

Rise 116

Chapter 116: Arriving Home

Along the way, the plump rich merchant and the failed scholar were successively sent off, and not long after arriving at Huaining County, only Zhu Ping'an remained in the carriage.

The closer he got to home, the more excited Zhu Ping'an became.

The caged bird longs for the old forest, and the fish in the pond yearns for its old deep. There is no place warmer than home, and no one warmer than family. The outside world is beautiful, but I must return home.

Upon reaching Kaoshan Town, Zhu Ping'an bid farewell to the cart and horses, slinging his travel bag over his shoulder. He wandered around the town for a short while, buying small gifts for his family. He bought a silver ear stud for his mother, a small jar of ten-year-old aged wine for his father, and a bag of high-quality tobacco for his grandfather...

After buying the items and carefully packing them into his travel bag, Zhu Ping'an set off towards the town's exit.

At the intersection outside Kaoshan Town, there was a strange ox cart. It was much longer and wider than an ordinary ox cart, with two rows of seats on top. The top was covered with a clean oilcloth, offering shelter from the rain and sun. In front of the cart, there was a large, strong black ox swishing its tail, with a big bell hanging around its neck.

The cart already had five people sitting in it. In front of the black ox, a bronze-colored, muscular man was holding a water basin, feeding water to the ox.

"Hey, Shouyi, do you see that boy coming over there? Isn't he your second son?" One of the older women on the cart, seeing Zhu Ping'an approaching from the distance, couldn't shake the feeling that he looked familiar, so she asked the man who was feeding the ox.

"Auntie, you're at it again. This is already the third time this month," the bronze-colored, muscular man said with a bitter smile. He continued feeding the ox salty water without lifting his head. He had already fallen for this trick twice, so there was no way he'd fall for it a third time. After the ox finished drinking, he still had to hurry home. If he got back late, his wife would be upset.

Zhu Ping'an immediately recognized his family's ox cart—it was too noticeable—so he walked in that direction with his travel bag on his back.

"Shouyi, Shouyi, it really is your second son! A few days ago, someone from the town came to your door beating drums and gongs, and this is your second son returning!" The older woman on the cart, watching Zhu Ping'an draw closer, became more and more convinced it was him. She excitedly reached out and patted the man feeding the ox on the shoulder.

"Auntie, stop it. Once the big black ox finishes drinking this water, I'll drive the cart and send everyone home," the man feeding the ox, Shouyi, said with a bitter smile. It seemed like he was afraid of being fooled again by the woman on the cart.

The old woman, unable to control her excitement, didn't know how to convince Shouyi. The other people on the cart weren't from Xiahe Village, so they didn't recognize Zhu Ping'an. This made it even harder for her to persuade him. She kept patting Shouyi's shoulder and saying, "It's true, it's true..."

Although the old woman had never heard the "boy who cried wolf" story, her feelings were just like the boy's in that story.

"Dad, I'm back."

Just as the big black ox was about to finish the entire basin of water, Shouyi suddenly heard a familiar voice from above.

Familiar. This voice was so familiar that even with his hands over his ears, he could recognize it.

Shouyi became excited.

The big black ox, however, had the most to say about Shouyi's excitement: I was drinking my water just fine. Hmm, the water's a little salty, but it's delicious. I was about to finish it, but unexpectedly, unexpectedly, the basin was suddenly pushed right onto my nose... I almost cried from the shock...

The man feeding the ox was Zhu Ping'an's father, Zhu Shouyi. Overcome with excitement, he pressed the basin to the big black ox's nose, and then, without caring about the ox anymore, he raised his head and looked at Zhu Ping'an. His clumsy, honest face broke into a smile, and then, trying to act casual, he said:

"Why did you come back? A few days ago, someone from the town came to the house with good news, saying you passed some exam and became a child scholar. They even said you might go to Yingtian to take another exam later."

Zhu Ping'an placed his travel bag on the ox cart, greeted the old woman and others on the cart, then took the water basin from Zhu Shouyi and began feeding the ox. While doing so, he explained to his father, "The academy exams aren't until August, and it's only April now, so there's still plenty of time. I can study at home just as well. Besides, the food Mom makes is a hundred times better than anything outside."

"The round trip will take half a month, it's better to stay there and review," Father Zhu rubbed his hands, then checked the rope ties on the ox cart, and said to Zhu Ping'an.

Before Zhu Ping'an could speak, the auntie on the cart interrupted, "Zhi'er, don't listen to your father's words. You don't know, when I first teased your father by telling him you'd come, he was so happy, as if he'd won something."

"Cough, cough, Auntie, you're just making things up..." Father Zhu was a bit embarrassed, but luckily his face was dark, so even if he blushed, no one would notice.

After Zhu Ping'an got on the cart, three more people joined. In total, there were nine people on the cart. Father Zhu then cracked the whip and drove the big black ox toward the outskirts of the town.

The cart was very lively. When the passengers learned that the person sitting in the cart was the town's youngest scholar, who had been the talk of the town recently, they either surrounded Zhu Ping'an asking questions or surrounded Father Zhu asking about how to educate children. For a moment, it felt just like modern-day high school graduates with excellent exam results being surrounded by parents asking for advice.

Father Zhu guided the ox cart in an S-shaped curve, delivering people from different villages to near their homes. After driving the cart for so many years, Father Zhu could almost do it with his eyes closed, accurately dropping people off near their homes.

By the time they returned to Xiahe Village, there was only one elderly lady left on the cart. She was talkative and chatted all the way with Zhu Ping'an and Father Zhu.

Once they entered Xiahe Village, they ran into some familiar villagers. When the villagers saw Zhu Ping'an, they all praised him. It seemed that the celebratory announcement with drums and gongs that had come from the town had quite an impact. At the very least, almost everyone in the village knew that Zhu Ping'an had become a scholar, and he had even ranked first in the entire Anqing Prefecture. To know that the highest level of education in the whole village was only that of a scholar, and it had taken his uncle many years to barely pass, no one in the village had expected Zhu Ping'an to pass the scholar exams. Now, not only had he passed, but he had ranked first in the entire Anqing Prefecture. So, when the villagers saw him, they couldn't help but admire him—he was truly remarkable.

Zhu Ping'an also greeted each of the villagers one by one, which made them all very happy and proud. Villagers cared about that kind of thing.

Because Zhu Ping'an spent some extra time talking with the villagers, by the time they got home, his mother, Madam Chen, had already prepared the meal.

Before entering the door, Zhu Ping'an overheard a conversation between his older brother and his mother.

"Mother, why did you make such a big spread of dishes again, with chicken and fish? We can't finish all this," came his older brother's voice.

"What do you know? What if Zhi'er comes back? Out there, he's not as lucky as you, able to eat my cooking every day. I wonder if Zhi'er has lost weight again..." His mother's voice followed.

"Restaurants outside cook even better," his older brother mumbled softly.

"What? Da Chuan, say that again! I didn't hear you clearly!" His mother's voice rose by three points.

"Cough, cough, cough, I said, Mother, your cooking is much better than the restaurants outside..."

Under Madam Chen's authoritative tone, even the clumsy and honest older brother had to flatter her. It seemed that his brother had been scolded quite a bit these past couple of days.