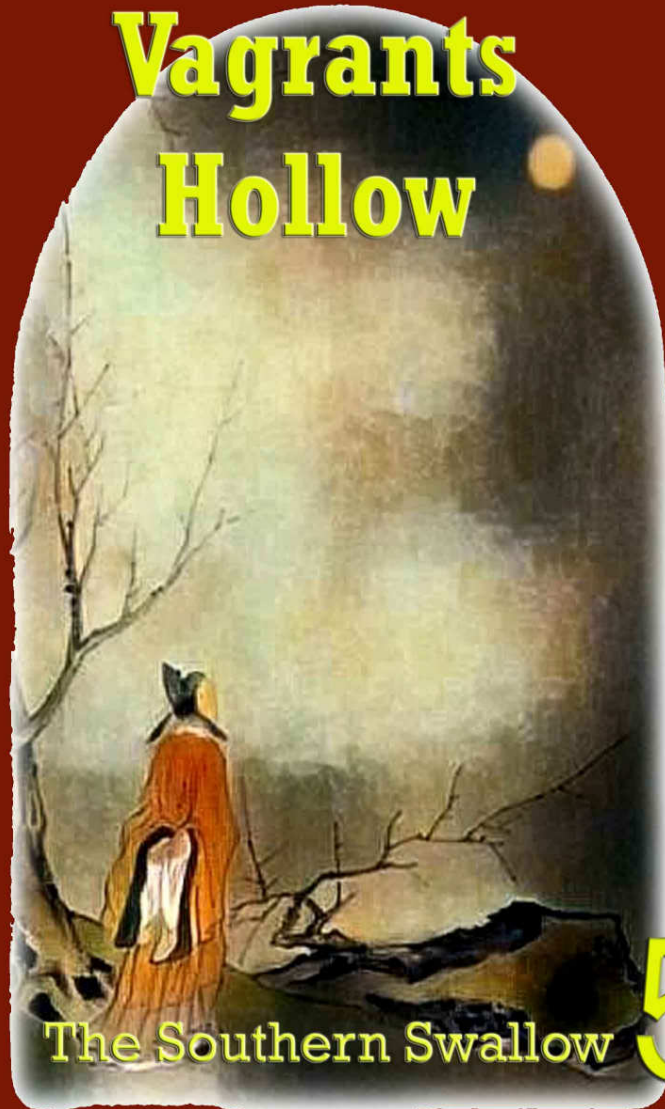


Vagrants Hollow



The Southern Swallow

5

Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

Southern Swallow Book V
Vagrants Hollow
by

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Afterword

Chapter One The Ghosts of Lin-an

1

Being a ghost is a difficult thing, let me tell you, as I've tried it several times during my existence. Like most members of a ch'i-t'ang, I come and go as the call summons — sometimes in the dead of night; sometimes when I'm squatting to rid myself of a good meal. But still I'm hampered by this thing we call life and, in my case, not a noble life, but a servant's existence, my master being indentured to a mystical jade bird and its warrant to end everyone's existence at a future time. His only task was to assure those summoned from the various wheres and whens of existence were ready to fulfill their destiny. And so, dead or alive, we appear; and I, being the Keeper of the Dragon Pendant, a pearl broach either blessed or cursed, however you may view it, am subject to fading from one place to another whenever destiny calls — a bothersome business when squatting over the hole.

My master, the famous scholar Li K'ai-men, a worthy sage of eighty-six summers, has remained steadfast to his warrants (that jade bird) and the various Majesties of the Sung court or courts as you will, as there appeared to be more than one at any given time. Blink an eye and someone new appeared upon the scene claiming to have Heaven's authority. Still, whoever showed up, they always wanted my master's advice, because he was the Custodian of the Yellow Door, not that he ever gave a fart about that. In fact, it was that title and his interminable position as the Grand Tutor to princes and emperors alike that kept him fixed at the capital; and, although Lin-an suited me fine, my master would have preferred to retire to his birthplace far to the southwest near Gui-lin.

As far as confinement goes, Lin-an was far better than our horrid exile in the tropics on Hai-nan Island, but confinement is confinement. No matter how hard my master pleaded to resign his Imperial commissions and drift southward, the Sung dynasts placed a premium on his services; so, stuck he was — we all were, K'ang Yu-wei, the oldest ch'i-t'ang member, who grew younger by the day due to his exposure to the Jade Waters; Hu Min, the old brute, less like an ox now, but still formidable, and me — K'u Ko-ling, piss ant son of a cucumber farmer, who kept them all from starvation and bodily rot. And there was the Other — who showed up from time to time and spouted prophecies and directives, Seer that he was. Yes, four old men and a wisp, all detailed to a garden pavilion west of the palace, a place once known as the Pavilion of Gentle Zephyrs, but now renamed for a harsher reality and known to all as Vagrants Hollow.

2

Beside the lotus pool in *Vagrants Hollow*, two old men sat — one living and one dead, although to those who could see the dead one, he appeared as much alive as the other appeared dead. They sat in silence as they had so many times, unable to touch, except as *ch'i-mates* mingling exasperation with painful longing. Between them stood a staff, known to those in the know as *Thunderer*, a remnant from a primordial time when dragonstone ate away at the world before the world reset, marking many souls with a fiery destiny scarcely imaginable by lowly folk like Emperors and fisherman and sons of cucumber farmers. Here, beside the lotus pool, the old men sat — the sage and his lost lover, drifting in silence like two paper boats on a milk puddle soured in the cracks of dawn.

"It is time," the ghost said, breaking the silence like a whip on the wind.

"You have said that more often now, my *Heart-song*."

"And still you are here when the master calls us to duty."

Li K'ai-men stared into the pale eyes of the specter, his lost love, Fu Lin-t'o. He knew when

released of his Imperial duties and allowed to fulfill his destiny, he might see Fu in a former light — a body restored and corporeal. But until then, these dawn greetings and twilight blessings had to suffice.

“I will try again,” Li said. “It’s difficult, you know, to leave these gates. They are not barred, but the hill is forbidding.”

“You must try again,” Fu murmured. “To fail will fail us all — fail the world — fail the *wei-lai-de*. They are the ones. *He is the One*.”

Li K’ai-men shut his eyes. He saw the *wei-lai-de* — the unborn *ch’i-t’ang* that would race to fulfill the final warrant — the crucial battle on the ephemeral plain in the shadow of Her hem — Mount Li. He saw *the One*, sailing in his sky-boat directing the feathered-kin. It would never happen unless he, Li K’ai-men — Nan Ya, the Southern Swallow, fulfilled his crucial warrant. He sighed.

“I will try again.”

He opened his eyes, but Fu Lin-t’o had disappeared. Nan Ya sighed.

“Is Master Fu here?” came a croaking voice.

Nan Ya looked askance, although he would know that voice anywhere.

“Ko-ling,” he snapped. “You scared him away.”

“I thought I saw him.”

“You never see him. You say it to humor me.”

“And why should I not humor you, master?” Ko-ling came to Li K’ai-men’s side, but did not sit, nodding instead of a bow. “If I came upon you unaware, you’d tell me that Master Fu was here and wave me off. So I asked first. And see how you treat your old servant.”

“I could’ve treated you worse. I should’ve beat you years ago.”

“You have scourged me with a warrant and this pendant.”

K’u Ko-ling touched his chest, a golden dragon pin catching the morning light, its two rough pearls dancing beneath their strands.

“I didn’t give you that relic. You stole it.”

“I did not,” Ko-ling protested. “His Majesty tossed it aside. Said he didn’t care for it and left it beside his tea cup. It was mine to take, foolish piss ant that I am. He left it for me, his Pearly Cap. Now I’m saddled with keeping it safe like the rest of our precious cargo.”

“At least I know when you’re coming,” Li K’ai-men replied. “*Thunderer* glows red in the pendant’s presence.”

“And the dragon’s teeth dance to *Thunderer*’s charms also, but more so when Master Fu is here, *Navigator* not far behind his heels.”

“Just so,” Nan Ya said, and sighed yet again. “I’m sad this morning to see him leave me.”

“Leaving you is his calling.”

Nan Ya gazed at his servant, the craggy remnant of a once spry boy whom the mistress, Mei-lin, chose to serve him. That was too many years ago to recall, despite Li K’ai-men’s crisp mind for memories. Of all the companions in his life, K’u Ko-ling was the most steadfast, lingering here still, his old noggin under his pearly studded skull cap. Still, K’u Ko-ling’s every complaint and verbal jab was a blessing — a touchstone to a living world, one that Nan Ya felt had slipped his grip.

“So, have you prepared my morning meal?” Li K’ai-men asked.

“You’ve already devoured it, master,” Ko-ling replied. “It was a basket of steamed eels, if you recall, and you complained of the garlic and that the congee was cold. I know you ate it because I smelled your farts as I approached the pool and recalled that eel farts are particularly telling to the nose. Now, if you want two morning meals going forward, you will need to apply to the court for a second slave, because I can only muster one morning meal per day.”

“I should’ve beat you when I had the chance,” Nan Ya said, not unkindly.

"You couldn't wield a cat now, so I think I'm safe. Of course, your little green relic has given you the power to rip my head off with a waggle from your fingers. But I know." Ko-ling laughed. "I know I still hold an important purpose in this *ch'i-t'ang*. You wouldn't risk your precious warrants on killing a poor bondsman for such a little thing as an extra basket of steamed eels."

"I *do* remember the eels, now that you mention it," Nan Ya remarked. He feared that life was so routine that his morning meals had become a cycle and not a memorable experience. "I also remember that you're here wasting my time."

"I'm here to say your pretty fellows are sitting in the pavilion waiting for your wise teachings; and that K'ang Yu-wei has taken up your seat and drones on and on with his favorite discourse."

Nan Ya shook his head. Master K'ang's favorite discourse concerned the futility of life and the inevitability of death, not a keen subject for a pavilion of young scholars with their whole lives before them. That this sermon would be delivered by a ninety-seven year old crone who dwelled in the body of a twenty-year old man, despite the rusty voice of age, only would underscore the depressing message.

"I suppose I ought to rescue them. Help me up."

"The last time I could help you to your feet, master, was well over a dozen years ago, as you well know."

"I mean, brace *Thunderer* while I shimmy."

Despite his *ch'i* powers and his knowledge as a *fa-shr*, Nan Ya had the same bodily failings of any man of his age, and few men were of his age, life being what it was. But even though immortality eluded him, *the Jade Owl* kept those it needed alive, although not necessarily in the best state.

Li K'ai-men grasped his staff, *Thunderer*, and raised his creaking frame to its feet, Ko-ling steadying the stick.

The path through the bamboo wood from the lotus pool to the main pavilion was not long, but seemed longer with every passing year.

"How is Master Fu?" Ko-ling remarked as they walked along the shady way.

"Dead," Li K'ai-men said. "And never ceasing to remind me that the time is nearing when we must depart the capital and attend to our business."

"Perhaps Master Fu could entreat the dead Emperor Kao to come in dreams and convince the retired-Emperor Xiao and His Majesty Emperor Kuang to let us leave."

"You should've arrived earlier and told him that yourself."

"He doesn't appear to me," Ko-ling mumbled. "He's your precious vision."

"Then perhaps I *should* waggle my fingers and send you to his side."

"What, and let you have two precious visions? I'd sooner cook up two baskets of steamed eels."

"Then you would complain about my bodily emissions."

"Enough to draw out the creatures from *the Realm of the Mountains and Seas*."

"You would know about those, Ko-ling. You would know."

Nan Ya laughed, but not too hard. His servant had been through the portals on several occasions to *the Realm of the Mountains and Seas*, an honor bestowed upon him by Master Han Lin. Ko-ling's mission was to learn the contours of the place, but to what end Nan Ya had never reckoned, although he supposed it held a place within the warrants.

Suddenly, the sun shone on Nan Ya's shoulders, the warmth a kiss from Heaven. The courtyard was busy with servants, many assigned to Li K'ai-men as he was still *the Grand Tutor* and also *the Custodian of the Yellow Door*. The courtyard had been a happier place when Mei-lin was alive and the children were still in residence. Then the place was dubbed *The Pavilion of Gentle Zephyrs* and was half its current size. Then came the long exile on Hai-nan Island and, by the time Nan Ya

returned, Mei-lin was gone, his son Li Pei-xien dead, his younger son Li Ch'-k'ai a thousand *li* away in Lung-xing, his daughter Fu-lan married into the Huang household even further away in Gui-lin, and Fu Lin-t'o was in the ground. Now this place was called *Liu-lang Kung-xin* — *Vagrants Hollow*.

Li K'ai-men welcomed the sun. He remembered a time when the sun kissed his naked, sinewy frame, in his days as a young official — the Superintendent of Su-chou. Then he and his *heart-song* would wake early and greet the sun. They raced naked about the *Ya-men* until they were breathless, passionately exploring their bodies behind a screen or a panel before splashing in the pool and preparing for the day's work. Now Li K'ai-men lost his breath after a few steps across the cobblestones.

Suddenly, he saw the welcomed sight of Hu Min leading two porters with a carry-chair to haul Nan Ya the remaining distance to the pavilion.

3

"If I only had a pair of sandals like yours, Hu Min," Li Kai-men said, hoisting himself into the chair, "I would go from here to there with the greater ease."

"I would lend them to you," Hu Min replied, "but my feet are bigger than yours."

"True. True."

Li K'ai-men gazed down at Hu Min's miraculous sandals — footwear that allowed *the Protector* to make great strides in a short time. Even at Hu Min's advanced age, they worked well and were put to much use in the *ch'i-t'ang*'s service.

The porters ran along, Hu Min's stride notwithstanding and K'u Ko-ling's trot a feeble gesture. Nan Ya was ready for his morning salute to his students, a small bevy of ten young men, sons of scholars seeking to expound the classics. Li K'ai-men was a good foil for them, although his interpretations were considered old-fashioned, now that Chu Xi had begun to expound a new interpretation of K'ung Fu-tze's profound words. But who was Chu Xi anyway — a failed official who found it easier to spout his own mind and call it classical. But it was the fashion to be broad-minded — to observe and apply empirically astute observations to ancient viewpoints. Nan Ya considered it important to cuff these pups when their thinking went too far astray. So he was prepared to speak today on the value of form and its importance over substance, ritual being the fundamental source of containment — a vessel to pass on whatever surviving substance from generation to generation.

The porters slowed as they entered the pavilion. Nan Ya observed K'ang Yu-wei standing before the scholars waving his hands over his head as if he was about to demonstrate a dance. But any dance from Master K'ang would be a death trot, a courting of life's end, his most passionate desire.

"These arms are as light as feathers," K'ang Yu-wei shouted. "Yet they should be moldering with my ancestors in the ground — as heavy as bronze bells."

Nan Ya saw yawns from his students. This demonstration was not invigorating. But it was cut short when Nan Ya's chair proceeded to the pavilion's forefront.

"Ah, the great Nan Ya is here," K'ang Yu-wei intoned, and not politely. "He will extol the virtues of living and the importance of the five cardinal relationships. Look never to me for such prattle. Never to me."

He bowed to Nan Ya, who gave him a cordial nod. Despite K'ang's youthful appearance, he was the elder and accorded much respect. Indeed, when Li K'ai-men was first appointed as an official, K'ang Yu-wei was his superior — a grandiose personage and the Governor-general of Yang-chou, no less. His powers were earthly and imperially bestowed. Now, whatever power he possessed to turn time backwards on its course came from his contact with the jade waters.

"Ko-ling," Nan Ya said.

K'u Ko-ling was at his side, giving him his shoulder, so Nan Ya could manage the trip from the carry chair to his cushions. Here Nan Ya sat scanning his young men, the sight of which enlivened him. After all, these handsome specimens were the nearest he could come to youth. Fu Lin-t'o had urged him years ago to take a younger lover, but Nan Ya refused, and would not do it now, not wishing to dishonor his heart-song's memory. Still, as he looked across these smooth faces, the thought crossed his mind, despite the fact that even one such tryst might tire him to the point of death — but just short of it. No, it wasn't worth the risk. The sight, scent and sweet sounds of young gentlemen had to suffice.

"Today I wish to speak of . . ."

Nan Ya's voice trailed off and his already knitted brows knit more. There was a commotion in the courtyard — an argument disrupting his discourse, preventing him from properly launching into it. He looked to Ko-ling, who shrugged, but hobbled out across the threshold to settle the matter. But the voices grew louder, and soon Hu Min marched between the scholars. K'ang Yu-wei met him halfway.

"What's the matter?" Nan Ya asked. "No one disrupts our discourse without consequence."

"There's a deputation," Hu Min said.

"From where? Which faction dares to interrupt us?"

Ko-ling returned; and not silently. He was followed by two men, who tugged at robes as if to put each off kilter, which would not take much effort because both men were getting on in age.

Nan Ya pushed off his cushion, getting to his feet, *Thunderer* his aid.

"How dare you, sirs?" he croaked. "How dare . . ."

He broke off. He knew the two men. One was Chou P'i-ta, the Grand Councilor of the Left, and the other was Ch'en Yuan, the Chief Eunuch. They were both men of stature and certainly above public arguments. However, rarely would either men actively seek the other's company, Chou being from the Outer Court and Ch'en, the Inner.

"Is it normal for such grandees to quarrel before young scholars?" K'ang Yu-wei asked. "Have you lost all sense of honor?"

"He has no honor," Chou P'i-ta announced, pointing to Ch'en Yuan. "No one recalls his name."

"Everyone recalls my name in the Hung-lung Palace," Ch'en Yuan retorted. He then turned to Nan Ya. "And it is to the Hung-lung Palace that you are summoned, Grand Tutor."

"I say he speaks lies," Chou P'i-ta snapped. "It is to the Ch'ung-hua Palace you are summoned, Nan Ya, and as *the Custodian of the Yellow Door*."

"I speak the truth — truth from His Majesty's lips," Ch'en Yuan replied. "I do not lie."

"Your ilk are liars, all," Chou P'i-ta snapped.

Nan Ya was confused and dizzy. His young scholars were buzzing, although not joining the debate. If observations were to be gathered, the empirical application would have resulted in a repulsive conclusion.

"Do either of these honorable gentlemen have an official summons?" he asked Hu Min.

"Not a scroll between them," Hu Min said.

The two officials turned to Hu Min as if to accost him, but *the Protector* was still a mighty brute; and neither man pursued his complaint. Then, on the pavilion's threshold appeared another gentleman — a tall, stately elder in blue robes with gold trim. His presence provoked a sigh from the scholars. The buzzing ceased. The cantankerous gentlemen bowed, while Hu Min and K'ang Wu-wei stood aside to let the man pass.

"Wu Yi," Nan Ya said, bowing. "You here?"

If the ranks in the pavilion were sorted, Wu Yi would top them all, he being one of the Empress Dowager's two brothers — her voice outside the palace. Wu Yi touched his official bonnet with his

fan, and then nodded to Nan Ya.

"You are summoned, Nan Ya," he said succinctly.

"Yes," Li K'ai-men replied. "So they tell me. But they don't say where or why. Is it Hung-lung or Ch'ung-hua?"

Despite his question, Nan Ya presumed it would be Ch'ung-hua Palace, the residence of the Retired Emperor Xiao. He was correct in that.

"He calls for you, Nan Ya," Wu Yi said. "It is grave. I don't believe the candle can remain lit beyond this day."

A sudden chill invaded Nan Ya's marrow. He grasped *Thunderer* to keep steady, but Ko-ling needed to buttress his master, while Hu Min kept the concerned scholars in their places.

"I didn't realize that He was ill," Nan Ya stammered. "If I had known . . ."

"Such knowledge has been kept within Ch'ung-hua Palace and will remain there until *Heaven* takes its course. Until then, you must come."

"You must go first to Hung-lung Palace," Ch'en Yuan stammered.

Wu Yi turned about, snapping his fan. Ch'en Yuan cowed and kept his silence. Wu Yi would not recall the Chief Eunuch's name. Nan Ya looked toward his young gentlemen. There would be no discourse today, and perhaps none tomorrow or the next day. He sighed. Too many plans were unsettled.

"Ko-ling."

"Yes, master."

"Prepare the boat."

4

"Ko-ling, prepare the boat." And I did. Well, I told a porter to tell our gardener to mention to our oarsman to give the boat a good wipe because the master would be going to Ch'ung-hua Palace. Why he went, I didn't say, nor would they care, being a porter, a gardener and an oarsman. But great doings were afoot and I, K'u Ko-ling, will explain it all. I'll not fail you in that.

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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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