

Rise 68

Chapter 68: Morning Exercise

In the early morning, the cold wind was fierce, and with the snow still not melted, the people of Xiahe Village were all curled up in their warm blankets, either sleeping in or playing some interesting games with their spouses. In short, the entire village was silent.

The door to one of the rooms in Zhu Ping'an's house was gently pushed open. Zhu Ping'an, dressed thickly and wearing an odd-looking rabbit fur hat, stepped out of the room with a satchel slung over his shoulder and carrying a black wooden board that had accompanied him for several years.

It was still early at this time, with only a faint glimmer of light in the east. The surroundings were quiet, with only the sound of the howling wind. However, the snow on the ground reflected enough light that the visibility in the courtyard was still quite good.

Zhu Ping'an stretched his body slightly, then habitually walked to a large stone he had specifically placed in the courtyard. He laid the black wooden board flat on the stone, poured some hot water into the stone's groove, pulled out a simple writing brush, and began practicing calligraphy with a suspended wrist. This had been a habit of his for several years. In ancient times, the imperial examination placed high demands on handwriting, and calligraphy was something one couldn't cheat at. The more you practiced, the better you wrote; the less you practiced, the worse you were compared to others. So Zhu Ping'an had always persisted in practicing his writing every morning, whether it was the coldest days of winter or the hottest days of summer, without ever skipping a day.

In fact, after several years, the situation had changed significantly. Zhu Ping'an's family had now joined the ranks of the wealthier households in Xiahe Village. However, Zhu Ping'an still maintained his habit of living a simple and frugal life.

Up until now, Zhu Ping'an had only two brushes. One was a gift from his first teacher, the old scholar Master Sun, and he used it for copying books and formal writing. The other brush was the one he was using now, which his father had made by hand. This brush was used for his morning calligraphy practice. Over the years, he had replaced the brush head several times, each time with a new one made of cow hair by his father, but the brush handle was still the same. It had been polished to a shine from constant use.

"Why are you up so early again, Zhi'er? It's so cold. Go back and sleep a little longer," his mother, Chen, said after she had been up for about half an hour. She opened the door and, as expected, saw her youngest son writing on the black wooden board outside.

The cold wind outside was biting. As soon as Chen opened the door, she felt the bone-chilling cold. Seeing her son practicing calligraphy with bare hands, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him and urged him to come inside to warm up and sleep a little longer.

"No need, Mom. I'm small, but I have a lot of energy," Zhu Ping'an replied, smiling sheepishly as he finished the last stroke of the character he was writing.

"Nonsense. If you have so much energy, why are you wearing that fur hat?" Chen rolled her eyes and teased him.

Zhu Ping'an grinned foolishly and said nothing.

Chen had no choice but to give up. She thought about cooking an old hen for breakfast to help nourish her son. When he was younger and chubby, he was so adorable. Now, although he had grown taller, he had slimmed down. No, she had to make more delicious food and fatten him up again.

After Chen got up, Zhu Ping'an's father and elder brother, Zhu Pingchuan, also woke up.

"Father, the snow outside makes it hard to walk. Let me drive the cart today," Zhu Pingchuan said to his father. He was now almost an exact replica of his father—dark-skinned, muscular, and very simple and honest.

"Today's a big market day. Big brother probably wants to bring something for my future sister-in-law, doesn't he?" Zhu Ping'an joked as he put down his writing brush.

"Hahaha..." Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan scratched the back of his head and laughed foolishly.

"What are you laughing at? Just tell the truth and be done with it," their father scolded with a laugh, giving Zhu Pingchuan a light kick from behind.

Chen, who was washing rice, paused for a moment, her tone full of jealousy as she spoke, "I've raised you for over ten years in vain. You haven't even married yet, and you've already forgotten about your mother."

Big Brother Zhu Pingchuan continued scratching the back of his head, chuckling awkwardly, "How could I forget, Mother? When I marry my wife, we'll both take care of you together."

Hearing this, Chen's expression softened considerably, though she still teased, "It sounds nice now, but we'll see once you have a wife."

Big Brother quickly reassured her.

Seeing this exchange, Zhu Ping'an suddenly got an amusing idea. He paused his calligraphy practice, a mischievous grin spreading across his face, and looked at his brother, asking with a teasing tone:

"So, if Mother and Sister-in-law both fell into the water at the same time, who would you save first, Big Brother?"

The question of who to save—your wife or your mother—was a clichéd one in modern times, often prompting clever answers from those who had heard it countless times.

But in this era, it was a brand new question.

When Zhu Ping'an asked, Mother Chen's eyes lit up with interest. She stopped washing the rice, eager to see how Zhu Pingchuan would respond.

Their father also looked at Zhu Pingchuan with amusement.

"Uh, uh, Second... Second Brother..." Zhu Pingchuan's face turned red as soon as he heard the question. He coughed awkwardly, looking helplessly at Zhu Ping'an.

How was he supposed to answer that?

Zhu Pingchuan felt as if a thousand ants were crawling in his heart. His already dark face flushed even redder, and his hand instinctively reached up to scratch his head.

If he said he'd save his mother first, what if Juan heard about it? That wouldn't end well.

But if he said he'd save Juan first, looking at Chen, who had even stopped washing the rice, Zhu Pingchuan knew that if he said that, his mother's anger might be minor, but hurting her feelings would be much worse.

This was tough.

Zhu Pingchuan stuttered, unable to say a word for a long time.

Zhu Ping'an watched his older brother's anxious expression and couldn't help but smile foolishly.

Chen looked at her eldest son, who was in a dilemma, feeling both happy and sad. This foolish boy was just too honest, which is why he always got teased by the second son. Unlike the second son, who appeared silly on the surface but was actually quite clever inside.

Seeing her eldest son in trouble and glancing at her youngest son, who was enjoying the show, Chen suddenly turned the question back to Zhu Ping'an.

"Zhi'er, what about you? Who would you save first?" she asked suddenly.

"Ah?" Zhu Ping'an was momentarily taken aback.

Now it was Zhu Pingchuan's turn to watch the younger brother face the same predicament he had just been in.

"Me? I'm still young," Zhu Ping'an replied.

Chen was not satisfied with this answer and pressed on, "No matter how young you are, you'll eventually marry. When that time comes, who will you save first?"

Without thinking, Zhu Ping'an smiled and answered, "I'm still young, so I have time to choose a wife who can swim. That way, when the time comes, I won't even have to think about it and will save Mother first."

"You little sly one!" Chen laughed and scolded.

The entire morning was filled with laughter and joy in the Zhu family.

As breakfast still needed some time to prepare, Zhu Ping'an practiced writing for a while, then tidied up his brush and wooden board, putting them back in his room. He took the "Doctrine of the Mean," annotated by Zhu Xi, which he had borrowed from Li Dacai's family, and went outside the courtyard to read.

The Zhu family's courtyard was close to the river and on the edge of the village, allowing Zhu Ping'an to easily find a quiet corner where he wouldn't be disturbed while reading.

In ancient times, for students from poor families, there was no shortcut for the imperial examinations. One could only accumulate knowledge steadily. With a solid foundation, one could rely on the memories from their past life to stand out in an era where the examination system favored those who excelled in their studies above all else. Speaking of foundation, his own foundation wasn't just the few years of primary schooling.

This time, the student scholar examination might just surprise everyone.

Zhu Ping'an looked at the "Doctrine of the Mean" in his hands, a foolish smile appearing at the corners of his mouth, while a faint glimmer of light flashed in his eyes.