

Rise 163

Chapter 163: Checking the Accounts

The morning sun, like a shy young girl, lifted the dawn from the east, slowly revealing her rosy little face, shyly scattering beams of golden light. The village of Xiahe River had just woken up from the morning mist, yet Zhu Ping'an's house was already bustling.

Today was the day Zhu Ping'an's family was hosting the flowing banquet. Grandparents and uncles and aunts had all come over to help. First Aunt and Zhu Pingjun also arrived, but First Uncle, who had just returned home the day before, did not come. According to Old man Zhu, he was at home studying. First Uncle's absence made Chen feel relieved; it was better that he didn't come because his presence would only add to her worries.

In the countryside, preparing a flowing banquet is not as simple as it sounds. Though the villagers only come to sit at the table around noon, preparations must begin the day before, with the need to prepare ingredients, the venue, tables, chairs, bowls, spoons, chopsticks, and so on. Yesterday, when Father returned from town, he brought back many vegetables and fruits. In the afternoon, he had the village butcher process a large fat pig, selling half a shoulder to the butcher while saving the rest for the banquet tomorrow. Some meat was also shared with the neighbors and Grandpa's family.

In addition, Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan had gone to the mountains to pick many kinds of mushrooms and wild vegetables, and he also caught several large fat fish, enough to place one on each table. There were also eight wild rabbits, which would be enough to add a meat dish to each table.

Early this morning, Old man Zhu dressed neatly and led the people from the old house to help, picking vegetables, washing dishes, and so on, staying busy for the entire morning. Although Chen didn't say much, her eyes showed warmth toward her parents-in-law.

Around nine o'clock, some women familiar with Chen brought fruits and vegetables to add to the dishes. They placed them in the kitchen and then sat down with Chen to chat for a while before rolling up their sleeves to help pick and wash vegetables, doing some of the kitchen work. The atmosphere was warm and harmonious.

Zhu Ping'an went to Shanghe Village early in the morning again, but his mentor still hadn't returned. When he got home, the house was already very lively. The village had a dedicated cook for such banquets, and the cook from Shanghe Village was Liu Da La Ba, who was famous for his fragrant cooking. People from eight villages loved to hire him. Now, he was busy with several boys from his family, working with clay pots, cutting meat, and handling ingredients, looking very professional.

Around noon, the villagers gradually arrived at Zhu's house to take their seats. Half the village was empty. In the countryside, a "banquet" is referred to as "Yan Xi," meaning both a feast and a meal. Because there were so many people, Zhu Ping'an's yard couldn't hold everyone, so they decided to set up the flowing banquet in the open space outside the gate, creating a noisy scene.

"Ah, your second son has really made you proud."

"Your Zhu family is really blessed this time."

"He's only thirteen, and he passed the scholar exam. Truly impressive. In a few years, he'll definitely return with a top scholar title."

Whenever a Zhu family member walked by, the villagers would express envy or jealousy with a sentence or two.

As a result, Chen became the happiest person today, feeling proud and elated, her face glowing all day.

Do not laugh at the country family's crude wine, the harvest year leaves enough chickens and pigs for guests.

Zhu Ping'an's flowing banquet had a generous amount of food, especially the meat dishes. Fish, pork, rabbit, lamb, and more fish were served in various ways. The villagers would only splurge on meat during festivals, and most hadn't had any meat in over half a month. Now, Zhu Ping'an could eat to his heart's content, and the villagers couldn't stop praising the banquet, which made Chen even more radiant.

Old Man Zhu also felt very proud. At this banquet, he sat with the village head and the village elder. Not only that, but the village head and elder also praised Old Man Zhu, which made him so happy that he nearly got drunk.

The banquet lasted until three or four in the afternoon before it finally ended, with everyone in high spirits.

Zhu Ping'an, Old Man Zhu, and Father stood outside the door, seeing off the villagers one by one. Chen greeted the familiar neighbors inside, dividing up the leftover dishes and fresh vegetables, and sending them home with bowls. It was a common practice in the village to give away leftovers at such events, and no one felt slighted; instead, they left happily.

By the time the sun began to set, Zhu Ping'an's family had finally restored the yard to its usual quiet appearance, as if no banquet had been held at all.

In the evening, Zhu Ping'an took out the book he had borrowed from the Li family last time and neatly copied down the last section that he hadn't finished copying.

The next day, after breakfast, Zhu Ping'an slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed towards Shanghe Village, intending to return the book to the Li family and borrow two more books.

As soon as he knocked on the door, Uncle Li, the doorman, opened it. He probably became more diligent since the wealthy Li family head returned.

"Young Master Zhu is here to borrow books again! Come in, come in," Uncle Li said.

Hearing the awkward way Uncle Li addressed him, Zhu Ping'an could only smile bitterly and gesture respectfully before stepping inside.

The study was different from usual. When Zhu Ping'an entered, there were already many people inside. They were not the scheming young girls, but rather a dozen or so very sharp-looking accountants. They were sitting at three tables, each with four or five people—some were using abacuses, others were reading the account books, and some were making notes. Everyone had their own task, and the sound of the abacuses clicking filled the room.

Rich man Li was sitting restlessly at one side, occasionally going over to a table to check something.

Zhu Ping'an entered without disturbing anyone. He bowed to Rich man Li from a distance and took out the book from his bag to indicate he was returning it.

Rich man Li, feeling anxious, waved his hand casually, signaling Zhu Ping'an to make himself at home.

Zhu Ping'an quietly bypassed the accountants working on the abacuses and accounts, went over to the bookshelves, and placed the book back in its place. Then he stood in front of the shelves, looking for the books he wanted to borrow this time.

The Four Books and Five Classics were almost worn out, so this time he planned to borrow some miscellaneous books for a change.

Zhu Ping'an wandered aimlessly along the bookshelves, flipping through the books one by one. He would stop and linger for a while on any book that caught his interest, then move on to the next.

The clattering of abacuses continued from outside, never stopping. The accountants, responsible for auditing the accounts, were exhausted, having been reviewing the books for three consecutive days. Apart from a little sleep at night, they had hardly rested, yet still couldn't find any problems with the books. With Rich man Li urging them, the accountants were growing more and more fatigued.

As Zhu Ping'an continued browsing, the scheming young girl entered the study, leading the maid Hu'er, with two elderly women following behind her.

"Father, have you found the problem?" the young girl asked as soon as she entered.

"Shu'er, why are you here? It's so hot in the study. It's much better to stay in your room. I had someone send two more basins of ice to your room," Rich man Li said, noticing his precious daughter had entered the study, and immediately forgot about the account books.

"Father, I'm not hot. Did you find the problem with the accounts?" Li Shu twisted her body slightly, pouting as she asked.

"Cough, cough, cough, it's almost done, almost done," Rich man Li reassured her.

"Almost done, almost done. You said that yesterday, and nothing's been found yet... And today it's the same..." Li Shu pouted so hard that it looked like she could tie a bottle with it.

"You all better hurry up with the auditing, it's not like you're slow when collecting money!"

Seeing his precious daughter upset, Rich man Li became a bit anxious, turning to urge the accountants at the three tables behind him.