

Rise 103

Chapter 103: A Chance Encounter at Taihu Lake

Early the next morning, at dawn, as the first light broke, Zhu Pingan quietly gathered his belongings as usual, slinging a cloth bag over his shoulder and carrying a black wooden board as he headed out.

The young woman on the bed instinctively opened her drowsy eyes, already accustomed to being awakened at this hour by the late-sleeping, early-rising boy. He thought he was being quiet, but he didn't realize how sensitive someone seasoned by the trials of the martial world could be.

Normally, there weren't many people by Taihu Lake at this hour. However, when Zhu Pingan arrived at the lake, he saw an old man with a white beard fishing by the water. The elder was seated precisely on the large rock Zhu Pingan had often used for practicing his calligraphy.

This old man must be troubled by something, Zhu Pingan thought. Rising so early to fish must be his way of seeking solace. Not wanting to disturb the elder, Zhu Pingan decided to leave him in peace. Taihu Lake was vast—surely, there would be other suitable rocks for his practice. Quietly, he skirted around the fisherman and walked along the lakeshore. Before long, he found a scattered cluster of stones by the water. Selecting a larger one to sit beside, he placed his black wooden board, brush, and bamboo water container on a lower stone and began his morning calligraphy practice.

As Zhu Pingan was engrossed in his writing, carefully dipping his brush in water to form characters on the black board, he suddenly felt the presence of someone breathing nearby. Looking up, he saw the old fisherman standing in front of him, watching intently.

This elder must really be preoccupied, Zhu Pingan thought. Otherwise, why abandon fishing to come watch him?

"Young man, how many years have you been practicing calligraphy this way?" the old man asked, holding his fishing rod. His curiosity was piqued by the sight of a boy diligently practicing calligraphy with water on a black board at such an early hour. Now that Zhu Pingan had noticed him, the old man stroked his beard and asked with a smile.

"Since I started my basic education, about eight years or so," Zhu Pingan paused his writing, thought for a moment, and replied.

"And why do you practice calligraphy in this manner?" the old man asked, intrigued.

"When I was young, my family was poor. Practicing calligraphy this way saved a lot of ink, paper, and brushes, sparing my parents some hard-earned money. Over time, I grew to enjoy this method of practicing," Zhu Pingan explained casually, without any hint of concealment.

"I see," the old man nodded, his expression showing even more approval.

After this brief exchange, Zhu Pingan resumed his practice, while the old man found a stone nearby and sat down. Watching Zhu Pingan write seemed more interesting to him than fishing.

Zhu Pingan remained composed, fully focused on his calligraphy, as if the old man wasn't there at all.

When the sun rose, casting its light over the earth, Zhu Pingan packed away his black board and brush. He then retrieved a handwritten book from his satchel and prepared to study it while seated on the stone.

"Young man, your calligraphy has already reached a solid foundation. You're only a step away from true mastery. However, if you continue practicing like this, that final step may remain out of reach," the old man remarked regretfully. Seeing that Zhu Pingan had just finished packing his tools and hadn't yet started reading, the elder took the opportunity to speak without interrupting.

Such a diligent and sincere youth—perhaps he could lend him a helping hand.

Hearing this, Zhu Pingan's eyes brightened slightly. This elder clearly understood calligraphy. Lately, Zhu Pingan had been feeling stuck in his practice, progressing only slightly each day but unable to overcome what felt like an insurmountable barrier. Now, seeing the old man's confidence and apparent willingness to assist, Zhu Pingan decided to seize the opportunity without hesitation.

"Please, Elder, do not hesitate to offer your guidance," Zhu Ping'an stood up, clasped his hands, and bowed.

The fishing elder waved his hand, signaling Zhu Ping'an to sit and chat. Stroking his beard, he smiled and said, "It's not guidance, merely shared experience."

"Practicing calligraphy emphasizes copying model scripts, tracing, direct observation, grid tracing, and reproducing from memory. To excel, you must not only immerse yourself in the models but also transcend them," the fishing elder said in a gentle tone, speaking from rich experience. "I can see, young man, that you

have already transcended the models. However, this is just the beginning. To truly master calligraphy, what you've done is still not enough."

Zhu Ping'an sat nearby, holding a book and listening attentively. Realizing the elder was about to share a crucial point, he leaned forward slightly, his ears fully attuned.

"Practicing calligraphy through imitation only scratches the surface. The key lies in studying and comprehending the essence of the model scripts—that's where the soul and spirit reside. True masters of calligraphy cherish reading and understanding model scripts. Cao Mengde of the Three Kingdoms and Ouyang Xun of the Tang Dynasty were exemplary in this regard.

"When reading model scripts, start from every dot and stroke, carefully examining and pondering the ancients' pen techniques, character structure, composition, momentum, and charm. You must extract the essence—its form, spirit, and emotion. When it enters your eyes, falls into your heart, it can flow through your hands onto the paper," the fishing elder explained, his tone earnest, as if teaching a younger generation.

Listening, Zhu Ping'an felt as though a profound enlightenment washed over him. The insurmountable cliff before him now seemed to have a stone staircase, ready to be climbed.

"Thank you for your invaluable teachings, Elder," Zhu Ping'an stood again and bowed deeply.

The elder, smiling warmly, accepted the gesture. He then took a yellowed booklet from his robe and handed it to Zhu Ping'an, saying, "This is a reproduction of Zhang Jizhi's calligraphy of Du Fu's verses from the Song

Dynasty. Though it is a reproduction, it closely resembles the original. Since fate has brought us together, I gift this to you."

Zhu Ping'an stepped back, shook his head gently, and said, "You have kept this book close to you, indicating it is something you cherish deeply. I have already been greatly blessed by your teachings and dare not take something you hold dear."

The fishing elder admired Zhu Ping'an's ability to resist temptation without hesitation. His respect deepened, and he insisted on gifting the booklet to Zhu Ping'an.

"A fine blade belongs with a hero, and a treasured script with one who appreciates it."

"One should not refuse a gift from an elder," the elder added.

Despite Zhu Ping'an's repeated refusals, the elder persisted. Seeing a trace of displeasure on the elder's face, Zhu Ping'an finally had no choice but to accept it. Bowing deeply again, he expressed his gratitude.

"Thank you, Elder, for this generous gift. I assure you it will not be dishonored. Oh, may I ask your name? Your great kindness, Zhu Ping'an of Xiahe will remember forever."

The fishing elder waved his hand and smiled, "Why must we know each other's names? Young man, focus on your studies."

With that, the fishing elder smiled, carried his fishing rod, and departed gracefully.