

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 131. Last time, Song Jiang had successfully sacked Muzhou (4,1) Prefecture and was waiting on Lu Junyi's army to rendezvous with him before launching the final assault against the rebels. But Lu Junyi was having problems. He was leading a march through the mountains to attack Shezhou (4,1) Prefecture, but the rebels at Yuling (4,2) Pass set an ambush that killed six of his chieftains in one go. So he tried a different tact, sending Shi Qian, the Flea of a Drum, to go look for a backway around the pass.

Shi Qian got a helpful tip from an old monk in a mountain monastery, and he reported back to Lu Junyi, who was delighted and immediately consulted with his strategist Zhu Wu.

"If that route exists, then it's perfect, and Yuling Pass is within reach," Zhu Wu said. "We need to send another person to go with Shi Qian to carry out an important mission."

Shi Qian asked what the mission was, and Zhu Wu told him, "The most important thing is to set off a signal blast. So bring explosives and firestarters with you, sneak around to the back of the enemy base, and set off the signal blast. That would be your great contribution."

"If that's all, then I don't need anyone else to go with me," Shi Qian said. "And even if you send someone else, they won't be able to climb walls like I can, and it would slow me down. But while I'm taking care of that, how would you get close to the front of the pass?"

"That's easy enough, Zhu Wu said. "The enemy can only use their ambush once. I will not even care whether they have any ambush or not. Whenever we approach woods on our way, we will burn them down. That will foil any ambush."

So Shi Qian packed his stuff and took his leave. Lu Junyi told him to also bring 20 taels of silver and a bushel of rice as gifts for the old monk, and sent a soldier to carry those items. That afternoon, Shi Qian and the soldier returned to the mountain monastery and gave the old monk the presents. Shi Qian then dismissed the soldier and asked the old monk to have his young acolyte lead him to the backroad around the pass.

The old monk suggested he wait until late at night to avoid detection, and prepared dinner for Shi Qian. Then, that night, the monk ordered his acolyte to show Shi Qian the way. The two of them left the monastery and traversed a couple miles of mountainous terrain under the faint glow of the moon. Eventually, they arrived at a spot with some treacherous looking terrain, but they saw in the distance the start of a narrow trail. The trail, however, had been blocked off by a pile of giant boulders that were stacked up like a wall.

“General, you can see the path from here,” the young acolyte said. “It’s right by that wall of boulders. Go over that wall and you will see the main road.”

Shi Qian now sent the acolyte back and proceeded alone. Using his nimble skills, he made short work of the wall of boulders, easily climbing over to the other side. He then headed east. As he walked, he saw woods in the distance enveloped in red. That was Lu Junyi’s army, advancing in full force and burning every shrub along the way. They had sent about 500 soldiers on ahead, cleaning up the bodies of their slain comrades along the way while setting fire to the hillsides to flush out any ambush.

When word of this reached the rebel commander of the pass, Pang (2) Wanchun (4,1), he said, “That’s the enemy’s scheme to foil our ambush. We just need to hold this pass; they will never be able to make it through.”

So, as the Song army approached, Pang Wanchun and his two officers prepared their defenses on the front side of the pass. On the back side, meanwhile, Shi Qian was sneaking up toward the pass. He climbed up a big tree and hid in its canopy. Looking down, he could see Pang Wanchun and his officers getting ready to fight.

Soon, the chieftains Lin Chong the Panther Head and Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs had arrived at the foot of the pass, and they hurled insults at the rebels. The rebels were just about to fire their arrows and crossbows, but suddenly, a thunderous blast shot up into the night sky from behind their position. When

they turned around, they saw that the back of the pass was on fire. Shi Qian had found two piles of hay and set them ablaze, and then shot off the signal blast.

The sight of fire from behind them took the fight out of the rebels. They fell into disarray and scattered, forgetting about the enemy army at the front. The rebel commander Pang Wanchun and his officers rushed to put out the fire in the back, but just then, Shi Qian set off even more explosives from the rooftops, which shook the buildings and scared the rebels into fleeing. Shi Qian then shouted from the darkness, "Ten thousand Song soldiers have already crossed over the pass! Surrender now and you will be spared!"

That left Pang Wanchun stunned and stamping his foot. His officers were literally scared stiff and could not move. By now, the Song army had charged up the mountain on the front side, and they poured into the pass, with everyone looking to get a piece of the rebels. They ended up pursuing the rebels for a good 10 miles out the back side of the pass. In the chaos, they captured both of Pang Wanchun's lieutenants and most of his soldiers. Only Pang Wanchun himself managed to escape.

And now, it was once again retribution time. After rewarding Shi Qian, Lu Junyi cut out the hearts of the two captured rebel lieutenants and sacrificed them to the six chieftains who had been slain by the rebel ambush. They also collected those chieftains' bodies and buried them on the pass, while cremating the other Song soldiers who were killed. The next day, Lu Junyi sent an urgent report to Military Governor Zhang, and then resumed his march, advancing all the way to the foot of the Shezhou prefectural seat.

This city was overseen by Fang Hou (4), the uncle of the rebel emperor Fang La. He also had two ministers helping him. One was named Wang (2) Yin (2), and the other Gao (1) Yü (4). They commanded more than a dozen officers and 20,000 troops. The minister Wang Yin used to be a stonemason in the local mountains, and he was skilled with a steel spear and rode a fine steed called Mountain Flyer that

could traverse mountains and water as if on flat land. The other minister, Gao Yü (4) was also a local and wielded a segmented spear. Both of them also were a little bit literate, and that was good enough for the rebel emperor Fang La to appoint them to high ministerial posts and give them oversight of important military affairs.

That day, the rebel commander from Yuling Pass, Pang Wanchun, fled back to Shezhou Prefecture and went to the palace to report to the imperial uncle Fang Mou (4).

“Some locals helped guide the enemy around the pass along some backroads,” Pang Wangchun said. “That made my army scatter and made it impossible to hold the pass.”

Fang Mou was irate. “That Yuling Pass was the most critical layer of defense for Shezhou Prefecture,” he scolded Pang Wanchun. “Now that the Song forces have occupied it, they will be here sooner or later. How will we be able to fight them?!”

Minister Wang said, “My lord, please restrain your thunderous rage. As the ancients said, ‘Failure in battle should not be censured. Heaven gives perfection to no one.’ Please pardon General Pang (2) for now, and send him out at the head of an army with the decree that he must repel the enemy. If he fails again, then you can punish him for both failures.”

Fang Mou (4) agreed and sent Pang Wanchun back out with 5,000 men. As it so happened, Lu Junyi was sending his forces in to attack the city, so both sides lined up for battle. Pang Wanchun rode out to challenge for combat, and the call was answered by the chieftain Ou (1) Peng (2), the Golden Wings Brushing Against the Clouds. The two traded blows for just a few bouts before Pang Wanchun turned and fled. Ou Peng wanted to notch the first merit in the siege on the city, so he gave chase.

Now, remember that Pang Wanchun was a renowned archer, so his flight was just a ploy. Sure enough, he suddenly turned and fired a shot. But Ou Peng was watching for that, and he was skilled enough that he actually reached up and snatched the arrow out of the air as it approached.

Having foiled the sneak attack, Ou Peng now gave chase again. But he did not count on Pang Wanchun also being skilled at rapid-fire shooting. So even though he snagged the first shot, he didn't expect a second shot. As Pang Wanchun's bowstring twanged again, the second arrow struck Ou Peng, killing him and sending him off his horse.

Pang Wanchun now led his forces on the offensive, and the Song army fell back in defeat, retreating 10 miles before they were able to regroup and pitch camp. When they did a head count, they found that they had lost another chieftain, as Zhang Qing the Gardener was killed in the chaos. His wife, the chieftain Sun Erniang the Female Yaksha, had some soldiers locate his body and cremate it, while she wept bitterly.

A disheartened Lu Junyi now huddled with his strategist Zhu Wu and said, "We lost two more officers in today's attack, what should we do?"

Zhu Wu told him, "Victory and defeat are common in war, and life and death in battle are preordained. The rebels are no doubt full of themselves after seeing us retreat today. Tonight, they will come to raid our camp. Let's deploy our forces and lay down an ambush."

Inside the city, the two rebel ministers and the general Pang Wanchun were indeed advising the imperial uncle Fang Mou to order a night raid. Fang Mou said, you guys figure it out and act as you see fit, so it was decided that Minister Gao Yü and Pang Wanchun would lead the raiding party, while Minister Wang Yin (2) would stay to defend the city.

That night, Gao Yü and Pang Wanchun led their army in silence and approached the Song camp. As they got near, they saw that the camp gates were open, so they did not dare to charge in lightly. Instead, they watched and listened. In the beginning, they could hear the watch drums being sounded regularly and right on time. But as the night dragged on, the beating of the drums were getting more and more lackadaisical.

Gao Yü now said, "We cannot go in."

"Why not?" Pang Wanchun asked.

"You can hear their watch drums getting erratic. That's obviously a trap," Gao Yü explained.

"Your excellency is mistaken," Pang Wanchun disagreed. "The enemy was routed today and are scared. They must be fatigued, and that's why their drums are erratic. There's no need to be paranoid. Just attack."

And that convinced Gao Yü. The two promptly ordered their men to charge into the camp. But when they poured into the heart of the camp, they did not see a single soul. Instead, they saw a few goats tied to a tree, and there were drumsticks tied to their hooves that beat some drums that were set out whenever the goats moved.

Recognizing a trap, the two rebel commanders tried to retreat, but a fire flared up inside the camp while Song forces rose up in every direction and swept in. When the two rebel commanders rode out of the camp gates, they ran into Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, who shouted for them to surrender. Gao Yü panicked and had no heart for battle. In that split second, Huyan Zhuo charged in and brought both of his steel staffs down on Gao Yü's head, crushing his skull.

Pang Wanchun, meanwhile, managed to flee from camp, but as he fled down a road, his horse was suddenly tripped up by the chieftain Tang (1) Long (2), who captured him alive and brought him back to the camp. When dawn broke, the Song officers regrouped after putting the rebel soldiers to flight, and Lu Junyi handed out rewards.

And yet, even amid this victory, there was cause for grief. The chieftain Ding (1) Desun (2,1) the Arrow-Struck Tiger, was dead. He wasn't killed in battle. Instead, he got bitten by a poisonous snake while traversing the mountain roads, and the poison acted quickly and killed him. Lu Junyi now cut open the prisoner Pang Wangchun and removed his heart as a sacrifice to all the chieftains he had killed, and sent his head to Military Governor Zhang.

The next day, Lu Junyi and his army again advanced on the city. This time, they saw the city gates open and the walls devoid of banners. The two chieftains leading the front column were Shan (4) Tinggui (2,4) the General of Sacred Water and Wei (4) Dingguo (4,2) the General of Holy Fire. They were eager to render some service, so they led their unit and charged straight into the city before Lu Junyi arrived with the main army.

Alas, they rode straight into a trap. The rebel minister Wang Yin (2), after last night's disastrous raid, had made it look like the rebel forces had abandoned the city and fled. But he had dug some deep, hidden trenches right inside the city gate. Shan Tinggui and Wei Dingguo were both more brawn-than-brain types and did not think to be on guard. As they galloped through the gates, they and their horses plunged into the trenches, and they were immediately besieged by rebels with long spears and arrows. And that was the end of those two chieftains.

Seeing the two chieftains meet their end, Lu Junyi became incensed. He ordered the soldiers in his front to carry chunks of dirt with them as they charged into the city. As they advanced, they first used the dirt to fill in the trenches, and then marched right over them to join the fight. They were so ferocious in their attack that the trenches ended up being filled by the bodies of rebel soldiers and horses.

As Lu Junyi galloped into the city, he ran into the overseer Fang Mou (4). Still fuming over the deaths of his chieftains, Lu Junyi needed just one bout to cut down Fang Mou. The rebel soldiers now fled out of the west gate, and the Song officers and soldiers spread out to kill and apprehend them.

In the midst of this chaos, the rebel minister Wang Yin was fleeing on horseback when he ran into the chieftain Li Yun (2) the Green-Eyed Tiger just outside the city, and the two went at each other. But Wang Yin had the advantage because Li Yun was on foot. As they approached each other, Wang Yin made his horse rear up and stomped on Li Yun, killing him instantly.

Another chieftain, Shi (2) Yong (3) the Stone General, saw this and rushed over. But Wang Yin's spear flashed this way and that, and Shi Yong was no match. Before long, Wang Yin ran him through with the spear.

But now, four chieftains rushed out from inside the city. These were Sun Li the Sick Yuchi, Huang Xin the Suppressor of Three Mountains, and the uncle-and-nephew tandem of Zou (1) Yuan (1) and Zou (1) Run (4). Wang Yin showed no sign of fear, however, as he put up a spirited fight against the four of them. But then, Lin Chong the Panther Head showed up, and the five chieftains together overpowered Wang Yin, killing him on the spot, cutting off his head, and delivering it to Lu Junyi.

By now, Lu Junyi had already set up headquarters in the palace. He posted notices to calm the civilians' fears and garrisoned his troops inside the city. He then sent word to Military Governor Zhang and to Song Jiang to discuss their rendezvous.

So all this time, Song Jiang had been waiting in Muzhou Prefecture. When he got word from Lu Junyi about the sack of Shezhou, it was accompanied by a casualty list totaling 13 chieftains. That sent Song Jiang into another round of grieving, and the strategist Wu Yong, sounding like a broken record by now, again told him, "Life and death are preordained for every person. There's no point in harming your own health over it. Please focus on the important matters of the state."

"That may be so," Song Jiang said, "but how can one not feel grief? The 108 of us were all listed on that stone tablet in heavenly script. Who would have thought that there would be so few of us left now? It's like losing my limbs!"

Wu Yong kept consoling Song Jiang and advised him to send a reply to Lu Junyi and arrange a date to advance on the final rebel stronghold, the imperial palace at Clear Stream County.



Speaking of which, let's now jump over to said rebel palace, where the rebel emperor Fang La was discussing military matters with his officials when he got word that Shezhou Prefecture had fallen and his uncle and two ministers were all killed. Oh and the enemy is on their way here from two directions.

Fang La was shocked and said to his officials, "You all have received rank and wealth from me. We have occupied territory and enjoyed riches together. But now Song Jiang's army is sweeping this way, and one city after another has fallen. Only Clear Stream County is left! Now they are coming here from two directions. How should we take them on?"

The left prime minister now said, "With Song Jiang's army bearing down, the palace will be hard to defend anyway. And we are short on troops and officers. If your majesty does not personally lead an army to fight the enemy, I worry our soldiers and generals will not give it their all."

Fang La concurred and decreed that all the officials of the court were to accompany him to the front line to fight Song Jiang. He appointed as the leader of the vanguard his nephew Fang Jie (2). This Fang Jie was the grandson of the imperial uncle who just got killed, so he was after revenge and wanted the job of being the vanguard general. He had been learning to fight since his youth and was very skilled with a halberd and possessed uncommon valor. He now led 15,000 imperial guard and 30-some officers and set out. His second-in-command was a general named Du (4) Wei (1), a former blacksmith and a confidant of Fang La's who fought on foot and wielded six throwing knives. Meanwhile, Fang La also appointed the drill instructor of the imperial guard to lead 10,000 men to face Lu Junyi's army.

While the rebels scrambled to mobilize, Song Jiang's forces were closing in on Clear Stream County on land and water. As they advanced, Wu Yong said to Song Jiang, "Fang La knows we are closing in. If he decides to flee and hide in the mountains, it will be hard to capture him. If we want to apprehend Fang La alive and take him back to the capital, we must have someone on the inside so we have someone who recognizes him and can find out where he's headed. Otherwise he will slip away."

Song Jiang replied, "In that case, we must use a fake surrender to plant someone on the inside. Previously, Chai Jin and Yan Qing went off to serve as spies, but we haven't heard anything from them. Who should we send this time?"

"Why don't we send Li Jun and the naval chieftains," Wu Yong suggested. "They can present Fang La with the grain in their ships to avoid suspicion. That Fang La is lowly, rustic sort. How can he not take them in when they bring him so much grain?"

Song Jiang agreed, and he sent Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to see Li Jun the River Dragon with instructions. Li Jun then told the two remaining Ruan brothers and the two Tong brothers to disguise themselves as boatmen. They took 60 grain ships and flew banners announcing that they were going to deliver grain to Fang La.

As they approached Clear Stream County along the river, they were met by rebel ships who started to fire arrows at them.

"Hold your arrows! I have something to say!" Li Jun shouted. "We are defectors and have come to offer grain to your great kingdom to help your soldiers. Please take us in!"

The rebels saw that Li Jun and company were unarmed, so they held off and sent someone over to question them and to inspect the ships. Upon seeing all the grain in the holds, they quickly informed Fang La's left prime minister, who summoned the defectors.

Li Jun went ashore and paid his respects to the left prime minister, who asked him for his identity and why he had come.

Li Jun told the prime minister his name and said, "I used to be a hero on the Sundown River and once rescued Song Jiang by raiding the execution grounds in Jiangzhou Prefecture. But now he has accepted the Song court's offer of amnesty, become the vanguard general, and forgotten all about our prior kindness to him, and he has repeatedly mocked me. Even though Song Jiang has occupied some of your cities, he has been losing brothers left and right. Yet he still doesn't know any better and is forcing us and

the navy to press on. I can't take this humiliation anymore, so I have brought you his grain ships and I am defecting to your great kingdom."

The left prime minister was convinced by that story, so he brought Li Jun to the palace to see Fang La. Fang La, surprisingly, also believed him and appointed Li Jun as his chief admiral, while the Ruan brothers and the Tong brothers were made vice admirals. They were told to oversee the ships at the rebel naval camp at Clear Stream County, with promises of even greater rewards once Fang La returned victorious from his battle against Song Jiang. Li Jun and company thanked him, and then handed over the grain from the ships.

Meanwhile, Song Jiang's front column, led by Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Hua Rong the Archer, Qin Ming the Thunderbolt, and Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard, had crossed into Clear Stream County and met the rebel vanguard led by Fang La's nephew Fang Jie (2). They lined up for battle, and Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt rode out to take on Fang Jie.

Fang Jie was in the prime of his youth and put up a vigorous fight, especially seeing how skillful Qin Ming was. The two men fought for 30-some bouts without a winner, and they were both getting really into it. But suddenly, a throwing knife came flying at Qin Ming's face, courtesy of Fang Jie's second-in-command, Du (4) Wei (1). Qin Ming quickly ducked to dodge the knife, but that provided all the opening Fang Jie needed. In the blink of an eye, his halberd found its mark, and Qin Ming fell dead to the ground.

So this was a huge loss for the Song forces, considering how fearsome Qin Ming had been in numerous prior battles. The Song soldiers used hooks to retrieve his body. When word of this got back to Song Jiang, he and everyone else were shocked. He arranged for a coffin for Qin Ming, while sending out more troops to take on the enemy.

Fang Jie, for his part, did not dare to charge into the enemy lines despite his victory. Instead, he just strutted around the front lines, shouting, "If there are any other men of valor in the Song ranks, come on out and fight!" When Song Jiang heard this, he rushed to the front lines to size up the enemy. Behind Fang Jie, he could see Fang La arriving with his forces. He was dressed in imperial regalia, or I guess bootleg imperial regalia as far as the Song court was concerned. He rode on a white horse and came out to the front lines to personally supervise the battle. When Fang La saw Song Jiang across the way, he ordered his nephew Fang Jie to go capture him.

But just then, an urgent message arrived on the rebel side. The army sent to face Lu Junyi had been crushed. Lu Junyi captured its commander, and had now reached the back of the mountains in which Fang La's palace was located. Fang La was shocked and immediately ordered his forces to fall back and go protect the palace, leaving the vanguard behind to cover the retreat.

But by the time Fang La's army approached their palace, they saw that it was engulfed in flames and chaos. This was the handiwork of the Song naval chieftains who had just defected to Fang La. Geez, who could've seen that coming?

When Fang La saw this, he sent his army in to try to save the palace. When Song Jiang saw the rebels fall back, he sent his army in pursuit. When he saw the rebel palace in flames, he figured that the naval chieftains had done their job, so he sent his forces pouring into the palace after the rebels. By now, Lu Junyi's army had also crossed over the mountains and the Song forces now converged on the rebel palace.

To see if this will be their last battle, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we hear from some long-lost characters. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!