

Rise 182

Chapter 182: Setting out on another journey

Who Knows the Hardships Behind Every Grain of Rice?

Since ancient times, farm work has been incredibly exhausting—facing the yellow earth with one's back to the sky, toiling away all day, only to end up with a sore back and aching waist. In the scorching autumn heat, harvesting rice in the paddies is both hot and tiring. After a full day of work, Zhu Ping'an finds himself drinking nearly two pots of water just to keep going. Without adequate hydration, such physical labor would be impossible. From morning till night, gripping the rice stalks leaves his hands red and painful, and his waist feels as if it no longer belongs to him.

Despite the hardships, when evening arrives and he sees the golden rice drying in their courtyard, a sense of fulfillment washes over him. Especially when he notices the smile on his mother's face as she tells his father that this year's harvest is better than the last—it makes Zhu Ping'an feel truly happy.

However, he only participated in the intense autumn harvest for two days before packing his bags and setting off on another journey of gains and growth.

Since everyone in the family was busy with the harvest and the sky had suddenly turned overcast, signaling impending rain, it was the perfect time to rush and gather crops. Because of this, Zhu Ping'an refused his father's offer to take him to town by ox cart. Instead, he chose to shoulder his luggage and walk to Kaoshan Town, where he planned to catch a carriage to Yingtian.

Even during the busy farming season, his mother, Chen, worked through the night to sew him two brand-new scholar's robes. Zhu Ping'an had grown taller, making his old clothes a bit too small. Besides the clothes, she also prepared a large package filled with dried meat, oil cakes, and pickled cucumbers—enough food to last him on the road.

Now, Zhu Ping'an was walking alone along the path to Kaoshan Town, carrying a heavy bag that made the journey rather strenuous.

Above him, the sky looked as if the heavens had accidentally overturned a black inkstone, as thick dark clouds swiftly covered half the sky.

Zhu Ping'an glanced up at the ominous clouds and instinctively pulled a bamboo umbrella from his bag—just in case.

Cling-clang, cling-clang. A string of camel bells jingled behind him.

At this time of year, who else would be heading toward town? Isn't everyone busy with the harvest? Zhu Ping'an muttered to himself as he moved to the side of the road.

The carriage rattled past him, kicking up a cloud of dust that made Zhu Ping'an hold his breath. There were actually two carriages traveling in a line, one after the other.

Just as the carriages disappeared into the distance, they suddenly turned back and stopped in front of Zhu Ping'an. A slender, jade-like hand gently lifted the curtain, revealing a mischievous yet charming face.

"Hehe, toad. It really is you. What, are you just hopping your way to the imperial exam?"

Li Shu, the black-bellied (scheming) young lady, covered her small cherry-like mouth as she chuckled, her bright eyes twinkling with amusement and mockery.

So arrogant yet proud. Every time Zhu Ping'an saw Li Shu acting like this, he had the urge to pull her over his knee and spank her.

"Good dogs don't block the road."

Zhu Ping'an gave the black-bellied young lady a glance and responded casually.

"You—!"

Li Shu's face instantly darkened. Her large, jet-black eyes glared at him fiercely.

From the front of the carriage, a little maid with round cheeks puffed up her face in protest. "Zhu Ping'an, how can you say such things? My lady was just being kind and offering you a ride!"

"Who would want to give this toad a ride!" Li Shu rolled her eyes and huffed, her delicate face still sour.

"But, my lady, just now you—" The little maid started to speak but quickly shut her mouth when Li Shu shot her a sharp glare.

Ha? Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but glance at the scheming young girl. Was this girl really that kind-hearted?

"What are you looking at? If you keep staring, I'll dig out your eyes and turn you into a blind toad!" The scheming young girl noticed Zhu Ping'an looking at her, glared at him fiercely, and bared her little tiger teeth in a threatening manner.

Sure enough, this scheming girl wasn't that cute after all!

"What are you standing there for? Drive the carriage! Let's go, let's go!" The scheming young girl suddenly lost her temper at the coachman in front.

With that, the two carriages jingled as they left in succession, kicking up a trail of dust as they went.

That annoying girl!

Going out with two carriages—one must be for her maids and attendants. She really knows how to enjoy life. Such a pampered young lady!

Zhu Ping'an muttered to himself, then carried his bag and continued walking.

However, before long, the two carriages turned around and came back, once again stopping in front of Zhu Ping'an.

"Get in. Just think of it as me doing a good deed. Hmph, if I weren't going to the temple to make a wish, I wouldn't bother bringing you along."

The scheming young girl wore a sullen expression, her face full of reluctance.

"Hurry up and get in! My lady is going to the temple to pray for our master's safety, and doing good deeds along the way makes the prayers more effective," the little maid, with a round face like a bun, poked her head out from the front and waved her little hand, urging Zhu Ping'an to board the carriage.

"Well then, thank you very much." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in thanks.

Just as he was about to get into the carriage, he suddenly heard the scheming young girl covering her nose in disgust.

"Ugh, who said you could get into this carriage? Don't you know men and women should keep their distance? Go to the other carriage! You smell!"

"Oh, my apologies." Zhu Ping'an belatedly realized his mistake and cupped his hands again in apology.

After that, he turned and went to the other carriage. The coachman helped him place his bag inside. Inside the carriage was only an old maid, and the offerings of incense and candles didn't take up much space. Even with Zhu Ping'an inside, there was still plenty of room.

This scheming young girl really was delicate. One carriage would have been enough, but she insisted on using two. She must have disliked the smell of the offerings.

The carriage moved quickly, reaching Kaoshan Town in less than half an hour. As soon as Zhu Ping'an got off the carriage and was about to thank the scheming young girl, she impatiently urged the coachman to drive off, disappearing with a whoosh.

By this time, the sky had grown even darker, filled with layers of thick clouds looming over Kaoshan Town. A strong east wind accompanied the dark clouds, rustling the trees on both sides of the road as if cheering the storm on.

Carrying his bag, Zhu Ping'an asked around the town for a carriage heading to Anqing Prefecture. This time, he didn't plan to take a carriage all the way to Yingtian. The last journey had been too bumpy. Instead, he intended to travel to Anqing first, then take a boat down the Yangtze River, which would be both faster and safer.

There weren't many carriages traveling from Kaoshan Town to Anqing. In ancient times, traveling required extra caution. After searching for a long time, Zhu Ping'an finally found a caravan heading to Anqing. This caravan regularly transported goods there and also took passengers along. They had been doing this for many years and were trustworthy.

Zhu Ping'an paid the fare and shared a carriage with two other people, joining a convoy of seven or eight carriages on the journey to Anqing Prefecture.

The weather was gloomy and stiflingly hot—it seemed like a heavy rainstorm was on the way.

He wondered if his parents had covered the harvested rice back home. But then again, he didn't need to worry. His parents had been farming for so many years; something like this wouldn't be a problem for them. This kind of weather wasn't unusual, and his parents had always handled it well. As long as one wasn't lazy, nothing was really a problem.

The carriages roared forward, heading straight for Anqing Prefecture.