

## Rise 71

Chapter 71: My benefactor, be careful, I am afraid

"Rotten wood cannot be carved, and summer insects cannot discuss ice." The students within several miles, each full of confidence, found a sense of superiority in Zhu Ping'an's presence. They all seemed to believe that they were destined to achieve the highest honors this year. With confident smiles, they waved their sleeves and set off on their journey to the county town.

Along the way, they leisurely enjoyed the scenery, reciting poems and composing essays, as if walking any faster might cause some misfortune. Their progress was as slow as a turtle's crawl. No wonder there's a saying, "It takes a scholar ten years to rebel, but they never succeed."

Zhu Ping'an followed behind these people, feeling quite irritated. To pass the time, he silently recited passages from the Four Books and attempted to break down the meaning of the text in his mind, avoiding wasting time like the other scholars.

The eight-legged essay, or baguwen, is no easy task. After studying in the Ming dynasty for several years, Zhu Ping'an felt that the difficulty level of the essay far surpassed that of modern college entrance exam compositions or civil service essays. Although the topics for the baguwen were limited to phrases from the Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, Analects\*, and Mencius, these four books together amounted to hundreds of thousands of characters. Examiners could select any sentence as the topic, making the range vast and the difficulty high. The topic could be a single sentence, a single word, a paragraph, or a combination of half-sentences from different sections. Thus, breaking down the topic was a challenge in itself.

Writing the baguwen was even harder. There were strict formatting rules, and the writer had to avoid "offending above" or "offending below." For example, if the exam topic was the phrase from the Analects, "The benevolent are not worried," when breaking down the topic, one couldn't think of the preceding phrase

"The wise are not confused" — doing so would be considered "offending above." Similarly, one couldn't think of the following phrase "The courageous are not afraid" — this would be considered "offending below."

As Zhu Ping'an walked, he continued pondering the essay topic. His already honest and simple appearance now looked even more simple-minded.

Occasionally, one of the students enjoying the scenery would glance back at Zhu Ping'an, and upon seeing his demeanor, would make a comment to their companions, followed by bursts of laughter.

"Zhu'er, the journey ahead is long, and you are still young and weak. Why don't you give me the items you're carrying, and I'll take them to the county town for you? You'll find it much easier this way." Zhu Shouren, Zhu Ping'an's eldest uncle, quietly approached him. Speaking with a sense of righteousness, he reached out to take the small bundle that Zhu Ping'an was carrying, showing the demeanor of a caring elder.

Zhu Ping'an's train of thought was interrupted by his first uncle's words. Seeing his first uncle reach for his bundle, Zhu Ping'an subtly sidestepped to avoid him. He looked at his first uncle with a naive smile and loudly said:

"Filial piety is the foremost of all virtues. As you are my elder, and since I wouldn't want to burden others with what I wouldn't want myself, how could I trouble you, First Uncle?"

Zhu Ping'an's words caught the attention of the people ahead, and many turned to look back. Uncle Zhu Shouren, having been refused, still maintained the demeanor of a cultured gentleman. His face carried a scholarly smile, and he appeared every bit the kind elder. "No matter," he said warmly. "Since you, Zhu'er, wish to strengthen yourself, let it be so. If you get tired, just tell your uncle, and I'll help share your load."

"Brother Zhu, you are truly a kind and generous elder."

"Brother Zhu, your affection for your nephew is a model for us all."

More than ten students praised Uncle Zhu Shouren for his kindness and generosity. Uncle Zhu humbly responded, saying he didn't deserve the praise, mentioning things like "the love of an old ox for its calf" and "human nature."

So, Uncle Zhu and the group of students went ahead, enjoying the scenic mountains and waters, composing poetry and songs, surrounded by an air of literary grandeur.

Zhu Ping'an watched his uncle from behind, a slight smile forming at the corner of his mouth. If Uncle truly wanted to help carry something to share the burden, why didn't he take the heavier backpack? That small bundle he took weighs less than two pounds in total—what burden is there to share? It seems more likely that First Uncle wanted to quietly pocket my travel expenses. Before the trip, Father, bowing to Grandfather's authority and risking angering Chen, had already given Uncle five taels of silver, with no mention of repayment, yet First Uncle still isn't satisfied.

The group walked for two or three hours, covering only seven or eight miles, when someone suggested finding a wind-sheltered spot to eat and rest before continuing.

They soon found an abandoned mountain temple, entered, and laid down hay or blankets. Some wealthier students had their accompanying servants place meat and wine on the ground, inviting everyone to drink and enjoy poetry.

Naturally, Zhu Ping'an, who had only come to make up the numbers for the student's exam, was ignored. Even the "loving uncle" at this moment didn't have the slightest intention of showing any "love." The group gathered in a circle, and no one invited Zhu Ping'an to join, nor was there a spot saved for him. Zhu Ping'an was treated the same as the servants, relegated to the corner.

But Zhu Ping'an didn't mind. He found a corner of the temple, laid down some hay, sat down, and took out the egg-and-flour pancakes his mother, Chen, had specially made for him before he left. He tucked a slice of pickled cucumber, made by his mother following Grandmother's recipe, between the pancakes, and, accompanied by water from the bamboo canteen at his waist, he began eating with relish.

The cucumber was crisp, and the pancake was fragrant—the taste was wonderful.

At that moment, a sudden cry for help came from outside the mountain temple, a girl's soft and pitiful voice:

"Help! Help..."

The girl's voice was soft yet pitiful, tinged with fright, trembling with helplessness, and mixed with sobbing... The sobs tugged at your heartstrings, and anyone who heard such a helpless cry would feel a surge of righteousness in their chest.

What's more, the cry for help was soon followed by the appearance of a disheveled girl, her innocent eyes red from crying. She had a delicate, pitiful appearance, exuding a weak, helpless aura that invited sympathy and protection.

The helpless, crying girl stumbled and, by chance, saw the resting students inside the mountain temple. A glimmer of hopeful sorrow appeared on her tender, pitiable face, and she stumbled toward the temple.

Her helpless cry, her pitiable appearance—these moved the group of students, stirring their sympathy and righteous indignation. They shouted a line that had been passed down through the ages:

"In broad daylight, under the clear sky, what scoundrel dares to snatch a maiden!"

Zhu Ping'an, sitting in the corner eating pancakes and chewing on pickled cucumber, almost spat out his food when he heard this. He hurriedly took a sip of water to calm himself down.

When Zhu Ping'an glanced at the girl calling for help outside the door, the corners of his mouth slightly curled up, but he made no other movement. He continued munching on his egg pancake, chewing on his cucumber, and drinking his water.

The more than ten students, overflowing with sympathy and a strong sense of justice, shouted their timeless phrase before heading out one by one, embarking on their "heroic rescue" mission.

The disheveled and helpless girl, her eyes filled with gratitude, stumbled behind the group of students. She trembled helplessly as she grabbed the hem of one student's robe, shaking with fear.

Chasing after the girl were five greasy, lecherous-looking ruffians with shifty eyes, making it clear they were no good.

"Hand over the girl, or don't blame us for being rough," one of the ruffians said.

The five ruffians stopped a short distance away, seeming somewhat wary of the crowd but still trying to act aggressive, hoping to scare them off.

Hearing the ruffians' words, the girl hiding behind one of the students trembled even more. Her voice quivered as she spoke:

"Benefactors, please be careful... I-I'm scared..."