

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 48.

Last time, Song Jiang narrowly escaped being turned into soup for some bandit chieftains on Clear Winds Mountain, ended up befriendng said chieftains, rescued an abducted woman from the lecherous clutches of one of the said chieftains, and found out she was married to the boss of his friend Hua Rong, whom Song Jiang was on his way to see. So Song Jiang saved the woman and released her, and then went on his way to see Hua Rong at Fort Clear Winds.

As we resume our narrative, it was the day of the Lantern Festival. While Hua Rong was on duty, Song Jiang decided to go out on the town and partake in the festivities. Early that evening, the sky had already darkened and a bright moon had climbed up in the east. Song Jiang and a few of Hua Rong's attendants strolled out into Clear Winds Town. Everywhere they looked, every home was adorned with lanterns, and the lanterns were decorated with paintings depicting various well-known stories and legends. And there were also cut-outs of lovely flowers like white peony, hibiscus, and lotus.

Holding hands to stay together as they squeezed through the crowds, Song Jiang and his entourage made their way to the temple to see the turtle-shaped frame that was covered with lanterns and streamers, which was indeed an impressive sight. After a while, they headed south, and after a few hundred paces, they saw an area in front of them that was lit up by candles, and a group of people were huddled around the gates of a compound with high walls. Gongs brayed, music played, and people cheered. Turns out they were watching a troupe of dancers performing in funny masks.

Now, Song Jiang was kind of short, so he couldn't see over the people in front of him. But his escorts knew some of the performers, so they cleared a path for him to go to the front of the crowd. There, as he watched the performers do their thing, Song Jiang couldn't help but laugh.

But that laugh turned out to be trouble. As it so happened, this compound was the residence of Liu Gao (1), the civil commandant of Fort Clear Winds, aka Hua Rong's boss, and aka the husband of the woman whom Song Jiang had saved back on Clear Winds Mountain. Liu Gao and his wife, along with

several other women, were sitting inside when they heard Song Jiang's laughter. Liu Gao's wife looked out and recognized him.

Pointing him out in the crowd, she told her husband, "See that dark, short man? He's the bandit chieftain who abducted me on Clear Winds Mountain."

Liu Gao was alarmed and immediately barked for his men to arrest the dark, short guy who's laughing. Song Jiang heard that order and quickly turned to flee. But he only made it about 10 houses down the road before the soldiers caught up to him and manhandled him like tigers devouring a lamb. They bound him with four ropes and dragged him back to Liu Gao's residence, marching him into the parlor and forcing him down on his knees.

Liu Gao barked at Song Jiang, "So you are one of the bandits from Clear Winds Mountain. How dare you come here to look at lanterns?! What do you have to say now?"

Song Jiang replied, "Sir, my name is Zhang the Third. I am a merchant from Yuncheng County and an old friend of Commandant Hua's. I've been here for quite a few days, and I have never been a bandit on Clear Winds Mountain."

But Liu Gao's wife now came out from behind a screen and shouted, "How dare you deny it?! Do you remember me calling you 'my lord?'"

Seeing her, Song Jiang said, "Madam, you are mistaken. Did I not tell you that I was a merchant from Yuncheng County who had also been captured by the bandits?"

But Liu Gao cut him off. "If you are a merchant who had been abducted, then how were you able to leave the bandit stronghold and end up here, taking in the sights?"

Liu Gao's wife also chimed in. "When you were in the bandit's lair, you were looking mighty comfortable sitting in the command chair in the center, letting me call you 'my lord.' You won't even speak to me."

“Madam, do you not remember how I saved you?” Song Jiang said. “Why do you now turn around and insist that I am a bandit?”

Liu Gao’s wife flew into a rage and cursed Song Jiang as she pointed at him. “These crooks will never admit anything without a good beating!”

“Quite right!” her husband agreed. He then ordered his men to beat Song Jiang with split bamboo rods. After two vicious rounds of caning, Song Jiang’s skin was split open and he was bleeding all over.

Liu Gao now ordered his men, “Throw him in chains. Tomorrow, we’ll put him in a prisoner cart and take this Zhang the Third, the Tiger of Yuncheng, to the prefectural seat.”

Meanwhile, the few men who had accompanied Song Jiang out on the town had seen him get hauled away by Liu Gao’s soldiers, so they hurried back to tell Hua Rong. Hua Rong was stunned and immediately wrote a letter and dispatched two capable attendants to deliver the letter to Liu Gao and ask for Song Jiang’s release. The attendants rushed the letter to Liu Gao’s residence. Liu Gao summoned them in and read the letter, which said:

“Respectful greetings from Hua Rong to my brother and colleague: A poor relation of mine named Liu Zhang (4) had recently arrived from Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. While he was out looking at lanterns, he inadvertently offended you. I beg you to restrain your anger and release him, and I will be extremely grateful. Please forgive my clumsy writing.”

So, there’s a bit of a problem here. Song Jiang had already told Liu Gao that his name was Zhang the Third and that he was from Yuncheng County. And yet, here was Hua Rong, telling Liu Gao that his name was Liu Zhang (4). That Liu Gao may be corrupt, but he was no dummy. When he read the letter, he flew into a rage and tore the letter to shreds.

“Hua Rong, how dare you?!” he fumed. “You are a government official. How can you have dealings with bandits? And to try to pull one over on me! That crook has already confessed his name is Zhang the Third from Yuncheng County, and yet here you are, claiming his name is Liu Zhang (4). I’m not someone you can fool. You think I would let him go just because he shares my last name?!”

Liu Gao now ordered his men to kick the couriers out. The couriers returned to Hua Rong and told him what happened, and Hua Rong lamented, “My poor brother! Quickly, prepare my horse!”

Donning his armor, Hua Rong grabbed his bow and arrows, as well as his spear, and hopped on his horse. Accompanied by about 50 armed soldiers, he rushed to Liu Gao’s fort. The guards at the gate saw them coming and figured this was gonna turn ugly, so they did the only sensible thing and scattered. I mean, it’s not like it’s their job to guard the compound or anything.

Hua Rong rode into the compound and dismounted in front of the parlor, clutching his spear. With his men lined up in a row, Hua Rong shouted, “Commandant Liu, I would like a word.”

By now, Liu Gao was scared out of his mind. He knew full well what skills Hua Rong possessed, and given the circumstances, he had no desire to go out there to sample those skills. Hua Rong waited outside the parlor for a spell, and then told his men to start searching the rooms around the compound. Soon, they discovered Song Jiang in a side room. He was hanging from the rafters and weighed down by chains. His legs had been beaten so badly that they were torn and lacerated.

The soldiers cut him down from the rafters, broke his chains, and brought him out. Hua Rong quickly sent some men to take Song Jiang back to his home. He then hopped back on his horse, and still wielding his spear, he called out again.

“Commandant Liu, you may be in charge, but how can you disrespect me so? Who doesn’t have relatives? What do you mean by this? You arrested my cousin and locked him up in your home as a bandit. How can you bully me like this? I’ll settle this with you tomorrow.”

Hua Rong then left with his men and returned to his own fort to tend to Song Jiang.

Once Hua Rong left, Liu Gao emerged from hiding and called up about 200 men and ordered them to go to Hua Rong's fort and take back the prisoner. Now, at the head of these 200 men were two drill instructors, and they were new, and neither could hold a candle to Hua Rong's skills. So when they got their marching orders, they were like, "Wait, you want us to do ... what?" But the boss had spoken, so they had no choice but to make it so.

It was early dawn when this group arrived outside Hua Rong's fort. The sky was just starting to lighten up. The group huddled in the entryway, but no one dared to set foot inside the fort. So they just stood there and waited, and waited, and waited.

By now, it was totally light out, and the men saw that the doors to the main hall were wide open, and Hua Rong was sitting in the center of the room, holding a bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right. As he stared at the men clustered in the doorway, he raised his bow and shouted,

"You soldiers. Don't you know that every grievance should be taken up with the culprit, and every debt with the debtor? Liu Gao may have sent you here, but you don't need to be risking your neck for him. And as for you two new drill instructors, you haven't seen my abilities yet, so let me show you my archery skills, and then if you are not afraid and still want to do Liu Gao's dirty work, c'mon in. First, watch me shoot the knobbed cudgel of the door god on the left."

As he spoke, Hua Rong loaded an arrow, pulled back his bowstring, and with a shout of "Strike," let fly his shot. His aim was true, and the arrow indeed found the cudgel on the door god painted on the left door. All of Liu Gao's soldiers were taken aback.

Hua Rong spoke again while pulling out a second arrow from his quiver. "Now, watch this arrow hit the tassel on the helmet of the right door god."

A split second later, his arrow struck the right door, and just like before, his aim was true.

Pulling a third arrow out of his quiver, Hua Rong now said, "Next, watch this third arrow strike the heart of the drill instructor who's wearing white."

Said drill instructor went oh crap and turned and ran. Everybody else followed suit, and soon, the doorway was empty.

Hua Rong told his men to shut the gates to the fort, and then he went to the back to check on Song Jiang.

"It's my fault you suffered," Hua Rong said.

"I'm ok," Song Jiang said. "But I worry that Liu Gao will not let this go. We must think long-term."

"I'd gladly give up this post to have it out with that bastard!" Hua Rong declared.

Song Jiang said, "Who could've expected that woman would repay kindness with wickedness and tell her husband to beat me. I was going to tell them my real name, but then I was worried they would find out about my murder case, so I just told them I was Zhang the Third, a merchant from Yuncheng County. Yet that Liu Gao was so unreasonable and declared that I was Zhang the Third, the Tiger of Yuncheng, and was going to ship me to the prefectural office in a prisoner cart as the leader of the Clear Winds Mountain bandits. I was going to be executed. If you hadn't come rescue me, there would be no way I could clear things up, even if I had copper lips and a steel tongue."

Hua Rong said, "I was thinking that since he's a scholar, he must place some value on those who share his familial name. So I wrote to him and said your name was Liu Zhang (4). But who knew he would be so unfeeling. Now that we've rescued you and brought you back here, we'll worry about him later."

"No brother, you're mistaken," Song Jiang said. "Even though you rescued me with your prowess, you must think things through carefully. As the old saying goes, 'Don't choke when you're eating; don't trip when you're walking.' You took his prisoner from him and scared away the men he sent to bring me back. How can he be willing to let it go? He's going to report you. I should leave tonight and go hide on

Clear Winds Mountain. That way, tomorrow you can just deny his accusations, and this would just turn into some bickering between civil and military officials. But if he gets his hands on me again, then you won't be able to talk your way out of it."

"I am but a brute," Hua Rong said, "I lack your deep insights. But I'm worried your wounds are too severe for you to travel."

"It's ok. I can manage in a pinch. I just need to make it to the foot of the mountain."

So that day, Song Jiang bandaged up his wounds and ate something. He left his belongings at Hua Rong's place, and at dusk, Hua Rong sent two soldiers to escort Song Jiang out of the fort, and Song Jiang headed off toward Clear Winds Mountain.

A couple days later, shortly after breakfast, Hua Rong got a visitor from the Qingzhou Prefecture office. He was the commander of the prefectural army. His name was Huang (2) Xin (4). He was renowned throughout the prefecture for his fighting skills, especially with his sword. He was known by the moniker "The Suppressor of the Three Mountains." As we mentioned in the last episode, there were three mountains controlled by bandits within the borders of Qingzhou Prefecture. These were Clear Winds Mountain, Double Dragon Mountain, and Peach Blossom Mountain. We've mentioned all three in our story already. Clear Winds Mountain was controlled by the trio of Yan Shun, Wang Ying, and Zheng (4) Tianshou, the guys who were going to make soup out of Song Jiang's innards. Double Dragon Mountain was where Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast, and Wu Song the Pilgrim were hanging out. And Peach Blossom Mountain was controlled by Li Zhong the Tiger-slaying General, and Zhou Tong, the Little Conqueror, aka the two guys that Lu Zhishen stole stuff from at one point. So that's a lot of formidable bandits spread across three mountains, but Huang Xin (4) had boasted that he would bring them all to heel, hence his nickname.

Hua Rong went outside to welcome Huang Xin and invited him into the main hall. After exchanging greetings, Hua Rong asked, "Commander, what business brings you here?"

"The prefect summoned me and told me that the civil and military commandants of Fort Clear Winds are not getting along for some reason. He was worried that the bickering between you two would interfere with the affairs of the state, so he sent me here with food and wine to make peace between you. Everything is already set up at the main fort. Please ride there with me."

Hua Rong chuckled and said, "How would I dare to bully that Liu Gao? If nothing else, he's my superior. It's just that he's been nitpicking me time and again. I didn't expect it would worry the prefect and trouble you to come all the way to my humble fort. How can I make it up to you?"

Huang Xin leaned in and whispered in Hua Rong's ear, "The prefect is on your side. If we ever need to take the troops into action, that Liu Gao is a civil official. What the hell can he do? Just come with me."

"Thank you for looking after me," Hua Rong said.

Huang Xin now again asked Hua Rong to go to the main fort with him. Hua Rong said let me treat you to a few cups of wine first, but Huang Xin said, "Once we resolve this issue, then we can drink to our hearts' content." So Hua Rong prepped his horse and rode off with Huang Xin.

When they arrived at the main fort, Huang Xin took Hua Rong by the hand and led him into the main hall. Liu Gao was already there, and the three greeted each other. Huang Xin then ordered his men to bring wine. Holding a cup, he turned first to Liu Gao and said, "The prefect was very concerned to hear that the two of you were not getting along, so he sent me here to make peace between you. I hope you two can focus on repaying the kindness of the imperial court and sort out your differences."

Liu Gao replied, "I may be untalented, but I still understand propriety. I never meant for the prefect to be worried. There's not really any serious problem between us; it's all lies spread by outsiders."



Huang Xin laughed heartily and said, "That's great then!"

After Liu Gao drank his cup of wine, Huang Xin filled a second cup and turned to Hua Rong and said, "Given what Commandant Liu just said, this must be just lies spread by people with nothing better to do. If that is the case, please drink this cup."

Hua Rong accepted the cup and emptied it. Liu Gao now poured a cup and offered it to Huang Xin, saying, "Commander, thank you for coming all this way. Please drink this cup."

As Huang Xin took the cup, his eyes glanced around the room. Suddenly, he threw the cup to the ground, and in that moment, a cry rose up from the back, and about 50 stout soldiers jumped out from behind the screens and pounced on Hua Rong, wrestling him to the ground.

"Tie him up!" Huang Xin ordered.

"What did I do?" Hua Rong protested.

Huang Xin laughed out loud and barked back, "How dare you ask that? You are a rebel, in cahoots with the bandits from Clear Winds Mountain. What did you do? It's only because of your past service that I haven't arrested your entire family."

"Where is your proof?" Hua Rong shouted.

"Fine, I'll show you the proof, so you know I'm not framing you," Huang Xin replied. "Men, bring him!"

A moment later, a prisoner cart was rolled up to the hall. In it sat a man with a red headband and a paper pennant. It was none other than Song Jiang. Hua Rong was stunned and could not say a thing.

So let's rewind the tape a couple days and see how this all came about. When his men came scampering back and told him that Hua Rong was too much to handle and nobody wanted a taste of his arrows, Liu Gao started thinking, "Now that Hua Rong has taken the prisoner away, he will no doubt release him back to Clear Winds Mountain tonight and then deny everything tomorrow. Even if I report

him to our superiors, it would be nothing more than common bickering between civil and military officials. I won't be able to do anything about him. Why don't I send some men to wait along the main road a couple miles away. If I get lucky and catch that bandit, I'll keep him locked up here and secretly report this to the prefecture so they can send an officer here to claim him, and arrest Hua Rong as well. That'll be the end of him, and then I can rule this fort alone, without having to put up with his crap."

So that night, Liu Gao dispatched 20-some armed men. Around 9 or 10 p.m., the men came back, and sure enough, they had a bound Song Jiang in tow.

"Just as I expected," an exuberant Liu Gao said. "Lock him up in the back and don't let anyone know."

That night, Liu Gao wrote a letter and sent two trusted men to deliver it to Qingzhou Prefecture. The prefect of Qingzhou was named Murong (4,2) Yanda (4,2). He has one of those unusual two-character last names, Murong (4,2). This Prefect Murong (4,2) was the brother of one of the emperor's concubines. With that influential backer, he pretty much did whatever the hell he wanted to in his post, enriching himself and his cronies at the cost of the common people of the prefecture. So you know, another caricature of a corrupt government official.

Prefect Murong was just about to go have breakfast when Liu Gao's letter arrived. The content of the letter alarmed him.

"Hua Rong is the son of an official who has rendered great service to the government, how could he hook up with the bandits on Clear Winds Mountain?" Prefect Murong said to himself. "But this is no small offense. It might be true."

So he summoned the commander of his prefectural army, Huang Xin, who set off for Fort Clear Winds immediately with 50 stout soldiers. He went straight to Liu Gao's place, and after welcoming him, Liu Gao invited him to a banquet in his private quarters. Liu Gao then brought out Song Jiang as proof of his accusations.

Seeing this, Huang Xin said, "There's no doubt about it then. Build a prisoner cart right away and put him in it. Put a red headband on him and stick a paper pennant on the cart that says, "Zhang the Third, the Tiger of Yuncheng and Leader of the Clear Winds Mountain Bandits." Song Jiang, remember, was still trying to keep his real identity hidden, so he did not dare to say anything.

Huang Xin then asked Liu Gao, "Does Hua Rong know you've captured Zhang the Third?"

"I caught him late at night and have kept him hidden here. Hua Rong just assumes he's gotten away, so he's sitting pretty at home."

"In that case, this will be easy," Huang Xin said. "Tomorrow, prepare a sheep and some wine and set up a banquet in the hall at the main fort. Have about 50 men lie in wait. Once everything's ready, I'll go invite Hua Rong and tell him that the prefect heard you two weren't getting along, so he sent me to make peace between you. Once I have lured him into the hall, I will throw my wine cup as the signal to arrest him. Then we take them both to the prefectural seat. What do you think?"

"Sir, you are truly insightful. That is a brilliant plan!" Liu Gao raved. "It's like catching a turtle in a jar. Just reach out and you've got him."

So fast forward back to the present, where Huang Xin's scheme went off without a hitch, and Hua Rong found himself bound.

"Don't blame me," Huang Xin told Hua Rong. "Liu Gao is the one who accused you."

"Not a problem," Hua Rong said. "This man is my relative from Yuncheng County, yet you guys keep insisting he's a bandit. But the truth will be sorted out when I see our superiors."

"Since that's your story, then I'll just take you to the prefectural seat and you can explain it yourself," Huang Xin said. He then told Liu Gao to round up 100 soldiers from the fort to escort the prisoners.

Hua Rong said to Huang Xin, "Commander, you may have apprehended me by deceit, but I will be able to explain everything to the authorities. On account of me being a military officer just like you, don't remove my clothing, and allow me to sit in my cart."

"That's easy enough," Huang Xin said. "We'll let you have that. You can go explain everything with Commandant Liu at the prefecture, so that we don't kill any innocents."

Huang Xin and Liu Gao then both mounted their horses, and led a combined force of about 150 men, escorting the two prisoner carts toward the prefectural seat.

After traveling for about 10 miles, Huang Xin and company came upon a big forest at the foot of Clear Winds Mountain. Suddenly, the soldiers in front pointed and shouted, "Someone is peeking at us from the woods!"

Everyone in the convoy froze, and Huang Xin asked why. When his men explained they saw someone in the woods looking this way, Huang Xin shouted, "Ignore them! Keep going!"

As they got closer to the woods, the sound of 30-some gongs suddenly rang out. All of Huang Xin's soldiers panicked and were about to flee, but Huang Xin barked, "Stop! Line up!" He then shouted to Liu Gao, "Commandant Liu, keep an eye on the prisoners!"

There was no answer from Liu Gao, who was turning green and yellow like a ripe melon and just kept mumbling, "Oh heaven oh heaven, please save me! I'll pledge 100,000 volumes of scripture and build 300 monasteries in gratitude. Just save me!"

To see if heaven will answer Liu Gao's desperate pleas, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see exactly what all the ruckus is about. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!