

Chinook

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN



Crazy coincidence. Death-wish stuff? Perhaps!

THERE is something about "Indian Summer" that frightens me. To most people, I suppose, this season of falling leaves and dying flowers and birds flying south imparts a feeling of wist-

ful sadness. "The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year . . ."

But that is not what I mean. Autumn, I think, is the season of ghosts. (Else why, indeed, is October 31st celebrated as All

Hallow's E'en?) I believe there is a certain mystic *weakness* in the air at this time—when nature is at its lowest ebb, the way the human body is said to be at midnight. Whatever subtle powers of resistance we may set up in Spring, or Summer, or Winter disintegrate somehow in Autumn, allowing certain Forces to assail us from planes beyond the one we understand.

I believe John Barradine felt this, keenly. In my opinion, looking back on the whole strange affair, I think it was not the actual date (November 19) that filled him with such unreasoning terror, but the *season*; the time of year when all things that belong to nature must die and go back to her to complete the endless circle of creation. Leaves must fall, flowers must die, and return to the earth to make more leaves and flowers. This is nature's pattern, and all the creatures of the forest obey it unquestioningly. It is only civilized man who thinks he can take a law of nature and twist it to his own ends, or even discard it entirely if he likes.

John Barradine convinced me of this, in a way that makes me shiver uncontrollably whenever I remember . . .

Barradine was the most urbane, the most sophisticated man I have ever known. I met him at a book-authors luncheon in Florida, at the Venice Writers' Colony. We were down there on the staff together, lecturing—I to publicize fantasy fiction, Barradine to plug his book on Indian relics and customs; one of the best I have ever read on what I had considered a rather dull subject. It was a busy session, and we saw little of each other except at meals. Barradine had his own little group of would-be non-fiction writers, and I had my classes in fantasy. Now and then we did glance across the screened patio of the Country Club and smile and nod—but I dislike tall, faultlessly groomed men with a little mustache, who talk with a Harvard accent. Barradine, I learned, had acquired his along with a Ph.D. and a Phi Beta Kappa key that he wore rather ostentatiously, as if to impress us. I had decided that I did not care much for his whole personality, or for anyone as sure of himself as he seemed to be. Then one of

my students, a nice old lady whom everyone called "Al", dropped a remark that shattered my casual opinion of my fellow-lecturer the way a violin note can shatter a wine glass.

"Poor man," she murmured over a spoonful of mint ice. "He's so horribly afraid of those Indians, he couldn't sleep last night. He has the room next to mine, and I heard him pacing up and down the . . ."

"Indians?" I came to a point like a bird-dog scenting game. "That man?" I laughed aloud; the idea was completely absurd. Barradine—afraid of getting scalped, like a small boy coming home too late from a double-feature western. Barradine, who knew all about Indian history and the present meek existence of the Red Man on various reservations over the country. Barradine, leaning on the club bar with a cocktail held in one lean pale hand and an ivory-tipped monogrammed cigarette in the other. A man like that, having nightmares about Geronimo attacking a wagon-train?

My dinner companion looked at me and smiled gently. "No, really. It's a phobia—he told us about it in class. He's been to ever so many psychoanalysts about it. His migraine headaches, I mean . . ."

"What migraine headaches?" I prodded impatiently. "You mean he . . .?"

"Yes," Al clucked her tongue sympathetically. "I knocked on his door last night when I heard him groaning. He was striding up and down, up and down, with his hands to his head. I . . . There wasn't anything I could do for him, except offer him an aspirin. He told me he has them all the time—sharp blinding headaches. They're not physical; they're psychosomatic. Imaginary. Or that's what the doctors all tell him. He's tried every way on earth to forget about that family curse . . ."

"What family curse?" I broke in, in thwarted curiosity. "Please! Start at the beginning, will you? Tell me . . ."

"About Dr. Barradine?" My friend blinked at me in surprise. "Why, I thought everybody— Well, it's all very queer. You knew he has Indian blood? His great-grandmother was a full-blooded Chinook."

"No! Really?"

I PEERED sharply at my fellow-lecturer, and decided there was something acquiline about his profile, at that; something dark and brooding about his straight high forehead and sombre black eyes. There were also lines of pain etched deeply between his brows, and blue circles under his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights. Previously, I had decided that Barradine merely looked dissipated, like many another successful writer who shuttles between Florida and New York, working too hard and living too fast.

But now, again, my opinion was changed. There was something decidedly odd about my fellow-lecturer, and I was annoyed with myself for not having noticed it before.

There was fear in those black, close-set eyes; a dull gnawing fear that, now and then, betrayed itself in a little tic at the corner of Barradine's thin mouth.

"But that's ridiculous!" I burst out laughing again. "There aren't any hostile Indians any more! Every school child knows that, and certainly an authority like Barradine . . ."

"Oh, that's not what he's afraid of," my companion said complacently. "You see, his great-grandfather married into the Chinook tribe and joined it—by blood rites and fasting. That was in 1810, I think he said. About five years after the Lewis and Clark expedition. There were 16,000 Chinooks then—a great tribe. Hunters and salmon-fishers, living along the Columbia River in what's now Washington."

"Uh-huh," I fidgeted. "But, the curse . . .?"

"I'm coming to that," Al said cheerfully. "Seems there was some kind of plague about then, and over half the tribe was wiped out. They fought desperately to survive and not be absorbed by the incoming tide of white traders, or by other Indian tribes. A proud lot, the Chinooks, with permanent wikipups, slaves, a language all their own, and well-made canoes and weapons. That's the tribe Dr. Barradine's great-grandfather joined when he married a daughter of the chief Kukúsím. They weren't just friendly with him as a white

hunter. *He became one of them . . .* You understand what that means, how a white man would have to change his whole way of thinking?"

I nodded impatiently. "Oh, sure. Plenty of white traders went squaw-man during the pioneer days! What has that to do with . . .?"

My friend shook her head emphatically. "Not a squaw-man. He became an *Indian*, a member of another race. A simple, savage race bound by certain beliefs and customs. Just as we are bound—you and I, for all our high-flown talk about not feeling any race-prejudice! *Every* race is prejudiced against another race. Actually, the Indians are the proudest of all, and the most resentful when a member of their color marries someone who is white, or black, or yellow. Because it's wrong. Nature didn't intend it, just as she doesn't intend for dogs and cats to mate."

I PURSED my lips, chuckling. "Huh! I never thought of it that way. Of course, they hated our taking their land—but it just never had occurred to me that Indians might resent being absorbed by the white race!"

"Ask one sometime," Al said simply. "Even Dr. Barradine, with all his college degrees and fame as a writer, is proud of his Indian blood. But he's afraid of it, too," she added, glancing over at him as he rose and left the patio for his next lecture. "You see . . . Well, his great-grandfather tired of being an Indian. And he became greedy, like all white men. The story is that he stirred up the white settlers against the remnants of his tribe, and they marched down on the camp one night. Wiped out every single Chinook—armed as they were with rifles against the Chinooks' handful of arrows. His squaw was killed. Some say Barradine's ancestor killed her himself, then snatched up their half-breed child at the last minute and took him along when he escaped. A last sentimental gesture, perhaps."

"And the curse?" I prodded. "Don't tell me the Chinooks caught up with him and took back the baby, after scalping . . .?"

My smile faded at the look on Al's face. She glanced at me queerly.

"No. I told you, they were all wiped out. Dead. Barradine's great-grandfather took his son to a distant city, after selling all the lands of his tribe for a tidy sum. He married again, a white girl. The boy was reared and educated as a wealthy white. He married and had two sons and a daughter. These in turn married. Two had children, and . . ."

"Yes, but the *curse!*" I demanded. "I don't see any just retribution in . . ."

"Oh, there was no idea of retribution," my friend said quietly. "It's just that Barradine's ancestor took the oath to become a Chinook . . . and all his children after him, and their children's children. So the— Well, nobody knows why, but everyone of them died the same way on exactly the same date: the date of that attack on the Indian village, when everyone of the tribe except Barradine's ancestor and his half-breed son were wiped out by the whites!"

I stared. "You say—they all *died?* On the same day, years apart?"

"Every descendant of that Barradine who pledged himself to be a Chinook," Al said quietly. "On November the 19th, they all died. Some of them quite young, some older than Dr. Barradine—he's about 45. Furthermore, they all died . . . *the same way! Of concussion, caused by a crushed skull!*"

I ran my tongue over dry lips, glancing after Barradine's gaunt figure as he disappeared through the door. This, I decided, I must look into; not that I believed in "curses," but simply because I'm always hunting plots for weird stories. *Revenge . . . A ghostly tomahawk, my mind ran, striking in the dead of night . . .*

"They were accidental deaths?" I pursued. "Car wrecks; something like that? Or was murder ever proved?"

"*Nothing was ever proved.*" Al shrugged, signalling for her check. "All those people were simply living along, happy and contented. Living normal lives, like you and me. Then, suddenly, they were found dead—in bed, at the breakfast table, at the theatre, almost anywhere. But the front of their heads were caved in, every single one of them! And now . . ."

I swallowed, nodding. "Now Barradine's afraid it's going to happen to him," I finished. "I wonder if he'd mind talking to me about it? I mean, is he sensitive on the subject?"

MY COMPANION shook her head. "Doesn't seem to be; he talked about it in class—although I noticed he became very nervous. His doctor advised him to talk about it, though, and study Indian lore. Try and reason himself out of it; laugh it off. I don't think he's having much luck, though," she added soberly. "Those headaches are getting worse. And each of his kinspeople had them. Horrible ones. Just before they . . ."

I grunted. "Well, as you say, it's queer. Pretty hard to laugh off all those— They couldn't have been anything more than a series of crazy coincidences! Death-wish stuff. Everyone of his kinsmen must have subconsciously *wanted* to die, to atone for what their ancestor did to those Indians who befriended him. So they—" I frowned suddenly, and shrugged. "I can understand how they'd let themselves get killed on exactly the same date. But why that particular way? With a crushed skull?"

Al shrugged, too. "Mind over matter; there you are!" she grinned. "Maybe their sense of family guilt affected the chemical structure of their bones! Or maybe—Oh, you figure it out!" She laughed and rose from the table.

"I certainly intend to," I announced. "Do you suppose dianetics would help that poor guy? You know—hygienic manipulation of the mind. It's the bright new word among us scientification fans now. What do you think of it?"

"All that stuff about psychic wounds? Like the case of the man who had mysterious choking spells, and found out they were caused by a sub-memory of the umbilical cord being wound around his neck before birth—" She laughed. "Nonsense! Pure nonsense."

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe not. But I think I'll talk to our friend Dr. Barradine just the same."

THIS resolution was not to be carried out that evening, however. A wire came from Barradine's publisher, calling him back to New York—something about the galley proofs of his new book. I was not to see him again for several months. Motor-ing through Washington with friends, I happened to notice a stone archway over a private drive that opened on the highway. The name on the cement inset was BARRADINE, and on impulse I decided to drop in on my fellow-lecturer.

Not wishing to bother him with strangers, I had my friends let me out at the huge wrought-iron gate. A long curving driveway of slag swept away through giant oaks and pines and maples that hid the house. Beyond the trees, in a flash of sparkling light, I caught a glimpse of the river. I glanced about the well-kept grounds, admiring the way a rather mid-Victorian iron deer seemed to burst from a coppice of red and yellow leaves. There was a formal-looking fountain, with water pouring from an urn held by a stately nymph. Here, I decided, former Barradines had made their home and spent a great deal of that money swindled by their ancestor from the Indians who had trusted him. Small wonder they all harbored a nagging sense of guilt!

Striding up the drive, I sighted the house at last, set well back from the highway among a small forest of towering trees ablaze with autumn color. I stepped up on the veranda and knocked with the brass knocker that sent hollow echoes resounding through the hall beyond. Instantly the door opened, and a liveried butler bowed me into the house, after I had given my name and reason for calling. With a gesture he ushered me into Barradine's library—a huge high-ceilinged room, all paneled oak and shelves of books. The room was also a museum of Indian relics—peace pipes, small totems, reed baskets with head-bands attached, bone fishhooks, and display after display of beautiful arrowheads, bows, and tomahawks.

Barradine himself rose as I entered, pushing himself up rather wearily from a big leather chair in front of the blazing fireplace. He was wearing a brocade dressing

gown and handsomely-tooled slippers of Moroccan leather. His smooth black hair glistened in the firelight, but he looked even thinner and more dissipated than when I had last seen him. There was a highball glass in his hand, and I saw at once, somewhat regretting my impulse to drop in unexpectedly, that he was quite drunk—and trying very hard to get drunker. He bowed rakishly, waving me to a chair, his first expression of annoyance at my call giving way to a sudden look of almost pathetic gratitude.

"My dear girl! How are you?" he asked, in the clipped affected tones I remembered.

"Fine. Wonderful." I smiled at him. "Busy. And you?"

Barradine's mouth twitched sharply in that violent tic I had noticed before. He stiffened in his chair, passing a hand over his high straight forehead. The spasm of pain that distorted his face for an instant was gone again. He smiled back at me lightly.

"Oh—I do very well, considering these damned headaches. I've just received an advance copy of my new book. Like to see it?"

He lifted a small volume from a tabouret near his chair and handed it to me. I blinked and almost started at the title: CHINOOK. Skimming over the chapters, I found it to be the intimate life-picture of an Indian, living in a Chinookan village of a century and a half ago. I could see at a glance that the author had put a great deal of intensive research on this least known of all tribes, and that the principal character, Anabotaha, was a living, breathing person to him. It was almost as though, rather pitifully, John Barradine sought to resurrect on paper one of those Indian braves his ancestor had slaughtered so long ago. Guilt-complex, I decided, smiling in triumph that my guess to Al months ago had been right.

"Devil of a time writing that thing," Barradine commented. "No two authorities seem to agree about what the Chinooks were like. My great-grandmother's tribe, you know. They seem to have lived in permanent villages and kept slaves, unlike the Sioux and Cherokees. They hunted and fished—along here, as a matter of fact.

These very grounds may have been the site of my ancestor's village. That's a queer thought, isn't it?" Barradine rambled on, almost as though he tried to stave off silence.

"Yes," I agreed, wishing I could leave gracefully at once. "I—I've often stopped on a crowded street corner, and thought: 'Two centuries ago a naked Indian stood here where I'm standing—aiming a flint-tipped arrow at a wild turkey flying just there, where that taxi nearly ran into that freight truck—'" I broke off with a small laugh. "The Vanishing American. This is their country, you know. We stole it from them and shoved them into little cubbyholes called reservations. Serves us right that everything is so complicated now! They're happy and secure and as simple as ever, but we civilized whites are all going crazy!"

Barradine laughed, the first really free unforced laughter I had ever heard from his lips. He looked me over with an alert expression as though seeing me for the first time, and waved his hand at a crystal decanter beside me.

"Do stop sitting on the edge of that chair," he begged with sudden humility. "Lean back. Have a drink, and talk to me. Ye gods!" Again he passed a hand over his forehead, his brows contracting with pain. "You're the first person I've met who really knows what's the matter with me. The fact is," he blurted, "I'm in debt up to my neck—and two years behind on contracts I've signed for new books. I'm—" He flushed, then went on frankly: "I'm being sued for breach of promise by a show girl I—became involved with, and wanted to marry until I realized she was only after my 'fortune'! What I'd like to do," he said bitterly, "is chuck the whole mess and— and give it back to the Indians, as you mentioned! Ever felt that way? Get rid of every civilized responsibility! Go native!"

"Just about everybody in the country feels that way right now," I reminded him. "What with this third war coming up, and the Atom Threat hanging over us, and inflation. Yes, I've felt that way. Wanting to turn myself into an African native, or a Polynesian. Or lo, the poor Indian!"

My host nodded slowly, thoughtfully, rubbing one temple with long white fingers.

"Yes," he said quietly. "But it's worse with me. I *am* an Indian. *And they want me back!*" he muttered this as though to himself. "*I've wanted to go back, like all the rest of my family. But I've been afraid, because it—it has to be complete! It's not as if I'm a member of just any tribe. I am Chinook!*"

I GULPED, commenting grimly to myself that Dr. Barradine's mind was going at last. He had evidently, I guessed, cracked up under the strain of civilized living, debts, and a rather unhappy love affair. I had, of course, heard rumors about the show girl in Florida; some cheap little bar-fly Barradine had picked up in a night club in a moment of loneliness and bewilderment. Pity for the gaunt, middle-aged man swept over me—but that violent twitch of his taut mouth made me glance nervously toward the door. One could never tell what the breakdown cases were likely to do next; and after all, my friends were waiting for me impatiently out on the highway.

I rose and took my leave, as pleasantly as possible. Barradine followed me to the door himself; but suddenly, in the hall, he clapped both hands to his forehead and leaned heavily against the paneled wall.

I stepped to his side solicitously. "Can I get you anything? Call your servant?"

"No—no." He straightened, and stood aside for me to pass through the open door. "I'm all right now. It's just about this time of year, I . . . I . . . What is today anyhow? November the . . . 17th? I . . ."

He stopped short, the blood ebbing slowly from his face as he spied something on the veranda—something very odd, which had not been there when I entered, I was quite sure. As Barradine bent over and picked it up with a shaking hand, I stared at it curiously. Why, it was nothing but two small boards perhaps an inch thick, tied together at one end with a piece of dirty rawhide.

But Dr. Barradine whirled on me accusingly.

"You—?" he snapped. "Is this some kind

of horrible joke you thought up because of my . . . ? You left this here for me to find! Yes! To drive me completely mad? I . . . I've heard of them, but I've never seen one!"

I blinked at him, backing toward the steps and deciding that my fellow-lecturer ought to be in a mental hospital. There was a look of such utter terror in his bulging eyes, and his mouth jerked hideously now with the nervous tic as he brandished those two innocent-looking rough boards at me.

"I . . . I haven't any idea what you mean," I said crisply. "But . . . you really ought to be under a doctor's care!" I made my voice as calm and soothing as possible, telling myself that if I ever got away from this sombre old house on the river, I would never again drop by alone to visit any interesting neurotics. "Call me sometime, won't you?" I gave Barradine my address in New York, and almost bolted down the drive, glancing back only one at that solitary figure still standing there in the doorway, those thong-tied boards clutched in his trembling hands.

You know the rest. No doubt you read of the case in the papers; certainly it was sensational enough to make headlines all over the country. I believe the tabloids even printed a picture of John Barradine, as his body was found by those two fishermen on the Columbia . . .

FLOATING downstream in that Indian canoe! Quite naked, too, except for a beaded breech-cloth and wampum strands about his neck and arms. His flesh had been stained a rich red-brown with some sort of berry juice, and his black hair had been clipped short and shaved off except for one savage bristle on top that stood up like a pony's mane. But there was no grimace of horror or of agony stamped on his dead face; only a look of ineffable peace.

As you know, the forepart of Barradine's skull was crushed in like an eggshell. The police arrested his butler, but later released him when he proved that his master had been left alone in that old mansion on the Columbia River the afternoon of his death.

On November the 19th—like all the other members of his line who, as Barradine expressed it so oddly, "went back" because the tribe "wanted them back." How his skull became crushed in that horrible manner, and who placed his body in that Chinook funeral-canoe afterwards, was a matter of great mystery to the police. The dugout itself, crudely fashioned with a stone hammer and adz, was *new*—and yet no such Indian canoe has been seen on the Columbia River for over a hundred years!

Most puzzling of all were those two rough boards, so gruesomely tied down at one end like some savage torture-instrument over Barradine's mashed-in forehead. That, the police said, was quite obviously the work of a maniac, as brutal and meaningless as the Black Dahlia slaying.

But I have my own opinions. I think I know who made that Chinook funeral-canoe, like a man, mortally ill, building his own coffin. And I believe Barradine himself climbed into it and laid himself out, still alive, because he knew *when* it would come . . . and *why*. I believe he tied that contraption on his head, too, as a last ironic gesture of submission.

Those two boards, I learned later, had been dropped on the Barradine veranda by the butler, who had meant to put them in the fireplace. He had taken them from the gardener, who had thus innocently tied them together with an old bootlace to prop up a bit of broken shrubbery. They could not know, of course, that what he made was a Chinook head-flattener: an instrument tied on the head of a papoose at birth, in order to press down its soft skull-tissue in a slope level with the nose. Thereafter a Chinook's skull grew that way; not perpendicular, like a white man's forehead, but *flat*—forever setting apart all tribal members from anyone else on earth. Just so did the Chinese nobility break and bind the feet of their girl-children, or the Ubangi women insert wooden disks in their split lower lips.

I learned of this tribal custom when I read Barradine's book. There was another name for the now-extinct tribe of Chinook Indians. They were called *Flatheads*.