

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 81.

Last time, the Liangshan bandits had suffered a resounding defeat against the chain-linked cavalry under the command of the general Huyan (1,2) Zhuo (2). But then one of their chieftains, Tang (1) Long (2) the blacksmith, said that the cavalry could be countered by barbed spears, but that only a cousin of his had the know-how to use that weapon. This cousin was named Xu (2) Ning (2) the Golden Lancer, and he was a military instructor in the capital, in other words, a respectable, law-abiding citizen who would never consent to help bandits. But our heroes were like, yeah, we've heard that before. Let's trick, I mean, talk him into joining us.

To do so, they sent their master thief, Shi (2) Qian (1), to go steal Xu Ning's family heirloom, a suit of fine armor so dear to Xu Ning that he hung it from the ceiling in his bedroom. As we rejoin the narrative, Shi Qian had just absconded with said armor and made his way out of the capital, while Xu Ning was off on guard duty for the emperor.

As the sun rose, so did the two maids in Xu Ning's household. They noticed that all the doors in the house were open. They panicked and immediately started checking to see if anything was missing. Everything seemed to be accounted for. They then went upstairs and told Xu Ning's wife, "For some reason the doors are all open, but nothing seems to be missing."

Xu Ning's wife suddenly remembered something. "Last night we heard sounds from the ceiling beams. You said it was mice fighting. Quick, go check the armor."

A second later, the maids started moaning in lament, and Xu Ning's wife panicked as well.

"Hurry, send someone to the palace to tell the master. Ask him to come home soon," she said.

So they sent three or four messengers in a row, but all of them came back and said that Xu Ning was by the emperor's side and the imperial guard was keeping watch outside the palace, so nobody could go in. All they could do now was wait for Xu Ning to come home. As the hours passed, Xu Ning's wife and maids were consumed with worry.

Finally, around dusk Xu Ning came home, and before he even went inside his house, one of his neighbors flagged him down and told him, "Your house has been burglarized. Your wife has been waiting for you."

Xu Ning was taken aback and hurried inside. The maids met him at the front door and said, "Master, when you left home around 5 a.m., a thief slipped in and took only one thing -- the leather box hanging from the ceiling beam."

Xu Ning went ah crap! "We can lose everything else, but that armor has been passed down through my family for four generations and had never been lost," he said. "Someone once offered me 30,000 strings of coins for it, but I couldn't bear to part with it. I wanted to save it in case I need to wear it into battle one day. I was worried something might happen to it, so I hung it from the rafters. Many people have asked to just have one look at it, and I just told them I don't have it anymore. If word gets out about this, I'm going to be a laughingstock. And now it's lost. What should I do?!"

All night long, Xu Ning tossed and turned. "Whoever took the armor must have known about it and came specifically for it," he said to his wife.

"I think the thief must have already been in the house when the light went out last night," his wife said. "It must be someone who wanted your armor and offered to buy it. When you refused, they must have hired a master thief to come steal it. You should have people ask around quietly to find out where it is, and then decide what to do. Don't disturb the grass and alert the snake."

When dawn approached, Xu Ning got up and just sat around the house brooding. Around breakfast time, someone knocked on his front door. His orderly went to answer the door and then came back and said, "It's someone named Tang Long. He said he's the son of the garrison commander at Yanan (2,1) Prefecture."

Xu Ning quickly invited his visitor in, and Tang Long immediately kneeled and bowed to Xu Ning and asked, "Brother, I hope all is well."

Xu Ning helped him up and said, "I heard that my uncle had passed away. But because of my duties and the great distance to Yanan, I could not attend his funeral, and I had no word on your whereabouts. Where have you been? What brings you here?"

"It's a long story," Tang Long said. "After my father died, my luck took a turn for the worse and I drifted all over. Right now, I have come from Shandong Province to see you."

Xu Ning asked him to sit and then arranged for wine and food to welcome him. Tang Long now took out two ingots of gold weighing 20 taels. He handed them to Xu Ning and said, "When my father passed, he left these and instructed me to give them to you. I had no one that I trusted, so I had not sent them. I've made the trip here specifically to give them to you."

"Uncle was so good to think of me, and I didn't even tend to him in any way," Xu Ning sighed. "How can I repay his kindness?!"

"Don't say that, brother," Tang Long told him. "When my father was alive, he always talked about your martial prowess. He lamented that he could not see you because of the great distance, so he left these for you as a memento."

Xu Ning thanked Tang Long for the gift and treated him to wine. As they were drinking, Xu Ning wore a big frown on his face. Seeing this, Tang Long asked, "Brother, you look a bit unhappy. What's bothering you?"

"[Sigh] It's a long story, brother. I was burglarized last night."

"What did you lose?"

"Nothing except that goose-feather armor called Lion's Fur that was passed down to me from my forefathers. That's why I'm unhappy."

“I’ve seen that armor of yours,” Tang Long said. “It’s unrivaled, and my father praised it to no end. Where were you keeping it? How did it get stolen?”

“I put it in a leather box and hung it from the main beam in my bedroom. I don’t when that thief sneaked in and made off with it.”

“What does the box look like?” Tang Long asked.

“It’s a red sheepskin box, and the armor inside is wrapped in a fragrant quilt made of silk.”

“A red sheepskin box?!” Tang Long said with surprise. “Does it have cloud head scepters stitched in white thread on the outside, with a lion playing with an embroidered ball in the middle?”

“Brother, where did you see it?!” Xu Ning asked.

“Last night, I was about 10 miles outside the city, drinking in a village tavern. I saw a dark, skinny man with sharp eyes, and he was carrying that box on his shoulder pole. I wondered what was in the box, so I asked him as I was leaving, and he said, ‘It used to hold armor, but now it’s just storing some random clothes.’ That must be him. I noticed that he was limping. Why don’t we go chase him down?”

“If we can catch him, then it would be a gift from heaven!” Xu Ning exclaimed.

“Then let’s not delay. Let’s go right now,” Tang Long said.

So Xu Ning quickly changed into some hemp sandals, strapped a short broadsword around his waist, and carried a long-handle broadsword in his hand. He and Tang Long rushed out of the east gate and rushed down the road.

After a while, they came across a tavern. In an inconspicuous corner of the front wall, there was a little white circle.

“Hey, let’s grab a quick bowl of wine,” Tang Long suggested. “And we can ask if they had seen the thief.”

So they went inside and sat down, and Tang Long asked the tavern keeper, “Sir, have you seen a sharp-eyed, dark, skinny man come through here, carrying a red sheepskin box?”

“Yes,” the tavern keeper said. “A man like that came through here last night with a red sheepskin box. He was limping.”

“Hear that, brother?” Tang Long said to Xu Ning. “What do you think?”

Xu Ning could only sit in silence. They drank a quick bowl, paid the tab, and got back on the road. After a while, they came across an inn. Again, in an inconspicuous corner of the front wall, there was a white circle.

Tang Long stopped and said, “Brother, I can’t walk anymore. Let’s stop here for the night and resume our chase tomorrow.”

“But I’m a government official. If I don’t report for duty, my superior will not like it. What should I do?”

“Don’t worry about that. Your wife will come up with a good excuse for you.”

Xu Ning decided that the family heirloom was worth calling in sick for, so they stayed at the inn that night. They asked the clerk at the inn whether he had seen the thief, and the clerk replied, “Last night a sharp-eyed, dark, skinny man stayed here. He slept in and didn’t leave until mid-morning. He asked for directions to Shandong Province.”

“Sounds like he’s within reach,” Tang Long said. “If we get up at 3 a.m., we can catch up with him for sure. Once we catch him, then we’ll know the whereabouts of the armor.”

So they got up at 3 a.m. and left the inn. Along the way, whenever they came across an establishment with a white circle on the wall, Tang Long stopped in to buy food or wine and asked if they had seen the thief, and every place said yes, that guy just came through here. All the while, Xu Ning was itching to get his armor back, so he just followed Tang Long’s lead.

As evening was approaching, they came upon an ancient temple. In front of the temple, they saw none other than Shi Qian sitting under a tree.

“Great! Isn’t that your box under the tree?” Tang Long exclaimed.

Xu Ning stomped over, grabbed Shi Qian by his collar, and roared, "You've got some gall! Why did you steal my armor?!"

"Hey, hey, stop shouting," Shi Qian said. "Yes, I stole your armor. What of it?"

"What of it?!! You damn rude scoundrel!!" Xu Ning barked.

"Why don't you take a look at the box first?" Shi Qian said.

Tang Long opened the box and it was empty.

"What did you do with my armor?!" Xu Ning barked at Shi Qian again.

"Ok, listen to me," Shi Qian said. "My name is Zhang the First. I'm from Taian (4,1) Prefecture.

There's a rich man there who wants to become acquainted with Old General Zhong. He knew that you had a suit of goose-feather armor that you refuse to sell, so he hired me and a partner named Li (3) the Third to go steal it. He promised us 10,000 strings of coins. But I fell from your rafters and hurt my leg and couldn't walk, so I let Li the Third take the armor and go on ahead, leaving the empty box with me. Even if you drag me into court and they beat me to death, I would not give up the name of my client. But if you keep the authorities out of this, then I can take you to go get your armor back."

Xu Ning thought about it for a good while but could not make up his mind about what to do. Tang Long now said, "Brother, he can't escape, so let's just go with him to get your armor. If he fails to produce the armor, then we can still take him to court."

Xu Ning agreed, so the three of them now set out. It was getting late, so they stopped at an inn. The next morning, they resumed their journey, and all along the way, Shi Qian kept buying them food and wine to apologize. In this way, another day passed.

The next day, they again hit the road, and Xu Ning was getting quite impatient by now and wondering if he'd ever see his armor again. As they were walking, they came across an empty cart hitched to three or four horses on the side of the road. Behind the cart was the driver, and a merchant

stood to one side. When the merchant saw Tang Long walking by, he immediately fell to his knees and kowtowed.

“Brother, what are you doing here?” Tang Long asked.

“I was doing business in Zhengzhou (4,1) Prefecture and on my way back to Taian (4,1) Prefecture,” the merchant replied.

“Perfect! The three of us need a lift, and we just so happen to be on our way to Taian Prefecture as well,” Tang Long said.

“Oh yeah, I can definitely take the three of you.”

Tang Long was delighted and introduced the merchant to Xu Ning. Xu Ning asked who this was, and Tang Long said, “I met him when I was offering a prayer at a monastery in Taian last year. His name is Li (3) Yong (2), and he’s a very honorable man.”

“In that case, since this Zhang the First is struggling to walk, let’s take a ride,” Xu Ning said.

So the three of them, along with the merchant, took a seat in the cart, and the driver started the cart down the road. Along the way, Xu Ning asked Shi Qian for the name of his client, but Shi Qian kept obfuscating, only telling him, “It’s a well-known Mr. Guo (1).”

“Do you know a Mr. Guo in Taian?” Xu Ning asked the merchant.

“Oh yeah,” the merchant said. “He’s a wealthy man and loves to rub elbows with government officials, and he keeps a whole bevy of hangers-on.”

Hearing this, Xu Ning felt a bit better, figuring that since there’s a reputable man at the heart of this, he should be able to track down his armor. Along the way, the merchant Li Yong (2) started chatting about martial arts, and he also sang a few tunes. And in this way, another day passed. I sure hope Xu Ning’s wife came up with a really good excuse for why he hasn’t reported to work for three days.

Later in the day, the merchant now asked the driver to go buy some meat and wine. The driver returned with a gourd filled with wine. The merchant poured out a cup and offered it to Xu Ning first. Xu Ning accepted it and drank it all in one gulp. The merchant then told the driver to pour another cup, but as he did so, the driver's hand slipped, and the gourd fell to the ground, spilling all the wine.

While the merchant cursed the driver and told him to get more wine, Xu Ning suddenly started to drool out of the corner of his mouth, and a second later, he collapsed in the cart.

Slowly, Xu Ning blinked and opened his eyes. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, and he had no idea where he was. All around him, though, stood strange men, along with his cousin Tang Long. He startled awake, sat up, and asked Tang Long what the hell was going on.

"Brother, hear me," Tang Long explained. "I heard that Song Jiang was recruiting heroes from all over the realm, so I became sworn brothers with Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and joined the gang. But now, we are under siege by Huyan Zhuo. We had no answer for his chain-linked cavalry, so I offered up the barbed spear, but only you know how to use it. So we came up with a scheme. We sent Shi Qian to go steal your armor, and then I went to lure you onto the road. After that, Yue (4) He (2) the Iron Whistle met us, disguised as the merchant. When we were passing near Liangshan, we drugged you and invited you here to be a chieftain."

Uhh, thanks a lot, cous.

"Brother, you've ruined me!" Xu Ning said.

Song Jiang now came forward with wine cup in hand and said apologetically, "We are only temporarily occupying this marsh. We are waiting for the court to grant us amnesty so we can do our utmost to serve the country. We have not dared to horde treasure, slaughter innocents or commit any dishonorable deed. I hope you can see the truth and join us in delivering justice on heaven's behalf."



Next came Lin Chong the Panther Head, who was a good friend of Xu Ning's when they were both instructors in the capital. Lin Chong said, "Brother, I have been here for a good while, too. I have often sung your praises to my brothers. Please do not refuse us."

Xu Ning turned to Tang Long and said, "Brother, you tricked me into coming here, but my wife and son will no doubt be arrested by the authorities. What of them?"

Song Jiang was like, oh no worries, we got that covered as part of our generous family-relocation benefit package. Then, the other top chieftains, Chao Gai, Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng, all came to apologize and apply peer pressure, and eventually Xu Ning caved. It's not like he had any choice anyway. They then prepared for the usual welcome feast.

Within 10 days, all the other chieftains they had dispatched had returned. Yang Lin the Multicolor Leopard came back with the family of Peng (2) Qi (3), the former enemy general turned chieftain. Xue (1) Yong (3) the Sick Tiger came back with the family of Ling (2) Zhen (4), another former enemy general turned chieftain. Li (3) Yun (2) the Green-Eyed Tiger came back with five cartloads of artillery supplies. And a few days later, Dai Zong the Magic Traveler and Tang Long came back with Xu Ning's family.

A surprised Xu Ning asked his wife how she came to be there, and she told him, "When you didn't come back to report for duty, I pushed some bribes and just said that you were sick and laid up in bed, so they didn't come to summon you. Then, cousin Tang Long came back with your armor and said, 'We got the armor, but brother Xu got sick on the way and is near death at an inn. He wants to see you and his son right away.' So he put me in a cart and drove us here."

Hearing this, Xu Ning's reaction was, it's great to see you, hon, but where's my armor?

"Brother, you left my armor back at home!" he said to Tang Long.

Tang Long laughed and said, "Brother, cheer up. After I helped your wife into the cart, I went back and fetched armor. I also tricked the two maids into packing up your valuables. It's all here."

"Alas, we can't go back to the capital anymore," Xu Ning lamented.

At that, Tang Long laughed and was like, yeah, you don't know how right you are.

"Brother, let me tell you something else," he said with a smirk. "On my way back, I came across a group of merchants. I put on your armor, smeared my face with soot, and then I robbed those merchants and told them I was you. Sooner or later the authorities in the capital will be calling for your arrest."

Uhhh, come again?

"Brother, you've really ruined me!" Xu Ning said.

Chao Gai and Song Jiang now apologized again, saying, "If we didn't do this, how could we get you to agree to stay?"

Yeah, I know, guys. That's kind of the whole point here -- your involuntary recruitment! But it was too late for that, so Xu Ning, like so many before him, stayed and joined the gang in the name of honor. He settled his family into some quarters, and then got down to discussing with the other chieftains about how to defeat the chain-linked cavalry.

By now, production was complete on the barbed spears, so the chieftains asked Xu Ning to demonstrate how to wield it. Xu Ning told them to select some stout lackeys to learn the weapon. While everyone gathered in the Hall of Honor, Xu Ning put on a show, drawing compliments from everyone.

Xu Ning now told them, "If you're using this weapon on horseback, you must swing from the waist. Advance in seven moves -- three hooks and four parries. Then, one stab and one cleave. A total of nine changes. If you're on foot, it's best to advance eight steps and parry four times. This will open the door. At the 12th step, change. At the 16th, turn completely around, alternately hooking and stabbing. At the 24th, push your opponent's weapon up, then down. ... [FADE OUT MIDWAY THROUGH THIS]

After a stirring training montage covering a couple weeks, about 700 lackeys had become skilled users of the barbed spear. Song Jiang and the other chieftains were delighted, and they now prepared for a rematch against Huyan Zhuo.

On the other side, Huyan Zhuo had been leading his army to the edge of the marsh every day to challenge for battle, but the outlaws refused to answer the challenge. Instead, the enemy's navy kept a tight watch on the beaches, and they had set up hidden spikes in the water to prevent Huyan Zhuo from crossing the marsh on boats. So Huyan Zhuo couldn't get close to the bandits' lair.

One day, as dawn was breaking, Huyan was sitting in his command tent when his scouts rushed back and reported that the bandits were banging war drums and chanting war cries around the marsh. Huyan Zhuo ordered his vanguard general Han (2) Tao (1) to go check it out, while he himself suited up and rode out with his army.

When they arrived at the marsh's edge, they saw that Song Jiang was leading a large force on the other side of the water. As Huyan Zhuo ordered his army to line up for battle, the vanguard general Han Tao came over and told him, "There is a battalion of enemy infantry to the south. We don't know their numbers."

"Who cares about their numbers," Huyan Zhuo scoffed. "Just run them over with the chain-linked cavalry!"

Han Tao now rode out with 500 men to conduct more recon. He saw another enemy force in the southeast. He was just about to send some men to investigate when more Liangshan banners rose up in the southwest. He reported back to Huyan Zhuo that there were now three enemy forces to the south.

"Those knaves are holding back instead of coming out to fight; there must be deception afoot," Huyan Zhuo said.

Before he finished talking, a cannon shot rang out from the north.

"This must be the doing of that damn Ling (2) Zhen (4)," Huyan Zhuo cursed. "He must have turned brigand and taught the bandits how to use cannons!"

And now, three more enemy forces appeared from the north.

“This must be the bandits’ trick,” Huyan Zhuo said to Han Tao. “Let’s divide up forces. I’ll go attack the enemies to the north, and you attack the ones to the south.”

They were just about to divide their army when another four battalions of outlaws rose up in the west. Huyan Zhuo was getting worried now, but his trouble didn’t stop there. A string of cannon shots rang out from the north, landing on a nearby hill. That was followed by 49 shots from Mother-and-Son cannons. Even though Huyan Zhuo’s men weren’t hit by any of the shots, it was enough to throw them into disarray.

Huyan Zhuo and Han Tao now ordered their troops to charge the enemy, who were all on foot. But all 10 battalions of enemy infantry turned and fled whenever Huyan Zhuo’s men approached them. Huyan Zhuo was getting pissed, so he led his troops and charged northward toward Song Jiang. Song Jiang’s men now turned scattered into the tall grass. Behind them, Huyan Zhuo drove his chain-linked cavalry forward, trying to stampede right over them.

As the cavalry dashed into the tall grass, they suddenly heard a loud whistle. The next thing you know, countless barbed spears poked out from the grass and started tripping up horses and cutting off their legs. As the horses on the edges fell, the horses in the center fell into chaos, since they were all linked together. In the blink of an eye, the cavalry disappeared, and the bandits were busying themselves with taking prisoners in the tall grass.

Seeing his best weapon get taken out of commission, Huyan Zhuo turned and rode toward the south to find Han Tao. And now, Fire-and-Wind cannon shots rained down on his troops, while all the enemy infantry turned stopped fleeing and became the hunter instead.

With all their chain-linked cavalry gone, Huyan Zhuo and Han Tao rode around looking to gather up what remained of their forces and find a way out. They saw a few paths that were covered with enemy banners, so they did not dare to go that way. Instead, they rode toward the northwest. They had not gone two miles when their path was blocked by a squad of bandits, led by the brothers Mu (4) Hong (2)

the Unrestrained and Mu (4) Chun (1) the Little Restrained, who were shouting, “Defeated scoundrels, stop!”

Huyan Zhuo was pissed and he rode forward, brandishing his twin steel rods. After just a few exchanges though, the Mu brothers retreated. Huyan Zhuo was wary of a trap, so he did not give chase and instead just kept going north along the main road.

Soon, another group of bandits appeared, led by the hunter brothers Xie (4) Zhen (1) and Xie (4) Bao (3), each wielding a trident. Huyan Zhuo exchanged blows with them for five bouts, and they too turned and ran, while Huyan Zhuo kept going.

After less than a mile, though, 24 barbed spears suddenly poked out from both sides of the road and swept toward Huyan Zhuo along the ground. Huyan Zhuo was in no mood to fight, so he turned and rode toward the northeast instead. There, he was met by the husband-and-wife odd couple of Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger and Hu Sanniang the Ten Feet of Steel. There was nowhere else to turn, so Huyan Zhuo charged forward and broke through the enemy lines. The bandits gave chase for a bit, but Huyan Zhuo managed to outpace them and kept riding toward the northeast. Eventually, his pursuers gave up the chase, but by now, Huyan Zhuo was all by his lonesome.

To see what Huyan Zhuo will do after this devastating defeat, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we catch up with a few heroes we haven’t heard from in a long time. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!