

Rise 297

Chapter 297: An Old Friend Pays a Visit

The front courtyard echoed with roars and scuffles, while in the guest room, someone was reading and sipping tea.

The brat's pig-slaughter-like howls rose and fell with rhythm, yet the instigator, Zhu Ping'an, sat calmly in the guest room, holding a book, seated upright at the desk, with a cup of hot tea, basking in the warm sunlight—utterly at ease.

"Your doing, I presume? The divine tortoise Gong'er raised—so skinny, yet still stewed into soup and gnawed on."

Li Shu pursed her cherry lips, smiled playfully, and glanced sideways at Zhu Ping'an, who was reading. Her skin was as fair as freshly peeled water chestnuts, and her bright, watery eyes accentuated her natural beauty.

Li Shu had come over with the little bun-faced maid. No one else was present. The maid was carrying a bulging bundle—it wasn't clear what was inside.

"If you say so, then so be it. If you seek to accuse, there will always be a charge."

Upon hearing Li Shu's question, Zhu Ping'an shifted his gaze from the book and looked up at her, who had arrived without his noticing, the corners of his lips slightly lifted in reply.

"Cut it out. Others might not believe it was you, but I won't be fooled. Hehe... You've done Gong'er in. Stewing the tortoise was bad enough, but then you even laughed and asked the chubby kid, 'Who are you?' If Grandma hadn't stopped him, Gong'er would've gained another layer of fat!" Li Shu rolled her eyes and laughed as she scolded.

"What stewing and gnawing nonsense, such vulgarity. I am a scholar, mind you," Zhu Ping'an scoffed, not caring one bit.

"You're really good at playing innocent," Li Shu teased.

"Hehe... Everyone says Young Master Gong is unruly. The last tutor only taught for three days before being driven away by him. Even the current tutor often takes leave to recover after being angered by him..."

The bun-faced little maid behind Li Shu giggled at the thought of the brat trying to complain, only to get another lecture from the old master. Her eyes smiled, and so did the two dimples on her cheeks.

Heh, perhaps the brat was just like the boy who cried wolf.

"You wicked fellow..." Li Shu rolled her eyes at Zhu Ping'an again but couldn't help smiling herself.

Of course, Li Shu hadn't come with the little maid to scold him. She had come to deliver a change of clothes. The bundle the little maid carried contained neatly folded garments—likely a scholar's robe, trimmed with mink fur. Elegant, with a hint of noble flair.

“Change into these later. From now on, every other day, I'll have Hua'er come pick up your laundry, wash and dry it, and bring it back. This isn't like home. There are too many shallow-eyed people here. Also, in three days, it's Grandmother's birthday. Don't forget.”

Li Shu had the bun-faced maid place the clothes in Zhu Ping'an's room, then gave a few reminders. After chatting with him for a while, she led the maid out.

Around noon, someone from the marquis' household came to summon Zhu Ping'an to the study.

The Marquis of Linhuai invited Zhu Ping'an over merely out of formality—just a cursory inquiry into his background. Although he already knew Zhu Ping'an was a young scholar here for the imperial exams, he was greatly disappointed in his humble origins. The Marquis preferred someone from his wife's side of the family, to strengthen their ties and offer real help to the household. He didn't think highly of Zhu Ping'an. A poor boy from a mountain village—so long as he didn't drag the household down, that would already be enough. The idea of him being a help was laughable. Especially after hearing from Fatty Zhou that Zhu Ping'an's exam seat number was among the unlucky ones, he was even more disappointed.

Unfortunately, the matter was already settled, so the Marquis could only swallow his disappointment. Thus, he treated Zhu Ping'an with a rather indifferent attitude.

Zhu Ping'an hadn't taken the Marquis' household too seriously to begin with, so he didn't mind the cold reception. He answered the Marquis' questions with calm composure, without arrogance or servility, undisturbed by honor or disgrace.

After a few words, the Marquis picked up his tea, and Zhu Ping'an tactfully cupped his hands and excused himself.

At noon, two young gentlemen came to visit Zhu Ping'an, claiming to be old acquaintances.

It could only be Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen. Zhu Ping'an tossed a silver ingot as a tip and said he wouldn't be eating lunch at the marquis' residence.

At the entrance of the residence, he indeed saw the elegant Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen.

When they saw Zhu Ping'an, their eyes lit up. He no longer looked like the shabby peasant boy from before. Dressed in his new clothes, he looked spirited, refined, and carried a subtle noble air.

Truly, the saying "Clothes make the man" holds some truth.

“Haha, Zihou, you really fooled us. We thought you were just an ordinary farmer’s son. Who’d have guessed you were from the Marquis of Linhuai’s household? Brother Zhu, what do you have to say for yourself?” Zhang Siwei greeted Zhu Ping’an with mock indignation as soon as he stepped out.

“My surname is Zhu, not Li. How could I be from the Marquis of Linhuai’s family?” Zhu Ping’an scoffed.

“And to top it off, you’ve won a beauty! Word’s already spread throughout the inn—Young Master Zhu’s wife is as beautiful as a goddess, even the maid is a rare beauty. You didn’t even come to find Wen Sheng and me after your exam, clearly lost in some romantic paradise. Such good fortune, yet you act coy. Careful your back courtyard doesn’t catch fire!” Zhang Siwei teased.

Zhu Ping’an couldn’t explain the full story, as it involved Li Shu’s reputation, so he could only smile bitterly.

“Out of excuses, huh? Today we must treat ourselves to a feast at your expense! What say you, Wen Sheng?” Zhang Siwei slapped Zhu Ping’an’s shoulder and grinned at Wang Shizhen.

“I second that,” Wang Shizhen replied, his white robe pristine and a gentle smile on his face. Even in jest, he appeared every bit the refined gentleman.

“Wen Sheng, even you’re learning bad habits from Siwei?” Zhu Ping’an chuckled.

He truly couldn't understand how someone like Wang Shizhen, who looked like a model student, could later write the shocking and scandalous *Jin Ping Mei* (The Plum in the Golden Vase).

"Zihou, just for that comment, we're definitely heading to Wenyuan Pavilion for a proper feast today!" Zhang Siwei said, laughing as he draped an arm around Zhu Ping'an's shoulder.

"But I didn't bring much silver with me."

Zhu Ping'an spread his hands with an innocent look.

Just then, the side gate of the marquis' residence opened again. The bun-faced little maid came running, lifting her skirts, her cheeks flushed red from exertion. She stopped in front of Zhu Ping'an, offering a money pouch like a precious treasure, looked up at him with bright eyes and said:

"Sir, sir! You forgot your money pouch. Miss told me to bring it to you. Oh, and she also told me to remind you not to drink too much and to stay away from any bad places!"

With that, she placed the money pouch in Zhu Ping'an's hand. Perhaps feeling the warmth of his touch, her face turned bright red, and she scurried back toward the residence.

“Hahaha, Zihou, your fortune is truly enviable. Such a beautiful, gentle, understanding wife, even her maid is so adorable. It’s enough to make others jealous. Come on now, the delicacies of Wenyuan Pavilion await. Now that you have your money pouch, what excuse could you have?” Zhang Siwei nudged Zhu Ping’an’s shoulder with a grin.

“My good brothers, lead the way.”

Zhu Ping’an said with a wry smile, extending his hand.