

Rise 218

Chapter 218: Scholar Zhang's Visit

Erecting a monument requires an inscription. Since it is meant to inspire the future generations of Xiahe Village, the inscription must be particularly well-written. The village elders and the village chief were dissatisfied with the inscriptions provided by the stone carver. So, early in the morning, they came to Zhu Ping'an's house to discuss erecting the monument and the flagpole stone. However, their main purpose was to request Zhu Ping'an to write the inscription.

As a result, Zhu Ping'an's family had to leave their breakfast unfinished. They were escorted by the village elders, the village chief, and the villagers who had heard the news, heading toward the village center where the monument was to be erected.

Due to this event, Zhu Ping'an's father was unable to drive the ox cart as usual, so his eldest brother, Zhu Pingchuan, took over the task. By now, almost the entire town had become accustomed to, or even dependent on, the Zhu family's ox cart service.

At the center of Xiahe Village, there was an open space, with a towering banyan tree in the middle. This great banyan tree had a history of over a hundred years. Its roots twisted like coiling dragons, its bark cracked like aged rock, resembling an old man stroking his long beard. The thick branches extended and coiled in various forms, spreading out like a giant umbrella, creating an imposing and majestic sight.

Under this banyan tree, a stone monument about ten feet tall stood prominently. Surrounding the monument was a stone-built platform.

In the center of the monument, an inscription read: "Erected by Juren Zhu Ping'an in the 30th year of Jiajing, Xinhai Enke." The sides of the monument were left blank, waiting for an inscription to be engraved to inspire future generations.

By the time Zhu Ping'an and his group arrived at the banyan tree, dozens of villagers had already gathered. Since there was little entertainment in the village, this was a grand event for everyone. Many villagers brought their children along, seizing the opportunity to instill in them the idea of learning from Zhu Ping'an. The atmosphere was lively and full of excitement.

Shortly after Zhu Ping'an arrived, a villager came over and informed them that someone had come to visit the Zhu family.

Before the villager could finish speaking, a sedan chair wobbled into view, followed by two horse-drawn carriages filled with goods.

The procession was grand, and the villagers turned their heads to watch. Soon, the sedan chair reached Zhu Ping'an and the others, and a middle-aged man stepped out. He wore a green sunflower-patterned round-collared robe, a gauze cap on his head, and black boots on his feet.

This was Scholar Zhang, who was in mourning at home. He was from the neighboring town and in his forties. Previously, he had served as a county assistant in Wangjiang County. Last year, due to the passing of a family member, he returned home for mourning. Since his wife was from Kaoshan Town, he was quite familiar with the area. This time, as his wife visited her maiden home, Scholar Zhang accompanied her. Upon hearing about the thirteen-year-old Scholar Zhu from Kaoshan Town, he decided to pay a visit.

"Haha, I came uninvited. I hope I haven't caused any trouble for Young Master Zhu or your esteemed village." Scholar Zhang, having served in an official position, was skilled in social interactions. As soon as he stepped out of the sedan chair, he greeted Zhu Ping'an with a smiling face and a cupped-fist salute.

"It is a great honor for our Xiahe Village to welcome Scholar Zhang," the village chief responded swiftly. Being well-versed in social etiquette, he recognized Scholar Zhang and also feared that Zhu Ping'an might not know him, so he quickly stepped forward to extend a welcome.

Hearing the village chief's words, Zhu Ping'an understood that this visitor was a scholar named Zhang, who seemed to have a notable reputation in Kaoshan Town. Otherwise, the village chief would not have been so familiar with him.

"I have long admired Scholar Zhang's name but have never had the chance to meet you," Zhu Ping'an responded with a cupped-fist salute, displaying composure and grace.

Before Scholar Zhang's arrival, Zhu Ping'an's eldest uncle, Zhu Shouren, had maintained an air of arrogance in front of the villagers and Zhu Ping'an. However, upon seeing Scholar Zhang, he immediately straightened his posture, appearing respectful and proper, much like a schoolboy before his teacher. He wanted to step forward to greet Scholar Zhang but hesitated, fearing he might be ignored, leaving him feeling uneasy.

"I came in haste and did not prepare a lavish gift. I hope Young Master Zhu will not mind," Scholar Zhang said, cupping his hands. As he spoke, a servant handed him an envelope.

"Young Master Zhu has achieved the title of Juren at such a young age. Truly admirable! I have nothing valuable to offer but present 50 taels of silver along with some fruits and vegetables as a congratulatory gift. I hope Young Master Zhu will accept them." Scholar Zhang handed the envelope to Zhu Ping'an, offering his congratulations.

Fifty taels of silver! The villagers gasped, their eyes fixed on the envelope in Scholar Zhang's hand. Zhu Shouren, in particular, stared at it with intense longing.

Zhu Ping'an smiled and politely declined, "I cannot accept such a generous gift without merit."

Scholar Zhang insisted, pretending to be offended, "Does Young Master Zhu think it's too little?"

Zhu Ping'an shook his head and continued to decline.

"We will need to support each other in the future. If you continue to refuse, it will seem as though you look down on me," Scholar Zhang said, growing slightly emotional as he firmly placed the envelope in Zhu Ping'an's hand.

Unable to refuse any further, Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to accept it.

Scholar Zhang was satisfied, and after conversing with Zhu Ping'an, the village chief, and the village elders for a while, he became even more interested upon hearing that the village was erecting a monument and a flagpole stone in Zhu Ping'an's honor.

Since he had also experienced a similar honor from his clan in the past, he eagerly shared his insights, speaking at length. The village elders and the village chief found his advice highly valuable.

After making some minor adjustments to the design of the monument and the flagpole stone, the next step was to write the inscription and have it carved by a stonemason.

"Young Brother Zhu is talented and renowned across Southern Zhili. Writing an inscription is a simple matter for him. Encouraging future generations is a fortunate endeavor."

Upon learning that the inscription was still needed, Scholar Zhang suggested that Zhu Ping'an should write it himself. He was also curious about Zhu Ping'an's literary skills. Although Zhu Ping'an had ranked last among the Juren, rumors about Lord Zhao's son-in-law selection and the dramatic turn of events at the Deer Cry Banquet had piqued his curiosity.

At the mention of the inscription, Zhu Shouren seemed eager, as if he had secretly prepared something.

Originally, the inscription was meant to be written by Zhu Ping'an, but since Scholar Zhang was also present, it would be impolite to ignore him. The village elders and the village chief discussed the matter and sought Zhu Shouren's opinion.

"It is rare for Xiahe Village to have two scholars. Why not have both leave their calligraphy to inspire future generations?" the village chief suggested.

"With Young Brother Zhu here, I shall refrain," Scholar Zhang said with a smile, shaking his head.

"The monument needs an inscription, and the stone pillars also require calligraphy. Even the ancestral hall needs some inscriptions. Scholar Zhang, please do not decline."

After some persuasion, Scholar Zhang finally agreed, "I see that the monument has blank spaces on both sides, as do the stone pillars. Since we wish to encourage future generations, why don't we each write a couplet? Later, we can choose the best ones. The remaining pieces can serve as references for future use."

Scholar Zhang's suggestion delighted Zhu Shouren. Seeing Zhu Ping'an's success, he also wanted his own writing to be inscribed on the monument and preserved for posterity.

With Scholar Zhang's proposal accepted, the village chief arranged for several young men to bring out tables and chairs, setting up ink, brushes, and paper under the banyan tree. The literate villagers, including the village elders, the village chief, and Zhu Shouren, gathered with Zhu Ping'an and Scholar Zhang, preparing to write.