

Rise 252

Chapter 252: Beneath the Feet of the Son of Heaven

The ancients once said, "A sachet quietly untied, a silk belt gently parted."

In feudal society, in this Ming Dynasty, sachets were considered intimate objects for women. Typically, only sisters would sew sachets or pouches for their brothers, or wives for their husbands—these were for family members. If an unmarried young lady suddenly sewed a sachet for a young man, it was considered a romantic gesture and would be looked down upon and despised by others. If they ended up married, it was fine; but if not, it would be utterly disgraceful. In more severe cases, one might be scolded directly to their face. In more conservative and strict places, one might even be punished by being drowned in a pig cage.

Therefore, when he saw a sachet being stuffed through the door crack, Zhu Ping'an smiled bitterly, bent down to pick it up, then opened the door and placed the sachet back on the windowsill next door.

After returning to his room again, Zhu Ping'an closed the door and used a straw cushion in the room to tightly seal the door crack, preventing the girl next door from tossing the sachet in again.

It was like playing hide-and-seek. Not long after Zhu Ping'an returned to his room, he heard rustling at the door again, but since the door crack was now firmly blocked, the girl was unable to stuff the sachet through this time.

Finally, there was silence.

By the light of the lamp, Zhu Ping'an leaned over his desk and recorded his observations from the past few days, then took out a book and began to read silently.

The temple walls were thin and not soundproof.

Soon, noises came again from the next room. The wall was lightly knocked a few times, and after a while, there came exaggerated sounds of splashing water and bathing...

Zhu Ping'an was unmoved, continuing to read his book, until he became drowsy and could no longer resist sleep. Only then did he extinguish the oil lamp and fall into a deep sleep.

Early the next morning, Zhu Ping'an rose with the sun. After tidying up, he went down the mountain and continued on his journey.

When the girl from the Wang family next door woke up, carefully dressed up, and knocked on Zhu Ping'an's door to invite him to breakfast with her family, she found that the room was already empty—Zhu Ping'an had left.

"This bookworm!"

Looking at the empty room, the Wang family girl's face darkened with anger. All the scholars she had met before would always peek at her sneakily, but this fool always acted with strict propriety no matter where he went—like a stereotypical bookworm. Was he even a man?! Or was it that the little fool didn't yet understand the ways between men and women?

It's all Father's fault. He insisted I come!

Ashamed and angry, the Wang family girl stomped her foot and twisted her slender waist as she returned to her room. Still, her father would surely blame her again for not being as good as her older sister!

After descending Longquan Mountain, Zhu Ping'an rode north, eating and sleeping in the open air. After days of travel, he had become much darker and thinner—but also noticeably stronger. If not for the scholar's robe he wore, few would associate him with a scholar. Just from appearance alone, he now looked no different from an ordinary and honest farm boy.

The clothes he wore had been washed many times, becoming plain and unremarkable.

He believed that, by now, he would no longer encounter any admiration from girls like he did at Longquan Temple.

"With the sound of firecrackers, another year departs;

Spring breezes bring warmth to the Tusu wine.

At every door and window under the rising sun,

New peachwood charms replace the old ones."

Today was New Year's Eve. Tomorrow would be the start of a new year. The final night of the year was especially precious. Every household had hung up lanterns, and the outdoors were bright and festive. Families would sit together, gazing at the night sky and looking forward to the new year.

Zhu Ping'an sat at a window-side desk in an old inn in the ancient city of Chengwu County, watching the bright night sky outside. He listened to the constant sound of firecrackers and the joyful shouting of mischievous children and couldn't help but miss his family far away in Xiahe Village.

Even though I'm not there for New Year this year, at least there's now a sister-in-law. Mother and Father should still be happy.

He dipped his brush in ink and wrote late into the night again.

On the first day of the new year, Zhu Ping'an continued his journey. The scenery along the way reflected the northern land's beauty, but after two days of travel, he began to encounter scattered groups of ragged refugees. They carried their wives and children, their faces showing signs of hunger. At first, they came in twos and threes, but soon they appeared in larger groups.

"The prefectural city is sealed. We can only try our luck in other county towns."

"Damn those corrupt officials! The grain in the granaries is full of worms, yet they won't give us a single bite."

"May those cursed bastards die a thousand deaths..."

Zhu Ping'an, walking along the road, could constantly hear the voices of refugees cursing the county officials of Jun County. After asking an elderly man, he came to understand the gist of the situation: unlike previous winters when the water flow of the Yellow River greatly diminished, for some unknown reason this year, the water volume had not decreased much. Moreover, floating ice on the river blocked the upstream waterway, forming a barrier lake. The dikes couldn't withstand the pressure and overflowed. The areas of Juye and Jiaxiang were the most severely affected. Since such flooding had never occurred in winter before, neither the residents nor the officials had taken precautions. Caught off guard, the disaster was even more devastating.

The disaster victims from Juye traveled north to Jun County seeking food and refuge, but the county officials closed the city gates, set up roadblocks, and forbade the refugees from entering Juye. Helpless, the refugees had no choice but to head south in search of survival. Along the way, the bark had been stripped from trees to stave off hunger. The line of refugees stretched endlessly, as far as the eye could see.

Fortunately, it had only been a few days since the Yellow River flooded, so the group of refugees Zhu Ping'an encountered were merely the vanguard. The respected elders and village chiefs among them were still able to maintain order, so the refugees remained relatively disciplined.

Even so, many of them stared at Zhu Ping'an, who was riding a horse with a pack on his back, their eyes gleaming green like wolves.

Zhu Ping'an divided more than half of the jerky and rations he carried and gave them to the leading elder and village chief of the group. Then, without hesitation, he turned his horse around, whipped it into a gallop, and rode ahead of the refugees toward the south. Afterward, he veered east for several days, making a wide detour around the disaster area before continuing north.

"A gentleman does not stand beside a crumbling wall," and now was no time for a woman's soft-heartedness.

Yet in the days that followed, the scenes of starving people gnawing on tree bark and pulling up grass roots played over and over in his mind. The refugees at the front at least had bark and roots to eat—what about those behind them?

"In times of prosperity, the people suffer; in times of collapse, the people suffer."

Only by witnessing such scenes firsthand could one truly understand the poet's lament.

Heading northward for several more days, the sorrow gradually faded. After over a month of traveling, dusty and weary, he passed through Qufu, Tai'an, Jinan, and Cangzhou, finally arriving at Tianjin Guard.

If the capital was considered the foot of the Son of Heaven, then Tianjin Guard was just one step away. Years ago, Prince Yan, Zhu Di, had crossed the Grand Canal here when he marched south to seize the throne. After becoming emperor, Zhu Di renamed the place "Tianjin" on the 21st day of the eleventh month in the second year of the Yongle reign, to commemorate the beginning of his "Jingnan Campaign"—the name meant "the ford crossed by the Son of Heaven."

Tianjin Guard was a military administrative region, but by now it was a mix of soldiers and civilians. Due to its strategic position guarding the approach to the capital, it had a large flow of goods and people and was quite bustling.

Upon entering Tianjin, Zhu Ping'an headed to the post station, only to leave disappointed.

Being so close to the capital, the post station was extremely busy. Officials returning from the capital and those heading there to report for duty had already filled it completely. To the staff, Zhu Ping'an—just a minor provincial degree-holder—was not worth paying attention to.

"A mere licentiate wants to stay at the post station? How ridiculous." An official traveling from the provinces to the capital mocked him incessantly.

Even the clerks at the station cast disdainful glances at him.

Was that really necessary?

Zhu Ping'an led his horse, glanced back at the post station, smiled and shook his head, then mounted up and rode off to find an inn for the night.