

Rise 115

Chapter 115: On the Road

The ancient carriage and horse travel was somewhat similar to today's transportation companies. The next day, as the sky grew light, Zhu Ping'an left the guest room, shouldered his bag, and headed straight to the carriage and horse company.

Upon arriving at the carriage company, he handed over the carved horse token he received the day before to the company manager, who then assigned him to a carriage. A carriage typically held four people, and there was already a corpulent merchant aboard. When he saw Zhu Ping'an boarding with his bag, he kindly offered to help and chatted cheerfully with him. After a brief introduction, when the merchant learned that Zhu Ping'an was a scholar who headed to Anqing Prefecture for the imperial examination, a sense of respect appeared on his round face.

After a while, another young man, dressed decently and holding a folding fan, boarded the carriage. He looked like someone who had overindulged in alcohol.

Once aboard, the young man started complaining. First, he grumbled that Zhu Ping'an's bag was too large and took up too much space. Then, he complained about the strong odor coming from the corpulent merchant.

Before the fourth passenger arrived, the caravan set off. There were five carriages in total, carrying around seventeen or eighteen passengers. Each carriage had a coachman, and the entire caravan was accompanied by five strong men who also served as guards and occasionally as substitutes for the coachmen.

After the carriage set off, the young man in decent attire began to complain again, saying that the carriage company had only provided one horse per carriage, whereas his family always used two or even three horses to pull their carriages.

The merchant simply smiled in a laid-back manner, his eyes showing a hint of disdain.

"The emperor rides with six horses, the feudal lords with five, ministers with four, the officials with three, the scholars with two, and commoners with one. Two or three horses? Who do you think you are?"

Zhu Ping'an just slightly curled the corners of his mouth, looking every bit the honest scholar.

In ancient times, carriage suspension was poorly designed, and the roads were uneven, so the carriage swayed a lot. This made Zhu Ping'an abandon his plan to read and instead closed his eyes, quietly reflecting on the poems and books he had read.

It's said that merchants are skilled in charming words. Within less than an hour of travel, the corpulent merchant and the overly drunken young man were already chatting away, mostly about women, alcohol, and pleasures. Just like in modern times, men often have easy topics of conversation about these things.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't particularly old-fashioned. Having experienced much in the modern world, he didn't feel any disgust.

The carriage traveled during the day and rested at night, with about an hour's break for meals.

The carriage company provided simple food, which you could buy for a small price. For just five copper coins, you could get two flatbreads and a bowl of meat soup, enough to fill your stomach. After eating, Zhu Ping'an sat on the grass beside the carriage, asked the coachman, and learned that they would rest for another half hour before continuing their journey.

Since it was still early, Zhu Ping'an took out a book from his crossbody bag and began to read slowly.

"Hey, still reading? What's the use of reading? It can't feed you or make you money. Look at how you're dressed, you probably don't have much money. Truly, a scholar is good for nothing."

The young man in the carriage, with a face full of excess alcohol, seemed to have a deep disdain for scholars. Seeing Zhu Ping'an sitting on the grass, leaning against the wheel and reading, he couldn't help but sneer.

Zhu Ping'an shifted his gaze from the book to the young man, glanced at him, and casually hummed in response, before lowering his head to read again.

The young man, who had overindulged in alcohol, seemed surprised by the young scholar's indifferent response. He thought to himself, Is this kid so dumb from reading that he didn't even react? Wasn't my scornful attitude obvious enough?

"Near my mansion, there's a poor scholar. Do you know what a scholar is? Just by looking at you, I can tell you're far from being a scholar. Even if you manage to become one, what good will it do you? If you don't have money to build connections, all you'll have is a scholar's air. What else can you do? Those who pass the

imperial examination are from prominent, wealthy families. The imperial examination is just a scam to deceive you poor scholars."

"What's the use of reading... what's the use..."

The young man continued to criticize Zhu Ping'an, full of resentment towards scholars. He seemed like a modern-day version of the incessantly nagging monk Tang Seng from Journey to the West. The corpulent merchant, who was resting nearby, tried to intervene twice, but couldn't stop him. It was like the Monkey King in The Monkey King's Box, dealing with the nagging advice not to damage the flowers and plants—just like the modern-day "Hundred Yuan Brother" who nags without giving anything in return. It made it hard for Zhu Ping'an to continue reading.

Thus, Zhu Ping'an raised his head, quietly looked at him, and slowly spoke:

"Amidst the thousands of worldly pleasures, my lord, you may walk on, while I will toast to the peach blossoms with wine. Let gold, jade, and fine steeds abound, but they cannot compare to the red beans and cinnabar between my brows."

The young man was stunned, not understanding the meaning.

You would be puzzled too—this is the classical Chinese version of the modern saying, "Do your thing, I just want to quietly be a handsome man."

Zhu Ping'an gave him another glance, gently shook his head, and without giving him a chance to speak, continued:

"Although you have constantly belittled studying, mocking its usefulness, how can you hide your identity as a scholar?"

"Indeed, I am speaking of you. Look at your slightly darkened lips; you must have the habit of licking the pen tip with your lips when grinding ink and writing, right?"

"Your right sleeve is worn, likely from writing and reading, right?"

"You harbor such resentment toward studying, you must have failed miserably in this imperial examination."

"You both yearn for and resent the powerful aristocratic families; you must have come from humble origins. Hmm, perhaps you are quite fond of a certain young lady, but alas, the falling flowers have their intentions, yet the flowing water has no feelings. After your failure in the examination, your hopes have likely dwindled."

"You reek of alcohol; it seems you've been drowning your sorrows in drink. Hmm, there is a strong scent of perfume, faintly pungent, likely of low quality. You probably spent time recently with some lowly women of the streets, didn't you?"

"The three armies can lose their general, but a man cannot lose his resolve. Rise from where you fell, failure simply means coming back stronger."

With each sentence Zhu Ping'an spoke, the young man, who had overindulged in wine, became more and more dejected. By the end, he had shed his disguise and transformed from a proud young master into a disheartened, fallen scholar.

"Sigh, thirteen years of hard study, each year a failed attempt." The young man, overcome with despair, let out a long sigh, no trace of ambition left in him. "After failing again this year, I swore never to touch poetry or books again. I'll return home and sell myself to a wealthy family to make a living."

He was yet another victim of the imperial examination system, thought Zhu Ping'an, who couldn't help but remember all those scholars who had been disheartened and heartbroken when the exam results were posted. Since they had met, he couldn't just stand by and watch a scholar sell himself into servitude.

So, Zhu Ping'an stood up, closed the book, shook his head slightly, and said, "Though I am young, I understand that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and without small steps, one cannot reach the thousand-mile mark. Persistence always brings hope for success, while giving up guarantees failure."

The fallen scholar glanced at Zhu Ping'an, sighed, and said, "You are still young; this is just your first failed exam, how could you understand the pain of failing eight times?"

Zhu Ping'an turned his back, looking off into the distance, and calmly said:

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Burn the boats, and the 102 Qin passes will belong to Chu.

Hard-working people are never let down by heaven. Endure hardship and taste the bitterness, and three thousand Yue warriors can swallow Wu."

Upon hearing this, the disheartened young man seemed struck by lightning. He suddenly looked up at Zhu Ping'an and silently repeated the couplet he had just heard, his eyes once again shining with light.

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Burn the boats, and the 102 Qin passes will belong to Chu.

Hard-working people are never let down by heaven. Endure hardship and taste the bitterness, and three thousand Yue warriors can swallow Wu."

"Young brother, great talent. Though you failed this year, you will surely succeed in the future. I am not as talented, but I have learned from you. Hanging a beam and stabbing the thigh, I will return to Anqing and try again."

The fallen scholar's spirit had been revived, and he once again bowed deeply to Zhu Ping'an in gratitude.

"I am no great talent, just a collector of others' wisdom. I heard this from an elder named Pu Songling."

Zhu Ping'an smiled foolishly, waved his hand, and said with a serious expression.

"Then I must thank you, young brother, for your words of encouragement."

The man insisted on bowing once more in thanks.

After the carriage set off again, the atmosphere inside became harmonious.