

Rise 279

Chapter 279

Swallows do not return, spring lingers late; Mist and rain over the riverbank, apricot blossoms shiver in the cold.

Unknowingly, spring had arrived in the capital in the second month. Chirping swallows joyfully flew into the imperial examination hall, flitting about in twos and threes, patrolling the venue with the invigilators. Inside the exam grounds, a nameless flower had bloomed without notice, swaying gently under the sunlight, stretching itself with all its might.

Today was already the final day of the hui shi (metropolitan examination). Before dawn had even broken, Zhu Ping'an got up, washed, and put on his mask again. He roasted some dried meat and preserved fruits over the brazier and forced himself to eat. It had been eight days and seven nights; apart from the first day's stewed meat porridge and noodles, every other meal had been a bland, tasteless affair. For a gourmand like Zhu Ping'an, this was almost an unbearable torment.

In addition, he hadn't washed his hair this entire time—let alone bathed. Others had it better, but he was stationed in a foul cell, which was practically a catastrophe! After such a long stretch, his whole body seemed to have absorbed the stench from the next cubicle. Of the two sets of clothes he brought, nearly both were a lost cause. His body was utterly exhausted—far worse than during the provincial exams.

Fortunately, today was the ninth day—the final day of the metropolitan examination.

Foul cell, I will endure you for just half a day more! I've put up with you this long, what's half a day more?

Once Zhu Ping'an was ready, he tidied up his test cell, placed the wooden plank horizontally along the wall again, set up his brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, laid out the exam paper and drafts, and resumed the exam he hadn't finished the previous day.

Around 3 p.m. yesterday, Zhu Ping'an had already completed all the questions for the third round and written them neatly on draft paper. By evening, he had already transcribed two answers onto the final exam paper. In other words, today, all he had to do was transcribe the remaining three essays on the Classics and History in order, and this metropolitan examination would be perfectly complete.

He closed his eyes to rest, and once he had adjusted his body and mind to the optimal state, Zhu Ping'an picked up his brush, dipped it generously in ink, and with full concentration began copying the last three essays from his draft to the official exam sheet.

While Zhu Ping'an was transcribing diligently, some examinees had already finished writing. They packed up, placed their completed papers aside, and then looked around one last time at the place where they had fought so hard.

There were rules for the metropolitan examination: after handing in papers, examinees had to wait until the final day before leaving. Departures were organized into three batches: before noon, afternoon, and evening. So those who finished early could only wait for the first batch to be released before noon.

As Zhu Ping'an was finishing the second essay, he heard footsteps outside the test cell and a commotion nearby. Looking up, he saw many invigilating guards pacing outside, and more clerks coming and going.

While he was still wondering, he heard the clear sound of a wooden gong being struck several times. Then a clerk shouted loudly outside the cell: "The time for the first batch to hand in papers has arrived! Examinees

who have completed their work and wish to submit may raise their hands. A token will be issued for departure.”

The examinees in the first batch, upon hearing this, eagerly submitted their papers one after another, received their tokens, and were led out of the venue by invigilators. The nine days and seven nights of the metropolitan examination had worn every examinee thin. Each person who exited had endured a grueling battle and was long overdue for a proper rest at home.

Since Zhu Ping’an still had one essay left to transcribe, he had to wait for the second batch.

With time to spare, Zhu Ping’an transcribed the last essay with utmost care. His handwriting reached its peak form—meticulous and powerful, the brushstrokes piercing through the paper.

When the clerk announced the second batch submission, Zhu Ping’an raised his hand. An officer came to collect his paper, examined it carefully, then began the sealing process. The portion of the exam paper where Zhu Ping’an had written his personal information (name, age, appearance, place of origin, record of conduct, exam situation, names of father, grandfather, and great-grandfather) was folded and sealed. An official seal was stamped across the fold, then collected and further sealed with a red stamp bearing a number identical to the one on Zhu’s paper.

This was one of the anti-cheating measures in the imperial examination.

After receiving Zhu Ping'an's paper, the officer handed him a pass token. Zhu Ping'an slung his packed bag over his back, grabbed his exam basket, and greeted the guard who had watched over him for the past nine days. Then, following the leading soldier, he strode out of the exam ground.

Rain and snow, falling thickly— Dissolve when the sun appears.

The farther he got from the foul cell, the more Zhu Ping'an felt that the sunshine was warm and the air was fresh. The hui shi was long and arduous, but finally, it was over. His mood couldn't be better.

That was how Zhu Ping'an felt—but the other examinees waiting to leave didn't quite share the sentiment.

You're leaving the foul cell and thinking the air feels fresh—but have you thought about us?

Nearby examinees, carrying baskets and bags, all instinctively kept their distance from Zhu Ping'an. Although they didn't know each other, the stench emanating from him was enough to make them glance askance.

Some examinees had seen Zhu Ping'an emerge from the foul cell and whispered it to others around them. That made people avoid him even more.

Ugh, this guy is one of those poor souls from the foul cell. Better stay far away from him—lest the bad luck rub off. Historically, no one who sat in a foul cell ever scored well. Over 90% failed. In hundreds of years,

there had never been an exception. It's the most notorious jinx in the exam grounds! We'd better steer clear so as not to get infected with his misfortune. I did pretty well in this hui shi, after all.

So, people around him looked at Zhu Ping'an with contempt and kept their distance.

Zhu Ping'an ignored their disdain, lips curled into a faint smile as he waited to be let out.

Who says someone from the foul cell cannot leap over the Dragon Gate?

Finally, the gates opened, and those in the second batch, including Zhu Ping'an, began to leave the venue. Zhu Ping'an followed the crowd and exited the examination grounds.

Outside, a sea of people had gathered—examinees and their waiting families. Some were friends waiting for others to finish, while others were family members. In small groups and large, they whispered and discussed one common topic: the metropolitan examination. Some exchanged answers, some asked how it went, and some shared stories from inside. The atmosphere was lively.

It was quite similar to the scene after the modern college entrance exams—only the clothing was different, giving Zhu Ping'an a strange sense of déjà vu.

As others emerged, they were met with warm welcomes, families eagerly asking how they had fared.

But when anyone from the lavishly dressed crowd of waiting relatives approached Zhu Ping'an, they all instinctively pinched their noses and backed away in disgust.

The crowd didn't know Zhu Ping'an had been placed in the foul cell. They just assumed he had terrible hygiene.

This guy reeks! Did he fall into a latrine? Or did he soil himself from exam nerves? Look at his hair—so filthy! He's a mess, reeks of bad luck. With that smell, you can bet the God of Literature wouldn't favor him. No way he passed the exam.

Geez, with hygiene like that, he won't just fail the exam—he won't even be able to get married. Doesn't matter if he's a juren (provincial graduate), he can forget about marrying into a good family. Maybe just some peasant girl, if he's lucky.

"Dear sir, we're over here!"

Just as everyone was casting increasingly scornful looks at Zhu Ping'an, a clear and tender voice rang out.

People turned, dumbfounded, to see a gorgeously dressed young lady—looking like a little bun—happily lifting her skirt and running toward none other than the youth they had so thoroughly scorned.

