

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 16.

Last time, on his way to the penal colony, Lin Chong met an influential nobleman named Chai Jin, aka Little Whirlwind. Chai Jin was a huge fan and went out of his way to make sure that Lin Chong would be well taken care of once he got to the penal colony at Cangzhou. That included giving him lots of silver, which would come in handy for all the bribes that would be expected, and writing letters to the prefect and the warden at Cangzhou. And sure enough, nothing greased the wheels of justice quite like money and power, as the head jailer at the penal colony promised Lin Chong that he would get the special treatment.

Now, Lin Chong had given this head jailer five taels of silver for his trouble, and then asked him to deliver an other 10 taels to the warden. But as soon as he left Lin Chong, the jailer pocketed 5 of the 10 taels meant for the warden, and then brought the remaining 5 taels to his boss. But you know, I think Lin Chong was probably expecting that, which was why he gave the jailer 10 taels to begin with. In any case, the jailer told the warden that Lin Chong was a good man, and he was probably framed by Gao Qiu. And oh by the way, here's 5 taels of silver AND he's got a letter from Chai Jin, so, you know, wink wink.

"Well, since he's got a letter from Lord Chai, we have to take good care of him," the warden said.

So the warden summoned Lin Chong. When Lin Chong was brought in, the warden said, "You are the new arrival. According to laws established by the founding emperor, newly arrived exiled prisoners must receive a caning of 100 strokes. Guards, seize him."

And that was Lin Chong's cue. As the jailer had instructed him to do, he quickly said, "Your servant caught a cold on the journey here and have not yet recovered. Please postpone this caning for now."

The jailer chimed in and played his part, saying, "Since this guy is sick right now, please show him some leniency."

"Well, since he's sick, we'll spare him for now," the warden agreed. "We'll give him the caning once he has recovered."

The jailer then said, "The inmate who has been taking care of the garrison prison temple has served his term. We can send Lin Chong to go take his place."

And so they signed the paperwork right then and there and assigned Lin Chong to that post. As he accompanied Lin Chong to go get his belongings, the head jailer said, "Instructor Lin, I've pulled out all the stops for you. Watching the temple is the cushiest gig at this penal colony. All you need to do is to light some incense and sweep the floor each day. Look at the other prisoners. They're slaving away from dawn to dusk, and that's not even the worst of it. The ones who don't have any money get thrown in the dungeon, where they pray for life and long for death."

"Thank you so much for your kindness," Lin Chong told him. He then gave the jailer another couple taels of silver and said, "Brother, I hope you can take care of one more thing for me. Can you get my cangue removed?"

"Leave it to me," the jailer said as he pocketed the money. And sure enough, he had a quick word with the warden and soon Lin Chong's cangue was gone.

From that day forth, Lin Chong took up residence at the temple. And as the jailer told him, his labor each day consisted of just refreshing the incense and sweeping the floor. In this way, about 50 days passed in the blink of an eye. The warden and head jailer, having received their bribes, became quite familiar with Lin Chong and pretty much just left him alone. Meanwhile, Chai Jin sent along winter clothes and more money, which Lin Chong generously spread around to the other inmates.

Time passed quickly, and soon winter was coming. One day around noon, Lin Chong went out for a stroll outside the gates of the penal colony. Suddenly, he heard someone shout from behind, "Instructor Lin, what are you doing here?!"

He turned around and recognized the man who had called out to him. His name was Li (2) Xiao-er (3,4), which literally meant Young Li the Second. But Xiao-er was also often used as a synonym for a

waiter in a tavern, and I'm not quite sure which meaning is the intended one here, since this Li (2) Xiao-er (3,4) used to be a waiter at a tavern in the capital. When he was there though, he stole some stuff from his boss but was caught, and was about to be hauled into court, where, lacking money and connections, he would no doubt suffer the full brunt of justice. But Lin Chong took pity on him and worked things out with the tavern owner so that this Li (3) Xiao-er (3,4) was spared. But he couldn't stay in the capital anymore, so Lin Chong gave him some travel money so he could go find a living elsewhere. But Lin Chong never thought he would run into this guy here, of all places.

"Xiao-er, how did you end up here?" Lin Chong asked.

Li Xiao-er kowtowed to Lin Chong and said, "After you saved me, I went looking for another job but had no luck until I wandered to here. The owner of a local tavern, whose last name was Wang, hired me. He liked that I was a hard worker and that I could cook some good dishes, which drew praise from the customers and improved business. So he married his daughter to me. Now, both of my in-laws have passed away, and it's only my wife and me. We opened a little tavern near the penal colony. I came here to collect on a tab today and ran into you. Benefactor, how did you end up here?"

Pointing to the tattoo on his own face, Lin Chong said, "I ran afoul of Marshal Gao, so he framed me and had me exiled here. Right now, I'm assigned to look after the temple, but I have no idea what will happen in the future. It's so unexpected to see you here."

Li Xiao-er now invited Lin Chong to his home and asked him to sit. He then called his wife out to meet his benefactor. Both of them were delighted and told Lin Chong, "We have no relatives, so having you here is a gift from heaven."

"But I am a convict; I don't want to taint your reputation through our association," Lin Chong said.

"Say no such thing. Who doesn't know your great name?" Li Xiao-er said. "Whenever you need to have your clothes washed and stitched, just bring them here."

They then treated Lin Chong to dinner before escorting him back to the temple. The next day, they came to invite him to dinner again. And so Lin Chong maintained frequent interactions with the couple. They often delivered soups and such for him, and he was touched by their reverence for him and often gave them money for their business.

So as far as the life of a prisoner goes, Lin Chong had it fairly good. He had a cushy gig. The guards treated him well. And now he had a couple friends. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and soon winter was here.

One day, Li Xiao-er was busy cooking in front of his tavern. Suddenly, a man slipped inside and sat down. Moments later, another man also slipped in and sat down. The first guy was dressed like a military officer, while the second one was dressed like an attendant. Li Xiao-er greeted them and asked if they wanted wine.

The guy who looked like an officer handed him a tael of silver and said, "Open a tab with this, and bring me three or four bottles of good wine. When my guests arrive, bring out whatever fruits and wine you have. No need to ask any questions."

"What guests are you entertaining?" Li Xiao-er asked.

"I need you to go the penal colony and invite the warden and the head jailer to come meet me. If they ask, just tell them that an official would like to have a word with them to discuss some work-related matter. Tell them I'm waiting for them."

So Li Xiao-er went to the penal colony and invited the warden and head jailer back to his tavern. After they exchanged greetings with the officer, the warden said, "We have not met before. What is your name, sir?"

"I have a letter here," the officer replied. "You'll find out soon enough. Let's drink first."

So Li Xiao-er quickly brought over the wine and the food. The officer asked for some wine goblets. He poured the wine and they all sat down. Li Xiao-er hustled back and forth, serving his guests without a pause. The guy who looked like an attendant took care of warming the wine. After they drank about a dozen cups, they ordered more food to go with the wine. The attendant then told Li Xiao-er, "I'll take care of warming the wine. Don't come in unless we call for you. We want to speak in private."

So Li Xiao-er left the room. But he went and found his wife and told her, "There's something fishy about those two men."

"What do you mean?"

"Judging by their accents, they are from the capital. And they didn't know the warden. Also, when I was bringing in the food, I heard the head jailer mention Marshal Gao. Wasn't he the one who framed Instructor Lin? Here, I'll manage things out front. You go and eavesdrop from behind the partition wall to see what they're talking about."

"Why don't you just go get Instructor Lin and see if he recognizes them?" his wife said.

"You don't understand. Instructor Lin is an impatient man. He's liable to kill people and burn the place down. If I bring him here and one of those guys turns out to be that captain Lu (4) Qian (1) or whatever, he would never let it go. If things go south, it would be trouble for us, too. Just go listen in for a bit."

So Li Xiao-er's wife went off and listened for about two hours. She then came back and told him, "They were whispering in there, so I didn't hear much. But I did see that officer-looking guy take out something wrapped in a white cloth from his attendant and give it to the warden and jailer. I'm guessing it was money. Then I heard the jailer say, 'I'll take care of it. We'll kill him one way or another.'"

Just then, the men inside the room called out for soup, so Li Xiao-er rushed off to tend to their request. When he brought in the soup, he saw that the warden was holding a letter in his hand. Li Xiao-er then went and brought them some more rice. The men ate for another hour or so before settling

their bill. The warden and jailer left first, and then the other two men also left, with their heads bowed low.

Soon after this party broke up, Lin Chong strolled into the tavern. "Brother, how's business lately?" he asked as he greeted Li Xiao-er.

"Benefactor, please have a seat. I was just about to go find you. I have something important to tell you."

"What is it?"

So Li Xiao-er recounted what he and his wife had just seen and heard. Lin Chong now asked what the two strangers from the capital looked like.

"One was of average build and had a fair complexion with no facial hair. He looked to be 30-something. The other guy also wasn't that old. He had a ruddy complexion."

Lin Chong became alarmed. "That 30-year-old must be Lu Qian. That damn scoundrel! How dare he come here to kill me. If I run into him, I'll smash him into jelly."

"The main thing is to be on your guard," Li Xiao-er said. "As the old saying goes, 'Make sure you don't choke when you eat and don't trip when you walk.' "

Lin Chong was now in a foul mood. He left Li Xiao-er's tavern and went to a shop on the street, where he purchased a sharp dagger. Hiding the blade on him, he prowled the streets, hoping to run into his nemesis. Meanwhile, Li Xiao-er and his wife were on pins and needles. But nothing happened that night. The next morning, right after he got up and washed, Lin Chong again took his dagger and went scouring the streets of the town. He spent the whole day searching every back alley but saw none of his enemies. And there was nothing unusual happening inside the penal colony either. So he went to talk to Li Xiao-er again.

"Nothing happened again today," Lin Chong said.

“Benefactor, let’s hope it stays that way. Just be careful.”

Lin Chong kept up his search for another few days, but still saw no sign of his enemies. Gradually, his temper began to cool.

On the sixth day, the warden summoned Lin Chong and told him, “You have been here for a while now. For the sake of Lord Chai, we need to improve your situation. There is a large depot five miles outside the east gate where they store horse feed for the army. When feed is delivered there each month, you get to collect some money. There’s an old soldier watching the depot right now, but I want you to swap assignments with him so that you’ll have an opportunity to earn a little spending money. You can go there with the head jailer to take care of the handoff.”

“I’ll go right away,” Lin Chong said. He then left the penal colony and went to tell Li Xiao-er, who said, “That assignment is similar to your job at the temple. When you collect the feed, there’s typically some cash in it for you. Usually no one would get that job without a bribe or two.”

“So instead of trying to kill me, they are giving me a better assignment? What’s the meaning of this?” Lin Chong wondered.

“Benefactor, don’t be suspicious. As long as nothing happens, that’s good. The only shame is that you’ll be farther from our home. In a little while we will come pay you a visit.”

Li Xiao-er then treated Lin Chong to a few cups of wine, and they took leave of each other. Lin Chong went back to the temple, collected his things, stashed his dagger, and grabbed a spear. He and the head jailer took leave of the warden and headed toward the depot. It was now the height of winter and the weather was bitter cold. Clouds covered the sky and snowflakes swirled around them as they trudged into the teeth of a rising wind amid a heavy snowfall.

When they arrived, Lin Chong saw that the depot was constructed with earthen walls and had a double-door entrance. They walked in and saw a thatched building that’s been divided into seven or

eight sections, which served as storehouses for fodder. Piles of hay were stacked up all around. In the middle was a small thatched hut. Inside, they found an old soldier warming himself by a fire.

“The warden has sent this Lin Chong to take your place,” the head jailer said. “You will be reassigned to the temple. Let’s do the changeover now.”

The old soldier grabbed his keys and gave Lin Chong the tour.

“The content of the storehouses are all under official government seal,” the old man said. “And those haystacks over there are all numbered.”

After counting the haystack, the old man led Lin Chong back to the hut and packed up his own things. As he was about to head out, he said, “I’ll leave you my brazier, my pot, my bowls, and my dishes.”

“I left such things at the temple as well,” Lin Chong replied. “If you want them, use them.”

The old man then pointed to a large gourd hanging on the wall and said, “If you want to get wine, head east along the main road for about a mile, and you’ll see a little marketplace.”

Once the old soldier and the head jailer left, Lin Chong set his bundle on the bed and replenished the fire in the brazier, adding a few pieces of firewood from a pile by the side of the hut. He then took a look around and saw that the hut was pretty dilapidated and shook with every gust of wind.

“There’s no way this place will last the winter,” he thought to himself. “Once the snow stops, I’ll go to town and find a mason to come repair it.”

Even though he was sitting by the fire, he still felt chilly. He thought to himself, “The old man told me there’s a marketplace a mile from here. Why don’t I go get some wine to warm up?”

So he took some loose pieces of silver from his bundle, tied the gourd to his spear, covered up the brazier, put on his broad-brimmed felt hat, and walked outside. He locked the doors behind him and headed east. The snow-covered ground was a mass of tiny flakes that resembled white jade, and more snow was coming down hard as he trudged forward with the north wind on his back.



A little ways down the road, he came across an old temple. Lin Chong pressed his palms together in front of his forehead in a gesture of prayer and bowed, saying, "May the gods protect me. I must come here one day and burn some paper money as a sacrifice."

After walking for a while longer, he saw some houses. They were surrounded by a fence, and he noticed a clump of broom straws hanging outside one of the buildings, which was a sign that indicated this was a tavern. So Lin Chong went inside.

"Sir, where are you coming from?" the tavern owner asked.

"Do you recognize this gourd?" Lin Chong said.

"Yes! That belongs to the old soldier from the depot."

"Exactly."

"Ah, so you're the new custodian. Please have a seat. It's bitterly cold. Have three cups on me as a welcome."

The tavern owner cut up a platter of beef and warmed up a bottle of wine for Lin Chong. Lin Chong also ordered some more beef and another bottle of wine to go. He drank a few cups and then wrapped up the remaining beef, filled his gourd with wine, and left some silver for the tavern owner. He tied the gourd to the spear again, said bye to the tavern owner, and headed back out into the wind and snow.

The snow was coming down even harder now. Lin Chong forged ahead into the north wind as he made his way back to the depot as quickly as he could. When he went back inside, however, he was in for a rude surprise: The little thatched hut that was his home had collapsed under the weight of the snow.

So, now what?

Lin Chong put down his stuff and searched around in the rubble of the collapsed hut. He was worried that there were still embers from the brazier, which could set the place on fire if not extinguished. He pulled aside part of a collapsed wall and reached inside and felt his way around. The

good news was that the brazier had been extinguished. But the bad news was that the only thing he could feel was a blanket, which he pulled out from the rubble.

By now, it was dark, cold, and snowing, and Lin Chong did not have a roof over his head. And to make it even worse, he didn't even have anything to make a fire with so he could at least stay warm. Just then, an idea came to him.

"I passed that old temple a little ways from here," he thought to himself. "I can stay there for the night and worry about this in the morning."

So he rolled up the blanket, grabbed the rest of his stuff, locked the doors to the depot again, and headed for the temple. When he got there, he rushed inside and closed the door. There was a big rock next to the door, so he rolled the rock over to block the door and keep it securely shut. He then took a look around.

In the middle of one end of the hall stood the statue of a mountain god dressed in golden armor. To the two sides, there were the statues of a judge and a small demon from the underworld. In a corner sat a pile of paper. Lin Chong inspected the entire temple but could not find another soul.

He now put his spear and gourd on the pile of paper and unrolled his blanket. He took off his hat and dusted the snow off his clothes. He peeled off his white tunic, which was half-soaked, and put it and the hat on the altar table. He covered the lower half of his body with the blanket and then began taking sips of the now cold wine from his gourd while eating the beef.

Suddenly, he heard loud crackling sounds outside. Lin Chong leaped to his feet and peeked out through the seam in the door. To his shock, he saw the depot engulfed in fire, with flames shooting toward the heavens. Lin Chong grabbed his spear and was just about to go out to try to put out the fire, but suddenly he heard the sound of people talking outside. He stood silently by the door and listened.

A few men rushed toward the temple -- three of them, judging by the sound of the footsteps. They tried to push the door open, but could not, on account of the big rock that Lin Chong had used to block it. After several futile attempts to open the door, the men gave up and just stood under the eaves of the temple as they watched the depot burn.

"That WAS a good idea, wasn't it?" one of the men said.

"We're much indebted to the warden and to you, head jailer," another man said. "When we return to the capital, we will let the marshal know and he will see to it that you two become high officials. And that Instructor Zhang will no longer have any excuses. Now that we've taken care of Lin Chong, Gao Yanei's condition will no doubt improve,"

The third man now chimed in. "That damn Instructor Zhang. We've talked to him time and again, telling him, 'Your son-in-law is no more.' But he just refuses to accept it, making the young master's condition worse and worse. So the marshal sent the two of us here to take care of this matter. And now, it's done."

The first guy then said, "I climbed over the wall and set like 10 fires to the haystacks. There's nowhere for him to hide."

"Looks like that place is almost all burned down by now," one of the other men said.

"Even if he manages to escape, it's a capital offense to burn down an army depot," another chimed in.

"Let's go back to town," one man suggested.

"No, let's wait a little longer," another said. "We can collect a few of his bones and take them back to the capital. The marshal and the young master will praise us for being thorough."

While all this oddly convenient exposition was taking place, Lin Chong was eavesdropping on the other side of the door. He recognized the men's voices. One was the head jailer, another was Lu Qian,

his former friend turned enemy. And the third was Fu (4) An (1), one of Gao Yanei's hangers-on who had devised the scheme to frame Lin Chong.

In that moment, the depot wasn't the only thing engulfed in flames. A different sort of fire was raging on this side of the door as well. Ever since that day months ago when Gao Qiu's son had tried to mess with his wife, Lin Chong had suffered every insult, every slight, every indignity with silent forbearance. There were many a scumbag who deserved a fist to the face, or worse, but he had taken the high road every time and let them off easy. But not this time. NOT. THIS. TIME.

To see how this night will play out, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we start to see why this novel is called the Water Margin when we haven't been near any bodies of water so far. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.0