

A Kentucky Courtship

By

Lloyd Mullins

Romance is for the birds. That was my first thought after the bullet took my hat off. Well, not quite; my first thought was, "Shit!" My reflections on the nature of romance followed, just as soon as I'd found a suitable tree to hide behind. It was romance that had brought me to this pass, and not even my romance. My brother Elvin was hunkered down behind a log, one hand over his eye while the blood poured out. "God, please don't let him die, I don't want no feud with anybody this handy with a gun, or this free with ammunition," I prayed.

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My name is Alvin Cross, and I was fourteen years old in the fall of 1919. The trouble had all started when my older brother Elvin had taken to courting Rose LeRoy, whose father had some good bottomland right next to our farm. Rose was pretty enough, but that acreage was really what Elvin was in love with. Elvin was already a prosperous man, but if he could add that land to his own, he'd be the biggest landowner in the county. Between that, the dry-goods store in town, and the four stills he had hidden away back in the hills, and Elvin would be a man to be reckoned with. A man with that kind of money could write his own ticket. (And by the way, if you think Elvin and Alvin sounds ridiculous, how do you think our sister Alvinia felt? Our folks were good people, but kind of unimaginative in the naming department.)

Unfortunately, Rose wasn't in a hurry to get hitched. To tell the truth, I think she scared most of the young fellers to death. I know she scared me. She worked in the

fields as hard as any man, and took no guff from anybody. She was tall and strong, and she had a fierce kind of personality that made her even more intimidating. She didn't seem too impressed with Elvin's flashy ways, and she was death on drinking, so him running so much 'shine wasn't making it any easier.

"Alvin," Elvin told me, "I ain't never seen a woman so down on a man making a living. Men are going to drink. At least the 'shine I cook is good, and not that busthead swill that killed her brother."

Then the war ended, and John Andrews came home. Rose and him had had an understanding, until he'd left for France with Pershing. She'd given him up when his rare letters stopped coming altogether, especially after the news about the Marne, and Belleau Wood. Everybody just assumed he was dead, right up until he stepped off the train in Cumberland. Rose was some put out with John, but when Elvin heard through the grapevine that John was going to call on her anyway, he sent me along to spy things out and make sure she was as mad as she seemed.

"Get up close enough you can hear, but don't let them see you," Elvin said. "I ain't looking to get on her bad side, but I want to know where things stand."

So that was how I come to be hiding in the bushes along the side of Rose's daddy's yard when John Andrews come to call. He come walking down the road in his uniform, with a couple important-looking medals hanging off him, looking like Black Jack Pershing himself. He wasn't big, not more than half-again bigger than me, and I was scrawny in them days, but he seemed to take up an awful lot of space for such a little feller. He come sauntering along with a bunch of flowers in his hand.

Rose was sitting on the porch with her momma and daddy, and John walked right up to the bottom step. "Evening Rose. Evening Mister and Missus LeRoy."

"Why daddy, look who it is. If it isn't John Andrews the heroic Kentucky fighting man. We all thought you were dead, John. Either that, or taken up with one of those fancy French gals. Why else would you stop writing, and after all we'd said before you left."

"Rose, darlin', I just didn't think there was any way I was going to survive. I felt like you was waiting on a ghost, and so I gave you up. But I'm back now, back and in one piece."

"Don't you 'Rose darling' me, John Andrews," said Rose, coming down off the porch like a scalded cat and stepping up nose-to-nose with him with her fists on her hips, "I'm not your 'darlin', not anymore, and it's your own fault. I'd have waited until hell froze over for you to come back, but you couldn't even bother to write, over there, having your big adventure. When you stopped writing, was it me you were thinking of, or was it those French maddymoselles?"

"Now you need to stop that line, before you make me mad," John said, as he took a step back. "You know there ain't no woman for me but you, not then, not now, and not ever. I was too busy trying not to get shot or gassed or bayoneted, to have time to think about women."

"Well, I know one woman you should have taken time to think about!" she snapped, stepping right into him. Now everyone in those mountains knew that John Andrews was a hard man, but it was him that backed away. Like I said, Rose was an intimidating woman. "You think you're going to waltz in here with a few medals on your

chest, and I'm just going to come running, well you've got another think coming. You're not the only bull in these fields, you know." She kept right on walking into him, backing him up, right toward where I was hid out, so everything they said got clearer and clearer.

"Well now, what the hell are . . ."

"Don't you think that kind of salty language will work on me! That sort of thing may impress those half-wit friends of yours, but it carries no water with me!"

"Now Rose, I didn't mean . . ."

"I know what you meant, and I don't care. I cried myself to sleep for weeks over you. Well, I'm all cried out. Now I'm just mad, so you'd better get used to it, or stop coming around!"

I looked up toward the house to see how Rose's folks was taking this. They were drinking sweet tea and enjoying the show.

Out in the yard, Rose was still going after John like a hound after a coon, and he was starting to look as eager to get away as that coon. As he backed away, he said, "Now Rose, don't go saying nothing you'll be sorry for later . . ."

"The only thing I'll be sorry about is that I'm too much of a lady to tell you what I really think."

Well, there's only so much abuse a man can take, and he'd had enough. He stepped forward and grabbed hold of her, and pulled her toward him to kiss her quiet, like I've seen them do in the pictures. The only thing he accomplished was to add velocity to the knee she fired like a mortar shell into his . . . well you get the point. John certainly did. He let out a high-pitched groan as his eyes rolled back in his head, and he

changed from pulling her to him to clinging to her for support. Like I said, she took no guff from no one.

Despite myself, I let out a groan in sympathy, but they were so intent on each other that neither noticed. I didn't reckon he'd be much competition to Elvin, at least not for a while.

John had recovered himself enough to let go of Rose, and stood gagging and retching, hands on his knees. "Good God Rose," he gasped, "if you hate me that much, couldn't you just shoot me?"

"I don't hate you John," she smiled, as she petted his back like he was her dog. "I just don't want you thinking you can just waltz in here like Douglas Fairbanks and sweep me off my feet. If you want back in my good graces, you've got some work to do. You can start by walking me to church next Sunday."

So John Andrews staggered down the road and up the mountain to his cabin, those flowers wilting in his hand, and Rose LeRoy stood there watching him go. Then she turned and stared daggers at the brush where I was hiding. She didn't say nothing, but I tell you, that look made my blood run cold. I wanted no part in getting on the bad side of that woman. Eventually, she went off to work in the garden, humming to herself as she hoed weeds from the rows of corn.

Once the coast was clear, I slid out for a rondevoo with Elvin. He laughed and laughed when he heard about that kick.

"Hot damn, Alvin boy!" Elvin gloated. "You know who the big bull in these fields is, don't you? Old John Andrews better hunt himself up another heifer, or this bull's

going to give him the horn. 'Course, from the sound of that kick, she may have done pulled his horns in for him already."

"They say he's a bad man to cross, Elvin."

Elvin rolled his eyes, "Hell, boy, you heard Rose. He ain't got nothing to offer but some army tinware, and she ain't impressed. She knows he ain't got a pot to piss in. I won't have to cross him. It's him should worry about crossing me."

I wasn't so sure. Elvin hadn't seen the way she looked at John when his back was turned, walking away.

When they walked into church together that next Sunday, Elvin couldn't believe his eyes. "What's she doing here with him?"

I reckon, he'd been so busy gloating that he hadn't heard that part. Just to rub a little salt in the wound, I leaned over and whispered, "Elvin, ain't that your girl there with John Andrews?" I got a bony elbow in my ribs, and Elvin spent the entire service fuming and acting like he hadn't even noticed.

Now, it was not at all unusual in those days for men to go armed. These mountains were full of dangers; panthers, bandits, trigger-happy moonshiners, and Government Revenuers, but it was also considered disrespectful to carry a gun into church. So we had a shade tree outside the church where them as went armed stacked or hung their guns so as not to upset the ladies. We called it the Gun Tree. It was also where the men would stand and visit after services while they waited for the women to finish gossiping inside. Well, when services were over, Elvin was ready to call John Andrews out, right up until he saw the hardware John was strapping on. He had a Colt's

Model 1911 on his hip, and was tucking a captured German Luger into a shoulder rig under his coat.

“Morning John,” was all Elvin said.

“Morning Elvin. Alvin.”

“Hidy John.”

We all just stood there looking at each other until Rose strolled up like she didn’t have a care in the world. “Why look at you all, being all civilized.”

“Well sure Rose, why wouldn’t we be?” asked John.

“No reason I can think of,” added Elvin.

“Elvin, you’d think John was going back to the war instead of just walking a girl to church wouldn’t you?” she said, with a glint in her eye. “Maybe he’s just scared of me.”

I couldn’t tell if that glint was amusement or meanness, so I kept my mouth shut and took a couple slow steps back.

“Don’t you start up on me again Rose,” said John, a little defensively. “Where I’ve been, this wouldn’t even count as armed. I just like to be prepared.”

“I just don’t want people thinking I’m putting on airs, going around with an armed escort,” she said with a smile, her eyes twinkling like the sun on ripples in the water.

She took his arm and looked at Elvin and me, “You boys have a nice day.”

As John and Rose strolled away, arm in arm, Elvin stood fuming, watching them go.

“Hey Elvin, ain’t that your girl walking off with John Andrews?” I asked. “Looks like there may be a new boss bull hereabouts.” Some people just have no sense of

humor. When Elvin got done reminding me I ought not to sass him, he picked me up and dusted me off.

“That bog-trotting Irish son-of-a-bitch ain’t going to beat me out,” he steamed. “I done put in too much time on Rose to be undone by the likes of him.” There was a fair amount of snickering from the other fellers standing around, but that dried up pretty quick when Elvin gave them the hairy eyeball.

For the next few weeks, Rose LeRoy’s dance card was filled. If Elvin wasn’t escorting her to the moving pictures in Cumberland, John was squiring her on long walks along the river. Elvin brought her candies and perfumes, John brought her wildflowers. The most entertaining part of the competition, to everybody else anyway, was Sunday mornings at church. Some Sundays, Elvin escorted Rose, while others it was John’s honor. Elvin started singing louder, showing off his fine tenor singing voice, while John rasped away in his gravelly baritone. Elvin took to tossing those big, heavy \$10 Golden Eagle coins into the plate, to make sure she heard it, and John kept the Ladies Benevolent Society supplied with venison to distribute to the county poor. After three months of this, the only clear winners in the competition for Rose’s hand were the church, the choir, and the poor. Nobody could tell who was ahead, and Rose wasn’t telling. She just smiled and went about her business. As for me, I just kept my head down and stayed out of it, other than aggravating Elvin about it every now and then.

One thing did change, John stopped carrying his guns all the time. I don’t know whether it was because he got tired of Rose needling him about them, or if he was just getting used to not being shot at by the entire German army on a daily basis, but he mostly wore them now only if he had business back in them hollers after church.



Well, the more peaceable John looked, the more belligerent Elvin got. "It's time," he told me one day, "to end this. Next Sunday, we'll lay for him up on the mountain, and let him know to back off from my girl."

"What you going to do about all that artillery he carries?" I asked. I'd been enjoying the show as much as anyone, and had no desire to get shot in pursuit of someone else's woman.

"You let me worry about that. We'll pick a time when he ain't armed, and let him have it, when he ain't got no choice but to take it."

So we watched, and on a Sunday when he wasn't armed, we laid up in the brush alongside the game trail he took from Rose's house to his own. As John approached, we stepped out in front of him.

"Howdy John."

"Howdy Elvin. Alvin."

"Hidy John."

"Can I help you boys with something" John asked.

Elvin smiled. "It's what we can help you with that's brought us out here John."

"Elvin, I can't think of a thing that I need your help with."

"We're here to help you keep from ruining' your life John."

"How's that?"

"Being' a thief will ruin your life John. You need to learn to leave things alone what belong to others."

"Elvin, you boys must be drunk. You go on home now, before somebody gets hurt."

Elvin made the first move, and got John's fist right between the eyes for his trouble. I leapt at John, who sidestepped, grabbed me by the throat and crotch, and flung me right on down the mountain. I must've fell twenty feet before I hit the ground, and laid there stunned. It sounded like they were really stuck into it up there, and to tell the truth, I was in no hurry to get back into it. Besides, Elvin was damn near twice John's size, and tended to fight dirty, so I wasn't worried. Eventually, the sounds of battle slowed down, so I crawled and climbed back up to stop Elvin killing John. Once he got started, Elvin could be kind of hard to stop. Sure enough, when I got back up there, there was only one man standing, but it wasn't Elvin. John was some bruised and bloodied, but Elvin was sitting on the ground with several of his own teeth in his hand, looking like Sherman had marched his whole army over him.

John give me a look, and I held up both hands to let him know I was done. "I don't know what's got into you boys, but you'd best steer clear of me 'til you're in a better mood," he said. Next time you want trouble, look for it somewhere else. I've had enough trouble for one lifetime already." Then he turned and walked away on up the mountain.

After that, Elvin decided that a less direct tactic might be more effective. We kept watch on the Gun Tree, and whenever John escorted Rose unarmed, we would run on ahead up the mountain, and roll boulders down on John as he walked home from Rose's house. We weren't really trying to kill him, especially since he had a large and particularly unforgiving family, but Elvin figured that a couple close calls ought to do the trick. After all, John had beaten the odds and survived the war, why would he risk getting killed now, over a girl as mean and hard to get along with as Rose? Of course,

I've often wondered why Elvin didn't back off either, for she didn't seem to like him none too well, but I figure it was more pride than any tender feelings for Rose. Well, pride and that land of her daddy's.

For John's part, he didn't seem worried, or even angry. I reckon he figured that if the Germans hadn't been able to kill him, and God knows they'd really tried, he didn't feel like us Crosses were anything to worry about.

Well, that last day, the one I was telling you about at the beginning of this, we hightailed it up the mountain after church, when we saw his guns weren't hanging on the Gun Tree. John walked Rose on home, and headed up the trail. When he heard the boulders start to roll, that crazy son-of-a-bitch pulled both guns, and blazed away like the fourth of July up the side of the mountain. The tricky bastard must've left his guns at Rose's house and picked them up when he got her home. Scared me to death, and ruined a damn fine hat.

When the shooting stopped, I left my tree and crawled over to where Elvin was screaming.

"He shot my eye out! The son-of-a-bitch shot my god-damned eye out! Oh sweet Jesus it hurts! Alvin, help me god-dammit!" Blood was pouring out from under his hands, and I was panicking, this being my first time in a shooting scrape. I decided I didn't care for it at all, and I cared for it a lot less when I heard a magazine slam home behind me. I turned and saw John standing over us, reloaded guns in hand. I ain't too proud to say that my face went white, and my pants went dark at the same time. Pride was what got us into this mess in the first place.

“Oh God, don’t kill us John,” I pleaded. “We didn’t mean no harm, please don’t kill us! We’re sorry, we’re so sorry, it was a mistake, please don’t kill us!”

John Andrews looked at the two of us disgustedly. “Shut up Alvin, I ain’t going to kill you,” he sighed as he holstered his guns. “Quit your hollering and let’s take a look at that eye, Elvin.” He pried Elvin’s hands down and told me to hold them. He took out a bandana and wiped away the blood, and laughed.

“How the hell can you laugh,” asked Elvin, “what kind of devil are you?”

“I ain’t no devil, and your eye ain’t shot out, you stupid son-of-a-bitch. It looks like a splinter of something hit you right over the eye. It bled pretty bad, but your eye is fine. Now you tell me, what in hell’s this all about?”

“We was just trying to scare you off from Rose,” I whimpered, “Elvin was courtin’ her and about had her all sewn up until you came back.”

“Well, if this is how you scare off rivals, you boys need to find a new line. Now I’m going to tell you fellers, enough is enough. There ain’t going to be no more of this nonsense.” John sighed, “I know you got feelings for Rose, and I don’t hold it against you, but I’ll have no more of this shit from you. She’ll pick who she wants, when she wants. If you don’t like that, well, you’re free to back off, but I’m not. You understand me?” After that, he, made sure we had no more serious injuries, and went on home.

After that, Elvin seemed to be less and less available to escort Rose to church. His singing wasn’t quite so loud anymore, and his contribution to the offering was a lot more modest. Eventually, he caught Shirley Mae Ledbetter admiring the scar over his eye, and they started walking out together. Six months later, John Andrews presented them with a beautifully dressed deerskin at their wedding. They had a passel of

young'uns, and Elvin prospered, just like he'd planned. He went on to serve 5 terms in the state legislature, which led to a term in the state penitentiary. Shirley Mae went back to her folks and divorced him, took everything he had. Well, everything he had that she know'd of anyways.

It took two more years, for John to finally get Rose to come around, and the hoops that woman put him through in those two years were something to behold, but once they was married, she settled right down, and the two of them were like a fine pair of matched plough-mules; in harness together for the rest of their lives. They raised up their own crop of young'uns and no one ever heard a harsh word from one about the other through 60 years of good and bad.

As for me, I'd learnt enough from all this to know it was the single life for me. I've steered clear of women (at least on any kind of permanent basis), and my caution has served me well. I took over the stills when Elvin left for the legislature, which led to more adventures with John Andrews, but that's a story for another day, and another jug.