

Chika

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CHIKA

By BEATRICE REDPATH

DRAWINGS BY FERGUS KYLE

Herron himself recognized it as no ordinary ambition. From the earliest time it had governed and controlled him. His days had been mapped out to fulfil it, and to that end he had shackled his impulses, until they had died down and withered. He had seen too many careers broken by the hot hand of desire; he would be master of his emotions—lord of his own soul. Thus it was with him when he went to the East to take charge of a branch of the Eastern Trading Company. But he had been there only six months when Chika walked into his life. He had paid very little attention to the natives, regarding them much in the light of a curious breed of animal, and looking with distaste at their dwellings, without any curiosity concerning them. The offices and the bungalows of the Company were separate, built down close to the pier, while the native shacks sprawled their hideous way up to the very edge of the forest. Some of the natives, it was true, had better dwellings, and some of them he ran across in the Company's offices. A few of them had grown rich, but felt a resentment towards the Company, even though they subsisted through and by it.

Chika was the daughter of one of the most prosperous of the natives, and was in the employ of the Company. She would come with messages from her father for Herron, and stood in the doorway in an indolent graceful pose, her dark eyes fastened upon him with an unswerving steadiness, as she gave him her messages in a soft voice that slurred the English words and made them seem unfamiliar and strange. Her tawny colored skin had the pure beauty of tinted ivory. She wore strange barbaric garments, a short skirt of scarlet with a striped bodice, which was hung with chains of gold and of colored beads.

Herron began to look forward to her coming, and to listen for the jingle of her beaded chains, look for the glimmer of her scarlet skirt through the foliage that draped the front of the bungalow with heavy hanging vines.

Gradually her visits became more frequent. Herron would question her, half for the curiosity of hearing her naïve remarks, uttered in those slow halting monosyllables, and half to watch the vivid beauty of her face. He thought that she was like some curious golden blossom, rare, luxuriant, and strange.



*“Sometimes she would slip down to her knees
in the doorway.”*

Sometimes she would slip down to her knees in the doorway, and stay there for hours at a time, a patch of brilliant color against the cruel blaze of out of doors. Herron liked to have her there, while he sat inside at some work which he had brought from the office to finish; she would sit still and impassive, only the lights in her eyes changing from shine to shadow, her hands delicately tinted as an iris bloom, clasped on the scarlet of her brief skirt.

Herron’s assistant, White, found her crouched there one day. She rose as he came up the steps and slipped down into the sunlight, graceful as an

animal of the forest.

“Making herself a nuisance to you?” White remarked. “Those natives have to be kept in their place. Don’t hesitate to tell her to get out. Her father thinks himself no end of a swell. There’s a strain of white blood somewhere, and it makes them impossible. I’m always having trouble with him. They have to be kept down.”

Herron was amazed at the sudden swift anger he felt towards White. He felt inclined to tell him to mind his own business. It was with difficulty that he restrained himself. He told himself that it was because he detested to be disturbed in his work. He was in the midst of making out some estimates, and White’s arrival had upset everything. Chika did not disturb him. He could work better in fact when she was there. He liked to see her sitting still and beautiful and silent, whenever he lifted his eyes from his work. He wished that White had not come in and driven her away. He felt a curious impulse to go to the door and call after her to come back; but he controlled this temptation. White would not understand.

“She doesn’t make a nuisance of herself,” he said, “she has more sense than any white girl I have ever known. She makes them all seem colorless, insignificant and uninteresting. She comes and sits there without moving if I am busy. I like to have her around,” he added with a touch of defiance for White’s expression.

“Look here, old man,” White leaned forward on the table above Herron’s mass of papers, “keep out of that sort of thing. Some men do it and keep intact. You can’t. You only have a few more months out here. Remember that career you are always talking about . . . keep to your straight road ahead.”

“Damn a career,” exclaimed Herron, and then pulled himself up, startled at his own fierceness. “Chika has nothing to do with it at any rate,” he added with more coolness, “it’s not going to hurt my future to let the girl come here occasionally, is it?”

“You’re human, Herron,” White said slowly, “in spite of the fact that you have tried to turn yourself into a machine all your life. For that very reason, because you have dammed back every impulse you have ever felt, if once you gave way, I don’t know what the result would be. Chika is not like the other native girls. My advice to you is to let her alone.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry your head on my account,” Herron said with a short laugh, “as I’ve often told you. . . . nothing is going to stand in the way of my success.”

But when White had left him, Herron sat back in his chair and stared out into the sunlight with narrowed eyes. Chika. . . . Chika. . . . he wanted her back there in the doorway. . . . wanted to see those dark eyes lighten and then deepen to softness as she watched him still as an iris flower silent and beautiful—Chika.

White's words pierced through him with a sudden pang of realization. Only a few more months, that was all, that he was to be out here. Then back to England again, and promised promotion, and all this would become but the memory of a dream. Back to England on the road to his ambitions, back to toiling work, to success. . . . oh, to superlative success.

And Chika! His iris flower! What of her?

God! Was he mad? A native girl?

How could she come into his life with any permanence? He picked up his pen which he had thrown aside, and tried to work. But for once he could not drive his mind, it escaped his control, it tore asunder the leash that had held so taut, so firm. It refused to obey it escaped again to thought of Chika.

“Why do you come here, Chika?” he asked the next time that he found her crouched there in the doorway, like a strange and beautiful bloom dropped there by the wind.

“I am happy here,” she said, “the skies were gray, and then the sun came, and Chika was happy. The sun will go away again, and then Chika will go down to the waters, and will be no more.” And she turned her large luminous eyes from Herron's face to where the water rippled down at the end of the pier blue and silver, blue and silver, endlessly, eternally.

“Nonsense, child,” Herron said sharply, “you're not to talk like that. You're not to think that way.”

“I don't think,” Chika answered, “my heart but speaks to me, and I must listen. How can I help it if my heart speaks of love?”

Herron rose and walked nervously across the floor of the bungalow, and then back again, pausing in front of the girl, who raised her eyes wonderingly to his face.

“Look here, Chika you're not to come here any more. Do you understand? It's not right. In four months from now I must go away, and you must marry one of your own people. This sort of thing is only going to make

you unhappy. I can't stay here I have to go back and I can't take you with me. You must forget all about me and be happy when I go."

She smiled, as though at the absurdity of such an idea, but she rose slowly to her feet, her eyes regarding him with a steady intense fixity.

"I shall go if you tell me to go," she said with a touch of pride, "and I shall not come again."

She slipped silently away in her usual fashion, walking with graceful free movements out into the sunlight and then into the shadows of green foliage beyond, while Herron stood watching her, until the leaves obliterated the last flicker of her bright skirt.

But the days that followed were empty, purposeless, without sense or meaning to Herron. He tried in vain to throw himself body and soul into his work, but it eluded him: he could not concentrate, he could not fix his mind on anything. He would throw down his pen and start pacing up and down, up and down, fighting against the desire that was in him, to send for Chika to come back. Why not? There were four months. And yet all the time he was aware, poignantly aware, that each day that passed was making harder and harder the thought of leaving, the very idea of going back.

And then would come the old dogged ambition, fighting down this new thing of fire and moonlight, that was spreading so insidiously through his soul. The old, old ambition that could not die easily, that could not be put down. Success! Oh, how he had fought for it, toiled for it, slaved for it, denied himself for it was he to fling it away now like a thing of no value? And for what? Moonlight and flame love and passion leaves upon the wind no life itself.

Yet a thousand times no. A native girl marry a native girl stay out here bury himself never in this world. He was going back at the end of his year as he had always intended to do, going back to success, to achievement, to recognition and prosperity. He would fight down this absurd obsession that had taken hold of him, this ridiculous longing for a mere native girl for the sound of her voice, the shine of her eyes the slow, slow grace of her movements the beauty that was hers. An iris flower! Was he to give up all his years of toil for this only this? Never! Again and again, never, never, never!

Would Chika carry out her threat once that he was gone? That thought, too, tormented him; and yet it tormented him even more to think of her married to one of the natives, to one of her own people, her beauty worn by hardship and child bearing, perhaps treated to blows, and worse. He could

not tolerate the idea. Better, oh almost better, wrapped by fold on fold of blue and silver . . . safe!

God! And he would start up and begin again that endless pacing too and fro, racing against his desire that threatened to overtake him, that was too strong and swift for him.

He met her one day crossing the clearing, drooping and listless. She turned as though she would avoid him, and he called to her.

“Chika.”

She came at once, radiant, and stood waiting for him to speak.

“Come back,” he said, “Chika, come back. Come as before. I can’t do without you.”

He did not see much of White these days. He avoided him purposely. He felt he knew very well what White was thinking. White, he felt, was sorry for him, pitied him for his weakness, was disappointed in him. White would not be able to see that this was something out of the ordinary. White would not understand. But it was none of his affair. Herron did not encourage him to his bungalow. He wanted to be alone . . . alone with Chika.

She was back there again now, glowing with a more assured beauty, since she knew that he could not do without her. She did not speak of the time when he must go, and he pushed it out of his mind, away from him. He was happy as he had never been happy, content in the present moment, not looking forward or back. Except sometimes in the long still nights, wakened by the eerie notes of a bird, he would lie sleepless for hours, tormented by the discord of his desires, which grappled and which threatened to rend him asunder. His work, his ambition, that goading ambition that seemed somehow to be drying up like a weed in the sun, shrivelling as he had seen green weeds shrivel in the hot, hot blast of a south wind. His ambition, blown upon by passion, was slowly dying, shrivelling, drying up, till he felt that it would someday crumble away like so much dust.

And the vision of Chika would rise before him, floating towards him, through the deep blue fathomless night, glowing beautiful, golden. He would feel again the warm pressure of her lips, the touch of her golden hand, the dark mysterious beauty of her eyes would look down, down, down into his soul. Into that soul where ambition was grappling with desire.

Chika! He would lie motionless in the dark, murmuring her name, glorying in her beauty, scorched by the flame of her passion . . . her passion mingling with his own. Chika . . . life was glowing . . . wonderful . . . a

thing of flame and moonlight! And then he would start up in the darkness, remembering with a sudden sharp misery that tore at his heart, just what was before him. Work dry, toiling work success, achievement loneliness but ambition fulfilled.

Oh, ambition was dry as dust in his mouth these velvet nights. It was dry as dust on the roadway along which he must go alone always alone and Chika his golden iris flower must fade must die also alone.

But ambition would not be beaten down. In the day time it would rear itself again, and he would strain at his work, he would go back to it with the old keen eagerness. The days were few now until his return. He had accomplished a great deal in the year that was ended. The Company's standing was more assured, he had straightened out a mass of detail, he had brought order from chaos. The Company were pleased with what he had done. They showed it by the words of satisfaction at the end of their letters, which Herron knew would mean a step up on his return. He was gratified, he had done what he had intended to do. He had taken a leap forward towards his goal. But the thought of what was before him wrung his soul.

The boat had arrived. It was down at the end of the pier. The natives were loading her with bales of merchandise. She would leave that night. Herron had not spoken of his departure to Chika, and neither had she mentioned it to him. His trunks were packed and locked. He had brought his mind down to a little point of fixity. He must only allow himself to think of what must be done, of what orders must be given, of what was ahead. He could not bear the thought of what was to be left behind.

He could not trust himself even to speak to her. She sat on the floor, motionless, leaning her head against the leg of the table, watching his every movement, but silent without a word or a gesture to indicate the agony that was hers.

"Well, Chika," he said at last, when it could not be put off any longer, "it's good-bye," and he drew her to her feet and took her in his arms.

He was running, running, running, through the blue pit of the night, down towards where the lights of the ship twinkled and shone. If he did not run fast, too fast for thought, he knew that his limbs would refuse to go forward. Back there in the bungalow Chika was sobbing on her knees, a broken iris flower. Oh, he had never known that it would be like this even in his worst moments he had never known quite this. But he must

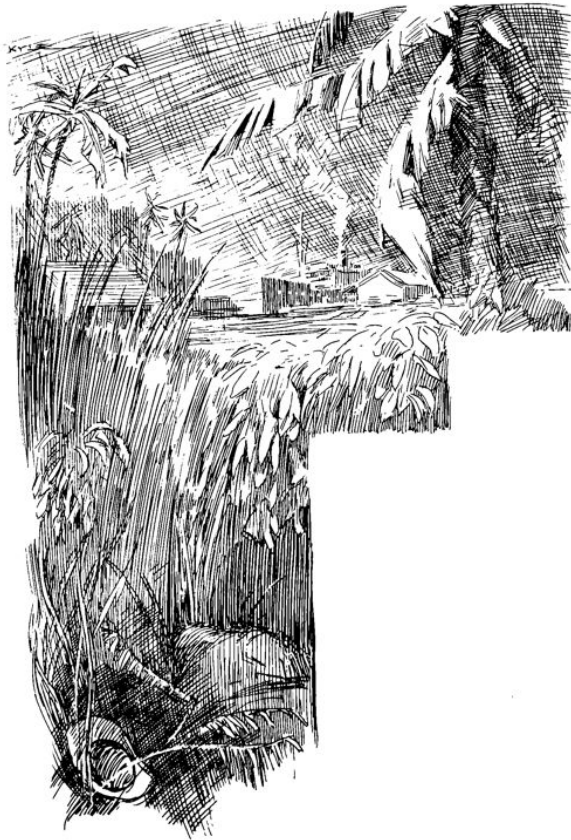
go forward without thought . . . forward . . . to where success awaited him. He must reach the goal of his ambitions . . . he must win.

He had said good-bye to White and had seen that White was almost glad to see that he was leaving, that his fears for him had come to nothing. White had not mentioned Chika again.

“I wish you success,” he had said, wringing his hand . . . “there is no doubt that you will succeed.”

No. There was no doubt now. He must go on and on until he had reached the very summit of his desire. On and on and on. What else was there for him? Oh, if he but paused for a moment, if he stopped even to think, he would go back . . . back to that darkened bungalow where a broken iris bloom lay across the floor. He had only enough resistance left to reach the ship. Once on board he was safe from his weakness. A broken iris bloom!

He stumbled . . . pitched forward . . . fire across his forehead . . . a vision of Chika floated up to meet him as he fell down . . . down . . . down . . . into darkness. A vision of Chika . . . golden . . . wonderful.



“In the bushes unconscious.”

That she was there above him when he opened his eyes was only to be expected.

“I found you fallen here in the bushes unconscious,” the slow, slow familiar tones. “The boat has gone.”

So after all his struggle, a pebble on the roadway, a stone in his path had defeated him, had flung him back into her arms, and he had no longer the will for another effort. He had no more strength to put forth.

And suddenly, he was enveloped, body and soul, in wave upon wave of inexplicable happiness, of resignation, and of complete abandonment to the fate that was overtaking him. Ambition success the dust under his hand passion and love the flame that was Chika.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Chika* by Beatrice Redpath]