

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 92.

Last time, the imperial court dispatched the general Guan Sheng to lift the bandits' siege of Daming Prefecture. Instead of fighting the bandits at Daming, however, Guan Sheng went to attack their base at Liangshan. That had the intended effect, as Song Jiang and company rushed back to defend their base.

The two sides fought to a standstill after their first day of battle. That night, Guan Sheng had a visitor — a bearded general who came unarmed and asked Guan Sheng to tell his men to leave them.

Guan Sheng obliged him. Once they were alone, the visitor said, "Your servant's name is Huyan Zhuo. I once commanded the chain-linked cavalry in the service of the imperial court and came to attack Liangshan. But I fell for their trickery, lost my army, and could not go home. When I heard about your arrival, I was ecstatic. Earlier today, on the battlefield, Song Jiang called off his generals Lin Chong and Qin Ming just as they were about to get the better of you, because he did not want to harm or offend you. Song Jiang has long harbored thoughts of surrendering to the court, but was afraid that the rest of the bandits would not agree to it. So he talked to me in secret about how to compel the rest of the bandits to surrender. General, tomorrow night, if you lead a light raiding party and attack the bandit camp from the backroads, you will be able to capture Lin Chong and the rest and take them to the capital to earn your reward."

Guan Sheng was delighted by this intel. He invited Huyan Zhuo to sit down for wine. As they drank, Huyan Zhuo told him that Song Jiang was always a loyal and honorable man who had the misfortune of falling in with bandits. The two men hit it off and poured their hearts out to each other as they drank.

The next day, Song Jiang led his army to outside Guan Sheng's camp and challenged for battle. Guan Sheng discussed with Huyan Zhuo and decided that they would go out and defeat the bandits to keep up appearances, and then carry out their plan when night came. So Huyan Zhuo borrowed some armor and they rode out to the front lines.

As soon as he saw them, Song Jiang cursed Huyan Zhuo aloud, “Liangshan never mistreated you. Why did you sneak away last night?!”

Huyan Zhuo shouted back, “You all are just crooks! How can you amount to anything?!”

Song Jiang acted enraged and ordered the chieftain Huang (2) Xin (4), the Suppressor of Three Mountains, to go fight Huyan Zhuo. So Huang Xin rode out wielding his sword. They had not fought for 10 bouts when Huyan Zhuo smacked Huang Xin across his back with a steel rod, and Huang Xin fell to the ground. The bandits rushed out and carried his body back to their lines.

Guan Sheng was delighted and ordered his men to charge. But Huyan Zhuo said, “We must not give chase. Wu Yong is a divine strategist. If we chase them, we will surely run into a trap.”

Hearing that, Guan Sheng quickly ordered his men to return to camp. Once they got back, he treated Huyan Zhuo to wine and asked him about his opponent on the battlefield today.

“That Huang Xin used to be a government official,” Huyan Zhuo said. “He was a commander in Qingzhou Prefecture and rebelled along with Qin Ming and Hua Rong. Killing that rogue today blunted the bandits’ prowess. Our raid on their camp tonight will succeed for sure.”

Guan Sheng was encouraged by his comrade’s confidence, and he ordered his officers Xuan (1) Zan (4) and Hao (3) Siwen (1,2) to lead two battalions as backup, while he himself would lead 500 riders armed with light weapons to follow Huyan Zhuo. They would head out around 9 p.m., make straight for Song Jiang’s camp, and use cannon shots as the signal to converge on the enemy.

By dusk, all the troops were ready. To move in silence, they removed the bells from their horses, the men donned light armor, and the soldiers all marched with sticks in their mouths so they would not say anything by accident. That night, under the glow of a bright moon, Huyan Zhuo led the way, and Guan Sheng’s men followed. They went around a hill, and after about an hour of marching, they came across a group of about 50 enemy soldiers.

“General Huyan, is that you?” these men whisper-shouted. “Commander Song ordered us to wait here for you.”

“Don’t make a sound; just fall in behind me,” Huyan Zhuo told them. And then the raiding party kept going, with Huyan Zhuo in front and Guan Sheng behind him. They went around another hill, and Huyan Zhuo pointed into the distance, where they could see a red lantern.

“What is that place?” Guan Sheng asked.

“That is where Song Jiang’s main army is camped,” Huyan Zhuo explained. Guan Sheng now ordered his men to pick up the pace and make for the red lantern.

Over at the red lantern, the silence of the night was suddenly shattered by the sound of a cannon blast, followed by the cries of battle as Guan Sheng and his troops stormed into the camp. But as soon as they charged in, they stopped.

There was no one in the camp.

Alarmed, Guan Sheng called for Huyan Zhuo, but there was no sign of him. Realizing he had been tricked, Guan Sheng quickly ordered his men to retreat. But it was too late. The sound of drums and gongs now echoed from the hills on all sides, sending Guan Sheng’s men into a panic as they fled down whichever path they could find. By the time Guan Sheng went around one of the hills that they had passed on the way here, he only had a few riders with him.

Suddenly, another cannon blast rang out from the woods behind him, and long hooks poked out from all around. They latched on to Guan Sheng and pulled him off his horse. He was immediately tied up and taken to the bandits’ main camp.

Meanwhile, Guan Sheng’s two officers, Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen were rushing to help him, but they were cut off by Liangshan forces. Hao Siwen found himself battling Lin Chong the Panther Head and Hua Rong the archer. After a few bouts, Hao Siwen figured he was no match for the two of them, so he

turned and rode away. But his path was cut off by the female chieftain Hu (4) Sanniang. She flung her red silk cord at him. Remember that this cord had a bunch of hooks at the end. They latched onto Hao Siwen's armor, and she yanked him off his horse. The lackeys rushed forward and tied him up.

The other officer, Xuan Zan the Ugly Prince Consort, was duking it out with the chieftains Qin Ming and Sun Li (4). He was no match for the two of them and soon was knocked off his horse by Qin Ming and captured alive.

While this was happening, another chieftain, Li Ying (4) the Striking Hawk, struck Guan Sheng's camp with a battalion. They rescued all the prisoners that Guan Sheng had taken, and made off with a hefty bounty of grain and horses before spreading out to round up the tattered enemy troops.

As the first light of morning appeared on the eastern horizon, Song Jiang and company made their way back up to Liangshan and sat down in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor. The three captured enemy generals were brought in. Song Jiang hurriedly rose from his seat, shooshed away the guards, and personally untied the three of them. He then helped Guan Sheng into the center command chair and kowtowed to him.

"We desperados have offended you. Please forgive us!" Song Jiang said.

Guan Sheng quickly returned the courtesy but said nothing as he was caught off guard by this gesture and didn't quite know how to react. Huyan Zhuo now came over and bowed to apologize as well, saying, "I was acting on orders and did not dare to disobey a command. Please forgive our deception."

Seeing that all the chieftains were clearly men of honor, Guan Sheng turned to his two comrades and asked, "We have been captured. What should we do?"

"We will follow your command," they told him, which, yeah, thanks guys. Way to pass the buck back to me.

“We three are too embarrassed to return to the capital; please grant us our death!” Guan Sheng said to Song Jiang.

“Why do you say such a thing?” Song Jiang replied. “If you would not think us too unworthy, then please join us in carrying out justice on heaven’s behalf. If you are unwilling to join us, then we would not dare to try to keep you and would just let you go back to the capital.”

Moved by this gesture, Guan Sheng said, “Everyone talks about how Song Jiang is loyal and honorable. Turns out that is the truth. Today, we have neither home nor country to go back to, so we are willing to serve as pawns under your command.”

Song Jiang was delighted, and the customary welcome-to-the-gang party commenced. Guan Sheng sent out word to his scattered troops, asking them to join him, and that brought another 7,000 men to Liangshan. The old and weak among them were given some money and sent home. Meanwhile, Liangshan’s HR department got the ball rolling on relocating Guan Sheng’s family.

As they were feasting, Song Jiang suddenly thought of Lu Junyi and Shi Xiu, who were still mired in the dungeon in Daming Prefecture. That thought brought tears to his eyes. Seeing this, the strategist Wu Yong told him, “Brother, don’t worry. I have a plan. Let’s celebrate tonight. Tomorrow we will mobilize our troops and attack Daming again. This time, we will succeed for sure.”

Guan Sheng swiftly rose and said, “I have no way to repay your kindness. I am willing to be the vanguard.”

Song Jiang was delighted, so the next morning, he ordered Guan Sheng to lead his old troops, along with Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen, and set off for Daming Prefecture. Song Jiang followed with all the chieftains who had gone on the first campaign to Daming, plus the naval chieftains Li Jun and Zhang Shun, who brought along some gear for fighting in the water.

Back in Daming Prefecture, Governor Liang was having a drink with the general Suo Chao the Impatient Vanguard as the latter had just recovered from his arrow wound. Scouts rushed in and said that Guan Sheng and his troops had been captured by Song Jiang and had joined the bandits. Oh and the bandits are coming this way again.”

Governor Liang was stunned and panicked upon hearing the news. Suo Chao, however, told him, “Last time, I took a cheap shot from them. This time, I will get my revenge.”

So Governor Liang rewarded him and ordered him to lead the troops under his command out of the city to meet the enemy. The two commanders, Li (3) Cheng (2) and Wen (2) Da (2), would provide backup.

It was the height of winter. The air was bitterly cold , the sky was covered with clouds, and a wild wind swept across the land. When Song Jiang’s army approached Flying Tiger Ravine, they found Suo Chao and his troops camped out, waiting for them. The next day, the two sides met on the battlefield. Song Jiang and a couple chieftains watched from a high vantage point while Guan Sheng went out to meet Suo Chao.

After three rounds of drums, Guan Sheng rode out to the front of the lines. Suo Chao did not recognize him, but some of his soldiers told him, “That’s Guan Sheng the Big Saber, the guy who just turned brigand.”

That was all Suo Chao needed to hear. The Impatient Vanguard galloped toward Guan Sheng, who raised his saber to counter. After 10 bouts, the commander Li Cheng could see that Suo Chao could not best Guan Sheng, so he rode out with his twin sabers to help. But that roused Guan Sheng’s lieutenants Xuan Zan and Hao Siwen, who quickly joined the fight. As the five warriors tangled, Song Jiang pointed with his whip, and his main army charged forward and put the enemy troops to flight. Li Cheng lost a majority of his men and fell back into the city that night. Song Jiang marched his troops to the foot of the city and pitched camp.

The next day, Suo Chao once again charged out of the city with a battalion. As soon as the Liangshan troops saw him coming, they fell back. Satisfied with this easy victory, Suo Chao returned to the city.

That night, clouds gathered and a heavy snow fell. By morning, about two feet of snow had accumulated. From the city walls, the sentries saw that the bandit army was disorganized, and their camps could barely stand up under the snow.

Seeing this, Suo Chao quickly called up 300 men and charged out of the city to attack. The bandits immediately scattered. In the midst of the mayhem, Suo Chao came across the two naval chieftains, Li Jun the River Dragon and Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. They were wearing light armor and riding toward him with spears in hand. But as soon as they traded blows, the two chieftains turned and ran, even ditching their spears as they fled.

Suo Chao gave chase. As he approached a section of road that was flanked by a stream, he saw Li Jun the River Dragon abandon his horse and dive into the stream, shouting, "Brother Song Jiang, run! Quickly!"

Hearing that Song Jiang was nearby, Suo Chao spurred on his horse in that direction. But suddenly, the ground below him gave way, and he and his horse tumbled into a deep ditch that the bandits had dug and covered up. It was all a trap, and the Liangshan forces now sprang out of hiding and pounced, capturing Suo Chao alive and setting his men to flight.

Some of Suo Chao's soldiers fled back into the city and told Governor Liang what happened. The governor was quite alarmed and ordered his men to just keep up a stout defense rather than go out to fight again. He wanted to execute Lu Junyi and Shi Xiu to appease his anger, but he was also afraid of further ticking off Song Jiang before any relief army could be summoned. So he just dispatched another urgent request to his father-in-law, Premiere Cai, begging for help.

Meanwhile, outside the city, the prisoner Suo Chao was taken into Song Jiang's tent. Song Jiang did his usual "Hey he's our guest; treat him with respect" routine. He untied Suo Chao, offered him wine and a seat, and said, "Look at my brothers. The majority of them used to be government officials. But they are all willing to help me carry out justice on heaven's behalf because the court has fallen into darkness, corrupt officials abuse power, and they are harming innocent civilians. General, if you would not spurn us, then let's uphold loyalty and honor together."

And now, Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast, who was a friend of Suo Chao's while he was serving under Governor Liang, came forward and helped with the recruitment pitch. Suo Chao, naturally, caved to their entreaties and surrendered, and a party followed.

The next morning, it was back to work, as the bandits resumed laying siege to the city. They did so for several days in a row, but could not make any progress. This had Song Jiang feeling mighty annoyed. One night, as he slept, he suddenly felt a chilling wind sweep through his tent. He looked up and saw none other than the dead former bandit leader Chao Gai standing outside his tent.

"Brother, why haven't you gone back yet? What are you waiting for?" Chao Gai said.

"Brother, where did you come from?" Song Jiang asked with surprise as he sat up. "My heart knows no peace because we have not yet avenged your unjust death. And we have neglected making offerings to your spirit. That must have prompted you to come reproach me."

"Not so," Chao Gai said. "Brother, your living essence is too strong, so my spirit cannot approach you. But I have come to tell you that within 100 days, you will suffer a blood tragedy. Only a man from south of the Yangzi River can cure it. You must retreat at once. That's the best move."

Song Jiang rushed toward Chao Gai and said, "Brother, since your spirit is here, please explain what you mean."



But Chao Gai suddenly gave him a shove, sending him falling backward. At that moment, Song Jiang startled awake. Turns out it was all a dream.

Unsettled, Song Jiang asked Wu Yong to join him in his tent to discuss the meaning of this. Wu Yong told him, "Since Brother Chao's spirit came to you, we must not disobey his instructions. Right now, the weather is frigid, making it difficult for the army to stay here long. Let's return to Liangshan for now. Once spring comes and the snow melts, then we can come back. It would still not be too late."

"You are right," Song Jiang said. "But Magnate Lu and Brother Shi Xiu are still in jail, where days pass like years. They are waiting for us to save them. If we leave, I am worried it might cost them their lives. So I don't know whether to stay or leave."

The next day, though, another problem cropped up. Song Jiang started feeling fatigued and achy, and his head felt like somebody was taking an axe to it. His body became swollen, and he was bedridden. When the chieftains checked in on him, he told them, "My back is burning up." They flipped him over and checked his back, and saw a huge red swollen spot.

Wu Yong consulted the 12th-century Chinese equivalent of WebMD and decided that it was an ulcer of some sort, and that powdered mung beans would be able to protect Song Jiang's heart from poisonous miasma. So they procured said powdered mung beans and gave it to Song Jiang, and yet, shockingly, his condition did not improve.

Zhang Shun, the White Streak in the Waves, now offered another idea. "When I was living by the Sundown River, my mother came down with swelling in her back that no medicine could treat. Later, she was treated by An (1) Daochuan (4,2), a doctor from Jiankang (4,1) District, and her ailment disappeared immediately. So I would send him silver whenever I got some, as a token of my gratitude. But Brother Song is in no shape to make that trip. So the only solution is for me to go invite An Daochuan here at once."

Hearing this, Wu Yong said to Song Jiang, "Brother, in your dream, Brother Chao said that your calamity can only be resolved by someone from south of the Yangzi River. Could that be this man?"

"Brother Zhang Shun, if you know of such a healer, then please go at once," Song Jiang said.

"Nevermind the difficulties. For honor's sake, go at once to invite that doctor here so that he may save my life."

Wu Yong now fetched 100 taels of gold as payment for the doctor. He also gave Zhang Shun about 30 taels of loose silver for travel money. He told Zhang Shun, "Leave immediately, and bring the doctor back no matter what. You must not fail. We will strike out tents and return to Liangshan and meet him there. Come quickly."

Once Zhang Shun set out, Wu Yong ordered the rest of the chieftains to prepare for retreat. They put Song Jiang on a cart and sent him on the road back to Liangshan that night. Inside Daming Prefecture, the city's troops had fallen for so many of the bandits' traps that they did not dare to give chase. When they found out the next morning that the bandits had left, they just counted their blessings and stayed in.

Now, as for Zhang Shun, he traveled through the night. But it was winter, and the constant rain and snow were making this a difficult trip. It didn't help that he left in such a hurry that he did not bring an umbrella or a poncho. After about a dozen days, he arrived on the bank of the Yangzi River. That day, a strong gale was blowing from the north, and thick clouds were hanging low as a heavy snow fell. Braving the snow, Zhang Shun forged ahead, looking for a way to cross the river, but there was not a single boat in sight.

Lamenting his rotten luck, Zhang Shun kept walking along the bank. Suddenly, he spotted some smoke rising from a thicket of reeds up ahead.

"Boatman, quickly, row over here! I need a lift!" Zhang Shun shouted in the direction of the smoke.

A moment later, a man walked out from the reeds, wearing a straw hat and a raincape made of the fibers from coconut husks.

“Sir, where are you going?” this man asked.

“I need to cross the river; I have urgent business in Jiankang District,” Zhang Shun said. “I will pay you extra if you can ferry me across.”

“It’s no problem to take you across, but it’s late. Even if you get over to the other side, there would be nowhere for you to spend the night. Why don’t you rest in my boat tonight, and I will take you across around 3 a.m., when the winds and waves will be calm. Provided you pay me extra, of course.”

Zhang Shun agreed, so he followed the boatman into the reeds. There, he saw a small boat tied to the beach. Under the canopy of the boat, a skinny young man was tending to a fire. The boatman helped Zhang Shun into the boat. Zhang Shun took off the soaking wet clothes he was wearing and asked the skinny guy to dry them by the fire. Meanwhile, Zhang Shun opened up his bundle, took out a blanket, wrapped himself up, and sat down in the cabin of the boat.

“Is there wine for sale around here? If so, I won’t mind buying some,” he said to the boatman.

“No place to buy wine,” the boatman replied. “But if you want rice, you can have a bowl.”

So Zhang Shun contented himself with a bowl of rice, and then lay down for some shut-eye. With all the hard traveling that he had endured the past two weeks, he soon fell asleep.

Some time later, Zhang Shun felt some movement and opened his eyes. He felt the boat bobbing up and down, which suggested they were on the river now. He tried to sit up, but could not. In fact, he couldn’t move at all. He struggled, but to no avail. His hands were bound behind his back, and a second later, he saw the boatman standing over him, pressing a knife against his body.

So, as it turns out, Zhang Shun let his guard down at the wrong time. Once he drifted off to sleep, the skinny guy said to the boatman, “Hey brother, do you see that?”

The boatman looked in the direction he was pointing in and reached over to feel the bundle near Zhang Shun. He felt something hard and heavy inside. No doubt about it. It had to be gold or silver.

“Push the boat away from shore,” the boatman said to his companion. “We’ll do it once we are on the river.”

As the skinny guy rowed the boat into the middle of the river, the boatman got out a rope and tied up Zhang Shun. He then pulled out a knife from under one of the planks. And that was when Zhang Shun woke up to find himself the victim of the sort of shady dealing that he and his brother used to be engaged in.

Putting aside the irony of the situation for the moment, Zhang Shun said to the boatman, “Hero, spare my life, and I will give you all the gold.”

“I want the gold, AND I want your life,” the boatman told him.

Recognizing the dire straits he was in, Zhang Shun pleaded, “If you will let me die in one piece, then my ghost will not haunt you.”

The boatman figured that was something he could agree to, so he put down his knife and threw the bound Zhang Shun into the deep river. Soon, Zhang Shun’s body vanished from sight.

After watching Zhang Shun sink beneath the waves, the boatman opened the bundle and was astounded by the amount of gold and silver inside. As he gazed upon more wealth than he had ever seen or dreamed of, a thought crossed his mind.

“Hey brother, I need to talk to you!” he shouted to the skinny guy.

The skinny guy ducked inside the cabin, but before he could even ask what’s up, the boatman had grabbed him and ran him through with the knife. A second later, another body was chucked into the water and sank beneath the waves. The boatman then washed off the blood in his boat and rowed away, as the waves swallowed up all evidence of his bloody deed.

So who is this boatman? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see what happens to Song Jiang now that his one hope was lying at the bottom of the river. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!