

Rise 126

Chapter 126: Qinhuai River

Even Heaven seemed to show some favor. When Zhu Ping'an woke up in the morning, he found that the rain outside the window had stopped. The eastern sky was tinged with red, hinting at the possibility of sunshine.

This morning felt particularly precious. After nearly a month of continuous rain, today was finally clearing up.

Zhu Ping'an dressed himself, washed up briefly, and packed some coarse cloth, a bamboo tube, a calligraphy copybook, a writing brush for practicing calligraphy, and a scroll he had recently transcribed at home into his bag. Slinging the bag over his shoulder and carrying a black wooden board, he left his room.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't the only early riser. Several unfamiliar students had also gotten up, some opening windows to read aloud or write by the window. Thankfully, their morning recitations were not the wolf-like howls from the previous night, but something more tolerable. When they noticed Zhu Ping'an stepping out with his odd cloth bag and wooden board, they gave him curious glances. Zhu Ping'an greeted them with a silly grin, and though they looked slightly surprised, they nodded in response.

The atmosphere of the prefectural examination felt distinctly more elevated, with the overall quality of the candidates being notably higher than those in the county or regional exams. After all, only those who had earned the title of "tongsheng" (child student) could participate, and they were all somewhat capable.

Leaving the inn, Zhu Ping'an made his way toward the Qinhuai River. He hadn't noticed it the evening before, but standing by the riverbank today, he was astonished by the splendor of the famed Qinhuai River. Pavilions

and towers dotted the landscape every ten steps, with smaller structures every five, forming a dense and vibrant scene bustling with visitors and exuding magnificence.

After a month of continuous rain, the clear skies brought life back to the opposite shore as well.

Across the river, young girls were lifting their skirts as they playfully chased one another. Others hummed soft Wu-style songs while washing up. Some, bolder and more spirited, exchanged sharp words with young men on pleasure boats after being teased. Though they had fallen into lives of hardship, these women seemed to enjoy more freedom than ordinary girls.

"Jiangnan, the land of beauties; Jinling, the city of emperors"—this sentiment indeed felt true.

Zhu Ping'an found a relatively secluded spot along the riverbank. Using an old piece of coarse cloth from his bag, he wiped down a green stone slab before sitting down. Taking out his copybook and other materials, he placed the black wooden board on a high stone step nearby. Bending down, he filled his bamboo tube with water from the Qinhuai River. After studying the copybook for a moment, he rolled up his sleeves and began practicing calligraphy, suspending his wrist as he wrote.

While Zhu Ping'an was deeply engrossed in his practice, a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl with a neat, well-dressed appearance and a "falling horse" hairstyle appeared on the opposite bank. She bent down to wash a handkerchief at the river's edge but soon noticed Zhu Ping'an practicing calligraphy with river water on the black wooden board.

The girl stared at Zhu Ping'an for a moment before bursting into laughter. She turned and called out in a sweet voice, "Sister, come quickly! Look at that half-grown scholar across the river practicing calligraphy with river water!"

Hearing her, a young lady of about eighteen or nineteen, dressed in light gauze, walked gracefully over to join her. She glanced at Zhu Ping'an twice and also began laughing.

"Hey, you poor scholar! Look over here! Quick, look over here! Ha ha ha! Why are you using our foot-washing water to practice calligraphy?" The older girl cupped her hands around her mouth to amplify her voice and called out to Zhu Ping'an before bursting into peals of laughter.

It seemed this spot was no longer suitable for practicing calligraphy. He would have to find another place tomorrow.

Hearing their words, Zhu Ping'an paused his brush, glanced at the other side of the river, and then lowered his head to continue practicing without a word.

"You call yourself a scholar? Have you studied so much that it's all gone to the dogs? How rude! My sister is talking to you!" The younger girl, indignant on her sister's behalf, pointed a slender finger at Zhu Ping'an and refused to let the matter drop.

Zhu Ping'an acted as if he hadn't heard a thing and continued practicing his calligraphy.

"Hey, scholar, are you deaf or mute?" the older girl in a gauzy dress asked with a teasing smile. "Why aren't you saying a word?"

"Do you believe I'll cross the river and have a word with you myself?" she added with a playful laugh when Zhu Ping'an still didn't respond.

"Yes, go across the river..." the younger girl giggled, chiming in agreement.

"Do not look at what is improper, do not listen to what is improper, do not speak of what is improper, and do not act upon what is improper," Zhu Ping'an replied softly, shaking his head.

Hearing this, the two girls on the opposite bank burst into laughter.

"Oh my, he's a pretentious scholar!"

"Pretentious enough to rot your teeth, haha!"

After their laughter subsided, the older girl gave Zhu Ping'an a captivating smile. "Hey, pretentious scholar, how about you come to my place today to lecture me? I'll play the flute for you, and we can watch the rain from the window together."

"And me, too! I can play the flute as well," the younger girl chimed in with a giggle. "We'll both listen to your lecture together!"

The Qinhuai River was indeed a place of charm and indulgence—not suitable for practicing calligraphy. Zhu Ping'an packed up his blackwood board and calligraphy materials into his bag, casually cupped his hands toward the laughing girls across the river as a polite gesture, and then left the riverside.

"Hey, scholar, don't leave! Come and play with us!"

Their cheerful laughter echoed behind him.

Such beauty and charm—it was no wonder so many scholars lost themselves here, forgetting their grand ambitions.

The Qinhuai River was lined with gold-gilded mansions. Slinging his bag over his shoulder and carrying his blackwood board, Zhu Ping'an left the bustling riverside behind and strolled leisurely in another direction.

He didn't walk far before spotting a secluded forest. Zhu Ping'an entered, found a stone to sit on, and took out a book he had copied earlier to read quietly.

When the sun rose high into the sky, Zhu Ping'an packed his things and began heading back toward the inn, his bag slung over his shoulder and the blackwood board tucked under his arm.

The area around the Confucius Temple in the Qinhuai district was known for its variety of snacks. Among these, none were as delicious and affordable as the potstickers sold by street vendors.

Zhu Ping'an ordered a serving of pork potstickers and, persuaded by the vendor, also got a bowl of duck-blood vermicelli soup. Sitting at a street-side table, he began to enjoy his meal.

The potstickers were served hot, and Zhu Ping'an took a bite. Perhaps he bit off too much, as the juices dripped down his fingers.

"Haha, young man, is this your first time in Yingtian?" an old man nearby said with a chuckle. Picking up a potsticker with his chopsticks, the man explained, "You have to eat our potstickers like soup dumplings. Bite too big, and the juice spills; bite too hard, and it sprays; bite too small, and it's just not satisfying!"

"Oh, thank you for the advice, sir." Ignoring the heat, Zhu Ping'an followed the old man's instructions, taking a more measured bite. The flavorful filling and rich juices, paired with the vendor's duck-blood vermicelli soup, made for an incredibly satisfying meal.

The potstickers resembled dumplings and weren't overly filling. Zhu Ping'an soon had only two left.

"Could I trouble the vendor for another serving of potstickers?" he called out.

"Of course, young master. Just a moment!" the vendor replied cheerfully. "I guarantee you'll want to come back for more after this."

Before the second serving arrived, a familiar voice complained, "Ah, Zhu brother, how could you discover such delicious food and not tell me?"

Zhu Ping'an turned to see Fatty Xue Chi running over. He still had the look of a nouveau riche, with a large gold chain around his neck and two oversized rings on his fingers, gleaming so brightly they hurt the eyes.