

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 35.

A quick note before we start: This episode and the next couple episodes contain some slightly risqué content. Nothing really obscene, but I wanted to give you a heads up, just on the odd chance that you're listening to a podcast about murderous bandits with young children but wish to avoid awkward questions like, "Hey what did that phrase mean?"

So last time, Wu Song had reunited with his older brother, Wu Dalang (4,2), but the reunion soon turned sour when his brother's wife, Pan Jinlian, made advances on Wu Song, which prompted Wu Song to move out without any explanation to his brother.

A couple weeks after the fallout, Wu Song got an assignment from his boss, the county magistrate, which was going to take him to the capital. Before he set out, though, he went back to his brother's home for a visit. When she saw him, Pan Jinlian thought Wu Song had come back because he missed her, but she was in for something else.

The three of them went upstairs to eat. Wu Song asked his brother and sister-in-law to sit down at the head of the table, while he sat to the side. His orderly brought up the food and wine and laid them out on the table. Wu Song then asked Wu Dalang and Pan Jinlian to have some wine. Pan Jinlian again fixed her gaze on Wu Song, but Wu Song just ignored her and kept drinking.

After five rounds of wine, Wu Song picked up a full cup, looked at his brother, and said, "Honorable brother, I have been sent by the magistrate on business to the capital and will leave tomorrow. It will take anywhere from 40 to 60 days. I wanted to say something to you before I left.

"You have always been meek. I worry that when I'm not home, outsiders will bully you. If you are selling 10 steamers of buns every day, then starting tomorrow just make 5 steamers of buns. Each day, leave home late and come back early. Don't go out to eat with anyone. When you get home, let down the curtain and shut the door. That'll save you some trouble. If anyone dares to pick on you, don't argue with them. I'll take care of it when I get back. Brother, if you will do as I say, then please drink this cup."

Taking the cup from his brother, Wu Dalang said, "Brother, you're quite right. I'll do as you say," and he drank the wine.

Wu Song then filled a second cup and said to Pan Jinlian, "Sister-in-law, you're a smart one, so there's no need for me to say much. My brother is a simple, honest man, so he needs you to take care of him. As they say, 'Inner force beats outward strength.' If you run a good home, then my brother would have nothing to worry about. As the old saying goes, 'A strong fence keeps the dogs out.' "

When she heard that, Pan Jinlian's whole face turned red, and she pointed at her husband and cursed, "What slander have you been spreading about me?! I am as tough and straightforward as any man! A man can stand on my fist, and a horse can trot on my arm. I can show my face proudly anywhere! I'm not a wife to be ashamed of!"

She then turned to Wu Song and continued. "Ever since I married your brother, not even an ant has dared to come in this house. What's this BS about a weak fence letting dogs in?! You better be able to prove every damn word out of your mouth. Every brick your hurl needs to hit the ground."

Wu Song just smiled and said, "If you can be so upright, then everything will be fine. Just live up to your words. Alright then, I'll remember what you've said. Please drink this cup."

Pan Jinlian shoved the cup away and dashed down the stairs. But she stopped midway on the staircase and shot back at Wu Song, "You're SOOO smart, but don't you know that you're supposed to treat your older brother's wife like your mother?! When I married him, I never heard about any brother-in-law. Where the hell did you come from?! And now you come here, and I hardly know you, and you act like you own the place. What rotten luck I have, to have to put up with so much crap!"

She then ran downstairs in tears and kept wailing. Meanwhile, Wu Song and his brother remained upstairs and drank a few more cups before Wu Song took his leave.

"Brother, come back soon so I can see you again," Wu Dalang said as tears welled up in his eyes.

Seeing this, Wu Song said, "Brother, just forget about selling steamed buns and stay home. I'll take care of your living expenses."

As they made their way down the stairs and out the door, Wu Song again said, "Brother, don't forget what I've told you."

Wu Song then went back to the county offices and packed for his trip. The next morning, he gathered his stuff and went to see the magistrate. The magistrate had already prepared a cart to carry the valuables he wanted to deliver to the capital. He also assigned a couple stout soldiers and a couple confidants to accompany Wu Song. Wu Song took his leave, picked up a long-handle broadsword, and set off for the capital.

So in case you're wondering, no, we're not going to have another convoy heist story, because that kind of thing apparently only happens to Yang Zhi. Instead, all the excitement is happening back home. After Wu Song's visit, his brother Wu Dalang got an earful from his wife all day every day for the next three or four days. But he did what he did best, just grin and bear it. Meanwhile, he did as Wu Song had instructed, and only made half the usual amount of steamed buns and came home early every day. As soon as he put down his shoulder pole each day, he would shut the door and just hang out around the house.

Pan Jinlian, of course, did not appreciate the sight of her husband coming back early and sitting around as if he were keeping an eye on her, so she took it out on him. She would point a finger in his face and curse him, "Useless bastard! Who keeps the door shut in the middle of the day?! Other people are going to gossip about what's going on with us. You are listening to your brother, but aren't you worried about other people mocking us?!"

"If they want to talk, let them," Wu Dalang would tell her. "My brother's suggestion is right and will save us a lot of trouble."

“[Scoff] You worm! You’re a man! How can you let others jerk you around instead of making up your own mind?!”

“No, I’ll listen to him,” Wu Dalang would say with a wave of his hand. “His words are invaluable advice.”

And so in this way, they carried on for the first dozen days or so after Wu Song’s departure. Every day, Wu Dalang would leave late and return early and shut the door as soon as he got home. Sure there were arguments with his wife, but after a few rounds of that, he just got used to it and didn’t really mind. It actually got to the point where Pan Jinlian, recognizing the futility of her tantrums, would take the initiative and go lower the curtain and shut the door herself when it was almost time for her husband to come home, and that made Wu Dalang happy as he thought, “Well this is actually not bad.”

A few more days passed, and it was now the tailend of winter and the weather was starting to warm up again. That day, shortly before Wu Dalang usually came home, Pan Jinlian went to lower the curtain on her upstairs window like she’s been doing. And that’s when IT happened.

She was using a pole to lower the curtain, but she lost her grip and the pole slipped out of her hand and out the window. At that very moment, a man was walking past down below, and the pole struck him on the head. Holding the back of his head, this guy was pissed and looked up to see who had hit him. But as soon as his eyes caught sight of Pan Jinlian, his anger vanished into thin air and was replaced by ... umm ... something else, and a huge smile crept across his face.

Knowing that she was in the wrong, Pan Jinlian bowed and said, “Sir, it was an accident. Please forgive me.”

“Oh no problem at all, miss. Please go about your business,” the man said as he straightened up his headscarf and bowed in return.

Meanwhile, the next-door neighbor, Mrs. Wang, was standing outside her teahouse and saw this little exchange. She laughed and said, "Sir, it's your fault for walking so close to the house. Serves you right!"

The guy laughed and replied, "Yes, it was my mistake. Miss, please forgive me."

"Sir, please don't be angry," Pan Jinlian said.

"Oh I would not dare," he laughed and said with a sweeping bow. But as he spoke, his eyes were fixed on Pan Jinlian. As he turned to leave, he kept looking back, gazing at her as he swaggered off slowly. Pan Jinlian, meanwhile, lowered the curtain and bolted the door while she waited for her husband to return.

So, who was that guy? Well, he came from a wealthy family in Yanggu (2,3) County, but he had come down in the world and was now running a pharmacy in front of the county office. He's always been a smooth and shifty character, and also not a bad fighter either. Recently, his luck had taken a turn for the better and he's gotten rich again by acting as a go-between in litigations at the county courthouse -- making deals, passing money around, bribing officials, you know, typical Chinese justice system stuff. Because of his influence, everyone in the county showed him great deference. His name was Ximen (1,2) Qing (4), and now that he was rich and powerful again, people called him the Honorable Mr. Ximen.

Shortly after his little encounter with Pan Jinlian, this Ximen Qing looped back around, popped into Mrs. Wang's teahouse, and sat down by the screen.

"Sir, that was quite a bow you gave out there just now," Mrs. Wang said with a grin.

"Mrs. Wang, come here for a sec," Ximen Qing said with a chuckle. "Tell me, whose woman was that?"

"Oh she's the kid sister of the King of Hell, and the daughter of his commanding general," Mrs. Wang replied. "Why do you ask?"

“Look, I’m serious, don’t make jokes.”

“Sir, how can you not recognize her? Her husband sells food outside the county office every day.”

“Don’t tell me she’s married to Xu (2) the Third, the date pudding peddler.”

“No,” Mrs. Wang said with a wave of her hand. “If she were, they would actually make a good couple. Take another guess.”

“Is she the wife of Li (3) the Second, the silver carrier?”

“Nope, though they would make a good pair, too.”

“Hmm. Is she married to Lu (4) Xiaoyi (3,4), the one with the tattooed arms?”

“Ha! No! If that were the case, that would a good pair as well. Take one more guess.”

“I really don’t know then.”

Mrs. Wang laughed out loud and said, “You’ll get a kick out of this. Her husband is Wu Dalang, the one who sells steamed buns.”

Stamping his foot, Ximen Qing roared with laughter. “Wait, the one they call Three Inch Mulberry Bark?”

“Exactly!”

Ximen Qing now lamented, “How did such a luscious lamb chop end up in a dog’s mouth?!”

“It’s a real pity,” Mrs. Wang agreed. “But life is like that. As the saying goes, ‘A magnificent steed gets a dolt for a rider; a charming wife sleeps with an oaf of a husband.’ The marriage god makes some crazy matches.”

“Oh hey, how much tea money do I owe you?” Ximen Qing asked.

“Not much. Don’t worry about it. We’ll tally it up another time.”

“Who’s your son working for these days?”

“Who knows. He went up the Huai (2) River with a merchant and still hasn’t come back. Who even knows if he’s alive or dead.”

“Why didn’t you tell him to come work for me?”

“Sir, if you’re willing to give him a chance, that would be perfect!”

“We’ll talk about it when he comes back.”

And after a little more idle chit chat, Ximen Qing took his leave. But two or three hours later, he came back again and sat back down in Mrs. Wang’s tea shop by the screen door, facing Wu Dalang’s home.

“Sir, would you like a plum drink?” Mrs. Wang asked.

“Yes, make it good and sour.”

So Mrs. Wang made a plum drink and handed it to Ximen Qing with both hands. He sipped it slowly and then set the cup down on the table.

“Mrs. Wang, you make very good sour plum drinks,” he said to her. “Do you have a lot in stock?”

“Oh I’ve been making matches all my life, but I don’t keep anyone here.”

“What? I asked you about your plum drinks, and here you are, talking about matchmaking.”

“Oh, I thought you were saying I made good matches.”

OK, timeout. This is one of those jokes that makes no sense when it’s translated from Chinese to English. So, in Chinese, the character for plum also means match, as in a marriage match. So the phrase “making plum soup” was kind of close to the phrase for “making a match.” So Ximen Qing and Mrs. Wang were basically engaging in a little double entendre. He may have been asking about her “plum drinks,” but she knew full well where his mind was and used this little play on words to redirect the conversation toward where that mind, and certain other body parts, were focused on.

So anyway, back to the conversation. Ximen Qing now picked up the baton that Mrs. Wang was dangling and ran with it. He said, "Mrs. Wang, since that's your line of work, why don't you make a match for me. Find me a really good one, and I'll reward you handsomely."

"Sir, if your wife finds out, she'll box my ears," Mrs. Wang half-heartedly protested.

"Nah. My wife is the best; she's very tolerant. I have a few concubines at home right now, but none of them pleases me. If you have a good one, then make me a match. Even a woman who's been married before would be fine, as long as she pleases me."

"Well, I did come across one the other day. But you won't want her."

"If she's a good one and you can make a match for me, I'll naturally thank you."

"Well, she's very pretty, but she's a little on the old side."

"Even if she's a couple years older, it's no problem. How old is she?"

"She was born in the year of the tiger. At New Year's, she'll be exactly 93."

"You crazy old woman, always joking around," Ximen Qing said with a laugh as he got up and took his leave.

Later that day, as evening approached, Mrs. Wang lit her lamp and was just about to close up shop when who else but Ximen Qing came calling once again, and once again, he plopped himself down by the screen door, facing Wu Dalang's house.

"Sir, how about a nice get-together drink?" Mrs. Wang asked, offering yet another drink with a suggestive name.

"That'd be great. Make it sweet."

So Mrs. Wang brought the drink and Ximen Qing nursed it for a while before getting up to go.

"Put it on my tab," he told Mrs. Wang. "I'll pay you tomorrow."



“No worries. Have a good night, and come again tomorrow,” she replied, and Ximen Qing chuckled and left for the night.

The night passed uneventfully, and early the next morning, Mrs. Wang had just opened up shop when she spotted Ximen Qing milling around out front yet again.

“He’s coming on strong,” she thought to herself. “Let me smear some honey on his nose, just out of reach of his tongue. He’s always taking advantage of other people down at the county office, but I’ll fleece him good.”

Soon, Ximen Qing came into the teahouse and sat down in his usual spot, facing the usual direction. But Mrs. Wang just pretended that she didn’t seem him and stayed in the back, preparing drinks instead of coming out to take his order.

“Mrs. Wang, two cups of tea please,” Ximen Qing called out.

“Sir, long time no see! Please have a seat,” she replied. She then brought over two cups of ginger tea and set them on the table.

“Mrs. Wang, join me for a drink.”

“Ha. I’m not your dearie,” the old woman cackled.

Ximen Qing also laughed and then asked, “What do they sell next door?”

“Steaming, dripping, hot, spicy, delicious goodies.”

“Listen to you, crazy old woman.”

“I’m not crazy. But she has a husband.”

“I’m serious,” Ximen Qing said. “If her husband makes good steamed buns, then I want to ask him to make me about 50 of them. Is he home?”

“If you really want to buy steamed buns, just wait a while and he’ll be out selling them on the street. Why do you need to come to his house?”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right.”

After sitting and sipping for a while longer, Ximen Qing got up and said, “Put it on my tab please.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t forget it.”

And again, Ximen Qing chuckled and left.

As she busied herself in the teahouse, Mrs. Wang kept an eye on Ximen Qing. He may have left the teahouse, but he didn’t go far. He just kind of strolled down to the east end of the street and took a look here and there, and then went back down to the west end and looked around a little bit before turning around. He did this seven or eight times and then came back into the tea house again.

“Sir, long time no see,” Mrs. Wang said.

Ximen Qing laughed and handed her a tael of silver. “Here, take your tea money,” he said.

“That’s too much,” she said with a chuckle.

“Oh just hang on to it.”

Mrs. Wang was secretly delighted. “I’ve got him now!” she thought.

She stashed away the silver and said, “Sir, you look a bit thirsty. Would you want a cup of steeped broad-leaf tea?”

“How did you guess?”

“Oh it’s easy. As the old saying goes, ‘One look at a man’s face tells you whether he’s prospering or suffering.’ Not even the strangest things get past me.”

“Well, I do have something on my mind. If you can guess what it is, I’ll owe you five taels of silver.”

“I only need one guess to nail it. Bring your ear over here.”

So Ximen Qing leaned in, and Mrs. Wang whispered, “I see you coming around here many times these couple days. It’s all because of that person next door, right?”

Ximen Qing laughed and said, "You're a shrewd woman. To tell you the truth, I don't know why, but ever since I saw her that day when she whacked me with the pole, I've been entranced. But I don't know how to get to her. Do you have any ideas?"

Mrs. Wang laughed out loud. "To tell you the truth, this teahouse is just a front, like the devil playing the night watchman. It's never made much money. My real trade is in the 'mixed market.' "

"What do you mean 'mixed market?' " Ximen Qing asked.

"Mostly, I'm a matchmaker. But I'm also a broker, a midwife, a lovers' go-between, and a bawd."

"If you can help me make this happen, I'll give you 10 taels of silver for coffin money."

"Sir, listen to me. Seduction cases are the hardest to pull off. You need to meet five conditions to succeed. First, you have to be as pretty as Pan (1) An (1). Second, you need to have a package as big as a donkey's. Third, you must be as rich as Deng (4) Tong (1). Fourth, you must be as forbearing as a needle plying through cotton wool. And fifth, you've got to put in the time. You must have all five to succeed."

So just some context here. Mrs. Wang just name-dropped a couple historical figures. The first one, Pan (1) An (1), was a poet from the second century who was known for his good looks. The other guy, Deng (4) Tong (1), was a Han Dynasty court official who lived in the second century BC who was famously wealthy. So Mrs. Wang was referring to historical figures who lived about a thousand years before the time of the novel.

Hearing her rattle off the five ingredients for success, Ximen Qing said, "To tell you the truth, I've got all five of those things. First, even though my looks can't compare to Pan An, I'm still ok. Second, I've had a big package since childhood. Third, I have a bit of money. It may not be on the level of Deng Tong, but it'll do. Fourth, I'm extremely forbearing. Even if she hit me 400 times, I would never hit her back. Fifth, I've got plenty of time. Otherwise, how could I keep hanging around here? You just make this happen for me, and when it's done, I'll pay you back handsomely."

"Well, even though you have all five, there's still one more thing that bothers me," Mrs. Wang said.

“What is it?”

“Honorable sir, pardon me for being straightforward, but this kind of thing is the trickiest. Every bit of the money that’s required counts. If you skimp on even one coin out of a hundred, it’ll be a bust. I know you’ve always been a bit tight-fisted and don’t like to throw your money around. That’s what’s bothering me.”

“Oh that’s easy enough to fix. I’ll just do as you say, alright?”

“Well, if you’re willing to spend money, then I do have an idea for arranging an encounter with her. Are you willing to do as I say?”

“Anything you want. What’s your idea?”

“It’s too late today. Go home, and come back in a few months and we’ll discuss it,” Mrs. Wang said with a smirk.

Ximen Qing now kneeled and said, “Mrs. Wang, stop joking around. You must help me make this happen!”

Mrs. Wang laughed. “Don’t panic. I have a good idea. It’s not foolproof, but it’ll succeed 9 times out of 10. Listen to me. That woman was raised in the home of a wealthy family in Qinghe (1,2) County. She’s a fine seamstress. You go buy a bolt of white brocade, a bolt of blue silk, a bolt of white silk gauze, and 10 taels of good silk floss, and bring them all to me. I’ll go over there and tell her, ‘A generous benefactor has given me some material for my burial clothes. I would like to borrow your almanac to see what’s an auspicious day to hire a tailor.’ Now, if she ignores me, then this thing is a bust. But if she says, ‘No need to hire a tailor; I can make the clothes for you,’ then we’re 10 percent there.

“Then I will invite her over to my house to make the clothes. If she says, ‘I’ll work on it at home’ and refuses to come over, then it’s a bust. But if she says happily, ‘I’ll come over to make your clothes,’ then we’re 20 percent there.

“Now, if she’s willing to come over to my place, then I’ll have to treat her to some wine and food. The first day, don’t show up. On the second day, if she says this is no good and she insists on working from her home, then this thing is a bust. But if she’s willing to keep coming over to my place to work on the clothes, then we’re 30 percent there. But don’t you come on the second day either.

“Now, on the third day, you get all dressed up and come to my place. When you hear me cough, then you just call out from the front, ‘Mrs. Wang, why haven’t I seen you in days?’ I’ll come out and invite you in. Now, if she runs home when she sees you, I can’t hold her down, right? So that’d be a bust. But if she doesn’t leave when she sees you come in, then we’re 40 percent there.

“Once you sit down, I’ll tell her, ‘This is the benefactor who gave me the materials. I’m really grateful to him.’ I’ll sing your praises, and you should compliment her needlework. If she doesn’t respond, then it’s a bust. But if she replies and starts talking, then we’re 50 percent there.

“Next, I’ll say, ‘I’m so lucky to have this lady make my clothes. You are both my benefactors, one providing the money and the other doing the work. This lady won’t even be here if I hadn’t gone out of my way to ask her. Sir, why don’t you help me show her my gratitude?’ Then you give me some silver to buy her food and wine. If she insists on leaving, I can’t make her stay, and this thing would be a bust. But if she doesn’t get up to go, then we’re 60 percent there.

“I’ll take the silver, and before I leave, I’ll tell her, ‘Help me keep the gentleman company for a bit.’ If she gets up and leaves, how can I stop her? And so this thing would be a bust then. But if she doesn’t get up to leave, then it’s looking good. We’re 70 percent there.

“When I get back with the stuff, I’ll lay it out on the table and tell her, ‘Put away your work for a while and have a cup of wine, since we’re fortunate enough to have this gentleman treat us.’ But if she refuses to eat at the same table as you and leaves, then it’s a bust. But if she just says she should leave but doesn’t actually get up, then it’s all good, and we’re 80 percent there.

“Once she’s had a few cups and you’ve started a conversation with her, I’ll say we’re out of wine and ask you to buy more. Then you give me money and ask me to go buy some. I’ll pretend to go buy wine and shut the door behind me, with the two of you inside. If she panics and runs away, then this thing is a bust. But if she doesn’t panic when I shut the door, then we’re 90 percent there. But that last 10 percent is the hardest. When you’re alone with her in the room, you must speak to her sweetly. Take it slow, don’t get all grabby and mess it up. Otherwise, I would wash my hands of you.

“So first, you pretend that you accidentally swept a pair of chopsticks off the table. When you bend down to pick them up, give her foot a squeeze. If she screams, then I’ll come save you, but this operation would be a bust then and we won’t get another chance. But if she doesn’t make any noise, then you’re all the way there. She will be all yours. What do you think?”

Whew! It certainly is ... umm ... nice of her to break it all down like that. To see if this plan comes to fruition, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, success or not, we’ll see the fallout from Ximen Qing’s attempt at seduction. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!