

Rise 36

Chapter 36: Chaos and Family Gossip

Because earlier he was threatened by the cunning little girl to tell a story, Zhu Ping'an didn't have time to roast fish today. On his way home from school, he took the whole fish basket back. Today's catch was not as plentiful as yesterday's, with only five palm-sized fish to make do with.

Riding the old yellow cow home, Zhu Ping'an found the house in utter chaos.

His fourth aunt, third aunt, and mother, Chen, were in a noisy argument in the courtyard with his eldest aunt and grandmother, causing quite the commotion.

It was surely about the two strings of cash his eldest aunt had taken from grandmother, but he wasn't sure who started it. It was three against one, and with grandmother staying silent, Zhu Ping'an knew his mother wouldn't suffer any losses, so he didn't step in.

"Senior sister-in-law, are you in cahoots with your maiden family to trick us? A few days ago, they sent you one string of cash, and yesterday you got two more from mother. Not even loan sharks charge that much interest! Second and third sister-in-law and I were just asking, but you say we're causing trouble for the family and ruining brotherly bonds. Aren't we allowed to ask?" Fourth aunt complained with a bitter look.

"I already told you, it's not what you think. Your first-brother-in-law is going to the county for a few days of academic study. He'll definitely pass the imperial exam next time, and then won't our whole family enjoy glory and prosperity together? We'll be on equal footing with the county magistrate, won't need to kneel, and can even be exempt from taxes and labor service. Fourth sister-in-law, you need to think long-term.

When your big brother succeeds, he won't forget you," the eldest aunt responded with ease, a smile on her face as if she were gently advising a little sister who didn't understand.

"Pass, pass, pass. You say that every time, but has first brother-in-law ever passed?" Fourth aunt muttered softly.

"What did you just say, fourth sister-in-law?" The smile on the eldest aunt's face froze and cracked.

"Nothing, nothing. How would we know if first brother-in-law used those two strings of cash for studying or to flatter your maiden family?" Fourth aunt quickly waved her hands. Everyone knew passing the imperial exam was the eldest aunt's wish, and no one dared touch that nerve, so she swiftly shifted the topic.

"That's right, big sister-in-law, two strings of cash is no small amount. If we used it ourselves, Jun'er could attend primary school, and it would also be enough for our Zhi'er to go too," Chen, Zhu Ping'an's mother, added.

Upon hearing this, the eldest aunt glanced at Zhu Ping'an, who was riding the old yellow cow and carrying the fish basket into the house. There was a hint of disdain in her smile, but she still replied cheerfully:

"Second sister-in-law, I think Zhi'er is doing just fine herding cattle. Look, he's even caught fish again. Originally, I didn't want my Jun'er to go to school either. I wanted him to stay home and help with the farm and cattle. But the fortune-teller insisted that my Jun'er is the reincarnation of the literary star, Wenquxing. Several fortune-tellers said the same thing after reading his fortune and doing character divinations. They even said that if I didn't send Jun'er to school, it would be against heaven's will. It scared me so much that I mentioned it to mother, and wouldn't you know, her grandmother rushed to give us the money."

Zhu Ping'an saw his mother's face turn green with anger from his eldest aunt's sharp-tongued remarks. It was clear that his mother was about to step forward and engage in a fierce verbal duel with his eldest aunt.

At that moment, Zhu Pingjun also returned home from school, as Zhu Ping'an had arrived a bit faster, riding the old yellow cow.

"Mother, I don't want to go to school anymore! That old teacher doesn't like me, he hits my palms every day. Look, they're all swollen. I'm not going back, no matter what!"

As soon as Zhu Pingjun stepped into the house, he started yelling, showing his red, swollen hands from the teacher's beatings. Tears and snot streamed down his face as he cried, saying he would never go back to school again.

Though Zhu Ping'an wore simple, patched clothing, he looked chubby, clean, and tidy. In contrast, Zhu Pingjun wore new clothes, but his face was covered in tears, snot, and traces of mud. Oddly enough, Zhu Ping'an looked more like a school student, while Zhu Pingjun appeared more like a monkey in a crown, more suited to herding cattle than studying.

Seeing this scene, Zhu Ping'an's mother, Chen, immediately calmed down, her anger vanishing. She mimicked the same expression and gaze that her eldest sister-in-law had used earlier, returning the favor.

Eldest aunt, provoked by Chen's reaction, glanced at her son, who was crying and wailing about how the teacher hit his hands every day and adamantly refusing to go back to school. Her frustration erupted.

"I'll show you for not going to school! I'll show you for not studying properly... Do you know how much effort your father and I put in to get you into school?" Eldest aunt could no longer maintain the dignified composure she had earlier while arguing with her sisters-in-law. Her face was flushed with anger, and she grabbed Zhu Pingjun and reached for the broom nearby, hitting him on the bottom with loud smacks.

"Oh dear, big sister-in-law, don't take your anger out on the child! Jun'er is so young; what does he know? He's the reincarnation of Wenquxing, don't go breaking him," Chen said sarcastically, sounding as though she was protecting Zhu Pingjun, but in reality, every word was mocking her eldest sister-in-law.

"Big sister-in-law, didn't you just say how much effort you put into sending Jun'er to school? Did I hear wrong? Wasn't it the money from your maiden family that paid for his schooling?" Fourth aunt, with her sharp ears, seized upon the slip in eldest aunt's words and refused to let it go.

Third aunt, who had been silent until now, also chimed in, "I heard big sister-in-law say that too."

Hearing this, eldest aunt paused mid-discipline, and Zhu Pingjun took the opportunity to break free from her grasp. Instead of running away, he flopped onto the ground and started rolling around, crying loudly, "You might as well beat me to death! Just beat me to death! I'm not going back to school, no matter what!"

In the blink of an eye, Zhu Pingjun had turned into a "mud monkey." His tears left two streaks of white down his face, contrasting sharply with the dirt, and his nose was smeared with two lines of muddy snot. His wails made him look all the more pitiful.

"Brother Jun, get up, the ground is dirty," the little girl, Yu'er, timidly emerged from a corner and approached Zhu Pingjun, trying to comfort him.

But Zhu Pingjun continued to roll on the ground, ignoring Yu'er.

Zhu Ping'an, meanwhile, got off the old yellow cow and walked over with the basket of fish. He glanced at the muddy Zhu Pingjun and then at little Yu'er, who was blinking her big, watery eyes, seeking his help. Zhu Ping'an spoke up:

"Come on, Yu'er. Your brother caught several fish from the river. Let's put them in the water basin to play. One of the fish has a colorful back—it looks really pretty."

As Zhu Ping'an spoke, he took Yu'er's hand and led her, carrying the fish basket, toward the well in the courtyard where there was a water basin.

"There's a pretty fish? Wait for me! Wait for me! I want to come too!" As soon as Zhu Pingjun heard there was something fun and interesting, he immediately stopped crying. He jumped up from the ground, wiped his tears and snot with his muddy hands, and happily chased after Zhu Ping'an as if nothing had happened.

Everyone in the courtyard stood dumbfounded, watching this scene.

Fourth aunt was the first to react. She turned to the eldest aunt and continued her questioning, "Big sister-in-law, you still haven't answered the question from me and third sister-in-law. Didn't your maiden family cover the costs of Jun'er's school fees? What was it that you and big brother worked so hard for?"

"Exactly, big sister-in-law, you should explain this to us."

"Yes, big sister-in-law, we're all family here. You can't keep things from us sisters-in-law."

The courtyard once again erupted into a noisy commotion.