

The Courting of Griselda

Sackett series

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1997

*** **

When it came to Griselda Popley, I was down to bedrock and showing no color.

What I mean is, I wasn't getting anyplace. The only thing I'd learned since leaving the Cumberland in Tennessee was how to work a gold placer claim, but I was doing no better with that than I was with Griselda.

Her pa, Frank Popley, had a claim just a whoop and a holler down canyon from me. He had put down a shaft on a flat bench at the bend of the creek and he was down a ways and making a fair clean-up.

He was scraping rock down there and panning out sixty to seventy dollars a day, and one time he found a crack where the gold had seeped through and filled in a space under a layer of rock, and he cleaned out six hundred dollars in four or five minutes.

It sure does beat all how prosperity makes a man critical of all who are less prosperous. Seems like some folks no sooner get two dollars they can rattle together than they start looking down their noses at folks who only have two bits.

We were right friendly while Popley was sinking his shaft, but as soon as he began bringing up gold he started giving me advice and talking me down to Griselda. From the way he cut up, you'd have thought it was some ability or knowledge of his that put that gold there. I never saw a man get superior so fast.

He was running me down and talking up that Arvie Wilt who had a claim nearby the Popley place, and Arvie was a man I didn't cotton to.

He was two inches taller than my six feet and three, and where I pack one hundred and eighty pounds on that lean a frame, most of it in my chest, shoulders, and arms, Arvie weighed a good fifty pounds more and he swaggered it around as if almighty impressed with himself.

He was a big, easy-smiling man that folks took to right off, and it took them a while to learn he was a man with a streak of meanness in him that was nigh on to downright viciousness. Trouble was, a body never saw that mean streak unless he was in a bind, but when trouble came to him, the meanness came out.

But Arvie was panning out gold, and you'd be surprised how that increased his social standing there on Horse Collar Creek.

Night after night he was over to the Popleys', putting his big feet under their table and being waited on by Griselda. Time to time I was there, too, but they talked gold and how much they weighed out each day while all I was weighing out was gravel.

He was panning a fine show of color and all I had was a .44 pistol gun, a Henry rifle, and my mining tools. And as we all know it's the high card in a man's hand to be holding money when he goes a-courting.

None of us Sacketts ever had much cash money. We were hardworking mountain folk who harvested a lean corn crop off a side-hill farm, and we boys earned what clothes weren't made at home by trapping muskrats or coon. Sometimes we'd get us a bear, and otherwise we'd live on razorback hog meat or venison.

Never will forget the time a black bear treed old Orrin, that brother of mine, and us caught nine miles from home and none of us carrying iron.

You ever tackle a grown bear with a club? Me and Tyrel, we done it. We chunked at him with rocks and sticks, but he paid them no mind. He was bound and determined to have Orrin, and there was Orrin up high in the small branches of that tree like a possum huntin' persimmons.

Chunking did no good, so Tyrel and me cut us each a club and we had at that bear. He was big and he was mean, but while one of us closed in on him from before, the other lambasted him from behind. Time to time we'd stop lambasting that bear to advise Orrin.

Finally that old bear got disgusted and walked off and Orrin came down out of that tree and we went on to the dance at Skunk Hollow School. Orrin did his fiddling that night from a sitting stool because the bear had most of his pants.

Right now I felt like he must have felt then. Every day that Griselda girl went a-walking past my claim paying me no mind but switching her skirts until I was fair sweating on my neck.

Her pa was a hard man. One time I went over there for supper like I had when I'd been welcome, back when neither of us had anything. He would stand up there in his new boots, consulting a new gold watch every minute or two, and talking high and mighty about the virtues of hard work and the application of brains. And all the time that Arvie Wilt was a-setting over there making big eyes at Griselda.

If anything, Arvie had more gold than Popley did and he was mighty welcome at table, but for me the atmosphere was frosting over a mite, and the only reason I dug in and held on was that I'd scraped my pot empty of beans and for two days I'd eaten nothing but those skimpy little wild onions.

Now when it came right down to it, Popley knew I'd worked hard as either of them, but I was showing no color and he wanted a son-in-law who was prosperous, so needing to find fault, he taken issue with me on fighting.

We boys from the high-up hills aren't much on bowing and scraping, but along about fighting time, you'll find us around. Back in the Cumberland I grew up to knuckle-and-skull fighting, and what I hadn't learned there I picked up working west on a keelboat.

Pa, he taught us boys to be honest, to give respect to womenfolk, to avoid trouble when we could, but to stand our ground when it came to a matter of principle, and a time or two I'd stood my ground.

That old six-shooter of mine was a caution. It looked old enough to have worn out three men, but it shot true and worked smooth. My hands are almighty big but I could fetch that pistol faster than you could blink. Not that I made an issue of it because Pa taught us to live peaceable.

Only there was that time down to Elk Creek when a stranger slicked an ace off the bottom, and I taken issue with him.

He had at me with a fourteen-inch blade and my toothpick was home stuck in a tree where I'd left it after skinning out a deer, so I fetched him a clout alongside the skull and took the blade from him. A friend of his hit me from behind with a chair, which I took as unfriendly, and then he fetched out his pistol, so I came up a-shooting.

Seemed like I'd won myself a name as a bad man to trouble, and it saved me some hardship. Folks spoke polite and men seeking disagreement took the other side of the road, only it gave Popley something he could lay a hand to, and he began making slighting remarks about men who got into brawls and cutting scrapes.

Words didn't come easy to me and by the time I'd thought of the right answer I was home in bed, but when Popley talked I felt like I was disgracing Griselda by coming a-courting.

So I went back to my claim shanty and looked into the bean pot again, but it was still empty, and I went a-hunting wild onions.

Nobody could ever say any of us Sacketts fought shy of work, so I dug away at my claim until I was satisfied there was nothing there but barren gravel. Climbing out of that shaft I sat down and looked at my hole card.

There was nothing left but to load up my gear on that spavined mule I had and leave the country. I was out of grub, out of cash money, and out of luck. Only leaving the country meant leaving Griselda, and worst of all, it meant leaving her to Arvie Wilt.

Time or two I've heard folks say there's always better fish in the sea, but not many girls showed me attention. Many a time I sat lonely along the wall, feared to ask a girl to dance because I knew she'd turn me down, and no girl had paid me mind for a long time until Griselda showed up.

She was little, she was pert, and she had quick blue eyes and an up-tilted nose and freckles where you didn't mind them. She'd grown into a woman and was feeling it, and there I was, edged out by the likes of Arvie Wilt.

Popley, he stopped by. There I was, a-setting hungry and discouraged, and he came down creek riding that big brown mule and he said, „Tell, I'd take it kindly if you stayed away from the house.“ He cleared his throat because I had a bleak look to my eye. „Griselda is coming up to marrying time and I don't want her confused. You've got nothing, and Arvie Wilt is a prosperous mining man. Meaning no offense, but you see how it is.“

He rode on down to the settlement and there was nothing for me to do but go to picking wild onions. The trouble was, if a man picked all day with both hands he couldn't pick enough wild onions to keep him alive.

It was rough country, above the canyons, but there were scattered trees and high grass plains, with most of the ridges topped with crests of pine. Long about sundown I found some deer feeding in a parklike clearing.

They were feeding, and I was downwind of them, so I straightened up and started walking toward them, taking my time. When I saw their tails start to switch, I stopped.

A deer usually feeds into the wind so he can smell danger, and when his tail starts to wiggle he's going to look up and around, so I stood right still. Deer don't see all too good, so unless a body is moving they see nothing to be afraid of. They looked around and went back to feeding and I moved closer until their tails started again, and then I stopped.

Upshot of it was, I got a good big buck, butchered him, and broiled a steak right on the spot, I was that hungry. Then I loaded the best cuts of meat into the hide and started back, still munching on wild onions.

Down on the creek again the first person I saw was Griselda, and right off she began switching her skirts as she walked to meet me.

„I passed your claim,“ she said, „but you were not there.“

She had little flecks of brown in her blue eyes and she stood uncomfortably close to a man. „No, ma'am, I've give... given... it up. Your pa is right. That claim isn't up to much.“

„Are you coming by tonight?“

„Seems to me I wore out my welcome. No, ma'am, I'm not coming by. However, if you're walking that way, I'll drop off one of these here venison steaks.“

Fresh meat was scarce along that creek, and the thought occurred that I might sell what I didn't need, so after leaving a steak with the Popleys, I peddled the rest of it, selling out for twelve dollars cash money, two quarts of beans, a pint of rice, and six pounds of flour.

Setting in my shack that night I wrassled with my problem and an idea that had come to me. Astride that spavined mule I rode down to the settlement and spent my twelve dollars on flour, a mite of sugar, and some other fixings, and back at the cabin I washed out some flour sacks for aprons, and made me one of those chef hats like I'd seen in a newspaper picture. Then I set to making bear-sign.

Least, that's what we called them in the mountains. Most folks on the flatland called them doughnuts, and some mountain folk did, but not around our house. I made up a batch of bear-sign and that good baking smell drifted down along the creek, and it wasn't more than a few minutes later until a wild-eyed miner came running and falling up from the creek, and a dozen more after him.

„Hey! Is that bear-sign we smell? Is them doughnuts?“

„Cost you,“ I said. „I'm set up for business. Three doughnuts for two bits.“

That man set right down and ate two dollars' worth and by the time he was finished there was a crowd around reaching for them fast as they came out of the Dutch oven.

Folks along that creek lived on skimpy bacon and beans, sometimes some soda biscuits, and real baking was unheard-of. Back to home no woman could make doughnuts fast enough for we Sackett boys who were all good eaters, so we took to making them ourselves. Ma often said nobody could make bear-sign like her son, William Tell Sackett.

By noon I was off to the settlement for more makings, and by nightfall everybody on the creek knew I was in business. Next day I sold a barrel of doughnuts, and by nightfall I had the barrel full again and a washtub also. That washtub was the only one along the creek, and it looked like nobody would get a bath until I'd run out of bear-sign.

You have to understand how tired a man can get of grease and beans to understand how glad they were to taste some honest-to-gosh, down-to-earth doughnuts.

Sun-up and here came Arvie Wilt. Arvie was a big man with a big appetite and he set right down and ran up a bill of four dollars. I was making money.

Arvie sat there eating doughnuts and forgetting all about his claim.

Come noon, Griselda showed up. She came a-prancing and a-preening it up the road and she stayed around, eating a few doughnuts and talking with me. The more she talked the meaner Arvie got.

„Griselda,“ he said, „you'd best get along home. You know how your pa feels about you trailing around with just any drifter.“

Well, sir, I put down my bowl and wiped the flour off my hands. „Are you aiming that at me?“ I asked. „If you are, you just pay me my four dollars and get off down the pike.“

He was mean, like I've said, and he did what I hoped he'd do. He balled up a fist and threw it at me. Trouble was, he took so much time getting his fist ready and his feet in position that I knew what he was going to do, so when he flung that

punch, I just stepped inside and hit him where he'd been putting those doughnuts.

He gulped and turned green around the jowls and white around the eyes, so I knocked down a hand he stuck at me and belted him again in the same place. Then I caught him by the shirt front before he could fall and backhanded him twice across the mouth for good measure.

Griselda was a-hauling at my arms. „Stop it, you awful man! You hurt him!“

„That ain't surprising, Griselda,“ I said. „It was what I had in mind.“

So I went back to making bear-sign, and after a bit Arvie got up, with Griselda helping, and he wiped the blood off his lips and he said, „I'll get even! I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I do!“

„And it just might be,“ I said, and watched them walk off together.

There went Griselda. Right out of my life, and with Arvie Wilt, too.

Two days later I was out of business and broke. Two days later I had a barrel of doughnuts I couldn't give away and my private gold rush was over. Worst of all, I'd put all I'd made back into the business and there I was, stuck with it. And it was Arvie Wilt who did it to me.

As soon as he washed the blood off his face he went down to the settlement. He had heard of a woman down there who was a baker, and he fetched her back up the creek. She was a big, round, jolly woman with pink cheeks, and she was a first-rate cook. She settled down to making apple pies three inches thick and fourteen inches across and she sold a cut of a pie for two bits and each pie made just four pieces.

She also baked cakes with high-grade all over them. In mining country rich ore is called high-grade, so miners got to calling the icing on cake high-grade, and there I sat with a barrel full of bear-sign and everybody over to the baker woman's buying cake and pie and such-like.

Then Popley came by with Griselda riding behind him on that brown mule, headed for the baker woman's. „See what a head for business Arvie's got? He'll make a fine husband for Griselda.“

Griselda? She didn't even look at me. She passed me up like a pay-car passing a tramp, and I felt so low I could have walked under a snake with a high hat on.

Three days later I was back to wild onions. My grub gave out, I couldn't peddle my flour, and the red ants got into my sugar. All one day I tried sifting red ants out of sugar; as fast as I got them out they got back in until there was more ants than sugar.

So I gave up and went hunting. I hunted for two days and couldn't find a deer, nor anything else but wild onions.

Down to the settlement they had a fandango, a real old-time square dance, and I had seen nothing of the kind since my brother Orrin used to fiddle for them back to home. So I brushed up my clothes and rubbed some deer grease on my boots, and I went to that dance.

Sure enough, Griselda was there, and she was with Arvie Wilt.

Arvie was all slicked out in a black broadcloth suit that fit him a little too soon, and black boots so tight he winced when he put a foot down.

Arvie spotted me and they fetched to a halt right beside me. „Sackett,“ Arvie said, „I hear you're scraping bottom again. Now my baker woman needs a helper to rev up her pots and pans, and if you want the job—“

„I don't.“

„Just thought I'd ask,“—he grinned maliciously—„seein' you so good at woman's work.“

He saw it in my eyes so he grabbed Griselda and they waltzed away, grinning. Thing that hurt, she was grinning, too.

„That Arvie Wilt,“ somebody said, „there's a man will amount to something. Popley says he has a fine head for business.“

„For the amount of work he does,“ somebody else said, „he sure has a lot of gold. He ain't spent a day in that shaft in a week.“

„What do you mean by that?“

„Ask them down to the settlement. He does more gambling than mining, according to some.“

That baker woman was there, waltzing around like she was light as a feather, and seeing her made me think of a Welshman I knew. Now you take a genuine Welshman, he can talk a bird right out of a tree... I started wondering... how would he do with a widow woman who was a fine baker?

That Welshman wasn't far away, and we'd talked often, the year before. He liked a big woman, he said, the jolly kind and who could enjoy making good food. I sat down and wrote him a letter.

Next morning early I met up with Griselda. „You actually marrying that Arvie?“

Her pert little chin came up and her eyes were defiant. „A girl has to think of her future, Tell Sackett! She can't be tying herself to a—a—ne'er-do-well! Mr. Wilt is a serious man. His mine is very successful“—her nose tilted—„and so is the bakery!“

She turned away, then looked back. „And if you expect any girl to like you, you'd better stop eating those onions! They're simply awful!“

And if I stopped eating wild onions, I'd starve to death.

Not that I wasn't half-starved, anyway.

That day I went farther up the creek than ever, and the canyon narrowed to high walls and the creek filled the bottom, wall to wall, and I walked ankle deep in water going through the narrows. And there on a sandy beach were deer tracks, old tracks and fresh tracks, and I decided this was where they came to drink.

So I found a grassy ledge above the pool and alongside an outcropping of rock, and there I settled down to wait for a deer. It was early afternoon and a good bit of time remained to me.

There were pines on the ridge behind me, and the wind sounded fine, humming through their needles. I sat there for a bit, enjoying the shade, and then I reached around and pulled a wild onion from the grass, lifting it up to brush away the sand and gravel clinging to the roots...

It was sundown when I reached my shanty, but I didn't stop, I rode on into the settlement. The first person I saw was the Welshman. He was smiling from ear to ear, and beside him was the baker woman.

„Married!“ he said cheerfully. „Just the woman I've been looking for!“

And off down the street they went, arm in arm.

Only now it didn't matter anymore.

For two days then I was busy as all get-out. I was down to the settlement and back up above the narrows of the canyon, and then I was down again.

Putting my few things into a pack, and putting the saddle on that old mule of mine, I was fixing to leave the claim and shanty for the last time when who should show up but Frank Popley.

He was riding his brown mule with Griselda riding behind him, and they rode up in front of the shack. Griselda slid down off that mule and ran up and threw her arms around me and kissed me right on the lips.

„Oh, Tell! We heard the news! Oh, we're so happy for you! Pa was just saying that he always knew you had the stuff, that you had what it takes!“

Frank Popley looked over at me and beamed. „Can't keep a good man down, boy! You sure can't! Griselda, she always said, *Pa, Tell is the best of the lot*, an' she was sure enough right!“

Suddenly a boot crunched on gravel, and there was Arvie, looking mighty mean and tough, and he was holding a Walker Colt in his fist, aimed right at me.

Did you ever see a Walker Colt? Only thing it lacks to be a cannon is a set of wheels.

„You ain't a-gonna do it!“ Arvie said. „You can't have Griselda!“

„You can have Griselda,“ I heard myself say, and was astonished to realize that I meant it.

„You're not fooling me! You can't get away with it.“ And his thumb came forward to cock that pistol.

Like I said, Arvie wasn't too smart or he'd have cocked his gun as he drew it, so I just fetched out my six-shooter and let the hammer slip from under my thumb as it came level.

Deliberately, I held it a little high, and the .44 slug smashed him in the shoulder. It knocked him sidewise and he let go of that big pistol and staggered back two steps and sat down hard.

„You're a mighty disagreeable man, Arvie,“ I said, „and not much account. When the boys down at the settlement start finding the marks you put on those cards you'll have to leave the country, but I reckon you an' Griselda deserve each other.“

She was looking at me with big eyes and pouty lips because she'd heard the news, but I wasn't having any.

„You-all been washing gold along the creek,“ I said, „but you never stopped to think where those grains of gold started from. Well, I found and staked the mother lode, staked her from Hell to breakfast, and one day's take will be more than you've taken out since you started work. I figure now I'll dig me out a goodly amount of money, then I'll sell my claims and find me some friends that aren't looking at me just to see what I got.“

They left there walking down that hill with Arvie astride the mule making pained sounds every time it took a step.

When I had pulled that wild onion up there on that ledge overlooking the deer run, there were bits of gold in the sand that clung to the roots, and when I scraped the dirt away from the base of that outcrop, she was all there... wire gold lying in the rock like a jewelry store window.

Folks sometimes ask me why I called it the Wild Onion Mining Company.

