

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 36.

Last time, while our hero Wu Song was away on business, a rich local playboy, Ximen Qing, had become obsessed with Pan Jinlian, the less-than-faithful wife of Wu Song's elder brother. This Ximen Qing had money and clout, and all he needed was a scheme to get together with Pan Jinlian. So he huddled with Mrs. Wang, who ran a teahouse next to Pan Jinlian's home. This Mrs. Wang was no stranger to arranging clandestine affairs, so she laid out an elaborate 10-step plan for Ximen Qing to seduce the object of his infatuation.

When she was done explaining the plan, Ximen Qing was ecstatic. "This is a terrific plan!" he raved.

"Just don't forget the 10 taels of silver you promised me," Mrs. Wang said.

"How can one forget Dongting (4,2) Lake while eating the fragrant tangerine peel produced there?"

Ximen Qing replied. "When do we start?"

"I'll have an update for you tonight," Mrs. Wang said. "While her husband is still away, I'll go over there and sound her out. You just go buy the silks and send them over."

"Make this happen for me, and you won't be disappointed," Ximen Qing reassured her.

As soon as he took his leave of Mrs. Wang, Ximen Qing did as she instructed and went to buy the brocade, silk, gauze, and pure silk floss. He had a servant deliver them to Mrs. Wang, along with five taels of loose silver.

Mrs. Wang then left her place through the backdoor and went over to the home of Wu Dalang and Pan Jinlian. Wu Dalang was still out selling buns, so Pan Jinlian received her and invited her upstairs for tea.

"Why don't you ever come over to my place for tea?" Mrs. Wang asked.

"I haven't been feeling well," Pan Jinlian said. "So I haven't had the energy."

"Do you have an almanac?" Mrs. Wang asked. "I would like to pick an auspicious day to hire a tailor."

“What kind of clothes are you making?”

“I’m always feeling all sorts of aches and pains in my old age, so I want to have my burial garments ready, just in case. A rich man gave me some fine fabric for it. It’s been sitting in my home for more than a year. And this year, I’ve felt my condition getting worse, and it’s a leap year, so I want to use this extra month to get the clothes done. But that tailor says he’s too busy and can’t do it for me. Woe is me!”

Pan Jinlian smiled and said, “I don’t know if you like my work, but how about if I do it for you?”

Mrs. Wang flashed a huge grin. “If you are willing to do it for me, I would die happy! I’ve long heard about your skill with the needle, but I did not dare to ask you.”

“It’s not a problem at all,” Pan Jinlian said. “Since I’ve made the promise, I will live up to it for sure. Pick a good date from the almanac, and I’ll start working on it.”

“YOU are my lucky star! As long as you’re making the clothes for me, we don’t need to pick any special date. Besides, I just remembered that I asked someone the other day, and he said tomorrow is a most auspicious day. I just forgot because I thought you didn’t really need a most auspicious day to cut materials.”

“That’s perfect! We don’t need to pick any other day then,” Pan Jinlian said.

“Since you’re willing to do me this favor, may I be so bold as to ask you to come over to my house tomorrow to start working on it?”

“Oh no need for me to come over; you can just bring the stuff here.”

“But I would love to see you work,” Mrs. Wang said. “Besides, who would watch my shop if I came over?”

“In that case, I’ll come over after breakfast,” Pan Jinlian relented.

Mrs. Wang thanked her profusely and took her leave. That night, she sent word to Ximen Qing, telling him to come over on the third day. The rest of the night passed uneventfully. The next morning, Mrs. Wang cleaned up her home, bought some thread, put on the tea kettle, and waited.

Meanwhile, next door, Pan Jinlian's husband, Wu Dalang, ate breakfast and set out with his steamed buns as usual. Once he left, Pan Jinlian rolled up the front door curtain and went out through her backdoor to Mrs. Wang's place. Mrs. Wang enthusiastically welcomed her inside and served her tea, as well as various nuts and dried fruits. Then, on a table that's been wiped spotless, Mrs. Wang laid out the fabric. Pan Jinlian took her measurements and started cutting and stitching. While she worked, Mrs. Wang looked on and praised her needlework nonstop.

"What great skills! I've lived almost 70 years and haven't seen such wonderful needlework."

When lunchtime rolled around, Mrs. Wang prepared some wine and food and cooked some noodles for her guest. Pan Jinlian ate and drank, and then worked some more before calling it a day as evening approached.

She got home right around the same time as her husband. Wu Dalang noticed some blush on his wife's cheeks, so he asked her if she had been drinking.

"Our neighbor Mrs. Wang asked me to make her funeral clothes, and she treated me to some food and wine at lunchtime," Pan Jinlian said.

"Don't let her get you food and wine. We might need to ask her for a favor at some point, too. Come home and eat at lunchtime; don't impose on her. If you go over there again tomorrow, bring some money and treat her back, ok? As they say, 'Nearby neighbors are better than distant relatives.' Don't forget proper courtesies. If she won't let you return the favor, then just bring the material back and work on it here."

Pan Jinlian listened and said nothing more about it that night. The next day, once Wu Dalang headed out after breakfast, Mrs. Wang came calling again to invite Pan Jinlian over to her place, and they resumed work on the clothes. As midday approached, Pan Jinlian handed Mrs. Wang a string of coins and said, "Here, let me buy us a cup of wine."

“What?! That won’t do!” Mrs. Wang objected. “You’re here working on stuff for me; how can I let you spend money?”

“My husband told me to do so. If you won’t accept, then I’ll have to take the material home and work on it there.”

When she heard that, Mrs. Wang quickly relented and said, “Well, your husband is so polite. Since you put it that way, I’ll accept.”

So Mrs. Wang took the money, added some from her own pocket, and went to buy some good wine, food, and fruits to treat her special guest. And since it’s been like a whole two pages in the novel since the last aggressively misogynistic comment about the entire sex, the author took this opportunity to slip in a little quip about how almost all women, no matter how clever they may be, are invariably taken in by small attentions and flattery, like good wine and food. [Sigh] Let’s move on.

So day two passed much like day one, and Pan Jinlian went home as evening approached. On the morning of the third day, as soon as Wu Dalang left, Mrs. Wang was at the backdoor, calling out to Pan Jinlian, “I’m here to bother you again.”

She hadn’t even finished speaking when Pan Jinlian came down the stairs and replied, “I was just coming over.”

So the two of them again went over to Mrs. Wang’s home and started working on the clothes and sipping tea. As midday approached, they heard a cough from the doorway to the teahouse, followed by someone calling out, “Mrs. Wang, why haven’t I seen you the last few days?”

“Who’s that?” Mrs. Wang asked.

“It’s me,” the voice answered.

Mrs. Wang got up and went out front. There stood none other than Ximen Qing, wearing a brand-new headscarf and dressed in his finest.

"Oh I was wondering who it was; turns out it's you, benefactor!" Mrs. Wang said with a chuckle.

"Your timing is perfect. Come in here and have a look."

She pulled Ximen Qing into her home and said to Pan Jinlian, "This is the benefactor who gave me the material for the clothes."

Ximen Qing respectfully greeted Pan Jinlian, and she hurriedly put down her needlework and returned the greeting. Mrs. Wang then pointed at her and said to Ximen Qing, "I've had the silks you gave me for more than a year and hadn't been able to get the clothes made. But fortunately, she's doing it for me now. Her stitches are as fine as any machine weave! So close and exact! What a rare skill! Here, take a look for yourself."

Ximen Qing picked up the garment and sang Pan Jinlian's praises. "How did you get such remarkable skills?! What a heavenly touch!"

"Sir, you jest," Pan Jinlian said with a smile.

Ximen Qing now turned to Mrs. Wang and asked, "May I ask whose wife she is?"

"Can you guess?" Mrs. Wang said with a chuckle.

"How could I guess?"

"She's the wife of Wu Dalang from next door. How could you have forgotten? That pole must have hit you harder than I thought the day before."

Hearing this, Pan Jinlian blushed and said, "That was an accident. Sir, please don't hold a grudge."

"Not at all," Ximen Qing said.

Mrs. Wang now cut in. "This gentleman has the most wonderful temperament. He never holds a grudge. He's a very nice man."

"I didn't recognize you the other day," Ximen Qing said. "Turns out you're Wu Dalang's wife. I know him. A reliable breadwinner. He's never offended anyone in the time he's been doing business on the streets. He earns money and has a good disposition. He's a rare find."

“Indeed!” Mrs. Wang chimed in in agreement. “Ever since she married him, he always obeys her in all things.”

But Pan Jinlian replied, “My foolish husband is a useless man. Sir, you must be making fun of us.”

“You’re mistaken!” Ximen Qing said. “As the ancients said, ‘The pliant rise in the world; the stubborn invite disaster.’ A good-natured man like your husband is a sure thing. ‘Not losing a single drop from 10 thousand tons of water,’ as they say.”

“Exactly!” Mrs. Wang again chimed in.

Continuing to utter compliments, Ximen Qing now sat down across from Pan Jinlian, and Mrs. Wang asked her, “Do you know who this gentleman is?”

“No.”

“This gentleman is one of the wealthiest men in this county and a good friend of the magistrate. Everyone calls him the Right Honorable Mr. Ximen. He’s very wealthy and runs a medicinal shop across from the county office. He’s got enough money to overflow the Big Dipper, and so much rice that it rots in his granaries. At his home, whatever is yellow is gold, what’s white is silver, what’s round is pearls, what glitters is jewels. And he’s got rhino horns and elephant tusks.”

And on and on went Mrs. Wang, praising Ximen Qing to the hilt. Pan Jinlian, meanwhile, just kept her down and worked on the clothes. As he watched her, Ximen Qing was doing all he could to restrain himself from just jumping her right then and there.

Mrs. Wang now brought them each a cup of tea and said to Pan Jinlian, “Why don’t you have some tea with the gentleman.”

As they sipped tea, Mrs. Wang could tell there were some flirtatious glances flying back and forth, so she looked at Ximen Qing and touched her face with the five fingers of her hand. He got the message: They were 50 percent of the way there.

Mrs. Wang now got to work on the other 50 percent. She said to Ximen Qing, "If you hadn't come here, I would never dare to presume to go invite you. It must be fate AND happy coincidence that you two meet. As the old saying goes, 'One person shouldn't impose on two patrons.' You're providing the money for my clothes, while she's providing the labor. I hate to trouble you any further, but don't you think that since she's kind enough to come here, you might treat her to a little food and wine?"

"How could I be so dim?" Ximen Qing said, playing along. "Here you go."

He took out some silver wrapped in a handkerchief and handed them to Mrs. Wang, asking her to prepare some food and wine. When she saw this, Pan Jinlian said, "I can't let you do that."

Well, she may have been saying that, but she made no motion to stop them even as Mrs. Wang got up to go. As Mrs. Wang headed to the door, she said to Pan Jinlian, "Please keep the gentleman company for a bit."

"No need for all this trouble," Pan Jinlian said again. But again, she didn't get up to stop Mrs. Wang.

Once Mrs. Wang left the room, Ximen Qing just kept staring at Pan Jinlian, and she answered in kind, stealing glances at him and feeling herself drawn to his good looks. But she mostly just kept her head down and kept working on the clothes.

A short time later, Mrs. Wang returned with a cooked goose, some stewed meat, and some delicate fruits and such. She set them on a platter and brought them into the room.

"Here, put away the needlework and have a cup of wine first," she said to Pan Jinlian.

"I would not dare to partake. Please help yourself and tend to the gentleman," Pan Jinlian said, remaining seated all the while.

"But we are doing this to express my gratitude, especially to you," Mrs. Wang insisted. "How can you say such a thing?"

So she set up the table, all three sat down, and she poured the wine. Ximen Qing raised a cup toward Pan Jinlian and said, "Miss, please drink hearty."

"Thank you for your kindness, sir," she replied.

Mrs. Wang now piled on and said to Pan Jinlian, "I know you are a good drinker, so don't hold back."

As Pan Jinlian took the cup in her hand, Ximen Qing grabbed his chopsticks and said to Mrs. Wang, "Please help me serve her some food."

So Mrs. Wang put a few pieces of food in Pan Jinlian's bowl. After three rounds of wine, Mrs. Wang heated up more booze. While she was gone, Ximen Qing asked Pan Jinlian, "May I be so bold as to ask how old you are?"

"Twenty-three."

"Ah, I am five years older."

"Sir, you are comparing heaven and earth."

Mrs. Wang now stepped back into the room and chimed in, "This lady is remarkably clever. Not only is her needlework beautiful, but she's read all the classics."

"Where would one find someone like her?" Ximen Qing gushed. "Wu Dalang is so lucky!"

"I'm not trying to stir up trouble," Mrs. Wang said to Ximen Qing, "but none of your many women can hold a candle to her."

"Ain't that the truth!" Ximen Qing said with a long sigh. "I've just got rotten luck. I haven't found a single good one."

"Well, your first wife was pretty good," Mrs. Wang said.

"Tell me about it. If she were still alive, how could my household be in such disarray? All my women are just mouths waiting to be fed. They don't look after anything."

"How long ago did your wife die, sir?" Pan Jinlian asked.



"It's a sad story. My first wife came from a poor family, but she was very skillful and handled everything for me. But she's been gone for three years now, and my household has fallen apart. It's a mess. Why do you think I'm always going out? Whenever I'm at home, I just get aggravated."

Mrs. Wang cut in and said, "Sir, pardon me for speaking plainly, but even your first wife couldn't make needlework like this."

"And she wasn't quite so pretty either," Ximen Qing followed up.

Mrs. Wang now said with a laugh, "What about that girl you're keeping on East Street? Why don't you ever invite me to tea there?"

"Oh that Zhang Xixi (1,1)? She's just a singing girl. I don't care much for her."

"But you and Li (3) Jiaojiao (1,1) have been together for a while."

"Well she's living in my home now. If she could oversee a household, I would've elevated her to my wife long ago."

"If you could find such a girl, would you have trouble bringing her home?"

"My parents have both passed away, so I'm my own master. Who would dare to say no?"

"I was just joking. There isn't a girl that can please you."

"Of course there is; I just haven't had the good luck of meeting one."

And of course, all this back-and-forth was being put on for Pan Jinlian's ears. Mrs. Wang now said, "Oh, we're out of wine. Sir, can I trouble you to buy another bottle?"

"There are about 5 taels of loose silver in my handkerchief. Take what you need and keep the rest."

Mrs. Wang thanked him and glanced over at Pan Jinlian as she got up. Pan Jinlian was sitting there looking down, but inside, fueled by alcohol and lust, she was getting ideas.

"I'll go get another bottle for us," Mrs. Wang said to Pan Jinlian. "You keep the gentleman company. There's still some wine in the heating tube. You can each have a cup. I'm going all the way down to the shop opposite the county office to get some good wine, so I won't be back for a while."

"No need," Pan Jinlian said, but again she just remained seated. So Mrs. Wang left the room, closed the doors behind her, and tied them up shut. She then sat down right in front of the doors.

Back inside the room, Ximen Qing poured wine for Pan Jinlian. As he did so, he went oh oops how clumsy of me, and brushed a pair of chopsticks off the table with his sleeve. The chopsticks fell right by her feet. Ximen Qing bent down as if to pick up the chopsticks, but while he was down there, he instead squeezed one of her embroidered satin shoes.

That prompted a giggle from Pan Jinlian, who said, "Mr. Ximen, you are trying to seduce me."

The moment had come, and Ximen Qing fell to his knees and said to her, "Please let me have you!"

And the next thing you know, clothes were flying off and the two of them were having a go on Mrs. Wang's bed.

After the clouds had spent their rain, the two were just about to get dressed when suddenly, Mrs. Wang barged in from outside and said angrily, "What the hell are you doing?!"

Both Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian were stunned, and Mrs. Wang went on, telling Pan Jinlian. "Oh great! I asked you to come make clothes, not to seduce men! If your husband finds out, that'd be the end of me. I'm going to tell him first."

As she turned around to leave the room, Pan Jinlian grabbed her skirt and pleaded, "Please don't be mad!"

Ximen Qing also chimed in and said to Mrs. Wang, "Not so loud!"

Mrs. Wang grinned and said to them, "If you want me to spare you, then you both must agree to one thing."

"I would agree to 10 things, much less one!" Pan Jinlian said.

"Alright, then from this day forth, you must keep your husband in the dark and come entertain Mr. Ximen every day. If you do so, I'll let this go. If you miss a single day, I'll go tell Wu Dalang."

Wait, so the condition for keeping your adultery a secret is ... more adultery? I smell a setup. But Pan Jinlian was in no position to refuse, nor did she really want to. So she agreed. Mrs. Wang now turned to Ximen Qing and said, "As for you, sir, I don't think I need to spell it out. The deed is done, so don't break your promises. If you do, I'll also go tell Wu Dalang."

Now, the way that was written in the novel, Mrs. Wang's words to Ximen Qing were vague enough that they could be taken to mean whatever promises he made to Pan Jinlian in the throes of passion. But of course, both Mrs. Wang and Ximen Qing knew she meant the payment he had promised her for arranging the affair. Ximen Qing reassured her that he would never break his promise. So the three of them now got back to drinking. It was now getting to be late afternoon, so Pan Jinlian said, "My husband will be back soon. I must go."

So she went through the backdoor again and returned home, where she lowered the front door curtain and waited for Wu Dalang. Her timing was perfect, as he walked in just a moment later.

After Pan Jinlian left, Mrs. Wang looked at Ximen Qing and said, "Was that a good plan?"

"It's all thanks to you," Ximen Qing said. "When I get home, I'll send you a bar of silver. You'll have everything I promised."

"My eyes watch for the banners of royal reward, and my ears are cocked for the sound of glad tidings," Mrs. Wang said jokingly. "Don't fail me. I don't want to be the funeral singer who's trying to get paid AFTER the burial."

Ximen Qing laughed and left. From that day forth, he and Pan Jinlian rendezvoused in Mrs. Wang's home every day. They were, according to the novel, as close as lacquer and as thick as glue. But as the old saying goes, "Good news never gets out the door, while bad news spreads for a thousand miles." Within half a month, all the neighbors knew what was going on. Everyone, that is, except for Wu Dalang, Pan Jinlian's husband. Hmm, I wonder who's gonna tell him.

So in the county seat, there lived a teenager of about 15. His name was Yunge (4,1). His family consisted of just him and his old father, and he helped the family scratch out a living by selling fruits to the many restaurants in town. He also got a nice tip every so often from Ximen Qing. One day, he had secured a basket of fresh pears and he stalked the streets looking for Ximen Qing, hoping to get a little extra for his merchandise. Well, I had mentioned how gossipy this county was, and on this occasion, someone told Yunge, "Hey, I know where you can find Ximen Qing."

"Please tell me, sir," Yunge said. "That way, I can earn some money to help my father."

"Ximen Qing is hooking up with the wife of Wu Dalang the steamed bun peddler," the gossip told him. "They're together every day in Mrs. Wang's teahouse on Purple Stone Street. They're most likely there now. You're a kid, so just go right in."

Yunge thanked the gossip for the tip and headed straight for Purple Stone Street. He went into the teahouse and saw Mrs. Wang sitting on a stool, hand-spinning hemp thread. Yunge put down his basket and greeted her respectfully.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Wang asked.

"I'm looking for the gentleman so I can make some money and take care of my dad."

"What gentleman?"

"Oh you know the one."

"Does this gentleman have a name?"

“The one with the two-character last name.”

“What two characters?”

“Mrs. Wang, stop pretending. I want to talk to Mr. Ximen,” Yunge said as he walked toward the room in the back. But Mrs. Wang grabbed him and scolded him.

“You little monkey. Where do you think you’re going? Don’t you know there’s such a thing as privacy in someone else’s home?”

“I was going to call him out from your room for a minute.”

“Frickin’ monkeyshine! Why would I have a Mr. Ximen in my house?!”

“Look, don’t horde him all to yourself. Let me get a lick of the juice too! You think I don’t know what’s going on?”

“You little monkey! What do you think you know?!”

“Wow, you’re as stingy as cutting vegetables with a hoof-paring knife in a wooden spoon. Don’t want to miss a bit, do you? Well, if I tell the truth, then the steam bunned peddler is going to get pissed.”

When she heard the boy call out her racket, Mrs. Wang flew into a rage.

“You little scamp! How dare you come fart in my house?!”

“Better a scamp than an old bawd!” Yunge shot back.

Mrs. Wang now grabbed the boy by the collar and smacked him so hard on his head that she left two lumps.

“Hey! Why are you hitting me?!” the boy shouted.

“Damn little monkey! Keep shouting, and I’ll smack you even harder!”

“Dirty old whore-monger! You hit me for no reason!”

Well, attempted extortion seemed like a pretty good reason, but it’s not like anybody is exactly on firm moral high ground here. In any case, Mrs. Wang kept beating the boy until she kicked him back out

onto the street. She then chucked his basket out, too, sending his pears rolling everywhere. The boy was no match for her, so all he could do was chase after his pears while sobbing and cursing. As he did so, he pointed at her teahouse and said, “Old whore-monger! Just you wait! You think I won’t go tell him?! Just watch!”

And by him, he of course meant Pan Jinlian’s husband, Wu Dalang. To see what fresh hell is gonna break out when Wu Dalang discovers the truth, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, the story takes a dark twist from simple adultery to something far more sinister. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!