

Rise 221

Chapter 221: Going to the Li Family Again

"Why?"

Chen felt a bit distressed. Now that Zhu Ping'an had passed the imperial examination, he had already received so many congratulatory gifts in just half a day. In the future, there would surely be even more.

"The law stipulates that accepting gifts is equivalent to bribery..." Zhu Ping'an said softly.

Hearing this, Chen suddenly felt as if the silver notes and land deeds in her hands were burning hot. Without a second thought, she threw them onto the bed.

"Then I'll hurry and return them all."

Although reluctant, Chen was eager to return everything. In her heart, her son was her top priority—his future couldn't be jeopardized because of these gifts.

"This time, it's fine. It still counts as social courtesy. But in the future, it's best not to accept them. Don't worry, Mother, I will take good care of you. Even without these gifts, I will make sure you eat well and dress warmly."

Seeing his mother's hesitation yet urgency in wanting to return the gifts, Zhu Ping'an smiled and reassured her.

"Are you sure it's really fine this time?" Chen picked up the silver notes and land deeds again, looking at him with hopeful eyes.

Zhu Ping'an nodded.

"Then I'll keep them for you." Chen's expression instantly brightened, and she happily tucked everything under the pillow, planning to hide them properly later when no one was around.

Zhu Ping'an had his own thoughts regarding the villagers who had come to offer themselves as servants. After discussing it briefly with his mother, he stepped outside into the courtyard.

"I truly appreciate your kindness, uncles and elders. But as you can see, my home is small, with only a few rooms and a tiny courtyard. I really don't need household servants or chefs. If I ever do in the future, I will certainly trouble you all then."

As Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands and explained this to the villagers, many who had come hoping to become his household servants or attendants felt somewhat disappointed. However, those who had come to donate land were delighted with his response.

For these villagers, donating land was merely a way to avoid taxes and labor levies. Their lives were tough, and they were burdened by heavy corvée labor and taxes. Donating their land was beneficial for them. Thus, Zhu Ping'an accepted their land donations.

Though the imperial court strictly prohibited land donations, they were still widespread. However, if discovered, there would still be consequences. Zhu Ping'an was meticulous in his actions, ensuring nothing could be used against him. He made two contracts with the villagers donating their land.

The first was a land sale contract—a genuine contract, but one that did not need to be executed, avoiding the issue of direct land donation.

The second was a tenant farming contract, which generally read as follows:

"Tenant Liu Erniu agrees to farm a certain amount of land under Zhu Ping'an's name, with an agreed-upon annual rent. In case of drought or flooding, the rent will be reduced accordingly. After the autumn harvest, the rent must be paid on time. This agreement is perpetual, with no time limit. This document serves as proof."

The villagers were overjoyed to receive this tenant farming contract. Officially, they had donated their land, but in reality, they still farmed it themselves. To further reassure them, Zhu Ping'an added a clause in the contract: "Perpetual tenancy with no time limit." This essentially meant the land was still theirs in practice.

"What's the usual rent?"

Zhu Ping'an asked while drafting the contract.

"One-tenth."

"Two-tenths."

The villagers gave mixed responses and looked at each other. A one-tenth rent meant they would pay 10% of their harvest as rent, while a two-tenths rent meant 20%. Typically, the Ming dynasty's official agricultural tax was below 10%, but landless tenant farmers also had to pay additional rent to landlords. Some greedy landlords charged as high as 30% or even 50%. The differences in the villagers' answers likely reflected the variation among landlords.

After hearing their responses, Zhu Ping'an set the rent in the tenant contract at 5%, half of the lowest rent they mentioned.

Such a low rent nearly brought the villagers to tears with gratitude. They repeatedly thanked Zhu Ping'an.

Seeing them so thankful, despite the fact that he had just gained nearly a hundred acres of land for free and was still collecting rent, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed—almost as if he were hearing that classic line from Fan Wei's comedy: "Thank you so much."

After lunch, to avoid more people coming with gifts or land donations, Zhu Ping'an slung his book bag over his shoulder and headed to Shanghe Village to stay away for a while.

Before he left, his mother, Chen, instructed him to say he was studying for the upcoming metropolitan examination if anyone came looking for him.

"Master Zhu has arrived! Congratulations on passing the imperial exam. Please, come in. It's cold outside—warm your hands by the fire!"

The gatekeeper of the wealthy Li family, Uncle Li, was more enthusiastic than ever. He even carried a small iron stove as he opened the door, immediately handing it to Zhu Ping'an.

After much difficulty in escaping Uncle Li's enthusiasm, Zhu Ping'an walked toward the study. The study's door was closed, so he knocked. Soon, he heard footsteps approaching, and someone opened the door.

A round-faced little maid peeked out from inside the study. When she saw Zhu Ping'an, her small mouth opened into a perfect circle in surprise.

"Zhu Ping'an... Master."

The round-faced little maid, Hua'er, instinctively called him by his name. But the moment she did, she remembered that Zhu Ping'an was now a Juren (a degree-holder in the imperial exams), so she quickly added the word "Master" at the end, feeling somewhat flustered.

Calling him "Master" felt incredibly awkward, and Hua'er scrunched up her round face.

"Just call me by my name." Zhu Ping'an's mouth twitched slightly.

"You said it yourself—don't regret it later." The round-faced maid Hua'er happily complied, her eyes curving into crescents.

"Hua'er, you naughty girl, you're letting the cold wind in."

At that moment, a lazy yet melodious female voice came from inside the study. It sounded like a lark flying into a warm room on a winter day.

"Miss, Zhu Ping'an is here to borrow books." The little maid Hua'er explained to her mistress, then turned her head and quickly whispered to Zhu Ping'an, "Hurry up and come in."

Zhu Ping'an nodded and stepped inside. Hua'er swiftly shut the door and lifted her skirt as she skipped over to her mistress.

Inside the study, it felt like a completely different season compared to the outside. Several charcoal braziers filled the room with warmth, making Zhu Ping'an feel comfortable as soon as he entered.

"Oh? I thought someone had passed the imperial exam and now looked down on the Li family's doorstep."

The same lazy female voice spoke again, full of sarcasm.

Zhu Ping'an looked up and saw a young girl with bright eyes and white teeth reclining on a couch covered with some kind of animal fur. She was rolling her eyes at him.

Besides this eye-rolling girl and the round-faced maid Hua'er, there were also two older maids and two other servants tending to the charcoal braziers and working on embroidery.

"Why aren't you saying anything? Did I hit the nail on the head? Hmph, it's just a Juren—what's there to be so proud of?"

The girl rolled her eyes again and mocked him once more.

