

I. Dynasty 34

Chapter 34: Wine & Poetry

Since ancient times, drinking wine and composing poetry have been the common afflictions of scholars. Wang Shijie and his companions, being mediocre scholars of the third tier, naturally fell into this category.

Moreover, Wang Shijie and his friends styled themselves as the “Four Great Talents.” In the past, Wang Shijie had even wanted to include Xiao Ming in this group, elevating it to the “Five Great Talents” with Xiao Ming as their leader. Truly, his face was thick enough to make such a suggestion.

However, the previous Xiao Ming had no interest in poetry or books, preferring instead archery and hunting. He scoffed at the idea of being labeled a “talent” and thus never accepted the empty title.

But since they were self-proclaimed talents, drinking wine and composing poetry were part of the routine. Even in Xiao Ming’s absence, the four of them often engaged in poetic competitions during their family banquets, partly to show off their literary skills and partly to attract attention, much like modern young men learning the guitar to impress others during the spring season.

“Your Highness, I humbly offer my clumsy attempt. Today, I shall compose a poem inspired by the snow: ‘The wind god carries the snow, the cloud mother spits cold, the earth is damp with frost, and the door god gazes at the sparrow’s perch,’” Wang Shijie recited slowly, hands clasped behind his back like a literary giant.

At this moment, Lü Luo also came upstairs. The distilled liquor from the side hall had been moved to the storeroom, and the distiller had been put away. Bored, she had come upstairs to relieve Li San.

Hearing Wang Shijie's doggerel, she couldn't help but cover her mouth and chuckle. "With door gods and earth spirits, is this a prayer for a sacrificial ceremony, Young Master Wang?"

Wang Shijie turned and saw Lü Luo. The alcohol had gone to his head, and seeing Lü Luo as fresh and beautiful as a lotus on clear water, he was momentarily entranced, staring at her intently.

"Ahem!" Xiao Ming coughed at just the right moment, startling Wang Shijie back to reality. He said, "Miss Lü Luo, you flatter me. It's just a clumsy poem."

However, in front of a beauty, any man has the desire to show off. Confident that he was far more talented than Xiao Ming, Wang Shijie couldn't resist dragging Xiao Ming down to make himself look better. He said, "Your Highness, my poem has made Miss Lü Luo laugh. Why don't you compose a poem for us to admire?"

Xiao Ming took a small sip of wine. He knew exactly what Wang Shijie was up to. Having spent five or six years in a modern office, he was well-versed in office politics.

However, when it came to composing poetry, he couldn't compare to these scholars who had spent their lives studying for the imperial exams. Things like parallelism and rhyme had long been forgotten.

But standing on the shoulders of countless literary giants from the tech library, just as he had with the technologies he had imparted, why should he strain his brain to come up with a poem? That would be a waste of brain cells.

Now that Wang Shijie was determined to make a fool of him, he couldn't be blamed. He thought for a moment, and a flood of ancient poems flashed through his mind. He recited:

“Qingzhou’s fine wine, fragrant with tulip,

Served in jade bowls, glows like amber.

If the host can make his guests drunk,

They’ll forget where their homeland lies.”

This poem was adapted from Li Bai’s “A Guest’s Song,” but since the original poem mentioned Lanling, which would be inappropriate here, Xiao Ming shamelessly changed it to Qingzhou, becoming a plagiarist for a moment.

After reciting the poem, Xiao Ming felt a twinge of guilt for stealing an ancient poet’s work. But then he remembered he was in a completely unrelated world and let it go.

However, when he looked up, he saw Wang Shijie and Lü Luo staring at him in shock, as if a polar bear had just seen a penguin.

Wang Shijie swallowed hard. Despite being drunk, he could still tell the difference between his doggerel and the masterpiece Xiao Ming had just recited. After a moment of stunned silence, he exclaimed, “A timeless masterpiece! Your Highness is truly a reincarnation of the Literary Star. I could never hope to match you.”

“Brother Wang, you flatter me. It’s just a small poem. Come, let’s drink more,” Xiao Ming said, pouring Wang Shijie another cup of wine.

Lü Luo, having been in Chang’an, a gathering place for scholars, had heard many poems. The one Xiao Ming had just recited was undoubtedly of high quality. She said, “Your Highness, you are too modest. If this poem were heard in Chang’an, even the top scholars might not be able to match it.”

“Miss Lü Luo is right. Your Highness’s poem is truly extraordinary. I believe it also reflects Your Highness’s current mood. Drinking Qingzhou’s fine wine and having lived here for five years, it’s only natural to feel nostalgic for Chang’an,” Wang Shijie said.

Li Bai’s poem indeed expressed the sorrow of being far from home, and Wang Shijie’s interpretation was not wrong. However, Xiao Ming didn’t share the sentiment in the poem. He was quite content where he was.

But to keep the conversation going, he said, “Brother Wang is quite right. Let’s not dwell on it. Let’s drink.”

The two of them drank merrily, and after two bowls, Wang Shijie finally couldn’t hold his liquor anymore, collapsing onto the table, completely unconscious.

Xiao Ming, having only drunk three bowls, was slightly tipsy. Seeing Wang Shijie out cold, he said to Lü Luo, “Have Li San take Young Master Wang back.”

Lü Luo acknowledged the order and went downstairs. Shortly after, Li San came up and helped Wang Shijie downstairs.

At this moment, Ziyuan came upstairs and said, "Your Highness, you've had quite a bit to drink. Would you like to rest?"

Xiao Ming waved his hand. "No need. Come, the view here is quite nice. Let's enjoy the snowy scenery of Qingzhou together."

Lü Luo chimed in, "Sister, His Highness just composed a poem on the spot. It was truly breathtaking."

"Don't be ridiculous. His Highness can compose poetry?" Ziyuan tugged at Lü Luo's sleeve, thinking she was joking.

Lü Luo pouted and recited:

"Qingzhou's fine wine, fragrant with tulip,

Served in jade bowls, glows like amber.

If the host can make his guests drunk,

They'll forget where their homeland lies."

Ziyuan listened, stunned for a moment before regaining her composure. She turned to Xiao Ming and said, "Your Highness, did you really compose this?"

Xiao Ming blushed but had to say, "Of course. Do you doubt my literary skills?"

"Not at all. It's just that I never expected Your Highness to have such talent. When I was by Her Majesty's side, she often said Your Highness was unlearned. But now it seems that during your years in Qingzhou, you must have studied diligently," Ziyuan said. Then she added, "However, I think this poem could be improved slightly."

"Oh? Let's hear it," Xiao Ming said, intrigued.

"The line 'They'll forget where their homeland lies' could be changed to 'They'll forget that their homeland is elsewhere.' This would enhance the poem's expression of longing for Chang'an," Ziyuan suggested thoughtfully.

Xiao Ming's eyes lit up. "Hmm, that could work, though it might not necessarily be better than the original." As he spoke, he observed Ziyuan. Normally, given the strict hierarchy, Ziyuan wouldn't dare to casually suggest changes to Xiao Ming's poem, as it would be disrespectful. Her bringing it up now must have been deliberate.

Ziyuan explained, "It's not that I presume to have literary talent, but I feel Your Highness's poem is perfectly suited for 'Drunken Qingzhou.' If Your Highness's poem were inscribed on 'Drunken Qingzhou,' and word reached the Emperor, he might be moved by Your Highness's homesickness and show compassion. Perhaps..."

“Perhaps the silver will come rolling in. Excellent!” Xiao Ming clapped his hands and laughed.

Ziyuan felt a wave of helplessness. The Prince of Qi was now obsessed with money. What she had meant was that the Emperor might be moved by familial affection to allow the prince to return for a visit.