

Rise 318

Chapter 318: The Results Are Announced (3)

The horse's hooves rose lightly, as if lotus flowers bloomed with every step.

The warm spring breeze gently caressed the Longevity Banquet at the Marquis of Linhuai's residence. Outside the mansion gates, the sound of horses' hooves was like celestial music. After much anticipation and longing, it finally rang out again on Gonghou Street. The people of the Marquis of Linhuai's household became excited once more, especially Fatty Zhou, who wished he could stretch his neck all the way out of the gate.

A moment later, a servant returned with news: the messenger bringing congratulations had merely passed by Gonghou Street, heading to another street to deliver good news. They said the congratulatory announcements had already been delivered to the eighty-eighth ranked tribute scholar.

"So fast? Already at eighty-eight?"

"At eighty-eight already... Could it be that Old Third Xu failed the exam too? Hahaha! Fatty Zhou, looks like you've got company now."

The table of young aristocrats at Fatty Zhou's side began laughing at him again, dragging Old Third Xu into their mockery as well.

These pampered sons were, in fact, somewhat envious of Xu Laosan. When Xu first passed the provincial exam to become a licentiate, it caused a stir on Gonghou Street. While there were indeed many from noble families who pursued scholarly paths, few could pass with such high marks. If Xu were to pass the metropolitan exam this time, his fame would grow further, and he would surely outshine them. Now, hearing the news that the announcements had reached number eighty-eight and there was still no word of Xu, they were secretly thrilled.

As for their jeers, Fatty Zhou did nothing but stretch his head out further and listen intently.

Although Fatty Zhou had once been confident—feeling great while answering the questions—now, as the announced rankings approached the top hundred, he too was getting nervous. His chubby palms were sweating from his tight grip.

Clip-clop, clip-clop...

Amid everyone's various expectations, the light, brisk sound of hooves rang out once again on Gonghou Street. This time it was unusually clear, as if sounding right beside their ears. The rhythm approached from afar and then stopped abruptly.

Had the rider pulled up their horse?

The sound seemed to have stopped right in front of the Marquis of Linhuai's mansion.

Finally, you're here. Luckily I didn't give up—happiness really isn't easy to come by...

Fatty Zhou sprang up from the table, pumping his fist. His round face twitched with excitement—finally, it was his turn! Hahaha...

“Metropolitan Exam good news! Congratulations to Master Xu Penghui of Shuntian Prefecture for achieving thirty-eighth place in this year’s exam!”

The loud, clear voice outside was like a clap of thunder over the Marquis of Linhuai’s banquet. Fatty Zhou, who had been ready to crow like a proud rooster, suddenly choked up as if someone had grabbed his neck.

“Old Third Xu actually got thirty-eighth place!”

“Damn, thirty-eighth! Xu Laosan is amazing!”

“Didn’t expect him to rank thirty-eighth!”

The mouths of the young aristocrats at Fatty Zhou’s table hung open. Xu Penghui—Xu Laosan from the Duke of Wei’s residence—had just been doubted moments ago, yet here he was, achieving thirty-eighth place. Since the palace exam usually didn’t eliminate people and rankings didn’t shift much, Xu was sure to graduate as a second-rank jinshi. This was a first for Gonghou Street.

Barely a minute after the announcement, cheers erupted next door at the Duke of Wei's residence, followed by an earth-shaking barrage of firecrackers.

The Duke of Wei's household set off firecrackers as if they were free, lasting a long while, and their joyous clamor outlasted even the explosions.

Fatty Zhou stared toward the Duke of Wei's residence, his fat face filled with disappointment, his heart aching with silent misery.

Compared to their joy, the Marquis of Linhuai's household was rather subdued.

Xu Laosan's literary talent had been evident since childhood, far surpassing Fatty Zhou. If Xu had ranked thirty-eighth, how could Fatty possibly do better?

The Old Madam's expression darkened; even the flattery of "May you live as long as the Southern Mountains" and "Fortune as vast as the Eastern Sea" couldn't disperse the cloud in her heart.

"Fatty Zhou, give it up. Xu Laosan ranked thirty-eighth—you can't possibly be better than him."

"Yeah, give up. Hahaha! A toad shouldn't dream of eating swan meat."

“That’s right, hahaha...”

The young aristocrats mocked Fatty Zhou again, confident in his failure.

“What’s the rush? There are still thirty-seven spots left!”

Fatty Zhou retorted weakly, which only made them laugh louder.

Not long after, Xu Laosan himself arrived—Xu Penghui, the newly ranked thirty-eighth—heading straight for Fatty Zhou’s table.

“Hehe, brothers, sorry for leaving early just now. I had family matters to attend to, but I’ve come to make amends—three cups as my self-punishment.”

Smiling broadly, brimming with youthful pride and charm, Xu strolled over, chin slightly lifted. Handsome, radiant, intelligent, and confident, his face glowed with vitality after his success.

He wore a dark-blue robe embroidered with bamboo in fine green silk—clearly expensive—and immediately drew everyone’s gaze.

Hearing of his arrival, the young ladies of the Marquis’s household, who had been seated inside, hurried to the door, cheeks flushed.

Handsome, smart, talented, thirty-eighth place in the metropolitan exam—and only seventeen years old, a year younger than Fatty Zhou. Such a young talent was rare indeed.

The young ladies’ hearts fluttered.

Especially the Sixth Young Miss, whose heart nearly flew away at the sight of the dashing Xu Laosan.

She was not yet betrothed, and both families had considered a match between her and Xu. The matter was nearly settled.

This is my future husband, she thought, even better than Second Sister’s—and certainly better than Fifth Sister’s useless, crude country bumpkin of a husband. Handsome but useless is still useless...

The Sixth Miss glanced at Fifth Sister Li Shu, expecting to see envy, only to find her calmly sipping tea, serene as a still pond.

Surely she's pretending, the Sixth Miss thought, smiling knowingly.

"Brother Zhou, has your good news come yet?" Xu asked casually, smiling faintly.

What the—?!

The young aristocrats burst into laughter again, mocking Zhou while congratulating Xu.

Meanwhile, the announcements continued.

The good news had reached the tenth place...

Then the sixth...

Each announcement made Fatty Zhou's heart sink further.

When the second place was announced at Minister Yan Song's residence, and given to his wife's nephew, the banquet at the Marquis's estate received the news as well.

"Hahaha, Fatty Zhou, stop sticking your head out—it's over. No way you're the huiyuan."

"Yeah, cry if you want, we won't laugh... hahaha..."

"If Fatty Zhou becomes huiyuan, I'll eat shit on the spot..."

"Me too..."

The jeers started up again. Even Xu Laosan smiled to himself while sipping tea.

Fatty Zhou's face flushed red; he clenched his fists, embarrassed and angry, yet convinced he couldn't possibly be huiyuan.

Clip-clop, clip-clop...

Suddenly, in the midst of laughter, brisk hoofbeats rang out once more on Gonghou Street, like a drum pounding directly on everyone's hearts.

What was happening?

The sound approached and stopped right in front of the Marquis's residence again.

Could it be...?

"Good news! Congratulations to the young master of this noble house for achieving first place—Huiyuan—in this year's metropolitan exam!"

The cry rang out as a group of servants escorted two messengers, repeating the announcement loudly as they entered.

What?!

Huiyuan?!

The mouths of the young aristocrats dropped open, their expressions frozen in disbelief, eyes staring at Fatty Zhou as if he were a ghost.

Even Fatty Zhou himself was stunned, gaping at the messengers.

A clink broke the silence—the sound of a wine cup falling.

It was Xu Laosan. His smile vanished, and the cup slipped from his fingers.

“Metropolitan Exam good news! Congratulations to the young master of this noble house for achieving first place—Huiyuan!” the messenger repeated loudly in the banquet hall.

The only one in the Marquis of Linhuai’s house who had taken the exam was Fatty Zhou.

“Zhou... Zhou... Fatty Zhou! Damn, you’re huiyuan?!”

One of the young aristocrats reached out a trembling hand to poke Zhou’s chubby cheek.

“Holy crap, Fatty Zhou—you’re amazing! You’re the huiyuan!”

The others now looked at him differently—as if he shone with golden light, as if a god had descended, dazzling everyone present.