

Rise 146

Chapter 146: The Joyous Event in Xiahe Village

Zhu Ping'an gradually walked farther away, his figure slowly disappearing into the crowd on the opposite bank of the Qinhuai River, like a drop of water falling into the sea, never to be seen again.

By the Qinhuai River, the sixteen-year-old girl held in her hands the calligraphy left by Zhu Ping'an, gazing at his departing back, unable to calm down for a long time.

"Let's go, Susu, a young man like him is not someone we can aspire to." The seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl shook her head, gathered the red-eyed girl's scattered hair into a bun, and comforted her in a sorrowful voice.

The sixteen-year-old girl, hearing this, her eyes reddened even more. She silently nodded, biting her teeth, and walked with the seventeen or eighteen-year-old girl toward the opposite bank of the Qinhuai River.

After the scene with the two girls, the time was already nearing dusk. Zhu Ping'an left the bank of the Qinhuai River and casually strolled through the city of Yingtian, looking for some delicious food that caught his fancy. In two days, he would return home; Yingtian had so many delicacies, and he hadn't had enough yet.

While Zhu Ping'an was casually strolling, a relay postman who had changed horses three times on the official road had already ridden into the city of Huaining, carrying with him the joyful news of this year's new students.

The sun set and rose again, and the swift horse grew thinner.

When Zhu Ping'an was heading to the Mingyuan Building at the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall in formal attire from the inn, several yamen officers wearing black and red uniforms, their faces full of joy, rode out from Huaining City, holding copper gongs, joyful news, suona horns, and other items.

Zhu Ping'an and a group of newly enrolled students in blue robes walked with high spirits under the red sun, entering the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall and heading up to the Mingyuan Building. The name "Mingyuan" is taken from the meaning in the "Great Learning," "Be cautious in the end and look far ahead. The virtue of clarity leads to great depth." Mingyuan Building is three stories high, and Zhu Ping'an walked with the crowd to the third floor. At this time, the examining officer had not yet arrived, so Zhu Ping'an and the others quietly waited for the officer to set up a feast and adorn themselves with flowers.

The bottom floor of Mingyuan Building has round arches on all four sides, all leading up to the next floor. Once upstairs, you can see windows on all sides. Zhu Ping'an stood by a window, looking down, and indeed, he could see the entire Imperial Examination Hall.

While Zhu Ping'an and the others were waiting for the examining officer, Xiahe Village had already erupted in excitement.

After breakfast, the people who went out to work in the fields saw five or six yamen officers in red clothes riding in from a distance. As soon as they reached the boundary of Xiahe Village, they dismounted and hung a string of firecrackers on a tree. Bang, bang, bang—the noise was deafening.

Then came the loud sounds of gongs and drums, and the suona horn blared.

Entering the village entrance, the atmosphere was festive. This was a privilege only those with official cases could enjoy.

"Sir, what's going on?" A bold old farmer stepped forward to ask.

"Congratulations, congratulations! Your village's Zhu Lao Ye has passed the imperial examination and become a scholar!" The yamen officer holding a red paper congratulated with a beaming smile.

Upon hearing this, the old farmer dropped his hoe and, with a strong step, ran excitedly into the village.

"Uncle Li, why are you running?" A man working the fields saw the old farmer sprinting and curiously asked.

"Hurry, hurry! Our village finally has a scholar! After so many years, we finally have a scholar! Let's go to Old Zhu's house and bring the good news!" The old farmer, panting heavily, said with excitement as he jogged toward the village.

"Is that true?" The man was overjoyed.

"Why would I lie at my age? Didn't you see the firecrackers, gongs, and drums with the yamen officers over there?" The old farmer puffed up his beard and glared.

The old farmer had just finished speaking when he saw the man let out a loud shout, throw aside his hoe, and rush ahead with a swish. The old farmer could only follow behind, eating dust.

"You little rascal. Wait for the old man!" The old farmer was so angry, it made him feel twenty years younger.

"Hahaha, Uncle Li, let me, your nephew, run this errand!" The man laughed foolishly, not looking back, and ran ahead with all his might.

"You little rascal!" The old farmer laughed and scolded him endlessly.

The man just kept laughing foolishly, and the more he was scolded, the faster he ran.

More and more people along the way heard the news and joined the celebratory crowd. This was great news for the entire Xiahe Village! Why was Xiahe Village inferior to Shanghe Village? It wasn't just because Shanghe Village was wealthier; a bigger reason was that Shanghe Village had someone like Master Sun, a scholar, to hold down the fort.

But now, finally, Xiahe Village also has a scholar. Still, they didn't know what "case" meant, but from the way the messenger talked, it sounded pretty impressive—like it might even be higher than the scholar rank!

More and more people heard the news, and more joined the celebration, a large crowd surging toward the Zhu family's old home. Everyone was running so fast, it looked like they were being chased by dogs. They had to hurry and tell the Zhu family this good news. If the Zhu family wasn't prepared when the officials arrived with their congratulations, it would be a problem. The yard needed to be tidied up, tea prepared, and snacks like seeds and candies ready. Of course, there had to be reward money too. They couldn't let the official look down on Xiahe Village. If anything was missing, they could go home and grab it; they had to make sure the Zhu family looked good.

As for why it was the Zhu family, that was easy to figure out. The official had already said congratulations to Master Zhu's son for passing the scholar exam. In their village, only the eldest son and the youngest grandson of the Zhu family were studying. The eldest son, Zhu Shouren, was the one who could be called "Master." The youngest grandson had also passed the scholar exam recently, but that was only the lowest level, a "child scholar." The last time the official came to deliver congratulations, it was for Zhu Gongzi, the grandson, not for Master Zhu. Zhu Shouren had been studying for twenty to thirty years, while the youngest grandson had only studied for a few years. Zhu Shouren had passed the scholar exam a decade ago, while the grandson had only passed it recently.

So, the old farmers naturally assumed that "Master Zhu" meant Zhu Shouren.

Xiahe Village wasn't very big, and before long, the crowd had run from the village entrance into the village.

Zhu Ping'an's mother, Chen, was at the front gate stitching shoes. When she saw the crowd rushing past her house toward the village, kicking up a large cloud of dust, she curiously asked a familiar villager what was going on.

"Don't you know, Second Brother's eldest son, Shouren, passed the scholar exam! Just now, Er Mazi said he saw the official messenger heading this way," the villager explained enthusiastically.

Upon hearing this, Chen, who was stitching shoes, accidentally pricked her hand with the needle. Her uncle had passed the scholar exam, but what about her own son, Zhi'er?

"What... what about my Zhi'er?" Chen asked anxiously.

"I heard there's only been one scholar from our village," someone else added, and then hurriedly urged the villager, "Hurry up, we need to tell Old Zhu's family, so they can prepare!"

"Your Zhi'er didn't pass, but it's fine. He's still young. Don't worry. Let's go, Second Brother's wife. Let's go congratulate your eldest son Shouren," someone else consoled.

"Yes, let's go. Having a child scholar is already great. Don't think too much about it, Second Brother's wife. I believe next time your Zhi'er will definitely pass!"

The villagers behind chimed in to comfort her, and the group sped by, eager to curry favor with the new scholar's family. After all, it would make things easier if they ever needed help in the future. They'd heard that the scholar was very powerful—no taxes to pay, and even the county magistrate treated them respectfully. Who knew, maybe someday they would need to ask him for a favor.

Chen stood frozen, staring at the crowd rushing toward the old Zhu family's house, clutching the shoe sole tightly. Even when the needle pricked her hand again and drew blood, she didn't notice. Although she hadn't expected her second son to pass the exam, the fact that her uncle had passed while her son didn't still left her feeling uneasy.