

Rise 66

Chapter 66: Even a Toad Wants to Take the Imperial Examination

What an unlovable little brat!

Zhu Ping'an shook his head slightly, shifting his gaze away from the scheming girl Li Shu and ignoring the spoiled girl who had been pampered by her family. He then noticed the baozi maid Hua'er still looking at him with curiosity and admiration, which made him smile.

"I observed the heavenly signs and calculated: it will snow today."

Zhu Ping'an brushed the snowflakes off his body and answered the baozi maid's previous question with the seriousness of a fortune-teller.

The baozi maid Hua'er blinked her eyes, looking confused.

"You silly Hua'er, he wrote 'It will snow today,' and he told you that you can only open it on a snowy day. How could it not be accurate!" Li Shu couldn't help but poke her delicate finger on Hua'er's forehead.

Hua'er, feeling aggrieved, touched her forehead and thought for a moment. Suddenly, she lifted her head in realization, puffed out her cheeks, and glared at Zhu Ping'an, saying, "Oh, I see! I fell for your tricks again, you bad guy!"

Zhu Ping'an turned his head away, unable to suppress his laughter.

"You bad person! No matter what you say today, I won't give you anything to eat!" the baozi maid Hua'er huffed angrily.

The old maid and other little maids behind the scheming girl Li Shu all laughed. In ancient times, there weren't many entertainment options, and these people were quite looking forward to Zhu Ping'an coming to borrow books. Every time he came to borrow or return books, as long as they brought some snacks or delicacies, they could exchange that for a storytelling session from Zhu Ping'an, whether it was about strange happenings or martial arts adventures. However, this kid was quite picky about his snacks, but Hua'er always seemed to bring something he liked, and she was always the most enthusiastic. So when they heard Hua'er sulking about not giving him food, they found it amusing.

The study of the wealthy Li family was very elegant and spacious, with a rich collection of books, always drawing Zhu Ping'an's attention.

There was a white-bearded steward managing the study. Zhu Ping'an entered the room and returned the books he had borrowed last time with both hands from the shoulder bag he carried. Only after the white-bearded steward checked the books could he choose new ones to borrow.

"Well, young master An is a book lover. So, in a few months, it will be the student exam. Are you going to show off your skills?" the white-bearded steward teased after confirming the books were in good condition.

The student exam, also known as the childhood exam, colloquially referred to as the scholar's exam, is divided into three stages: the "county exam," the "prefectural exam," and the "provincial exam." The county exam takes place in each county, presided over by the county magistrate. It is generally held in February each

year and consists of five rounds. After passing, candidates proceed to the prefectural exam, overseen by local officials, held in April and consisting of three rounds. Those who pass both the county and prefectural exams are called "tongsheng" (童生) and can take the provincial exam presided over by educational officials from each province. Those who pass the provincial exam are referred to as "shengyuan" (生员) or scholars. The top candidate in the county exam is called "jieyuan" (解元).

Zhu Ping'an's first uncle passed the county and prefectural exams, earning the title of "tongsheng," but he has never succeeded in the provincial exam. Since Zhu Ping'an's family was divided, his first uncle has taken the imperial examination two more times and, as in the past, failed miserably. In a few months, it will be the three-year student exam again, and his first uncle will certainly participate. Rumors say that his uncle has boasted that he will definitely pass this time.

As for whether Zhu Ping'an will participate this time...

"The student exam, huh? Well, I think my teacher mentioned it a few days ago. Initially, he didn't plan to let me go, but one of my senior brothers is staying home in mourning and can't participate in this exam. Since five people are needed to register together, and they were short one, my teacher said I should go and experience the imperial exam, to learn from it. This way, when I take it in the future, I won't panic. Haha, I'm just there to make up the numbers, to learn from failure..."

Zhu Ping'an pondered briefly and repeated what his teacher, Master Sun, had said, then smiled self-deprecatingly.

To take the student exam, candidates must register at the county's registry office, filling in their name, birthplace, age, and the background of three generations. Five candidates must jointly guarantee each other, and a registered scholar from the same county must act as a guarantor by issuing a certificate, known as a "renbao" (guarantee). Zhu Ping'an's teacher, Master Sun, was a registered scholar with the right to guarantee

candidates. Initially, he didn't plan to let Zhu Ping'an participate, but since one of the original five was in mourning, Master Sun added Zhu Ping'an to fill the gap. There was no expectation that Zhu Ping'an would pass the exam—he was simply making up the numbers.

"Well, the toad does have some self-awareness! A slick-tongued rascal like you, who only knows how to trick young girls, will pass the exam only if the sun rises in the west. If you ask me, even calling you a seat-filler is too flattering. Only the god of literature could pass; you're just a toad."

As soon as Zhu Ping'an finished speaking, the scheming girl Li Shu, who had followed behind him, immediately started mocking him.

After Li Shu finished speaking, she burst out laughing at Zhu Ping'an's stunned expression, and the old maid and little maids behind her all followed suit, laughing as well.

Although Li Shu's words were somewhat irritating, seeing so many girls laughing together in front of him was still a pleasing sight.

Zhu Ping'an merely smiled faintly in response.

Zhu Ping'an then went to the study to select the books he needed. Since the exams were approaching, he mainly picked books related to the Four Books, Five Classics, and the Eight-Legged Essays. The imperial exams in ancient times had textbooks as well, and different commentaries existed for the same classics—Zhu Xi's and Su Shi's commentaries, for example, were two different versions. This time, Zhu Ping'an chose a *Zhong Yong* (Doctrine of the Mean) annotated by Zhu Xi.

He could only borrow one book at a time. This rule was set by none other than the scheming girl, Li Shu, who had just mocked him. Her father, the wealthy Lord Li, would spoil her to the skies if he could, so naturally, he agreed to her setting such a rule.

After borrowing the book, Li Shu refused to let Zhu Ping'an leave unless he told a story. No story, no borrowing books.

With no choice, since he was under her roof, Zhu Ping'an had to continue the story of The Eight Dragons that he hadn't finished last time.

The little maids and old maids, well-accustomed to the routine, moved chairs into place, brought out snacks, and sat in a row.

This time, though, after offending the baozi-faced maid Hua'er, Zhu Ping'an didn't get any snacks. To make matters worse, the scheming girl deliberately had the kitchen prepare a steaming hot pot filled with thin slices of lamb, fish, and vegetables, which she laid out across the table. She invited Hua'er and the other little maids to sit around the table, eating lamb hot pot while listening to the story. The deliberate smacking of their lips left Zhu Ping'an drooling.

On a snowy day like this, hot pot seemed like the perfect match.

Zhu Ping'an didn't know how many times he had swallowed his saliva. Unable to hold back anymore, he turned to Hua'er to negotiate, "Miss Hua'er..."

Hua'er, her cheeks bulging with lamb, shook her head at Zhu Ping'an and mumbled, "Forget it, this time you're not getting any, no matter what you say."

"No, it's not for the food. Could you lend me a handkerchief?" Zhu Ping'an shook his head.

"What for?" Hua'er asked, puzzled.

"To wipe my drool when I watch you all eating..."

Zhu Ping'an glanced at them, his tone calm.

Upon hearing this, the girls gathered around the hot pot burst into peals of laughter, sounding like silver bells.

"Look at how pitiful you are, and you still think you can pass the imperial exam? I've never seen a literary god so unambitious!" Li Shu gave Zhu Ping'an a disdainful look, clearly unimpressed with his lack of composure.

"The sound of you swallowing is unbearable!"

Then, Li Shu pointed to one of the maids and said, "Go tell the kitchen to send another pot over."