

Rise 42

Chapter 42: Preparation for Apprenticeship

Mother Chen returned to the room like a victorious general, invigorated and high-spirited, quickly making a schoolbag for Zhu Ping'an. As she entered the room, she deliberately threw some sarcastic remarks at First Aunt and Fourth Aunt. Zhu Ping'an tied the old yellow cow securely in the barn before hurriedly following Chen into the room.

Outside the east wing, Fourth Aunt and First Aunt were still in disbelief, saying some sarcastic comments. They wondered how one could study without attending a school, claiming that Zhu'er was surely trying to deceive people. They even questioned whether the teacher was playing with Zhu'er. Clearly, their remarks stemmed from envy; since they couldn't achieve it, they hoped no one else could either, which brought them some psychological balance.

After returning to the room, Chen felt a bit troubled. She couldn't make a schoolbag herself. In this era, students' schoolbags were portable wooden or bamboo boxes, and their designs were mostly the same, with the distinction lying in the materials used and the quality of workmanship. Making a schoolbag was a carpenter's job, and Chen couldn't do it. Once she calmed down in the room, she realized that her earlier promise in the courtyard might have been clouded by her excitement.

"Well, Zhu'er, I'll make the schoolbag for you when your father comes back. He's good at carpentry," Chen said awkwardly.

Upon hearing this, Zhu Ping'an rolled his eyes. After carrying schoolbags for over a decade in the modern world, he was already used to fabric bags. Who would still use wooden ones that were so heavy?

So, Zhu Ping'an gestured with his hands while saying, "Wooden bags are too heavy. I want one made of fabric, any kind of fabric will do. Just a piece of fabric that's flat, sewn up so it can hold things. And sew straps on both sides so I can hang it around my neck."

Chen, being accustomed to sewing, quickly understood Zhu Ping'an's gestures.

"You little brat just know how to boss me around," Chen scolded jokingly, but her face showed a smile as she rummaged through the cabinet for a piece of burlap, moving the scissors around, her needle flying as she worked.

Soon, a schoolbag took shape in Chen's hands. Its design resembled that of schoolbags from the 1980s and 1990s but was somewhat different, lacking unnecessary patterns or decorations, giving it a simpler and more elegant style. The bag wasn't large; Zhu Ping'an tried it on his shoulder and found it just right. The dimensions were also perfect—not too big, but with enough space for him to store books, ink, and paper.

"Thank you, Mom," Zhu Ping'an said, touched as he looked at Chen's thumb, which she had accidentally pricked while hurrying to finish.

Chen replied irritably, "Just don't annoy me."

After a while, the Zhu family members returned one after another. First, Grandfather entered with his hands behind his back, holding his pipe. When he heard from Grandmother that Zhu Ping'an had been accepted into school for free, he became so excited that his old face turned red, repeatedly exclaiming, "Good, good, good!"

Following him was Fourth Uncle, who staggered in, reeking of alcohol. His first words upon entering were, "I was drinking with friends outside, so don't call me for dinner." After saying this, Fourth Uncle swayed into the room, bumping into the door. It was clear he had drunk too much. Although Fourth Aunt was angry, she hurriedly went to support him and took the opportunity to pinch him a few times to vent her frustration.

Seeing this, Grandfather was so angry that he almost wanted to kick Fourth Uncle a few times, cursing, "What a useless guy!"

Grandmother disagreed, pulling Grandfather back and not allowing him to kick Fourth Uncle. She spoke up for him, saying, "Men are like that; who doesn't socialize outside? This just shows our Fourth has a good network and many friends."

"What friends? They're all a bunch of good-for-nothing rascals! You just spoil him!" Grandfather retorted angrily, reprimanding Grandmother.

Father Zhu Shouyi and Elder Brother Zhu Pingchuan were the last to arrive, both carrying baskets on their backs as they had gone into the mountains again today.

"Oh, Second Brother is back from the mountains!"

Fourth Aunt, who should have been inside serving Fourth Uncle, dashed out like a wolf that had caught a scent of blood, startling Chen, who had just stepped out of the east wing.

Father Zhu's basket was quite full, containing two live rabbits, a wild chicken, and a lot of bamboo shoots and mountain mushrooms. Fourth Aunt's face lit up with joy at the sight—finally, there would be some meat to eat! Zhu Pingchuan's basket was also full, but it contained mostly wildflowers, which made Fourth Aunt a bit unhappy. "Why did Da Chuan get infected by Zhu'er and pick so many wildflowers?" she thought.

"I wanted these," Zhu Ping'an said, waddling out on his short legs, clearing Fourth Aunt's confusion.

Grandmother and Fourth Aunt were uninterested in the wildflowers, just like last time. They organized the other items and tossed the basket of wildflowers aside for Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an circled around the basket full of wildflowers, grinning like a fool.

First Aunt was grumbling to herself, thinking, "What a silly boy, getting so happy over a few wildflowers! What a low standard! He's just studying primary education; how can he compare to our Jun'er?"

When Father and Elder Brother heard that Zhu Ping'an had been chosen by Old Scholar Sun for free schooling, they were overjoyed. Father was so happy that he grabbed Zhu Ping'an and spun him around in the air a few times, almost making Zhu Ping'an throw up.

"Mom, the teacher said it's free, but we can't just go empty-handed. I think, how about I take this wild chicken and some of the mountain mushrooms I collected to give to Old Scholar Sun tomorrow for him to try?" Zhu Shouyi said after putting Zhu Ping'an down, discussing it with Grandmother.

Grandmother wore an unwilling expression, and before she could utter a word of refusal, Grandfather spoke up.

"That's right; my second son is correct. Those mountain mushrooms and wild delicacies aren't worth much, so we might as well bring them along," Grandfather nodded repeatedly.

"Is all this really necessary?" Grandmother protested.

"What do you know, you woman!" Grandfather interrupted with a dark face. "Listen to me; just take them all tomorrow."

Dinner that evening was naturally harmonious, and Grandfather unusually drank two extra cups, feeling a bit tipsy.

"If only this fabric could be used to make a new outfit for Zhu'er. It's all your fault for wasting money and not spending it wisely."

After dinner, in the east wing, Chen began to complain about Zhu Shouyi while looking at the white and pink cotton fabric at the head of the bed.

Zhu Shouyi, of course, nodded repeatedly, his face black but full of smiles.

Outside the window, Elder Brother Da Chuan was helping Zhu Ping'an fetch water for his bath, as he would be apprenticing for his education the next day and needed to wash up properly. In ancient times, becoming an apprentice was a significant event; one had to bathe, change into new clothes, and eat vegetarian meals to show respect—this was what was called fasting. Although it wasn't as strictly observed in rural areas, bathing was still essential; one needed to be clean and tidy to at least demonstrate respect for the teacher.

"Oh, by the way, I also brought along a blue cotton bed sheet as my dowry. Hurry and dig it out for me; I want to make Zhu'er a new outfit." Chen, who had been complaining about Zhu Shouyi, suddenly remembered and urged him to search high and low for the bed sheet with a beaming smile.

"That's your dowry..." Zhu Shouyi hesitantly replied.

"What do you know? I want it," Chen said, giving Zhu Shouyi a firm kick and repeatedly urging him to get the bed sheet. "Zhu Shouyi, hurry up!"