

Golden 24

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Grasshopper and the Gourd (Part 1)

When Zhuang Rui was only 5 or 6 years old and still living in the old family house, his favorite game was cricket fighting. Back then, three or five friends would often go late at night with flashlights to catch crickets among the broken bricks and tiles near the Xima Terrace, and then have a competition to see who could catch the most crickets.

Urbanization in those days wasn't as extensive as it is now, with buildings everywhere. Plus, the old house was located at the foot of Yunlong Mountain, inhabited by all sorts of birds and insects. Every night, the sounds of insects and birds filled the air. You could easily find a cricket or some other insect hidden under any stone you turned over.

Besides cricket fighting, after Zhuang Rui met Liu Chuan, the two also took a liking to raising crickets. In order to catch good crickets, the two often went to the vegetable gardens in the suburbs. They also often got a beating from Liu Chuan's father for bringing crickets to class to play with. However, at that time, having a bright green cricket with a loud chirping sound was undoubtedly a very prestigious thing among classmates.

Therefore, after hearing the rapid chirping just now, Zhuang Rui immediately recognized it as the chirping of a cricket. He was very surprised. He knew that most people played with crickets in the summer and autumn. Once winter came, most crickets would die from the cold. The crickets that Zhuang Rui raised when he was a child never survived to the New Year. However, the cricket he heard now was loud and strong, obviously not the kind that would die in the winter.

Following the sound, Zhuang Rui discovered that the cricket's chirping was coming from Xiong Ge's arms. He couldn't help but ask in surprise, "Don't crickets usually die in winter? How come yours is chirping so loudly?"

"Hehe, I can tell you're not an expert at keeping crickets. The kind you're talking about is kept in a cage, of course they won't live long. My cricket is kept in a gourd, I keep it close to my body every day, so it's fine..."

As Xiong Ge explained with a smug look, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a cricket gourd that was entirely red with a hint of purple.

Through Xiong Ge's explanation, Zhuang Rui finally understood that what he had been doing before was not playing with crickets at all. Real good crickets can survive the winter, and some can even live for up to a year. However, there are many things to pay attention to. First, special attention should be paid to the temperature of crickets in winter. When the temperature is low, try not to let them chirp. During the day, put them in a gourd and keep them in your bosom so that the temperature can be raised by the body temperature. Second, although crickets like to chirp, each time should not exceed half an hour, and no more than three times a day, otherwise it will shorten the life of the cricket.

Listening to the crickets chirping in front of him, Zhuang Rui felt as if he had returned to his childhood, and couldn't help but say to Xiong Ge, "Can I see this?"

"Take it, but don't leave it out for too long, low temperatures are bad for the crickets..." Xiong Ge was quite generous, handing the cricket gourd in his hand to Zhuang Rui.

The moment Zhuang Rui held the gourd in his hand, he felt a warmth in his palm. Examining it closely, he estimated the gourd to be about 10 centimeters tall, with a large central section, roughly seven or eight centimeters. The hollowed-out core looked like it was carved from jade, exquisitely crafted. Its outer skin was a deep, serene reddish-brown, exuding a gentle, aged charm. Zhuang Rui, having recently studied antiques extensively, knew this was a sign of a thick, rich patina.

The cricket inside the gourd seemed to sense the drop in temperature and stopped chirping. As Zhuang Rui examined the cricket gourd, he habitually released the spiritual energy from his eyes.

"Huh?"

Just as the spiritual energy came into contact with the cricket gourd, a familiar feeling appeared in Zhuang Rui's eyes. Spiritual energy, that's right, a faint aura merged into the spiritual energy in Zhuang Rui's eyes. Although the aura was faint and the increase in spiritual energy after returning to his eyes was very small, Zhuang Rui could still clearly sense that this cricket gourd obviously contained spiritual energy.

"Brother Xiong, right? I like this thing. Are you selling it? I used to play with this a lot when I was a kid. It feels nice to see it now. If you're willing to sell, just name your price."

Zhuang Rui first returned the cricket gourd to Xiong Ge, then, without changing his expression, pretended to be very casual and asked. He knew that everyone who could survive in this market was shrewd. If you showed even the slightest interest in the item, they would immediately exaggerate its value to the skies.

Although the spiritual energy contained in this cricket gourd is far less than that of the couplet and manuscript, it is still the third spiritual object that Zhuang Rui has encountered. If the price is not too high, Zhuang Rui would still like to buy it.

"I'm just playing with this myself, not selling it."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Xiong Ge showed a troubled expression. He wasn't being stubborn this time; he had been raising this cricket for almost half a year, carrying it with him every day and carefully feeding it various insects. He had developed a strong attachment to it, and hearing Zhuang Rui's words, he was truly reluctant to part with it.

Zhuang Rui, unwilling to give up, urged, "Brother Xiong, I really like this. Could you part with it? You can name your price. If it's right, I'll buy it. It's the New Year, so you're having a lucky start, and I've also found something I like. We're all happy, right?"

"Brother Xiong, you can raise another one after the start of autumn. This brother likes it, so let him have it." The monkey next to him chimed in. In his opinion, a cricket was only worth ten or eight yuan. Since this person wanted to buy it, why not just sell it?

Xiong Ge's expression changed, and he seemed to be tempted. He had bought the cricket for 20 yuan half a year ago, and the cricket gourd was something he had picked up from a street stall when he stayed at his uncle's house in Tianjin the year before last, which only cost him about ten yuan.

Thinking of this, Xiong Ge's expression turned serious, and he said to Zhuang Rui, "This cricket of mine is top-quality. You heard its chirping just now; it was incredibly loud. I'm not bragging, but in this entire market, no one who keeps crickets can compare to me. Since you really like it, I'll give you an offer. If you think it's reasonable, I'll sell it to you..."

"Go ahead and say it," Zhuang Rui replied.

"One thousand yuan, no bargaining. I'll sell you the cricket gourd along with it. This gourd is a really good one. The old man at the 'Jiyaxuan' shop over there offered me 800 yuan yesterday, but I couldn't sell it to him."

Xiong Ge gritted his teeth and said, half of what he said was true and half false. The owner of the antique shop "Jiyaxuan" did offer him a price for this gourd yesterday, but it was only 100 yuan. Now that it was in Xiong Ge's mouth, it had become 700 yuan.

After considering it for a moment, Zhuang Rui decided to buy it. After all, this was the third item he had encountered that could increase spiritual energy since his eyes began to generate spiritual energy. A thousand yuan wasn't a lot of money, and he could afford to lose it all.

"Alright, Xiong-ge, since you're willing to part with it, a thousand yuan it is. Take the money, but the item is mine..."

Just as Xiong Ge and Monkey were scrutinizing Zhuang Rui's expression, Zhuang Rui spoke up. He took out his wallet from his pocket, counted out a thousand yuan, and handed it to Xiong Ge. He then took the cricket gourd and, just like Xiong Ge had done before, carefully put it away. Xiong Ge seemed reluctant to part with it. He took the money, counted it casually, and put it in his pocket, but his eyes kept glancing at the spot where Zhuang Rui had placed the cricket.

Touching the cricket gourd in his arms through his clothes, Zhuang Rui slowly walked towards Liu Chuan's pet shop, feeling somewhat happy. After all, he had found an item with spiritual energy, although the amount of spiritual energy he absorbed was rather small, it was better than nothing.