

Rise 125

Chapter 125: The Fatty from Bozhou Turns Things Around

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an's luggage had not yet been unpacked—he had only changed into a new set of clothes—so it was very easy to carry.

However, just as Zhu Ping'an slung his bag over his shoulder and opened the attic door, the fat man was already standing outside with a large bundle in his arms, grinning cheerfully. Beside him were two inn attendants, each holding something in their hands, looking puzzledly at the fat man.

"Ah, my good brother, you really are a man of your word," the fat man said as he squeezed into the room with his large bundle, as if afraid Zhu Ping'an might change his mind.

Once inside, the fat man exclaimed loudly, praising the room. "Not bad, not bad, it's indeed very spacious," he said with great satisfaction.

Zhu Ping'an, too, was very pleased with the fat man's room. It was a premium guest room, even more spacious than the fat man had described, about 30 square meters. By the inn's standards, it was an excellent room. The furnishings were elegant and tidy, and the writing desk, in particular, delighted Zhu Ping'an.

On the desk, a small piece of silver was pressed on a note with flamboyant calligraphy that read: "Endless Gratitude."

Why did this scene remind Zhu Ping'an of Fan Wei's style of humor?

Returning to the inn's main hall, Zhu Ping'an found that the attendants had already set up a full table of dishes that the fat man had ordered for him, exuding an enticing aroma.

At this moment, the fat man also came downstairs. Seeing Zhu Ping'an, he repeatedly expressed his thanks and eagerly pulled Zhu Ping'an to sit at the table laden with food. His enthusiasm was palpable.

"Words cannot express my gratitude; let it all be in the food," the fat man said, tearing into a chicken leg with a loud, smacking bite, making a distinct "pop" sound as he chewed.

This drew the attention of people around them, who turned to look.

With such eating habits, it was no wonder no one had wanted to share a table with the fat man earlier. Zhu Ping'an smiled slightly, unfazed. He picked up a steamed dumpling, gently inhaled its aroma, and with one smooth motion, popped it into his mouth, savoring the flavor as it filled his palate and chest. He closed his eyes in blissful appreciation.

When it comes to eating, Zhu Ping'an had never backed down from a challenge. Without this confidence, how could he dare to call himself a foodie?

Goodness! He ate a whole large meat dumpling in one bite!

As a result, the people who had just been looking sideways at the fat man now turned their attention to Zhu Ping'an.

Birds of a feather indeed.

The onlookers cast glances at the two while forming their judgments.

The fat man tore into a chicken leg; Zhu Ping'an countered with a saltwater duck. The fat man tackled a crab; Zhu Pingan responded with a shrimp...

As their feast reached its peak, the two looked up from their plates and cups, exchanging smiles. It felt like the camaraderie of meeting a kindred spirit—like the saying, "A thousand cups of wine are too few when drinking with a friend."

"I am Xue Chi from Bozhou in Fengyang Prefecture. My courtesy name is 'Fan Shen' (Turnaround). Yes, my father is counting on me to 'turn things around and redeem the family's honor.' It's ridiculous. Back in the day, my father took the imperial examination for eighteen years but never made it as a scholar. In the end, my grandfather donated money to get him the title of a supervising student. My father wasn't satisfied with that, though, so I was born, and that's how I got this name. Then he gave me this courtesy name, 'Fan Shen,' which makes me too embarrassed to even greet people at the academy. My father's relentless too, always pushing me to study. I mean, why not just donate another title for me? But he refuses no matter what... Oh, by the way, may I ask for your name?" The fat man set down the crab in his hands, wiped his mouth, and asked. He was a talkative fellow. Though his words carried a nouveau riche tone, his enthusiasm was unmistakable.

Zhu Ping'an swallowed a bite of lobster, sipped some tea, and smiled slightly. "Zhu Ping'an from Xiahe Village, in Anqing Prefecture. I don't have a courtesy name yet."

"Got it. We should get closer in the future," Xue Chi replied, grinning broadly. "Oh, by the way, have you heard of Laozi? He's from Bozhou. Cao Cao, also known as Cao Mengde? He's from Bozhou too. And surely you've heard of Hua Tuo, the divine doctor—that's right, he's also from Bozhou. And don't even get me started on the eighteen riders our great ancestor took from Bozhou, including Duke Xu, Duke Feng, and Duke Qian..." Xue Chi waved his greasy hands as he spoke, spittle flying everywhere as if all those historical figures were his close relatives.

What a straightforward, candid man.

Zhu Ping'an looked up from his meal and chimed in with a rare comment: "Truly a place blessed with talented people and natural beauty."

Hearing this, Xue Chi grinned so broadly he resembled a bulldog.

Thanks to Xue Chi's generosity, Zhu Ping'an ate until his stomach was round and full. By the time he climbed the stairs, he was waddling with a protruding belly, careful not to move in a way that might cause him to regurgitate lobster or crab meat.

By the time he reached the upper floor, night had already enveloped the world. Without an oil lamp, it would have been pitch black.

After entering his room, Zhu Ping'an sprawled across the bed for a brief rest. Once his stomach felt less bloated, he got up, opened his luggage, and retrieved his oilcloth-wrapped book bag. Turning to the desk, he examined it closely.

The desk was made of fragrant rosewood, exuding a strong Ming Dynasty aesthetic—simple yet exquisitely crafted. Positioned by the window, Zhu Ping'an placed the oil lamp on the front right corner of the desk, laid out his ink, brushes, paper, and inkstone, and opened a book. Picking a random phrase from 'The Great Learning', he began drafting a baguwen (eight-legged essay) as an exercise.

Outside, the wind and rain battered the window, the rhythmic pitter-patter resembling the looped soundtracks of modern audio players.

Hunched over the desk, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush in ink and began to write, letting the faint scent of ink waft through the window and into the night sky. After finishing his essay, he reread it several times, identifying two passages that felt awkwardly phrased. He carefully refined them, polishing the text until it flowed seamlessly.

By this time, the sound of the night watchman striking his clapper reached his ears—it was the third watch.

"The third watch, the lanterns are lit; the fifth watch, the rooster crows. It's the perfect time for a man to study." As true as the saying is, balance between work and rest is important. The third watch was roughly eleven o'clock, and it was time to sleep. Without sufficient rest, how could one continue striving the next day?

Just as Zhu Pingan was about to lie down, a clear voice reciting passages suddenly pierced through the wind and rain outside his window.

How to describe it? It made him want to throw open the window and yell in frustration.

"To learn and practice what is learned, is this not a great joy?"

"To learn and practice what is learned, is this not a great joy?"

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The voice outside continued repeating the same nine-character phrase endlessly. Every time, it was the exact same line, as if stuck on a single loop. The voice itself wasn't particularly pleasant either. Who just recites one sentence over and over like that?

"If your mother truly birthed you with such unpleasantness, why not take a piss and see your reflection? You're no beast, so why howl in the middle of the night like one?"

An irate scholar, unable to bear it any longer, flung open his window and shouted toward the room where the voice was coming from.

In modern terms, his tirade translated to something like: "Your mother, for heaven's sake! This is unbearable! Why don't you take a piss and look at yourself? You're a human, not an animal—so why the hell are you howling in the middle of the night?"

After the outburst, the outside world fell silent. Only the rhythmic sound of rain persisted.

Finally, peace. Zhu Ping'an extinguished the oil lamp, walked to his bed using the lightning as his guide, undressed, and drifted into a deep and restful sleep.