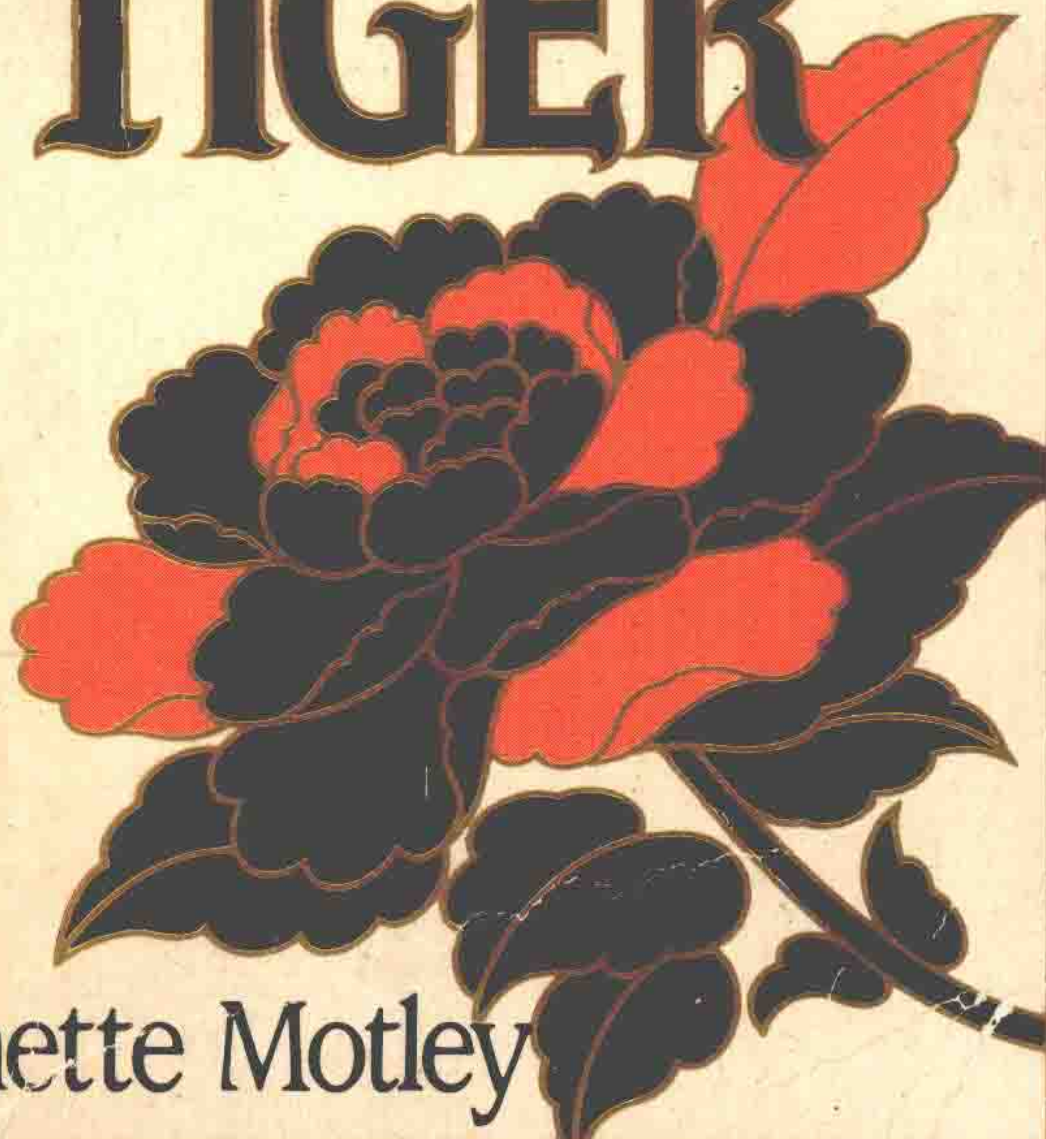


A NOVEL OF
PASSION AND INTRIGUE—
“SUMPTUOUS...EXOTIC...”

—*Publishers Weekly*

GREEN DRAGON, WHITE TIGER



by
Annette Motley

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Chronology

Age of A.D.

B.J.	625	Black Jade is born in Wen Shui.
13	638	Her father dies and she enters the palace in Chang An.
17	642	She becomes the favourite concubine of Emperor Li Shih-min.
18	643	She befriends Pheasant who shortly becomes Crown Prince.
24	649	Li Shih-min dies.
25	650	Black Jade spends a year in the convent of Kan Yeh.
26	651	She returns to the court. Lotus Bud born.
27	652	She becomes the concubine of the new Emperor, Pheasant.
28	653	Her first son, Bold Tiger, is born.
29	654	A second son, Young Tiger, is born.
30	655	Birth and death of her baby daughter. Suspicion of Empress.
31	656	Despite machinations of her enemies, Black Jade becomes Pheasant's Empress Consort.
32	657	Ex-Empress Paulownia convicted of sorcery. Black Jade has her executed. Loud Tiger, the third son, is born.
32	657	Haunted by her victims, Black Jade removes to Loyang for a year.
33	658	Death of Old Integrity.
34	659	Death of Archduke Wuchi.
35	660	Pheasant's first illness.
36	661	Black Jade conducts war with Korea. Death of Rose Bird, Black Jade's sister.
37	662	Dawn Tiger, her fourth son, is born. Black Jade falls in love with Shing-jen the Taoist priest.
38	663	He is accused of sorcery and has to leave the capital.

39	664	Birth of Tiger Lily, her long-awaited daughter.
40	665	Truce in Korea.
41	666	Imperial visit to Taishan.
42	667	Lotus Bud dies at 16. Three years of famine.
44	669	Bold Tiger marries at 16.
45	670	Golden Willow dies, Black Jade's mother, also Sage Path and Great Wall.
46	671	Young Tiger marries at 17; Bold Tiger at 14 contracted to Red Poppy; Pheasant ill again.
47	672	Loyang becomes the permanent capital of the Empire.
	672-5	Bold Tiger is Regent.
50	675	Black Jade causes death of daughter-in-law, Red Poppy. Bold Tiger dies at 22. Young Tiger becomes Crown Prince at 21, tormented by rumour that he is not Black Jade's son.
52	677	War with Tibet. Tiger Lily's convent built when she is 13.
54	679	Young Tiger murders Ming the Astrologer. Tiger Lily meets Bold-hand at 15.
55	680	Tiger Lily's marriage at 16. Young Tiger is exiled. Loud Tiger becomes Crown Prince at 23.
58	683	Pheasant dies. Loud Tiger becomes nominal Emperor at 26 under Black Jade's guidance.
59	684	Loud Tiger deposed at 27. Dawn Tiger replaces him. T'ang rebellion put down. 'Reign of Terror'.
60	685	Black Jade falls in love with Feng. Makes him Abbot of White Horse Monastery.
61	686	The Stone of Prophecy discovered. Black Jade moves towards throne.
63	688	Revolt of T'ang Princes crushed.
65	690	Black Jade ascends the Dragon Throne.

The Prophecy

The astrologer was appalled.

The child turned in its nursemaid's arms and gave a shout of delight, grabbing at the shiny dragon pendant that hung from her neck. The girl chuckled and tried to loose the acquisitive little fingers, but they held on fast, both hands clutching the bright medallion.

Surely this was a sign that he was not mistaken?

The child's parents were waiting for his next words. The wind-scoured surfaces of the General's face showed no impatience but he was betrayed by the long grey vein that throbbed at his temple. His wife, Golden Willow, stood beside him, her silken sleeves folded across her breast, her graceful figure as tranquil as a pillar of jade. Only the extreme quality of her stillness told Yuan of her deep concern.

His apprehension subsided, giving way to excitement. In all his years of practice there had never been anything like this.

How should he tell them? He needed time. The occasion should have its dignity.

How would they take it? He had given them small cause for satisfaction so far.

The General had wanted no prediction for himself. He had enjoyed the friendship of two Emperors, and was now a duke, with the tax revenues of two thousand families, and the governor-general of the prefecture of Li Chou. He no longer had any need to question fate.

He had, however, been gratified to learn that Golden Willow was destined for wealth and contentment throughout her days, and that one of her children would bring her particular satisfaction. He had been less pleased to hear that this was unlikely to be their eldest daughter, Rose Bird, who would make the honourable marriage expected of her, but would later bring dishonour to her husband's name. Family pride had been further dashed by the news that, although the General's two young sons by his first wife would both enter the imperial service, they would never become first

grade officials; their path to success was obscurely blocked by some greater force than that of their own destinies.

Each of these three children had been sent away in turn, and now only the youngest remained, the infant in boy's clothes who stared at Yuan out of strange green eyes above the captured dragon.

If only he could be absolutely certain. He felt the pressure of their waiting grow stronger. For good or ill, he must speak.

"The boy has a rare and remarkable appearance," he began. He saw the little nursemaid simper and instantly he was sure. His expert eye retraced the delicate features which presented such an astounding revelation. Midway between a science and an art, his physiognomist's skill customarily showed him the broad outline of character and fate which would be filled in by the subject's horoscope. What he saw here had shocked him deeply.

"It would be helpful if you would put down the baby and let him walk about," he said, marshalling his confidence. "Oh, by all means let him keep the pendant, or he will screw up his face with tears and I shall not be able to observe him as closely as I must."

The nurse smiled and did as he asked. The parents were silent. Yuan watched closely as the child staggered about the room before running to its mother, who bent to caress its dark head with a movement of pure grace. The proportions of the small body confirmed the conclusions formed from his examination of the bones of the head and the tiny, flower-like face. According to the ethics of his profession, he must, of course tell them what he saw; but he would leave them an escape route, should they wish to take it.

What he was about to reveal was, after all, tantamount to treason.

"This child is marked and blessed by the rays of the sun," he announced with the solemn mystery of his trade. "This is the countenance of the dragon and of the phoenix—the sacred attributes of the great God-emperors of our history. You must realise that these are the characteristics of a person who will win great fame and wield unparalleled power."

Pressed by the heightening of parental tension, he hurried on. "I have yet to cast the horoscope, of course, but I am already perfectly certain—" he hesitated, aware of the enormity of what he must say, "—that if this child were a girl—"

he looked quickly at the young nursemaid, who rewarded him with an instant blush, "—there is no doubt whatsoever that she would one day become the ruler of the Empire."

Golden Willow made a small sound. Then came a silence filled with the heartbeat of intense reaction.

"Your findings leave no room for any manner of doubt?" the General asked at last, quietly, but not without a measure of threat.

"I will stake my life upon them," Yuan said simply. "Indeed, I have already done so, in speaking to you so freely."

"That is true," the General allowed. He stroked his dark beard in deliberation.

"But is it not also true to say that the mandate of Heaven can never pass into the hands of a woman?"

Yuan bowed his head.

"Then we will not speak of this any further. There will be no horoscope cast. And you, astrologer, will never speak of it again, to anyone, no matter how exalted. Do I make myself clear?"

"It is understood, my lord."

"Swear it!"

"I swear!"

The General turned appraising eyes upon the child's nurse, who stood goggling with one hand to her throat.

"And you, my girl—do you think you are capable of keeping your word, once you have given it?"

"Yes, Honourable Master. I swear!"

"For a lifetime?" His smile was kind. "I believe women are fonder of telling secrets than of keeping them."

"I have sworn." The small chin went up. "I will keep my word."

"That is excellent."

He knew he did not have to speak to his wife, who had taken the child in her arms and was holding it as though she would save it from an earthquake or a great fire.

"Then, now let us go and dine," he said expansively, "and leave the future in the gift of the Gods."

They did so.

The astrologer did not again set eyes on the youngest child, concerning whose sex no one had spoken, but as he left the great house the next morning to begin his long journey to the capital, he said to himself with a strange exhilaration, "If she can hold on to the Dragon Throne with as much determination as she held on to that bauble, her rule will be longer and stronger than any in our history!"

PART ONE

Spring Dreams

1

Spring dreams that went on
Well past dawn; and I felt
That all around me was the sound
Of birds singing; but really
The night was full of the noise
Of rain and wind; and now I wonder
How many blossoms have fallen.

(Meng Hao-jan, 689-740)

"He'll be here tomorrow! I can hardly believe it!"

Black Jade held out her arms in welcome to the sun. She was so happy that she wanted to sing aloud.

"Neither can I. It's the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to us!" Rose Bird waved away a bee from her peach-gold nose.

It was the season of plum blossom. The orchard hummed with the bees' song and the afternoon air was deliciously scented with honey. Among the dreaming trees small birds sang in hanging cages, their soft feathers as white as the prodigal drift of blossom, and their tiny claws gilded to match the hearts of the flowers.

Black Jade stood still and let the heady essences surround and seep into her until she seemed to swim in them, buoyed and floating on a sheer weight of scent.

"Come on, or we'll never be ready in time." Rose Bird plucked at her sleeve, and slowly, half-drunk with the perfumed invasion of her senses, she led the way across the path of flat stones which allowed one to pass without injuring the fresh new blades of the grass. Winding between the trees, they soon reached the scarlet-painted pavilion where they loved to sit and gaze out over the gardens towards the stern longevity of the mountains. Old friends and guardians, these lifted their hawk-haunted indigo crags to form a protective phalanx far beyond the tall trees and the curving blue and green roofs of the Wu mansion.

While her sister hurried inside, Black Jade sat down contentedly on the pavilion steps and surveyed the familiar, beloved landscape. Slowly, possessively, her gaze stroked down from the mountains to the dusty golden bowl of the

plain, ribboned by its bright tributary of the mighty Yellow River, and returned to the sunburned walls that kept her like a jewel in their strong casket. Within them, the various beautiful buildings were winningly disposed upon both banks of a narrow, discursive stream, the Hasty River. An ancestor with an artist's eye had widened one of its curves to form a pretty ornamental lake, where waterfowl led their chicks in and out of the floating lotuses and around the islands where they made their nests. There were several bridges across the river, as it wound among the gardens, conveniently dividing the apartments of the girls' father and of their other male relatives from those of the feminine members of the clan. One was never very far from the sight or sound of water, and in winter there was the sparkling pleasure of skating on the frozen lake.

But now it was spring, the time of year for feeling everything passionately. As she gazed at its beauty, Black Jade was filled with a deep and intense love for her home. Its unrivalled setting, just above the tree-line, overlooking the town to the east and the green and gold plain to the west, with the river to feed it, and the mountains to guard it, answered a need in her for the dramatic, the grandiose, the exceptional. It was simply the finest estate in Wen Shui, perhaps in the whole of Shansi province. The scene before her was especially glorious now, during the few days known as the period of Serene Clarity, when the sun smiled down from the mountains and the plum blossom was spread like white lace over the orchard.

This year Serene Clarity was more than usually auspicious. Tomorrow would bring inestimable honour to the Wu clan, who were already the acknowledged leaders in the province. It was the day when the Emperor himself would pay them a visit.

Black Jade sprang from her seat on the steps and did a small dance of joy which her stately mother would have considered unsuitable to the peaceful and harmonious surroundings.

"Just think!" she called to Rose Bird, who was, as usual, doing something useful, up on the veranda. "Tomorrow the Son of Heaven will stand on this very spot! Like us, he will be ravished by the plum blossom. He will sit and eat in this very pavilion. His sacred hands will touch—at least I hope they will—the dishes we have spent so long preparing. Do

you think he will like my Hangchow ginger—or will it be too hot for him?”

“He’ll love it,” said Rose Bird loyally. “It looks so pretty, crystallised and coloured with lemon and rosewater. And he’s sure to eat lots of the stone-honey cakes.” These were mouth-watering delicacies made from the juice of dried sugarcane, shaped into little men and horses. Black Jade was very proud of them.

She stood up and paced in the longer grass beneath the wooden foundations of the pavilion. “I can hardly bear this anticipation. It almost hurts. I wonder what he will be like? If he is even half the man Father says he is—”

“—Of course he is, probably twice the man! How can you doubt it? You have listened to all the stories, as often as I have.”

The stories. They had coloured their early childhood in vivid and exciting hues. First there had been the tales of the present Emperor’s father, the High Ancestor, who had often visited here in the old days when the General had fought beside him to help him establish the dynasty. The girls had come to think of him much as they would of some elderly uncle whom they had never met. But his son, Li Shih-min the Magnificent—he was a very different proposition. His glorious achievements had already put him into the realm of myth, even in his own young lifetime. He was the people’s hero—that, indeed, was the very meaning of his name—a figure of romance and chivalry to rival even the semi-divine rulers of the Empire’s early history.

“I don’t doubt it,” Black Jade cried, stretching out her hands as though she was already welcoming the paragon. “I know he will be as handsome as the Yellow Emperor and as clever as the Monkey King.” He had to be, for at an age when most ambitious young men were seriously studying their classics, he had gathered and trained a military force that had unified the broken Empire by the power of a character that drew men towards him like a lodestone.

“Do you suppose he will speak to us—separately, I mean? Whatever would I say to him, if he did?” Rose Bird flushed, looking extremely pretty. At sixteen, she was old enough to weave romantic fantasies about the young hero.

“Oh, don’t worry,” teased Black Jade. “All you will have to do will be to bow in acquiescence. He will go to our honourable father, pale and shocked beneath the impact of your beauty, and beg him to allow you to become his

concubine—or who knows, even a secondary wife? So enslaved will he be that he will sweep you on to his horse and carry you away with him when he leaves for Chang-an, impatient with the desire to make you his own!" she finished extravagantly.

"Don't be cruel, Jade!" Rose Bird was mortified by this more or less exact description of her private dream.

"I'm not. Really. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you were invited to enter the Inner Palace. The Emperor is very grateful to the General, and it is the accepted thing to reward his servants by giving positions to their sons and daughters. And I am sure," she added warmly, "that when he actually sees you, he *will* want you for his concubine. Though I would miss you, most terribly, if you went away."

"You mustn't talk such nonsense," said Rose Bird, scarlet and pleased. "Now come in here and let's decide where everything is to be."

"In a moment."

Black Jade leaned on the crimson lacquered rail of the veranda, trying to make herself concentrate on their plans for the coming Feast of the Plum Blossom. Her own fantasies, which she now consciously repressed, revolved less around the Emperor than around the revolutionary career of his young sister, the legendary Princess Hero, who had thrown off the restraint and claustrophobia of the women's courts to ride at the head of her own cavalry and set out to conquer the capital at her brother's side. Black Jade had hoped that perhaps Lady Hero might, by some marvellous quirk of fate, accompany Shih-min on his present journey, but she had to admit that, since the Princess was now married and occupied with her husband and family far to the east of the province, her dream was less likely to be realised than was that of her sister.

She shook it from her and went through the delicate, open-carved doors to the pavilion platform. She had always loved the little building. The General himself had carved many of the lattice-work screens that made up its waist-high walls. It was an art to which he had always been partial, and all his children possessed intricate wooden toys, also of his loving workmanship.

Now his second wife's younger daughter cast a similarly artistic eye over the space that was to be transformed for tomorrow.

"I think we should leave most of it until the morning," she

decided. "The blossom will be fresher if it is picked at dawn, and we can take the bird-cages at the same time. We can fetch the cushions, the shawls and the rugs today; this evening will do. It's the music I'm most concerned about. I've rehearsed the players several times, but it's by no means perfect."

"It will be," said Rose Bird with certain knowledge. "Not even the Son of Heaven can be such a perfectionist as you are."

This was so. It was why, in compliment to her talent for such things, their mother had placed her in charge of the organisation of the feast which the men of the clan would hold in the pavilion. Rose Bird would be her aide. They had always worked well together, for her sister was content to let her take the lead in their schemes, which suited her admirably. Rose Bird's taste was the more restrained, however, and she could be relied upon to scotch Black Jade's deplorable tendency towards exaggeration. She called her now, frowning slightly and dragging a piece of furniture.

"Haven't we a better dragon chair?" she asked. "Part of one of the claws is missing at the back."

Black Jade ran to help her, making a mental note to ask the maids to sweep and perfume the floor of the pavilion. She examined the vast ebony chair with the dragons writhing on its high back and crawling along the arm-rests.

"I think this is still the best. The upholstery is new, and besides, it's the one Shih-min's father used to sit in."

"Hush, Black Jade! You know you must not speak the Emperor's name."

"What can it matter? No one will know. I think it is a very foolish rule. The Son of Heaven must have a name, like anyone else. We call everyone else by their first names, even dukes—why not Shih-min?"

"I don't know. I only know we mustn't," replied the law-abiding Rose Bird.

"I think," said Black Jade after some consideration, "that it is just another of those things that are meant to distance him from us, to make him seem a far greater creature than any mere man could be, like the laws about what colours he can wear and which way he is to face and what he must eat at certain times of the year."

"But he *is* greater than any other man! He is more like one of the Gods. Of course he should be distant from us."

Black Jade sniffed. "Well, if I were Emperor, I should

find it all very tedious. Nevertheless we had better get it right." Her tone became businesslike. "Now, according to the Book of Rites we must place the dragon chair here, on the eastern side of the room, if we are to conform with the imperial orientation for springtime. I wonder if His Majesty is a strict observer of the *feng-shui*? I should imagine he'd find it more practical to choose which side of his palace he lives in according to the prevailing winds rather than the *Book of Rites*. What else? He won't wear green, as he should, because he is still in mourning for the Empress, but if he has something green about him, and asks only for lamb and sweetcorn, we shall know he does hold to the conventions. I hope he doesn't. What a waste of all our lovely sweetmeats! Now, where do you think we should put the musicians?"

"Not too near. They'll want to hear themselves talk at the table."

"True. We'll put them among the trees, on the north side; the sound will travel gently from there. Have we thought of everything? We've worked out the colour schemes, and the food and wine are all arranged. The musicians have their orders."

"I think that's all. Surely nothing can go wrong. These few days are under the rule of Jupiter, and the calendar says they are a time for "benevolence and the relaxation of authority". Isn't that lucky?"

Black Jade grimaced. The almanac also qualified Serene Clarity as a period of angry emotions. That, alas, would be nothing strange to the Wu household, whose lovely setting was not matched by inner harmony.

As if the thought had created its own image, the sound of male laughter gusted through the trees, and the girls saw their two half-brothers approaching, their faces alight with shared mischief.

They had evidently been hunting for their bows were slung over their padded jackets and their trousers, yellow with dust, were tucked into the deerskin boots that crushed their way through the new grass.

Yuan Shuang idly cracked his whip across a branch that lowered in front of him, causing a pale shower of petals. Then he stopped as if struck by something. He chuckled and seized his bow. Before the horrified eyes of his sisters he took aim carefully and accurately discharged the strong arrow that was made to pierce the hide of a deer through the