

Golden 23

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Double Act (Part Two)

Xiong Ge's stall was the same as the others nearby: a two-meter square red cloth spread on the ground, displaying coins, bronze artifacts, and other items. They all appeared rusty and old, but Zhuang Rui's spiritual energy couldn't penetrate them, so he hadn't lingered and simply ignored the stall.

"Monkey, didn't I tell you already? Someone has already ordered that painting. I wouldn't have put it out if you hadn't seen it. Why are you bringing people to see the goods again?" The stall owner, Xiong Ge, looked impatient as he spoke to the thin young man, but Zhuang Rui noticed that Xiong Ge's eyes seemed to be glancing at him.

When I was chatting with Uncle De at the pawnshop before, he mentioned that back before liberation, there were people in the underworld who specialized in dealing in genuine and fake antiques and dealing in antiques and calligraphy. Later, some tomb raiders joined in, and they resorted to all sorts of petty theft, cheating, and swindling. They even traced their lineage back to the thief Shi Qian, recognizing him as their ancestor and calling themselves the "Jianghu Cemen" (a sect of martial arts practitioners). Their behavior is somewhat similar to that of the two people in front of me.

"If someone wants it, then forget it. I can't afford an authentic work by Zheng Banqiao anyway. Alright, I'm leaving now."

In this market, Liu Chuan was a well-known figure, so although Zhuang Rui was not afraid of trouble, he was too lazy to provoke these local bullies. He turned around and was about to leave, as it was almost noon and he needed to take his daughter to lunch.

"No, no, brother, this is a rare find! Take a look before you leave. Brother Xiong, I've never seen anyone turn away a customer like this!" The thin young man quickly grabbed Zhuang Rui, while constantly winking at Brother Xiong. If he persisted, Zhuang Rui might really leave.

"It's fine to just look, but if this brother takes a liking to it, I'll be in a difficult position. I've already promised someone else. Well, let's take a look first..." Xiong Ge saw Zhuang Rui about to leave, and a look of panic appeared on his face. His tone immediately softened.

In fact, Zhuang Rui overestimated these two. Jianghu sects might have really existed seventy or eighty years ago, but after the ten years following liberation, these monsters and demons were wiped out long

ago. These two were at best putting on a show, fooling those who didn't know anything or were new to the industry, and making a little money. Their professional level was far inferior to those old Jianghu veterans that Uncle De mentioned. At the very least, even Zhuang Rui could see through the little tricks they were playing at a glance.

Zhuang Rui stopped in his tracks upon hearing this. Since there was no harm in taking a look, and with Liu Chuan looking after him in the market, he wasn't afraid of these two forcing him to buy something. He also harbored a sliver of hope. If someone could obtain Wang Shizhen's manuscript of "Xiangzu Notes" from an old woman in the countryside, perhaps this person really had some good stuff. If it was real, even if he couldn't afford to buy it, absorbing the spiritual energy within would still be a sure win.

Xiong Ge was secretly pleased to see the young man turn around. He and Monkey had been observing him for a while, noticing that he lingered at each stall selling old paintings and calligraphy, looking but not buying anything. People like this usually knew a bit about art, but judging from his age, he was probably new to the business, a dabbler with little knowledge, the kind who'd be easily fooled with their high-quality forgeries.

When Xiong Ge stood up, Zhuang Rui realized that what he had made was not a stool, but a rattan box. After opening the box, Xiong Ge carefully took out a scroll wrapped in yellow cloth with both hands. After removing the yellow cloth, the wooden shafts at both ends of the scroll were worn and old, and at first glance, it looked like an old object.

Xiong Ge unrolled the scroll on the rattan box. Zhuang Rui discovered that it was a vertical scroll, about 50 x 110 centimeters in length and width. The paper was slightly yellowed. It depicted bamboo growing among rocks, and included a poem: "Bamboo pierces the sky and covers the earth, turning wind and rain on the tip of the brush; I refuse to follow others' methods, and write out dragon whiskers and phoenix tails." The characters were of varying sizes and crooked. Below the poem were the two characters "Zheng Xie" and several seals.

"Who is Zheng Xie?"

Zhuang Rui blurted out the question, but regretted it as soon as it left his mouth. He had made a fool of himself. Zheng Xie's courtesy name was Banqiao. However, the name Zheng Banqiao was too famous, and Zhuang Rui did not react for a moment. This was similar to the joke that Yang Wei's father said that Tang Bohu and Tang Yin were two different people.

Xiong Ge and Monkey looked at each other, their eyes full of suspicion. This man didn't even know Zheng Banqiao's original name. How could he tell the difference between the real and fake? If he were an impulsive person, it would be easy to deal with. He would buy it if it looked real. But this man looked quite calm. He wouldn't be so easy to fool today.

Zhuang Rui lowered his head, using the strands of hair on his forehead to shield others' view, and focused intently on the so-called calligraphy and painting by Zheng Banqiao. A yellow light flashed in his eyes, and spiritual energy had already circled the painting. When the spiritual energy returned to his eyes, there was no unusual phenomenon. Without asking, Zhuang Rui had already sentenced the calligraphy and painting to death in his heart.

Since he was able to absorb spiritual energy from couplets and that manuscript, Zhuang Rui had experimented on many books, but none of them contained spiritual energy. After pondering for a long time and combining the two experiences of absorbing spiritual energy, Zhuang Rui came to a conclusion: objects that contain spiritual energy must be ancient things, at least before the liberation. This judgment was based on the couplet by Lian Sheng.

Zhuang Rui even suspected that the spiritual energy in the couplet and manuscript might be the result of the author's complete concentration during the creation process, but this idea was too absurd, and Zhuang Rui only thought of it unintentionally. However, Zhuang Rui was now convinced that the thing in front of him was definitely a fake.

"Gentlemen, I'm not entirely sure about this thing. You should put it away for now," Zhuang Rui said, raising his head to Xiong Ge and Monkey, who both looked on with anticipation.

Uncle De once told Zhuang Rui that in the antique business, there is no such thing as genuine or fake, only new and old. And you should leave room for maneuver. Even if the item is new, most people will just say they can't tell or can't say for sure, but they won't point it out directly. The seller will naturally understand and won't make a fuss.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Xiong Ge and Monkey exchanged bewildered glances. They hadn't expected that this man, who didn't even know Zheng Banqiao's real name, would utter such jargon without even asking the price. It turned out they had misjudged him. Little did they know, if Zhuang Rui didn't have those eyes, how could he distinguish between the real and the fake? Even if you gave him a modern print, he might have thought it was genuine just because it looked so realistic.

Monkey and Xiong were unlucky to run into Zhuang Rui. The aging technique used on this high-quality forgery of Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy and painting was quite sophisticated. The paper was indeed from the Qing Dynasty, and the calligraphy and painting were done by a master. Compared with Zheng Banqiao's original work, it was almost indistinguishable from the real thing. Moreover, the "axis" of the hanging scroll had also been aged. Anyone who knows a little about calligraphy and painting but is not an expert on Zheng Banqiao would definitely think that this calligraphy and painting was Zheng Banqiao's handwriting. Unfortunately, Zhuang Rui was an unconventional guy, and all their hard work went down the drain.

Xiong Ge was quite straightforward. After hearing Zhuang Rui's words, he didn't say much and quickly put the calligraphy and painting back in the box. These were their livelihood. Anyway, there are plenty of people in society who want to take advantage of others. If Zhuang Rui wasn't fooled, others would naturally fall for it.

Zhuang Rui was also losing interest. The spiritual energy in his eyes had been greatly reduced due to treating his mother's illness, and he was eager to replenish it. However, after browsing around all morning, he hadn't found a single thing of value. It seemed that even with his eyes, finding a bargain wasn't so easy.

"Gentlemen, if you ever come across any old items in the future, just go to the Pet Home up ahead and give the owner a heads-up. You two go ahead with your work..."

Zhuang Rui exchanged a few polite words. He would be returning to Zhonghai City for work in a month or so, and he couldn't stay here all the time. On the other hand, these people in front of him hung out here all day long, and who knew they might run into something good sometime.

"Suckling... Hurry, hurry, hurry..."

After Zhuang Rui greeted them, he was about to leave when he suddenly heard a familiar and melodious chirping sound.