

Folly 221

Chapter 221: Buying a Stone Mill

Mu Shuangshuang finally wrapped things up, having sold most of the fish, with only five remaining unsold, seemingly unlikely to attract any buyers.

She discussed with Lu Yuanfeng and decided to give the fish to the Xue Family, allowing Old Mrs. Xue to have a taste.

However, since the fish was handed over through the Xue Family's servants, Mu Shuangshuang didn't meet with Old Mrs. Mu.

The hour was still early, and Mu Shuangshuang had planned to invite some acquaintances over for dinner last night. But since it was late and there was no meat, it didn't come to fruition.

Today, she felt it was time to buy some supplies and invite Xiao Yun and the others over for a meal.

After talking it over with Lu Yuanfeng, they decided to buy two pounds of five-flavor pork and make braised pork at noon. She had left a dozen fish at home; although the fish weren't large, their meat was tender.

Kept in water, they could be eaten for a few days, so that was feasible.

These days, the market was growing increasingly lively; Mu Shuangshuang knew it was a sign of the double harvest ending. Once the slowest batch of farm households finished planting their fields, the market would become bustling.

By then, the mountain goods should emerge.

This season marks the ripening of peaches, watermelons, and melons, and upon passing by several spots, she saw people selling these items.

Mu Shuangshuang recalled that the raspberries in the mountains were past their season, so tomorrow's juice definitely couldn't use raspberry juice.

While contemplating whether to wait and buy some watermelons to make watermelon juice, a man selling glutinous rice cakes by the roadside caught her attention.

The man's business was especially good, not for anything else but because his glutinous rice was ground on the market premises. His millstone was several times smaller than others', and it was harder to push, but Mu Shuangshuang found it intriguing and joined in.

"Uncle, did you make this millstone yourself?"

Lu Yuanfeng followed behind Mu Shuangshuang, knowing she had something in mind, thus paying more attention to the millstone.

The bows and arrows in Lu Yuanfeng's house were all self-made; plus, before going to the military camp, he had learned some blacksmithing from Uncle Da Niu in town, so his hands-on skills were quite strong.

"Yes, this thing, you pick a stone and chisel it out yourself, but it takes time. Little girl, are you interested in my millstone?"

Of course, Mu Shuangshuang nodded. With this millstone, she could make cold noodles at home instead of constantly going to Aunt Zhao Yun's house. After all, she always went in the evenings to grind mung beans, which could disturb others' rest.

"But mind you, this millstone isn't cheap, and it's quite hard work. You, little girl, may not be able to push it."

The uncle before her was incredibly kind, and although Mu Shuangshuang had been standing for a while, he didn't hurry her away. Instead, he chatted intimately with her while working.

"Uncle, it's alright, I can help her push. I'm strong. How much is your millstone?"

Only now did the uncle notice Lu Yuanfeng. The young man's tall and strong build, with a straight back and clear eyes, evident that he wasn't up to anything nefarious. Together with the little girl before him, they complemented each other.

"Three hundred and fifty wen if you want it."

Three hundred and fifty wen indeed wasn't cheap; Mu Shuangshuang's fish sales totaled only three hundred and twenty wen. But thinking about the future convenience, she gritted her teeth and decided to buy this millstone.

"But Uncle, I also need to transport it home, and my house isn't close. Could you cut the price a bit, just treating it as transportation fees, and sell it for three hundred and twenty wen?"

Mu Shuangshuang didn't know the ins and outs of this millstone, but managing to haggle even one wen saved a chicken egg for the household.

Come to think of it, the price of eggs had dropped, which her grandma probably didn't know. If she did, she'd inevitably throw a fit at home.

"You little girl, with your sharp tongue, I made just twenty wen profit from you, and you bargained it back. Without knowing you, I'd truly think you were an expert." The uncle shook his head helplessly, but in his eyes, he had even more goodwill towards Mu Shuangshuang.

He'd encountered plenty of people haggling, but hearing someone factoring in transportation fees into the bargain was a first. Although this transportation fee was somewhat steep, he was quite willing to sell to this little girl.

"How about this, follow me home, and I'll give you my new millstone, how about that?"

Mu Shuangshuang naturally shook her head, "Uncle, I don't have that much time; there's still work to be done in the fields... Even if it's the one in your hands, that's alright. When you have time, find a place to put it, and I'll come back to get it."

"Okay, how about this, you wait for a while. I have two pounds of glutinous rice to grind; once finished, you can take the millstone directly."

The person before her was indeed reasonable, and given Mu Shuangshuang had a handcart today, it was convenient, so she agreed to this suggestion.

Meanwhile, Mu Shuangshuang didn't stay idle. She pulled Lu Yuanfeng to the meat stall and carved out two pounds of meat, buying four watermelons on the way back.

Two wen per pound of watermelon, each weighing three pounds, totaling twenty-four wen.

Carrying two big ones, Mu Shuangshuang couldn't help but sigh. "Lu Yuanfeng, when will we reach the end of this making money cycle? Everything requires money, everything needs to be bought."

Mu Shuangshuang realized that every time she went out, she ended up spending money on things and carrying a bunch back. Fortunately, the cold noodles sold well at Jiu Si Xuan lately; otherwise, she'd truly be left with just northwest wind.

Thinking of her money-making journey, Mu Shuangshuang still felt a headache.

"How about we grow these ourselves?"

Lu Yuanfeng now shared the same sentiment; cultivating land and growing vegetables themselves, though tiresome, resulted in a taste distinctly marked by their own efforts.

"That's true; we can grow all the produce ourselves, but it's beyond watermelon season now. Otherwise, we could've planted some."

Packing up the purchased items, Mu Shuangshuang finally collected the millstone.

Once back in the village, Lu Yuanfeng took Shuangshuang home and then left, saying he'd head up the mountain to check the traps for possible prey.

If there was any, they would catch it and cook it for lunch, especially since there would be about a dozen people for noontime meal.

When Mu Shuangshuang reached home, it was quiet, with only Mu Dashan busily weaving straw fans, while Little Zhi and Xiao Han were nowhere to be seen.

Mu Shuangshuang inquired and found out her mother had taken the two kids to the fields to plant rice seedlings.

Mr. Mu had stopped coming according to the agreement, preventing the third branch from continuing their work, but Old Mrs. Mu wasn't quite willing to let it go; she cursed all morning, mostly scolding the third branch, and hadn't stopped even now.

Mu Shuangshuang observed the time wasn't early, so she began preparing for the midday meal.

The firewood used to cook yesterday's meal was now almost gone, so Mu Shuangshuang donned gloves and headed into the mountains to gather a few sturdier logs. Starting a fire, she promptly began cooking.

Chapter 222: Treating to a Meal

The curling smoke rose from the chimney of Shuangshuang's house, as she took several fish from the little wooden barrel, carefully scraped the scales and gutted them. Following last night's method, she sliced them open and began marinating.

This time, there are too many guests to invite. Aunt Zhao Yun's family counts four, plus Zhao Gouzi.

Last time when Mu Shuangshuang and Mrs. Jin had a fight, it was Zhao Gouzi who tipped off Mu Dashan to come home and have a look, so Zhao Gouzi can be considered a benefactor to the third branch.

Since she was cooking for someone she liked, Mu Shuangshuang was in a good mood, which naturally made her cook faster than usual.

At noon, Yu Si Niang returned from the fields with Little Zhi and Xiao Han, both had turned into little mud-covered figures. Their faces were smeared with mud, but it was clear they were both very happy.

Mu Shuangshuang handed a ladle of well water to Yu Si Niang, who didn't drink first but gave it to the two little kids instead. They must have been truly thirsty, as each guzzled down almost half of the ladle. By the time the water reached Yu Si Niang's hands, only half remained.

Thankfully, it was enough!

"Mom, you came back at the perfect time; the food is ready, just need the tables set. You take a break. I'll go call Aunt Xiao Yun's family, and Uncle Gouzi."

The plan to invite people for lunch was already agreed upon by Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang last night. Mu Shuangshuang had left early in the morning, so naturally, Yu Si Niang was in charge of inviting guests.

Everyone was okay with it, as this was also to celebrate the third branch breaking out from Old Mu Family together.

"Sis, no need to call anyone. We told them on our way back, Aunt Xiao Yun said she'd come over after she washes her face. Uncle Gouzi said he'd head home first and be over soon." Xiao Han called out to Mu Shuangshuang.

"Haha, but sis still needs to call one more person." Mu Shuangshuang suddenly remembered Zhang Huai Shu had helped her quite a bit, so there was no reason not to invite him over for dinner. Besides, she'd better give him one or two silver coins first.

The initial agreement was to repay ten silver coins half a year later. Mu Shuangshuang now indeed had ten silver coins in total, but she was thinking of buying an acre of land to plant peanuts and sweet potatoes.

As for Zhang Huai Shu's money, she'll return it before the New Year after coming up with a way to earn some.

"Sis, are you talking about Grandpa Huai Shu?" Little Zhi tugged at Mu Shuangshuang's pant leg, looking at her with a 'I knew it' expression.

"Yes, how did you know, Little Zhi?"

Mu Shuangshuang crouched down, feeling that the two little ones were becoming more sensible.

Xiao Han was steady, Little Zhi was smart; the two little ones never worried her about anything.

"Because mom went to invite him this morning, Grandpa Huai Shu went to another village for a visit and said he won't be back for three days."

"I see, thank you, Little Zhi, then I won't go to invite him." Mu Shuangshuang rubbed Little Zhi's hair, noting that after a day's work, it was damp with sweat, leaving a wet trace as she touched it.

"Little Zhi, Xiao Han, quickly go inside and dry your hair, don't catch a cold."

"Okay, we know."

Mu Shuangshuang followed them into the house, found a cotton cloth towel and handed it to Little Zhi, unexpectedly bumping into a flushed Mu Dashan.

Mu Dashan wasn't flushed from heat, but from excitement. He had overheard Yu Si Niang and Mu Shuangshuang's conversation and knew the family was inviting guests for a meal, familiar faces no less.

He never thought there'd be a day when the poorest third branch of Old Mu Family could also invite others over for dinner.

Though the food may not be the best, it was only the beginning, proving that the third branch could now stand proudly.

"Shuangshuang, should we go to Uncle Wu's house in the village and buy two jin of wine?" Mu Dashan suggested.

"What wine? Your health isn't good yet, what if you get sick again?" Yu Si Niang came into the room, reluctantly scolding Mu Dashan.

Ever since that night when Yu Si Niang said what was on her mind, she was more direct when speaking with Mu Dashan.

According to Shuangshuang, women can hold up half the sky, earn money, and argue with men on reason, no longer allowing men to have their way.

While she was still adapting, Yu Si Niang believed she could soon interact using Shuangshuang's proposed mode of equality more naturally.

"Mom, it's rare for dad to be happy, let's just buy some wine. At most, let him wet his chopsticks lightly? Besides, there's Uncle Gouzi and Uncle Yu Tou, two grown men, surely they can't not drink?"

Mu Shuangshuang raised her hands, clasped them on her chest, and softly sought forgiveness from Yu Si Niang.

Yu Si Niang always listened to Shuangshuang, and when she agreed, Yu Si Niang naturally didn't oppose.

"Okay, okay, you can go, but don't buy too much, no more than two jin."

Once Yu Si Niang agreed, Mu Shuangshuang dashed off like an untethered horse.

The wine at Old Wu Family's house in the village was authentic grain wine, not expensive, costing just a penny per jin. Mu Shuangshuang bought the wine at Old Wu's and hurried home, only to find several people gathered at her house.

In the yard, near the kitchen, upon approaching, one could faintly hear people saying things like, "Fengzi is amazing, he can get this kind of stuff."

Mu Shuangshuang came closer and heard the squealing of pigs, quickly realizing what it was.

"Oh, Shuang is back, congratulations, your kitchen is set up, and you've even got pigs, wild ones at that."

"Exactly, Shuang, you guys from the third branch are going to have better days now, even able to raise pigs."

Few families in the village raised pigs; Wang Erma's family was one, but they relied on killing and selling pigs for a living; then there was the Wang Fugui family, a farming household, so raising pigs was normal.

And then came the third branch of Old Mu Family. Although they raised boars captured from the mountains, wild pigs grew much bigger than domestic pigs and their meat was more valuable.

The third branch of Old Mu Family managed to accumulate so much in such a short time, building pigsties and raising pigs, garnering enough to attract others to come and watch the commotion.

Mu Shuangshuang greeted several acquaintances before arriving outside the pigsty.

In the pigsty, Lu Yuanfeng was helping spread dry straw; in the corner, a small black-haired boar was panting heavily.

The "squealing" sounds were audible from afar.

Mu Shuangshuang recognized that it was one of the two wild piglets she and Lu Yuanfeng had seen on the mountain last time.

"Shuangshuang, you're back just in time. Fengzi just brought over this pig. He said you've paid and told me to take good care of it."

Yu Si Niang pulled Mu Shuangshuang by her side. It was her first time seeing a live wild pig, so her expression was similar to others', full of astonishment.

Chapter 223: Delivering a Wild Boar Piglet

When Mu Shuangshuang heard Yu Si Niang's words, she knew that Lu Yuanfeng was once again generously giving away his family's possessions.

That silly boy, why can't he think for himself?

A wild boar is worth quite a bit of money, and the last time he paid for the cloth too.

Thinking about it gave Mu Shuangshuang a headache. She felt increasingly entangled with Lu Yuanfeng, and if this continued, this silly boy would end up giving away everything in his family.

Just as she was feeling troubled, the people from the Old Mu Family came back from working in the fields.

Last night, Mrs. Lin and Mu Danian didn't manage to steal even a bird feather, and ended up getting injured. Falling from such a large wooden barrel, Mrs. Lin nearly broke her back.

Originally set on causing trouble early in the morning, Mrs. Lin was instead scolded by Old Mrs. Mu and sent to clean the toilet. By the time she was free, there was only the sickly Mu Dashan left in the third branch. Mrs. Lin humiliated Mu Dashan before heading to the fields to work in a better mood.

After a morning of work, Mrs. Lin felt unsatisfied again, so she came over to vent.

"Yo, why are so many people gathered here? Is the smell of the pigsty pleasant, or are the meals of the Old Mu Family's Third Branch so appetizing?"

"Too bad they're so stingy, they wouldn't invite you to eat. Now scatter, scatter!"

Mrs. Lin's sarcastic words made the neighbors increasingly discontent.

Each one glared at Mrs. Lin before leaving angrily.

After driving these people away, Mrs. Lin felt quite proud of herself. She surveyed around triumphantly and quickly noticed the wild boar in Mu Shuangshuang's pigsty and Lu Yuanfeng who was spreading straw in the pen.

"Yo, Shuang, you're even raising pigs now. I suppose you'll have pork for New Year's, huh? Don't forget your second auntie."

Mrs. Lin's attitude suddenly changed because she figured that when the pig grew larger, there would surely be plenty of pork, which the third branch wouldn't be able to finish. The Old Mu Family wouldn't be willing to weigh much meat for the New Year. If she could have some in advance, her life would certainly be more comfortable.

Mu Shuangshuang chuckled and said to Mrs. Lin, "Second Aunt, we're raising the pig, but not for eating."

"Then what's it for?" Mrs. Lin got anxious. If such a big pig wasn't for eating, was it supposed to fly?

"To sell, of course. Isn't that a simple reasoning you can't understand?"

"Hey, I say, you little brat, yesterday you didn't take out the fish for us to eat, fine, but now you won't give us pork either. Do you have no conscience?"

Mu Shuangshuang composed herself. She had no words for someone so self-righteous.

"Second Aunt, this has nothing to do with conscience. The things are mine. If I'm good-hearted, I might give them to you. If I don't want to, that's reasonable too. You should stop coveting the third branch's things because we won't be giving them to you!"

"You... you little brat, you just wait, I..." Mrs. Lin was so angry at Mu Shuangshuang's words that she stammered, unable to form a coherent sentence after a long while.

She stomped her foot in frustration and quickly headed toward the main house of the Old Mu Family, presumably to complain.

Yu Si Niang watched the scene, feeling suddenly scared. "Shuangshuang, go inside. If your grandpa and grandma come, don't come out."

Regardless, the Old Mu Family was still managed by Mr. Mu and Old Mrs. Mu. Even though the families were separate, the third branch could not be too harsh to the two elders in public, or they would be criticized for being unfilial.

In the Da Ning Dynasty, being unfilial was a major taboo. If the offense was severe, it could even lead to legal consequences.

"Don't worry, mom. Let's eat before the dishes get cold."

Mu Shuangshuang was unconcerned. She thought that whether she spoke or not, with Mrs. Lin's nature, she would still twist the story a lot. Even if she offered the wild boar, it wouldn't change Mrs. Lin's fondness for stirring trouble.

Lu Yuanfeng, after cleaning the pigsty and adding water to the trough, finally crawled out of the pen.

His forehead and face were covered in sweat from the work, and his shirt was damp with it.

It was clear that he had worked hard.

Mu Shuangshuang quickly took out her handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to Lu Yuanfeng.

"Wipe your sweat, you're drenched."

Lu Yuanfeng was momentarily stunned, as was Yu Si Niang.

In ancient times, ladies cherished their handkerchiefs greatly. Particularly for noble families, if a lady lost her personal handkerchief and it was picked up by a rogue, her reputation could be ruined.

Mu Shuangshuang hadn't been in the Da Ning Dynasty for long, so she couldn't know everything clearly, and taking out her handkerchief was more of a subconscious act without any further thought.

Lu Yuanfeng, however, understood the implications since Xia Guagua had tried numerous times to send her handkerchiefs to him, which he had always thrown out.

He naturally understood the meaning behind it.

"What's wrong? Are you embarrassed? Think it's dirty?" Seeing Lu Yuanfeng hesitating to take the handkerchief, Mu Shuangshuang teased.

"No, I... I don't mind it." Lu Yuanfeng quickly shook his head.

He wasn't sure how to explain, especially with Yu Si Niang nearby...

"Then there you go, hurry and wipe your sweat, wash your hands, and get ready to eat. I have big plans for the afternoon."

Mu Shuangshuang forcefully handed the handkerchief to Lu Yuanfeng and went into the kitchen to put away the alcohol.

Yu Si Niang had only asked for two jin, but Mu Shuangshuang decided on her own to get five jin, not only for entertaining guests in the future but more importantly because white wine was an essential seasoning for making grand dishes. If she wanted to make something nice for the family as a treat, white wine was indispensable.

Lu Yuanfeng held the handkerchief tightly in his palm, unsure whether to use it or not, and looked to Yu Si Niang for guidance.

Unexpectedly, Yu Si Niang had no solutions either.

A daughter's handkerchief in a man's hand, and right in front of her at that.

She had intended to matchmake the two but seeing that the daughter didn't seem inclined to marry, she didn't know what to do.

"Aunt Si..."

"Fengzi, don't overthink it. Shuangshuang gave it to you, just use it. Just don't let others see it."

At this moment, Yu Si Niang felt she was an inadequate mother, letting things slide with Shuangshuang.

"Mom, Fengzi, come help with serving the food. Once the guests arrive, we can start eating."

From inside, Mu Shuangshuang called out. Yu Si Niang quickly entered the kitchen to help out.

Lu Yuanfeng held onto Shuangshuang's handkerchief tightly in his palm, as though it was a treasure. After quite some time, he folded it neatly and placed it in his pocket.

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With eleven bowls of rice ready, the guests invited by Mu Shuangshuang's family began to arrive gradually.

Zhao Yun came this time, not empty-handed again. In her small bamboo basket, she had some green peppers, quite large, and somewhat wilted from being picked at midday.

She naturally placed the basket of vegetables in a corner of the kitchen before finding herself a seat.

Chapter 224: The Daughter is Promising

The chairs at Shuangshuang's house were always not enough. This time, she borrowed a few in advance from various households, otherwise, everyone would have to stand while eating.

"Everyone, don't be polite. Consider our home as your own, eat whatever you want."

Mu Dashan sat at the head of the table and spoke a few heartfelt words as the host.

After everyone laughed, they looked at the large table full of dishes, each with wide eyes, somewhat in disbelief.

Braised pork, boiled live fish, and cold black fungus salad...

These dishes, if not during a festival, were usually not tasted by everyone. Yet these were just plain fare as per Yu Si Niang.

If this was considered plain fare, then what they ate would be equivalent to pig feed?

"Alright, alright, Dashan, you don't have to worry about us being polite. We are all so familiar, if we've come to eat, we'll definitely eat to our fill."

Zhao Gouzi picked up his chopsticks and said to Mu Dashan with a grin.

"That's right, let's eat and drink well. It's rare for everyone to get together. Shuang can now make cold noodles and earn money to buy meat!"

The speaker was Zhang Yutou, remembering the time Mu Shuangshuang made cold noodles at his house. He still recalled the sour and spicy taste, craving it many times but feeling too shy to ask Shuangshuang.

After all, she uses it to sell for money.

"You're just greedy. Next time, when Shuangshuang makes it again, sneak in and ask her to make some for us." Zhao Yun knew her husband well; he usually loved to eat good food, especially spicy stuff.

The cold noodles Shuangshuang made perfectly suited his taste, and Zhao Yun, hearing him mention it several times, was tempted to satisfy her husband's cravings.

"Haha, Aunt Xiao Yun, Uncle Yu, as long as you like it, it's good. Tonight, I'll make some more and send a bit over to you tomorrow."

Mu Shuangshuang laughed heartily. It was rare for someone to appreciate what she made, so she planned to soak more mung beans later.

"If I hear it, I want a share. I want to eat whatever good stuff there is."

"Alright, alright, once I've made it, I'll give each family a little, but it's just to satisfy cravings, not enough for a large supply." Mu Shuangshuang nodded, then urged everyone to dig in quickly.

Zhang Yutou was the first to start; he picked up a piece of braised pork and put it in his mouth, barely chewing before giving Mu Shuangshuang a thumbs up.

"Mmm... this is amazing, Shuang, how is your cooking so good? Not even the town's chefs can top this."

"Is that so? Let me try..." Zhao Gouzi, unwilling to be outdone, also took a piece of braised pork.

"Oh my, it's delicious. Shuang, your skills are truly extraordinary!"

The compliments for Mu Shuangshuang kept coming from the third branch's kitchen, and the joyful laughter spread far and wide in an instant.

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On the other side, Mrs. Lin returned to the main house. She embellished the story about the third branch raising a wild boar and having a feast to tell the Old Mu family people.

Sitting at the head, Mr. Mu's face looked somewhat displeased, feeling like something was stuck in his throat, an increasing unease settling in his heart.

When the third branch split off, he deliberately gave them only one and a half mu of poor land, hoping they would see the difficulty and retreat. Who would have thought that not only did they not retreat, they persisted stubbornly like hitting a brick wall?

How long has it been since the division? And now it's fish and meat galore. It's not that he cared so much about the third branch's things, but hearing that they invited outsiders without inviting his own family made Mr. Mu feel that something was slipping from his control, leaving him feeling choked up inside.

"What about that ungrateful girl? I, the old woman, have seen through it; Yu Si Niang used to pretend to be pitiful and honest in front of me.

In the end, isn't she just a piece of filth, if not scheming then deceitful? Back then, I shouldn't have allowed Old Three to marry that bitch, nor birth that sordid girl."

Old Mrs. Mu sneered to herself, her words filled with disdain for the third branch.

"Exactly, it's that unscrupulous girl in the third branch. If she had been married off, my eldest brother would have had financial support a long time ago." Mrs. Lin echoed, predictably fueling the hatred towards Mu Shuangshuang at the dining table.

Mu Zhenzhen, having taken a few bites of her meal, lost interest upon seeing not even a bit of meat, putting her chopsticks down with a lackluster expression.

"What's wrong, Zhenzhen? Didn't you say you were hungry?" Old Mrs. Mu noticed that her daughter hadn't touched her rice or dish, having merely bitten into it before pushing it back to the table.

"Oh, I'm not hungry anymore. I'm going out for a bit."

In truth, upon hearing Mrs. Lin mention the third branch having a feast, Mu Zhenzhen was intrigued. In Dahuo Village, a feast means plenty of fish and meat, and the third branch seemed well-off now; perhaps they had such fare.

Watching Mu Zhenzhen leave the main house, Mr. Mu suddenly voiced what had been stuck inside him for a long time.

"Wife, we should let Zhenzhen return. She's been here at her parents' home for so long now, if she doesn't go back, Zhuangzi's mother will start complaining again."

"Complaining about what? Isn't that little beast already retrieved? Our Zhenzhen isn't obliged to work for them. Going back can wait."

Old Mrs. Mu directly refuted Mr. Mu's words.

She hadn't cared for her daughter enough, and besides, her eldest son was about to take the exams. How could she manage without someone by her side? Once her eldest was gone, she would give all the good food to Zhenzhen.

"Woman, don't you fear Zhuangzi will divorce Zhenzhen saying things like that?" Mr. Mu was infuriated, unintentionally raising his voice.

"Bah, who besides our Zhenzhen would look at someone like Zhuangzi, who resembles a fat pig? Don't assume a few plots of land make them so special. Don't forget, their family has the third son. When the property is divided, who knows if Zhenzhen will get any?"

Zhenzhen staying with her own family means having enough to eat and drink. When the eldest son becomes a scholar, they might come begging to us."

Old Mrs. Mu stubbornly refused anything contrary, leaving Mr. Mu to sigh heavily, fuming alone while poking at the food.

"Who knows what the third branch is eating? We are all family, how could their hearts be so cruel, inviting outsiders and not us?" Mu Danian always knew how to twist the knife.

Last night, he suffered a setback, failing to gain anything from the third branch, and today he didn't get to eat anything good, leaving him feeling unbalanced.

"Why concern yourself with other people's business when you haven't cleaned up your own mess?"

"Dad, I'm just stating facts. What kind of principle involves inviting outsiders but not inviting your own family?"

Mu Danian grumbled, but eventually, no one felt like eating anymore, and only then did it stop.

Mu Zhenzhen practically ran to the third branch, and when she entered the kitchen, the third branch people were enjoying their meal with laughter.

She immediately chimed in. "Hey, Third Brother, Third Sister-in-law, eating already? I'm just in time, I'm hungry too, let's eat together!"

Chapter 225: Second Aunt is a Glutton

Mu Zhenzhen barged into the house unceremoniously and was about to grab chopsticks and a bowl to help herself to some food, only to find she couldn't locate any extra chopsticks or bowls despite searching the entire room.

"Third brother, what's up with your house not even having extra utensils?"

Mu Zhenzhen stared eagerly at the table full of food, her mouth watering. If it weren't for the presence of outsiders, she would've just grabbed some with her hands.

Mu Shuangshuang frowned slightly. This second aunt had no qualms about entering her kitchen directly; did she really think her home was her own?

"Second aunt, we third branch have just split from the family, where would we have so many utensils? Maybe you could buy us some?"

"You wish. Your lack of utensils has nothing to do with me. So, are you saying you don't want me to have this meal?"

"Second aunt, you yourself said our house doesn't have extra utensils, and you don't care. So not having eaten is none of third branch's business, right? If you want to eat, you can always go home and cook, after all, a pound of meat doesn't cost that much."

As Mu Shuangshuang spoke, she deliberately picked up a piece of braised pork and waved it in front of Mu Zhenzhen.

The braised pork she made was naturally fragrant; getting a little closer to it, the aroma was nearly enough to captivate one's soul.

Mu Zhenzhen's feet unconsciously followed the piece of braised pork.

Just when she thought she might be close enough, Mu Shuangshuang quickly popped the braised pork into her mouth.

"Chomp," and in an instant, Shuangshuang's chopsticks were empty.

Mu Zhenzhen could only watch as Shuangshuang chewed the braised pork by herself, deliberately making exaggerated expressions.

Lu Yuanfeng and the others, seeing Shuangshuang act that way, wanted to laugh but felt embarrassed to, so they just glanced at each other awkwardly.

"Little brat, you tricked me!" Mu Zhenzhen realized she had been fooled and decided to vent her anger with a loud burst of cursing.

"I did trick you, so what, what!"

Mu Shuangshuang wasn't scared of tearing into Mu Zhenzhen; everyone present was familiar with the third branch and had often been annoyed by Old Mrs. Mu. Plus, none were the gossiping type, so Mu Shuangshuang was unconcerned.

"Such stinginess, little brat, I'll tell you, you're so heartless, you better watch out for lightning strikes!"

Mu Zhenzhen's words were quite sharp, so much so that Mu Dashan, who initially planned to keep the peace, couldn't sit still.

"Zhenzhen, go eat at your side's place. Today's meal is to thank Yu Tou and Gou Zi for helping the third branch; I'll send some food over to you later."

"Send food? I bet it's leftovers. If you were really sending food, you'd do it before the meal. Now saying these pretentious words, what's the point? I don't care, I'm eating here today."

As Mu Zhenzhen spoke, she reached out to take the third branch's dish, but Mu Shuangshuang reacted swiftly and swatted Mu Zhenzhen's hand away, causing her to grimace with pain.

"Ah, little brat, dare you hit me, you..."

Mu Shuangshuang didn't want this meal to go sour due to Mu Zhenzhen's antics.

She stood up directly, grabbed Mu Zhenzhen's arm, and started dragging her outside. Mu Zhenzhen struggled and tried to shake off, but she couldn't loosen Shuangshuang's grip.

With some forceful tugging and pulling, she finally managed to get Mu Zhenzhen out of her home.

When they arrived outside the main house of the Old Mu Family, Mu Shuangshuang still hadn't let go of Mu Zhenzhen's hand.

Her arrival inevitably invited some mocking and teasing.

"Oh, little brat is here to borrow something from us? We don't have fancy food, but we do have plenty of heartless people." Mrs. Lin quipped sarcastically.

"Grandpa, second aunt has been causing a scene at our third branch. Couldn't you intervene a bit? We have guests at our place; if anything happens and becomes a laughing stock, the reputation of our Old Mu Family would be tarnished."

Mr. Mu was already feeling down, and Shuangshuang's arrival compounded his gloom; this sensation of having been slighted was something only he understood.

"Zhenzhen, sit down and have your meal. Why run riot when people are eating?"

"Dad, how did I run riot? You don't know how outrageous this little brat was—even hitting my hand to stop me from eating, sob sob..."

Mu Shuangshuang rolled her eyes at the sudden change of scene.

Damn it, this Mu Zhenzhen was simply a drama queen, skilled at twisting facts. "Second aunt, stop smearing Shuangshuang. The third branch has no rice, no chopsticks, no bowls; I asked you to take some utensils but you refused, insisting on being unreasonable. What could I do?"

"You're lying..." Mu Zhenzhen stomped her foot, fuming the moment Mu Shuangshuang spoke.

"Grandpa, Grandma, I'm leaving now. Enjoy your meal."

Mu Shuangshuang left the main house of the Old Mu Family with her head held high, the sun blazing down without any scarf for protection, making her scalp tingle.

Soon, she was drenched in sweat, yet making the Old Mu Family gnash their teeth in resentment but helpless made Mu Shuangshuang extremely pleased.

Since coming to this world, for the first time, she felt a sense of her existence's worth.

Indeed, she was cut out for bold encounters and conflicts, not suited for the subdued role of a bullied wife.

After the midday meal, Mu Shuangshuang tidied up the kitchen, while Lu Yuanfeng and Yuanbao had already left due to other commitments.

Though the meal was a pleasant one, the odd visit from Mu Zhenzhen in the middle made her dread the days ahead.

She couldn't drive the oddity away, and her current silver was insufficient to relocate.

She could only wait and see if someday she could find a truly profitable way.

Once done cleaning, Mu Shuangshuang placed the leftovers from lunch in a pot, warming them with hot water since in these ancient times there were no cooling devices, so everything had to be made sparingly, or it would spoil quickly.

Originally planning a nap, Yu Si Niang entered.

"Shuangshuang, rest, no need to get up."

Seeing Shuangshuang on the bed about to rise, Yu Si Niang swiftly moved to support her.

"Mom, why aren't you napping, is something the matter?" Mu Shuangshuang asked concernedly, rubbing her eyelids.

"Not really, just that you've been quite close with Fengzi; tell me honestly, have you two been..."

Today, having come to see Shuangshuang, Yu Si Niang had thought quite a bit; after all, her daughter had grown, and talk of eventual marriage loomed. It wouldn't fare well for her reputation if gossip arose.

"We've got nothing, Mom, why're you asking?" Mu Shuangshuang looked puzzled.

Yu Si Niang leaned toward feeling like dealing with a situation of early romantic notions, which worried her.

At this moment, Yu Si Niang would rather her daughter confessed to having something with Fengzi, whom she particularly liked; if her daughter were to marry someday, she'd willingly see her marry Fengzi.

But the concern was that it might not be so.

"Mom just feels you should pay more attention to your lifelong matters. Your birthday's approaching, and over it, you'll be fourteen. When I was your age, preparations to marry your dad were already underway."

Chapter 226: Transplanting Rice Seedlings

Yu Si Niang was tirelessly advising, aiming more towards making Shuangshuang aware of marriage and finding a partner.

Mu Shuangshuang was overwhelmed by the talking and just kept saying she would certainly pay attention to this matter.

"Mom, marriage is a big deal, I must see clearly before deciding. And I want to find someone who can respect me and complements my personality. You know, I have a pretty impulsive nature and I'm quite forceful, the average person can't handle my few blows."

Mu Shuangshuang was doing a self-analysis, letting Yu Si Niang know her own shortcomings.

She might as well have not said anything, because Yu Si Niang felt a rush of happiness inside.

Respecting Shuangshuang, complementing personalities, able to withstand beating, isn't that Fengzi?

So Yu Si Niang decided not to meddle in this matter anymore, perhaps her daughter already has Fengzi in her heart, but she just doesn't know it herself.

People who are together every day, feelings are always slow to realize.

"Mom understands, do whatever you want. Are you hot? Let mom fan you."

Yu Si Niang got from Shuangshuang's mouth more or less the answer she wanted. Seeing her daughter constantly wiping her eyelids, she knew it was because she got up too early in the morning and was tired now.

She picked up the straw fan by Shuangshuang's bedside and gently fanned Shuangshuang, while humming the lullaby she used to sing to her when she was little.

Yu Si Niang's lullaby was very soft, and she occasionally patted Shuangshuang's shoulder as well.

Shuangshuang only felt very comfortable, and soon fell asleep.

After Shuangshuang fell asleep, Yu Si Niang took the cloth in her room and went back to her own room.

She had to seize every moment to help the family make clothes so that the kids at home could wear new clothes soon.

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After a nap, only half an hour had passed; it should be noon now, around two in the afternoon, just the hour to go out and work.

Mu Shuangshuang climbed out of bed as Yu Si Niang was getting ready to go out. She wore a headscarf, and had a water jug tied to her waist, Little Zhi and Xiao Han followed behind her, seemingly ready to go out and work as well.

"Little Zhi, Xiao Han, you two don't go out. Xiao Han, there are some books on sister's bed in her room for you to familiarize yourself with and then tell sister later how you feel about it. Little Zhi, you take care of Little Black, walk it a bit in the afternoon, it's grown too fat, sooner or later it won't be able to climb trees."

Little Zhi and Xiao Han were only five or six years old, really not the age for work; it's better for them to stay home.

Xiao Han's eyes were somewhat bright and black now. He stared blankly at Mu Shuangshuang, completely petrified.

Mu Shuangshuang's books were bought from the scholar who doesn't eat food given in contempt. She had been flipping through them casually these days, and had recognized most of the words, so it's about time to teach Xiao Han.

Although it's a bit strange for her to read, after considering Xiao Han's future, she still decided to find an excuse to teach him more.

Xiao Han could be sent to the school for primary learning after spring starts, by then he would almost be eight years old, just the right age for school.

But compared to those taught at home, initially he would definitely be a bit behind.

Mu Xiaohan almost raced into Mu Shuangshuang's room and took the few books she had bought from her bed.

He cautiously opened a book, the black characters attracted his gaze; though he didn't recognize a single word, seeing the book made him feel unusually at peace.

Perhaps, he really could go to school.

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Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang were going to plant crops today on the fertile land forcibly acquired from the Old Mu Family. This morning, Fu Jiu brought the land deed to Yu Si Niang, so now Mu Shuangshuang could boldly state that their third branch now owned one acre of high-yield land.

Along the way, Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang dragged back the cart they borrowed from Zhuangzi's family and headed towards the seedling field.

They encountered several young wives from the village, greeted each other, and continued working.

In the seedling field, Mu Qingqing and Mrs. Liu were pulling seedlings, while Gou Dan played with mud on the bank. After more than ten days of double cropping, Mu Qingqing was already very tanned, looking no different from the young wives who work all year round in the village; whereas Mu Shuangshuang, actually didn't work much.

So her skin was almost the same as before, not much tanned.

Mu Qingqing looked up and saw Mu Shuangshuang with her head wrapped in a scarf, legs tucked into her pants, she looked at herself, going out without even a piece of cloth for shade.

Mu Qingqing disdainfully glanced at Mu Shuangshuang, then began to mock.

"Oh, who did I think it was? This young lady finally tasted the good life and came to work today?"

Mu Shuangshuang didn't even look at Mu Qingqing, just found a corner and prepared to go into the field to pull seedlings.

Generally, seedlings for a few plots of land are predetermined in quantity, neither too much nor too few. Mu Shuangshuang's family had two acres, so they didn't need too many seedlings.

But because their family had few people working, everything had to be done by themselves, they might end up being the last to finish planting.

Mu Qingqing didn't get the expected answer, and Mu Shuangshuang ignored her, leaving her stewing with anger and without energy.

Mrs. Liu saw Mu Qingqing like this and couldn't help but remind her. "Qingqing, we need to pull more seedlings, later your grandfather will need seedlings to plant."

Mrs. Liu always had no position in the Old Mu Family. Mu Qingqing didn't like her, feeling that the fourth branch was the same as the third branch, poor and foolish.

Moreover, her fourth aunt always shrank back whenever bullied, timidly standing aside, so Mu Qingqing never regarded Mrs. Liu highly.

"Move aside, don't order me around, you fourth branch are the most hopeless." Mu Qingqing elbowed Mrs. Liu, nearly knocking her into the field.

Mrs. Liu clutched her stomach, which was hit painfully, moved to one side, just thinking of resting, when Mu Dazhong came over carrying seedlings.

These days, Mu Dazhong was more reliable than Mu Danyan, though he still liked to slack off, but wouldn't go to the toilet four times in the morning anymore.

He picked up a few seedlings into his bucket, not even filling one side, he paused and spoke to Mrs. Liu.

"Fourth sister-in-law, move quicker, don't act like you haven't eaten, our dad is still waiting for seedlings to plant."

Mrs. Liu nodded meekly, quickened her pace a bit.

But Mu Dazhong was still unsatisfied. "Fourth sister-in-law, Qingqing is a child and pulls seedlings faster than you. Speed up, I need seedlings urgently."

At this moment, Mrs. Liu was almost using both her hands, still couldn't get many seedlings in one go.

Mu Dazhong coldly stared at Mrs. Liu working alone in the field, not offering any help.

Mu Shuangshuang was furious seeing this, her fist couldn't help but clench.

Suddenly, a small dark green object caught Mu Shuangshuang's attention...

Chapter 227: Mu Dazhong Cried

It was a leech as thick as a chopstick. It curved its body, moving back and forth by Mu Shuangshuang's feet, seemingly wanting to suck her blood.

Unfortunately, when Mu Shuangshuang went out, she used the sleeves of old clothes at home to make pant legs, and tied the cuffs tightly with rope. Neither leeches nor leeches could easily suck her blood.

On the other hand, Mu Dazhong had his pant legs rolled up, exposing his hairy, black, thick legs. These were probably the leech's favorite.

However, it was troublesome that this person wouldn't go into the water.

Mu Shuangshuang was pondering when the opportunity came.

Mrs. Liu had pulled out a few more seedlings and thrown them behind herself, combined with Mu Qingqing's, this trip was enough. But Mrs. Liu was too busy pulling seedlings to hand them over to Mu Dazhong on the shore, so he eagerly went down to the field to fetch them himself.

Luckily, I wasn't too far from them.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, Mu Shuangshuang picked up half a stalk of rice straw, coiled the leech with it, and quietly followed, pretending to be pulling seedlings next to Mu Dazhong.

Her hand gently placed the leech by Mu Dazhong's foot.

The leech is a kind of soft-bodied animal with strong adhesion. Once it entangles something it can suck blood from, it will never easily let go.

So as soon as Mu Shuangshuang placed it in the right spot, it naturally adhered to Mu Dazhong's leg.

Stepping in the mud already feels different from stepping on solid ground, and Mu Dazhong didn't mind as he took the seedlings and walked up the field slope. Before leaving, he reminded Mrs. Liu not to slack off.

Mu Shuangshuang almost watched Mu Dazhong leave.

She believed that the leech she personally delivered would surely have a feast today.

"Shuangshuang, how about this? Mom pulls seedlings, you wash the mud off, and then bundle them together, okay?"

Yu Si Niang smiled at Mu Shuangshuang and handed her some more rice straw.

After being pulled from the paddy field, seedlings come out with a lot of mud, making them very inconvenient for transport and difficult in transplanting. So the pulled seedlings must be washed repeatedly in water to clean off the mud.

Mu Shuangshuang knew Yu Si Niang was worried about her getting tired. Besides, Yu Si Niang had been doing farm work for so many years, and was indeed more efficient than Shuangshuang.

"Mom, let's do as you say, but let's have a race to see if you're faster at pulling seedlings or if I'm quicker at washing them."

Mu Shuangshuang placed the rice straw by her feet, waiting for Yu Si Niang to pile seedlings in front of her. Her hands swiftly grabbed a bunch of seedlings, quickly washed them, and skillfully tied a knot with the rice straw — a bundle of seedlings was ready.

One after another, Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang worked more energetically, their hands becoming increasingly quick and efficient.

Finally, while Mrs. Liu and Mu Qingqing managed to gather only two loads of seedlings, they had already finished all the seedlings needed for the afternoon.

Mu Dazhong had made two trips, carrying seedlings twice, spending about half an hour in total, and now, as he came to carry seedlings again, he felt an intense itch at his calf.

Mu Dazhong couldn't resist touching it, and the moment his hand made contact, he felt something soft and slippery.

"Ah..." Mu Dazhong was shocked, throwing the carrying pole and baskets off his shoulder.

On his leg, the formerly thin leech had swollen to the thickness of a finger.

"Oh my, oh dear, this... a leech... it's sucking my blood, it's sucking my blood..."

"I'm going to die, I'm going to die..."

Mu Dazhong had been afraid of leeches and similar creatures since he was a child. Once he was playing in the fields and a leech crawled into his shorts, sucking blood from his private part all afternoon, leading to ridicule from others and scolding from Old Mrs. Mu.

Since then, whenever doing farm work, Mu Dazhong avoided entering the fields, choosing instead to harvest rice or carry loads on the shore.

The leech clinging firmly to his leg, that fear surged back.

Mu Dazhong cried, wailing like a banshee.

Seeing her father like this, Mu Qingqing also stopped pulling seedlings, hurriedly rushing ashore to help her father, only to be waved away by Mu Dazhong.

At this point, Mu Dazhong was flailing about like a person possessed, his movements faster and faster.

Yet the leech, as if firmly rooted, refused to drop off.

Mu Dazhong kept muttering about how he was going to die.

"Someone, come help my dad!"

"Uncle, aunt, please help out!"

Mu Qingqing called out to a few villagers who had come to watch the spectacle.

"Qing girl, isn't it just a leech? Those of us who do farm work, who hasn't been sucked by leeches?"

Moreover, when you're sucked by a leech, you ought not to make a noise. Your dad is jumping and howling — the leech might have already taken root in his leg.

Soon, your dad's leg will have little leeches."

The speaker was the village's most notorious braggart, known for his tall tales. Normally, people wouldn't believe a word he said.

But Mu Dazhong was different. He took the words to heart and screamed even more miserably.

In his mind, one thought roared — he didn't want leeches rooting on his leg.

"Dad, Mom, help..."

Mu Dazhong looked pitiful, while Mu Shuangshuang secretly laughed by herself.

The little trick she came up with on a whim worked so well. If only she had caught a few more and put them on Mu Dazhong's bed; perhaps this second uncle would be scared to death.

Hehehe!

Mu Qingqing, weeping, pleaded with this person and that person, but nobody was willing to help.

Everyone was keen on watching the commotion; who would step in to rescue?

Yu Si Niang and Mu Shuangshuang arranged the seedlings on the cart, and as they happened to pass by, the desperate Mu Qingqing took Yu Si Niang as her last straw to clutch at.

"Aunt, please help my dad, my dad... boo-hoo..." Mu Qingqing cried pitifully.

"Qingqing, I don't know how..." Yu Si Niang was scared herself. Most women are, except for the daring Mu Shuangshuang who even dared to play with leeches.

Seeing that Yu Si Niang was unwilling, Mu Qingqing turned her gaze to Mu Shuangshuang.

"You know, don't you? Save my dad."

Talking to Mu Shuangshuang, Mu Qingqing's tone was more commanding.

"I really don't know. Uncle's flesh attracts these little creatures. How can someone else separate them?" Mu Shuangshuang subtly smiled, her calm expression a vast contrast to Mu Qingqing's desperation.

That faint smile made Mu Qingqing feel certain she knew the way.

Involuntarily, her hand tugged at Mu Shuangshuang's sleeve, her tone softening significantly.

"What do you want in return for helping my dad? I know you have a way."

Chapter 228: Love for Beauty

"You know, I never make a losing deal. How about this: you apologize to Aunt Si, and in the afternoon, you pull seedlings by yourself to let her rest, and we'll call it even?"

Mu Shuangshuang originally just intended for a small punishment.

She didn't mean for Mu Dazhong to go this far, but she might as well take the opportunity to make them suffer a bit.

Mu Shuangshuang actually really wanted Mu Qingqing to directly promise not to bully Mrs. Liu anymore, but she knew better that such empty promises were less helpful than simply letting Mrs. Liu do less work.

A dog can't change its habit of eating shit, and similarly, Mu Qingqing won't stop bullying others.

As for Mrs. Liu, the only way not to be bullied is to stand up for herself. No matter how much others help, it's only temporary.

"Why are you helping that cowardly woman?" Mu Qingqing looked at Shuangshuang, puzzled.

She thought that since the third branch finally split off, they shouldn't involve themselves in such matters.

"Because I feel familiar with it. Qingqing, you probably forgot that we, the third branch, were bullied like this before. Even though we've now split off, this feeling often torments me, making me uneasy."

Shuangshuang didn't mind chatting with Mu Qingqing for a while; the longer it dragged on, the more suffering it was for Mu Dazhong.

Mu Qingqing also realized this issue, quickly ran to Mrs. Liu's side, apologized, and then returned.

Mu Shuangshuang nodded in satisfaction, picking up a board from the cart and comparing it to Mu Dazhong's leg. Especially with her squinting one eye and opening the other, it was clear what she was about to do.

"What are you doing?" Mu Qingqing asked anxiously, but it was already too late.

Mu Shuangshuang raised the board, and with a bang, smashed it on Mu Dazhong's leg, making him howl in pain as his leg twitched even more fiercely.

But finally, the leech fell off.

The leech that fell had half a pouch of blood in its mouth. When stomped on, it spat out quite a bit more, which was all Mu Dazhong's.

The matter was finally resolved, and Mu Dazhong collapsed on the ground, seemingly exhausted, not moving for a long time.

Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang pushed the cart to the northern fertile fields. Along the way, Mu Shuangshuang kept recalling Mu Dazhong's hopping antics, which amused her greatly.

"Mom, do you know why Second Uncle, such a big man, is so afraid of leeches?"

Mu Shuangshuang needed to figure this out; it might come in handy in the future.

"What else? Before, your Second Uncle got sucked by a leech down there." Yu Si Niang said casually, then suddenly realized her daughter hadn't married yet, and such dirty talk shouldn't be heard.

"Shuangshuang, I was just joking with you, don't take it seriously." Yu Si Niang explained.

"It's alright, I know nothing." Mu Shuangshuang suppressed her laughter and waved her hand to Yu Si Niang.

She couldn't understand how the leech could crawl to Mu Dazhong's 'little brother' position.

Could it be that the leech is more into 'gold' than blood?

"That's good, that's good!"

Yu Si Niang comforted herself, and upon reaching the paddy field, she and Shuangshuang began throwing prepared seedlings into the field, one every half meter. After covering half the field, the two finally started transplanting the seedlings.

Transplanting seedlings is one of the few technical tasks among farmers' chores, emphasizing speed and skill. The more capable young women in the village can plant an acre by themselves in a day.

Mu Shuangshuang had no such ambitions; just finishing the work by the last double harvest day was good enough.

Sorting seedlings, picking seedlings, and planting seedlings, these actions were done skillfully by Mu Shuangshuang. She and Yu Si Niang stood side by side, leaving a trail of green wherever their hands passed.

"Duang, Duang, Duang" the sound of hands touching the water reached the ear, quite pleasing.

Seedling after seedling, Mu Shuangshuang and Yu Si Niang finally finished the afternoon's work.

Ten seedlings were left, but they couldn't finish today.

Any further work would leave her without strength to go to the town to sell cold noodles and straw fans the next morning, and there were pigs to feed at home too.

Without mentioning it, it felt like an endless list of tasks for Mu Shuangshuang.

"Shuangshuang, let's spread the seedlings in the water, so they won't turn yellow when Mom comes back tomorrow."

Overnight seedlings need to be untied from the straw they're tied to, a common rule everyone knows about. Although Mu Shuangshuang didn't know this, she did what Yu Si Niang instructed.

With the last bunch of seedlings spread out, Mu Shuangshuang was finally able to head back.

With her body almost falling apart from exhaustion, once on the bank, Mu Shuangshuang didn't rush to sit down to rest. Instead, she did a few simple yoga stretches to loosen her muscles.

The only thing that delighted her now was how flexible her body was.

Splits, yoga, grappling and combat—all didn't make her bones ache.

The first two, Mu Shuangshuang practiced often, while grappling and combat she rarely touched, mainly due to lacking the strength now, making practice ineffective.

When she has time someday, she plans to get a sandbag and practice for half a month before returning to martial arts.

By then, she might even spar a few moves with Fengzi.

Yu Si Niang, seeing Shuangshuang fidgeting with her body there, rubbing her waist and shrugging her shoulders in particularly graceful movements, couldn't help but grow curious.

"Shuangshuang, what are you doing? It looks fun."

"Mom, it really is fun. Do you want to learn it, to strengthen your body?"

Yoga indeed has many benefits. Although Yu Si Niang does a lot of physical work usually and doesn't necessarily need this for exercise, yoga benefits the waist and neck greatly. If Yu Si Niang learned it, it might help alleviate pain in those areas.

"With these aged bones, can I still learn?"

"Mom, you're not old at all. You're in your prime. A woman at thirty is a blooming flower, and you're not even thirty yet."

Yu Si Niang indeed wasn't old. She reached maturity at fifteen, had Mu Shuangshuang at sixteen, and Mu Shuangshuang was now thirteen; thus, she was only twenty-nine, the prime of her youth.

In modern terms, these would be the most attractive years, peak beauty.

However, the hardships faced by farmer's wives made their skin look dull and yellowish, making her look no different from someone over thirty, even though she was only twenty-nine.

"Mom, let's hurry back. I'll make you a cucumber face mask."

Mu Shuangshuang became excited; poor skin can be cared for, and a bad figure can be improved through exercise.

If she starts instilling these into Yu Si Niang now, even ancient cultural shackles can be broken.

"What... mask?" Yu Si Niang widened her eyes, curiously repeating the word Shuangshuang used.

"A face mask, something that can make your face as fresh as an eighteen-year-old girl's."

Yu Si Niang was stunned; an eighteen-year-old's skin is smooth and soft, incomparable to hers.

But everyone loves beauty, so she couldn't help but feel a little anticipation for whatever Shuangshuang referred to as a "mask"!

Chapter 229: Wild Vegetable Porridge

Back home, Mu Shuangshuang rummaged through boxes and cabinets, searching for something.

Cucumber, eggs, but unfortunately no rice paste and honey. Mixing white rice paste with egg whites and honey, applying it for the time of an incense stick; once removed, it truly can be said to be as delicate as a bullet, then use a layer of cucumber mask...

"Oh dear, why didn't I think of it, we actually have a stone mill at home."

Zhao Yun's house has a large stone mill, which was previously pushed by men or pulled by donkeys. Later, a rope was added to the beam to reduce some of the force, making it lighter, so less strength was needed for pushing.

Mu Shuangshuang initially placed the stone mill in the kitchen. She quickly grabbed some rice, soaked it for a while, and started grinding paste.

The rice paste produced wasn't very thick, as the rice hadn't soaked long enough.

After grinding to her desired amount, Mu Shuangshuang beat an egg, mixing the egg white into the rice paste evenly, and asked Yu Si Niang to wash her face, then applied the mixture to her face.

An incense stick's time later, Yu Si Niang, who had washed her face, found her skin not only smooth but also tender, and she couldn't help but touch it, feeling quite fond of it.

"Shuangshuang, this... I feel like it's not my face anymore," Yu Si Niang indulged.

Without a copper mirror at home, she could only use a water basin. Although the image in the basin wasn't clear, her psychological effect made her feel she saw herself clearly.

"Just used an egg white, quite extravagant," Yu Si Niang still felt a bit pained.

"Mom, don't think like that. You get what you give. A woman's face is her first appearance, and if it's good-looking, she'll be more confident. This is a world that values appearances.

It's like nobody would dare enter a house if the front looks old, broken, and dirty, with cow ||| dung and stuff, right?"

Yu Si Niang nodded. "You're right, an egg now sells for no more than a penny in town. I and your dad make a fan, and it can sell for a penny."

Yu Si Niang muttered, as if comforting herself.

She used to be accustomed to saving every item, never daring to use both rice paste and eggs as she does now.

"Mom, it's good that you understand. I'll cut a few pieces of cucumber for your face, then we can prepare dinner."

The farmers' knives are made of iron and are particularly sharp. Mu Shuangshuang cut a small segment of cucumber and applied it all over Yu Si Niang's face.

Just as she was about to uncover the pot lid, she surprisingly discovered that the lid wasn't in the same position as she left it at noon, as if someone moved it.

Sure enough, lifting the lid, there wasn't even residue left in the pot.

The bowl holding the food lay sideways in the pot, with the leftover oil licked clean, and the last piece of boiled fish eaten down to just a fish head.

"Mom, our leftovers were stolen."

Mu Shuangshuang furrowed her brows, trembling slightly as she held the pot lid.

"Ah, what's going on?" Yu Si Niang approached, not even caring about the cucumber mask on her face, stared at the pot for a long time, then said, "How did a thief strike in broad daylight?"

"Probably someone from over there. I'm speechless. They even stole the leftovers and licked the oil residues in the bowl clean."

Excited, Mu Shuangshuang even spoke in internet slang.

Indeed, she had seen plenty of petty theft from her past life until now, but had never seen someone steal leftovers.

Yu Si Niang's face froze. Mouth agape, she glanced towards the direction of the Old Mu Family, paused for a while, then continued, "Forget it, just a bit of leftovers. If they want to steal, let them."

"Let them, what else can be done."

Catch the thief with evidence; she couldn't go inspect everyone to see who stole the leftovers, nor could she wait until they defecated to see who discarded what.

Overall, this time, Mu Shuangshuang was disgusted.

"No way, the bowl licked by someone must be disinfected again."

Mu Shuangshuang grabbed some fir leaves, lit a fire, started adding firewood into the stove, poured several ladles of water into the pot, added a spoonful of salt, a few drops of vinegar, and after the pot boiled, washed the bowl again and again before stopping.

Yu Si Niang watched from the side, feeling both angry and amused. Angered by someone doing such a vile thing, amused by her daughter's disgusted expression, as if the bowl were tainted with something bad.

"Mom, let's keep it simple tonight. I'll chop some wild vegetables; we can add water to the lunchtime crust in the pot, cook them together, eat wild vegetable porridge, then make a cold dish, cucumber salad."

Mu Shuangshuang had leftover chili oil from last time making cold noodles, so her cold dishes were always in demand.

Indeed, the chili oil itself is spicy and fragrant. When mixed with cucumber and a little vinegar, it's truly a summer essential delicacy.

"Great, today I'll send a message to your grandpa and grandma, asking them to deliver some sweet potatoes and mixed grains. Our rice was bought, if we don't save, by next year's harvest, I don't know how much money we'll spend buying rice."

Last time Yu Si Niang went home to fetch green beans; Shuangshuang's grandpa asked her to bring some sweet potatoes. She declined, thinking with the family not split, no matter how much she brought, the third branch wouldn't have enough.

Now things have changed, the third branch is split now. Whatever she takes from her parent's house is hers.

"Yes, yes!"

Mu Shuangshuang naturally agreed. Not just for her family, other farmer households also never cook plain rice. Every time rice is cooked, only a little is used, with the rest mostly mixed with sweet potatoes or wild vegetables.

Mu Shuangshuang started washing vegetables. These days, there's enough greens at home. Zhuangzi's mother sent so many, and Aunt Xiao Yun often brings some.

However, vegetables are like this; if kept for a day or two, might wilt.

The taste won't be good, so Mu Shuangshuang decided to process the greens after cooking the porridge, making cucumber skins, bitter melon can be dried to eat as dry bitter melon, as for small cabbage types, they can be blanched in boiled water, dried to make dry mustard greens.

The wild vegetables collected from the mountain were chopped by Mu Shuangshuang. She poured two ladles of water into the pot, waited for it to boil, placed the crust in the pot, kept stirring, then added all chopped wild vegetables, continued stirring.

Soon, a pot of wild vegetable porridge was ready.

Wild vegetable porridge, with a bowl of green cucumber salad, just looking at them increases one's appetite.

The third branch of the Old Mu Family remains harmonious and happy as usual.

But it's uncertain on the other side of the Old Mu Family, they also started eating dinner...

Chapter 230: Second Aunt Got a Fish Bone Stuck

The Old Mu Family also prepared quite a few dishes tonight. Mr. Mu was feeling upset over the matter at noon, so as soon as Mu Shuangshuang left, he instructed Old Mrs. Mu to go to Wang Erma's house and get half a pound of meat.

Of course, whether it's really half a pound, only Old Mrs. Mu knows.

Half a pound of meat, stir-fried with chili peppers, made the entire main room smell like meat.

The Old Mu Family members were drooling one by one.

Mu Dazhong's originally bloodless face, due to the afternoon incident, immediately regained its color, as if he'd been injected with chicken blood.

"Mom, you're so kind to your son. You know I lost a lot of blood this afternoon, and you bought meat to nourish me." Mu Dazhong smiled brightly, praising Old Mrs. Mu.

But Old Mrs. Mu's next words brought him back to reality.

"This is specifically purchased by my old wife from Wang Erma's house for your sister Zhenzhen. She likes stir-fried meat with chili peppers. Later, you all eat less meat and more peppers, leaving more meat for Zhenzhen. She's been here for such a short time, and she's almost unbearably skinny."

Mu Dazhong's face darkened instantly. It turned out to be his wishful thinking.

But why didn't he notice that his constantly idle and gluttonous second sister was losing weight?

She was fairly slim when she arrived, and now her face has become rounder. Is his mom blind?

"Second Brother, I told you, that little blood you lost isn't even enough for Second Sister to shed a few tears. Second Sister is Mom's darling; you should just step aside!"

"Fifth, why do you speak so harshly? You think you'll get to eat the meat?" Mu Dazhong retorted, unwillingly drawing disdain from Mu Danian.

Mu Danian's mind was as clear as a mirror. In such situations, of course, whatever his mom says goes. When the dishes are served later, just keep grabbing them; surely his mom won't dig the meat out of his bowl.

As they were talking, Mu Zhenzhen walked in from the yard, raising her arms and stretching lazily.

"Ahhh... feels so good to have a nap!"

While speaking, Mu Zhenzhen felt her throat was uncomfortable and a bit sore.

The sore throat had started in the afternoon, when Mu Zhenzhen had just finished the dishes stored in her third brother's house, including that half bowl of braised pork and boiled fish. It was simply so delicious she wanted more, and Mu Zhenzhen even licked the bowl clean.

Thinking of that melt-in-your-mouth braised pork, Mu Zhenzhen still wanted to drool at this moment.

"Mom, what's for dinner tonight?" Mu Zhenzhen ignored the soreness in her throat and lazily asked Old Mrs. Mu as she walked over to her.

"There's your favorite stir-fried meat with chili peppers. How's that? Am I good to you?"

For once, Old Mrs. Mu's face didn't look like someone owed her a lot of money, so Mu Zhenzhen naturally clung to Old Mrs. Mu, shouting softly, "Mom is the best to me. Zhenzhen loves mom the most..."

These words disgusted the others around.

"Mom, I'm hungry. Let's eat!" Mu Zhenzhen nudged Old Mrs. Mu's shoulder.

Seated in the main room, Mr. Mu frowned and glanced at Mu Zhenzhen before saying, "Your fourth brother and fourth sister-in-law are still working in the fields. Let's wait for them to eat together."

"Dad, let's not wait. You know, Fourth Brother has always been slow doing chores. By the time he comes back, the daylilies will be cold."

"No, today's Fourth's family worked hard; we should wait for him!"

Mr. Mu righteously refused.

It's not that he doesn't love his daughter in front of him, but lately the family has been increasingly lacking in order. If he doesn't manage it soon, the Old Mu Family will fall apart.

Mu Zhenzhen saw Mr. Mu wasn't budging, so she turned to plead with Old Mrs. Mu, "Mom, I'm starving. If you don't let me eat, I'll die."

Old Mrs. Mu was indeed troubled, torn between her husband and her precious daughter, unsure of what to do.

Mu Zhenzhen could see Old Mrs. Mu's hesitation and shouted, then put her hand on her eyelid, "Woo woo woo, Mom doesn't like me anymore... I don't want to live..."

This crying and fussing act had annoyed everyone to the point they turned their heads, pretending they hadn't seen a thing.

Old Mrs. Mu kept comforting her when suddenly Mu Zhenzhen covered her throat, making indistinct gurgling noises. Her expression was extremely painful, her face crimson red, her eyes wide, even the whites showing.

"What's wrong, Zhenzhen? Don't scare Mom..." Old Mrs. Mu hugged Mu Zhenzhen and began to cry.

The Old Mu Family members watched the scene like it was entertainment, unwilling to step forward. In the end, Mr. Mu, sensing something was amiss, quickly instructed Mu Dazhong to fetch Zhang Huai Shu, the village doctor.

Once he went, he found out that the doctor had gone to another village for consultations and wouldn't return for several days.

"Zhenzhen, what's wrong?"

Mu Zhenzhen pointed at her throat, painfully saying, "Bone... fish bone..."

"Ah, are you saying there's a fish bone stuck in your throat?" Upon hearing clearly, Old Mrs. Mu became less panicked.

"Second daughter-in-law, why are you still standing there? Go get some vinegar. Qing, prepare a mouthful of rice for your second aunt."

Everyone knew that if there's a bone stuck, either use vinegar to soften it or swallow rice to push it down.

Mu Zhenzhen was Old Mrs. Mu's treasure, so naturally she needed to use both methods.

The vinegar arrived, Mu Zhenzhen drank nearly half a bowl without effect and became purple-faced from vomiting.

The rice arrived, Mu Zhenzhen took a big bite, but it had no effect and made the bone lodge deeper.

Mu Zhenzhen cried loudly and endlessly, her voice so loud it reached the third branch members having wild vegetable soup at home.

Little Zhi ran in from outside and went straight to Mu Shuangshuang. "Sister, I just overheard that Second Aunt has a bone stuck in her throat, and Grandpa and Grandma are treating her!"

Little Zhi, acting as Mu Shuangshuang's informant, relayed everything he heard, along with a version of Mu Zhenzhen's wails.

It made Mu Shuangshuang and Xiao Han laugh so hard their stomachs hurt.

"Serves her right for stealing our leftovers and licking our bowls!"

This statement was made not by Mu Shuangshuang but by Mu Xiaohan.

Mu Xiaohan, usually an aloof and cold beauty, rarely speaks. This time, he actively said Second Aunt Mu Zhenzhen deserved it, showing how much trouble Mu Zhenzhen caused.

"Shuangshuang, won't your Second Aunt choke to death?"

Mu Dashan felt a bit sympathetic; years ago, Mu Zhenzhen wasn't that bad. When she was very young, she even shared food with Mu Dashan.

"Don't worry, don't worry, with Grandpa and Grandma there, they won't let Second Aunt die. And if all else fails, there's still me."

"You're willing to help your Second Aunt?" Mu Dashan's eyes lit up, looking at Mu Shuangshuang hopefully.

"Of course not!" Mu Shuangshuang quickly shook her head, "But if I get something good, I'll consider it!"

Mu Shuangshuang blinked playfully at Mu Dashan!