

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 17.

Last time, Lin Chong was reassigned to watch over a depot where they stored horse feed for the army. He went out to get some wine and came back to find that the little thatched hut he called home had collapsed. So he was forced to spend the night in a nearby temple. That turned out to be a blessing in disguise. In the middle of the night, he saw that the depot had somehow caught on fire. Before he could go outside, three men ran to the temple. They couldn't get in because Lin Chong had blocked the door from the inside with a big rock, so they stood outside and talked, providing all the convenient exposition Lin Chong needed. Turns out these three men were the head jailer from the penal colony and two of Lin Chong's old enemies from the capital -- Lu Qian and Fu An -- the scoundrels who had devised the plan to frame him and who had now come to finish him off. They were the ones who started the fire at the depot, hoping to burn Lin Chong to death.

As he listened to the three men's chatter, Lin Chong thought to himself, "Thank you heaven for taking pity on me! If that hut had not collapsed, I would have perished in the fire."

He now quietly rolled the rock away from the door. Then, he kicked the door open, leaped outside with spear in hand, and shouted, "Scoundrels! There's nowhere to hide!"

The three villains were stunned. Their heads said run, but their bodies were too shocked and frightened to move. In a flash, Lin Chong had thrust his spear into the head jailer, sending him to the ground. Lu Qian, meanwhile, was still frozen in place and could only let out a cry of "Have mercy!" His companion, Fu An, did try to run, but he didn't make it 10 paces before Lin Chong's spear entered his back and came out through his chest.

Lin Chong pulled out his spear and turned around. By now, Lu Qian had regained enough of his senses to start running.

"Scoundrel, where are YOU going?!" Lin Chong roared. He caught up to Lu Qian, grabbed him by the chest with one hand, and threw him to the ground. Lin Chong then stuck his spear in the snow and

pulled out the dagger he had bought a few days earlier when he first got word that Lu Qian was in town. He put one foot on Lu Qian's chest and waved the dagger in his face.

"You filthy wretch! I have never wronged you! Why must you go to such extremes to kill me?! You are unforgivable!"

"It's not my fault!" Lu Qian pleaded. "I had orders from Marshal Gao. I had no choice but to come."

"You scoundrel! We had been friends since our childhood, and yet you came to kill me. How is it not your fault?! Tell it to my knife!!"

Then, with one motion, Lin Chong ripped open Lu Qian's clothes and plunged the dagger into his chest and twisted. Blood spurted everywhere, and with one jerk, Lin Chong pulled out Lu Qian's heart and held it in his hands, Temple of Doom style. Yeah, feels good to vent, doesn't it?

Lin Chong now turned around and saw the head jailer getting to his feet and trying to run. Lin Chong grabbed him and shouted, "Turns out you're a bastard too! You can have a taste of my blade as well!"

With one swing, Lin Chong ran his dagger through the jailer's neck and cut off his head. He tied the head to his spear, and then went and cut off the heads of the other two corpses as well. He put away the dagger and tied the three heads together by their hair. He then carried this gruesome bundle back inside the temple and placed it on the altar as an offering to heaven for saving him tonight.

Now, he put his clothes back on, drank all the wine that was left, ditched his gourd and blanket, took only the spear with him, and headed east out of the temple. He had gone but a mile or so when he saw a bunch of villagers running toward the flaming depot with buckets.

"Go put out the fire; I'm on my way to report this to the authorities," Lin Chong told them. And then he picked up the pace and kept going in the opposite direction, disappearing into the dense snow.

Four hours later, the snow was still coming down hard. Lin Chong had been walking nonstop all night, and he was freezing. Behind him, the burning depot was now barely visible. In front of him laid a

sparse grove of trees. Amid the trees, he saw a small house, weighed down by a thick mantle of snow. Through the seams in the wall he could see firelight, so he headed that way and pushed open the door to the house. In the center of the house sat an old workhand, surrounded by four or five younger workhands, and they were all warming themselves by a fire.

“Greetings,” Lin Chong said to the group. “I am on a mission from the penal colony. My clothes are wet from the snow. May I please dry it by your fire?”

“Sure thing. Help yourself,” the men told him.

So Lin Chong started toasting his damp clothes until they were a little drier. Just then, he noticed a large jug sitting near the fire, and he could smell the fragrance of wine coming from it.

“I have some silver here. Can I please buy some wine?” he asked.

But the old man said, “We take turns every night guarding the grain bins. It’s the middle of the night and it’s freezing. There’s not even enough wine here for us, so how can we let you have any? Forget it!”

“C’mon, just let me have a couple bowls to warm up,” Lin Chong pleaded.

But the old man steadfastly refused. The more Lin Chong smelled the wine, the thirstier he felt, so he kept begging for some, until the men said, “Look, we were kind enough to let you use our fire to dry your clothes. But now you want our wine? Go already! Otherwise, we’re going to hang you up.”

Well, this was the wrong night to be saying things like that to Lin Chong. He had, after all, just cut off three heads, so whatever else he does would seem mild by comparison.

“You guys are so unreasonable!” he said angrily. Then, with one flick of his spear, he sent a piece of ember from the brazier toward the old workhand’s face. That set the old guy’s beard on fire. All the workhands jumped up, and now Lin Chong beat them with the handle of his spear. The old man was the first to run, followed by the rest.

“Good, get out of here!” Lin Chong said. “Now I can drink in peace.”

He saw two coconut ladles on the bed, so he took one down and used it to scoop out wine from the jug. Soon, he had devoured half the jug. His thirst sated, Lin Chong now walked outside and staggered onward. But the wine was having its effect, and he began stumbling around. Pretty soon, a strong gust of wind blew him off his feet, and he fell over and laid stupefied in the snow.

As first light approached, Lin Chong was starting to come around. He startled awake, only to discover that he could not move. He looked around and found himself suspended in the air in the courtyard of a large estate.

“Who dares to leave me hanging here?!” he shouted.

A workhand came out with a wooden staff and shouted back, “Yeah keep running your mouth!”

The old workhand whose beard had been singed earlier now said, “Don’t ask him any questions. Just beat him! When the master wakes up, we’ll take him to the authorities.”

So all the workhands rushed forward and started beating Lin Chong with staffs, and he could only shout, “Don’t beat me! I can explain!”

Just then, someone yelled, “The master is coming.”

Lin Chong looked up and saw a nobleman strolling out with his hands behind his back. He came down from the porch and asked the men, “Who are you beating?”

“A grain thief that we caught last night,” they told him.

The nobleman came forward, took one look at Lin Chong, and immediately told his men to back off as he personally let Lin Chong down, untied him, and asked, “Instructor Lin, how did you end up here?”

Wait, the boss knows this guy? Oh boy. Cheese it! All the workhands scrambled in the blink of an eye. Lin Chong took a closer look and recognized the man who had just saved him. It was none other than Chai Jin, the Little Whirlwind.

“My lord! Save me!” Lin Chong cried in desperation.

“Instructor, how did you end up here, being humiliated by those country bumpkins?!”

“It’s a long story.”

So the two men went inside and sat down, and Lin Chong recounted everything that happened last night. When he was done, Chai Jin said, “Brother, you have had such a run of bad luck! But our meeting today is heaven-sent. Don’t worry. This place is my east manor. Stay here for a while, and then we’ll figure it out.”

Chai Jin then told his men to bring Lin Chong a fresh change of clothes and set out food and wine for him. And Lin Chong stayed with him for the next five or six days.

Meanwhile, all hell was breaking loose in the penal colony, what with the fire at the depot and then the discovery of the three headless bodies by the temple. The local prefect quickly dispatched his men to go put up wanted posters with Lin Chong’s likeness at every town, village, inn, and shop. A reward of 3,000 strings of coins was offered for his arrest. There was tight security everywhere, and the whole thing caused quite a stir among the locals.

Word of this soon reached Chai Jin’s manor, and Lin Chong was on pins and needles. As soon as Chai Jin returned that day, Lin Chong said to him, “My lord, I know you want to keep me here, but the authorities are hot on my trail and are searching house by house. If they come here, it’s going to cause trouble for you. I hope you can be generous and spare some travel money so that I may go find another refuge. If I survive, I will repay you with my complete devotion.”

“Brother,” Chai Jin replied, “since you insist on leaving, I have a place you can go, and I can write you a recommendation letter.”

“My lord, you are too kind! What is this place?”

“There is a body of water in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture in Shandong (1,1) Province. It’s called the Liangshan (2,1) Marsh,” Chai Jin said. By the way, Liangshan (2,1) literally translates to Liang Mountain,

but you'll hear me call it Liangshan a lot of times because that rolls off the tongue a little better, and this is a name that will be repeated many, many times in this novel. Anyway, Chai Jin continued:

"This marsh is more than 250 miles all the way around. In the center is a fortress, and three men of valor have set up a stronghold there. Their leader is called Wang (2) Lun (2), who is nicknamed the White-Clad Scholar. The No. 2 chieftain is named Du (4) Qian (1), and he's nicknamed the Skyscraper. The third guy is Song (4) Wan (4), nicknamed Giant in the Clouds. They have gathered about 800 bandits and are raiding and pillaging. Many capital offenders have gone there to seek refuge and have been accepted. Those three heroes are good friends of mine and they write to me often. I can write a recommendation letter for you to join them. What do you think?"

"That would be ideal!" Lin Chong said.

But just then, Chai Jin thought of something else.

"The trouble is that the prefecture is littered with your wanted posters, and they have two army officers inspecting everyone who goes through the checkpoint on their way out. And you have to go through that checkpoint. ... Wait! I've got it! I have an idea to help you get through."

"I will never forget your kindness!" Lin Chong said.

So that very day, Chai Jin told one of his workmen to go on ahead and carry Lin Chong's luggage through the checkpoint on the main road out of the prefecture. Meanwhile, he prepped about 30 horses, as well as equipment, falcons, and dogs for a hunt. Lin Chong mixed in with his entourage, and they all rode toward the checkpoint.

As they approached the checkpoint, the officer in charge saw them and recognized Chai Jin. Turns out that before this guy was appointed to this post, he had been to Chai Jin's manor and became well-acquainted with Chai Jin. So when he and his fellow officer saw the entourage coming this way, he quickly got up and said, "My lord, on the hunt for pleasure again?"

Chai Jin dismounted and asked the two officers, "What are you guys doing here?"

"The prefect of Cangzhou issued an order for the arrest of the fugitive Lin Chong, and we have been assigned here to keep watch. We have to carefully question everyone who comes through."

Chai Jin chuckled and said, "Well, it just so happens that Lin Chong is in my entourage right now. Don't you guys recognize him?"

The officers also laughed and said, "My lord, you are a law-abiding citizen. We know you would never smuggle a fugitive. Please get back on your horse."

"You trust me that much? Well, if I catch anything, I will definitely present them to you as a gift."

After the requisite pleasantries, Chai Jin and his entourage got back on their horses, went through the checkpoint, and continued for about 5 miles before they saw the workman who had gone on ahead with Lin Chong's luggage. Lin Chong now dismounted, changed out of his hunter's clothes, put on the clothes that the workman had brought, strapped a short broadsword to his waist, donned a red-tasseled felt hat, put his bundle of belongings on his shoulder, and grabbed a long-handled broadsword. He then said goodbye to Chai Jin and took off. Chai Jin and his men then actually went hunting. And when they went back through the checkpoint that evening, they presented the officers with some game before returning to the manor. So yeah, that was easy.

After parting ways with Chai Jin, Lin Chong traveled on foot for about a dozen days. It was now January. The sky was covered with dense clouds and a strong wind began to blow, and soon a heavy snow began to fall. Within six or seven miles, the ground was covered with snow as far as the eye could see.

Lin Chong pressed on even as the temperature plummeted. Soon, evening was descending. In the distance, he spotted a snow-covered tavern sitting next to a lake. The tavern was surrounded by a few

dozen old trees and a low wall made of yellow soil. All of its small windows were shut, while a banner sporting the character for wine flapped in the wind.

Lin Chong hurried into the tavern, pulled up the reed curtain at the front door, and went in. There were a lot of seats in the tavern and there were no other customers. He picked a table, took a seat, and laid down his stuff. A waiter now came and asked him how much wine he wanted.

Lin Chong ordered two horns of wine to start with. The waiter soon brought out the wine. Lin Chong then asked him what kind of food they had.

“We have raw and cooked beef, fat geese, and tender chicken,” the waiter said.

“Cut me two catties of cooked beef first,” said Lin Chong, ordering the equivalent of about 1 and 1/3 pounds of beef. The waiter soon came back with a big platter of beef, along with some vegetable sides and a large bowl for the wine. The waiter poured, and Lin Chong drank.

After a few bowls of wine, Lin Chong saw someone walk out from the back of the tavern with his hands clasped behind his back. This guy walked to the front door to check out the snow, and then asked the waiter who was drinking. While the waiter and the guy chatted, Lin Chong looked him over and saw that he was wearing a warm hat with a long peak, a sable-lined jacket and deerskin boots. He was tall and strong, with cheekbones that looked like fists. His face was adorned with a mustache and a goatee.

While that guy continued to watch the snow, the waiter resumed tending to Lin Chong.

“Here, you have a bowl of wine, too,” Lin Chong said to the waiter.

After the waiter drank a bowl, Lin Chong asked him, “How far is it from here to Liangshan Marsh?”

“It’s only a couple miles, but it’s all waterways. There is no land route. If you want to go, you’ll need a boat.”

“Can you get me a boat?”

“It’s snowing hard and it’s night; where would we find a boat?”

“I’ll pay you extra. I just need you to find a boat to get me to Liangshan Marsh.”

“But there’s nowhere to look for one,” the waiter explained.

Lin Chong was now concerned about how to proceed. After a few more bowls of wine, he began brooding and thinking to himself, “When I was a drill instructor in the capital, everyday I would walk the streets, see the sights, and drink at will. Who could’ve known that I would end up here thanks to that scoundrel Gao Qiu, tattooed, exiled, and alone, with no place to call home.”

The more he thought about it, the more depressed he got. Fueled by the wine, he asked the waiter to bring him ink and brush, and in the spur of the moment, he wrote 8 lines of poetry on the white walls of the tavern. The poem said:

Chivalrous is Lin Chong,
The loyalest of men.
Renowned among the gallant,
A hero of the land.
By tragedy set adrift,
His name turned to dust,
But should he have his day,
All in Shandong will quake!

When he was done with his poem, he threw down the brush and picked up his wine again. But as he was taking a sip, the man in the sable jacket marched forward, grabbed him around the waist and said, “You’ve got some gall! You have committed a capital offense in Cangzhou. How dare you show your face here when the authorities have a bounty of 3,000 strings on your head?!”

“Who do you think I am?” Lin Chong said.

“Are you not Lin Chong, the one they call Panther Head?”

“No, my last name is Zhang.”

But the man laughed and said, “Stopping lying! You wrote your name on the wall, and your face carries a criminal’s tattoo. There is no getting out of it.”

So yeah, writing drunken poetry praising yourself by name while you’re on the run from the law? NOT a good idea.

“You really want to arrest me?” Lin Chong asked.

The man now laughed again and said, “Why would I want to arrest you? Come with me to the back and we can talk.”

So the man let go, and Lin Chong followed him to a pavilion that sat over the water behind the tavern. The man told the waiter to light a lamp. He then exchanged greetings with Lin Chong, sat down across from him, and asked, “Brother, I heard you asking for directions and looking for a boat to Liangshan just now. That’s a bandit stronghold. Why do you want to go there?”

“To tell you the truth, the authorities are hunting me and I have no refuge, so I’m going to join the bandits there.”

“But even so, someone must have suggested that you come here.”

“Yes. A friend of mine from Cangzhou Prefecture.”

“Was it Chai Jin, the Little Whirlwind?”

“How did you know?!” Lin Chong asked in astonishment.

“Lord Chai is a good friend of the bandit leader, Chieftain Wang,” the man explained.

Recognizing that this was no ordinary tavern keeper he was talking with, Lin Chong bowed and said, “I was blind. Please tell me your honorable name.”

The man hurriedly returned his bow and said, “I am the lookout for Chieftain Wang. My name is Zhu Gui (4). On the jianghu (1,2) scene, they call me Dry Land Alligator. I have been instructed to open this tavern here to keep tabs on people coming and going and alert my comrades when a wealthy person is coming through. If someone is traveling through here alone, if they’re not wealthy, then we’ll just let

them go on their way. But if they are wealthy, then when they come into the tavern, we would either drug them or kill them on the spot. We would make jerky from their lean flesh, and use their fat as lamp oil. Just now, I heard you ask about how to get to Liangshan, so I did not dare to make a move on you. And then I saw you write your name. I have heard about your gallantry from people from the capital; I never expected I would get to meet you. With Lord Chai's introduction letter and your splendid reputation, Chieftain Wang will definitely welcome you!"

Ok, timeout. Let's just go back to the part where Zhu Gui was talking about turning unsuspecting customers into jerky and lamp oil, which might have you going "what the hell?!" But this is a common motif in novels like this. The Jianghu (1,2) scene is apparently littered with shady taverns -- or "black taverns" as they are called. These are places where you go in and there's a good chance you don't come out, or if you do come out, you're being served up in unrecognizable forms as food for other unsuspecting passersby who may soon become food themselves. So I guess these taverns are using sustainable meat. And what's more, the people who run these establishments are generally depicted as heroes and valiants, and nobody on the jianghu scene bats an eye about their line of work.

To wit, after hearing from Zhu Gui that this was a "black tavern," the upright Lin Chong didn't really have any problems with this. In fact, he and Zhu Gui now sat down for a feast at the pavilion for half the night. As they drank, Lin Chong asked Zhu Gui how he could get to Liangshan.

"There will be a boat; don't worry," Zhu Gui assured him. "Just rest here tonight. Get up around 5 a.m. and I will accompany you."

So Lin Chong slept until about 5 o'clock before Zhu Gui came and woke him up. After he washed up, they drank another four or five cups of wine and ate some meat. The sky had yet to lighten, but Zhu Gui now opened the window in the pavilion on the water and took out a bow decorated with painted

magpies. He fitted a whistling arrow onto the bow, took aim, and fired a shot toward a creek in a thicket of reeds on the other side of the cove. The sound of the whistle echoed across the surface of the water as the arrow disappeared.

“What is that for?” Lin Chong asked.

“That is a signal to the stronghold,” Zhu Gui explained. “A boat will be here shortly.”

And sure enough, pretty soon a swift boat appeared from the reeds across the way, rowed by a few bandit lackeys. They rowed all the way to the pavilion. Lin Chong took all his belongings and followed Zhu Gui into the boat, and the bandits rowed the boat back toward a yellow, sandy beach on the other side. They headed toward a tall mountain surrounded by deep waters and tangled thickets of reeds.

Upon landing on the beach, Zhu Gui and Lin Chong disembarked, while one of the bandit lackeys carried Lin Chong’s stuff, and they headed up the mountain toward the stronghold. Lin Chong looked around and saw that the path was lined on both sides with huge trees. Halfway up the mountain sat a pavilion. After they passed that, they saw a tall mountain pass, in essence a wall built across a narrow path to serve as a checkpoint and defensive barrier. In front of the pass stood rows of weapons, and on both sides of the hills were stacked logs and boulders that could be rolled down to crush enemies.

The bandit lackey went on ahead to announce their arrival, and then Lin Chong and Zhu Gui entered the pass. Their path was lined with organized rows of banners. They kept walking went through two more passes before they approached the entrance to the stronghold. This area was surrounded on all sides by tall cliffs, as well as defended by the aforementioned three passes. In the center of this mountainous terrain, though, was a plain as flat as a mirror, about 4,000 feet in circumference. The main gate of the stronghold faced the pass, and on both sides stood other buildings.

Zhu Gui now led Lin Chong to the main assembly hall, which was called the Hall of Gathering Righteousness. In the center of the hall sat the three chieftains. The leader, seated in the middle, was

Wang Lun, the White-Clad Scholar. On the left sat Du (4) Qian (1), aka Touching the Sky. On the right was Song (4) Wan (4), Giant in the Clouds.

Zhu Gui and Lin Chong stepped forth and greeted the chieftains. Lin Chong then stood beside Zhu Gui while the latter said, "This is Lin Chong, nicknamed Panther Head. He was a drill instructor for the imperial guards in the capital. But Marshal Gao framed him, had him exiled, and then tried to burn him to death at a feed depot. He killed three men in the fight and then found refuge with Lord Chai, who welcomed him and sent him here with a recommendation letter to join us."

To see if Lin Chong gets to stay, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we witness a grave injustice, when an attempt to attain a government post through bribery is rebuffed. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!