

Rise 153

Chapter 153: After a few months of wandering, the child returns home

Two days later, the Qinhuai River was ablaze with lanterns and decorations, the crowd bustling with excitement—several times livelier than during the provincial exam.

The sound of oars slicing through the water mingled with the shimmering reflections of lanterns, while willow branches swayed gently. The annual Flower Queen competition along the Qinhuai River had officially begun. Scholars, poets, and wealthy merchants eagerly vied for attention, more enthusiastic than the performers on stage.

Amid the clamor and commotion, a carriage quietly passed by. The curtain was lifted slightly, but the gaze behind it was not fixed on the grand event across the river. Instead, it lingered on the waters of the Qinhuai River.

At this time of year, autumn had arrived at the Qinhuai River. Sunlight gently poured onto the water, which flowed lazily along. The towering city walls stood firm, leaves drifted down from the trees, and the soft wind carried flocks of geese flying southward. Red leaves floated along the riverbank, swirling in eddies and drifting into the distance like golden butterflies bathing in the river.

Autumn in Yingtian was poetic and breathtakingly beautiful.

Zhu Ping'an lowered the curtain he had lifted, a faint smile curving his lips. As lovely as this place was, it could not compare to Xiahe Village.

At the Qinhuai River, the Flower Queen was being chosen, but Zhu Ping'an was already heading back home by carriage.

After several days of traveling, Zhu Ping'an naturally had no knowledge of the grand spectacle at the Qinhuai River. He was unaware of which gentleman's poem had stirred the hearts of thousands, propelling him to fame. He also did not know that his uncle, Zhu Shouren, had garnered considerable attention by borrowing Zhu Ping'an's farewell poem at the Long Pavilion and the verses from "If Life Were Only as It Was at First Sight." Although it was later pointed out that the work was borrowed, it did not diminish Zhu Shouren's moment in the spotlight.

Even less did Zhu Ping'an know that during the Flower Queen competition, two dark horses emerged and, though previously unknown, both seized the "Flower Companion" titles. One sang "White Fox," while the other danced. Their unique performance style, a husky yet melancholic voice, and the delicate interpretation of the song captivated everyone present, leaving the audience in awe.

The poignant question, "Could you dance one more time for me?" tugged at the heartstrings, drawing tears and evoking profound sorrow in all who listened. The story of the fox spirit and the scholar falling in love, with the white fox hoping to dance one last time for her beloved before parting, spoke of immense generosity and love.

For a time, the scholars in attendance were utterly entranced. Among them, Zhu Shouren and other villagers were particularly enthusiastic.

When the multi-day festival concluded, Zhu Shouren and his fellow villagers still savored the memory, feeling it a pity that Zhu Ping'an had missed such a spectacle. By then, however, Zhu Ping'an had already set foot in Kaoshan Town.

In the Zhu family courtyard in Xiahe Village, Zhu Ping'an's mother, Chen, was busy drying wood ear mushrooms, mountain fungi, and other wild delicacies in the yard. As she worked, she hummed a simple rural tune, slightly off-key.

"Mom, why are you drying so much? Aren't we supposed to take it to town to sell tomorrow?" Zhu Pingchuan asked as he entered and saw that his mother had spread out all the wild delicacies he had collected from the mountains the previous day. He couldn't help but voice his confusion.

"Your brother likes eating them," Chen replied without even looking up.

Hearing this, Zhu Pingchuan pulled a long face. "Mom, you have to discipline him a little."

Chen, in no mood for his complaints, retorted sharply, "I'd like to discipline you first, but you have to give me the chance! You're hardly ever home, and you haven't even brought home a wife yet."

Zhu Pingchuan's face turned red, and he chuckled sheepishly. "Mom, that reminds me—I found a wild ginseng root on the mountain last time. Since my younger brother uses his brain a lot for reading, I'll save it for when he comes back to nourish him."

"Forget it. You'd better save it for your fiancée, Juan'er," Chen said with a sarcastic tone as she continued sorting through the fungi she was drying.

"Juan'er doesn't need it," Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan muttered quietly.

Chen heard Zhu Pingchuan's muttering and immediately changed her expression. Grabbing Zhu Pingchuan, she began scolding, "What did you say, Dachuan? Say it to me again. What do you mean by saying Juan'er doesn't need it, so you're thinking of giving it to your brother?"

"No, no, Mother, that's not what I meant..." Zhu Pingchuan, flustered, didn't even know what to say. When he first found the wild ginseng, he had thought of his younger brother Zhu Ping'an. His earlier words carried no other intention.

"Not what?" Chen didn't care. "I think that's exactly what you meant."

"Mother... Mother, I really didn't mean that. I thought of Zhu'er right from the beginning." Zhu Pingchuan, much like his father, was not good with words. He repeated the same phrases over and over, unable to explain himself clearly.

"Stop with the 'Mother' already! Hurry up and find a wooden box to store the wild ginseng. If it goes bad, you'll regret it!" Chen shot Zhu Pingchuan a glare and spoke in an irritated tone.

"Yes, yes." Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan, hearing his mother's words and realizing she had calmed down, quickly ran into the house to properly store the wild ginseng.

After putting away the wild ginseng, Zhu Pingchuan came out to help Chen dry some mountain mushrooms. Chen was delighted to have her eldest son helping and sat down to drink some water.

Chen poured two bowls of water, holding one for herself, just about to drink, when she heard the jingling of the bell tied around their big black cow's neck coming from outside.

Unable to stay seated, Chen got up.

"Zhu Shouyi, why are you back now, at the height of market time when you could be making money? Do you know how much you could have earned this trip..." Chen got up and walked outside, her voice full of energy, as if she were about to interrogate him. It hurt her to think of the several dozen coins they could have earned, wasted by her "reckless husband," Zhu Shouyi!

As she reached the doorway, her words abruptly stopped.

"Mother, what's wrong?" Zhu Pingchuan, who was drying mushrooms, heard his mother's energetic voice suddenly cut off. Thinking something had happened, he hurriedly ran out to check.

And then he saw his mother standing at the door, beaming with joy, unable to even speak.

Looking further outside, he saw Zhu Ping'an standing at the doorway with a silly grin, calling out, "Mother, Brother, I'm back!"

Their father, Zhu Shouyi, was carrying Zhu Ping'an's luggage in one hand, looking at Chen with a fawning expression.

Zhu Shouyi grinned foolishly at Chen and held up Zhu Ping'an's luggage as if seeking credit: "Last time, I didn't carry Zhu'er's bag and got slapped by you. This time, surely I won't get hit again, right?"

"Good to have you back, good to have you back," Chen said, her gaze toward Zhu Ping'an filled with both tenderness and pride.

Then, turning her eyes to Zhu Shouyi, who was holding the bag, her expression immediately darkened.

Chen delivered a slap to Zhu Shouyi's large shoulder with a crisp sound. Her trademark "Lion's Roar of the East River" echoed again:

"Zhu Shouyi! What kind of father are you? Can't you see my son's gone skinny from studying hard outside? Coming back from town, you didn't even think to buy a piece of meat! My son came all this way, and you didn't even plan to make him a hot meal!"

I carried the bag! Meat can be bought at the village entrance! Also, Zhu'er doesn't look skinny; he even has meat on his face.

But these were just thoughts. Father Zhu dared not voice them. Instead, he looked at Chen with an aggrieved expression.

Chen glared at him again.

"I'll go buy some now," he said.

Carrying the luggage with both hands, Zhu Shouyi no longer dared to look aggrieved. Whenever Chen glared, all he could do was grin foolishly in an attempt to please her.

"I'll go, I'll go!" Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan rushed to the village entrance first. After taking a couple of steps, he stopped and asked Zhu Ping'an, "Zhu'er, what else do you want to eat?"

"Just buy some meat, that's enough. As long as it's made by Mother, I'll love it," Zhu Ping'an said, shaking his head and taking the opportunity to flatter his mother.

"Sweet talker," Chen said, though her face was lit up with an uncontrollable smile.

