

LUCKY WOUNDS

Theric Jepson

Old George sat on an upturned half-barrel cleaning his gun. It only ever shot blanks these days, but that didn't matter much. A fellow outlaw'd once told him the state of your gun's the state of your soul and George liked the sound of that religion as much as any other he'd come across. Least it had clarity; that much was sure.

Around the corner from the phony saloon he was up front of came the sounds of horses and yelling. The director was telling someone to fall bigger—bigger!—and for someone else to find the fiddle player for the next scene. They tended to shoot a feature a day on this lot, which was the best honest money Old George had ever made, even counting his time as a Pinkerton.

His gun cleaned, he leaned back on his barrel to the saloon wall and let his hat push over his eyes. How long he then slept who can say, but he woke to his name. "George! George, init?"

George opened one eye. Under the brim of his hat he could make out a famous pair of chartreuse cowboy boots. Happy Doug Green. Biggest cowboy picture star by gross of 1921, 1922, and now looking like 1923.

George nodded. "That's right. What's on your mind?"

"The boys tell me you're the real deal. Killed yourself an Indian or two back in the day."

"I reckon that's so."

"How many you killed, then?"

"Indians? Oh, 'bout the couple you say."

Happy Doug smiled. "Well, well. You suggesting you killed yourself a few white men as well? Why ain't you hanged then?"

“Well, sir, ain’t no answer for that but luck.”

“Luck? What kind of good luck let’s a murderer run free?”

“Ain’t no such thing as luck good or bad. Luck’s just the way things turn up.”

“Like the way you fall when I shoot you? That the way the men you killed fell?”

“No, sir. That’s the way they tell me it looks good for pictures.”

“Yeah. Yeah, yeah.”

Happy Doug paced back and forth a bit. “I’ll level with you, George. I’m not sure about these pictures I’m making. Kill a dozen men or so a picture, then they focus in on my smiling teeth and everybody Tecumseh to Washington claps and hoots and I start making another one. You ever smile after killing a man?”

George paused and considered this one. “No, I don’t figure I did.”

“How many you killed?”

“Can’t say for sure. Maybe the dozen you said.”

“How can a man not know a thing like that?”

“Well . . .” George thought a spell, looked out down the dusty “old West” avenue, saw a couple painted ladies practicing their dance. “I think I seen you with both them ladies.”

Happy Doug squinted, shrugged. “Could be. Can’t quite tell from here.”

“When you first make a woman?”

“Oh, when I’s sixteen, seventeen maybe.”

“You remember.”

“Sure I do.” He laughed. “Day afore my eighteenth. Same day I decided to come out to California, make it in pictures.”

“And now you leave with a different woman, every evening at wrap.” George pressed a thumb and finger into his eyes. “Same with killing. First time, I can tell you the time of day, the color of sky, dress of the woman what rushed to the body. . . . But after a while—

“You get used to anything.”

Happy Doug sat on the edge of the wooden walkway and leaned on his knees. "So . . . why ain't you hanged?"

"Well. We had what you call lucky bullets. Pass right through you, never hit nothing. Nothing important, that is. "I got scars on my belly and not a one couldn't I ride away from. But one time, three fresh holes in me, I passed out from the blood. I come to in a hospital outside Mesa with a lawman offering me a chance to deputize and live. I took that chance. Likely I killed more men as a deputy than before. That's how them Indians met their maker. It don't feel much different, no matter who you shooting—good man, bad man, red man, white. Nobody tell you that. Times I reckon I'd be happier they just hung me. Mighta been the right thing."

"And now here you are in your long white beard making movies."

"And the villain again."

"Money decent?"

"Seventy-five a day."

"I'll have'm make it a hundred."

"That's not—"

"Friend, you have any idea what they paying me? I see you do. It'll be a hundred."

Happy Doug stood and stretched, took a practice leap at his revolver, then tipped his hat and walked away. Old George watched him go, his movieman spurs a-jangling. From the rumble headed this way, sounded like Old George'd get to take his bullet and eat some dirt these next few minutes. Just a small role this picture, stealing some man's bride from the man what stole her first. Falling dead his first scene? That was just fine. He was hitting eighty this summer and the more times this old grizzly could get shot before quitting, the better.

And he would have to quit soon enough as, every time he fell, he made certain to hurt himself something good.

And bruises don't heal so quick on a man called Old.

A long time ago, when he was still a boy, one of his father's women told him some sins were unforgivable. She'd been referring to his disrespecting her, as he recalled—that bit was fuzzy—but then his own dear mother had said while that might be true of an old bird like Aunt Betty, God his holy self would hold out a hand till every George on earth had taken his whipping and was ready to come home.

That old West of George's childhood was so far gone it existed now only in fake towns for pictures. But perhaps for a man with luck, the God of this new West too might still be holding out his holy hand.

THERIC JEPSON {theric@thmazing.com} recently wrapped up his fourth year of teaching early-morning seminary, his eighteenth year of parenting children, and his forty-fifth year of avoiding guns. He edits *Irreantum* and has a novel coming out later this year from BCC Press. He has silent-film recommendations if you need them.