

Rise 85

Chapter 85: Zhu Ping'an from the River

"Young master, your insight is like a torch; here are the thirty taels of silver, which you have won."

The person managing the betting booth pushed through the crowd and approached Zhu Ping'an, presenting him with ten times his wager, both hands holding the money bag.

"Thank you for your trouble." Zhu Ping'an accepted the bag of money and cupped his hands in gratitude.

The wager was contained within a small pouch, filled with scattered silver coins contributed by everyone, totaling thirty taels.

"Not at all. Your insight is remarkable, and it's truly admirable. May I ask your name, young master?"

The betting booth operator slightly turned aside, unwilling to accept Zhu Ping'an's gesture of respect. Whether this young master's bet was due to genuine insight or mere boldness, it didn't matter; this seemingly simple young man had an unlimited future ahead of him.

"I don't deserve such a title. I am Zhu Ping'an from the river." Zhu Ping'an weighed the money bag in his hands and casually replied.

"Ah?"

The betting booth operator was taken aback, unable to believe that the seemingly naive youth before him was the same one he had heard tales about—the luckiest boy who had survived a snake bite and heard birds singing.

It was completely unexpected.

"You are Zhu Ping'an!" The betting booth operator murmured, falling silent for a moment before bowing deeply. "I apologize for any offense in the writings. I hope you will forgive me, young master."

Zhu Ping'an tucked the money bag into his clothing, looked up at him, and smiled earnestly, saying, "How could that be? I should be thanking you instead. Thanks to you, I now have enough for the provincial examination."

"Your generosity is extraordinary; you are no ordinary person." The betting booth operator thanked him again and departed.

At this moment, Zhu Shouren, Zhu Ping'an's uncle, truly accepted the reality that Zhu Ping'an had again topped the imperial examination. However, he felt a mix of emotions, making it hard to articulate. This reality was incredibly difficult for them to accept. Zhu Ping'an was only thirteen years old and had eaten less rice than they had consumed salt. If the first time was merely good luck, how could they explain this second time? Such luck was rare in the imperial examination, let alone hitting the jackpot twice... How could someone who indulged in food and sleep during the examination still come out on top both times?

"Congratulations, An Ge'er. We have been reckless these past few times."

One of the candidates who had failed this time seemed to have matured after experiencing the setback. He had shed his previous frivolity and viewed Zhu Ping'an with newfound respect. It was clear that luck couldn't strike twice, indicating that Zhu Ping'an must possess some genuine talent, and thus he apologized and congratulated Zhu Ping'an on his second success.

"Not at all; it was merely good fortune."

Zhu Ping'an was not petty; he readily responded, providing the other person with a way out.

However, not everyone shared this perspective. The other three candidates, including Zhu Shouren, insisted that Zhu Ping'an had likely relied on luck again in this exam, perhaps even encountering the same questions, much like a cow that hits a wall and doesn't turn back.

"This time, Ping'an has fortuitously won some prize money. He will keep twenty taels for his provincial examination expenses, and the remaining ten taels can be returned to you all," Zhu Ping'an said, keeping twenty taels of his winnings for himself while preparing to return ten to his uncle and the others.

In truth, it wasn't that Zhu Ping'an was particularly generous or that he was a saintly figure repaying grievances with virtue. The situation dictated his actions. On one hand, having bet three taels to win thirty, keeping twenty taels was already more than enough; one shouldn't be too greedy. On the other hand, this

was ancient times, an era that valued righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust. By using ten taels to win a good reputation, it was indeed a win-win situation.

As for Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others, haven't you heard about the Duke of Zheng during the Spring and Autumn period?

Sometimes, leniency can be a strategy in itself.

Once Zhu Ping'an spoke, Uncle Zhu Shouren reacted immediately, taking the ten taels of silver in hand. He then divided it among the others according to their respective bets. In the end, he discreetly kept half a tael for himself, slipping it into his sleeve without anyone noticing.

This time, including both the first and second lists, over five hundred people were named. Those who passed the examination returned to the inn joyfully to prepare for the next round, while those who failed trudged back home, disheartened. Only Zhu Ping'an remained calm, his expression unchanged.

"Not long ago, we were blind to your worth, Young Master An. Please don't hold it against us; we shall return home now," one of the unsuccessful candidates said as he and his companions packed their belongings.

Due to Zhu Ping'an's earlier decision to return his wager, the failed scholars had significantly revised their opinions of him. Before leaving, the three of them made a point to visit Zhu Ping'an's room, bowing respectfully to say goodbye.

"Not at all; it was my performance that was lacking," Zhu Ping'an said, putting down his book and rising to return their bows.

"Young Master An, do you have any messages for us to take back home?" one of the unsuccessful scholars kindly asked.

"Yes, please convey to my parents that I am well and that I now have funds for the provincial examination, so they need not worry about me," Zhu Ping'an replied without hesitation. He also mentioned that any remaining money at home should be saved for his elder brother's wedding, relieving them of any concern for himself.

"Your kindness is commendable, Young Master An," the failed scholar praised.

As they were about to leave, one scholar glanced at the Four Books and Five Classics sprawled across Zhu Ping'an's desk, along with the repeatedly used writing paper, and remarked, "We were blind to your efforts, Young Master An. Your diligence is far beyond ours."

"My intelligence is lacking; I can only work harder. Learning is like a bow and arrow—skill is like the arrowhead," Zhu Ping'an replied casually, gesturing with his hands.

To his surprise, the failed scholars' eyes brightened at his words. They repeated, "Learning is like a bow and arrow; skill is like the arrowhead. A wonderful saying, a wonderful saying! Young Master An is truly talented."

Uh-oh. Noticing their admiring expressions, Zhu Ping'an belatedly realized that he had inadvertently quoted a famous line by Yuan Mei from the Qing Dynasty. However, having said it, he couldn't take it back and simply explained, "It's not my own saying; I heard it from someone else."

Whether the three failed scholars believed his explanation was unclear, but when they finally said their goodbyes, Zhu Ping'an couldn't discern their thoughts.

After seeing off the unsuccessful scholars, Zhu Ping'an returned to his room to continue reading. The annotations of Zhu Xi in the Four Books were genuinely perplexing. Some notes seemed like flashes of inspiration that Zhu Xi had while on the toilet; others might have come after days of contemplation over a single phrase. Often, if he hadn't written them down, even he might not have understood them, let alone anyone else. This led to countless earnest candidates, exhausted from their studies, simultaneously cursing Zhu Xi's family in various ways as they tried to decipher his version of the texts.

But no matter how challenging it was, if he wanted to succeed in the imperial examination, he had to calmly and diligently study, as this was the prescribed reference material for the exams.

The sunlight streamed through the window, bathing Zhu Ping'an in a golden hue and casting the shadow of a bookworm on the floor and walls.