

Rise 181

Chapter 181: The Fragrance of Rice

This time, Zhu Ping'an borrowed three books from the cunning young girl's house, all of which were related to the upcoming imperial examination and the provincial exam. The previous thought of borrowing miscellaneous books to read had long since vanished without a trace. Zhu Ping'an understood well that one must focus on the right task at the right time. With the imperial examination approaching, reading books related to it was his top priority.

The moonlight grew brighter, and the sound of frogs echoed outside.

After dinner, Zhu Ping'an sat at his desk under the bright glow of the oil lamp, engrossed in his night reading. Having lived two lifetimes, he deeply understood the value of time—every moment was as precious as gold. Many geniuses with extraordinary talent had ultimately faded into the annals of history, all because they lacked diligence.

Sweat more in practice to shed fewer tears in critical moments. Youth is meant for effort and struggle; the time for enjoyment had not yet come. One must work hard when it is time to do so, fight when it is time to fight—only then, when the time for enjoyment arrives, will one not be left without wealth or companionship. Otherwise, in old age, one could only look on with endless regret at the riches and lovers in others' hands.

"A sharp sword is forged through honing, and the fragrance of plum blossoms comes from enduring the bitter cold." The struggles of his past life had much to do with his lack of diligence and effort. In this life, in this feudal Ming dynasty, Zhu Ping'an resolved to learn from his past mistakes, strive for self-improvement, and never stop moving forward.

Under the dim lamp, he read tirelessly, never putting the book down.

At dawn, Zhu Ping'an got up early and stepped out of his room, where a few lost stars still lingered in the sky.

He walked to the stone by the courtyard well, habitually laid down a black wooden board, scooped up a ladle of well water, and washed his hands and face. Then, he poured the used water into a groove in the stone, dipped a brush made of ox-tail hair—crafted by his father in his early years—into the clear water, and practiced writing on the stone.

Even before his mother got up to prepare breakfast, Zhu Ping'an had already put away the black wooden board and brush, returned them to his room, picked up several copied books, slung a cloth bag over his shoulder, and headed toward the riverside.

The riverside was quiet. A gentle breeze blew—it was a perfect place for reading and studying.

As the eastern sun began to rise and the rooster crowed over Xiahe Village, Zhu Ping'an closed his book, stretched, and leisurely walked back home.

Just in time—his mother, Chen, had finished preparing breakfast, and the delicious aroma filled the entire courtyard.

"What delicious food did Mother make today? It smells amazing!" Zhu Ping'an took a deep sniff and flattered her with a grin.

"You and your sweet mouth."

Chen beamed with joy, utterly delighted by her youngest son.

Another day in Xiahe Village had begun. Zhu's father went off to drive the ox cart to earn money. Lately, he seemed to have grown fond of the job, setting out happily every day with the big black ox. Meeting all kinds of people—scholars, merchants, commoners, and wanderers—had broadened his perspective, and he had become noticeably more talkative.

Three days later, one afternoon, a county official arrived at their house, delivering a copied notice from Yingtian Prefecture.

"By the boundless grace of the Emperor, an edict is issued for the special examination... In accordance with the sacred decree, I shall oversee the imperial examination candidates at Yingtian on the twentieth of October. Those who have improved in their studies shall await the imperial exam; those who have neglected their studies shall be dismissed as commoners or officials; those who fail to appear without reason shall be strictly punished."

As expected, it was a supplementary examination. Fortunately, it was scheduled for the twentieth of October, and the location was Yingtian Prefecture. The imperial exam would be held shortly after, meaning Zhu Ping'an would not have to travel back and forth unnecessarily.

By his calculations, there were still about twenty days left before the exam.

Plenty of time.

A few more days passed, and the rice fields turned golden. The autumn breeze carried the scent of ripened grain, and the heavy stalks bowed their heads in gratitude to Mother Earth for her nourishment. As the wind blew across the fields, waves of golden rice swayed, rolling from the east to the west of Xiahe Village, bringing joy and contentment to its people.

Then, Xiahe Village became busy because Tianli's rice had ripened.

That day, Zhu Ping'an also changed into coarse cloth short clothes early in the morning, preparing to go to the fields with his parents and elder brother to harvest the rice.

"Brother, what are you doing? Hurry back and read your books." Zhu Pingchuan, his elder brother, had sharp eyes. As soon as he saw Zhu Ping'an change into coarse cloth short clothes, he immediately understood what his younger brother was up to and promptly ordered him to return to his room to study.

"Eh? I only looked away for a moment, and you already changed clothes. Stop messing around and go back to your books." Upon hearing this, his mother, Chen, also saw Zhu Ping'an stepping out of the room. She let out a surprised exclamation and, without hesitation, ordered him to return to his room to study.

"Zhi'er, you don't need to go. Your brother, your mother, and I are enough. These days are the busy farming season, so I won't be driving the cart." Father Zhu also insisted that Zhu Ping'an stay home to study. Although he always believed that boys should sweat and toil, now that the provincial examination was approaching, he thought it best for Zhu Ping'an to focus on his studies.

Dressed in coarse cloth short clothes, Zhu Ping'an walked up to his parents and elder brother with a silly grin. "I've been reading for too long; my arms and legs feel rusty. It's a good chance to stretch out in the fields. Besides, I've been studying at home these past few days and feel a bit weary. Consider it a break. I used to go to the fields before—this won't make a difference for just two days."

Over the years, the Zhu family had acquired more farmland. If his parents and elder brother were to handle the harvesting alone, who knew how long they would be busy?

"One more or one less doesn't matter." Chen was unwilling to let Zhu Ping'an go to the fields. "You're already a scholar; what's the point of working in the fields? Just go back to your books."

"Mother, I'm also a strong laborer. Besides, even the emperor himself goes to the fields at certain times to promote agriculture. How can I, just a scholar, do any less?" Zhu Ping'an grinned and took the sickle from his mother's hands.

"Reading one more day or one less day doesn't make a difference. I've already memorized the books, and I can recite them in my mind while working." Zhu Ping'an continued to argue.

His parents and elder brother couldn't persuade him, so they reluctantly agreed to let him come along—but only for one day. He wouldn't be allowed to do this again.

On the way, many villagers were surprised to see Zhu Ping'an dressed in coarse cloth, wearing a straw hat, and carrying a sickle. They were quite curious.

"Why is Master Zhu working in the fields?"

"Why is the scholar out here?"

The villagers, either out of curiosity or amusement, kept asking questions when they saw him.

"A scholar is still a person, and people need to eat. Even His Majesty sets an example by promoting agriculture, so how can I, a mere scholar, be any different? Besides, all my uncles and elders are toiling under the sun—how could I sit idly by?" Zhu Ping'an responded with a silly grin.

Once in the fields, Zhu Ping'an joined his parents and brother, sweating profusely as he harvested the rice.

The Zhu family's fields were next to the ancestral home's fields. In the ancestral home's fields, only his grandfather, third uncle, and Zhu Pingjun were working. Zhu Pingjun was only putting on a show, barely making an effort. After working half the day, he had barely harvested anything...

During the break, Zhu Ping'an learned that his fourth uncle had fallen ill again—this time from eating something bad the night before. Meanwhile, his eldest uncle, Zhu Shouren, was, as usual, staying at home reading...

Zhu Ping'an's grandfather, harvesting rice under the scorching sun, looked at his hardworking grandson in the distance and couldn't help but sigh. His eldest son had never engaged in farming, yet here was his grandson working diligently. Both were scholars, yet the difference between them was vast.

The harvested rice was loaded onto the Zhu family's ox cart. Their cart was relatively large and could carry more rice in one trip than others could in two. The ox cart transported the rice to the drying yard—a raised, flat area used for drying and threshing crops. Before use, these yards were flattened and compacted with a stone roller pulled by oxen, making them dry and level.

In Xiahe Village, the drying yards were connected, a layout planned by their ancestors hundreds of years ago. Every household placed their harvested rice there, spreading it out to dry. Once dry, oxen pulled stone rollers over it to thresh the grain. After a few more days of drying, the grain could be stored in the granaries.

From morning until night, Zhu Ping'an followed his parents and brother, harvesting rice all day. By bedtime, his arms were sore.

"Everything else is inferior—only studying is supreme," Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but sigh before falling asleep. He resolved to study even harder in the future.