

Rise 76

Chapter 76: Huaining County

The setting sun is endlessly beautiful, yet it approaches dusk.

In the twilight, the city wall of Huaining County is lovingly enveloped by the sunset, sinking into its embrace, dyed a rose red.

Against the backdrop of the setting sun, a dusty young man walks towards the city, casting a long shadow in the remaining light. The young man carries a bundle on his back, covered in dust, with his blue robe speckled with grass clippings. Looking up at the nearby Huaining County, a simple smile spreads across his honest face.

In a rush, he also caught a ride with a kind-hearted uncle's cart along the way, managing to arrive at Huaining County before sunset.

This young man is Zhu Ping'an, heading to the county for the examination. After breaking away from a girl's side, he headed straight for the county town. Along the way, apart from encountering a peddler he had met before in Xiahe Village, for whom he spent two coins to send a message home, Zhu Ping'an did not stop moving.

With peace rising in all corners and calm reigning everywhere, Huaining County is bustling with people, carts flowing like water, and horses galloping like dragons, far more prosperous than Kaoshan Town.

Zhu Ping'an blended into the crowd, slowly walking towards the city gate.

To enter the city, one must pay a coin; leaving the city requires no payment. When it was Zhu Ping'an's turn, the guarding soldier saw that Zhu Ping'an was dressed in a blue robe and asked him why he was entering the city. Zhu Ping'an replied that he was there to take the student exam. Upon hearing that Zhu Ping'an was a scholar attending the student exam, the soldier instantly became much more respectful, treating him entirely differently than the other passersby, even letting him enter the city without charging the entrance fee.

In this age, all pursuits are deemed inferior; only reading is esteemed. As Zhu Ping'an walked into the county town with his bundle, he once again felt the meaning behind this saying that represented the era.

Strolling through the streets of Huaining County, he felt the rich ancient charm. This is a real, thriving life of an ancient county town, no less than that of a modern city; they represent two styles: one of steel and concrete modernization, the other of ancient ink-wash paintings.

At dusk, the city remains lively and prosperous, with streets paved with bluestone slabs, flourishing shops on both sides, and pedestrians in fashionable, clean attire, perfectly showcasing the wealth of the people living here.

As Zhu Ping'an walked along, dusty and weary, he truly felt like a country bumpkin entering the city.

The immediate priority now is to find an inn, settle down, enjoy a hot meal, take a warm bath, change into fresh clothes, and finally have a good sleep.

Zhu Ping'an headed towards an inn named "Yue Ke Lai." The inn is a three-story building, with many diners in the lobby. Outside the inn, a neat and tidy young attendant, with a white towel draped over his shoulder, greeted Zhu Ping'an warmly as he approached.

"Dear guest, do you wish to stay for a while or rent a room?"

"I'd like to rent a room," Zhu Ping'an replied with a simple smile.

"Alright, please come in, dear guest." The attendant gestured with a bow, leading Zhu Ping'an into the inn. Once inside, the attendant called out loudly, "Boss, this young gentleman wants to rent a room."

"This young gentleman is in luck; we only have one last room available, and it's the lowest grade," the innkeeper said.

Soon, a stout innkeeper waddled over, a middle-aged man in his forties, his face shiny and round.

"Could I trouble you to show me the room?" Zhu Ping'an asked. Hearing that it was the worst room made him think of a movie he had seen in his past life, featuring a room that couldn't even be properly cleaned and had a faucet that broke off at a touch.

"Of course, young master, follow me," the innkeeper replied amiably.

Zhu Ping'an followed the innkeeper to a room in the back corner of the courtyard. Upon opening the door, he found only the most basic bed and table; although it was clean, the lighting was poor, and reading in this room would strain his eyes. Zhu Ping'an was not very satisfied with this accommodation.

"Recently, more and more scholars have come to the city for exams, and this is the last room we have left. Other inns in the city are nearly full," the innkeeper remarked, noticing Zhu Ping'an's dissatisfaction.

"How much is this room, and what would be the cost for a stay of a month or two?" Zhu Ping'an casually inquired about the price.

"A short stay is one hundred wen per day, while a long stay is two taels and five qian of silver per month," the innkeeper said, gesturing with his hand.

Cough, cough, such an expensive price for this room, almost ten times that of Kaoshan Town. Although Zhu Ping'an had made a little money today, he was unwilling to be taken advantage of. His father worked hard all day just to earn this amount, and the daily rent was enough for his mother to make pouches for two days. No way.

"Sorry for the trouble," Zhu Ping'an clasped his hands in apology.

"No worries, young master. You can check other inns. If you can't find a place to stay, my inn's doors will be open to you—of course, as long as this room is still available," the innkeeper said with a dismissive smile.

"Thank you, uncle." After expressing his gratitude, Zhu Ping'an left the Yue Lai Inn with his bundle.

As Zhu Ping'an walked down the street, he encountered several scholars dressed in long robes. The weather was cold, and many of them carried folding fans, exuding an air of authority.

Next, Zhu Ping'an inquired at three more inns, which varied in size. The smaller ones had slightly cheaper rates; the lowest-grade room was ninety wen per day, with a monthly rate of two taels and three qian of silver. The larger inns had similar prices to Yue Lai Inn, while one was even more expensive. Unfortunately, all the inns were fully booked, leaving only the pricier one with a few rooms available, but the innkeeper was adamant about not lowering the price.

It seemed that the market was indeed like this, and other inns were likely the same. Zhu Ping'an was about to return to the Yue Lai Inn to rent that lowest-grade room, deciding he could read outside if necessary.

"Is that you, Zhu'er?"

At that moment, he heard a familiar call.

Zhu Ping'an turned to see his uncle Zhu Shouren, now in new clothes, approaching with several other scholars.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an covered in dust, with bits of grass clinging to his blue robe and a red forehead, Uncle Zhu Shouren felt a sense of balance in his heart.

"Uncle, do you still have some extra funds to share with Zhu'er?" Zhu Ping'an said as soon as his uncle Zhu Shouren came closer.

Then he saw Uncle Zhu Shouren's face twist as if he had swallowed a fly.