



Lead for Supper

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

“HAPPY, don’t look so mournful. I ain’t about to let them two lop-eared saddle bums into my jail,” says old Pinky Page, blowin’ like a grampus through his walrus mustaches. He pinches his nose, and sniffs. “Pee-uu!” he snorts. “Where’d yuh get ‘em?”

“They was denned up with a wood pussy,” I says. “Back in Cave Canyon. Guess the skunk resented the intrusion.”

“So do I!” snaps Pinky. “Get ‘em outa here. Send ‘em away.”

“Uncle Sam ain’t goin’ to like that,” I says. Then I whisper somethin’ in Page’s

ear.

Me, I’m just Happy Hen Hennepin, Pinky’s segundo. Pinky bein’ sheriff of Wing county, he’s the boss. All the same I figger before he starts turnin’ my roped an’ handcuffed prisoners loose he better know who they are.

“Hmm!” grunts Page, standin’ up and hookin’ his pudgy thumbs in the broad, bullet-filled belt around his outsize equator. “Scraggs McKee and Blackie Binks, the notorious mail robbers and killers. Nice work, Happy. Open the window and move ‘em downwind a piece. Which one’s Binks?”

“Him,” I says, nodding toward the most beetle-browed and ornery lookin’ of my pair of squat, shifty-eyed captives.

“We wasn’t denned up with no skunk neither,” growls Blackie. “That sad-lookin’, long drink o’ water with the three cornered chin an’ a star on his vest jumped us in the canyon.” He pointed to me. “When the lead started singin’ through the ozone me and Scraggs lit out fer a cave behind us. That’s where the wood pussy come in.”

“Yuh mean the skunk was already in,” corrects Scraggs bitterly. “Her an’ all her brood o’ little striped kittens. Gosh!”

“To put it in a nutshell, boss,” I says. “Here’s how it happened. I came. The skunk saw ‘em. An’ we conquered.”

“What’s worryin’ me,” declares Pinky, “is where I’m goin’ to put ‘em. The jailhouse is full plumb to the rafters.”

THAT’S true. The facts of the case bein’ our local clink most always has the S.R.O. sign hung out in front which is partly due to Pinky Page bein’ a sheriff with a sure aim and a kind heart. It works out this way. Felons figgerin’ a shoot-out with Page might be fatal suicide usually surrenders at the call.

Besides Page treats his prisoners right, givin’ them the respect due hombres who has simply took up a misguided callin’. Pinky ain’t one to lay the blame o’ unfortunate circumstances on a boy just because he runs foul of the law now and then.

Mostly, however, it’s on account of Pinky’s swell cookin’ that fellers incarcerated in our calaboose don’t never ask no time off for good behavior.

Pinky’s right name is Pendleton Page. He gets his moniker because of his round face which is pink and innocent as a cherub’s except when he gets riled. Then he’s a basketful o’ fightin’ bobcats. An’ no

matter how much desert sun he absorbs, Pinky don’t ever tan to saddle color. His face just goes from pink to flamin’ red like a beautiful Arizona mornin’ sunrise.

Him and me been ram-roddin’ the law together in Dumpcart for years and this here catch o’ these big time mail robbers is about the biggest haul I ever made. McKee and Binks is wanted bad in practically all States west of the Rockies. The Feds has dodgers out on ‘em too, sayin’ if caught to hold ‘em, but tight, till they can send for ‘em.

“Fellers like them,” I says to Page, “oughta have a de luxe room and bath.”

“A bath anyhow,” says Pinky.

“Dunk ‘em in the horse trough whilst I see can I fix a place for ‘em.”

Cold water ain’t goin’ to help what ails them coyotes so I herd ‘em down to King’s Barber and Bath Shop and give ‘em the works, windin’ up with a bottle of perfume apiece on the county to dispel the last remnants of wood pussy fragrance. When I come back Pinky is moppin’ his forehead with a blue bandanna.

“Well,” he says, “I finally got a place for ‘em. Cell thirteen.”

“What did yuh do with Flam Hodgkins?” I asks. “Judge Rawlins give him ten days for shootin’ up the Chink laundry and he ain’t served but six.”

“I know,” explains Page. “Flam didn’t want to go neither. Said his missus wouldn’t like it noway, him comin’ home early. I give him a note sayin’ it wasn’t no jail break an’ we’d take him back first chance we got.”

It appears when I take McKee and Binks down the corridor and lock ‘em in that Binks is superstitious. He don’t want thirteen. Claims it’s bad luck. But there ain’t none of the boys will change with him, so him and McKee gets it.

The two of them are kinda sour an’ uncommunicative at first till a few meals of

Pinky's home cookin' softens them up. Pretty soon they're gettin' real friendly with the rest o' the gang, though they always act a mite superior.

Along about the third day after the capture I come back from the courthouse and find Pinky pacin' up an' down the office, pluckin' a hair out of first one side of his droopy mustache, then the other, and yellin' "ouch" every time he does it.

"Scissors an' a razor would be quicker," I tell him, "an' I've heard of Indians usin' a clam shell."

"Shut up, I ain't shavin'," he growls, givin' both handlebars a tug that nearly turns him over. "Read this."

IT'S a telegram from Washington. It says will we mind keepin' Scraggs McKee and Blackie Binks on ice until next week when they can send a man for 'em. There's more about takin' special care not to leave no loose guns or keys or stuff around as both McKee and Binks is known to be desperate and dangerous men who will shoot at the drop of a hat, especially if it is somebody else's hat.

"So what?" I says. "Pinky, them braised pork chops an' lemon chiffon pies has got 'em eatin' outa yore hand."

"Did yuh read where it says I'll be held personally responsible for their safe-keepin'?"

"That's accordin' to the statutes," I declares.

"And this Satiddy," means Page, "is the annual Garden Supper and Cake Bakin' Contest of the DCOTLLAOA . . ."

"What's that?" I cut in. "Double talk?"

"No," says Page. "That stands for the Dumpcart Chapter of the Longhorn Ladies Association of Arizona. It's a female woman's club devoted to the better things in life. I'm to judge the cake bakin'."

"Yuh better make sure Missus Macready wins it," I says. "Her husband

swings half the votes in Wing County."

"The judgin'," declares Pinky solemnly, "will be strictly honest. That is it would o' been. But I can't go. My duty's here, watch in' an' guard in' them Federal prisoners."

"Shucks," I says. "I'll ride herd on them jail pigeons. I caught 'em, didn't I?"

"Yuh an' a skunk," says Pinky.

I can't argue the old feller outa the notion. Page may be queer in lots of ways to them as don't know him real good. But outside o' cookin', the responsibilities o' his office is the one thing he's hipped on. He's goin' to be bad disappointed too if he don't get to lay the accolade on the winnin' sample o' Dumpcart's very best cake cookers.

I'm gettin' ready to tell him it's plumb inconsiderate o' them Feds not to come sooner when I get an idea I figger will make everybody happy. And the way it turns out it does—almost.

"Pinky," I says, "if the mountain can't go to the cake bake, why not, as the sayin' is, bring the cake bake to the mountain?"

"I ain't no mountain," snaps Page, bristlin'.

When I get him calmed down, and willin' to listen he likes the idea.

"Yuh mean have the garden supper and the cakes an' all on display right out back in the jail courtyard?" he asks.

"Exactly," I says.

"Nope," he says, "there ain't no flowers out there. Nothin' but solid concrete."

"We could paint some on the back wall," I says and Pinky brightens up again.

"Good," he says. "That's yore job. I'll announce it to the club and get 'em to change their plans."

The way our plant is laid out there's a single row of jail cells down each side of the courtyard with an outside corridor sheltered by a tile roof in front of each. The back of the sheriff's office, livin' quarters

where me and Pinky bunk up, plus kitchen, blocks one end of the yard. A stone wall with a lot of broken bottles cemented in the top stretches across the back end.

The wall is whitewashed and I spend a lot o' time paintin' flowers all over it and makin' signs to go beside 'em, like "These here is peen-ies" an' "This is a pear bunch," an' stuff like that.

NATCHERALLY the prisoners is all excited about havin' the best citizens of Dumpcart on the feminine side in their midst. Even McKee and Binks warms to the idea an' McKee makes a suggestion.

"Mr. Page," he says to Pinky the mornin' before the big to-do, "seein' as how Dumpcart's garden club and cake bakers is to be our guests, so to speak, how about lettin' us join in the fun-in a nice clean way."

Pinky don't know what he's drivin' at till McKee goes on.

"Take me and Binks for instance," he says, "we'd like to bake a cake and try fer that ten buck grand prize."

"Well now," says Pinky, "that's mighty civic-spirited o' yuh boys. Why didn't yuh tell me yuh could cook?"

"Blackie's the best and he's modest," says McKee.

Pinky polls the cells and finds there's a lot of fellers wants to try for that ten dollar first prize.

"See," says Pinky, "there's a lot of good in them boys if yuh just try to bring it out."

Next mornin' the kitchen's a madhouse and almost a wreck as I bring our charges out a batch at a time and watch 'em massacre the makin's of many a good meal, tryin' to make a devil's food with fudge icin' that'll rate ten cartwheels, or a sponge cake that won't taste like a sponge.

All except the guys that started the thing. McKee and Binks: They just watch.

"I wonder would it be against the rules to make a pie?" Binks finally says to me, "I'm a better hand at them."

It ain't my party so I take it up with Pinky.

"Why sure," he says. "Pies, cakes, biscuits . . . anything goes. It's just called a cake bake."

"Thanks," says Binks, but he don't start dough mixin'. After a while he comes up to me again. "Listen, Weepin' Willow," he says, "would it be too much if I was to ask could I use my own special kind of flour? I can't get no good results with this punk stuff."

I take that up with Pinky an' get an okay on it. Then this prima donna of the pie plate claims there's only one place in town he can get the flour he wants. That's from Jack Slaver who owns the Red-Eye Saloon down at the less savory end o' town.

"It ain't that I don't trust yuh," explains Binks. "But this pie has won prizes before and I hate to let the secret out. So if yuh'll take a note from me to Jack, he'll get the flour an' yuh can bring it back yourself."

Pinky says that all good cooks has secret recipes they wouldn't even tell to their best friends and he'll watch the boys in the kitchen while I go down to the Red-Eye and get the flour Binks wants. Binks gives me a note in a sealed envelope and makes me promise I won't open it and read it as then I would know his secret recipe.

Slaver reads the note when I get down to the Red-Eye an' goes out for a few minutes. When he comes back he hands me a small flour sack. It's got flour in it all right because I open the top and look but it don't look no different to me than the stuff Pinky's got in the jailhouse kitchen.

"I hope my old pal Blackie wins a prize," says Slaver.

"So do I," I says. "He's sure puttin' everybody to a lot of trouble."

“Oh, I don’t mind it,” says Slaver. “Glad to help when I can. Guess yuh’ll have a big crowd at the party.”

BINKS and McKee is still stand in’ around in the kitchen when I get back. They both grab for the sack a’ flour.

“Thanks,” says Binks, “yuh’re a real pard.”

By this time the pair has talked Pinky into lettin’ them make their pie in secrecy.

“You or Horse-face here,” Binks addresses Page, “can stand guard at the door if yuh’re afraid we’re gain’ to run away.”

So I stand guard while they go to work. After a while they came out holdin’ about the biggest pie I ever I seen in a big tin dish an’ I must admit the steamin’ crust on top is browned to a turn. Pinky gets a gander at it as they take it to their cell. His nose twitches and his eyes pop out like saucers.

“Looks like a winner,” he says, givin’ me a jab in the ribs with his bony elbow.

I’M PLENTY busy from then on. The l’guests start comin’ in through the front office bringin’ a wide variety o’ their own bakin’ skill. Out back in the jail yard we’ve got tables lined up in a long row and everybody picks a place to put the exhibit they’ve brought and then stands hopefully behind it.

The inmates has a special table to themselves down at the end of the yard. Pinky is struttin’ up and down with a big white celluloid button on his coat with the word “Judge” printed on it and givin’ a nod here and a word there to all his friends o’ the garden club. And I must say them gals old and young, good-lookin’ and not so good, flutter around him like he was the mammoth of all he surveyed. I notice he has shucked his hardware for the occasion.

“In the presence of ladies,” he says to me. “And when the party’s all here, lock

the doors and come out gun-free like a gentleman. We don’t want to frighten the weaker sex.”

“Boss,” I tell him, mightly uncomfortable in a stiff shirt and with my Sunday store pants tucked into the tops of my ridin’ boots, “it’s the weaker sex that frightens me. Singly or in bunches. Suppose I just stay in the office like this in case any business turns up.”

“No,” declares Pinky. “In a way yuh’re responsible for this gala festival. It was yore idea. Come out and get the credit for it. Besides yuh gotta help me with the judgin’.”

Though I’d of rather faced a cage of tigers than them millin’ women, talkin’ and gabbin’ all at once, there wasn’t nothin’ for it but to drag my legs out there and keep a watch on everythin’ includin’ Pinky and the prisoners, the latter bein’ huddled close up around their own table.

When everythin’ is set Pinky gets out in the middle of the yard and makes a speech welcomin’ the Garden Club to the Dumpcart jail and says how glad he is to have them there. He explains again how he couldn’t leave the premises on account of he had a couple of important house guests that was just stoppin’ over with him till a U. S. Marshal come down and picked them up. Then he points to the flowers I got painted all over the wall.

“They ain’t good. But they ain’t bad. Anyhow our good friend an’ my loyal deputy Happy Hen Hennepin done the best he could. And they give the place a garden touch. Let’s give Happy a hand—”

WHEN the women start to clap I kin feel my face burnin’ like it was in front of an open fire and I edge down to the table where the prisoners is. Binks edges up to me.

“When is the judgin’ goin’ to start,” he asks.

“Soon,” I says.

But I guess I ain’t posted good on social etiquette because after Pinky concludes his remarks, Missus Macready has to get up and sound off on behalf of the Garden Club. When she sets down a couple of more females make speeches and then Pinky calls fer me to come and walk beside him while he examines the exhibits. Pinky’s in his glory but me, I’d rather be doin’ somethin’ else.

It’s very quiet in the yard as we proceed slowly down the long line of tables. Pinky tallies the victuals fer texture, lightness, taste and so on but he don’t say nothin’ as he walks along. Then we come to the last table and even a tenderfoot in the game like me can see the results ain’t so good.

I pick up a couple of things Scrambled Joe dreamed up in the jailhouse kitchen. They’re hard as rocks and heft like they was twice as heavy. There’s no real harm in Joe. He just tries to drink too much too fast when he goes on a bender and we lock him up and boil him out regular.

“What’s these, Scrambled?” I ask him, makin’ conversation.

“Dropcakes,” he says.

I pass one up to Pinky. “I’d sure hate to drop one on my foot,” I says.

By this time Pinky is up to where McKee and Binks is standin’ beside their big pie. Pinky’s got the flat cake knife he’s been samplin’ the other exhibits with in his hand.

“May I cut yuh a piece, Sheriff?” says Binks, reachin’ fer the knife. Pinky gives it to him.

From the way Binks bends over it and works on it, it seems like the crust is tougher than it looks. Suddenly Binks reaches in the pie an’ stands up straight, his black eyes blazing with the killer meanness in ‘em, and two shiny guns grasped tightly in his partly outstretched hands.

“All right everybody,” he rasps. “Stand

still and elevate.” Then he addresses the Garden Club at the other end of the yard. “You ladies,” he says, “shuck yore jewels and money. Leave it on the table and my partner will pick it up as we go by. Do as yuh’re told and nobody’ll get hurt.”

Binks turns to McKee. “The keys.” I hear him whisper. “Get the keys so we can walk out.”

Binks jabs a gun in Pinky’s direction.

“Fork over the keys,” he snarls, “an’ make it snappy.”

Pinky keeps his arms up an’ jerks his head in my direction.

“Happy’s got ‘em,” he says, but I catch his quick wink.

I also notice Pinky’s still clutchin’ one of Scrambled Joe’s sinker dropcakes in his upraised hand.

For a split second while Binks is motionin’ McKee to search my pockets the attention of both killers is centered on me. That’s the moment Pinky lets Binks have the dropcake . . . right between the eyes. Binks staggers.

The next second Pinky is rushin’ into them flamin’ guns like a chargin’ elephant. The whole place is a screamin’ pandemonium. The women is runnin’ back to the office end of the yard, but they can’t get out because the place is locked. The rest of the prisoners start duckin’ toward their cells to get outa the line of gunfire. I grab up a rope and throw a noose around McKee’s neck but he pulls it off quick and I drop the other end.

PINKY comes at Binks in a crouch, snaps his steel-strong arms around the killer just above the knees and lifts him clear of the ground. With a single motion he swings Binks down onto the concrete jail yard floor and the smack as Binks hits sounds like Pinky was handlin’ a carpet beater.

Quick as a flash McKee dives for one

of the guns that slithers across the floor. He beats me to it. Lead tears through my pants leg as I go sprawlin' full length on the concrete.

I'm figgerin' McKee's next shot'll drill me where it counts when I see Pinky comin' at him from behind. Pinky claps both arms around McKee's neck just below his chin, and flips him up and over his shoulder like he was a rubber doll.

The gun goes flyin'. This time I get it. But by the time I'm on my feet again, Pinky has a killer in each hand by the scruff of the neck an' is draggin' 'em to the nearest cell. Both McKee and Binks is out colder'n iced fish. Pinky shoves 'em inside an' clicks the door shut, lockin' 'em in.

Comin' back he wipes the dust of the scrimmage off his hands, an' asks me did I get any lead in my system.

"Just my pants tore," I says.

Then Pinky starts callin' the Garden Club back to the tables. Some of the women is pretty nervous, but gradually he gets 'em out by twos and threes. He apologizes fer the interruption.

"Anyhow, I will now," he says, "announce the winner an' award the prize money. The winner is—"

Before he gets the name out, his voice is drowned by someone bangin' on the inside door o' the sheriff's office.

"First it's people wantin' out. Now it's somebody wantin' in," snaps Pinky.

"Seems like I can't please nobody today."

Me and Page get to the door just as the party on the other side is about to break it down. In fact when I unlock the door, the guy practically falls in our arms. He's carryin' a drawn six-gun—an' a gold badge.

"What's goin' on?" he barks. "I'm the U. S. Marshal. Got here sooner'n I expected. Come for Binks and McKee. Got another prisoner too. Name of Jack Slaver. He sent those men a pair of guns in a sack o' flour. Had getaway horses waitin' for 'em behind the jail." Suddenly he scowls at me and Pinky. "I . . . I ain't too late, am I? Heard firin'. Yuh didn't let 'em get away?"

"We didn't, an' yuh ain't," snaps Pinky, grabbin' the marshal by the arm. "Fact is yuh can award the prize money. Ten dollars fer the best cake an' the winner is—" He lowers his voice an' winks at me. "Missus Macready."

Later when everybody's gone home, includin' the marshal with his prisoners, Pinky comes over to me and shakes his head sadly.

"Yuh know, Happy," he says, "I'm terrible disappointed in Scrambled Joe. I thought he could cook better'n that. Them dropcakes was hard as rocks."

"I know," I says. "He got cement instead of flour mixed in his dough. I seen him when he done it."