

Rise 179

Chapter 179: How about you just don't take the exam?

Once the official exam schedule was announced, the imperial examination was expected to come soon.

Zhu Ping'an shifted his focus to the imperial examination. The exam followed the curriculum of the county and prefecture schools, centered around The Four Books, the Classics, the Great Compendium of Human Nature and Principles, and Zhu Xi's General Outline. Subjects like etiquette, music, and calligraphy were no longer studied, as they were not part of the examination. The exam mainly focused on topics like the Classics, books, meanings, essays, and strategies, and sometimes required memorization. Zhu Ping'an practiced specifically for these subjects and question types.

In addition, Zhu Ping'an's study intensity increased significantly. He woke up about half an hour earlier than before and stayed up half an hour later in the evening.

Although the examination was usually overseen by the educational commissioner, who typically managed the exams for each county and prefecture, sometimes the commissioner would use the "suspended examination" or "type examination" methods. The "suspended examination" meant the commissioner would temporarily move students from other prefectures to the current one for testing. The "type examination" allowed the commissioner to delegate the exam duties to county officials, who would then assess the students and send the results to the provincial capital for final evaluation. The suspended examination often made students endure exhausting travel, while the type examination could easily foster corruption because of local official involvement. The ideal method was for the educational commissioner to personally oversee the exams at regular intervals.

In between his studies and revisions, Zhu Ping'an continued writing the Record of the Heaven Sword and the Dragon Slayer, which he had previously shared with the cunning young girl. He wrote several thousand words, which took up quite a bit of time, but he considered it good practice for his handwriting.

His mother, Chen, also made a variety of delicious dishes for Zhu Ping'an—stews, boiled dishes, steamed, fried, grilled, pickled... She employed all sorts of cooking techniques, making sure Zhu Ping'an was always well-fed, concerned that he might not be getting enough nutrition.

"Zhi'er, how about we stop the exams?" one day, as they sat at the dinner table, Chen suddenly spoke up.

This caught Zhu Ping'an off guard, and even Zhu Ping'an's father and eldest brother, Zhu Pingchuan were shocked.

A few days ago, Chen had been joyfully boasting to everyone that her son was going to take the imperial examination, with even more enthusiasm than Zhu Ping'an himself. Chen loved to show off, and whether Zhu Ping'an passed or not, just participating in the exam was enough for her to feel proud.

So, when she suddenly said this, everyone was surprised.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Zhu Ping'an asked, surprised, as he swallowed a piece of chicken.

Chen looked at him with deep concern. "I see you're studying too hard. These days, I've been making all sorts of delicious food for you, but instead of getting fatter, I've noticed you've lost weight. Let's stop the exams, okay?"

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an felt both touched and amused by his mother's overwhelming love.

"Why should a boy get too fat?" Zhu's father casually said, taking a bite of meat pie, not paying much attention.

This remark stirred up a hornet's nest.

"Zhu Shouyi, it's not your flesh that's falling off, so of course, you don't care!" Chen slammed her chopsticks onto the table and gave Zhu's father a stern glare. She then noticed the meat pie in his hand and snatched it away. "This meat pie is for Zhi'er and Da Chuan, not for you!"

Then, Chen placed the half-eaten meat pie in front of Zhu Ping'an.

Cough, cough, cough... Looking at the piece of meat pie that Zhu's father had bitten into, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but smile wryly.

"Mother, I'm growing. The meat is going to my height. Look, I've grown a lot taller these days," Zhu Ping'an said as he stood up from the table and gestured above his head, indicating that he had grown taller.

"You can't be growing that fast," Chen chuckled, her mood lifting after his lighthearted comment. She smiled and teased him.

"Zhi Di, you've really grown taller." Eldest brother Zhu Pingchuan spoke at the right moment, his words sincere. It truly felt like his younger brother had grown taller over the past two days.

"Really?" Their mother, Chen, lit up with excitement. Her eldest son was just like his father—he never lied.

"Really."

Zhu Ping'an and his eldest brother, Zhu Pingchuan, spoke in unison.

Only then did Chen feel much better, no longer insisting that Zhu Ping'an refrain from taking the exam.

Zhu Ping'an then placed the meat pie, which had a missing corner, back into his father's bowl.

Father Zhu glanced at the meat pie, then at Chen, but he didn't dare say a word.

"What are you looking at? Just eat your pie. Who else would eat something you've already bitten?" Chen rolled her eyes at Father Zhu and scolded him playfully.

Hearing her teasing, Father Zhu grinned foolishly and began eating.

"Look at you!" Chen couldn't hold back her laughter.

The atmosphere at the dining table instantly became warm and harmonious. The family enjoyed their breakfast together. Over the years, the Zhu family's living standards had visibly improved. Father Zhu made good earnings transporting goods with his ox cart, eldest brother Zhu Pingchuan had plentiful harvests from the mountains, and Chen's needlework often supplemented the household income. Last year, Father Zhu even purchased ten mu of paddy fields and ten mu of dry farmland in Xiahe Village. Combined with their original land, the Zhu family was now considered well-off in the village.

Especially after Zhu Ping'an passed the Xiucai examination, the Zhu family's status in Xiahe Village had risen significantly. Now, whenever Chen went out, people would eagerly greet her, making her happy every day.

Eldest brother Zhu Pingchuan's marriage was also settled; they were just waiting for the twelfth lunar month to formally bring Sister Juan into the family. Zhu Ping'an, being constantly buried in his studies, had never met his future sister-in-law, but he had heard she was a good person. His eldest brother, in particular, was beyond satisfied with his future wife, often finding ways to get closer to her. In the past, her father had strongly opposed the match, but ever since Zhu Ping'an passed the Tongsheng and later the Xiucai exams, the future father-in-law not only turned a blind eye but would even occasionally take a casual stroll outside.

In short, everything was looking up for the Zhu family.

In contrast, the old Zhu family at the ancestral home felt somewhat bitter. Although Grandpa Zhu and Grandma Zhu were still treated with respect when they went out, they could sense a hint of mockery in the villagers' compliments.

Grandpa Zhu often sighed in the courtyard, thinking about how great it would have been if he hadn't separated his second son's family back then.

"I heard from the second son's family that Zhi'er is going to take the Imperial exam again," Grandpa Zhu suddenly remarked to Grandma Zhu, who was picking vegetables.

"It's not even close yet, but the second son's family is acting like he's already passed," Grandma Zhu scoffed.

"What do you know? Just being able to take the Imperial exam is impressive." Grandpa Zhu took a deep drag from his pipe.

"You should smoke less. You coughed so much last night."

Grandma Zhu was stunned for a moment. She looked up to see Grandpa Zhu lighting his pipe again and immediately put down the vegetables to persuade him.

"Just a couple of puffs," Grandpa Zhu muttered, pursing his lips.

The old Zhu household returned to its usual quiet, with only the sounds of chickens, ducks, and pigs filling the air.