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Chapter Thirty-Nine: Appraising Treasures (Part Four)

Hearing Manager Lü's words, Zhuang Rui felt much more at ease. The Guanyin wooden carving was most likely a fake. Although his primary goal in participating in this treasure appraisal event was to find items that could replenish his spiritual energy, he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of everyone, and he certainly didn't want to pay for this group to go on a lavish meal at the Mingdu Grand Hotel.

Not satisfied with just absorbing a little spiritual energy from those chairs, Zhuang Rui was told by Manager Lü to keep looking, which suited him perfectly. He didn't refuse and picked up the second item in front of him.

The second item on the table was a snuff bottle, very small and exquisite, only seven or eight centimeters tall. If it were hidden in the palm of your hand, it would be hard to notice unless you looked closely. In the antique knowledge that Zhuang Rui had been cramming on a few days ago, he happened to see an article about snuff bottles in the miscellaneous category. He knew that this thing was somewhat similar to the cricket gourd. In the beginning, they both had their special functions, but later they became objects for some people to play with.

Speaking of snuff bottles, we must first talk about snuff. Snuff is made from high-quality tobacco through processes such as drying, fermentation, and filtration. It has the effects of relieving pain and eliminating fatigue, so it became popular among the royal families and nobles of various European countries in the 14th century. Later, at the end of the 16th century, Western missionaries introduced it to China.

From the Kangxi Emperor onwards, almost all Qing Dynasty emperors were fond of snuff. However, the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors were even more fond of snuff bottles than of snuff itself. Therefore, the production of imperial snuff bottles continued uninterrupted until the fall of the Qing Dynasty. During these centuries, the craftsmanship of snuff bottle making greatly developed, resulting in a plethora of exquisite pieces.

Among snuff bottles, the one with the greatest influence in later generations is the inside-painted snuff bottle. There is a little story behind this. It is said that a minor official from another province went to the capital on business and stayed at a temple. Because he had no money to buy more snuff, he used a snuff stick to pick out the remaining snuff stuck to the inside of the bottle. As a result, he drew many marks on the inside of the bottle. This scene was seen by a thoughtful monk in the temple. He then dipped a

bamboo stick into ink, inserted it into the transparent glass bottle, and painted on the inside wall. Thus, the inside-painted snuff bottle came into being.

Folk legends have shrouded snuff bottles in a mystical aura, and the exquisite inside paintings have made many people fall in love with snuff bottles. In fact, inside-painted snuff bottles are made by craftsmen who use iron sand and corundum to shake and rub the inside of the snuff bottle, making its inner wall milky white and frosted, delicate and not slippery, with a texture even close to that of Xuan paper. Thus, they can paint freely, and it is not as mysterious as people imagine.

After the reign of Emperor Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty, inside-painted snuff bottles reached their peak, producing renowned inside-painting masters such as Zhou Leyuan, Ma Shaoxuan, and Ye Zhongzhi.

Originally an imported product, snuff unexpectedly led to a significant development in snuff bottle craftsmanship after its introduction to China. Furthermore, Chinese snuff bottles became wildly popular in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming highly prized artifacts exchanged as gifts and collected by royalty and nobility.

The snuff bottle in Zhuang Rui's hand was a miniature vase-shaped, oval-shaped object. The top and bottom were only the size of a little finger, while the body was half the width of a palm. This snuff bottle was an enamelware, painted with two Western figures wearing top hats and holding canes. The whole scene was brightly colored and realistically shaped, without a trace of age. If Zhuang Rui had seen this object in an arts and crafts store, he would definitely have thought it was mass-produced. However, after seeing the wood carving earlier, Zhuang Rui had little confidence in his judgment.

Alright, stop being so coy and just use your spiritual energy to look. Zhuang Rui's brown-tinted glasses effectively blocked other people's view. He focused his attention and his spiritual energy instantly reached the snuff bottle.

There was hope! When the spiritual energy passed through the glass snuff bottle, Zhuang Rui immediately felt a cool breeze merging into the spiritual energy in his eyes. Although the breeze was very weak, only slightly stronger than the spiritual energy in the chair earlier, Zhuang Rui was still very satisfied. Even a small mosquito is still meat.

As Zhuang Rui placed the snuff bottle on the table and was about to speak, he suddenly remembered the spiritual energy he had absorbed from Liu's gourd in Sanhe yesterday. The amount was almost the same as the spiritual energy he had absorbed from this snuff bottle. However, the spiritual energy he had absorbed from the couplet the first time was far greater than these two times, not to mention the

spiritual energy he had absorbed from the manuscript. Compared to the latter, it was simply incomparable.

"Could it be that the spiritual energy contained in books is greater than that in other objects?"

Since the spiritual energy appeared in his eyes, Zhuang Rui has received four replenishments from external objects, including this one. Obviously, the spiritual energy absorbed from the couplets and manuscripts was far greater than the latter two. Is there any necessary connection between them? Zhuang Rui lowered his head and began to think. For a moment, he forgot about his own situation. Others were still waiting for him to give his opinion on this snuff bottle.

"Wooden head, wooden head, you're asleep, what are you spacing out for..."

Liu Chuan's voice rang in Zhuang Rui's ears, startling him from his reverie. He looked up and found Xu Wei sitting next to him talking animatedly about the snuff bottle he had just been looking at.

"If this were an object from several hundred years ago, the colors would definitely not be so vibrant. So I think this thing should be a modern craft. But this is just my personal opinion. Let's hear Mr. Zhuang's opinion. Judging from Mr. Zhuang's thoughtful look just now, he must have a different view on this snuff bottle."

These were the words Zhuang Rui heard from Xu Wei after he regained consciousness. When he looked up, he saw Xu Wei's smug expression and felt inexplicably irritated. He wanted to punch that pretty boy's face. He hadn't provoked him, so why did Xu Wei always bring him up? With this feeling of disgust, Zhuang Rui's words became unpleasant.

"Mr. Xu is truly learned and talented. Not only is he well-versed in jewelry, but he is also quite accomplished in miscellaneous items such as wood carving and snuff bottles. However, I think this snuff bottle is genuine, and its age should be between the Kangxi and Qianlong periods. Hehe, don't worry, whether I'm talking nonsense or Mr. Xu is just spouting off, we'll find out soon enough."

When Zhuang Rui was halfway through his sentence, he saw Xu Wei trying to interrupt him again, but this time he didn't give him the chance. After finishing his sentence in one breath, he pointed to the last jade pendant and said to Manager Lü, "I can't tell the price of this item, so I won't embarrass myself by showing it. Let Brother Song and Brother Wang do it next."

This wasn't Zhuang Rui being modest; rather, his spiritual energy wasn't yet capable of breaking down and seeing through jade-like items. With just his eyesight, he couldn't even discern where the jade pendant came from, let alone authenticate its origin or authenticity.

Manager Lü looked at Zhuang Rui and laughed, a laugh that was somewhat meaningful. He was becoming more and more interested in this young man. Others might not know, but he knew his own possessions very well. Zhuang Rui had guessed both of his items correctly, which was something that could not be achieved by luck alone.