

Rise 326

Chapter 326: Northern Barbarians, Southern Pirates

At the banquet, everyone was engaged in lively conversation, wine cups clinking endlessly. With their minds loosened by drink, the topics grew broader and bolder. Someone brought up the issue of the “Southern Pirates and Northern Barbarians,” and faces flushed with wine argued heatedly, each man eager to offer strategies for the nation.

The “Southern Pirates and Northern Barbarians” had always been the twin problems the Ming Dynasty was forced to confront, ever since its founding. The “Southern Pirates” referred to the bands of Japanese raiders and coastal marauders along the southeast, while the “Northern Barbarians” meant the nomadic tribes in the north—like the Mongol Tatars and the Oirat who once humiliated Emperor Yingzong. During the Ming, both issues were collectively referred to as “Southern Pirates and Northern Barbarians.”

“Our empire is the Celestial Kingdom. Those so-called Southern Pirates and Northern Barbarians, mere horse-herders and cattle-breeders, petty island savages—if they truly knew their place, they would not dare act so arrogantly.” Someone, reeking of wine, could not help but exclaim indignantly.

“Give me thirty thousand soldiers, and I shall return with the enemy chief bound by his topknot!” Another drunkard slurred, slapping the table in a burst of bravado.

How many scholars dreamed of campaigns to the frontier? How many believed that casting aside their brushes to don armor would save the realm? Thus, when such bold words were spoken, they drew cheers from a crowd of like-minded men.

“Well said, Hua Changgong! Let us drink to that!” Cups were raised, laughter spilling over.

That was how it always went—once drunk, there was no boast too great to make. To those flushed with drink, the Southern Pirates and Northern Barbarians seemed like no more than trifling ailments, as though a single charge from them would be enough to sweep the foes away.

Talking warfare on paper—such games always stirred their interest.

“Look at our gatherings in recent times—most are filled only with idle talk of wine, flowers, and moonlight. But we, we take the affairs of the nation as our duty. Since poetry at banquets has always revolved around romance, why not today compose poems on iron steeds and clashing arms? Let us leave behind verses that will inspire us, so that in days to come we may devote ourselves wholly to the country, to the very end of our lives.” At the height of their discussion, Luo Longwen rose and made this proposal.

It was met with unanimous approval.

Zhu Ping’an, chewing on a fin of shark’s fin, paused for a moment when he heard the suggestion. Why was it that no banquet could ever do without poetry? How utterly clichéd! Still, seeing Comrade Ouyang’s excitement, Zhu knew at once this had been arranged in advance. No doubt Ouyang had already prepared several fine poems, ready to astonish.

Well, it made sense. After all, one of the purposes of tonight’s gathering was to spread Ouyang’s fame.

So Zhu Ping’an only paused briefly before returning to his quiet feast. This was Ouyang’s stage, after all. He had been invited merely as a stepping stone. Very well then—he would play his role dutifully, and leave the spotlight to Ouyang.

And indeed, Ouyang did not disappoint Zhu Ping'an, nor did he disappoint Yan Shifan and the others.

Two men came forward first to compose verses, but they were rather poor. Perhaps it was because they were accustomed only to themes of romance, or perhaps their mediocrity was deliberate—either way, their poems were uninspired.

When they were done, someone called for Ouyang to compose. He declined politely a few times, but the crowd's enthusiasm could not be resisted. With a show of reluctant grace, he took up the brush and produced a poem:

"Beyond the Frontier"

White armor frosted in the cold beyond the pass,

Barbarian beacons flare, reaching Chang'an.

On the battlements, beneath the western moon,

How many soldiers gaze from horseback?

Ouyang's poem was remarkable. As Zhu Ping'an chewed, he silently admired it. It carried both vigor and emotion, an excellent frontier poem—one that would not be out of place even among Tang poetry.

The imagery was vivid: the soldiers' black armor turned white with frost, proof of the bitter cold; yet still they charged forth, for barbarian flames of war already threatened the capital. Behind them lay home and empire—how could they remain in comfort? At dawn, they rode out, the moon still hanging above the city walls. But why did all the soldiers gaze toward the battlements? Were they awaiting the court's command? Or perhaps looking upon the moon, thinking of loved ones?

The fusion of scene and feeling made this poem a masterpiece. Especially when compared to the mediocrity before it, it stood out like a crane among chickens.

Ouyang truly had ability—no matter how much he had prepared in advance.

Naturally, the poem was met with thunderous applause. Even neutral parties sang its praises, and even those displeased with Yan Shifan could not deny their admiration for Ouyang's verse.

Then, amid the clamor, Ouyang once again seized the brush, dashing off another poem in a single sweep:

“Feast for the Generals”

At Tianshan in March, the north wind roars,

Soldiers spur their steeds, galloping like flight.

Shock cavalry, guided by the White Horse Lord,

Bows bent, striking falcons from the sky.

In Jincheng once, stores filled for General Chongguo,

Now at Chaohai, pirates are slain with blade.

Beware, you foolish tribes of the West and East,

Our sacred drums will crush your savage hordes.

Compared to the subtle restraint of the first poem, this one blazed with hot-blooded ferocity. Blades flashing, arrows piercing, throats slit in verse. “Falcons” symbolized the Northern Barbarians, who boasted that even their children could shoot them down; “pirates” were the Southern raiders. With these words, the poem tied itself directly to the earlier topic—sweeping away both North and South!

Two poems, both excellent, written in one breath—naturally Ouyang’s fame spread swiftly around the banquet.

Others also composed verses, Luo Longwen among them, but with Ouyang’s brilliance, theirs seemed dull in comparison.

Even among the neutral faction, some produced poetry. One verse contained lines that drew approval:

“I hear the general vows a horsehide shroud,

But how many truly return in coffins wrapped?”

Yet, since it resembled too closely the old verse—“Laugh not that I sleep drunk upon the battlefield; since ancient times, how few return from war?”—it still fell short beside Ouyang’s.

So Zhu Ping’an simply sat silently, watching the poetic performances, content to remain a quiet eater.

But sometimes, trouble seeks you out no matter how much you avoid it. Just as Zhu Ping'an resolved to be nothing more than a diner, flames of contention crept toward him.

"Our champion scholar certainly has an appetite. Could it be that all of our poems here cannot compare with the delicacies upon your plate?"

The speaker, as expected, was Luo Longwen, who had never liked Zhu. He sneered, eyes cold.

"How could that be? I've been listening with full attention." Zhu Ping'an raised his head, smiling lightly, showing his perfect eight-toothed grin.

"Listening with attention? What I saw was eating with attention." Luo scoffed. "Can one serve two masters at once? If an army marched as distractedly as you, divided between eating and planning, would it not end in disaster, defeated as if by armchair generals?"

"Indeed..." Several voices echoed in agreement, pointedly targeting Zhu.

Armchair generals? That's you lot, not me, Zhu thought darkly, though outwardly he only smiled.

“Oh? Are you not the champion scholar? Why not compose a poem of your own?” someone suggested.

“Yes, let’s see what masterpiece our multitasking champion can produce.”

“And if you refuse, then it means you look down on us all!”

The proposal won instant support. No one believed Zhu Ping’an, caught off guard, could outshine Ouyang. Their voices pressed him, leaving him no room to decline.

So that’s how it is—you won’t even let me eat in peace. You want me to trip instead of serve as a stepping stone? I hadn’t wanted to show off... but if you insist on forcing me, then don’t blame me for obliging.

With the crowd’s urging, Zhu Ping’an reluctantly rose, took up the brush, and after a moment’s thought, set ink to paper:

“Utmost Loyalty to the Nation”

If my head falls today, what of it?

The road of service is hardship, battle upon battle.

Even in the netherworld I'll summon my old troops,

Ten banners strong, to cut down the King of Hell.

It was in fact a borrowed verse from Commander Chen's "Three Poems of Meiling," altered slightly by Zhu to suit the moment—turning the theme from revolution to loyal service, with the meaning of eradicating pirates and sweeping away the barbarians.

You accused me of divided focus, of harming both self and others? You mocked me as an armchair strategist? Very well—then I begin my poem with death itself. Let me show you: I, Zhu Ping'an, pledge utmost loyalty, unafraid of death. Alive, I will sweep away the pirates and barbarians. Dead, I will still rally my soldiers, banners flying, to strike even at the gates of Hell, and return to fight anew. Alive, I serve the nation with all my strength. Dead, I remain steadfast for my country. That is true devotion until death, true righteous spirit. I do not fear death—I will gladly shatter myself for my homeland.

Even in death, I will continue to fight.

Such was the poem's spirit. Under such grandeur, what poem could compare? Even Ouyang's verses, fine as they were, dimmed in this brilliance.

When Zhu finished, faces around him shifted. The looks directed his way were no longer the same as before. Champion scholar indeed—such a spirit was not something ordinary men possessed.

For others, loyalty ended in life. For him, it endured beyond death. Who could rival that?