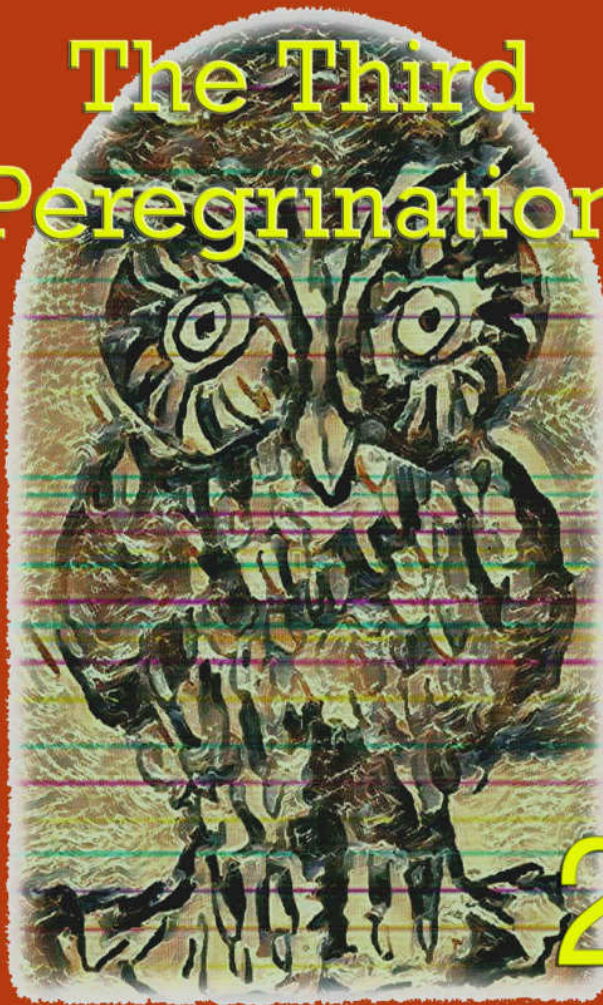


The Third Peregrination



2

Edward C. Patterson

Sample Chapter

The Jade Owl Legacy Book II

***The Third Peregrination:
The Search of the New China Hands***

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The Third Peregrination

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Chapter One

Secrets Among Friends

1

In his soul's hollow, Rowden Gray harbored a secret — a private terror kept from friends and family. *A dreadful secret. Ponderous*, and yet somehow in need of a reckoning. A hidden, burning coal that could liberate him from his current impasse . . . if he would let it. At such times, when this secret bubbled uppermost in his mind, Rowden Gray would bask in the Museum's inner sanctum; in John Battle Memorial Hall — a hall of quiet relics now, promises notwithstanding. This kept him near the brink of stability.

Rowden loitered about the display case that housed his greatest acquisition, known to some as the *U-gu-ku*, to others just as *damned*, but to the world as *the Jade Owl*. Six inches tall. Light green. Avian in all respects. A stubby, perky-eared hoot-bird. Rowden cracked his knuckles.

It served us well, he thought. *Or who has served whom?* Open question that. Since the Jade Owl returned to its display case, it had not flickered once. It had not charred so much as a piece of toast. No images cast. No time portals broached. *Dead now* — one hoped. *A quiet relic* displayed naked in this inner sanctum, the Museum world ruled by Curator-General Rowden Gray. *His* greatest acquisition, but innocuous now, sitting on its red velvet drape, set beside its pearl *cage*. Mysteries, it still kept. Still Rowden harbored . . . *his secret*.

A year had past since the tomb. A funny thing, time, tinkering with Rowden's noggin. He tried to close a thirteen hundred-year-old circle, but in that more questions were raised than settled — more *rosebuds* like hordes of killer bees from hell's bowels — the Museum's basement. From . . . *the secret*. A burning cannonball dropped heavy into Rowden's gut.

"Curator Gray," came a cracked voice from the shadows.

A man in a white shop coat stood clearing his throat. He clasped a clipboard to his chest, his latex gloves giving him the appearance of an intern on his rounds. *Stat*. His ebony hair was matted and in want of a combing. His earflap held a No. 2 pencil and heavy tortoise-shell spectacles. Lips pursed, perhaps a sign of impatience, or perhaps concentration on some matter at hand. Despite the late hour (the Museum having closed its massive doors to the public hours ago), this man seemed to harbor a full agenda. He continued his attempt to get the Curator-General's attention with another croak.

"Curator Gray."

"Yes, Sydney?" Rowden said, not diverting his attentions from the display case.

"I don't mean to disturb you, sir." *Ah, but he did*. Sydney blinked. He tapped the clipboard, not that it refocused Rowden's attention. "The loaners are ready for conservancy."

Rowden smiled at Sydney's warble. Despite his assistant's appearance, Sydney was a competent conservator. *Beyond competent*. Rowden had known few like him — quality delivered in spades. Now that the Shang-hai loaners had arrived, he had entrusted Sydney Firestone with the validation and conservation of these relics so that they might become a dazzling new exhibition for the good citizenry of San Francisco. Sydney cleared his throat again.

"Any special instructions sir?"

Rowden cracked his knuckles. *Yes, competent indeed*. Although Sydney cut a nerd's figure, he was a worthy Sinologist. In fact, Rowden detected something of himself in Sydney.

"You're a lucky fellow, Sydney. I had to wait years before being exposed to a collection like these Shang-hai loaners." Rowden's hand swept the air, a favorite gesture, although a trifle melodramatic. "China is at our fingertips." He came within a pin-throw of Sydney's pencil, and then whispered. "Do you hear her call?"

Sydney's eyebrows arched over the thick, black rims.

"Do you know what she says?" Rowden didn't say it. He hoped Sydney was keen to know the answer.

Report my secrets to the world, so the world will never forget me.

Sydney just shrugged, gathering the clipboard higher in his arm's crook.

He's missed the point, Rowden thought. "Is it really just science to you, Sydney?"

"Just science?" Sydney played with the latex cuffs.

"It's okay, if that's all it is. Not everyone has passion."

"I have passion. Believe me, Curator Gray, I have passion."

Rowden placed his finger to his lip, and then observed Sydney — inspecting the professional package, expecting a blend of passion and competence.

"Are you sure it's passion and not just the process that's gotcha? The process can be as riveting as the big picture."

Sydney let the clipboard slip to his side. He twiddled with the No. 2 pencil. He puckered his lips, perhaps frustrated at not getting an answer to his question. He smacked his lips, revealing a small gap between his front teeth.

"I love to touch old things." He blinked. An odd statement, but a valid one. "I like to clean them up — attack a crack and make it disappear." He shrugged. "Or give it prominence, if that's the case. I like to watch the tarnish vanish, to see fine lines revealed." He grinned as if the sun still shone. "It's like . . . like excavating an old ruin, watching bricks emerge to tell their tale. Now, you might call it *process*, but it feels like passion to me."

Rowden laughed a hearty stage laugh. *Ha Ha*. It might have offended Sydney, had Sydney been the offended kind, but Rowden knew where the lines were drawn.

"Keep to that passion, my boy and you'll soon put me to shame." Sydney beamed, the gap spreading, his tongue revealed. Rowden swept his hands aloft. "This place is *my* passion. Whatever my mood, I can always drift into my hall of relics."

Quiet or otherwise. His eye caught the elevator in the periphery. *And my secret*. He sighed.

"I'm restored here. Take a deep breath Sydney; take it in. Fill your lungs. From Golden Gate Park to the Golden Gate Bridge, there's no other place like John Battle Memorial Hall."

Rowden's mood broke. He gazed at the Jade Owl again recalling thoughts of another place — a place deep in the heart of a secret tomb, where the waters healed and a selfish Empress defied death. In *that* place, the Jade Owl did its worst, shattering the porcelain dame. *Death and destruction*. Rowden shivered. These images still crammed his dreams . . . when dreams came. The cannonball stirred.

"Are you okay, sir?"

"Yes. The one fly in the ointment is the reminder of my last field trip and . . ."

". . . the Jade Owl expedition." Sydney was animated. "I wish I could have been on that one. That would have been pay-off, indeed."

Rowden gazed at his assistant. Yes. Much like me in my younger days.

"Sydney, you would have been an asset."

"Thank you, sir. I guess it's a matter of timing. If I had graduated six months earlier, I could have applied for employment here and . . ." Rowden raised his hand cutting Sydney off mid-résumé. "Sorry," Sydney said. He adjusted his shop coat, and then resecured the No. 2 pencil in its natural holder. "The relics are in the Conservancy."

"As you've said." Rowden smiled. "Took a fucking year."

"The old slow boat from *you-know-where*. In any case, I want to start. I need your authority to . . ."

“... you have it.” Rowden’s mind drifted again. “The usual protocols. This’ll be on the grand scale, you know. If you need help, I’ll get you some.” Sydney blanched at that suggestion. *Good.* “I’ll join you ... soon. Start with an inventory.”

Sydney drove his hand into his pocket.

“Inventory’s done. Your copy.”

“Very good.” Rowden glanced at it. *Was there ever such an assistant?* “Pick some samples for authentication. These relics are a unique acquisition. Some day I’ll tell you ...” Rowden’s attention waned. His glance drifted back toward the elevator — back to haunted places. *Ponderous.* *Disquieting.* He would go to *it* tonight. However, there was the party. *Had he forgotten the party?* Audrey would brain him if he missed the party. Still, he was compelled to visit *it* ... tonight.

Sydney strode off at a march, his footsteps echoing to the skylight. Rowden stared at the inventory sheet. *Was there ever such an assistant?* It slipped his grasp, floating to the ebony floor, like a leaf on an ice pond.

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The inventory sheet spun twice over the black marble tiles before resting beneath the rubber soul of a black and white Nike. A quick hand snapped the paper into spidery fingers, and then popped the surface.

“Rowdy, you litterbug.”

Rowden turned.

Lavender.

“Nick.” He smiled at Nick Battle, son of the Old China Hand. *Of course, it would be Nick.* Time was fleeting.

“Are you ready to go?” Nick asked. He grasped Rowden’s hand with both his.

“I guess so. I’m a bit edgy.”

“Forget it. You *think* too much. Besides, what’s there to brood about here among my father’s things — in his hall of quiet relics that don’t sing or play or glow or hoot?”

“Always the smart-ass. Good to see you too. And good timing. I was just pondering some ideas for the Shang-hai loaners. Perhaps a theme. Perhaps ...”

“Perhaps you’ve found something new among the relics?”

Rowden glanced at the elevator doors. *Had Nick guessed? Something new among the relics?* “Perhaps ... but, where’s Simon?”

Nick leaned on the Jade Owl display. “A fashion crisis. His blush didn’t match his evening bag. He’ll be along.” Rowden chuckled. With Simone, the world balanced on color congruency. There was nothing else to say on the subject. “You’re not plunging into one of your moods, are you? Not tonight. If you do, I’ll drag your ass out to the *Painted Lips*.”

“No dancing tonight. Not that I don’t enjoy going deaf and choking on smoke. Besides, I don’t think Audrey would approve of my dancing with the gay boyz now.”

Nick twirled, his sneakers squeaking on the marble.

“Bring Cousin Audrey along. What’s different now?”

Rowden returned his attention to the vacuity. Nick pursed his lips, and then cocked his head.

“Keep your secrets then.” He snapped his fingers under Rowden’s nose. “And I’ll keep mine.”

Rowden’s face broadened, a full sunray smile from behind the thunderhead — a *give me a fucking break* smile.

“Nick Battle with secrets? How novel.”

Nick snapped his fingers again. Rowden turned to tell the gadfly to *buzz off*, but Nick performed a trick. He balanced a mossy wooden box on his fingertips. That got Rowden’s attention — *Svengali*

snagging his *Trilby*.

"I have what every Sinologist needs. Another relic to fart around with."

Mesmerized, Rowden's attentions bolted to the box.

"Do tell. You know I have a whole Conservancy filled with loaners."

Nick pushed his secret toward the Curator-General.

"Leave the loaners to your assistant. This relic comes from Gui-lin." Rowden touched it with his naked fingers. "Where's your latex?"

"Will I need it?"

Nick popped open the box. Secret revealed. A ring — an enormous opal ring. Pale. Near jade in translucence. An inch long, at least. Fat. Marbled like fine beef. The silver setting, a dragon's claw shimmering in the display lights.

Forget the Conservancy and its heap of loaners. This piece was worthy of a *Trilby*. "Where?" But as Rowden reached for it, Nick pulled it back, cheeky monkey, teasing his elder. Rowden interlaced his fingers like a Franciscan viewing a splinter from the cross.

"May I?" *Hold still*, he thought. Rowden hadn't seen such ring craft in his entire voyage on history's Ark. No *two-by-two* experience this.

Nick relented. He tossed Rowden the box.

"It's yours to study, dear friend. Let's call it an anniversary present from one adventurer to another — from a New China Hand to an Old China fart."

Rowden touched the ring. Cool, almost icy. Something from the freezer perhaps, a mini-Klondike bar set in a serpent's clutch. He sniffed it, and would have licked it, if it hadn't been unscientific to do so. From his shirt pocket, Rowden seized his magnifier, *the great loupe of the snoop*. He combed every scintilla with his expert's eye, perusing the network of spidery green filigree. *How do opals to look?* This one appeared like none other in his experience. He wasn't a gemologist, but this one might be from a new vein. *Ancient*. Definitely a Sung Dynasty setting. *Bai-ch'i huan Silver from K'ai-feng*. He knew the trademark silver overlay on the claw, but that was the setting. He couldn't estimate the age of the stone. It would be like kissing the seashore and proclaiming it *Mesozoic*.

"It's from the Sung Dynasty," Nick said.

Rowden gave Nick the fish-eye. *How would he know that?* He wouldn't know *Bai-ch'i huan* from *Gogol Bordello*.

"You're guessing."

Nick smiled. "Yep, lucky guess." He whistled.

Rowden continued his scan, but sensed that Nick still toyed with him — a Nick pastime. "Keep your secrets then, but it doesn't help me study this fine relic if you don't reveal the source."

Nick's lemur eyes assaulted him. "You're right. There should never be secrets between us. Never."

Never. No secrets. The cannonball reset in the pit of Rowden's tummy.

"So in the spirit of *No secrets*, I'll tell you. This ring was a *thank you* gift from Huang Li-fa."

"The CTS guide?"

"The one I call little Cricket. You *do* remember him?"

Who could forget him? Huang Li-fa was key to their success in regaining the Jade Owl when it went missing in Gui-lin. "But how could Huang Li-fa come by such a thing? I mean . . ."

Nick templed his hands to his lips as if preparing to sing a psalm.

"The ring is his family's heirloom. It once belonged to an ancestor — a Sung Dynasty bureaucrat."

"Some *thank you* gift."

Nick pouted. "I helped him, Rowdy. I freed him from the *closet*."

"As I said, some *thank you* gift."

Nick turned away. "No joke, Rowdy. It's a bitch being gay in a repressive society. Still, he *came out*. Brave little Cricket. He was grateful, and that ring is a worthy *thank you* gift, don't you think?"

No comment. Rowden recalled that a special bond had formed between Nick and little Cricket.

"So you've had this for a year and you kept it to yourself?"

"I was waiting for the right occasion." Nick clapped twice. "In fact, I was gonna give it to you at the party tonight, but I figured that would end the party. So I'll let you fuck around with it now. Go ahead. Put it on."

"It's a woman's ring."

"I'm no expert, but no woman wore *that* ring. Simon wanted to wear it in his act, but I told him it was too butch. Put it on."

The stone lay heavy in Rowden's palm. Still, he slipped it over his rugged middle finger. Queer feeling. Like poking a digit into a monkey puzzle. He raised his hand admiring its look in the florescent lighting.

Nick bowed in Chinese fashion, hands clasped to the forehead. "My lord, you must rule something mighty with that ring. And since it's too heavy for you to wear and also crack your knuckles, perhaps you should wear it all the time."

"Smart-ass."

Suddenly, Rowden had guilt pangs. Nick had revealed a guarded, year-old secret. Yet Rowden grit his teeth about his own secret. The cannonball rolled.

"Your mind's drifting again," Nick said. "I don't have another relic up my ass to keep you floating."

"No, Nick." Rowden slipped the ring off, and then boxed it. He gazed into Nick's intense blue eyes. "No. Your secret's delectable. Mine's . . . a horror."

Nick braced Rowden's arm. He shook, excitement brimming to his gaping maw. *Alarm*.

"Don't tell me you're sick. I couldn't bear that. I just couldn't." He sucked the air. "Too many friends . . . gone. Too many. I couldn't . . ."

"No, Nick. I'm not . . . It's nothing like that." He braced Nick, calming him. "It's just that . . . I've been less than honest with you."

Nick's eased, scrunching his shoulders. If anger welled, Rowden couldn't tell. Nick had little reserve for a dark side. Yet at times, Rowden sensed something deep, a drop off into a shadowy ravine. Nick was the Jade Owl's chosen *One* — *Po-huai*. He merited the *first warrant* — sown, sealed and delivered.

Rowden captured whatever bubbled to the surface now, and then redirected it to a spot across the hall, to the elevator doors.

It was time for revelations. That cannonball, how it rolled.

3

Nick approached the elevator, looking to Rowden for confirmation. *Press the button?* The murmur of the metallic beast scraped the air. The door slid open like some obsidian door lost on a tomb's verge — a *secret* tomb's verge. With a sweep of his hand, Rowden invited his friend into the ancient car.

"You should get the Board of Trustees to refurbish this thing," Nick said.

He scanned the inspection certificate that hung loose in a rusted panel. The decrepit moving box scrapped deep into the Museum's bowels. Nick's blue peepers shone at Rowden.

"You know I hate going down here because of this rattle-trap." Face distorted. Fists clenched.

“This ride gives me the willies.” His alarm increased as the car buckled and pitch, a rasping scrape. “There better be something good down here, Rowdy.”

Rowden snickered.

“Walk down. Ride up.” This elevator’s renovation was on Rowden’s punch list of future activities. The warehouse pre-dated the great quake, the storerooms like coal bins, light dim to none. Suddenly, the elevator door jarred open.

“We could use those miner’s hats right about now,” Rowden said.

Nick hopped into the darkness. He felt the wall for a switch. A fluorescent light flickered revealing a quirky triangular space, a vestibule tapped by three corridors. A dim line of red light bulbs illuminated each passage. Catacombs; more so, as the store rooms along each path held things older than some *bona fide* catacombs — dead things awaiting their turn in the halls above. Some relics would never receive public approbation; others had received it for too long, thus boxed in permanent retirement.

Rowden grabbed a flashlight from a utility box.

“This way, Nick.” He led him down the *East Asian* corridor, where the sleeping relics of a thousand digs hid heaped in crates behind closed doors. The doors appeared funereal, each with a family name affixed to it like slabs in a Mausoleum — *Korea, Early Han, Fujiwara, Liang* and *Liu Sung*. While above ground, shining points of light in environmentally controlled display cases stole the paying public’s hearts, these rank vaults kept history’s council like novices at vespers or old crones about their cauldron.

Rowden shone the flashlight from door to door, label to label. He stopped. This place frightened Nick. The closeness. The reminders of that day in Wu Tze-t’ien’s tomb, when they trod through the deep dark to complete the *first warrant*.

“Cheer up, Nick. Some day, I’ll commission someone to sort through these relics and switch them out with some of the older chestnuts upstairs. But . . .” Nick lowered his eyes. “Well, there’s one relic that will never see the light of day again.”

“Your secret?”

No response. Rowden just continued his progress, the light sweeping the doors — *Hou Wei, Yuan, Ashoka, Meninkabao*. Nick reached for Rowden’s arm, staying progress.

“I have a wicked thought.”

“Wicked or smart-ass?”

“I suppose both. It’s just that this warehouse reminds me of Wu Tze-t’ien’s treasure trove.”

“Can you imagine the space we’d require?” Rowden trained the light on a distant door. Would it be labeled *her shit, pending Conservancy*? Rowden had considered another spree into the secret tomb just to do as P’ing Hu proclaimed. *I know when too much is too much, unlike you sinological thieves, who would cart the entire trove to display cases.*

“I think that most of Wu Tze-t’ien’s treasure would be buried down here . . . for another thirteen centuries.” He chuckled.

“Are you saying *her* tomb would be an extension of our warehouse?”

Rowden moved on. He muttered.

“It feels more like our warehouse is an extension of *her* tomb.”

He stopped. Breath hitched. *Second thoughts*? Still time to turn around and liberate Nick from the deep dark. Finally, Rowden illuminated the next door. The label was clear. No dynastic period. No cultural era proclaimed.

KEEP OUT

Nick touched the sign. “Keep Out!” Broaching the light, his face posed a dozen unspoken questions.

“This is where Gillenhaal kept the relics stolen from your father. It’s his sign, not mine. It’s designed to keep prying eyes away from his *not-so petty* felonies.”

“But I thought you moved my father’s finds to the main hall.”

“Yes. Either there or to the Conservancy.”

Nick’s eyes bloomed wide.

“But there’s still something, Rowdy.” He faced the sign. “I can feel it. Something you’ve deep sixed.”

“Yes. Something that shall never see the light of day again. But . . .” He fished for the key. Instead, he found the wooden ring box. He shuddered, exasperation crossing his face. The flashlight waggled until Nick steadied it, taking both box and the flashlight. Rowden searched in his other pocket, until he found it — an old-fashioned skeleton key, the kind that could be found by the heap at Merced Market.

“Shine the light, Nick.”

Rowden wiggled the ugly black key into the lock. It took a few tentative jiggles to catch, and then — *click*. Rowden hesitated again. The cannonball in his stomach shifted to yet a lower level. Cold air rushed out as he pushed the door open. A stench gripped his nostrils.

“I know that smell,” Nick said. “It’s the stink of the Xiao Homestead.”

Cinnamon and onions. In short, the aroma of battlegrounds and killing fields.

Rowden flipped a switch, and a tentative red bulb flared from an invisible ceiling. He swept the room with the light, but the secret was prominent, even in this crypt-size space. Atop an aging crate sat an ebony relic — a jewelry box; one that had been beautiful and rare, bejeweled and aglow with pearls and rubies, but now sat black and ugly on its splintered pedestal like Persephone’s bridal veil.

“*The Joy of Finches*,” Nick stammered.

Tap, tap, tap.

“And no other. It’s not so joyful now. I daresay you’d be pretty precocious if you could find a finch among the snakes and vermin. It slithers.”

Nick gave Rowden a love tap.

“You told me it was out for cleaning. You told everyone it was out for cleaning.” This sounded *j’accuse*, but Nick was a skilled prevaricator. He didn’t pursue the barb beyond a glare, but instead approached the box. It stood like death, its aviary of cranes, sparrows and doves transformed into ravenous crows and vultures, its dragons into vipers.

“What’s happened to it? Was it burned?”

“I don’t know. The day I assumed my curatorship, Connie Wilson drew my attention to its changed condition.”

Tap, tap, tap.

“And what’s that tapping?” It came from inside like a claw scratching to get out. Nick drew close, but Rowden pulled him back. So Nick just circled the box like a child ogling gifts on Christmas morning.

Tap, tap, tap.

The dull, leaden tapping echoed through the room as if it was an *Abudah* chest with a patent hag inside, ready to spring out with a curse. Nick’s face shone in the red light. For a moment, Rowden saw Nick as an imp, some purpose sparkling in his noggin. Just a passing impression, from that shadowy *ravine*.

“What’s on your mind, Nick?”

“It’s a mess.”

“Your mind? Or *the Joy of Finches*?” Nick flipped Rowden the finger. Rowden laughed. “Don’t touch it. Apparently, there was some electrical failure in Battle Hall one evening. It’s in the security reports. Not much help. Quivers hid behind his desk and saw nothing except what he described as *blue lightning*.”

“It was struck by lightning? But that noise — that tapping?”

Tap, tap, tap.

“I have my theory, but it’s a queer one.”

Nick poised the flashlight under his chin, his face a Halloween glow.

“I’m queer. Try me.”

Rowden snatched the flashlight, running the spotlight across the box from the base to the comet shaped top notch, where the Jade Owl had once set. The notch, charred now, matched the grotesque relic like a crater on the moon.

“Only *you* might believe this theory. Only *you* have seen what I’ve seen.” Rowden held the flashlight in his arm’s crook, and then cracked his knuckles. “I think there’s a connection between *the first warrant* and the box’s current condition. I’ve been meaning to check the date of that electrical storm with the date of our encounter with Wu Tze-t’ien. I believe the tapping may be some mechanism that . . . well, it’s hard to prove.” *More a stretch to believe*. “I think it started . . .”

Tap, tap, tap.

“. . . you think we started it when we fulfilled *the first warrant*?”

“Just a theory. Nuts, I know, but enough to keep *this* relic locked away.”

Rowden felt science slipping. Speculation, at least, was based on a logical premise, but logic shot the rapids when it came to this relic. In his mind rattled Ch’en Hui-ni’s reaction to *the Joy of Finches*, when they first encountered the old gentleman in Shang-hai.

Young sir, Hui-ni asked Nick Battle, the box and bird have been joined? Nick confirmed this. And disengaged? Another confirmation. And the Joy of Finches is . . . Is where? In San Francisco, Nick said. Why does all this matter? Hui-ni smiled. It is well then.

It was well . . . then.

Tap, tap, tap.

Nick winced.

“Your theory’s a stretch. Do you think there’s something else afoot?”

Have box and bird been joined? And disengaged? The Joy of Finches is in San Francisco. Far away from the Jade Owl. It is well then. Rowden’s eyes glanced toward the ceiling. Not so far away now.

Nick seemed to have caught this message. He grinned.

“Who would be fool enough to join Box and Bird again?”

Rowden’s cannonball pitched forward. His flesh prickled. Suddenly, the tapping increased, changing from taps to thuds.

“Back away, Nick. I think it’s somehow reacting . . . to *you*.”

“Me?”

TAP, TAP, TAP.

The Joy of Finches hopped on its pedestal.

“It is you, Nick?”

The One.

“No,” Nick said. He looked to the ring box. His hands shook. “It’s this. It’s the opal ring.”

Nick flipped open the lid. *The Joy of Finches* went wild, spinning. A tantrum, if such things were possible with ugly *hoodoo* chests.

“Put it away!” Rowden shouted. “Don’t aggravate it.”

Nick stuck the ring in his pocket. *The Joy of Finches*' tantrum eased to a rumble, and then returned to . . .

Tap, tap, tap.

Another sound. A creak at the door. Rowden turned toward the dull red corridor light. A silhouette. Massive. A man draped in a ghastly shawl. Enough to drive seven shades of shit from petulant bowels.

Rowden flashed his light into the creature's face. A man after all, neither massive nor shawled. In fact, the shop coat made him appear like a dentist on a house call.

"Sydney!" Rowden shouted. He held his chest as if the final stroke was here. "What the fuck are you doing down here?"

Sydney shaded his eyes. He shivered.

"I work here."

Rowden flashed the light on the door.

"What does *that* say?" He banged on it. "Read it! It's not in bone characters, sir. It's in plain ass, fucking American English!"

Sydney trembled. If he had never seen Rowden Gray pissed-off before, he was seeing it now.

"It says . . . *Keep Out*."

"And what does *Keep Out* mean?" Nick pushed between them. He shook Rowden's shoulders. Rowden looked beyond him. "It means *Keep Out*."

"But sir . . ." Sydney clenched his clipboard. "I needed to see you. I thought it was . . . important. I figured you . . . Quivers said you went . . . well went . . . So I came down and I heard . . ."

His eyes widened beneath the tortoise shells.

"I *heard* something. Weird sounds. I heard them and came to investigate." He stared at the *KEEP OUT* sign. "I didn't even see the sign. The door's open and besides, I'm not *in* the room. I'm not coming in either." He returned to the corridor.

Nick glared at Rowden.

"He said he was looking for you . . . doing his job."

Nick grabbed Sydney and pulled him back.

"There's no help for it. The cat's out of the bag. No fault on Sydney's part."

Sydney's eyes met Rowden's, who was already feeling shameful for his hasty reaction. Nick pulled Sydney close, borrowing his ear for an important announcement.

"Sid, listen to me. You know there are *professional secrets*. Right?"

Sydney shook his head, dislodging the No. 2 pencil from his ear.

"You're an employee of the Museum. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Right?"

"I agree, Mr. Battle." Sydney's *all business* demeanor had been shattered. His head twitched. His hands fluttered like the old joke about *too much coffee*. "I'm sorry to have . . . caused a problem, Curator Gray. I'll go back to the Conservancy and . . . wait for you there."

He turned to hurry away toward the ancient elevator.

"Wait, Sydney," Rowden called. Guilt, one of Rowden's more practiced emotions, rushed on him. "Come back."

Sydney crept back toward the Curator-General, his head lowered like a puppy beat with a newspaper for pissing on the rug.

"Sydney, I overreacted. Please accept my apology. You startled me at a bad moment." He noted *the Joy of Finches* with his eyes. "The contents of this room are problematic."

"Problematic?"

"Let's say it's a residual from my last field trip. Until I can make some sense of it, I'm touchy as

to the public eye. I've kept it secret."

"He didn't even tell me," Nick said.

"I'm relying on you to forget what you've seen . . . or heard."

Sydney agreed. Deep sighs replaced fluttery hands.

"Good."

Sydney continued along his course.

"But hold up. You wanted to see me. I can at least give you an ear."

Sydney covered his chest as if he was about to recite the pledge of allegiance, complete with clipboard and gloves. He smacked his lips.

"I think it's best that you see for yourself, sir." Mystery now charged the air, that cinnamon and onion stink. Sydney's face feathered.

When would this evening's events run their course? Did the basement's revelation unleash a Genie, one without benefit of three wishes per rub?

Rowden pulled the door closed, and then applied the ugly key. The elevator beckoned.

It feels more like our basement is an extension of her tomb.

Tap, tap, tap.

End of Sample Chapter – The Third Peregrination
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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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