

Rise 134

Chapter 134: The Unlucky Child

The closer one got to the latrine, the stronger the stench became, and the buzzing of flies and mosquitoes grew louder.

The smell was utterly unbearable.

"Ugh..."

The sound of retching echoed, and Zhu Ping'an looked over to see a poor, pitiful, and unlucky fellow sitting in the stall near the latrine. His face was pale, his eyes lifeless, and he was leaning against the corner, vomiting.

He was retching so much it seemed endless...

When this unlucky fellow saw Zhu Ping'an approaching with the "To Relieve Oneself in Peace" plaque in hand, he shivered like a young girl cornered in the dark by a seven-foot brute. His lifeless eyes seemed to carry a silent complaint: Damn it, it's already unbearable, and here you come again!

To this poor guy, Zhu Ping'an could only express his apologies with a glance.

The scene at the latrine doesn't require much description; suffice it to say, under the scorching heat, with the overwhelming stench and the dance of flies and mosquitoes, relieving oneself was nothing short of torture.

When it was revealed that Zhu Ping'an was headed to the smaller latrine next door, the fellow in the adjacent stall looked like he wanted to give Zhu Ping'an a hundred thumbs-up. After finishing his business and washing his hands, Zhu Ping'an left the latrine and noticed the grateful look in the eyes of the poor soul next door. For a moment, he was confused.

But upon reflection, he understood.

In any case, Zhu Ping'an hoped this unfortunate guy wouldn't be so overwhelmed by the stench that it affected his performance. After all, as the saying goes: "When Heaven is about to bestow great responsibilities upon a man, it first tests his will, tires his muscles, starves his body, and thwarts his endeavors." He hoped the fellow could achieve a good result. But judging by his eyes rolling back from the stench, it seemed like a tall order.

Returning to his stall, Zhu Ping'an handed the "To Relieve Oneself in Peace" plaque back to the invigilating officer and resumed answering the exam questions.

He had already drafted the first eight-legged essay question and proceeded to tackle the scripture-based question. It was simple and didn't require much time; he quickly finished it and neatly wrote it on draft paper.

With the scripture question done, Zhu Ping'an moved on to the second eight-legged essay question, titled: "The Gentleman Aspires Upward, the Small Man Downward." This came from a line in the Analects: "The gentleman aspires upward; the small man aspires downward," meaning that a gentleman seeks virtue and righteousness, while a small man pursues personal gain. Although Zhu Ping'an hadn't tried this specific

question before, it was a standard eight-legged essay topic and not particularly difficult—it mainly tested the flow of one's writing.

Zhu Ping'an paused, pondered for a long time, and then refined his thoughts for a while before dipping his brush into the inkstone and neatly transcribing the carefully crafted essay onto the draft paper in fine script.

After completing drafts for all three questions, Zhu Ping'an stretched lazily and moved his body a bit. Sitting hunched over in such a stifling environment to write was truly harmful to one's health.

After stretching, he looked toward Mingyuan Tower in the distance to give his eyes some exercise. Nearsightedness in ancient times was a real issue, as there were no glasses.

"Hey, you there! Stop looking around!" A nearby patrolling officer noticed Zhu Ping'an glancing elsewhere and reprimanded him.

I was just looking forward! Zhu Ping'an thought to himself but obediently retracted his gaze. The ancients didn't understand the concept of eye care, and arguing with the officer at this critical moment was akin to courting death.

Under the watchful eyes of the officer, Zhu Ping'an dutifully retracted his gaze and focused solely on his eight-legged essay, ignoring everything else.

After refocusing, Zhu Ping'an began transcribing the first eight-legged essay onto the answer sheet. He took even greater care with this transcription, striving to bring out the best of his calligraphy skills, neatly writing in fine script.

After finishing the first question, the sound of three drumbeats signaled lunch. Shortly after, officers brought meals and water to each examinee's stall. The meal consisted of one meat dish, one vegetable dish, a large bowl of rice, and another bowl of plain boiled water—this was the standard lunch for the exam candidates.

The vegetable dish was too bland, the meat dish overly salty, but the rice was perfectly cooked, with each grain glistening and tasting delightful. Normally one eats rice with the dishes, but today Zhu Ping'an found himself eating the dishes with the rice. Over time, he felt his taste buds had become picky, and only the rice allowed him to feel full.

After eating, attendants came to collect the tableware and clean the stalls, leaving the examinees with tidy spaces to continue their tests.

After lunch, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but think about the examinee in the latrine stall. He wondered how the poor fellow managed to eat his meal.

Zhu Ping'an couldn't see the examinee in the latrine area, who immediately vomited again at the sight of food, waving his hands as if he had encountered a ferocious beast. In such an environment, it was no wonder he couldn't eat anything.

After the unfortunate and miserable fellow finished vomiting, he became deeply worried. "Damn, if everyone eats lunch, won't the latrine area become active again..." With this thought, he started vomiting once more.

After finishing his meal, Zhu Ping'an began copying the second question. Halfway through, he heard three drumbeats, followed by three strikes of a cloud gong. Immediately after, the proctor shouted, "Hurry up and finalize your answers!" much like how modern invigilators remind examinees to manage their time.

At this point, it was around 1:00 to 2:00 PM. Zhu Ping'an bent over and continued copying the second eight-legged essay. Since these essays were relatively short, it didn't take him long to finish the second question. He then proceeded to copy the scripture question as well.

Once all the exam questions were copied, Zhu Ping'an meticulously reviewed his work. By this time, some candidates had already submitted their papers and were heading to the waiting area to leave the examination hall. Ignoring the others turning in their papers, Zhu Ping'an continued his careful review, checking his work twice. After confirming everything was accurate, he stood up and signaled the proctor to submit his paper.

When the paper collection officer arrived, Zhu Ping'an was asked to remove the slip with his name from his exam paper and write down his seat number. Only then did the officer accept his paper and give him an exit token.

With the token in hand, Zhu Ping'an followed a bailiff to the waiting area to await his release. By then, the first batch of candidates who had submitted their papers had already been allowed to leave. Zhu Ping'an's group waited for about a quarter of an hour before being permitted to leave the examination hall.

At the gate, a clerk checked the token of each candidate before allowing them to exit. Zhu Ping'an queued up, handed in his token, and walked out of the Jiangnan Examination Hall.

Once outside, looking back at the grand gate, he felt as if a bird had escaped its cage, his entire body suddenly relaxed and at ease.

"Brother Zhu, you're finally out..."

Before Zhu Ping'an could take a few deep breaths of the fresh air, a loud cry pierced the air.

There was no need to look. From the sound alone, he could tell it was the chubby Xue Chi.

"Brother Xue..." Zhu Ping'an raised his head and started to respond, but the words were swallowed halfway as he was utterly stunned by the sight before him.

The image of the chubby man was so shocking—he looked like he had been dragged into the woods by a gang of burly men, scrubbed and rubbed a hundred times over, and yet not a single coin was paid for his ordeal.

He was truly a picture of tears and snot streaming down his face.

"Brother Zhu..." Xue Chi, with a face full of snot and tears, staggered over.

Accompanying him was a foul and nauseating stench.

"My goodness, did you take a bath in a toilet?" Zhu Ping'an stepped back two paces, treating Xue Chi like a plague.

This remark seemed to strike a nerve with Xue Chi. Hearing it, his snot and tears flowed even more profusely, like rivers in reverse.

"Brother Zhu, I was assigned to the latrine area! Waaaaah! I vomited the whole day..."

With snot and tears mixing together, the chubby Xue Chi waved his fat hands and bitterly complained about the unfairness of the examination. Being assigned to the foul-smelling latrine area had caused him to perform at only 10% of his usual ability.