired just about all the information he needed. One way or another, it was time to extract the boy from Barrow & Locke.

Doing so without bringing harm to either Tommy or Jack's interests was proving a challenge, however, one Jack had been ruminating on for the better part of a fortnight. He had devised and discarded a number of potential schemes as unworkable. He had even briefly considered drafting a letter to the Locke heir, requesting that he release Tommy so that the boy might return to his own employ. But an inquiry of that sort might arouse suspicion to a mind as compulsively paranoid as Nathaniel Locke's, and that wouldn't do.

Thus, a Monday afternoon found Jack in his office, settled in his comfy chair before a cozy fire, ruminating once more on the best course of action. In a few hours, Tommy would come by to load the week's deliveries of J.T. Fields' Special Brew into his old pickup truck. He always stopped by the office for a chat, as a courtesy, and Jack was loath to disappoint him once again with the news that he hadn't worked out a plan just yet. He was J.T. Fields. He always had a plan. It was a particular point of pride, and it was vexing him that this situation proved so daunting. As he sat pondering, and considering the creative stimulation a draft of his own brew might provide, the heavy black rotary telephone on his desk released a shrill peel.

“J.T. Fields. How can I help you?”

“Jack. This is Nathaniel Locke...”

And like the first ray of sunshine piercing through the cloud cover after a storm, the answer presented itself.

It seemed that Locke Rail had devised a scheme of their own. In the midst of the rail industry’s current economic downturn, the company needed to find a new means of generating revenue. They planned to introduce a new amenity on board their passenger trains — a whole new car designed exclusively for the traveler’s entertainment. The bar car would be furnished in rich upholstery, tooled leather, and polished wood, reminiscent of the glory days of the speakeasies of the 1920s, and feature fine spirits and classic cocktails to appeal to their wealthiest passengers... as well as beer, in deference to the reduced circumstances so many folks found themselves in these days. The beverage car’s grand opening would be celebrated with an exclusive inaugural run from Locke’s offices in Paradise to the Barrows’ headquarters in Pennsylvania — one long party chugging its way north, packed with B&L executives and their closest associates, and overseen by Mr. Nathaniel Locke himself. Mr. Locke would be delighted to stock his fancy new bar with Fields Distilling’s finest, and to make a gift of several barrels to his counterparts at Barrow.

For J.T. Fields, it represented a golden opportunity. As he said his goodbyes and returned the receiver to its cradle, the plan was already forming in his mind. It was, by Jack’s standards, nearly perfect — it was simple, elegant, and would accomplish multiple goals at once. He could extricate Tommy from his entanglement with Barrow & Locke and thus relieve himself of that nettlesome sense of indebtedness, while removing an increasingly troublesome obstacle from his own path. The one small difficulty might be ensuring the boy’s safety after he’d played his part... but that could be handled easily enough.

The man currently known as Mr. J.T. Fields lifted the telephone’s receiver again, dialed an old acquaintance, and called in a favor.

[ “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*

As the sun sank gracefully down behind the gentle slopes of the Appalachians and the evening temperatures dropped, the street lights of Paradise sparked to life, their incandescent glow illuminating the small city's wide sidewalks for her citizens as they rushed about, heading home from a day's work in the offices downtown, or hustling into the shops before they closed. It had been a bright, crisp November day, and was shaping up to be a chilly night, or so the forecast had predicted.

It had been a long day at the offices of Barrow & Locke, and Tommy Adkins was tired. His employer had been in rare form since early that morning, vacillating between buzzing enthusiasm as they made arrangements for the launch of a new service on board Locke Rail's passenger trains, and seething rage as he pondered the guest list for its grand opening. Nathaniel Locke was not especially fond of his colleagues, particularly those affiliated with the Barrow half of B&L. Dealing with his mood swings was exhausting for his staff, particularly Tommy, who had a better sense than most of what lurked beneath the man's urbane exterior.

As he stepped out into the cool twilight, tipping his hat to the doorman on his way out, Tommy wanted nothing more than to head back to his small apartment, heat up a jar of the vegetable

soup his mama insisted on sending him home with every time he visited, and spend the evening curled up in the comfortable old chair next to the wood stove with a book. He'd begun re-reading *The Maltese Falcon* last week — a favorite, in part because it had been a birthday gift from Ginny a few years back — but had picked up Hammett's last novel at the drugstore newsstand over the weekend and was eager to dive into it. Unfortunately, that plan would have to wait. It was Monday, and Tommy had deliveries to make on behalf of Fields Distilling. So he walked out to his old, beat-up Model T, started her up, and turned toward the small warehouse that housed Mr. Fields' bottling operation.

The facility was quiet by the time Tommy pulled his truck up to the loading dock out back, its small staff having already departed for home at least an hour before B&L finally released their employees for the day. He could see a light on in the office, though, which meant Jack would still be here. He had a few bits of information from B&L to pass on, so he walked around to the office door, rapped lightly on its surface, and stepped inside.

Jack appeared to be in unusually high spirits, greeting Tommy with a cheery, "Tommy! Just the face I wanted to see! Come in, come in! I have great news."

Tommy's mood lifted instantly. There could be only one piece of news Jack had that would matter to him — he'd figured out a way to release Tommy from his service to Barrow & Locke so that he could join Ginny in California. "Yeah?" he asked hopefully.

"I certainly do! I assume you're aware of the new cars Locke Rail plans to roll out on their passenger trains?"

Tommy's forehead creased in confusion. "Yeah, but I only heard about it today. I was coming in here to tell *you*. Where did you find out about it?"

Jack grinned. "Your boss called to tell me personally this afternoon. Seems like they're gonna make quite the spectacle of it — a big party to celebrate the launch of Locke Rail's new bar car, on its inaugural run from Paradise to Barrow. Featuring only the finest spirits — including whiskey from Fields Distilling, of course."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully. “Right, but... how does this help us? You want me to, what? Just sneak out of town while Mr. Locke is away?”

“No no no,” Jack chuckled. “Obviously they’d just track you down if you tried that, son. I have a more... permanent solution in mind.” He gestured Tommy to the comfortable chair across the desk, which he’d occupied on many occasions before. “Sit down and let me explain. Now, I’ve asked Nathaniel to allow you to personally accompany those barrels of my special brew up to Pennsylvania. Seeing as you’re my delivery manager, it’s only fitting that you act as my personal envoy in this matter.”

Tommy nodded again, still confused, and Jack continued.

“The barrels you’ll be transporting will contain a very... special brew indeed, one I’ll prepare just for our good friends at B&L. At a certain point along your route — don’t worry, I’ll map it all out for you, be easy as pie — all you’ll have to do is light a fuse, exit the train, and then — boom.” Jack spread his hands in an expansive gesture.

Tommy’s brow furrowed. “Boom,” he repeated apprehensively. “If I didn’t know better, Mr. Fields, I’d say you’re suggesting I blow up a train.”

A smile spread slowly across Jack’s face, and he shrugged. “It’s a neat solution to several problems I’ve been considering, Tommy, amongst them your own. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine — once you light the fuse, you’ll have a good sixty seconds to hop off the train.”

Tommy sputtered with indignation. “Hop off the... I can’t... *people die* from jumping trains, Jack!”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, you’ll be fine,” Jack assured him. “Like I said, you’ll wait to get up to a certain spot up the line. The train will slow down to change tracks. You’ll be perfectly safe! And I’ll have a man meet you there — personal friend — to collect you and ensure you get on your way safely. B&L will assume you died in the explosion, and you’ll be on your way to sunny California to meet your sweetheart. It’ll all be just fine.”

Tommy stared at Jack, dumbfounded for a moment. There were times that Mr. Fields appeared to have difficulty appreciating the concerns of... well, everyday folks. In these situations, Tommy typically found it best to exercise patience, and carefully explain his position. To be fair, Jack was rarely moved by such explanations — he just tended to plow ahead with whatever scheme he meant to pursue — but on occasion, he could be persuaded. And so Tommy tried. “Mr. Fields — Jack — you can’t just ask me to blow up a train — a passenger train, especially. Who knows how many innocent people will get hurt — or even killed? You gotta understand, I can’t have that on my conscience.”

“Tommy!” Jack chided. “Have I ever asked you to do something like that? Of course not! I promise you, there will be no innocent people on this run. It’s a very exclusive trip — a party on the rails, open only to Barrow & Locke, and those who serve them.” His face darkened, and his voice grew serious. “You’ve seen enough to know... there will be no innocents among them, Tommy. You’ll hurt no one who hasn’t earned it many times over.”

Tommy sighed, and dropped his head into his hands. It was true. In the course of his employment at Barrow & Locke, he had seen — or heard — a good many things he wished he could forget. He had worked side by side with a man whose voice never sounded quite right to him, echoed as it was by phantom whispers, particularly when he was in a temper, which was often. Nathaniel Locke’s rages filled the room with writhing shadows and left a rime of frost on the windows. Tommy was certain Locke had killed one of the family’s accountants right in front of him, although he hadn’t physically laid a finger on the man. In that moment, he had felt... whatever it was... inside the heir to Locke rail brush against him. The incident had been explained away as a sudden stroke — how unfortunate, so tragic in one so young, be sure to send flowers to the family, won’t you, Tommy?

Tommy had called the florist — not to mention the undertaker — and had carried on as though he had no sense of what had truly happened. When they came to take the body away, Tommy showed them into the office and assisted as best he could. He phoned the man’s supervisor and explained the situation, and expressed the appropriate sympathies to his friends and colleagues. And at the end of the day, he went home to the tiny set of rooms he occupied in one of Jack’s properties, and locked himself in the bathroom, and he huddled in the cold, empty porcelain tub

and squeezed himself into a ball, and muffled his screams into his folded arms until he finally stopped shaking.

The next morning, Tommy had reported for work, taking up pen and paper to begin the day's tasks at 8 a.m. on the dot. There was no mention of the accountant — not by Nathaniel Locke nor anyone else at B&L so far as Tommy ever heard — but he never forgot the man. It was far from the only such incident he had witnessed, and not even the worst, but it had stuck with him. The world would not suffer in the absence of a man like Nathaniel Locke, would likely even be the better for it. Tommy would be a liar if he tried to say otherwise, and his mama and daddy had raised him better than that.

“I can't believe I'm even considering this,” Tommy mumbled.

“Sometimes, son, we're called upon to make hard choices, to do things we would usually never consider, in the interest of folks we care about. Or our own.”

“Why can't you do it, then? I've seen a lot over the past seven years, Mr. Fields. I know... I know you're not a... *normal* man either.”

Jack fell silent, his eyes on Tommy, as still as a rattlesnake about to strike. The air began to grow warm around them, an almost suffocating mugginess rising out of the November chill, and the smell of strangler vine and muddy creek water filled Tommy's nose. He froze, realizing that might have been the wrong thing to say. It was the unspoken rule that governed their acquaintanceship, and here he'd blundered right into it.

Heartbeats ticked by, and Tommy counted each one. Then finally Jack sighed, rubbing one hand over the faint stubble on his cheek. “Oh, would that I could, boy. But my hands are tied. If I took direct action against them, there would be... consequences. I have to move through proxies, be discreet. It's frustrating as hell, but necessary.”

“You sound like a politician.”

Jack reared back in his seat in shock, and the expression on his face reminded Tommy of a deeply affronted cat. “Now, Tommy, I know you’re under a lot of strain here, but that was just uncalled for,” he said stiffly.

Tommy raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry. Sorry,” he conceded with a sigh. “Fine. Now I’m not saying I’ll do it, but tell me more about this plan of yours.”

“Well... the next part you’re... probably not gonna like,” Jack said with a wince.

“I don’t like anything about this plan. How bad can it be?”

“Well... the thing is, B&L are gonna investigate the explosion pretty thoroughly,” Jack explained. “They’re gonna need proof you died in that crash — nothing major now, a finger would probably be enough—”

“What do you mean ‘a finger’?” Tommy asked suspiciously.

“Oh, it’s no big deal! Just a pinky will do. It’ll be real quick. I’ll sharpen the ax myself—”

“You want me to cut off a finger?”

“Or... well, a toe would probably suffice...”

“Sweet Jesus, I can’t believe we’re even talking about this, Jack. I can’t cut off a toe! How am I supposed to jump off the train and *run* after I do that?” Tommy pointed out, hoping to appeal to reason.

“Well, it’ll have to be the finger then,” Jack sighed, the barely-held patience in his voice sounding for all the world like Tommy’s mama dealing with one of his more recalcitrant siblings. “You’re right handed, ain’tcha? Just use the left pinky. You’ll barely miss it.”

“I’m not cutting off my finger — or anything else — and that’s all there is to it.”

Jack threw up his hands in exasperation. “Fine! Fine, we’ll figure something else out. But if they send them Hollow Men looking for you, don’t blame me.”

“I won’t.”

“All right then. Go on, get outta here. I got details to iron out, you got deliveries to make,” Jack grumbled, pointedly eyeing the door.

Tommy shook his head. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” he grumbled back. But as he stepped out into the night, there was a smile on his face. The exhaustion that had weighed him down earlier was all but gone, and as he loaded crates of J.T. Fields’ Special Brew into the bed of his truck, he hardly felt their weight. They had a plan. Soon, he could put all the horrors of Barrow & Locke behind him. Soon he would be free, and he and Ginny would be together again.

[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. My, oh my, we are heading into some troubled waters now, aren’t we now? We can all trust our man Jack to have Tommy’s best interests at heart, can’t we? Can’t we? Yeah, that’s what I thought. I do wanna thank everybody who has recently joined the family by completing their social media ritual by following us on Twitter, Instagram and on Facebook. Links to all those things and the wonderful world of the Discord server are available over at [oldgodsofppalachia.com](http://oldgodsofppalachia.com).

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Talk to you soon Family, Talk to you real soon.

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