

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 80.

Last time, the bandits of Liangshan had finally become enough of a nuisance to warrant imperial attention. The emperor dispatched a general named Huyan (1,2) Zhuo (2) to wipe them out. On the first day of battle, the two sides pretty much fought to a standstill, although Liangshan did manage to capture Peng (2) Qi (3), one of Huyan Zhuo's two generals.

The next day, Song Jiang lined up the bandit forces for battle again, with five battalions at the front, followed by the main army led by 10 more chieftains. He also assigned two forces to lie in ambush on the flanks. He then sent the chieftain Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt out to challenge Huyan Zhuo for battle.

On the other side, the government troops kept shouting battle cries, but they did not budge. After this went on for a while, Song Jiang got a little suspicious. He took a closer look at the enemy's formation, and noticed that it consisted of only about 1,000 infantry, and they were just banging their drums and making lots of noise, but no one was coming out for combat.

Getting a bad feeling about this, Song Jiang discreetly gave the order for the rear column of his forces to fall back, while he himself rode forward to take a closer look. Suddenly, a string of cannon shots rang out from the opposing lines, and the thousand infantrymen parted. Through the opening came trouble.

Three thousand armored cavalry poured through the opening. They were clad in heavy armor, but that wasn't the end of it. The riders were arranged in rows of 30, and all the horses on each row were connected by iron chains. Once they got going, all the horses moved as one. So instead of dealing with individual horses and riders, you were facing a literally unbreakable phalanx of hooves, men, and pointy objects. While the cavalry charged, arrows flew from both flanks, and the center of the formation bristled with long spears.

Shocked by this sight, Song Jiang quickly ordered his men to fire arrows, but just like the day before, their arrows were useless against the heavily armored horses and riders. Soon, the chain-linked cavalry was sweeping across the field and approaching the bandits' lines. The five battalions at the front of those lines now turned and ran. The main army behind them also faltered, and soon everyone was just running for their own lives.

Song Jiang himself was fleeing on horseback, protected by 10 chieftains. Behind them, a row of chain-linked cavalry was in hot pursuit. Just as things were looking dire, one of the Liangshan forces that had been lying in wait on the flanks, led by Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and Yang Lin the Multicolored Leopard, charged out and rescued Song Jiang. They ran back to the edge of the marsh, where their navy was waiting. Song Jiang rushed onto a boat and then ordered his men to go help all the other chieftains onto boats as well. They pushed away from shore just in time to elude the enemy cavalry, which now pelted their boats with arrows. But the arrows were no threat, as the men on the boats had shields to defend themselves. They rowed their boats over to Duck's Beak Beach, where they disembarked and regrouped at the naval camp.

The damage was extensive. More than half of the bandit troops that went out that day had been lost, and although all the chieftains survived, six of them were struck by arrows, and countless rank-and-file soldiers had been wounded. And to add insult to injury, they soon saw four more chieftains rowing across the water. These were the folks in charge of two of Liangshan's waterside taverns slash reconnaissance outposts. They rushed onto shore and told Song Jiang, "The enemy infantry attacked and destroyed our taverns. If we didn't have boats waiting for us, we would've all been captured."

The bandit leader Chao Gai soon heard about the defeat and came down with the strategist Wu Yong and the priest Gongsun Sheng to check on Song Jiang. They found him with furrowed brows and a look of concern.

Wu Yong consoled him and said, "Brother, don't worry. Victory and defeat are common affairs in war; don't let it bother you. We'll think of a plan to defeat the chain-linked cavalry."

Chao Gai now ordered the navy to defend the beach day and night. He then asked Song Jiang to go back up to the stronghold to rest, but Song Jiang steadfastly refused. Instead, he sent the injured chieftains back to the stronghold to recover, while he himself set up base in the naval camp on Duck's Beak Beach.

On the other side, Huyan Zhuo returned to camp victorious. His army had slaughtered countless enemies and captured 500-some bandit lackeys and 300-some horses. He dispatched a messenger to bring word of this victory to the capital, while he rewarded his troops.

Back in the capital, Marshal Gao Qiu got word of the victory and was delighted. He informed the emperor the next day, and the emperor sent an official to deliver 10 bottles of fine imperial wine, a brocade robe, and 100,000 strings of coins to Huyan Zhuo's troops.

When Huyan Zhuo heard that an envoy was coming, he and his second-in-command, Han (2) Tao (1) the Undefeated General, went several miles outside of camp to receive the messenger and escorted him back to base. After the official ceremonies, Huyan Zhuo treated the envoy to wine and told Han Tao to distribute the rewards to the men. As for the 500-some prisoners, he had them locked up in his camp for now. Once he had captured the bandit leaders, he would take them all to the capital for their public execution.

As they were talking, the envoy asked how Huyan Zhuo's other vanguard general, Peng (2) Qi (3), got captured.

"He was after Song Jiang and ventured too far into enemy territory and got captured," Huyan Zhuo said. "After the last battle, the bandits will not dare to come attack again. We must divide our troops and attack them and cleanse their stronghold, dredge their swamp, capture all the outlaws, and take

apart their lair. But their base is surrounded by water; there's no path in. I have observed their camp from a distance. We must use cannons to shatter their lair. I've long heard that there is a famous artilleryman in the capital named Ling (2) Zhen (4). His nickname is the Heaven-Shaking Thunder. He's an expert in building cannons that have a range of up to five miles. Where his shots land, heaven falls, earth sinks, mountains collapse, and rocks shatter. If I can get him, then I can attack the bandits' lair. He's also quite skilled in combat. Sir, when you get back to the capital, can you mention this to Marshal Gao and ask him to send Ling Zhen here at once. Then we can sack the bandits' lair in no time."

The envoy agreed and left the next day. When he returned to the capital, he relayed Huyan Zhuo's request to Gao Qiu, and Gao Qiu quickly ordered Ling Zhen to come see him. Ling Zhen did as he was commanded, and soon was on his way to Liangshan with his gunpowder, explosives, various types of cannon, stone balls, and mounts all in tow. He also brought along his armor, saber, and 30-some soldiers.

Once he arrived and met with Huyan Zhuo, Ling Zhen went to set up his cannons. He set up three types of cannons: Fireball, Golden Wheel, and Mother and Sons. His men set up the mounts on the edge of the water and prepared to fire.

On the other side of the marsh, Song Jiang was talking strategy with Wu Yong but found himself banging his head against the wall trying to come up with a viable plan. Just then, spies reported that an artilleryman named Ling Zhen had arrived from the capital and was setting up cannons by the water's edge and taking aim at their naval camp.

"That's no problem," Wu Yong said. "We are surrounded by water. There are lots of channels, and our fortress is far from the water. Even their most powerful cannons won't be able to reach our base. We'll just abandon this camp and see how their cannons do, and then figure out our next step."

So they did as he suggested and retreated up to the stronghold. Chao Gai and company were just about to ask how they plan to repel the enemy when they heard a series of earth-shattering booms from the foot of the mountain. Three straight shots from Fireball cannons rang out. Two landed in the water, but one hit the auxiliary camp on Duck's Beak Beach.

Song Jiang was quite dismayed when he heard where the shots landed, and all the chieftains turned pale. I guess those shots were a little too close for comfort.

Wu Yong, however, had an idea. "We must get someone to lure Ling Zhen to the water's edge and capture him first. Then, we can discuss how to defeat the enemy."

Chao Gai now came up with an idea, and he dispatched six naval chieftains for the job, with the former constables Zhu Tong and Lei Heng serving as backup on land.

The six naval chieftains -- Li Jun the River Dragon, the brothers Zhang Heng and Zhang Shun, and the three Ruan brothers -- now split into two squadrons. Li Jun and Zhang Heng took about 50 sailors and set out on two fast boats. They slipped across the marsh amid the thick reeds. The other four chieftains led 40-some boats as reinforcement.

When Li Jun and Zhang Heng's men reached the opposite shore, they stormed onto land, made a ton of noise near the cannons, and knocked over all the cannon mounts. The enemy soldiers quickly reported this to Ling Zhen. He hurriedly mounted his horse, took his spear, brought two Fireball cannons, and rounded up 1,000 men to go repel the attack. When Li Jun and Zhang Heng saw him coming, they fell back immediately. Ling Zhen chased them to the edge of the reeds, where he saw 40-some small boats spread out in a row on the water, manned by about 100 enemy sailors.

Meanwhile, Li Jun and Zhang Heng had fled back onto their boats, but they didn't push away from shore. Instead, when they saw the enemy approach, they and their men all abandoned ship and jumped into the water. Ling Zhen now ordered his men to seize the boats. Just then, he heard the sound of drums and battle cries echoing from the opposite shore. This was the doing of the chieftains Zhu Tong

and Lei Heng, who were providing backup. Ling Zhen ordered his men to get on the boats they had just captured and row across the water to attack the enemy.

As they rowed to the middle of the marsh, they could see the bandits on the opposite bank, but just then, they got a nasty little surprise. Gongs started ringing from the opposite bank, and suddenly, about 50 Liangshan soldiers surfaced around the boats and pulled plugs out of the sterns of the boats. The next thing you know, water was pouring into the boats, while the boats were being rocked side to side by the Liangshan divers, sending all of Ling Zhen's soldiers into the water.

Ling Zhen himself tried to turn his boat around and flee, but someone had already made off with his boat's rudder. Two chieftains now popped up around his boat and gave it a good flip, sending Ling Zhen into the water. Waiting underwater was Ruan Xiao'er, the eldest Ruan brother. He grabbed hold of Ling Zhen and dragged him through the water to the opposite bank, where he was quickly tied up and taken up to the stronghold. As for Ling Zhen's men, about half of them died in the water, another 200-some were captured alive, and only a few managed to escape.

By the time Huyan Zhuo got word of this debacle and rushed over with his troops, the action was long done. All the boats had been rowed back over to Liangshan's side of the marsh, where no arrow could reach them. There was no sign of anyone. Welp, so much for his new secret weapon. Huyan Zhuo fumed for a good while, but in the end, he had no choice but to return to camp.

Meanwhile, as the outlaws were taking their prisoner Ling Zhen up to the stronghold, they were met midway by Song Jiang and all the other chieftains. As soon as he saw them, Song Jiang rushed over, personally untied Ling Zhen, and then lectured his own chieftains, saying, "I told you all to politely invite the commander to our base. Why did you treat him so rudely?!"

Song Jiang then laid it on thick with the usual "we are not worthy", "men of honor", "we're just a bunch of innocent mixed-up kids", yadi yada. Bottom line: Ling Zhen was grateful to Song Jiang for

sparing his life and bowed to thank him. After offering him wine, Song Jiang took him by the hand and walked up to the stronghold together.

There, Ling Zhen saw Peng (2) Qi (3), the other former Huyan Zhuo subordinate turned prisoner turned chieftain. As Ling Zhen stood in silence, Peng Qi told him, “Chieftain Chao and Chieftain Song are carrying out heaven’s justice and gathering men of honor. They are waiting for the court to grant them amnesty so they can serve the country. Since you and I are here, we should obey them.”

Song Jiang chimed in with his own recruitment pitch, and eventually, Ling Zhen relented.

“It’s ok for me to stay here, but my mother and wife are still in the capital,” he said. “If anyone finds out, they would be executed for sure. What should we do?”

Song Jiang was like, no worries, we got this. We do this all the time, actually. Thus reassured, Ling Zhen pledged his allegiance to the bandits, and a party ensued.

The next day, all the chieftains gathered in the Hall of Honor to celebrate the newest addition. While they drank, Song Jiang started discussing how to defeat Huyan Zhuo’s chain-linked cavalry. Everyone was scratching their head when suddenly, the blacksmith Tang (1) Long (2), aka the Gold Coin Spotted Leopard, stood up and said, “I may be untalented, but I have an idea. We need a certain weapon and a particular friend of mine.”

“Brother, what weapon, and which friend?” the strategist Wu Yong asked.

“Generations of my family have made their living by smithing weapons,” Tang Long explained. “My father rose to be the head of the garrison at Yanan (2,1) Prefecture because of his smithing skills. A previous emperor once used the chain-linked cavalry to achieve victory. If you want to defeat it, you must use the barbed lance. I have the design from my ancestors. I can make it anytime.

“But I only know how to make it; I don’t know how to wield it. If you want someone who knows how to use it, you must get my cousin. He’s an arms instructor. His skills with the barbed lance are passed

down through his family and they never teach outsiders. Whether on horseback or on foot, he has a supernatural touch with this weapon.”

Before Tang Long finished hyping his cousin, Lin Chong the Panther Head cut in and asked, “Are you talking about Xu (2) Ning (2), the drill instructor for the Golden Lancers?”

“Yes, exactly!” Tang Long confirmed.

“If you hadn’t mentioned him, I would’ve forgotten,” Lin Chong said. “That Xu Ning’s techniques with the golden lance and barbed lance are one of a kind. When I was in the capital, he and I often hung out and talked shop. We had great respect and admiration for each other. But how can we get him to come here?”

Tang Long said, “Xu Ning has a treasure that’s also one of a kind. It’s a family heirloom. When I accompanied my father to the capital to visit my aunt, I saw it a few times. It’s a suit of goose-feather armor hooped in metal. It’s called “Lion’s Fur.” It’s light and snug-fitting, but no blade or arrow can pierce it. Many rich men have begged him to let them see it just once, but he always refuses. That armor is his life. He keeps it in a leather box and hangs the box from the main beam in his bedroom. If we can get our hands on that armor, he would have no choice but to follow it here.”

Wu Yong the strategist now said, “If that’s the case, then it’s easy enough. We’ve got a talented brother right here. This is the perfect job for Flea on a Drum.”

Said Flea on a Drum, aka Shi (2) Qian (1) the master thief, perked up and said, “If it’s there, I’ll get it, by hook or crook.”

“If you can get it,” Tang Long said, “then I can get Xu Ning to our base.”

Song Jiang asked him how he planned to do that, and Tang Long whispered something in his ear, which prompted Song Jiang to laugh and declare, “What a great plan!”

And since they were going to the capital anyway, Wu Yong suggested that they should send three other guys -- one to buy artillery supplies for Ling Zhen, and the other two to fetch his family like they



had promised. Hearing this, Ling Zhen's fellow prisoner-turned-chieftain Peng (2) Qi (3) raised his hand and said hey don't forget about my family. So Song Jiang dispatched Yang Lin the Multicolored Leopard to fetch Peng Qi's family, while Xu (2) Yong (3) the Sick Tiger was sent to the capital, disguised as a medicine peddler, to fetch Ling Zhen's family. Li (3) Yun (2) the Green-Eyed Tiger, disguised as a merchant, would accompany Xue Yong to the capital to purchase artillery supplies. Tang Long, meanwhile, would set out with Yue (4) He (2) the Iron Whistle and meet up with Xue Yong. Shi Qian the thief, meanwhile, would go on ahead of everyone.

Before Tang Long left, he drew up the design for the barbed spear, and the chieftain Lei Heng, who was a blacksmith before he became a constable, was put in charge of overseeing production. All the chieftains going on the mission then set out, and the next day Dai Zong the Magic Traveler was dispatched to conduct recon.

We'll jump on ahead and catch up with Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum. Once he made his way to the capital, he found lodging at an inn. The next day, he went into the city and got directions to Xu Ning's home. He first took a look at the front door, and then swung around to check out the back door. The house was surrounded by a high wall. Within the walls, he saw two cute small buildings. Next to it stood a tall, decorated column.

After studying the layout for a while, Shi Qian knocked on a neighbor's door and asked, "Is Instructor Xu at home?"

"He won't be back until evening, and then he has guard duty in the palace at 5 a.m.," the helpful neighbor told the random stranger who just showed up at his door.

Shi Qian thanked him for the information and then returned to his inn. He grabbed his tools, stashed them under his clothes, and told the clerk at the inn, "I probably won't be back tonight. Please keep an eye on my room."

“Sure thing. Don’t worry,” the clerk assured him.

Shi Qian then went back into the city and got some dinner. After that, he made his way back to Xu Ning’s house. He looked around but couldn’t find a good place to wait near the house. As darkness descended on this moonless winter night, he spotted a big cypress tree behind a temple. He easily climbed to the top of the tree, sat down on a big branch and waited as he kept an eye on Xu Ning’s residence.

Soon, he saw Xu Ning return and go inside his house. The two soldiers who accompanied him then came back out with lanterns, locked the front door behind them, and went home. Just then, the drum that signaled the time sounded, indicating it was 7 p.m. The night became chilly, the moon and stars remained hidden, and a light frost began to form.

Shi Qian now silently climbed down from the tree and sneaked to the back door. With little effort, he scaled the high wall and landed in the courtyard within. He tiptoed over to outside the kitchen. Inside, under the light of lanterns, two maids were busy cleaning up. Shi Qian then scaled the decorative column and climbed onto the eave of a corner of the roof. There, he lay down and looked into a window on the upper floor.

Xu Ning was sitting with his wife next to a stove for warmth. In his lap, he held a young boy of six or seven. Shi Qian then fixed his gaze on the bedroom, and sure enough, hanging from the beam was a big leather box. On the door to the room hung a set of bow and arrows and a short broadsword, and there was a clothing rack with various colored outfits.

Just then, Xu Ning called out for one of the maids. “Plum Fragrance, come fold these clothes for me.”

One of the maids immediately came up. On a long sideboard table, she folded a purple embroidered robe, an official tunic with green lining trimmed at the bottom by multi-colored embroidered flounces, a colored silk neckerchief, a red-and-green belt sash, and several handkerchiefs. She wrapped all these in

a bundle, along with a yellow kerchief packet that contained a golden sash, from which two otter tails dangled. She then placed this bundle above the stove.

By now, it was after 9, and Xu Ning was getting ready for bed.

“Are you on guard duty in the palace tomorrow morning?” his wife asked.

“Tomorrow his majesty is visiting the Auspicious Dragon Hall, so I have to get up at 5 a.m. to attend him,” Xu Ning said.

His wife now told one of the maids, “The master needs to get up at 5 a.m. tomorrow to go on guard duty. You two get up at 3 a.m. to make hot water and prepare breakfast.”

All this while, Shi Qian was hanging out on the roof, watching them like a hawk. He thought to himself, “The armor must be in that leather box. I could take it in the middle of the night, but if they raise the alarm early, then I won’t be able to get out of the city tomorrow. Let me wait until 5 a.m.”

Soon, Xu Ning, his wife, and their son were all in bed. The two maids also laid out their bedrolls outside their door. There was only a single night lamp lit on the table in the room. All five members of the family were soon sound asleep, especially the two maids, who had been working all day.

Now, Shi Qian silently slipped down from the roof. He pulled out a hollow reed, poked it through the paper window, took aim, and with one huff blew out the lamp. It was now pitch black in the room. And then, he waited.

When 3 a.m. rolled around, Xu Ning got up and called for the maids to get up and heat up water. The two maids yawned and dragged themselves up groggily. Then they noticed it was pitch black.

“Hey the light is out,” they said.

“Then hurry up and get a light from the back. What are you waiting for?” Xu Ning told them.

The two maids opened the door at the top of the staircase and walked downstairs. Shi Qian heard them coming. With a quick leap, he scaled the column and hid in the shadows beside the rear door. As one of the maids opened the rear door, walked out, and opened the gate in the courtyard, Shi Qian quickly slipped into the kitchen and hid under the table.

A minute later, that maid had relit the lamp. She then went to the kitchen and lit the stove. The other maid went back upstairs with a charcoal brazier. Soon, the water was boiling, so the maids brought it up to Xu Ning. He washed up and told the maids to bring up some warm wine. They did so, along with some meat and steamed buns. Xu Ning ate and told the maids to also bring some food to the orderly who was waiting for him outside. He then walked downstairs, told his orderly to eat, and then strapped on his bundle, took his golden lance, and left for work. One of the maids saw him out with a lamp.

While their backs were turned, Shi Qian crawled out from under the kitchen table and slipped up the stairs, climbed a lattice wall onto the main beam and crouched on it. By now, the two maids were coming back inside. They shut the door to the building, blew out the lamp, came back upstairs, disrobed, and went back to bed to catch a little more sleep before launching into another long day of labor.

Once he heard that they were both sound asleep, Shi Qian took out his hollow reed and again blew out the night lamp. With the room once again enveloped in darkness, he gently untied the leather box from the beam. He was just about to climb down when suddenly, Xu Ning's wife heard some movement and asked the maids, "What is that noise coming from the beam?"

Thinking quickly, Shi Qian made a few squeaks.

"Mistress, it's just mice," one of the maids mumbled. "They're fighting and making noise."

Oh ok, just a few plague rats hanging around our house. Nothing to worry about. Xu Ning and the maids all drifted back to sleep. Now, Shi Qian silently slid down from the ceiling, slowly opened the door at the top of the stairs, tiptoed down, opened the outer door, and slipped out of the house. He headed

to one of the gates leading out of the city. By now, the city gates were already open, since there were people who had to leave on guard duty. Shi Qian mixed in with a group and slipped out.

So part 1 of the plan had come to fruition. The armor was in hand. How will the bandits now lure Xu Ning to their stronghold? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Xu Ning has a ... umm ... chance encounter with a long lost relative. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!