

The Jade Owl



Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

The Jade Owl Legacy Book I

*The Jade Owl:
In Search of the Old China Hand*

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Sample Chapter – The Jade Owl
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Opportunities Lost

1

When Rowden Gray charged into the San Francisco Museum of East Asian Arts and Culture, he caused quite a stir. He had been pacing in the buttery sun of Golden Gate Park for at least twenty minutes, his feet scuffing the grayment. He clutched a battered telegram. Stopping, he gazed at the Museum's marble archway. He tried hard to restore his calm. *Difficult*. He was not calm. After the flight from New York, his jet lag advanced. His stomach growled like a fireball. His eyes strained from the grit of in-flight movies. He took one bracing lung-pulling breath and felt the strange warmth of the wintry air.

I should leave, he thought. *I should just head back to the airport and go home. Why should I give him any satisfaction?* Rowden sauntered to a bench, sat and then cracked his knuckles almost dropping the balled up paper. He loosened his tie. Hands wiped on his gray slacks. Eyes closed. Spit. *Where would I go?* All these years waiting for this or something like this, was shattered like the telegram he mashed. Shattered *by* the telegram he mashed. Years of research and classroom slavery, a sea of bored faces cropping into his mind — students without interest, without aptitude. No reward for the serious scholar, the passionate expert in things Chinese. Here it was, before these doors, the opportunity of a lifetime, the reward that comes to the worthy. Only now that reward lay tarnished in words ill met by downcast eyes. *I wish they hadn't led me here*. But they had. He had, and to Professor Rowden Gray, that made the telegram burn as if it had teeth biting into his palm, eating his composure to the marrow.

So when Rowden resolved to enter and face his foe, he flew off the bench, whirled up the marble stairs into the cold luster of the Museum's cavernous lobby. His feet kept him focused on the goal, but blind to the many visitors and guests. As Rowden bolted past the security guards, he ran smack into an unsuspecting visitor.

"Aye."

Rowden kept to his own feet, the visitor being a slight thing — a young man in a blue shirt, who careened backwards, spun and fell near the guard station.

"Are you all right?" Rowden asked. He came to the young man's aid feeling quite the ass for his actions. "I didn't mean to . . . I mean, I'm sorry to have . . . Christ, I'm sorry." The man lay facedown, squirming to regain his feet. When he turned, his eyes met Rowden's. *Lavender*, Rowden thought, although he had no idea why he thought it. Maybe it was the kid's aftershave or perhaps his deep blue eyes. Whatever crossed Rowden's mind, it stymied him from helping. The guards rushed to the young man's assistance. They scowled at Rowden Gray.

The stricken visitor seemed more embarrassed than upset. "It's okay," he said. "I'll be okay. Leave me be. I'm okay. Really."

Rowden sighed, and then cracked his knuckles. The guards, appearing to know the young man, helped him brush off. One guard had a full cropping handlebar mustache. The other was as hairless as a Chihuahua.

"You better have a good explanation for charging in here like a fucking bull," said the mustached guard.

Rowden looked about. Beyond the lobby, the main exhibition hall now echoed with the chatter of visitors.

"Well," the guard snapped. "Are you listening to me?"

"I am," Rowden said. He held the crumpled telegram in his right hand. "I have business here. Important business. Pressing business."

"We'll see about that," the guard said, pulling at the telegram. Rowden refused to surrender it.

He turned away from the main hall, glancing down a long corridor. A woman approached, her beige high heels echoing on the marble floor, announcing her arrival.

"RG?" she said upon reaching the entrance.

"Connie?" Rowden tightened his hold on the telegram. "Connie, look what I've caused."

Connie inspected the damage. There was none. The young man was already recuperating. The other visitors were drifting back to the display cases.

"Quivers," Connie said to the mustached guard. "This is Professor Gray. He has an appointment with the Curator-General."

Quivers bobbed his head and fluttered his hands. "If you say so, Miss Wilson."

"I'll take him in," she said. "Follow me, RG."

The young man in the blue shirt sat on a bench now. Rowden thought to apologize again, but perhaps it was best to leave it alone. Incident over. He had vented his anger. *Shame it poured over an innocent bystander. Shame.*

Rowden followed Connie Wilson through the corridor past an *authorized personnel only* sign. She slinked, her fetching curves easy to follow, if one had a notion.

"Rowden, I'm really sorry this has happened."

"Me too," Rowden said. "I hope that young man's okay."

"Young man?" She smacked her lips and rolled her eyes. "Don't worry about him. I'm sure he'll recover. Accidents happen." She turned toward him and straightened his tie. "No, I meant about *the position*."

Rowden sighed, loosening his tie. "So you know?"

"I do. I was excited when I heard that you were joining our team. I told J.J. that the Board made a wise decision in choosing you. I heard the *bad* news only yesterday. I'm sorry."

They had reached a dark cold spot in the hallway. Rowden could barely see his conductor, but felt her as she slipped his tie up again. She gave him a peck on the cheek.

"I only wish they'd told me before I came all the way out here," he said. He raised the telegram and punched it.

"I agree. Not tactful nor timely."

They turned a corner into a brighter stretch. A windowed door filtered light upon the mosaic floor. *Curator-General* was emblazoned across the opaque window proclaiming the seat of authority. Connie turned the knob, but hesitated before the pull.

"He'll fill you in, RG. I believe there will be satisfactory compensation."

"It's not about the money." Rowden's chin tucked as his former anger rekindled. "This place is my dream. John Battle's quarry is here. What an opportunity to prod and poke in the old man's treasures. You, of all people, know what this post meant to me."

Connie lowered her eyes, the look of understanding. She opened the door, ushering Rowden in. The Curator-General's secretary, a pleasant, older woman with white hair and tidy heft, acknowledged them with a friendly smile. She stood behind her well-ordered desk.

"Millie, this is Professor Gray."

"Professor Gray," Millie said. "It's such a pleasure. Your name is a legend among the staff. Just the other day I heard . . ." She stopped mid-smile, perhaps thinking what she had heard should not be repeated, although she probably had repeated it often enough. No matter. "Actually, Professor Gray, I wish the Curator-General had better news for you. I'm truly sorry. It would have been nice to have you on board." Suddenly, her pout changed to a broad smile. "Are your accommodations satisfactory?"

Rowden's head cocked. *She's worried about my accommodations, when I'm out here adrift. How flaky is that?* "Quite nice," he said. "I'm at the Drake, but you would know that, wouldn't you?"

“Yes,” she said, inviting him to sit. “Good. I’m glad. At least we can make you comfortable while you’re our guest in San Francisco.” She waddled around to his side. “I’ll tell J.J. you’re here.”

Rowden sat. He was the picture of anxiety. Lips tensed. Teeth clenched. Eyes scanning the room. He cracked his knuckles. Connie sat beside him.

“Still doing that?” she said, placing her hand on his.

“Bad habit, I know.”

“And noisy.” She brushed his pants toying with the crease, or what would have been a crease had the flight been shorter. “How’s Rose?”

“Rose?” He smiled. “News travels slowly. Rose and I split up. I thought you knew. It’s been four years.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not really helping you, am I?”

“Actually, you are. You’re a friendly face — a familiar one.”

He had felt abandoned since his arrival, even before he checked in at the Drake and got that poisoned telegram. He came to San Francisco filled with excitement. Things had been rough lately. Nothing but a sea of the same old classroom assignments and beginner’s guides to the Cultural Revolution — nothing special.

“Connie, this post was good news — great news. Then, to get this telegram.” He slapped the paper again. “You don’t know what it is to arrive with hope only to be handed bad news by a front desk clerk. It’s no way to treat a man of letters.”

“No,” she agreed. “But you needed to hear about it somehow and before you came here today.”

That’s certainly true. But why should he be here at all? Why didn’t they just leave him alone in his obscure fiddle-fucking, pen twirling sinological obscurity — allow him to fester on some innocuous research paper for *The Harvard Journal of Asian Studies*, a cancerous whim meant for importance instead of infecting him down to the knuckles he cracked? Why did he feel so alone and betrayed? *Why should he not?* He was both.

2

Millie returned through the Curator-General’s door, where a tall, portly man stood wearing a three-piece suit. Older than Rowden by two decades, J. Jenkins Gillenhaal appeared older still, time aging him with the same subtle brush that had varnished his office’s dark paneling.

“RG,” he boomed. “Please come in. Have a seat. Millie, two coffees. If I remember, you take it black?”

Rowden jerked to his feet. He veiled his thoughts behind a forced smile and followed J.J. Gillenhaal’s cue. The curator checked his pocket watch, proceeding to a large picture window overlooking Golden Gate Park. A grandfather’s clock bellowed the noon hour as Rowden sat.

“We have beautiful weather here in winter, RG,” the Curator-General said. “It gets cold during the summer. Befuddles your East coast logic, doesn’t it?”

“The weather doesn’t befuddle me, J.J.” He cracked his knuckles. “I love Golden Gate Park in any season. This museum is its crown jewel.”

“We are proud of it.” *Within these halls, the relics told their tales and slipped their secrets.* “Ah, the coffee. Thanks, Millie.”

When Millie left, Curator Gillenhaal sat behind his empire desk, his demeanor changing. He played with his *MontBlanc* pens, three of them — one green, one red and one blue. “It’s been some time since we’ve sat face to face. You were among my star pupils.”

“J.J., cut to the chase. I’ve come a long way for nothing. I’m as tired as hell and fucking pissed. Bottom line, please.”

“I can understand your hurt,” Gillenhaal said, shrugging, “but it’s not personal, you know. The

Board of Trustees created a real position. You *were* their choice and rightly so. Although, I must say, you haven't published much and you've never held tenure in any of your positions. Nonetheless, the Board reviewed your research. You were their choice."

"It sounds like I wasn't *your* choice."

The clock ticked like a bomb somewhere in the corner of the room.

Tick dock. Tick dock.

"There is no other expert of your caliber in Sung Dynasty studies today," J.J. said. "I did have reservations. Personally, I think you cleave too much to John Battle's school of thought, you know. Battle's methods were never my cup of tea."

Tick dock. Tick dock.

"John Battle was a great man."

"Yes. A pirate and swashbuckling scholar." J.J. templed his fingers, tapping his lips. "There was always a touch of drama about John Battle. He was *too* driven. And then there was his obsession with the Jade Owl." Rowden winced. Just this reference to his mentor's lost relic sent shivers down his spine. "I mean, it's a shame the damn thing went missing, if it existed at all. But whatever credibility the Old China Hand had with me evaporated when he lectured on the Jade Owl."

Tick dock. Tick dock.

Rowden remembered one such lecture about that precious jade avian figurine. John Battle claimed it glowed and hooted and cast *who-knows-what* voodoo over its possessor. He delivered that lecture with the conviction of an evangelist on the Mount of Olives. Rowden also remembered the whispers. *The old man's lost it. He's stayed out in the sun too long.* Rowden hated that the field's most prominent scholar was cast in lunacy's tinge. *Jealousy, more like it.*

Tick dock. Tick dock.

"Last time I looked," Rowden said, "the main exhibition hall out there sports John Battle's name."

"Don't get me wrong. Without his contributions, this Museum would be poorer." Gillenhaal smirked, apparently pleased to see his points secure. He had tossed a javelin and it hit its mark. "You see how you defend unorthodoxy?" he groaned. "Nonetheless, despite any reservations, I *did* approve you as the choice." He tapped his coffee cup with the spoon.

Tick dock. Tick dock.

"We didn't expect the Endowment to be cut. That makes the new position out of the question. Maybe when the administration changes, the cash flow might improve. However, in my experience, it really does not matter who rules the national cupboard, once cut, it's cut."

"I see," Rowden said. "So it really doesn't matter that I have an agreement with the Board?"

Tick dock. Tick dock.

"Well, it's not really an agreement. We extended the offer. You accepted. We were to finalize it here."

Rowden *exploded*, standing so forcefully, his chair pushed back a half yard.

"That's bullshit, J.J. We settled on salary and bonus. I don't think you can pull this crap!"

Curator Gillenhaal, calm and silent, continued stirring. He placed the cup down and rearranged his *MontBlancs*. He glanced out the window again appearing braced by the warm winter weather.

Rowden sat again. He shook in the shadow of Gillenhaal's calm. Firebrands may explode over parapets, but if they fail to provoke, it's no more than pissing in the wind.

Gillenhaal reached into a side drawer, and then flopped a document onto the blotter — a rather legal looking document. "Calm down, RG." He pushed it across the desk.

"What's this?" Rowden asked, perusing it. He knew full well. He was almost ready to see just how prepared the Board of Trustees was to assuage his ire. Call it *pain and suffering*.

“You see,” Gillenhaal said with the tedium of an old bureaucrat, “we will compensate you for your time and expectations. It’s a fair amount, I believe?”

Tick dock. Tick dock.

Rowden cocked his head. His eyes bugged. “It’s not about the money. I love what I do, and I do it well. I would do it best here. It’s my passion you’re fucking with, J.J.”

“I believe, in the end, it will be about the money,” J.J. said, shaking his head. He raised a finger to the side of his nose. Rowden gazed at the plethora of degrees and awards ensconced on the walls, the ever-present clock (*Tick dock. Tick dock*), and the precisely stacked collection of expensive fountain pens.

“You will hear from my lawyer, J.J.”

He tossed the agreement at his former teacher.

“Very well.”

Gillenhaal swept the agreement into the desk drawer, and then slid it shut. “There’s still time. You have three weeks to consider the matter. The settlement will be here, if you want it. However, one call from your attorney and it’s a memory.”

Curator Gillenhaal arose, went to the window and warmed his hands in the winter sun.

“Good day, Professor Gray.”

3

Rowden wandered into the Museum’s main exhibition hall — John Battle Memorial Hall, named after his professorial mentor. He had let himself out of the office, drifting along the dark corridor past the guards. The mustached guard, the one called Quivers, regarded him. The other guard, the bald one, must have gone on break. Quivers sneered under his handlebars like a Schnauzer guarding a bone. Rowden ignored him and sauntered into the great hall.

The hall, high arched and skylighted, sported two balconies, tiers overlooking the precious displays of Chinese dynastic art and reliquary. *John Battle’s quarry*. Rowden’s breath hitched. He could almost feel the Old China Hand beside him pointing out long columns of text, rattling about the significance of *this* passage or *that*. Rowden shut his eyes. Lips quivered. He remembered his mentor and that wondrous find — the Jade Owl.

Rowden had never seen the Jade Owl. He didn’t know anyone who had except the old man. Rowden had seen a sketch on fine linen sheets in John Battle’s own hand. *We must find it*, Battle had bristled. *It has an inner splendor like no other relic, RG. Believe me, you must follow and take up the trail. You must . . .* But Rowden couldn’t recall the rest of John Battle’s passionate call to mystery. He had blocked it from memory. *Bizarre. Unorthodox. Swashbuckling.*

“I’m sorry, JB,” he whispered.

Rowden opened his eyes. The sunlight filtered across the main display, a great glass cabinet at the hall’s far end. His gaze fixed on that display like a magnet to steel. He took two steps toward it, and then paused. He looked at his right hand. It shook, still gripping the telegram. Snapping his fingers apart, he jettisoned the evil paper ball across the polished floor.

“Does that make you feel better, RG?” came a voice. It was Connie Wilson. She had been tracking behind him.

“Better?” Rowden turned and walked backwards. “Better than what? Better for whom?” He quickened his pace, turning to assure he didn’t trounce another unsuspecting visitor. “J.J. has always been a bastard. Am I better for that?”

“Take it easy, RG. Slow down.”

Rowden stopped. “I’m sure my position could have been preserve, except for J.J. He’s had it in for me for years.” Connie gave him an incredulous look, probably drawing a different conclusion.

“He’s always hated the fact that I followed John Battle’s research techniques. And why not? John Battle taught me everything.” Rowden cracked his knuckles. His gaze encompassed the display objects as if they were a fine blend of malt and barley. “Look about you, Connie. Look.”

Connie shifted her eyes from side to side. Rowden grabbed her hand pulling her forward past case after case of Chinese relics — richly adorned porcelains, fine crafted silver jewelry, bronze vessels, and silk ceremonial robes. She resisted, apparently embarrassed to be pulled about like quarry.

“RG, stop pulling me around.” Connie stood her ground. “I see these objects every day. Of course, they’re special, but it’s where I work. They’re my familiars. I can’t get as goosey over them as you do.”

Rowden stopped.

“Work?” He clenched his fists. “Yes, to work here. This is the work — the real work, the kind of thing that a China Hand needs to survive.”

His eyes danced as he gazed to the skylight. Connie looked around probably assuring that they had not become the center of attention.

“RG, the old China Hands are gone . . . except J.J.”

He scowled. “Not J.J. You can’t call him that. Don’t even put him on the same plain as John Battle.” She signaled him to lower his voice, which had carried through the hall’s hollow. “John Battle is like a god to me.” His hand swept up toward the vault. “See what an Old China hand can procure. Just look at these. I know you see them every day, but do you, really? Do you really see them?”

“RG, you’re just upset.”

“Wouldn’t you be if you were in my shoes?” He drifted toward the centerpiece display. *To be custodian for any of these relics would be my great privilege*, he thought. *In that, I would be better. In that, this museum would be better. But I’m not going to do that now, am I?* “You all lose.”

“I’m sure . . .”

“Sure of what?” Rowden shook his head. Sigh — a deep drawn bracing sigh preventing him from exploding at Connie. After all, she was *a friendly face*, a pretty face at that, with a fresh Ivory Soap aroma. Soft cheeks. Beige curls bobbing over a tight green sweater. He shut his eyes to blank her out. She was distracting. He turned toward the great display case.

“Take a look at it, will you?” He pointed at the glory of John Battle Memorial Hall — a great jewelry box, hewn from jade and encrusted with pearls and silver. Rectangular. Four feet high with ethereal carvings — cranes and sparrows, doves and ducks. At each bird’s eye, a pearl. On the cover, a sea of dragons chasing treasure — except at the crest. There, a break evidenced a missing piece. Where the missing piece belonged was a comet shaped indentation.

“The Empress Wu’s Jewelry Box,” Connie said. “*The Joy of Finches*.”

Rowden brought his face close to the glass.

“The box that cannot be opened.”

“There’s nothing in it.” Connie came close to Rowden’s shoulder. *Oh, the Ivory Soap*. “We had it x-rayed. It’s hollow.”

“The wonders of modern science. Who knows what hides in that emptiness?”

“Well, even John Battle couldn’t find out. He spent the better part of his fortune trying, the poor man. But he was a little daft at the end.” Rowden winced. “You must admit that the business with the Jade Owl was over the top. I know the old man was sincere in his belief that he had found and lost the cure for all the world’s ills, but I just think . . .” She didn’t have to say it. *He stayed out in the sun too long*.

Rowden bit his tongue. He was not going to drag himself through this argument again,

defending what he didn't understand — a relic he had never seen. He glanced at Connie. *She's so fetching in that sweater.* "Are you doing anything tonight?" he asked. "Would you like to get a drink?"

"I'd love to, but I have a long-standing appointment tonight."

"Break it."

"I can't. It's with the marketing consultant from Biggs. He's in town for tonight only." Rowden sighed. He cracked his knuckles. "How long do you think you'll be in San Francisco?"

"I'm not sure. Not long." He hunkered down near the display.

"I'll tell you what, RG. I'll check my scheduler. If I'm free this week, I'll leave you a message at the Drake."

"Thanks," he said, standing. "*It was* really nice to see you again. I'm sorry I'm such a surly bastard today."

She kissed him on the cheek. He hugged her and took a larger liberty beneath her nose, which she apparently did not discourage as she let his lips repose there twice.

"Will you be okay?" she asked.

Rowden smiled. "I'm in freaking John Battle Memorial Hall, standing beside *the Joy of Finches*. Now, that's a restorative."

Connie kissed him again before retreating to the entrance and beyond the *authorized personnel only* sign. Rowden's smile dimmed. His fury had melted to despair. A wave of sadness engulfed him despite his *restoration* declaration. He returned his attention to *the Joy of Finches*, his eyes studying the contour of every beak, eye, and swirl. How he wished he could don latex and explore each contour of this lovely object with his scientific hand. It beckoned him, a power within, calling from an ancient, withered Imperial heart. As he stared, his imagination played a game. *A mirage*. He shuddered. At the crest of the box, he thought he saw the outline of that haunting bird — a deep velveteen green wavering in a fluorescent glow. He blinked. It was gone.

Rowden hunched forward squinting. Perhaps he had seen another relic in some back case imposing its image in his line of vision. But no. There was nothing. *Nothing?* He shuddered again.

"What's that?" He thought he saw another ghost. *No*. A reflection in the display case glass — the young man in the blue shirt from his earlier encounter. He gave Rowden a start.

Rowden abruptly turned, but there was no one. *Nothing*. Just the lingering scent of lavender. He cocked his head, looking for reflections in the black marble floor.

How odd, he thought. *I must be losing my mind. I must.*

He took another longing glance at *the Joy of Finches* — the Empress Wu's great treasure.

"You *all* lose!" he muttered.

He turned away wondering why he could think of nothing now but the aroma of lavender.

End of Sample Chapter – The Jade Owl
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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

Contact author at edwpat@att.net — Feedback is always appreciated
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