

RISE OF THE POOR

Chapter 2: Luck and Possession

As the sun set halfway, the members of the Zhu family gathered in the main hall, and dinner was ready. The Zhu family had dinner at this time primarily to save on candle wax; after all, if they could take advantage of nature's bounty, why not?

In the middle of the Zhu family's upper room, a large table was set up, around which the family sat. The elder of the Zhu family, over fifty years old and still robust, sat at the center of the table, holding a hand-rolled cigarette in one hand. In front of him was a pile of boiled peanuts, beside which stood a cup of cloudy liquor. This contrasted sharply with the bowls of cornbread, wilted vegetable leaves, pickles, and thin porridge laid out on the table.

Sitting next to Old Master Zhu was his wife, Madam Liu, who was of a similar age. Although she had wrinkles on her face, she was neatly dressed, making it clear she was not someone to be trifled with. Next to Madam Liu sat the fourth uncle's family; Fourth Uncle Zhu Shouxin had just married Fourth Aunt Zhao this year. Fourth Uncle had the potential for a pretty boy, with looks that were perhaps the best in the Zhu family, having perfectly inherited Madam Liu's genes, which made him quite favored by her. Fourth Aunt wore a brand-

new skirt and blouse, her hair styled in the town's popular bun, adorned with a silver hairpin, and her earlobes graced with a string of valuable silver earrings.

Next to Old Master Zhu sat the family of his eldest son, Zhu Ping'an. Eldest Uncle Zhu Shouren was a middle-aged man, dressed in a semi-new scholar's robe. He had his hair tied up in a bun on his head, wrapped in a net scarf, giving off the impression of someone well-read in classical literature. Next to him was Aunt Wu, who was of a similar age, dressed in a semi-new blue floral gown, also neatly arranged. In Aunt Wu's arms was their late-arriving six-year-old son, Zhu Pingjun, whose brand-new clothes were covered in mud, with snot running from his nose and dirty hands.

Following them were Zhu Ping'an's parents. His father, Zhu Shouyi, had a bronze complexion and a robust build, typical of a farmer. Over these past few days, Zhu Ping'an had learned that his father was quite the jack-of-all-trades—he could hunt, do carpentry, and was also skilled in farming. However, his father had a particularly honest nature and could be described as rather dull-witted. Zhu Ping'an's elder brother, Zhu Pingchuan, was ten years old, nearly a replica of their father, sturdy and honest.

The third uncle resembled his father a lot; at first glance, one could tell he was an honest farmer. The third aunt was Zhang, who had just persuaded Chen at the door. The third uncle and aunt had been married for many years and only had a daughter, the timid little girl Zhu Pingyu, who was in her mother's arms.

In the small courtyard of the farmhouse, there were indeed quite a few rumors.

Eldest Uncle Zhu Shouren was a scholar; although he had tried for over ten years and never succeeded in the imperial examination, he was at least a student. To become a scholar, one had to pass three tests: the county, the provincial, and the academy exams. Eldest Uncle Zhu Shouren focused on studying and did not engage in agricultural production; after years of effort, he passed the county and provincial exams six years ago and earned the title of student. Although he never became a scholar afterward, it was still a long journey that had just begun. Old Master Zhu and Madam Liu held their eldest son in high regard, believing he was the hope of the Zhu family's glory, especially after he achieved the title of student, leading to even more favoritism toward his family. Fourth Uncle, being the youngest son, was pampered by Madam Liu, who also favored Fourth Aunt greatly. As for the families of Zhu Ping'an's father and third uncle, they received much less attention. With some family members being favored and others ignored, conflicts were bound to arise among them.

The favoritism of the elder and matron was quite obvious; one could see it just from their clothing. The Zhu family's four households displayed significant differences in attire. Eldest Uncle and Fourth Uncle's families wore relatively good, semi-new clothes, while Zhu Ping'an's and Third Uncle's families wore coarse, patched garments.

It seemed he needed to work hard; putting aside the ambition for glory, he at least wanted to ensure a better life for his own family first.

As Zhu Ping'an stepped into the house with his short legs, he noticed something strange: each Zhu family member had a white energy column above their heads. The white energy column above Eldest Uncle Zhu Shouren's head was denser than the others, but they were all white.

The sudden appearance of this phenomenon shocked Zhu Ping'an, and he quickly shook his head. When he closed his eyes and reopened them, the strange sight had vanished, and everyone looked normal again, with no white energy columns visible.

Strange—what just happened? That couldn't have been an illusion; his eyesight shouldn't have been faulty. It seemed a bit like the fortune described in novels. Could it be that he could see others' fortunes? The fact that he had crossed over and been reborn was already strange enough, so being able to see others' fortunes was understandable. But why couldn't he see anyone's fortunes now?

"Zhi'er, why are you just standing there? Come and eat!" His mother, Chen, saw Zhu Ping'an dazed at the door and couldn't help but remind him. Silly boy, if you don't come soon, your biased grandmother will give your portion to Eldest Uncle's and Fourth Uncle's family!

"Oh, oh, coming!" Zhu Ping'an quickly snapped back to reality and responded. Forget it; the fact that he could see others' fortunes was already bizarre, and it was normal for him to be confused for a moment.

Before eating, Zhu Ping'an still kept the habit from his previous life, scurrying towards the washbasin with his short legs to wash his hands.

This was somewhat unusual in the hygiene-lacking rural society of ancient times, especially since the village's little boys were all muddy, like Zhu Pingjun from his uncle's family, who was currently nestled in his aunt Wu's arms, sniffing. Ever since Zhu Ping'an came into this life as this little boy, he insisted on washing his hands and face. After more than ten days, he was clearly distinct from that group of snot-nosed kids, being a chubby little boy with a fair complexion and a round face, which was quite eye-catching.

"Little Zhi'er, after recovering from his illness, has really started to care about cleanliness; could he have been possessed?" Aunt Si covered her mouth with a handkerchief, her small eyes sizing up Zhu Ping'an as she spoke in a surprised tone.

Possessed?

Zhu Ping'an was clearly startled by Aunt Si's words. In this closed-minded, backward rural area, being suspected of possession could be a dangerous thing. Just think about Old Wang, who was force-fed a bowl of gray water for talking in his sleep! I've been careful not to display any thoughts that seem out of this world; it's just washing my hands! Aunt Si is truly an uneasy woman; she and my idle Uncle Si are a perfect match.

Zhu Ping'an was determined to keep to himself the fact that he could see luck and fortune; he wouldn't tell anyone.

Before he could figure out how to respond to Aunt Si's words, his mother, Chen, had already stepped in!

"Who are you calling possessed? I think you're the one who's possessed! My son just likes to be clean, and you say he's possessed? What about you? You wash your hands and face every day and often wear new clothes; doesn't that make you a fox spirit?" Hearing Aunt Zhao's words, Chen felt a surge of unnamed anger, standing up and taking two steps forward to stand in front of Aunt Zhao, demanding an explanation.

Zhu Ping'an's ten-year-old brother, Zhu Pingchuan, also spoke up, insisting that his brother wouldn't be possessed.

"Mother, look at how Second Sister-in-law is; I just said a casual remark, and she reacted like this," Aunt Zhao turned her gaze away from Chen, looking at Grandma Zhu with a pitiful expression, even wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, appearing delicate and miserable.

"Is that so? I only said one thing to you, and you start crying and making a fuss. How dramatic! Too bad I'm not Fourth Brother; I won't fall for your act! From the Fourth Family, you must clarify this today, or else I won't be happy," Chen coldly stated, her voice strong and spirited, in stark contrast to Aunt Zhao's soft, pitiful act.