

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 10.

Last time, Lu Zhishen managed to get himself kicked out of the monastery on Wutai Mountain, but the abbot still looked out for him and sent him to a colleague at another monastery located in the capital. On his way, Lu Zhishen came across a manor where an old man was being forced to marry his daughter to a bandit chieftain. Lu Zhishen told the old man he could persuade the bandit to change his mind and give up the marriage, so the old man allowed him to wait for the bandit in the bridal chamber. And of course, by “persuade,” Lu Zhishen meant “I’ll make the guy think he’s coming to meet his wife in the dark and then beat him to a bloody pulp, and I’ll do it totally naked, just for more laughs.”

But when all was said and done, no one else was laughing. Not the bandit chieftain, who ran back to his mountain hideout bruised and bloodied, and especially not the old man, Grandpa Liu (2), who was dreading the death and destruction that will no doubt rain down his house when said bandit chieftain returns with a vengeance.

After Lu Zhishen spared everyone further trauma by putting his clothes back on, Grandpa Liu said to him, “I thought you were going to talk to the bandit and convince him to change his mind. I didn’t know you were going to give him a beating. Now he must have gone off to round up the rest of his men to come slaughter me and my family.”

“Sir, don’t worry,” Zhishen said. “To tell you the truth, I used to be a major in the garrison under Old General Zhong (1) at Yan’an Prefecture. I became a monk after I committed murder. Even if we were facing a couple thousand troops, I would not be afraid, much less a few bandits like these. If you all don’t believe me, try picking up my staff.”

The old man’s workmen tried to pick up his staff, and sure enough, they could barely nudge it. Zhishen then picked it up and twirled it around as if it were a lamp wick.

“Sir, you must not leave!” Grandpa Liu begged. “You must save my whole family!”

“Of course!” Zhishen said. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“Bring some wine for the reverend,” Grandpa Liu told his men, “but not so much that he won’t be able to fight.”

But Zhishen said, “The more I drink, the better I fight.”

Umm, ok then. Grandpa Liu did as he said and let him have as much wine as he wanted.

Meanwhile, on Peach Blossom Mountain, the top bandit chieftain was sitting in his stronghold, waiting to hear news of his second-in-command’s wedding night. Suddenly, he saw a few of his men rushing back in a panic, bemoaning the night as they came in.

“What’s wrong? Why are you in such a panic?” the bandit leader asked.

“The No. 2 chief got beaten up!”

The leader was just about to ask for details when his second-in-command returned. The leader looked and saw that his second’s headscarf was missing, and his green robe had been torn to shreds. The second dismounted from his unsaddled horse, kneeled in front of his comrade, and said, “Brother, save me!”

“What happened?!”

“I went to the manor and went into the bridal chamber. But who knew that old donkey had hidden his daughter and instead stashed a fat monk in her bed. My guard was down, and when I lifted the bed curtains, that bastard grabbed me and gave me a beating. When he saw our men coming to my rescue, he let me go, grabbed his staff, and started fighting them. That’s why I was able to get away with my life. Brother, you have to help me get justice and revenge!”

“Go rest; I’ll go capture that crooked monk for you,” the leader said. He then mounted his horse, grabbed his spear, and went down the mountain with all of his men.

Lu Zhishen was drinking when word of this arrived. He told the old man and his workhands, "Don't worry. Whichever bandit I knock over, you tie them up and take to the authorities for a reward. Bring me my knife."

He removed his cassock, tied up the skirts of his robe, and hung the knife on his belt. Then, wielding his staff, he stomped out to the threshing ground. Amid the light of the torches, he saw the bandit leader seated on a horse and wielding a spear.

"Where is that bald donkey? Come out and settle this!" the bandit leader shouted.

"Dirty unflogged scoundrel," Lu Zhishen cursed. "I'll teach you to know me!"

He raised his staff and charged forward. But the bandit leader suddenly parried his blow with the spear and shouted, "Monk, hold on! You sound awfully familiar. What is your name?"

"I am none other than Lu Da, a former major in Old General Zhong's garrison. I have become a monk and changed my name to Lu Zhishen!"

Hearing this, the bandit leader started laughing as he dismounted, tossed his spear aside, clasped his hands together, and greeted Zhishen.

"Brother, how have you been? So it was you who gave my brother a beating."

Surprised and suspicious, Lu Zhishen leaped back a few steps, pulled back his staff, and took a closer look. Under the light of the torches, he recognized the bandit leader. It was none other than Li Zhong, the Tiger-Slaying General, that medicine peddler who was a former teacher of Shi Jin's. Remember that Lu Zhishen met Shi Jin back in the town of Weizhou (4,1), and then they encountered this Li Zhong on the streets and became drinking buddies.

Taking Lu Zhishen by the arm, Li Zhong asked, "Brother, how did you become a monk?"

"Let's go inside and talk," Zhishen said.

As he watched the monk and the bandit walk into his house hand in hand, old Grandpa Liu could only lament his fate. "This monk is in league with the bandits?!" he exclaimed.

Once inside the house, Zhishen put his cassock back on and chatted with Li Zhong in the hall.

Zhishen sat in the middle of the hall and asked Grandpa Liu to come out. The old man, though, was too afraid to come forward.

“Sir, don’t be afraid of him,” Zhishen said, referring to Li Zhong. “He’s my brother.”

So Li Zhong took the second seat, and Grandpa Liu the third. Zhishen then said, “I will tell you two my story. After I killed Butcher Zheng with three punches in Weizhou (4,1), I fled to Yanmen (4,2) County in Dai (4) Prefecture. There, I ran into the Old Mr. Jin (1) that I had saved. He didn’t go back to the capital, but instead stayed in Yanmen (4,2) County with an acquaintance. His daughter married a local rich man. ...” And yadi yadi yada. You know the rest. So I’m not going to rehash the last three episodes again.

Anyway, Lu Zhishen then asked Li Zhong how he came to be here, and who was the bandit chieftain that got beat up earlier. Li Zhong replied, “After You, Shi Jin, and I parted ways in front of the tavern in Weizhou that day, the next day I heard that you had killed the butcher. I went to talk to Shi Jin, but he had also vanished. When I heard that the authorities were out looking for you, I left town in a hurry, too. When I passed by Peach Blossom Mountain, the guy you beat up was already robbing and pillaging there. His name is Zhou (1) Tong (1), and people call him Little Conqueror. He came down with his men to fight me, but I beat him, so he asked me to stay on as the leader of his gang, yielding his position to me. I’ve been an outlaw here since then.”

So, personally I think Zhou Tong’s nickname is kind of ironic, since he hasn’t exactly conquered anyone so far in the novel. Instead, he just got owned on his wedding night by a fat, naked monk.

“Brother, since you’re here, how about you just drop this matter of the marriage?” Zhishen said to Li Zhong. “Grandpa Liu only has this one child and needs her to take care of him. If you guys take her, he would be left all alone.”

Only now did Grandpa Liu breathe a sigh of relief. In fact, he was delighted and immediately arranged some food for the two heroes. Even the bandit lackeys who came with Li Zhong each got two steamed buns, two pieces of meat, and a big bowl of wine. Grandpa Liu also brought out the gifts that Zhou Tong had left as betrothal gift.

“Brother Li Zhong, take these things back to him,” Zhishen said. “I’m putting this whole thing in your hands.”

“No problem,” Li Zhong said. “May I invite you to my stronghold for a bit? Grandpa Liu, you come along, too.”

So Grandpa Liu had a couple sedan chairs prepared for himself and Lu Zhishen, while Li Zhong got back on his horse. They took along Zhishen’s luggage and weapons and set out at dawn. When they arrived at the mountain stronghold, Li Zhong invited the two of them into the assembly hall and they all sat down. Li Zhong then called for Zhou Tong to join them.

When Zhou Tong saw the fat monk sitting there, he was steamed. “Brother, you were supposed to avenge me. Why did you invite him here instead and give him the seat of honor?” he asked Li Zhong.

“Brother, do you recognize this monk?” Li Zhong said.

“If I did, I won’t have gotten beaten up by him!”

“He is the person I’ve been telling you about, the one who killed Butcher Zheng (4) with three punches.”

Zhou Tong clutched his head and went, “What?!” He immediately kowtowed, and Lu Zhishen returned his greeting and said, “Please forgive my offense.”

After they all sat back down, Lu Zhishen asked Grandpa Liu to stand and said to Zhou Tong, “Brother Zhou, listen me. Grandpa Liu only has this one daughter and needs her to take care of him in his old age. If you took her for a wife, he would be left all alone. He doesn’t want this marriage. So listen to me and give her up. Pick another nice girl. Your original gifts to him are all here. What do you think?”

Well, even if Zhou Tong didn't want to give it up, what was he going to say? I mean, here was the fat monk who just whupped his butt, and he's buddies with the leader of the gang.

"I will listen to you, brother, and never go to his home again!" Zhou Tong declared.

"A real man never goes back on his words," Zhishen pressed.

To show that he meant it, Zhou Tong snapped an arrow in half and swore an oath. Grandpa Liu offered his gratitude, returned the gifts, and went back to his manor.

With that matter resolved, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong turned their attention to welcoming their guest. They slaughtered oxen and horses and put on a big feast for Lu Zhishen, and then repeated it for several days. They also showed Zhishen around Peach Blossom Mountain, and it was truly a remarkable place. It was wild and foreboding, with steep cliffs all around. Only one road led up the mountain, and everywhere was overgrown with tangled grass.

After a few days, Lu Zhishen was ... uhh ... not really feeling his hosts. The problem was that Li Zhong and Zhou Tong were kind of tightwads. Remember how when Lu Zhishen asked Li Zhong to pony up some silver to help the father-and-daughter who were being bullied by the butcher, and Li Zhong kind of hemmed and hawed before pulling out a paltry amount? Well, Zhou Tong was apparently cut from the same cloth, and Lu Zhishen did not care for it. So he insisted that he had to resume his journey. His hosts tried hard to convince him to stay and join them, but he said, "Since I have joined the monastic order, how can I become an outlaw?"

Seeing that their pleas were in vain, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong said, "Brother, since you're not willing to become an outlaw and insist on leaving, then tomorrow, the two of us will go down the mountain, and whatever business we get, we'll give it all to you as travel money."

And by business, they of course meant robbing unfortunate passers-by. So the next day, they ordered the men to slaughter pigs and goats and prepare a going-away feast. They set out lots of gold

and silver goblets on the tables, and were just about to sit down and drink when a sentry came to report that about a dozen men were passing by the mountain with two carts.

Hearing this, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong rounded up their men to go conduct ... umm ... business transactions. They left only two men to attend to Lu Zhishen.

“Brother, have a few cups of wine by yourself first,” they told Zhishen. “We’ll be back as soon as we collect some booty, and then we will see you off.”

Once they were gone, Lu Zhishen got to thinking, “Those two are such cheap asses. They have all this gold and silver right here on the table, but instead of giving me those, they’re going to rob somebody else and give that to me. It won’t cost them anything; only the travelers will suffer. [Scoff] Let me leave them a surprise.”

So he asked the two men who were left to attend to him to join him for drinks. After a few cups, he suddenly leaped to his feet and knocked them both out. He then took off his sash and used it to tie them up and gagged them with knots of hemp rope. Then he opened up his bundle and discarded all the nonessentials. In their place, he grabbed a bunch of the gold and silver wine goblets from the tables, stomped them flat, and put them in the bundle. This done, he stashed the recommendation letter from the abbot in another bag, grabbed his weapons and bundles, and left the bandit fort.

Now, there are just so many things going on here. First, there’s the whole robbing-from-your-host thing. Second, I just love that while Lu Zhishen didn’t like the fact that his hosts were going to rob somebody to get him travel money, but he had no qualms about stealing the gold and silver goblets that were no doubt booty from another robbery. And finally, one just has to wonder about the whole stomping-the-goblets-flat thing. I mean, as far as I know, flattened drinking vessels were not exactly a standard currency at this time. So was he planning to stop somewhere to melt this stuff down to make actual gold and silver pieces, or was he just going to pay for dinner with a crushed silver cup?

Anyway, Lu Zhishen headed to the backside of the mountain, but found nothing but steep cliffs with no path down.

“If I go down the mountain on the front side, those guys will definitely see me,” he thought to himself. “So why don’t I just roll down this side.”

So first he took off his knife and bundles and tossed them to the foot of the hill, along with his Buddhist staff. Then, he tucked himself into a ball and rolled down the hillside. Somewhat amazingly, he got to the foot of the hill without any injuries. He popped up, collected his stuff, and took off toward the capital.

Meanwhile, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong were on the other side of the mountain, conducting business. They intercepted the traveling party and found that they, too, were armed. While their men shouted, Li Zhong and Zhou Tong wielded spears and charged forward, yelling, “If you are smart, pay the toll!”

Among the group of travelers, one man hoisted a long broadsword to go fight Li Zhong. The two of them traded blows for about 10 bouts without a winner. Zhou Tong was getting impatient, so he charged and let out a shout, directing all of his men forward. The travelers could not hold their ground and turned to flee. But seven or eight of them didn’t run fast enough and were cut down.

A successful transaction thus concluded, the bandits collected their booty and went back up the mountain, singing victory songs all the while. But when they got back to their fort, they were in for a shock. They found the two men they left behind tied up by the gazebo, while all the goblets on the tables were gone.

Untying the two men, Zhou Tong asked them, “Where did Lu Zhishen go?”

“He knocked us out, tied us up, and took all the drinking vessels,” they told him.

“That bald donkey is no good,” Zhou Tong said. “And now he’s taken advantage of us. Where could he have gone off to?”

As they went searching, they eventually made their way to the back of the mountain, where they saw a flattened patch of grass.

“That bald donkey is a veteran thief,” Zhou Tong said. “How did he manage to roll down such a steep hill?”

“Let’s go catch up with him and demand our stuff back,” Li Zhong said. “That’ll embarrass him.”

“Let it go,” Zhou Tong sighed. “There’s no use locking the door AFTER the thief has left. Where would we go to look for him? Besides, even if we do catch up with him, he won’t give us our stuff back. If things come to a head, neither of us is a match for him, and it would make things awkward if we run into him again in the future. Let’s just forget it. That’ll make things easier if we see him again. Let’s open up the booty on the carts and divide the valuables into three portions. You and I can each take one share, and the third share can go to the men.”

“It was my fault for bringing him to the mountain,” Li Zhong said. “It cost you lots of stuff. Here, you can have my share.”

“Brother, we are supposed to live and die together,” Zhou Tong said. “So don’t worry about such trifles.”

And so from that day forth, the two of them continued their outlaw ways on Peach Blossom Mountain.

We’ll leave Li Zhong and Zhou Tong to their looting and pillaging and catch up with Lu Zhishen on his journey to the capital. After he rolled off the mountain, he walked nonstop from morning till afternoon and covered 20-some miles. By now, his stomach was growling, but there were no taverns along the road. He began looking around for a place to find some food. Suddenly, he heard the sound of rattling bells in the distance.

“Great!” he thought. “That must be either a monastery or a Daoist temple, and the wind is blowing the bells hanging from its eaves. Let me go stay there.”

So he followed the sound over a few hills and saw a large pine forest and a mountain path. He followed the path for a quarter of a mile and saw in front of him a dilapidated monastery, with bells rattling in the breeze. On the front gate hanged a faded vermilion sign with four golden characters that said, “Waguan (3,4) Monastery.” Waguan (3,4), by the way, means crock pot, so this was literally a crock-pot monastery.

Lu Zhishen continued for another 50 paces and crossed over a stone bridge. There, he saw an ancient monastery that was clearly showing its age. He entered and took a close look, and it was a large monastery. He went straight to the guest quarters, but they were missing their front doors, as well as their walls.

“How did such a large monastery fall into such a sorry state?” Lu Zhishen thought to himself. He then went into the abbey and found its grounds covered with swallow droppings. The doors were shut with a lock that was covered with cobblewebs.

Pounding the ground with his staff, Lu Zhishen shouted, “I am a passing monk, here to ask for some food!”

He shouted for a good while, but received no answer. He now made his way to the kitchen and found that it matched the rest of the monastery in its state of disrepair. The wok was gone, and the stove had collapsed. He put his bundles down in front of the idol of the kitchen god, carried his staff, and started searching around.

When he turned into a small room behind the kitchen, he saw a few old monks sitting on the floor, looking quite emaciated.

“Hey, you rude monks!” Lu Zhishen hollered at them. “Why did you not answer me when I was shouting?”

The monks waved their hands and pleaded, "Lower your voice!"

"I'm a passing monk; what's the big deal with letting me have some food?" Zhishen asked.

One of the old monks replied, "We have not had any food for three days. Where would we find food to give to you?"

"I am a monk from Wutai (3,2) Mountain," Zhishen said. "Even if you just have congee, I'll take half a bowl."

"You're from a holy sanctuary, so we should provide you with food," one of the old monks said. "But all the monks of our monastery have scattered, and we have not a single grain of rice. We have starved for three days."

"Nonsense! How can such a big place not have any food?"

"Our monastery was indeed once very prosperous. Wandering monks came from all over. But then one of them brought a Daoist priest and they took control. They have ruined everything, and there is nothing they won't do. They kicked all the monks out. We are too old to leave, so we have no choice but to languish here and starve."

"What a crock!" Zhishen scoffed. "If a monk and Daoist priest have done such a thing, then why did you not go to the local magistrate?"

"You don't understand," the monks explained. "We are a long way away from any magistrate. Besides, even the authorities would not be able to stop them. That monk and the priest are quite fierce. They are murderers and arsonists. Right now, they are staying in a room behind the abbey."

"What are their names?" Zhishen pressed.

"The monk's last name is Cui (1), and his nickname is Cast Iron Buddha. The Daoist priest's last name is Qiu (1), and his nickname is the Flying Messenger from Hell. They're not men of religion. They're just robbers and thieves who are using religion as a cover."

While they were talking, Lu Zhishen suddenly caught a whiff of something fragrant. He stomped to the back and saw an earthen stove where steam was seeping out through the reed cover of a pot. He lifted the lid and saw a pot of millet porridge.

“You old monks are damn rude!” he cursed. “You told me you haven’t eaten in three days. But here I find a pot of porridge. How can you men of the monastic order lie?!”

Seeing that he had discovered their porridge, the old monks could only lament their bad luck as they rushed to hoard all the bowls, plates, utensils, anything he could use to eat. Well, Lu Zhishen was ravenous, so he was going to eat that porridge, come hell or high water. He saw a chipped old painted table covered with dust sitting next to the stove, and a light bulb went on in his head. He grabbed some hay to dust off the table. Then, he lifted the pot with both hands and poured the porridge onto the table.

Seeing this, the old monks rushed forward to snatch the porridge, but after just a couple mouthfuls, they were all shoved out of the way by Lu Zhishen, who shooed them away and began to scoop the porridge into his mouth with his hands.

“We haven’t had food in three days,” the old monks complained. “We had just gone to the village to beg for these few morsels of millet to make some porridge, but now you have taken it from us.”

Lu Zhishen had just eaten a few mouthfuls when he heard those words, and they prompted him to stop. Just then, he heard someone singing outside. After washing his hands, he grabbed his staff and went out to take a look. From behind a collapsed wall, he saw a Daoist priest, wearing a black bandana, a cloth robe tied at the waist by a multi-color girdle, and sandals made of hemp. He carried on his shoulder a bamboo pole. One end of the pole hung a bamboo basket, from which some fish and meat covered by a lotus leaf were poking out. On the other end hung a bottle of wine, also covered with a lotus leaf. As this priest walked, he sang these lines:

In the east are you, in the west am I,
For you no husband, no wife for me.
Without any wife I can still get by,
Without a man how lonely you must be.

Now, remember that Daoist priests were supposed to be men of religion, so this would have a highly inappropriate diddy for a legit priest to be singing. But of course, this was no legit priest. The old monks came out and told Lu Zhishen, "That is Priest Qiu (1), the Flying Messenger from Hell."

Hearing this, Lu Zhishen grabbed his staff and followed the priest. Unaware of this, the priest kept walking as he headed around the walls behind the abbey. When Lu Zhishen followed him there, he saw a table set up under a green locust tree. On the table were some plates, three wine cups, and three pairs of chopsticks. In the center sat a fat monk with eyebrows that looked like streaks of smeared paint and a face as black as ink. He had bulging muscles and a dark, fat belly. Next to him sat a young woman, and they were now joined by the priest as he set down his bamboo pole.

Lu Zhishen now stomped right in front of them, startling the fat monk, or should I say, the other fat monk, who leaped to his feet and said, "Brother, please have a seat and have a cup with us."

Holding his staff, Zhishen asked, "Why did you two wreck the monastery?"

"Brother, please sit down and listen," the other monk said.

"Tell me now!" Zhishen pressed.

To see how the fat monk and the priest will try to talk their way out of a butt-whopping, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!