

Rise 317

Chapter 317: The Results Are Announced (2)

The Marquis of Linhuai's residence, for the sake of the old madam's birthday banquet, had even invited the most popular opera troupe in the capital. A stage was set up in the garden, and the troupe began to perform several of the currently trending bright-red operas, singing in a drawn-out and melodious style.

Everyone present watched with great interest, applause erupting from time to time. Only Zhu Ping'an found the performance on stage dull and flavorless. Having been exposed to Hollywood blockbusters and domestic film and television productions, how could he possibly be moved by operas he couldn't even understand?

A performance of *The Story of Washing Silk* pushed today's birthday banquet to its climax.

The Marquis's third master had already prepared three large baskets of money in advance. After listening to this opera, the old madam happily said, "Reward them." The second master of the Marquis's residence then instructed the servants and maids to scatter the money from the baskets onto the stage.

With a series of crackling sounds, it was as if a rain of money fell upon the stage.

Seeing this, the old madam was overjoyed, beaming from ear to ear in great delight.

“No wonder yesterday the lamp’s wick kept bursting and knotting — it was all a sign for today. I thank the birthday star for the blessing.” The hua dan (young female lead) singing on stage curtsied gracefully and thanked the old madam of the Marquis’s residence.

At Zhu Ping’an’s table, he was the youngest. Since no one came to serve them, Zhu Ping’an took it upon himself to pour tea and wine for everyone at the table. For a time, the atmosphere at the table became quite harmonious.

This table was full of the Marquis’s poor relatives. Seeing that Zhu Ping’an had such a good appetite — eating as though he had never tasted good food before — they assumed he was also one of the Marquis’s poor relatives. They didn’t hold back around him and began quietly sharing the Marquis residence’s secrets. Over the years, the Marquis’s family had only cared about social climbing and looked down on these poorer relatives, so when they spoke of these secrets, there was a bit of personal resentment in their tone.

And then, Zhu Ping’an found that their gossip was far more interesting than the opera on stage — stories about the Marquis of Linhuai having ambiguous relations with the maids; the second master liking to flirt with young nuns at the temple; sometimes even bringing pretty young manservants to his room to relieve himself; the eldest and second masters conspiring together to take over the third master’s business ventures outside... All told in vivid detail and full of feeling.

As the birthday banquet of the Marquis’s residence was reaching its peak, a commotion could be heard outside. Like a chain of dominoes, the noise spread from outside the Marquis’s gates into the residence, and then into the banquet itself.

“The results of the hui shi (metropolitan exam) for the special grace session are being announced...”

The news of the hui shi results quickly spread throughout the banquet. In every household or among relatives and neighbors, there was always someone connected to a candidate in the exams, so the announcement stirred great excitement.

“This time, the results are being announced a few days earlier than usual.”

“This Xu Laosan really has accurate information — he said they would be announced today, and indeed they are.” A second-generation rich kid at Fatty Zhou’s table sighed.

The announcement process for the hui shi was similar to that of the provincial exam: first, the good news was delivered by express riders, sent directly to inns or homes. Only after all personal deliveries were complete would the results be posted in front of the Shuntian Examination Hall in the southeast of the capital.

Those who passed the provincial exam were called juren; those who passed the hui shi were called gongshi. The top scorer was the huiyuan. The “gong” in gongshi meant “tribute,” as in being presented to the emperor — one step away from soaring high. After becoming a gongshi, one could take the palace exam (dian shi), personally overseen by the emperor and considered a grand imperial talent selection. The palace exam never failed anyone — all gongshi would pass and be ranked in the top three tiers, though their exact positions could vary.

Passing the hui shi meant one’s career was about to skyrocket. If especially talented, one might even become the zhuangyuan (first place), bangyan (second place), or tanhua (third place), and in the future possibly serve as a grand councilor.

This year’s hui shi would admit 400 people, no more and no fewer. Messengers galloped out from the Shuntian Examination Hall in an unending stream.

After the news of the announcement spread, the guests at the banquet craned their necks to look outside, sending their servants to gather information. The old madam of the Marquis's residence did the same — even Fatty Zhou from the residence had participated in the hui shi.

“Da-da-da!”

Suddenly, from the distant street came a crisp, lively sound of horse hooves — each strike landing in everyone's hearts, clear and stirring.

The banquet guests became excited. Such clear hoofbeats must mean the messenger had reached Gonghou Street.

More servants were sent out in haste. Before long, they returned, panting, to report that it was actually the son of the Duke of Cheng riding past — not the hui shi messenger. Everyone felt slightly disappointed. Really, of all times to go riding, why now?

But soon, excitement rose again — another set of urgent hoofbeats came from outside.

“Hui shi success announcement! Congratulations to Master Li Yiyi of Bao'an County, Guangzhou Prefecture, for placing 396th in the hui shi special grace session...”

The clear voice of the herald carried from far away.

The announcements were made in reverse order from last place to first, so now they had reached 396th place.

Fatty Zhou instantly became excited, stretching his chubby face forward as if the next announcement would be for him.

“Heh heh, Fatty Zhou, what are you so worked up about? Meddling in things that don’t concern you — forget it.”

“Yeah, with your level? Not a chance. Not only is the door shut to you, the window’s shut too. And when Heaven shut the door, it even slammed it on your head. Give up on the imperial exams already — just come with us to get a post in the Capital Garrison, so we can look out for each other.”

“That’s right. If you pass, I’ll eat a plate.”

The second-generation heirs spared no effort in mocking Fatty Zhou. One of them even held up a plate, swearing he’d eat it if Fatty Zhou passed.

After a while, no more hoofbeats came down the street in front of the Marquis's residence — since the 400 successful candidates lived all over the capital, the messengers didn't have to pass this way. But the banquet guests knew exactly how far along the announcements had gone, as the servants they sent kept returning with updates.

By now, the results had reached the 188th place.

"Heh, it's already in the hundreds, Fatty Zhou. Give it up. Maybe at 300-something you'd have a chance if the examiners were blind, but at 100-something? Forget it."

The second-generation heirs seized the moment to mock him again.

"Hmph, it's still early — what's the rush?" Fatty Zhou snorted. He still had high hopes of making the list, his small eyes staring intently outside.

"Oh, stop. You're not giving up until you see the Yellow River. If you pass, I'll eat dung on the spot."

"Me too..."

The heirs took great delight in ridiculing him, teasing and laughing without the slightest belief he would succeed.

During a lull in her conversation with her sisters, Li Shu overheard the announcement and frowned slightly. She called over her little bun-faced maid, Hua'er, and whispered instructions: go find Wang Xiao'er, send more men ahead of time to intercept the messenger bringing Zhu Ping'an's results, and stuff them with extra red envelopes so that when they reported to the Marquis's residence, they would only say "the young master of the household has passed" without mentioning his name. As long as they omitted the name, the reward would be doubled.

Watching little bun-faced maid, Hua'er, trot away, Li Shu's lips curved into a faint smile.

Heh, it's better to share the joy than to keep it to oneself...