

Rise 267

Chapter 267: The Imperial Examination Arrives Unexpectedly

Zhu Ping'an returned to the inn and began a secluded life of studying. Other examinees generally still attended poetry gatherings, poetry societies, and assemblies to gain some fame, but Zhu Ping'an did not participate in any of these.

Except for a few occasional joint visits by Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, Zhu Ping'an stayed in his inn room, secluded and focused on reading.

The few times Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen visited, they took Zhu Ping'an on tours around Jingmu City, focusing on the southwestern part of the city, the Gongyuan (Imperial Examination Hall). They strolled through Biguan Alley, Liyu Alley, and Lutizi Alley. Biguan Alley, as the name suggests, was a street selling pens and paper; Liyu Alley and Lutizi Alley were places where examinees lodged.

Liyu Alley was originally a small alley, first called "Old Man Alley." Examinees who entered the capital with money mostly rode donkeys and stayed in Lutizi Alley. Legend has it that during one imperial examination, a poor examinee had no money and came on foot, traveling day and night. Because he arrived late, all the lodgings were fully booked. An elderly man living near the Gongyuan in Old Man Alley took him in. Three days before the exam, a sudden torrential rainstorm broke out. A thunderclap startled everyone, and then a golden, shining white carp leapt from the clouds and landed on the street where the Henan examinees temporarily stayed. After another thunderclap, the carp soared into the air, flying directly towards the examination hall inside the Gongyuan... Hence, the elders said, this was the "Carp leaping over the Dragon Gate."

Three days later, the exam began, and the poor examinee indeed passed the exam with honors. This examinee was very grateful and, after the results were published, immediately went to thank the elderly man who had helped him and erected a large commemorative archway for him. Since then, Liyu Alley became

famous, and during every imperial examination period, scholars from all over the country gathered there to seek good luck.

Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen lived in Liyu Alley. The two rented a private compound, which naturally cost quite a lot. Each brought two maids and one book boy to serve them.

As the exam approached, Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen visited less and less frequently. Especially inspired by Zhu Ping'an's secluded study, the two gradually declined invitations to poetry meetings and gatherings, devoting themselves to preparations for the imperial examination.

Zhu Ping'an seemed to have returned to his own old exam days, not stepping outside. He studied diligently, with three meals a day delivered punctually by the inn's waiter. This was the waiter's own initiative, and the meals were well-prepared, served on time, with an excellent balance of meat and vegetables.

One day, Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen arrived together once again. They invited Zhu Ping'an to go to the yamen (government office) to register for the exam. Zhu Ping'an's secluded study lasted only half a month before it had to end because the imperial examination was about to begin. Zhu Ping'an had initially miscalculated the exam date — the Ming dynasty's imperial exams were held in February, but he had remembered March, the later Qing dynasty date.

The imperial examination was hosted by the Ministry of Rites, following a process similar to the provincial exam. First, candidates had to register, which was akin to modern exam registration, and then take the exam. After all, the exam gathered candidates from all over the country, and without registration, the officials wouldn't know how many were actually participating.

"Have you heard? This imperial exam is said to admit 400 candidates, nearly a hundred more than previous years,"

On the way to register, Zhang Siwei suddenly looked mysterious and excited as he told Zhu Ping'an and Wang Shizhen.

"Ziwei, your news is really reliable," Zhu Ping'an said admiringly.

Zhang Siwei's family was a salt merchant family and wealthy in Puzhou. His uncle was Wang Chonggu, a Jinshi graduate from the 20th year of the Jiajing era, a formidable man now serving as a prefect somewhere. Having connections in the court really helped—he could even get insider info on the imperial exam admission quotas.

In previous years, the exam admitted about 300 candidates. If this year really admitted 400, then Zhu Ping'an's chances would improve.

Zhu Ping'an was quite pleased to hear the news.

"Yes, I've heard that too. This change is fortunate for us. If the three of us all pass, wouldn't that be splendid?"

Wang Shizhen had heard about this news before but still felt very excited hearing it again. Especially thinking that if he, Zhang Siwei, and Zhu Ping'an all passed together, it would be truly delightful. Sharing interests, meeting before the exam, and all passing together—what a joy.

“Wensheng, I am confident about this exam. The Wang family of Taicang is the most cultured and scholarly, and you are their outstanding representative. You will surely succeed at once. Zi Hou, your exam won’t be a problem either. Although young, you are quick-witted and rare. Also, the court usually splits the exam list into south and north, six-tenths south and four-tenths north. This year’s quota increased, and you are on the southern list, so you will surely achieve great results.”

Zhang Siwei pointed to Wang Shizhen, then looked at Zhu Ping’an, holding high hopes for both of them in this exam.

However, then Zhang Siwei’s tone changed, and he pointed to himself with a wry smile:

“As for me, I’m afraid I’ll hold you both back.”

“Ziwei, you’re joking again. Others might not know, but Zi Hou and I surely do. Ziwei, your writing and calligraphy are excellent, you are well-versed in history, known as the ‘True Learned Gentleman’ of Puzhou, especially famous for your Eight-Legged Essays. I’m good at poetry, but I’m far behind you in Eight-Legged Essays. Zi Hou, don’t listen to his nonsense. Ziwei is charming and playful, always joking around.”

Wang Shizhen shook his head, pointed at Zhang Siwei, and smiled at Zhu Ping’an.

“Wensheng, don’t try to comfort me,” Zhang Siwei smiled wryly.

“I say, you two will definitely pass this imperial exam list. Believe me or not?”

“Zi Hou, you’re joking too.”

“Exactly, don’t look at Zi Hou’s silly face and youth, but in my opinion, Zi Hou’s wit even surpasses Ziwei’s.”

“That’s because people are fooled by my silly face and let down their guard. I really curse my parents for giving me this unhandsome face, haha.”

Hearing this, Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen both changed the topic and laughed jokingly about Zhu Ping’an.

“Ten taels of silver, I bet you two will definitely pass the list,” Zhu Ping’an smiled confidently.

“Where does your confidence come from?” Wang Shizhen asked.

“It’s not confidence, it’s faith in you,” Zhu Ping’an smiled calmly.

“Well, based on that, if I pass, I’ll give you a hundred taels. But if I fail, I’ll definitely drain you dry,” Zhang Siwei laughed.

“Seconded,” Wang Shizhen agreed.

Both came from prominent families and did not care much about such sums.

“That’s settled then,” Zhu Ping’an laughed, jokingly. “Brother, I know history; you two are surely passing.”

“Zi Hou, you talk about us, but why don’t you say anything about yourself?” Wang Shizhen asked.

“Zi Hou doesn’t say anything, which means it’s settled,” Zhang Siwei smiled, answering for Zhu Ping’an.

The three laughed all the way to the registration office. After registering, they each returned to prepare for the imperial examination.