

Rise 160

Chapter 160: A Tricky Matter

Zhu Ping'an clicked his tongue in surprise. The Li family really was wealthy and powerful. In ancient times, coral was definitely a rare item and very expensive.

Ge Hong's "Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital" states: "King Nanyue once presented a coral tree, one zhang and three chi tall." Ge Hong, who prided himself on his immortal-like demeanor, specifically recorded this event in his miscellany, which shows that such a coral tree was also very rare in his eyes, so he felt the need to document it. When this coral tree was brought to the imperial palace, it caused a huge stir and quickly became one of the prized treasures of Emperor Wu's court. This shows that coral was extremely rare and valuable in the Han Dynasty. Why was coral so expensive? A poem by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin can serve as indirect evidence. In his poem "Green City", he writes: "The jade wheel looks back at the newly born rabbit's soul, the iron net has no branches for coral yet." This poem describes how coral was harvested with an iron net in the vast ocean. Given the limited production methods of ancient times, harvesting coral was as difficult as climbing to the heavens, which is why it was so expensive.

Zhu Ping'an didn't know what kind of coral the wealthy Li family head had brought for the scheming girl, but it was definitely worth a lot. In ancient times, having such a doting father was rare indeed.

While Zhu Ping'an marveled at this, he still couldn't understand why the scheming girl had secretly given him money.

When the wealthy Li family head was pampering his precious daughter, he noticed Zhu Ping'an watching from the door of the study.

Which family's young man is this?

Why is he in my house?

Could he be here for my daughter?

Just as Li family head considered the third possibility, he swiftly moved to hide his daughter behind him and waved toward Zhu Ping'an, intending to figure things out. His precious daughter was not someone just anyone could covet.

Seeing the Li family head wave at him, Zhu Ping'an calmly walked over.

"Greetings, Mr. Li."

When he got closer, Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in greeting.

"Who are you?" Li family head asked, sizing Zhu Ping'an up with a curious look.

"I am Zhu Ping'an from Xiahe Village," Zhu Ping'an replied calmly.

Upon hearing the name, Li family head suddenly understood. "Oh, so you're the poor young man who frequently comes to borrow books."

"Father, you can't keep calling him a poor young man. He's accomplished now, you know? He's passed the imperial exam and is the top scholar in our town!" The scheming girl, who had been hidden behind her father, said sarcastically with a tone full of disdain for Zhu Ping'an.

After hearing his daughter's mockery and disdain for Zhu Ping'an, Li family head sighed in relief. As long as his daughter wasn't interested in him, everything was fine.

Just now, Shu'er said he's a scholar? It's rare to see such a young scholar. But he's just a scholar, after all. I've seen plenty of them, including government officials. I've met many. Li family head was somewhat surprised that Zhu Ping'an had become a scholar at such a young age but didn't take him seriously. He merely nodded at him.

Many scholars fail to advance beyond the title of scholar, and end up returning to their hometowns to teach or take up other humble jobs. Economically, they aren't very well-off, but they hold a slightly higher status than regular commoners, often referred to as "poor scholars." After tasting abalone, who would still have an appetite for small fish and shrimp?

Li family head's reaction was exactly what Zhu Ping'an had expected.

"Here's the thing," Zhu Ping'an continued, "I've been indebted to Mr. Li for several years, allowing me to borrow books from the study. It's thanks to that, that I was lucky enough to pass the imperial exam this year.

In three days, my parents are hosting a banquet at our home, and I hope Mr. Li can honor us with your presence." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands again and stated his purpose for coming.

"Oh, it's a bit unfortunate. I've encountered some troublesome matters recently, and I'm afraid I won't have time," Li family head said, shaking his head and politely declining Zhu Ping'an's invitation.

Zhu Ping'an had expected this rejection.

What puzzled him was whether the "troublesome matters" Li family head mentioned were genuine or just an excuse. If it was merely a polite way of declining, that would be fine; however, if it was real, Zhu Ping'an wondered if he could help, given that he had been borrowing books from the Li family for years.

"Oh? I wonder what kind of troublesome matter Mr. Li is facing? If there's anything I can assist with, please don't hesitate to let me know," Zhu Ping'an asked politely.

Li family head glanced at Zhu Ping'an again and gave a small, dismissive laugh. "Perhaps you're learned in books, but this troublesome matter is not something you could handle."

Well, that was that.

Since Li family head didn't seem inclined to share any further, Zhu Ping'an decided not to press the matter. If Li family head wanted to tell him, he would do so without being asked; if he didn't, there was nothing to be gained from inquiring further. Li family head clearly belonged to the latter group.

"Forgive my rashness, Mr. Li. You've been working hard, and I won't trouble you any further. I'll take my leave," Zhu Ping'an said, bowing respectfully and preparing to take his leave.

Li family head didn't stop him, and even offered to let him borrow a couple more books to save him the trouble of making multiple trips.

After bidding farewell to Li family head, Zhu Ping'an returned to the study. Since Li family head had already given his permission, Zhu Ping'an went to the bookshelf, picked out two books on strategy, and placed them in his bag, preparing to head home.

Just as he was about to leave, the scheming girl stormed in with an angry look on her face.

"It's really outrageous! Betraying us like this, and I even called them uncles and aunts before. What a bunch of ungrateful wolves! I can't believe it! I'll make sure to check the accounts and expose them!" she fumed, speaking to her maid, Hu'er, as she walked into the study.

Zhu Ping'an, who was about to leave, stayed for a couple more minutes to listen. It seemed the "troublesome matter" Li family head had mentioned was exactly what the scheming girl was so upset about. He hadn't expected it to be true, but it turned out to be a real issue. From what the scheming girl was saying, it seemed that a few of Li family head's shopkeepers had been colluding over the past few years, working together to

embezzle money through fake accounts and other means. Li family head had only recently gotten wind of this, and upon reviewing the profits from the past two years, he became suspicious. However, these shopkeepers had been working together for so long that their accounts appeared flawless. Li family head had even spent several days with the accountants trying to uncover anything wrong, but to no avail.

The reduced profits, coupled with the inability to find any issues during the account checks, had provided the shopkeepers with the perfect excuse to further their schemes. They had been in contact with other businesses, causing instability in the commercial network Li family head had painstakingly built. The shopkeepers were employees, not bound by any formal contracts like the household servants, and it seemed that they had some familial ties to the Li family as well. Without any concrete evidence, Li family head couldn't act hastily, so the matter had become one of great difficulty for him.