

## Rise 79

### Chapter 79: You Play

Except for one day when someone inexplicably asked him if he was Zhu Ping'an and, after receiving a positive response, shoved a twenty-tael silver note into his hands, his days in Huaining County passed rather uneventfully.

Every morning, he practiced writing and reading, and on his way back from the streets, he would find a place to enjoy some snacks. Each morning, he attempted to break down the Four Books and Five Classics into eight-legged essays, while in the afternoon, he casually flipped through a few Qing Dynasty eight-legged essays he had memorized from his past life for study.

Time passed in this ordinary manner, with less than five days remaining until the examination.

On this particular morning, Zhu Ping'an, as usual, was preparing to go to the riverbank to practice writing when he was called from behind as he was about to leave the inn.

The familiar voice belonged to his uncle, Zhu Shouren.

"Uncle, good morning," Zhu Ping'an turned around to greet him.

"Why did you get up so early today, Zhir?" Uncle Zhu Shouren asked, rather surprised to see Zhu Ping'an at the entrance among a group of scholars.

Why did I get up early today? Zhu Ping'an was speechless at his uncle's remark. It wasn't that he got up early today; he got up early every day. Today, it was just that they had seen him—usually, they were still fast asleep.

"With the exam approaching, I feel uneasy, so I got up early to find a quiet place to study," Zhu Ping'an replied, patting his backpack.

The other students walking with his uncle laughed at Zhu Ping'an's response, referring to him as a "talented child living in a wooden shed." They thought it was pointless for him to start studying only five days before the exam.

"Come on, An Ge'er, today is February 3rd, the birthday of the Wenchang Star. Scholars who have read extensively across the land should go to the Confucius Temple to pay their respects to the Wenchang Star and pray for success in the imperial examination."

Some of the fellow students felt sympathy for Zhu Ping'an, this late-blooming child who lived in the wooden shed. They saw that he wasn't going to worship at the Wenchang Star's birthday and instead thought about cramming at the last minute. They figured that if he didn't go to worship, he would just be asking for trouble. Feeling pity, they suggested he join them at Wenchang Temple to offer incense and pray.

Uncle Zhu Shouren also intended to showcase his support for the younger generation among the students, so he added, "Instead of cramming now, why not go to the Confucius Temple to light a stick of incense and seek the blessings of Confucius and the Wenchang Star? Don't worry about the money; I'll cover it for you."

Then Zhu Ping'an saw his uncle, looking as if he were sacrificing a piece of flesh, putting five copper coins into his hand.

Is he treating me like a beggar?

Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but laugh and cry at the sight of the five coins, feeling a thousand grass mud horses galloping through his mind. It was just five copper coins; why did he have to make it sound so noble? When did studying become cramming? Going to the temple to offer incense and pray was the real cramming, okay?

Afterward, Zhu Ping'an was swept along by the group of students into the Confucius Temple, and he had to start breaking down the essays as he walked.

The Confucius Temple not only housed Confucius but also had a hall dedicated to the Wenchang Star. As the sun rose, the temple was already filled with incense smoke, and the chatter of people was bustling. Ninety percent of those present were students, and just like the modern-day students preparing for the annual college entrance examination, these scholars regarded the worship of Confucius and the Wenchang Star as a crucial pre-exam event, praying that they would succeed in the examination and bring glory to their families.

At the Confucius Temple, where there is incense smoke, there are also temple priests, and where there are temple priests, activities like drawing lots and interpreting the results are never far behind. After completing their worship and lighting incense for success in the imperial examination, the students gathered around a few priests to ask about their futures.

The priest appeared to be a wise man, dressed in a robe, with a distinctive mustache and fingers in a distinctive pose as he chanted incantations.

Uncle Zhu Shouren drew a lot, spending a full hundred wen to have the priest interpret it. After receiving the money, the priest pondered for a moment and declared it an excellent lot, saying it was a sign of good fortune and that he would surely pass the exam. Hearing this, Uncle Zhu Shouren's face flushed with excitement, and he handed over another fifty wen to the priest.

Damn it, he gives ten times more to a fortune-teller than he does to his own nephew. When he gave me money, it was like he was cutting into flesh, but he didn't blink when giving to the priest.

Uncle, you truly are something else.

The accompanying students congratulated Uncle Zhu Shouren, as if he had already succeeded in passing the examination.

Others followed suit, each drawing lots and paying a hundred wen for interpretations, most of which were also good or excellent lots, causing each of them to be filled with joy.

Zhu Ping'an was with them, but he had only offered a stick of incense to Confucius and the Wenchang Star. He stood at the back, showing no intention of drawing lots with the priests.

The priest, feeling enthusiastic as he collected money, noticed Zhu Ping'an standing still and approached him, shaking the donation box in front of him.

The other students stood by, smiling, waiting to see how this poor boy from the thatched house would respond.

"Master, having money is impressive," Zhu Ping'an said with a silly grin, showing no intention of spending a hundred wen on an interpretation. A hundred wen was the amount Zhu's father earned after a whole day of hard work driving a cart; how could he be willing to spend that much just to hear some nonsense from the priest?

Hearing this, a dark line appeared on the priest's face.

"An old tree cannot be carved."

"A fool cannot be reached."

The surrounding students regarded Zhu Ping'an's actions with deep disdain and ridicule. Drawing a lot before the Wenchang Star to bring himself a good omen for the examination was a common practice, yet this foolish boy was being so stingy.

The priest, being knowledgeable and experienced, was not willing to let Zhu Ping'an get away with this. After all, how could he conduct business in the future if he let himself be humiliated now? So, stroking his beard and putting on a wise demeanor, he began to preach:

"Money and lots are like a fishing rod and a basket of fish; if you had to choose, which one would you take?"

"I want a basket of fish," Zhu Ping'an answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Benefactor, how shallow! Teaching someone to fish is better than simply giving them fish; do you understand this principle? Once you eat the fish, it's gone, but with a fishing rod, you can catch many fish and use it for a lifetime! The Wenchang lot also..." The priest succinctly explained the idea of teaching a man to fish rather than just giving him fish, believing that this would seal the deal for his business.

At this moment, the priest noticed the admiring gazes from the crowd and felt a sense of pride swelling within him. He was just about to elaborate further on the significance of lots and money when he was interrupted by the foolish young man in front of him.

"I want a basket of fish, then I can sell it to buy a few fishing rods. I'll keep one for myself and sell the extra rods to others..."

The priest, dressed in his Daoist robe and looking wise, felt as if he had swallowed a fly at that moment. His internal thoughts were undoubtedly: "Infinite heaven's respect... please, I don't want to talk to you."

"Such decorum is lost..."

"An old tree cannot be carved..."

The surrounding students began to criticize Zhu Ping'an's words, dissatisfied with his interpretation of the classic sayings.

"What I said just now was all a joke. Ping'an has no other intention than to say this because I am short of money." Zhu Ping'an responded honestly, bowing to the crowd without any hint of shame.

At this point, the other students looked as if they had swallowed a fly themselves. How could he so calmly admit to being financially embarrassed?