

Folly 40

Chapter 40: Cold Dressed Wild Vegetables

Mu Shuangshuang entered the kitchen. Mrs. Liu hadn't started the fire to cook, but the vegetables had been washed and placed on the kitchen table. She was carefully searching through a basket of rice for something.

Rice from the countryside is dried in muddy fields, and even if an oilcloth is spread underneath, it's inevitable that some dirt or stones get mixed in. Before cooking, the wives usually carefully sift through the rice once, and then again during rinsing, to reduce the chances of biting into something hard.

"Aunt Si, these wild vegetables were just picked and are a bit old. You need to remove the back stem, just keep the front leaves."

"It's not a problem, the old wild vegetable stems are tasty too, delicious..." Mrs. Liu adjusted her sleeves, which reached her elbows, and looked momentarily embarrassed when Mu Shuangshuang started talking to her.

"But these old stems are hard to chew, Aunt Si. Even without the stems, the wild vegetables should be enough for our family to have a meal." These were wild vegetables Mu Shuangshuang gathered herself. Although she deliberately chose older ones, she estimated that even if the stems were removed, the Old Mu Family could still enjoy a good meal.

"Well... alright, thank you, Shuangshuang." Mrs. Liu decided to be indulgent after seeing the sizable bunch of wild vegetables in Mu Shuangshuang's hand.

"There's no need to thank me—it's not like I'm the only one eating these. Aunt Si, cook them up and see if they're good. If they are, I'll pick more wild vegetables when I find them in the future."

Mrs. Liu nodded vigorously. The Old Mu Family's garden produced just enough for her daily needs, while the rest was gathered by Old Mrs. Mu and given to Yu Si Niang to sell in town for silver. Though even a bunch of vegetables couldn't fetch much money, Old Mrs. Mu tirelessly saved up silver for Mu Dajiang.

After taking the wild vegetables, Mrs. Liu quickly removed the stems cleanly, while Mu Shuangshuang stood by watching her.

The Old Mu Family's four daughters-in-law were similar to their husbands—simple, hardworking people who rarely spoke. But Mrs. Liu's life was much harder compared to her husband Mu Dajiang. Old Mrs. Mu, no matter how mean, wouldn't bully her own son, but a daughter-in-law was different. She'd scold them when in a good mood and scold them even more when in a bad mood, sometimes even coupled with a beating.

People often say a bitter daughter-in-law eventually becomes a hardened mother-in-law; that's certainly true in the Old Mu Family. The daughters-in-law really had a tough life. Good food, drinks, and items were reserved for Old Mrs. Mu and the husband; getting a new dress every three years was a pipe dream for daughters-in-law.

Mu Shuangshuang looked at Mrs. Liu's outfit, wondering how many years it had been patched up. It was impossible to discern the original fabric's color.

"Aunt Si, would you like me to tend to the fire for you?"

Before even starting the meal, Mrs. Liu was already sweating profusely, not to mention the rigorous task of managing the stove fire.

"No, no need. It's hot tending the fire, and you're still young, Shuangshuang, go and play."

Mrs. Liu had accepted the fact that Mu Shuangshuang could speak anew. She was someone with a strong acceptance ability, taking in both good and bad situations wholeheartedly.

"By the way, Aunt Si, when are Xiaochu and Xiaxia coming back? I heard from my mother that they went to their grandmother's place; it's been over a month, hasn't it?"

The fourth household of the Mu Family had one son and one daughter. The daughter, Mu Xiaxia, was one year younger than Mu Shuangshuang, while the son, Mu Xiaochu, was only two and a half this year, an innocent young boy.

"Yes, their uncle said they'd stay for two days, but it's been a month now. They should be coming back." Talking about the children softened Mrs. Liu's expression considerably, even a slight arc could be seen at the corners of her eyebrows. Mrs. Liu rarely smiled, hence she often received scolding from Old Mrs. Mu for her bitter melon face.

But before the smile reached its brightest, Old Mrs. Mu entered the kitchen.

"You lazy woman of the fourth household! I told you to make a meal, yet you dared to throw all the wild vegetable stems away! Do you think you're some precious mistress now, wasting like a landlord's wife? You must be itching for a beating, right?"

Old Mrs. Mu started scolding Mrs. Liu right away, it was clear she was in a foul mood.

Old Mrs. Mu had turned everything inside Mrs. Lin's room upside down, pulling apart the bed, turning the closet, rummaging through clothes, but found nothing, not even a fart. The fury within Old Mrs. Mu had nowhere to go, so she came looking for Mrs. Liu, knowing she wouldn't fight back or talk back.

"Mother, no, I'm not wasting. These stems are too old."

"Oh, I see, you think being wasteful is justifiable? Watch me not beat you to death today." Old Mrs. Mu's eyes wandered around aimlessly, clearly looking for a switch.

Mu Shuangshuang rolled her big black eyes, quickly coming up with a plan. "Granny, Aunt Si said she was planning to use these wild vegetable stems to make a cold dish with them; it's just temporarily on the ground, not thrown away."

When Mu Shuangshuang spoke up, Old Mrs. Mu finally noticed her standing at the kitchen entrance. Her fury flared up even more.

"You stinky girl! You dare to deceive your old granny! Didn't you say your second aunt had silver in her room? I've rummaged through everywhere, and found nothing! Today I'll beat you too so you won't dare to lie again."

Mu Shuangshuang hurriedly pretended to be frightened, looking timidly at Old Mrs. Mu. "Granny, it wasn't me who said that. It was Gou Dan, saying we didn't have lunch and would go hungry, yet he had sugar cakes and didn't share with us, not even with Granny."

"Humph! You still try to fool me, the second household's room didn't have any silver at all! You black-hearted wicked girl! Since Yu Si Niang won't discipline you, I'll do it today!"

Old Mrs. Mu grabbed the cutting board from the table, intending to hit Mu Shuangshuang with it, scaring Mrs. Liu to the point where her face turned pale and her legs shook uncontrollably.

Mu Shuangshuang bit her lip, her eyes filled with defiance. This dead old woman kept finding trouble for her; today she wouldn't hold back. Her hand was already on the firewood by the stove wall.

Suddenly, Mu Shuangshuang saw Old Mrs. Mu's shoes and had a thought.

"Granny, I heard Gou Dan say yesterday, he had a pair of shoes with the upper worn off. Second Aunt refused to throw them away; no one knows what treasure they were, but Second Aunt cherished them quite a bit."

Upon hearing Mu Shuangshuang's words, Old Mrs. Mu's eyes lit up, discarding the cutting board and leaving the kitchen as swiftly as the wind.

The kitchen instantly calmed down, but Mrs. Liu was still shaken, unable to walk properly, as she approached Mu Shuangshuang.

"Shuangshuang, quickly go to the village entrance to wait for your mother. She'll be returning in the time it takes to brew three cups of tea. With her here, you won't be beaten too severely. Hurry."

"It's no problem, Aunt Si. I still need to help you prepare the cold wild vegetable stems, don't worry, Granny won't be back for a while."