

## Rise 78

### Chapter 78: Early Morning in Huaining County

Because he was too tired, after paying a month's rent, Zhu Ping'an quickly finished a plate of small dishes and two steamed buns, took a hot bath in a wooden tub, and then went to bed early to rest.

Over here, while Zhu Ping'an slept soundly, he was unaware that his name had already started to spread in a small area near the inn.

Scholarly students are known for enjoying wine, composing poetry, and writing essays. During dinner in the main hall, someone read aloud in a mocking tone Zhu Ping'an's poem written at the ten-mile long pavilion, which included the line about hearing birds everywhere after being bitten by a snake. The entire hall erupted in laughter, and when someone carelessly mentioned that the talented scholar who wrote about the snake bite was currently fast asleep in the woodshed, the hall was filled with mockery, causing Zhu Ping'an's name to circulate in the vicinity of the inn.

Zhu Ping'an, who was soundly asleep, had no idea about this. Even if he did know, he would surely just laugh it off.

The next morning, as dawn broke in the eastern sky, the dim light barely illuminated the dark surroundings.

The students who had spent the night drinking and writing poetry were now lost in dreams, but the woodshed of the inn had already been pushed open. Dressed in a blue robe and carrying a slanted satchel, Zhu Ping'an stepped out looking refreshed and energetic, holding a black wooden board, he closed the door behind him and strolled outside.

Upon leaving the inn, there were few pedestrians outside, and the frost mist gave Huaining County a unique flavor.

In ancient times, fortune was emphasized, and most county towns were built near mountains and rivers. Huaining County was no exception, relying on a river named Pangjiang, which also diverted the river water through a moat into the town in a winding manner.

Zhu Ping'an walked along the bluestone path toward the riverbank. He found two adjacent blue stones by the river, placed the black wooden board on one of the higher stones, lifted his robe, and sat on the lower stone. He took out a brush and a bamboo tube from his slanted bag, beginning his daily morning practice.

Practicing in winter for strength and in summer for endurance, Zhu Ping'an soaked his brush in clean water, writing vigorously at the misty riverside...

As the mist dissipated and the sun rose, Zhu Ping'an packed away his brush and black wooden board, taking out a copied version of Zhu Xi's annotated Spring and Autumn Annals from his bag. He read it with great interest. Zhu Xi was a very interesting figure, someone whose external demeanor severely contradicted his internal character. Without mentioning his relationship with Su Shi, one can observe that while he preached the importance of preserving natural principles and eliminating evil, he also visited brothels to comfort fallen women. Oh, he had many wives and concubines, too many to fit at a single table. However, to be fair, Zhu Xi had a very high level of understanding of the Four Books and Five Classics, otherwise, how could his work become the official textbook for the imperial examination, revered by the emperor?

"Look quickly, a sour scholar, giggle, giggle..."

The young girls and wives who came to the riverside to wash clothes and pound rice saw the boy sitting on the stone by the river, oblivious to the fact that his long robe had already gotten wet at the hem, and they couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Not leaving through the front door, nor stepping out the back—this was the standard for noble ladies in ancient times. Common folk didn't have such strict rules, of course, but the separation of the genders was much stricter than in modern times, with men and women not allowed to be alone together. However, now that so many young girls and wives were gathered, they weren't worried about gossip and felt bolder. Seeing Zhu Ping'an's innocent appearance, they couldn't help but giggle, and some even dared to tease him.

"That little scholar is reading so earnestly; could it be he's reading about men and women fighting?"

"Giggle, giggle..." The wives laughed one after another.

Of course, there were also some young girls who hadn't yet come of age, their faces flushed with embarrassment as they chased after the bold wife to argue with her.

Zhu Ping'an, on the other hand, felt a bit shy because of these people. It wasn't that he was embarrassed by the bold wife's words; after all, with countless modern experiences, how could he feel shy about such trivial remarks? Rather, it was because he wasn't used to being watched by so many young girls and wives while reading. He wasn't a monkey in a zoo.

"Good morning."

So, Zhu Ping'an packed up his poetry books, waved to the young girls and wives from a distance with the black wooden board in hand, and got up to leave.

"Hey, don't go! You haven't answered yet!"

Behind him came a chorus of giggles from the women.

After the mist dissipated, Huaining County left Zhu Ping'an with a hazy impression: the moist bluestone roads, the clear waters of the Pangjiang River, and the tall city walls made of blue bricks and white stones all came together to create a poetic atmosphere.

Following a tempting aroma, Zhu Ping'an found a snack stall by the street, ordered a bowl of tofu pudding and two potstickers, and the vendor gave him a small plate of homemade pickles. He enjoyed his meal.

The tofu pudding was topped with a sprinkle of cilantro and drizzled with the shop's secret seasoning, looking delicious and fragrant. The potstickers emitted a mouthwatering pork aroma, and the pickles were crisp and refreshing—truly delicious.

The only slight disappointment was that the vendor was not a tofu beauty but rather a middle-aged woman.

It's said that in modern novels, the male protagonist often encounters a tofu beauty, a wine beauty, or even a pork beauty, but how come he hadn't met anyone like that in over eight years in the Ming Dynasty?

Despite the regret, Zhu Ping'an still left, his belly full and satisfied.

Having eaten and drunk his fill, Zhu Ping'an asked a few passersby for directions and began to navigate the winding streets.

Along the way, he spent a coin on a pack of high-quality pastries, wrapped in red paper, and bought some fruits from another shop to carry in a bamboo basket, heading in the direction pointed out by the pedestrians.

While walking and searching, after about half an hour, Zhu Ping'an arrived at his destination—the Baicao Hall.

This was a large pharmacy, more than five times bigger than the one in Kaoshan Town, with people coming and going, and there were six seated doctors in the hall.

Zhu Ping'an entered with the fruits and pastries, and a pharmacy apprentice came over to ask, "May I inquire if you're here for a consultation, sir?"

Zhu Ping'an shook his head, bowed, and replied, "No, I'm from Xiahe Village in Kaoshan Town. Eight years ago, I was fortunate to be saved by the miraculous hands of the renowned physician, Old Hu, and I owe him my life. My parents have been working in the fields and unable to come to express their gratitude, which has always weighed heavily on my heart. Today, I specifically came to thank Old Hu."

The apprentice thought for a moment and said to Zhu Ping'an, "Please wait a moment; I will go ask my master."

It turned out that this apprentice was indeed a disciple of Old Hu, the renowned physician. After saying this, he headed toward the back of the pharmacy. About fifteen minutes later, the apprentice returned.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, sir. My master said he doesn't remember this matter and asked you not to take it to heart." The apprentice conveyed Old Hu's message and added, "In fact, my master has saved countless people and encountered similar situations many times, so please don't worry about it. As for the gifts, please take them back; my master never accepts gifts."

Zhu Ping'an stood there pondering for a long time. Finally, he took out a silver note worth ten taels from his sleeve and said, "I admire Old Hu's demeanor, but it weighs on my conscience that I cannot show my gratitude. How about this: let this silver note serve as payment for those patients who cannot afford their medicine at the pharmacy. Though it is little, it represents my sincere intention."

The apprentice dared not decide and went to inform his master again. After a while, he returned to tell Zhu Ping'an that Old Hu had agreed.

The physician, who never accepted gifts, would accept this meager ten taels for those unable to afford treatment.

What a physician devoted to helping the needy!

Zhu Ping'an was thoroughly impressed by Old Hu's medical ethics and character. If modern hospitals had even a tenth of Old Hu's medical integrity, the doctor-patient relationship would not be so tense.