

Rise 143

Chapter 143: Short and Slightly Chubby, with a Simple Face and No Beard

After returning from the other shore, Zhu Ping'an went to the first cloth shop near the inn. He explained his request, paid a fifty-wen processing fee, and a tailor measured him with his palm before starting the work.

The scissors snipped loudly, and the needle and thread flew quickly. Before long, the scholar's robe in Zhu Ping'an's hands had been reduced by several sizes.

Then, the tailor heated a few pieces of charcoal and used an iron-like object, which was similar to an iron, to press the smaller scholar's robe.

"This is a scorched iron, used to iron clothes. Young master, since you are busy studying, it's understandable that you haven't seen one," the tailor explained when he noticed Zhu Ping'an's curious gaze at the scorched iron in his hand.

Haven't seen one?

I've seen irons that are thousands of times more advanced than this, Zhu Ping'an thought to himself, but his expression showed that he was learning something new.

The tailor didn't use a ruler to measure but simply made adjustments with his palm. However, after trying on the adjusted scholar's robe, Zhu Ping'an found it surprisingly well-fitted. The robe was blue, with wide borders all around. The tailor had carefully adjusted it without disturbing the wide borders, and the sleeves were loose, with the length just perfect to cover his hands.

After putting it on, Zhu Ping'an immediately felt more refined and scholarly. It seemed that the design of the clothing by the old Zhu was indeed quite good.

Zhu Ping'an was very satisfied with the alterations. He thanked the tailor and returned to the inn. As he passed through the hall, he ordered two dishes and a soup, asking the waiter to bring them to his room once they were ready. After changing into the scholar's robe and tidying up both inside and out, he had his brunch, washed up again, and then went downstairs to head to the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall.

In fact, the scholar's robe is best paired with the Four-Square Pindin Hat, a black gauze hat. The design is square, and it is entirely the work of old Zhu, intended only for officials and scholars to wear. However, Zhu Ping'an was still young and had not yet reached the age for wearing such a hat, so he didn't wear it.

On his way to the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall, Zhu Ping'an encountered many new scholars, all wearing freshly made scholar's robes and heading to the hall. They all exchanged polite greetings before continuing on their way.

"Is that Brother Zhu ahead?"

As Zhu Ping'an walked, he suddenly heard a familiar voice from behind. He stopped, turned around, and saw Feng Shanshui from Sushong, holding a folding fan and waving from a distance. He was accompanied by five people, two of whom Zhu Ping'an recognized—Xia Luoming and another person who always followed them, though Zhu Ping'an couldn't recall the name. However, there were also two unfamiliar faces.

Apart from Feng Shanshui, the others looked at Zhu Ping'an with strange expressions. Xia Luoming was fine, but the two strangers looked at him with a mix of provocation, resentment, and disdain—so complicated.

"Oh, Brother Feng, Brother Xia, uh, and a few other brothers, nice to meet you," Zhu Ping'an greeted them from afar, cupping his hands.

"Not yet congratulated Brother Zhu. The top spot, eh? You have made me quite envious," Feng Shanshui said with a smile as he approached.

"Just lucky," Zhu Ping'an grinned awkwardly.

"Brother Zhu is too humble..." Xia Luoming shook his head slightly, his tone somewhat heavy, "I saw your exam paper yesterday. That wasn't something luck could achieve."

Upon hearing this, the two unfamiliar faces next to them stared at Zhu Ping'an even more provocatively. One of them was glaring at him with such intensity that it almost seemed tangible.

The two of them felt that their papers were just as good, if not better, than Zhu Ping'an's. But the top spot went to a mere teenager who hadn't even fully matured. How could they save face?

Actually, the county exam was one thing, but the provincial exam and the imperial exam were even more competitive. With thousands of papers placed together, apart from special circumstances, the best papers were almost impossible to differentiate. The ranking of first, second, and so on was mostly down to luck, depending on whether your paper aligned with the tastes of the examiners.

It was because of this that the two felt that Zhu Ping'an had just happened to suit the examiner's preferences, and thus they were provoking him and harboring resentment.

Although they were provoking him, no one would act on it at that moment. They were all scholars, and now they were all xiucai (a successful candidate in the imperial examination). Without the right opportunity, they wouldn't act out of turn to avoid losing face.

"Come, come, Brother Zhu, let me introduce you. This is Liu Qian from Tongcheng, and this is Guo Ziyu from Sushong, both of whom were last year's provincial top candidates. And this is Zhang Tao from Taihu, whom you've met," Feng Shanshui said with a broad smile as he introduced the people traveling with him.

"Long time no see," Zhu Ping'an greeted, cupping his hands.

"Brother Zhu is young and talented," both Liu Qian and Guo Ziyu were friendly, though there was still a hint of arrogance in their eyes.

Afterward, Zhu Ping'an walked with them toward the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall. The conversation was mostly among them, and Zhu Ping'an felt somewhat out of place. Fortunately, the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall was not far, and they arrived shortly.

After some decoration, the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall had a festive air, looking much cleaner than it had during the exam.

When Zhu Ping'an and the others entered the Jiangnan Examination Hall, the place was already bustling with people. Most of the new candidates from the fourteen provinces had arrived—about forty from the large provinces and thirty from the medium-sized ones, making over four hundred people in total.

Inside the Examination Hall, there were attendants respectfully asking the candidates to go to their respective registration counters according to their provinces. The officers handling the registrations were selected from the academies and county schools, wearing formal attire that exuded authority.

Zhu Ping'an was assigned to the candidate group from Anqing Prefecture. When the people around him learned his name, they all bowed their heads in embarrassment and did not dare to stand in front of Zhu Ping'an's desk. Helplessly, Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to cupped his hands in gratitude and stood at the very front.

When the time arrived, the officer began the formal review of the new candidates' personal declarations. Since Zhu Ping'an was assigned first, he was the first to go up and fill in his personal declaration.

Zhu Ping'an dipped his pen in ink and began filling in his personal information on the form: name Zhu Ping'an, age 13, hometown Xiahe Village, Kaoshan Town, Huaining County, Anqing Prefecture. These were easy to fill in, but there was a section for personal traits, which Zhu Ping'an wasn't sure how to fill out.

"Short and slightly chubby, simple face, no beard," the officer said seriously from across the table.

It sounded as if the description was of Wu Dalang! My short stature is because I'm young, and I'm still growing. Slightly chubby? No way! I've actually lost weight these past few days of exams, though I do have some baby fat on my face. Simple face? Can you at least say 'thick' instead of 'simple'? I am honest, not simple; no beard, though that part is accurate.

But, the officer's description wasn't entirely wrong.

Reluctantly, Zhu Ping'an, feeling a bit embarrassed, filled in "Short and slightly chubby, simple face, no beard" in the remarks section.

The officer across from him reviewed Zhu Ping'an's completed declaration, then took out a document with an official seal and selected Zhu Ping'an's from the pile. After a brief check, he nodded, took the seal from the corner of the desk, pressed it into the ink pad, and stamped it firmly onto Zhu Ping'an's form.

"Alright. The personal declaration will be submitted to the academic officer for review, and based on your hometown, you will be assigned to a school. Tomorrow, at the hour of Chen, the academic officer will summon the new candidates to the Mingyuan Building in the Examination Hall for the ceremony and flower pinning ceremony. Don't be late," the officer said after stamping the form, looking at Zhu Ping'an for a moment before adding, "You are young, and entering school at your age is rare in our Ming Dynasty. You have limitless potential, but do not fall into bad habits and destroy your own future."

"Thank you for your guidance, I will remember it in my heart," Zhu Ping'an respectfully nodded, thinking that there are indeed many scholars who practice caution in their solitude, and this officer was surely one of them.

"Mm, you may go now," the officer waved his hand with an impassive expression, signaling for Zhu Ping'an to leave.

Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands and left. As he passed by Xia Luoming and the others, he apologized and quickly left.

As Zhu Ping'an exited the Jiangnan Examination Hall, unsure of what to do next, he heard someone calling out to him.

"Hey, you, stop. I'm talking to you, the young scholar!"

It was a girl's voice, full of anger.

"Big sister, please don't..." Another girl's voice followed, sounding like she was crying, trying to stop her.

Zhu Ping'an looked up and saw the girl he had met earlier this morning, the one who had fallen from her high horse. She was now red-eyed like a rabbit, as though she had been crying. She tightly grasped the hand of a girl around seventeen or eighteen, who was glaring at Zhu Ping'an with anger.

What's going on? Zhu Ping'an looked confused.

"Don't stop me, you silly girl, how can we let people bully us for nothing! What's wrong with us selling smiles? We don't steal or rob, why should we be treated with such contempt?"

The seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl saw Zhu Ping'an's "unrepentant" expression and became even angrier. She pushed away the girl with the fallen hair bun and stormed up to Zhu Ping'an, glaring at him with fury.

"You! Why did you humiliate my little sister and make her cry for so long? In the past, I admired your gentlemanly demeanor, but who would have thought you're such a despicable person? If you're like this at such a young age, what will you be like when you grow up—an elegant beast, a well-dressed savage!"

Zhu Ping'an had just left the Examination Hall when this eighteen-year-old girl blocked him, launching into an angry tirade. The spittle was almost hitting his face.

What's this all about? I haven't even done anything.

"Did you forget to take your medicine?" Zhu Ping'an said, feeling speechless.

"What do you mean? I'm not sick, why would I take medicine?" The angry seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl was utterly confused by his comment.

Alright, I guess nobody in the Ming Dynasty would understand that.

"I thought you were crazy, leaving the house without taking your medicine," Zhu Ping'an responded indifferently.

"You're the crazy one! Your whole family's crazy! I was really blind to think you were a gentleman when you're nothing but a well-dressed beast!" Only then did the girl realize what Zhu Ping'an had meant by his "Did you forget to take your medicine?" remark. Her anger flared up even more, and she began venting both old and new grudges.

The girl's loud outburst had already attracted the attention of some people inside the Jiangnan Examination Hall.

This was the entrance to the Examination Hall. Here he was, a new candidate, being verbally assaulted by two women from the Qinhuai River region. Even without thinking, Zhu Ping'an knew this situation was far from favorable.

In ancient times, scholars consorting with courtesans was a relatively common phenomenon, and the government only cracked down on officials engaging with courtesans. Scholars consorting with them were mostly just seen as indulging in flirtations.

But if a woman from the brothel was pointing her finger at you and cursing you, it wasn't the kind of reputation you'd want—it would probably just be a disgraceful one.

In the Ming Dynasty, a tarnished reputation could harm your future prospects. As a scholar, you would face yearly exams, and your reputation was a key factor in these evaluations.

"It's so hot here, only adding to the tension. Let's move to the shade over there and discuss things further."

So, with few people yet having noticed the scene in front of the Jiangnan Examination Hall, Zhu Ping'an decided not to continue arguing. Instead, he swiftly moved the confrontation to another location.