

Rise 261

Chapter 261: Another Encounter with a Celebrity

After Zhu Ping'an finished responding to the couplets, the entire inn fell into silence.

The six couplets had already been displayed in the inn for two days. Today was the third day. Previously, the best record had only been matching three couplets. It was precisely because of this that many scholars and literary enthusiasts had been drawn in to try their hand.

Everyone in the hall was deeply immersed in thought, racking their brains, hoping to stand out by solving three or even four couplets.

But in the blink of an eye, the record was broken—and nearly to the extreme: all six couplets were answered in one go, with fluent and spontaneous replies; the first couplet alone had been answered with seven different matching lines.

However, no matter how hard they tried, no one could connect that poor country bumpkin with the person who had just broken the record!

In everyone's minds, the one who could set such a record had to be refined and scholarly, with a dignified appearance. Yet here he was—a youth with dark skin, plain looks, dressed in shabby clothes, and clearly greedy and unrefined. When he was eating just now, he looked like he hadn't eaten in eight generations—utterly disgraceful.

The contrast in imagery was simply too great.

For a while, everyone found it hard to accept, stunned on the spot.

Of course, there were exceptions. For instance, two well-dressed youths now approached Zhu Ping'an's table together. Leading the way was a youth in refined attire, followed closely behind by another youth named Wensheng. Both appeared to be in their early twenties—just around the age of a recent college graduate in modern terms—and still looked somewhat inexperienced.

"I am Zhang Siwei from Puzhou, and this is Wang Shizhen from Suzhou. May I ask what this young brother is called?"

The speaking youth introduced himself as Zhang Siwei. He wore a black satin robe with silver hibiscus flower patterns lining the edges, and his thick black hair was tied up with a gentle mutton-fat jade hairpin. His facial features were handsome, giving off a somewhat unrestrained air, but the gleam in his eyes made it clear he wasn't someone to be underestimated.

The young man beside him, Wang Shizhen, was also striking in appearance, dressed in spotless white robes, looking like a refined gentleman straight out of a book of poetry. He gave off a well-behaved, model-student vibe.

When these two approached, Zhu Ping'an initially didn't feel much. But after hearing the name "Zhang Siwei," he was stunned.

Zhang Siwei!

Wang Shizhen!

How could he not be shocked? These were the second and third famous historical figures he had encountered, after Zhao Wenhua. And in terms of reputation and influence, they were no less significant.

Zhang Siwei was a Grand Secretary of the Ming dynasty. After Zhang Juzheng passed away, this guy took over. Although he scrapped all of Zhang Juzheng's policies the moment he came into power, he still held the top position in government. Zhu Ping'an had once summarized Zhang Siwei as an upgraded fusion of Sima Yi and Gou Jian!

As for Wang Shizhen, though he held a lower official rank, he was even more famous than Zhang Siwei. Ever heard of "Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng"? That was his pen name. Yet looking at this model-student-like Wang Shizhen, Zhu Ping'an found it hard to believe he was the same person who wrote the world's "Number One Bizarre Book," *Jin Ping Mei* (The Plum in the Golden Vase). He couldn't imagine what must have happened for such a moralistic man to write such a sensational novel.

Of course, historically, there is no clear evidence to prove that Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng is indeed Wang Shizhen, so there is some controversy. However, who could have known that I would be in the period when this strange book was born, just in time to help later generations confirm this?

For a moment, countless thoughts flooded into Zhu Ping'an's mind.

“Ahem, this young brother?” Wang Shizhen saw that Zhu Ping’an had not responded and couldn’t help but cough before asking.

“Oh. I am Zhu Ping’an from Xiahe. I have never seen such imposing people like you two before, and for a moment, I was a little dazed. Please pardon my manners.” Zhu Ping’an cupped his hands and explained calmly.

“Imposing? What are you talking about? Just now, Brother Zhu, your eloquence was like flowing water, responding smoothly without hesitation—that’s true imposingness. Don’t mind me, I could only come up with two couplets,” Zhang Siwei said, shaking his head with a smile.

“I too have only come up with three couplets,” Wang Shizhen also smiled wryly, shaking his head.

“I was just lucky,” Zhu Ping’an smiled slightly, then gestured for Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen to sit down. He poured two cups of tea and placed them in front of the two.

“Brother Zhu, don’t be modest,” Zhang Siwei said as he sat down and picked up the tea cup. “It’s no luck to come up with six couplets like that.”

“Especially the third couplet, ‘Lonely is the cold window guarding the widow; far and near, the road leads to freedom.’ I thought long and hard about it and only had a rough idea. But Brother Zhu, you effortlessly came up with the second line, and it really makes me feel ashamed.”

Wang Shizhen shook his head and sighed.

Wang Shizhen’s literary talent was extraordinary. He was born into the Wang family of Taicang, which was renowned for its scholarly and noble traditions. The Wang family was a branch of the Langya Wang family, which had produced generations of officials during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the family had long settled in Tonglu, Zhejiang. The family produced many notable figures, such as the governor Qu Feng during the Tang dynasty, the official Ren Gao during the Five Dynasties, and the imperial advisor Jin during the Song dynasty. Wang Shizhen was raised in such a prestigious official family, receiving excellent education from a young age. His parents hired scholars like Wang Cai and Luo Jujing, both of whom were highly educated and held the title of Jinshi, to teach him, enabling him to excel in his studies and sharpen his intellectual abilities. Among his peers, he was regarded as the most talented in literature and eloquence.

With such impressive literary skills, Wang Shizhen only came up with three couplets. However, Zhu Ping’an effortlessly recited six complete couplets.

So when Wang Shizhen heard Zhu Ping’an describe it as “luck,” he couldn’t help but smile wryly.

The three sat together at the table, chatting and drinking tea. Unknowingly, Zhu Ping’an became quite familiar with the two, and they began to exchange their courtesy names. Zhang Siwei’s courtesy name was Ziwei, while Wang Shizhen’s was Ziyuanmei, and he had a childhood nickname “Wensheng” because, when he was young, he grabbed a book during a drawing game and wouldn’t let go, so his family gave him the nickname. Of course, Zhu Ping’an also shared his courtesy name “Zihou” with them.

During the conversation, they learned that Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen were of the same age, though Wang Shizhen was born a month earlier. The two had known each other for a long time, and they had both passed the imperial examination three years ago. This time, they had come together to participate in the Enke Imperial Examination.

When the two learned that Zhu Ping'an had also come to participate in the Enke Imperial Examination, their expressions were quite remarkable.

"Zihou, truly the youth is to be feared," they said.

Through their conversation, they learned that Zhu Ping'an was only fourteen years old this year. Despite being only fourteen, he had come to participate in the examination. Though he had benefited from the Enke system, passing both the Student Examination and the Provincial Examination at such a young age was an extremely rare achievement. Even with their own talents, they couldn't help but acknowledge that the youth was indeed to be feared.