

Rise 324

Chapter 324: No Banquet Is Ever Truly Kind

In Customs and Traditions it is written: “When an official’s horse grows fat, onlookers cheer, and the rider delights in their praise, urging the beast ever onward—until it dies.” During the May Fourth Movement, on May 9, Mr. Cai Yuanpei, in his resignation statement, quoted this very passage: “I am weary. ‘The one who kills your horse is none other than the child clapping by the roadside.’”

Put simply, the ones who kill your horse are precisely those bystanders applauding it to death—what we now call “killing with praise.”

On the surface, Yan Shifan was elevating him, but in truth, it was nothing more than this sort of deadly flattery. Without Yan Shifan’s “praise,” Luo Longwen’s accusations would have sounded hollow and pale. To this, Zhu Ping’an saw everything as clearly as fire through smoke.

The back-and-forth between Yan Shifan and Luo Longwen was nothing but a deliberate show—to give him a heavy slap of humiliation!

Could being huiyuan—the top scholar—excuse tardiness? Of course not! Then why was Zhu Ping’an late? Was it because his moral character was rotten, or... because his moral character was rotten?! From small faults, greater truths can be seen: if even the huiyuan cannot keep time, then a man without trust—how can such a one be worthy of that title?

As Luo Longwen’s cold accusations dripped with venom, Zhu Ping’an’s lips curled faintly into a smile. Interesting. Truly, this banquet was living up to its name.

The invitation he had received had clearly stated: “This day, let us drink with waving dusters, from the hour of Si till You, no need to divine the night.” In the Jin dynasty, scholars often waved feathered dusters as they debated in leisure—thus the phrase. Put plainly, the card meant: today we drink and talk nonsense, start around nine or ten in the morning, end around six or seven in the evening, and not a moment beyond.

But when Zhu Ping’an received the invitation, it was already near ten o’clock—by then the feast had surely begun. Though he mounted his coal-black stallion and rushed straight over, the lateness was fated the moment the card touched his hands.

No matter the reason, late he was, and that was an unchangeable fact. What mattered was how he would face it.

All eyes at the banquet turned toward Zhu Ping’an, eager to see his response.

“Ping’an comes late—let me punish myself with three cups.”

Under their gaze, Zhu Ping’an cupped his hands in a deep bow, admitted his fault, and strode to a corner seat. From the tray of a passing maid he took a wine cup, filled it full from the winding stream where goblets floated, and drained it in one draught. He did this three times without pause.

To tell the truth plainly would be foolish. On one hand, it would sound like excuse-making, as though he knew his fault yet refused to amend it. On the other hand, it would be no less than a direct rebuke of Yan Shifan—who had just now raised him up. To repay favor with accusation is the surest way to earn contempt.

Claim the roads were blocked? Nonsense—this was not the modern age!

Besides, the opposition surely had other tricks prepared. They had the advantage of calm, waiting here in ambush—of course they had made arrangements in advance.

Thus, it was better to accept this basin of dirty water cleanly and without protest.

Zhu Ping'an's swift acceptance caught Luo Longwen and the others off guard. He had prepared a bellyful of rhetoric, only to find his words useless. It felt like throwing a fist into a cloud of cotton—hollow and unsatisfying.

“There is no disgrace greater than shamelessness; and no virtue higher than to correct a fault once found.”

Others at the banquet found Zhu Ping'an's attitude refreshing, even admirable. Some had already guessed the truth of the matter, and his calm response earned him a measure of respect.

“Ping'an has only just arrived in the capital, unfamiliar with the roads. He wandered down many a wrong street, and so came late. I beg my elders' pardon. You shine like the moon and sun, while I am but a firefly's faint glow. How could a firefly dare compete with sun and moon? I can only gaze up in awe—never would I dare to slight you.”

Having downed his three cups, Zhu Ping'an bowed again, speaking steadily and without haste.

"Hmph. The huiyuan has quite the silver tongue," Luo Longwen sneered, his words thick with irony—implying that Zhu Ping'an was twisting truth into lies.

"Enough, Hanchang. Zihou is no ordinary man, and would never deceive us. Likely it was the servants' negligence that delayed the card. After the banquet, I shall see to their punishment. Zihou, come, take your seat."

Yan Shifan pressed his hand downward, brushing aside Zhu Ping'an's tardiness as if it were nothing. Then he looked at Zhu Ping'an, cheeks quivering with a smile, and beckoned him over.

"Brother Donglou is magnanimous. We are but lesser men," Luo Longwen immediately echoed, dropping the matter and adding a flattering note for Yan Shifan's ears.

"My thanks, Lord Yan," Zhu Ping'an replied, wearing an expression of tearful gratitude, before taking his seat in the corner.

If not for history's records, he might truly have been moved by Yan Shifan's words, might have cried out to clasp hands with such a "noble friend." But he knew this man's character well—today's little play had surely been orchestrated by Yan Shifan himself. Still, the act of gratitude had to be kept.

Yan Shifan, watching Zhu Ping'an's grateful expression, smiled in satisfaction. Clever the huiyuan might be, but at fourteen years of age he lacked the weight of years and experience.

The mood of the banquet soon recovered its liveliness. Sitting quietly in his corner, Zhu Ping'an observed them all. The guests fell into three camps: the largest, Yan Shifan's loyal faction; the smallest, a mere handful, yet subtly hostile to him; and between them, seven or eight who held to neutrality.

Now Zhu Ping'an understood Yan Shifan more directly. The fat man was arrogant, imperious, but his tongue was quick, his words flying like sparks.

Seated beside him was this year's huishi second-place, young Ouyang. Yan Shifan had already paraded him before the crowd. The youth had the look of wealth and refinement, and his literary talent was no small thing.

When the company began their wine-poetry games, young Ouyang never lost once. Time after time he produced brilliant verses, drawing admiration and endless praise.

Zhu Ping'an, by contrast, played the games with deliberate mediocrity. Twice he even allowed himself to lose outright. When he did win, his verses were plain, unremarkable—never dazzling. He allowed Ouyang to shine, deliberately overshadowing himself.

It was not that Zhu Ping'an could not perform better—but that he must not. By careful observation, he had already grasped the banquet's theme: to suppress Zhu and exalt Ouyang.

Besides, many raised cups in his honor, congratulating the new huiyuan. He drank more than a little, his head already clouding with wine. Even had he wished to show brilliance, it would not have been easy.

This was all for Ouyang's sake—for his performance at the palace examination. Zhu Ping'an was to be the stepping stone, trampled upon so Ouyang could rise in glory.

The fact that Ouyang lived within the Yan residence was proof enough: he was kin, and closely so. Surely there were other ties of profit between them as well. Yan Shifan's support for Ouyang was but the natural course of things.

And so, from the moment he received that invitation, Zhu Ping'an's role in this banquet was set—he was destined to be no more than Ouyang's stepping stone.