

Rise 336

Chapter 336: Yan Maoqing, With Only the Clear Wind in His Sleeves

Rise of the Poor

Zhu Ping'an and his two companions did not linger long at the Xu residence. They only stayed long enough to show their faces before excusing themselves. On the one hand, there were other newly admitted scholars waiting outside with calling cards to pay their respects; on the other hand, it was obvious that Xu Jie still had matters to discuss with Zhang Juzheng and Yang Jisheng.

“Those whose aspirations are lofty and far-reaching must be diligent and never idle. The sea of learning has no end—everywhere one must seek to broaden knowledge and sharpen wisdom. Study books so as to benefit the people, and never grow complacent or arrogant.”

Before their departure, Xu Jie had exhorted Zhu Ping'an and the others to aim high and persevere in their studies. His earnest encouragement was plain in both words and expression.

Leaving Xu's residence, the three of them went straight to Yan Maoqing's mansion without pause. On the road, their talk turned to Zhang Juzheng and Yang Jisheng, whom they had just met at Xu's. Their impressions of Yang Jisheng were unanimous; as for Zhang Juzheng, their opinions differed slightly.

“I feel that Zhang Juzheng is a man of deep calculation, not someone easy to grow close to,” Wang Shizhen remarked.

“Oh? What makes you say that?” Zhu Ping’an asked with interest.

“His bearing,” Wang explained quietly. “At Xu’s residence, when I asked him about the poetry societies in the capital, his expression gave nothing away, and he even kindly recommended several to me. But in his eyes—there flashed, for the briefest instant, a look of disdain. It was fleeting, but I am certain I did not mistake it.”

“You must have imagined it, Wen Sheng,” Zhang Siwei interjected with a shrug. “I didn’t sense anything of the sort. Though Zhang Juzheng did not speak much, whenever he did, it was to the point. He seemed approachable, without pretension. From today’s impression, I saw no such hidden depth.”

“Zi Hou, what do you think?” Wang ignored Zhang’s words and turned to Zhu Ping’an.

“Zhang Juzheng is a man of profound depth—unfathomable. His future is boundless,” Zhu Ping’an said softly, voicing the judgment that history itself would one day pass on Zhang Juzheng.

“Ah?” Zhang Siwei was startled. He had already been surprised when Wang Shizhen suggested Zhang had hidden depths. Now Zhu Ping’an was saying Zhang’s depth was not merely present, but immeasurable—his astonishment grew.

Wang Shizhen too was taken aback. He had only thought Zhang somewhat calculating, but had never held so positive a view of Zhang’s future.

“To win Xu Jie’s esteem is no easy matter. To speak little, yet always to the point—could such a man’s heart be shallow? The Hanlin Academy, cradle of future ministers—this man is not to be underestimated,” Zhu Ping’an explained slowly.

“Hehehe. I cannot say what future awaits Zhang Juzheng, but Zi Hou’s own future is beyond measure. After the palace examination, you too will enter the Hanlin Academy. With your ability and talent, the road ahead will surely be bright. Just don’t forget to look after Wen Sheng and me, eh?” Zhang Siwei teased with a laugh.

“Hehe, we’ll just have to cling tightly to Zi Hou’s thigh,” Wang Shizhen joined in, laughing.

“If you want to cling to my thigh, you’ll have to coax me first,” Zhu Ping’an replied in full play, deliberately putting on airs, even swaggering sideways like a crab as they walked.

“Alas, pity that we don’t know how to coax,” Zhang Siwei sighed dramatically.

“Indeed, indeed. I’ve never been good at coaxing anyone,” Wang Shizhen chimed in, spreading his hands helplessly toward Zhu Ping’an as though to say: I’d love to cling to your thigh, but I have no talent for flattery.

“Actually, I’m quite easy to coax. Stars you may not have, but a few hundred taels of silver would muddle me along just fine...”

As he spoke, Zhu Ping'an stretched out his hands in a money-counting gesture, squinting one eye and grinning roguishly.

Pfft...

Wang Shizhen and Zhang Siwei couldn't help bursting into laughter. On the surface, this fellow looked honest and guileless, but inside he was sharp enough to sell you off and still make you count the money for him. And beyond that, he was witty and humorous, making his company light and delightful.

Thus the three joked and laughed all the way until, before long, they arrived at Yan Maoqing's residence.

Though Yan Maoqing's mansion could not compare with Yan Song's, it was far more extravagant than Xu Jie's. At the top of its vermillion gate, a black nanmu plaque gleamed with two bold, soaring characters: Yan Residence.

In the history of Ming, there were many figures remembered for their virtue—but not a few also infamous for their corruption. Yan Maoqing was among the most dazzling of the latter.

Yan Maoqing, styled Jingsiu, a native of Fengcheng's Quangang East Village, was notorious as one of the most infamous lackeys of the traitor Yan Song. His fame lay not merely in sycophancy, but in his bottomless greed. Like a mythical beast that swallows without ever spitting out, he amassed wealth endlessly. His life was one of absurd extravagance: "toilet furnished with brocade, chamber pots adorned with silver"; "a gaudy palanquin carried by twelve maidens." He was not only greedy, but also ruthless in framing the loyal. It was he who orchestrated the famous dismissal of Hai Rui.

With keen curiosity, Zhu Ping'an followed Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen to the gates of the Yan residence, presenting their calling cards.

Soon enough, the gatekeeper returned: the master invited them in. Led by the servant, the three stepped into the mansion.

Everywhere within, opulence abounded. Though the rumors of embroidered toilets went unseen, one could still feel the excess at a glance: exotic gardens, vast ponds, towering walls carved with guardian beasts, and row upon row of magnificent, richly decorated chambers.

Yan Maoqing received them in his study. Apart from him, no one else was present. According to etiquette, Zhu Ping'an and the others bowed in greeting.

"Enough, enough. Look at you—bringing gifts again! Old Zhang, what's this? Have I not told you time and again, no gifts allowed?!"

Yan Maoqing remained seated, only lifting his hand slightly to motion them up. When he saw the gift boxes, he immediately donned a stern expression, scolding the servant who had led them in with the righteous tone of a man of spotless integrity.

He went on and on, the gist being: Have I not repeatedly instructed, both within and without these walls, that no gifts are to be accepted? How many times must I say it? An official must be upright, untainted, sharing the worries of the people before their joys. One must endure loneliness, not seek pleasure. We must be worthy of the Emperor above and the people below. We must be frugal, we must not live in luxury, we must not waste wealth...

Listening to him, one might have thought him recalling hard times over a coarse millet bun.

Indeed, Yan Maoqing was a fine actor. Had Zhu Ping'an not already known the man's true nature, he might almost have been taken in by this performance.

"This must not happen again, this must not happen again..."

After his solemn sermon, Yan Maoqing repeated the phrase several times. Then, with well-practiced subtlety, he slid the gift boxes inward along the desk, stealing a glance at their contents. But when he discovered they contained only ink, his disappointment and disdain showed clearly.

Yan Maoqing was no stranger to such things. What of a few boxes of "Spring Green Ink"? If he wanted, Luo Wenlong—Yan Shifan's toady and an expert in ink-making—could send him boxes upon boxes. The last time, Luo had foisted more than ten boxes onto him; they still lay piled up in the storeroom.

And so, the "upright, self-denying" Yan Maoqing looked as though he had been shorted several hundred taels of silver. Especially toward Zhu Ping'an, his attitude cooled markedly. Before long, with the excuse of pressing official duties, he hurried them out, not even bothering with the usual polite words of encouragement at parting.