

Rise 87

Chapter 87: The Many Faces of Drunkenness

The county examination, which lasted for more than ten days, finally came to an end. In this fundamental exam, the majority of scholars failed miserably; out of over a thousand candidates, only about one hundred and fifty passed.

From the first announcement to the final results, Zhu Ping'an consistently ranked on the top list.

He still remembered the shock on his uncle Zhu Shouren and others' faces when the final results were announced. If it hadn't been for the fact that three fellow villagers also passed the county examination, they might have made a scene at the county magistrate's office. Even so, they still protested, claiming the magistrate was unfair—why were they, who had studied extensively, only ranked on the second list, while Zhu Ping'an, a glutton who had been bitten by a snake and heard the cries of birds, was at the top?

After the county examination results were released, only those who had passed remained at the inn, celebrating their success. Since there was no banquet for the occasion, they began to celebrate on their own. The inn was filled with poetry and wine, with scholars behaving extravagantly, drinking and singing, much like how we would after finishing our college entrance exams.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and a few fellow villagers sat at a table, celebrating the three who had passed the county examination. In a drunken haze, they discussed their plans to set off for the prefecture the next day.

Zhu Ping'an sat alone at a table by the window in the main hall, subtly excluded by the others. No one in the hall believed that Zhu Ping'an had the talent to pass the county examination. Even though they were often proven wrong when the results were posted, they still stubbornly stuck to their opinions.

Perhaps this is what it means for scholars to look down on each other.

The prefectural examination would take place in April, and now it was already the end of February. With the travel time, there was no time left to go home.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but miss his family: his dull father, his fierce and protective mother, his simple-minded older brother, and even the family's pride—the large black ox.

The smell of alcohol filled the inn. The scholars, who used to care about their image, no longer considered such things; they were all drunkenly rolling up their sleeves and downing drinks.

"Come, come, come! Our top scholar, let's share this cup!"

A swaying fellow villager approached, holding a jug of wine, and without further ado, poured a cup for Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an looked up at him, but before he could say anything, the man continued with a slurred tongue:

"If you don't drink this cup of wine, it means you look down on me."

Why should I look up to you? Zhu Ping'an really wanted to say this, but the words couldn't come out; dozens of eyes were watching him.

No matter how cunning you are, it's of no use in front of these drunken people.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and the other villagers also came over, glaring at him with a predatory look.

Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to lift his cup and down it in one go. Although he could discreetly pour the wine into his sleeve while wiping his mouth, he couldn't bring himself to do it, knowing that this robe was painstakingly sewn by his mother, Chen.

The mountain temple was a matter of helplessness; here, it was nothing more than a drunken escapade.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an finish his drink, the onlookers pounced on him like wolves sensing blood. It was probably out of jealousy and a desire for revenge; they all thought about getting him drunk to make a fool of himself.

Let's not even mention how low the alcohol content of Ming Dynasty fermented wine is—anyone would struggle to handle being forced to drink cup after cup by so many people. Besides, he was only thirteen and couldn't hold much liquor.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't someone overly concerned about face-saving. After several rounds, he felt his head getting heavy, so to avoid becoming a puddle of mud, he decided to simply lay his head on the table and pretend to be drunk.

"Skills are limited to this extent..."

"Your drinking capacity is surprisingly small."

"You're unworthy of being a man."

A group of scholarly students from the same hometown hurled insults at Zhu Ping'an, who was sprawled over the table, before losing interest and leaving to find drinking partners. One by one, they ended up drunk, each displaying various ridiculous behaviors.

They imitated ancient customs, boasting about how they were merely basking in the glory of their studies;

Some shamelessly bragged that they alone possessed a third of the world's talent;

There were even those who, as if they had just topped the imperial examination, expressed their thoughts, claiming that it was all due to the Emperor's excellent guidance, truly believing they had become the champions of the palace examination;

Of course, there were also those who, after drinking, spilled their true feelings, mumbling that the county magistrate was blind, having appointed a glutton bitten by a snake and fooled by a singing bird as the top scholar, while completely oblivious to their own vast knowledge—foolish, truly foolish...

The innkeeper and the staff were worried about these drunken scholars. After all, they had passed the county examinations, and who knew which of them might one day become a successful scholar or even a jinshi? They dared not spoil the fun for these men, so they could only watch as they became increasingly intoxicated, leaving a mess of bodies on the tables and the floor.

"Please prepare a barrel of hot water."

The voice startled the worried innkeeper and staff.

Wasn't that the young man who had been drunk from the very start? How was he now acting as if nothing had happened, even leaving several coins for his meal on the table?

The prefecture city was quite different from the county town. Traveling from Huaining County to Anqing Prefecture required crossing two counties. Early the next day, Zhu Shouren and the others hired two horse-drawn carts to prepare for their journey.

Before they set off, Zhu Shouren went to Zhu Ping'an's woodshed room, standing at the door without entering, fearing that the room might jinx his examination luck.

"Zhi'er, have you packed the luggage? We are about to set off." Zhu Shouren asked from the doorway.

"Please wait a moment, Uncle." Zhu Ping'an replied while tidying up his belongings. "Would you like to come in for some tea?"

Zhu Shouren naturally declined, joking that the woodshed room was just a place for ash and should not be entered.

"Zhi'er, this time the cost for the carts needs to be shared among us. The journey is long, and each person needs half a tael of silver." Once Zhu Ping'an came out, Zhu Shouren immediately spoke.

Zhu Ping'an, carrying his backpack, glanced at Zhu Shouren and asked nonchalantly, "Yesterday, I heard you discussing with the other uncles about bargaining with the cart drivers. Didn't you say the fares could be lowered by a hundred wen? Perhaps I misheard."

At this moment, Zhu Shouren seemed as if he had just woken from a hangover, sighing with great feeling, "I forgot about that after my hangover yesterday."

Zhu Shouren showed no signs of embarrassment, completely open about it.

Zhu Ping'an naturally wouldn't say anything directly. He had already prepared four hundred wen, which he handed over to his uncle, expressing gratitude for the trouble Zhu Shouren took to prepare the carts.

The seven of them squeezed into two horse-drawn carts. It wasn't too cramped, but the journey was quite dull; the small space was filled with the lofty rhetoric of Zhu Shouren and the others.

The carts started and stopped along the way, and whenever they saw mountains and rivers, the group would get excited about poetry, stepping down to compose several poems that sounded rather amateurish. They would flatter each other for a bit, and that was that, wasting quite a bit of time.

Traveling by day and resting at night, sometimes in inns, sometimes in temples, and sometimes at farmhouses, they encountered some setbacks but nothing major. After five days of traveling back and forth, they finally arrived at Anqing Prefecture.