

THE HUNGER CHANCE



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BENNETT LEPINE was not one of those men who are born lucky, have luck come to them, or go forth and immediately get luck for the going. He was born up beyond the Arctic circle hard by Herschell Island. His father was a super-adventurous trader, and his mother an Eskimo girl whom Jacques Lepine had taken before an itinerant priest to solace his northern exile. There was nothing very lucky in that natal spot, a cabin built out of scraps of a whaler's wreck, smothered by shore drifts and menaced by the jut and shift of the ice packs. Nor in all the years he was attaining manhood did luck come to the younger Lepine. He knew only the usual routine of life within the circle. Like his father, he killed the walrus, the seal, the fox, and the bear; fished through the jammed floe ice in winter; threaded by kayak the open sounds in summer, taking toll of the immense flocks of ducks and geese that came up to breed in the short period when the sun shone twenty-four hours a day; traded with the Eskimos of the farther north and with the Indians of the Yukon to the south; and sold the furs of their taking and trafficking to the Hudson's Bay men who mushed up from the Mackenzie's mouth.

No, luck did not come to him—rather disaster! Jacques Lepine failed one day to stop a charging walrus and fell to the goring tusks. After that Bennett's Eskimo mother went back to her own people, and Bennett drifted south in search of fortune. He skirted the coast to the Mackenzie, wound down the Mackenzie to the Peel River below Simpson Island, and followed the Peel into the Yukon. There he ranged the land north, south, east and west, driving poling boat in summer, mushing dogs in winter, searching unceasingly for the luck that hid from him. McCormack, Henderson, and a few thousand more had made great stakes, but Lepine was not one of the blessed number. Where they struck, the gravel turned to gold. Lepine possessed no such magic pick. He tried all districts with uniform failure. He failed on the Tanana waters, on the Porcupine, the Klondike, the Sixty-Mile, the Pelly. Upper or Lower country, it was all the same. He could no more wash dollar pans on the bars of Forty-Mile than show colours on the Stewart.

Men said he was no prospector, had never been born for one, and would never become one to the end of his unlucky days. Whatever truth there was in that statement Lepine refused to accept. Year after year he kept doggedly on with his search, tasting the bitterness of defeat till he was physically molded in the shape of gloom and bitterness and his heart grew callous as a stone. His name became a byword in the Yukon. Men shunned him as a hoodoo lest he cast malignant spells upon them. And Lepine, with the intuitiveness of the wild, untutored being, was not slow to interpret this attitude of his fellows. He had envied them. Now he hated them. And when they made light of the breed of him and held this mixed blood strain responsible for his lack of fortune, he thirsted for revenge.

"French-Canadian father," they would say, in tracing his descent. "That's half-breed anyway, ain't it? And Eskimo mother! The good Lord knows what breed she was! That splits it up mighty fine, eh? I'd call him about a sixth-or-seventh-breed. Haw! Haw! Prospect? Oh, no, he's no prospector! What'd you expect? Just ambles round like a Siwash. Never gets anywhere."

TRULY, in all those years Lepine never got anywhere. And none of his scorers dreamed of the insatiable ambition of the man. They thought he wandered about from place to place, staking here and there only to abandon the claims without working them properly. They thought he had no perseverance. They classed him with the Siwash, lowest of northern castes, and it never occurred to them that Lepine resented it. They were not aware that he hated them with a fierce, aboriginal hate, that he yearned and strove and sweated for gold, that he longed to have the stuff in his grasp to literally throw in their faces. He had wild wishes and wilder hopes of buying the roofs over the heads of these jeering fools, of buying the ground under their feet, of combining claims and monopolizing creeks till there was no pay ground left for indi-

vidual working and those who had been loud with ridicule crept whining to his feet.

Always he had such wild dreams of getting the upper hand of these pure-blooded white men who would not accept him as a brother and an equal, and at last he got it, though not precisely in the way he had dreamed.

When the hour struck, he was about at the end of his resources and making a last stand on Moose Creek. So low were his finances that in the middle of August he had to come into Dawson to ask a loan from Bonanza Jones, who had always been more tolerant with him than other people, and had grub-staked him in spite of his hoodoo some dozens of times. The reason of this tolerance was that the genial Bonanza was invariably drunk and incapable of nice distinctions of class and blood. Bonanza had been too lucky from the start. Bonanza Creek, whereon he had been in time to stake, had used him too well. Now he leased lays on his claim and spent his time and money in Dawson. Lepine was always sure of finding him at the Monte Carlo, the Elkhorn, or the Tivoli.

THIS time it was the Tivoli. The place was gay with lights, loud with clamour, and the atmosphere struck Lepine with the mighty force of contrast. Here was the glittering, frothing bar with scores pouring over it the gold he yearned for. There was the polished dancing floor with men in trail garments and moccasins, and women in satin tripping fantastically to the music of a high-priced, imported orchestra, enjoying themselves where he might not set foot. All about were the silk-curtained stalls, like opera boxes, where anyone but Lepine could sit and view the gaiety below. And yonder at the farther end of the ball-room gleamed the rainbow-hued marquee of Carlotta, the Circassian fortune-teller, where any man but a sixth-or-seventh-breed could have his future revealed by way of the palm-chart, cards, or crystal ball.

But Lepine was a sixth-or-seventh-breed, and he knew it. Wherefore he was bitter. These white men had no place among them for him. He wanted none of their pleasure—yet! He wanted Bonanza Jones. His sullen eye swept the whole length of the Tivoli from the door to Carlotta's tent, but Bonanza, surrounded by a boisterous crowd for whom he insisted on buying, was for the moment hidden. Yet Lepine's big, uncouth body, filling the doorway, was an easy mark for the eyes of Bonanza's friends.

"There's Lepine," one of them announced. Immediately a medley of comments broke out. "Oh, the big Eskimo! Yes, sure it is." "Shut up, he'll hear you." "Think he cares? He's lazy as a Siwash. And no prouder!" "Steer clear of him, anyhow, boys, or you'll never make another strike."

"How's that, partner?" "He's the genuine jinx. Don't let him cast eyes on you. He chases paystreaks miles and miles."

And as Bonanza Jones espied him, guessed his mission, and went towards him, a babel of voices yelled at him to come back. Bonanza paused and raised an expressive hand to them.

"He's got his fingers crossed," his comrades howled in delight. "The jinx don't jump on him."

Go on, Bonanza. We ain't afraid for you."

Lepine's swarthy face grew purple-black with anger under this cutting byplay. He could hardly control himself to speak when Bonanza reached him.

"What you wanting?" Jones asked.

"Nothing!" Lepine whirled wrathfully and went to stride out.

Bonanza seized his coat sleeve.

"Hold on, Lepine. You don't want to take it like that. The boys was only chaffing a bit. Just chaffing, that's all. Life ain't worth living up here if you got to cut out the chaff and everything. Is it, now? You can take a joke with the best of us, Lepine. I seen you do it. So never mind the boys. You was only chaffing, wasn't you, boys?"

THE boys appealed to stopped their laughter and badinage which had passed on to some more worthy victim. "Sure," they chorused, ironically.

"See?" Bonanza was half-seas over and very earnest and sympathetic. "I knowed the boys was only chaffing. Come on in, Lepine, and tell me what's the trouble."

He drew Lepine to a seat against the wall near the door. Lepine unfolded the tale of his woes and of the voracious hole in his bench claim on Moose Creek which ate up the money without offering any return, and asked for a loan. The others, he reminded Jones, he had always scrupulously repaid. He would likewise repay this. His resources were slimmer than usual, but he would repay. If he found he couldn't, he would go on shift at Bonanza Creek for Jones and work it out.

"That's all right," Bonanza assured him, with ponderous gravity. "That's all right. I'll stake you, Lepine. I'll stake you more'n once. But look a-here. Mebbe you'd better hit new ground. You've wrassled quite a while with that bench on Moose. Eh?"

"I dunno," Lepine answered, moodily. "Just as you say, Bonanza. I don't want to go sinking your money there if you don't like it, and—"

"Not me!" Bonanza interrupted. "Run your own show, Lepine. You know your own business best. I was only suggesting. Savvy? Have you any faith in yon ground?"

"I ain't got faith in any ground."

"Go on! It's come to that, eh? Well, Lepine, there's a saying that you got to put a dollar in to get a dollar out. But you beat that saying a thousand miles. Specially on that bench on Moose."

Lepine rose uneasily to his feet. "Tell me what to do," he pleaded. "I'll jump it if you say so."

"Not me," demurred Bonanza. "I ain't driving you. I leave it to yourself."

"But I don't know what to do."

"Neither do I."

"Tell me," Lepine blurted desperately.

"I can't," beamed the genial Bonanza.

Lepine mouthed some savage imprecation, and his eye roved fiercely over the Tivoli alive with its lucky squanderers. Bonanza's glance somewhat stupidly followed his across the seething bar, across the gambling tables in the alcove, across the dancing floor to the gaudy tent of the Circassian fortune-teller.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed. "Let's ask Carlotta."

"Who?" demanded Lepine, incomprehendingly.

"Carlotta! Ask her anything. She answers. Come on." He dragged the astonished Lepine after him, ploughing through a crowd of merry-makers and dancers. These were as astonished as Lepine. Smiles turned to scowls, and angry murmurs that boded trouble arose. But Bonanza waved off the trouble-makers. He had Lepine in tow. He was a favourite habitue of the Tivoli. He could do as he pleased. He would do it, too. This was his business and no one else's—unless it might be Lepine's. He landed the dumbfounded sixth-or-seventh-breed right up against the table placed across the entrance of the fortune-teller's tent and threw down a ten-dollar gold piece.

Of course Carlotta was no Circassian. She really hailed from Los Angeles. But she had a splash of Spanish blood in her, and when she pencilled her eyebrows, put a dab of red on her cheeks and a band of red ribbon across her black hair, arranged rings on her fingers and ears and bangles