

Rise 111

Chapter 111: The Female Scholar of the School

The wind and rain lashed outside Zui Jun Tower, while inside, the atmosphere was as charming as a peach blossom.

Zhu Ping'an, drenched like a drowned rat, was pulled into Zui Jun Tower by the villager, clutching a broken black wooden board and carrying a cloth bag slung over his shoulder.

At first glance, he saw the scholars and beauties inside the tower chasing each other and laughing. Looking up, he could also see some elegantly dressed women on the upper floors, either sitting alone by the railing or chatting and laughing in small groups. The laughter of the young ladies blended with the sound of silk and bamboo instruments in the air.

Zhu Ping'an, drenched like a drowned rat, was completely out of place in the tower, standing out in stark contrast.

"Oh, who's this sentimental young master, rushing here in the wind and rain without even an umbrella?"

"Hee hee hee, that's the sentimental young master, clearly a down-and-out poor scholar..."

"He's so young and already out playing, who knows if he's of any use..."

The women on the upper floor, leaning against the railing and gazing into the distance, were the first to spot Zhu Ping'an, drenched like a drowned rat. One by one, they waved their delicate hands, pointing and whispering, and then all of them covered their mouths, letting out a series of silver bell-like laughs.

The young ladies' laughter drew the attention of others inside the tower. The well-dressed gentlemen glanced at Zhu Ping'an, noting his drenched appearance, the black wooden board under his arm, and his simple clothes. They couldn't help but laugh. This person dares to come to Zui Jun Tower looking like this? He probably doesn't even have enough for three cups of wine in his pocket! They soon lost interest and resumed discussing life and ideals with the beautiful women in their arms.

The red lanterns and the wine-filled atmosphere reeked of decay.

Zhu Ping'an gently shook his head and followed the villager upstairs. The villager seemed quite anxious, not allowing Zhu Ping'an a moment to catch his breath or squeeze the water out of his clothes, instead pulling him upstairs directly.

The upstairs was another world, decorated with even more charm. The women up there were much more beautiful than those downstairs, and the men upstairs had far better taste.

As soon as Zhu Ping'an arrived upstairs, he heard a voice filled with emotion calling out from a distance:

"Zhi'er, my family's prized steed, your uncle has been waiting for you for so long!"

Zhu Ping'an looked up and saw his uncle pushing through a crowd of richly dressed people. Upon seeing Zhu Ping'an, his uncle's face lit up with joy, arms open wide, greeting him with an unprecedented warmth.

It was certain to be trouble.

That was Zhu Ping'an's first instinct. This was no empty rumor—every time his uncle was this warm, misfortune followed. "My family's prized steed"? Are you speaking honestly? Have you forgotten the oft-repeated words of experience you always say?

"Brother Wang, thank you for your trouble." His uncle quickly walked over, bowed deeply to the villager in front of Zhu Ping'an.

Behind Zhu Ping'an's uncle stood another villager and his uncle's overweight friend. When they saw Zhu Ping'an, they looked at him as if he were their savior.

"Since you're here, then make sure to compose this poem properly. Don't ruin our female Scholar's eyes with those random, messy lines."

"Exactly, our female Scholar isn't someone just anyone can meet..."

"Boasting about having once passed the provincial exam to bring our female Scholar here, but the poems you've composed are just an eyesore..."

A commotion broke out in the distance, and then several people came over, surrounding Zhu Ping'an and his uncle, escorting them into a group of richly dressed individuals. These people were mostly scholars or young masters from wealthy merchant families, passionate about this field. Some familiar faces from the "Exquisite Poetry Gathering" could be seen among them.

This group of people was gathered around a high platform. At the top sat an elegant young girl, veiled, but her captivating eyes were visible, drawing in the onlookers. Her aura was as graceful as ink, and in her delicate hands was an ancient zither, exuding an alluring yet subtle sense of temptation.

So, this was the "female Scholar" they had been talking about. Zhu Ping'an merely gave her a cursory glance before losing interest. He instead focused on the inkstone in front of everyone—a desk with brushes, ink, paper, and inkstones scattered about. In one corner of the desk were some sheets of incense-scented rice paper with poems written on them, and the top one clearly displayed his uncle's lines: "The female scholar is as delicate as a beauty, a celestial fairy descending to earth."

His uncle's poetry was... quite something.

From the chattering voices around him, Zhu Ping'an soon understood the situation.

It turned out that after the results of the provincial exam were announced yesterday, his uncle and others had been quite disheartened. They decided to come here for some drinks and lighthearted conversation to

ease their frustrations. They had called upon some familiar women to accompany them, and for a while, everything was going smoothly with laughter and wine flowing. However, it turned out that today was the day of the monthly public reception of Zui Jun Tower's famed courtesan, Mo'er.

Scholars, young masters, and rich gentlemen crowded forward, eager for a glimpse of her beauty, hoping for a chance to bask in her charm. Though Mo'er's public reception was merely a time for her to play the zither and chat with guests, this was enough to stir the crowd. Those with money spent lavishly, and those with talent composed poems on the spot, all hoping to earn a chance to spend time with Mo'er.

Mo'er had a well-known reputation for her talent, which was reflected in her stage name, Mo'er. People admired and adored her so much that they began calling her "the female scholar." She always wore a veil when receiving guests, without exception. This only fueled the curiosity of the men, making her immensely popular.

Seeing Mo'er in her veil stirred up the passions of Zhu Ping'an's uncle and his companions. The fact that she wore a veil only added to her allure, and they couldn't help but imagine how breathtaking she would be without it.

After a few drinks, Zhu Ping'an's uncle, filled with bravado, decided to make a bold declaration. Though he had no wealth, he had talent—and in his opinion, his talents far surpassed those of his 13-year-old nephew. With a loud boast, he proclaimed that his group was more talented than Zhu Ping'an, who had recently topped the provincial exam. He even went so far as to claim that if they composed a poem, it would make Mo'er, the renowned courtesan, willingly remove her veil.

The crowd, already eager to see Mo'er's face, was intrigued by his words. When Mo'er smiled mischievously and agreed to their challenge, the excitement among the men grew even more intense.

Zhu Ping'an's uncle quickly composed a poem, but it was far from impressive. Even the onlookers, who were already predisposed to admire any poetry, were unimpressed by the poor quality. His boast about surpassing the provincial exam's top scholar was quickly ridiculed.

Unfazed, his uncle continued, "I may not be good with alcohol, but what I'm saying is true. My nephew, the top scholar today, is my own flesh and blood. I've only tutored him for a short time, but look at the result—he's become the provincial top scholar. If I had taken the county and provincial exams, he might not have had such luck."

Despite the ridicule, his uncle spoke with the confidence of someone accustomed to attention, and his speech was delivered with the air of a seasoned scholar.

At this point, his uncle's boast also included the other men from their hometown, hoping to share in the glory. The crowd was now eager to see Mo'er's true face, as it seemed she had finally spoken. This rare opportunity should not be wasted, and so the village men were encouraged to write poetry. Of course, they too played the same card, blaming their poor poetic efforts on not being able to handle their alcohol.

However, the crowd would not relent, insisting that Mo'er had spoken, and they weren't about to let it go without seeing her face. The pressure mounted, and it became clear that Zhu Ping'an's uncle and his companions were running out of options. Frustrated and desperate, the group resorted to insulting the other towns and regions in an attempt to salvage some dignity.

As the situation grew more awkward for his uncle and the others, it was clear that Zhu Ping'an would have to step in to smooth things over. His uncle and the villagers, caught in their own pride, pushed Zhu Ping'an into the spotlight.