

## Rise 226

Chapter 226: With a home like this, what else could one ask for?

The north wind was blowing outside, and the night was especially cold.

After clearing the dinner table, Chen returned to the bedroom looking a bit distracted. When Father Zhu placed the prepared foot-washing water in front of her, she nearly tipped over the basin while washing her feet.

"Our family isn't short on money. Lending some to Elder Brother is fine. He said he would repay it," Father Zhu assumed Chen was upset about the ten taels of silver they had lent to his older brother Zhu Shouren earlier that evening and tried to comfort her.

"Who knows when that will be, maybe not until the Year of the Monkey," Chen curled her lips. "I'm not counting on your brother to repay it anyway. I watched Jun'er grow up too. Since he's getting engaged, it's only right that we help out with some money."

Father Zhu gave an awkward smile at her words. He also knew what his elder brother was like—none of the previous loans had ever been repaid. In fact, his brother never even brought them up again.

"Husband, Jun'er is already getting engaged. Do you think it's time we arrange something for our Zhi'er too..." Chen finished washing her feet hastily, then looked at Father Zhu, eyes shining as she asked.

"No rush. Jun'er is a year older than Zhi'er anyway. Besides, Zhi'er is about to head to the capital for the imperial examination. Let's not distract him."

Only then did Father Zhu realize that Chen's absentmindedness wasn't about the money—they were her thoughts on Zhi'er's marriage. After thinking it over, he shook his head, then bent down and brought the basin of water she had used in front of him. Taking off his shoes, he washed his feet in the same water.

"You're right. Zhi'er's just returned home for a few days, and now he's already preparing to leave for the capital."

Chen thought of how Zhu Ping'an would soon be going to the capital for the imperial exams. If anything interfered with that, it wouldn't be good. So she temporarily set aside the idea of arranging a marriage for him.

In another room, Zhu Ping'an had no idea that he had narrowly escaped being matched for marriage. At the moment, he was sitting at the desk by the window. Using the light of an oil lamp, he was flipping through books he had borrowed from the wealthy Li family—reading for a while, then copying for a while. When his hands got too cold to bear, he would tuck them into his sleeves to warm up before continuing.

At first, Zhu Ping'an really treated the Eight-Legged Essay as nothing more than a tool for the civil service examination, and held a critical attitude toward it. But after reading and studying more, he gradually began to feel admiration and reverence.

The Eight-Legged Essay lacked the romantic charm of Song poetry and the heroic grandeur of Tang poetry, but it had a unique rigor of thought. It could still be majestic, elegant, even richly expressive and grand in scope. Despite being restricted to the rigid format of the Eight-Legged style, it still left room for innovation and individuality for those truly knowledgeable and talented.

Most importantly, it was a ladder for poor scholars to climb the ranks. After long nights of bitter study under dim lamps, there was still the joy of seeing one's name on the honor roll.

After copying a model Eight-Legged Essay, Zhu Ping'an carefully studied it, comparing its structure and writing style with his own previous attempts. He drew out the essence, searched for flaws, and felt he gained a lot from the process.

After finishing that essay, Zhu Ping'an picked up his brush and began writing a new one. But halfway through, the oil lamp suddenly went out.

The windows were shut tight—no wind could have come in. Yet the lamp went out without warning.

Outside, it was a deep and silent night. The sound of the wind was eerie, almost like ghostly wails.

Could it be...?

Zhu Ping'an reached for the oil lamp. His body froze.

"Sigh..."

Just then, a sigh drifted softly through the room.

"No more oil in the lamp,"

Zhu Ping'an paused, then sighed himself. He had noticed days ago that the oil in the lamp was running low, but forgot to refill it. Now the oil was completely gone. Yet his thoughts were flowing and he was only halfway through the essay. The feeling was like being interrupted halfway through a passionate moment between lovers—cut off at the most crucial point.

Left with no choice, Zhu Ping'an put on a thick coat, picked up the lamp, and headed toward the kitchen. His mother kept the lamp oil in the kitchen, so he had to go there to refill it.

Outside, the night was deep and silent. The moonlight was faint but just enough to see his feet.

Zhu Ping'an entered the kitchen, lit the kitchen lamp using a firestone, and used that light to refill his own lamp. Then he lit his lamp and blew out the kitchen one.

Just as Zhu Ping'an stepped out of the kitchen holding the lamp, he saw a dark figure standing at the door. It appeared there suddenly and unnaturally under the moonlight.

Zhu Ping'an nearly threw the oil lamp in his hand to the ground.

"Zhi'er, it's you. I thought a thief had broken into the house. Why aren't you asleep yet?" came the voice of Father Zhu.

Dad, don't you know this kind of thing could scare someone to death?

Zhu Ping'an looked at his father with a face full of grievance, shook the oil lamp in his hand, and said, "Dad, the oil in my lamp ran out just now, so I came over to add some more."

"It's nearly midnight now, don't stay up reading anymore. Go to sleep, Zhi'er." The door to the main room opened, and his mother, Chen, stood at the door yawning as she spoke.

"Mm, I know, Mom. I'll go to sleep now," Zhu Ping'an responded.

Father Zhu and Chen went back to their room to rest. Zhu Ping'an carried the oil lamp back into his bedroom, placed it on the table, sat down, and continued writing the Eight-Legged Essay that he hadn't finished.

The next morning, when Chen got out of bed, she looked through the window and saw that Zhu Ping'an—who had gone to bed late the night before—was already sitting in front of the big stone in the courtyard practicing his calligraphy. She couldn't help but feel heartache. Why is this silly child up so early? Did he even sleep well last night?

Seeing how diligently Zhi'er was studying, Chen really didn't have the heart to disturb him again. She put aside the thought she'd had about arranging a marriage proposal for him.

"Go catch one of the old hens in the coop and slaughter it to make soup," Chen turned from the window and said to Father Zhu, who was getting out of bed.

"Didn't Old Zhang's family just bring us a cleaned rooster yesterday?" Father Zhu said while putting on his shoes.

"A rooster doesn't nourish like one of our old hens. I saw Zhi'er up again so early today, and I don't even know what time he went to bed last night. He needs a good tonic," Chen said, her voice full of tenderness as she looked at Zhu Ping'an studying outside the window.

"As long as you don't mind the loss, that's fine," Father Zhu chuckled.

"Just do what I say. You talk too much—are you a grown man or not?" Chen gave Father Zhu a fierce glare.

"You don't know whether I'm a grown man or not...?" Father Zhu muttered ambiguously.

"What nonsense are you talking about!"

Before he could finish, Chen blushed and pinched his arm hard.

Father Zhu didn't cry out in pain; instead, he grinned foolishly.

"What are you smiling at? Go empty the chamber pot!" Chen blushed again, shot him a glare, turned her head away, and went off to cook.

Zhu Ping'an was practicing calligraphy on the stone when he suddenly heard a commotion from the chicken coop—feathers flying, chickens squawking. He turned his head and saw his father with a few chicken feathers stuck to his head, grabbing an old hen, murmuring, "Easy, little chicken, don't panic," then quickly and skillfully slit its throat, dipped it in hot water, plucked the feathers, gutted and cleaned it—all in one smooth sequence. Then he carried the white, cleaned chicken to the kitchen to show off his efforts to Chen...

It was clear that his mother was going to prepare a special meal for him.

With a family like this, what more could a man ask for?

Zhu Ping'an felt full of energy, and his brush strokes flowed like running water—everything felt smooth and effortless.