

Rise 202

Chapter 202: Choosing a Son-in-Law from the Rankings

Despite being at the bottom, despite being the last, he was still a high ranking juren (a successful candidate in the provincial exam), and his status was vastly different.

Regardless of whether the scholars in the inn were jealous, envious, or looking at Zhu Ping'an with prejudice, a pass was still a pass. The scholars came over in twos and threes to congratulate Zhu Ping'an, and he stood up to return their greetings with a bow.

One wave of celebratory announcements after another swept past the entrance, leaving the scholars in the inn waiting anxiously.

However, they did not have to wait long before two more messengers entered the inn.

"Good news from the provincial exam! Congratulations to Master Zhu Shiming of Suzhou Prefecture for ranking 89th in the exam!"

Another scholar in the inn had passed the exam. He shared the same surname as Zhu Ping'an, but his ranking was much higher—89th place. Of course, he was also much older than Zhu Ping'an, at least in his forties.

The atmosphere in the inn completely shifted. Except for the chubby man, all the scholars who had gathered around Zhu Ping'an now swarmed toward Zhu Shiming, offering congratulations and trying to establish familial or friendly ties.

"Brother Zhu's juren title is not a matter of luck."

"Indeed. 'Sima Xiangru and Lin Xiangru share the same name, but they are not the same in reality.'"

Among those gathered around Zhu Shiming, some even subtly belittled Zhu Ping'an to elevate Zhu Shiming, implying that Zhu Ping'an's title was gained by luck, while Zhu Shiming was the real deal.

"What nonsense!" The chubby man was indignant, squinting disdainfully at those flattering Zhu Shiming.

"Why take it to heart? Come, let's go and offer our congratulations." Zhu Ping'an remained indifferent, the corners of his lips slightly curved in a faint smile. He stood up and spoke calmly to the chubby man.

When Zhu Ping'an and the chubby man went to congratulate Zhu Shiming, Zhu Ping'an noticed the arrogance and faint disdain in Zhu Shiming's eyes. Although Zhu Shiming responded with a courteous bow, his eyes did not lie.

"What's he so proud of? He's already halfway to the grave before finally passing the exam. He's not even worthy of carrying our shoes," the chubby man muttered after they returned to their seats, eyeing the smug Zhu Shiming with a curled lip.

Zhu Ping'an also looked at the triumphant Zhu Shiming, the corners of his mouth curving slightly as he shook his head. "A full vessel spills over"—his capacity was limited to this, nothing more.

It was just a provincial exam. The road to officialdom through studying was long and arduous—this was just the beginning.

"The rankings are being posted! The rankings are being posted!"

Before long, excited shouts rang out from outside the inn. The scholars inside rekindled their hopes. The messengers might not have delivered all the news yet—perhaps theirs was still on the way. With renewed anticipation, they rushed outside.

"Come on, let's take a look too!" The chubby man eagerly pulled Zhu Ping'an along to witness the rankings being posted in front of the Jiangnan Examination Hall.

This was a historic moment that Zhu Ping'an didn't want to miss, so he followed the chubby man toward the examination hall.

The Jiangnan Examination Hall was packed with people, bustling with activity and adorned with festive decorations. When Zhu Ping'an arrived, he saw that the crowd under the rankings board was in an uproar, as if they had been scalded by boiling water, shouting excitedly.

"Hurry, hurry! Someone is being chosen as a son-in-law under the rankings board!"

A mischievous shout clarified the commotion for Zhu Ping'an—it turned out that someone was being "captured" as a son-in-law. Intrigued, Zhu Ping'an found a stone to stand on and looked toward the lively crowd.

In the crowd, a young scholar dressed in the traditional student attire was being pulled by seven or eight uniformed servants. On the other side, an elderly gentleman, around fifty years old, stroked his beard as he observed the scene, occasionally instructing the servants, "This is an excellent son-in-law! Invite him to my home and reward him with ten taels of silver."

With such a generous reward, the servants were highly motivated, quickly pulling the young scholar into a sedan chair.

The elderly gentleman turned to the crowd with a smiling bow, while his servants scattered copper coins among the people as celebratory money. Then, he stepped into another sedan chair, carried by his attendants as they made their way home.

"Did you see that? The one being captured as a son-in-law is our very own Cao Yang, the jiejyuan (top scorer in the provincial exam) of Yingtian! How enviable! Do you know who that old gentleman is? He's none other than Zhao Darent, a fifth-rank assistant prefect of Yingtian Prefecture. And it's said that he has three daughters as beautiful as flowers... Tsk, tsk, tsk..."

"Today, one's name is inscribed on the golden roll; tomorrow, the bridal chamber is adorned with candlelight. Truly, I envy them. When I return, I must study diligently..."

"Ah, why is it not us?"

Hearing the voices of admiration, jealousy, and resentment around him, Zhu Ping'an immediately realized that the groom-to-be captured from the ranking board was none other than this year's top scorer, Cao Yang. The tradition of "capturing a son-in-law" was in full effect. However, while Cao Yang looked young, he was at least twenty-three or twenty-four years old. In ancient times, such an age was typically well past the usual marriageable period. Zhu Ping'an wondered how the top scholar would handle this situation.

Not far from the commotion, in the upper floor of a restaurant with a private room, two examiners dressed in plain clothes were drinking wine while observing the scene at the Jiangnan Examination Hall from the window.

"Haha, that Cao Yang should be thanking Brother Zhang," said Chief Examiner Wang, watching the spectacle below with amusement as he turned to Examiner Zhang.

Examiner Zhang shook his head with a bitter smile, unable to respond.

"He has gained a top scholar for nothing," Chief Examiner Wang said meaningfully, stroking his beard.

"Brother Wang, be careful with your words," Zhang replied with a wry smile, shaking his head.

"It's just the two of us here. Everyone else has gone to see the results. There's no need for caution. If you ask me, Brother Zhang, your idea was good, but your method was flawed. Someone who should have been the rightful top scholar was deliberately pushed to the bottom of the ranking..." Wang remarked while shaking his head.

"If he understands my intentions, he will one day be deeply grateful to me," Zhang said calmly as he stroked his beard. "There have been countless cases of wasted talent like the story of 'Injuring Zhongyong.' I do not want this young prodigy to become a cautionary tale for future generations."

"And how can you be certain that this young man is not already determined and diligent?" Wang questioned.

"I had no choice. Talents like him are the pillars of the nation. I did this to ensure nothing goes wrong," Zhang replied with a composed expression.

While the two examiners continued their conversation, more and more people gathered in front of the Jiangnan Examination Hall to check the results. Zhu Ping'an and his chubby companion managed to squeeze through the crowd and reach the ranking board.

First place: Cao Yang.

Second place: Xu Tianshou.

Third place: Liu Rucheng.

Fourth place: Yang Wendao.

Fifth place: Jiang Yuyou.

Sixth place: Li Yuze...

Zhu Ping'an craned his neck to scan the rankings. The names at the top were unfamiliar to him. It was only at the twentieth rank that he saw a familiar name—Wang Jin. Further down, at sixty-third and seventy-ninth, he spotted Liu Qian and Guo Ziyu. Beyond that, there were no more familiar names.

As for Feng Shanshui, Xia Luoming, and the others who usually studied with them, they were nowhere to be found on the list. Either they had been unable to take the exam or they had participated and failed.

"Young Master Zhou, it really is you!"

Hearing an excited voice, Zhu Ping'an turned his head and saw two familiar young women. One was a girl with her hair styled in a "falling-horse bun," while the other was a few years older.

"Young Master Zhou, don't be discouraged. You didn't pass this time, but next time, I'm sure you will!" The girl with the falling-horse bun blinked her sympathetic eyes and nervously pinched the hem of her sleeve as she consoled him.

The older girl had a similar expression.

"Young Master Zhou, hahaha..."

The chubby companion beside Zhu Ping'an burst into laughter, pointing at him.

"Hey! Don't you have any sympathy? How can you mock Young Master Zhou like this? You don't know how hard he worked... So what if he failed? Next time, he will surely succeed!" The girl with the falling-horse bun pouted in dissatisfaction, glaring at the chubby man.

"Congratulations, Brother Zhu."

At that moment, another voice came from behind. Xia Luoming, Feng Shanshui, and others approached, accompanied by Liu Qian and Guo Ziyu. Xia Luoming had a complicated expression as he congratulated Zhu Ping'an.

"You got lucky. Even though you're at the bottom of the list, at least you made it. You'd better burn some incense and thank your ancestors," Guo Ziyu said, his tone laced with sarcasm and arrogance. His attitude made it clear he did not think much of Zhu Ping'an's achievement.

"Zhu? Isn't Young Master Zhou's surname Zhou?" The girl with the falling-horse bun was stunned.

The older girl also gave Zhu Ping'an a deep look. However, when she noticed Xia Luoming and the others arriving, she quickly pulled the younger girl away before she could ask for confirmation. Earlier, they had been able to blend into the crowd while checking the rankings, but now that they were surrounded by scholars, they clearly felt out of place as courtesans.