

Rise 284

Chapter 284: Count Yourself Sensible

Even if Li Shu hadn't said anything, the first thing Zhu Ping'an did after returning was to take a bath. During the nine days and seven nights of the imperial examination, he hadn't bathed even once, which made him extremely uncomfortable, especially since he was used to regular bathing. While he had been completely focused during the exam and hadn't noticed it much, once it was over and his attention shifted, he began to feel utterly grimy and uncomfortable.

However, he didn't know why, but every time he saw a wooden tub, he couldn't help but think of Sima Guang, even though what he smashed was a vat.

In ancient times, people bathed in wooden tubs. There were no ceramic bathtubs yet, even though such bathtubs wouldn't be difficult for the ceramic industry of the Ming Dynasty to produce. People simply hadn't thought of making bathtubs from ceramics. The tubs used for bathing were large wooden barrels assembled from multiple wooden planks. Inside the tub, there were stair-like steps to help one get in and out easily. The craft of making these wooden tubs was highly advanced, so there was no need to worry about water leakage; and even if a leak did occur, there were specialized repair methods available.

Steam rose from the hot water in the tub, and Zhu Ping'an quickly stepped in and soaked in the hot bath.

However, after bathing for a short while and reaching for a towel, he unexpectedly touched a small hand. Startled, Zhu Ping'an quickly turned his head and saw the little bun-faced maid with her face flushed red, looking like she wished she could bury her head in her chest.

“Sir, the young lady... asked me to come in and scrub your back.”

The little bun-faced maid’s voice was trembling, and her hand shook as she held the towel, nervously rubbing Zhu Ping’an’s back, her face red enough to drip blood.

“No, no, I can do it myself. You should leave first.”

Zhu Ping’an took the towel from the maid’s hand, waved his hand in exasperation, and signaled for her to leave.

In the feudal society of the Ming Dynasty, it was common for maids to assist the wealthy in bathing—whether it was the master, the young master, or the young lady—they would all enjoy the service without hesitation. Of course, the maids who bathed the master or young master were their personal maids, who would usually become their concubines in the future. If the master or young master was in a good mood after the bath, they might even pull the maid into the tub for some adult scenes. But that wasn’t the main purpose. The real reason for the maids’ assistance was that in the current Ming Dynasty, there was no running water. When the water cooled, the maid would add more hot water, and they would help scrub backs and massage shoulders.

Although Zhu Ping’an found the idea somewhat tempting, he absolutely didn’t have any such improper desires at the moment. He was still too young—his body simply couldn’t handle it.

Also, his relationship with the scheming Li Shu was only a temporary arrangement. Their marriage couldn’t be considered certain. In ancient times, maids were often included as part of a dowry, and this bun-faced maid was one of Li Shu’s dowry maids. There was no need to complicate things further.

Li Shu sending her dowry maid over—who knew what she was scheming!

So, Zhu Ping'an sent the bun-faced maid away.

"But sir... the young lady instructed me to..." the bun-faced maid said from behind the tub, her face flushed, clutching the hem of her clothing like an ostrich hiding its head.

"It's fine. Go on out," Zhu Ping'an waved his hand again.

Thanks to Zhu Ping'an's insistence, the blushing, ostrich-like bun-faced maid was finally granted a reprieve. She lowered her head and backed out toward the door, almost bumping into a pillar on her way.

Watching her leave, Zhu Ping'an sighed in relief. Seriously, this damn old society is full of too many temptations.

"One, two, three, four, five, six..."

Li Shu stood expressionless at the door of the inner room, silently counting. When she reached ten, she saw the bun-faced maid coming out of the bedroom with her head lowered, face red with embarrassment.

Seeing her retreat, Li Shu's face showed a satisfied expression. She muttered softly, "At least you know your place."

"Miss... sir wouldn't let me scrub his back..." The bun-faced maid stammered, still blushing from the tension of the moment.

"Oh, if he refused, then forget it," Li Shu said calmly.

After this little episode with the bun-faced maid, Zhu Ping'an quickly finished bathing, dried himself off, and got dressed.

"Ah! Why are you wearing those rags again?" Li Shu frowned at Zhu Ping'an's clothes, pouting with clear distaste.

"This piece of clothing was handmade by my mother, sewn stitch by stitch through sleepless nights. To me, it's the best garment I own," Zhu Ping'an glanced at her and said lightly.

"But... do you even know where we're going?" Li Shu stomped her foot angrily. "The old residence is full of snobs who kiss up and look down on others!"

“So what? I’m just a commoner,” Zhu Ping’an curved his lips slightly.

“Fine, fine, I admit I was wrong to belittle auntie’s work,” Li Shu glared at Zhu Ping’an, then reluctantly muttered an apology in a low voice.

To Zhu Ping’an’s surprise, the prideful and pretentious Li Shu actually apologized. The odds of that happening felt lower than the sun rising from the west. It was practically impossible—but she had indeed apologized. Though her tone and expression showed no remorse at all, she did say the words.

Zhu Ping’an was momentarily stunned.

“Sir, let me help you change your clothes,” the bun-faced maid chimed in at just the right moment. She quickly trotted over and eagerly helped Zhu Ping’an change.

Because traditional clothing involved wearing undergarments, the process wasn’t too awkward.

By the time Zhu Ping’an came back to his senses, the bun-faced maid had already helped him into a new outfit. The robe was made of fine silk, embroidered with ink bamboos, cinched at the waist, and topped with a fox fur cloak—much better than his rabbit fur one. Interestingly, both the inner and outer garments fit perfectly, as if they had been custom-tailored.

The maid had also dried his hair with a towel, re-combed it, tied it into a topknot, and secured it with a hairnet.

“Miss, look! Sir looks so much better in clothes,” the bun-faced maid said with satisfaction after dressing Zhu Ping’an.

Hearing that, Zhu Ping’an was speechless. I look better in clothes? Did she mean I used to not wear clothes at all?

Li Shu glanced at him, her eyes flashing slightly, though she pouted and said, “Even if the clothes are good, they still look rustic.”

Well, a change of clothes is a change of clothes. Zhu Ping’an folded the garment made by his mother, Chen, and placed it in his travel bag. Then, he packed the rest of his belongings before heading downstairs under Li Shu’s urging.

The busy inn waiter downstairs wasn’t surprised by Zhu Ping’an’s new look. He had already guessed that Zhu Ping’an was a nobleman when Li Shu arrived earlier. Now that his suspicion was confirmed, his attitude toward Zhu Ping’an became even more respectful.

They left the inn and boarded the carriage again, which headed west—toward what Li Shu had referred to as the “old residence.”

From the direction of the carriage, Zhu Ping’an could already tell that Li Shu’s family was extraordinary.

In the capital, there's an old saying: "The East is wealthy, the West is noble, the South is poor, the North is destitute." This proverb accurately describes the population distribution in the capital.

Those living in the eastern part of the city were usually wealthy—merchants, landowners, and lower officials. The western part, on the other hand, was home to the noble and powerful—royal families, aristocrats, and high-ranking officials. The southern and northern parts were relatively impoverished, inhabited mostly by ordinary people with little wealth or influence.

As the carriage headed westward, it became clear that anyone who lived there wasn't ordinary. That's why Zhu Ping'an came to that conclusion.