

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 26.

Last time, the perfect crime was starting to come unraveled. Acting on a tip from his brother, the police inspector He (2) Tao (1) arrested Bai Sheng, the Daylight Rat, for his part in the hijacking of the birthday gifts for the premier. After sufficient torture, Bai Sheng fessed up and confirmed that Chao Gai, the ward chief at East Bank Village in Yuncheng (4,2) County, was the ringleader of the plot. So He Tao was dispatched with 20 men to go to Yuncheng County, where they were to get the cooperation of the local magistrate and arrest Chao Gai and his co-conspirators.

When He Tao got to Yuncheng County, court was in recess. So he talked to a clerk of the court, a man named Song Jiang. Now, this Song Jiang was apparently a man of some renown, because He Tao showed him great deference and confided to him the reason for the visit, asking him to help. Song Jiang said sure, no problem; I'll take you to see the magistrate as soon as he comes back in the afternoon. In the meantime, pardon me while I go take care of a few things at home. So Song Jiang left He Tao at the teahouse across the street from the courthouse and hopped on his horse. But as soon as he left the town, Song Jiang galloped off toward the east.

Soooo, what gives? Who the heck is this Song Jiang? And where is he going? As it turns out, this lowly clerk of the court in a podunk little county is going to be THE central character of our novel. So let's introduce him properly. He was the third son in his family, and his ancestors had long resided in Song Family Village in this county. Because he was short and had a dark complexion, everyone called him Dark Song Jiang. He was a very filial son and very generous with his money when it came to helping others in need, so people also called him the Filial and Gallant Dark Third Master. Yeah, I know. The Chinese just get really hung up on the swarthy skin thing.

Song Jiang's father, the old squire, was still alive, but his mother had long since passed away. He also had one younger brother, who was named Song Qing (1), and this Song Qing was nicknamed the Iron Fan, even though the novel never explains why. While his father and younger brother lived in their

ancestral village and made their living as farmers, Song Jiang moved to the county seat to work as a clerk of the court. He had great penmanship and was a terrific writer, and he was familiar with all the administrative procedures. He also dabbled a bit with weapons, though he would never be mistaken for a warrior.

So, so far, you might be scratching your head as to what the big deal was about this guy. I mean, ok, he's filial and generous, but as far as we can tell, he didn't fight that well, and his greatest strength was ... what? Being familiar with the minutiae of judicial procedures?

Well, there's more, actually. You see, Song Jiang loved to make friends with the heroes from the jianghu scene. Whenever someone came to him for help, no matter their status or reputation, he would take them in without exception. He would put them up at his family's manor, feed them, and keep them company all day. And when these men took their leave, he would shower them with travel money. It's said that he scattered gold like dust. He never refused a request for money, and he was always helping people out, solving their problems, settling differences, saving lives. He would give the indigent money for medicine and, when the medicine didn't work, he would give them money for their coffins. So his name was praised to the heavens in the whole region as a great humanitarian who gave charity to the poor, assisted in emergencies, and helped ease hardships. And for that, people gave him another nickname, and the one that's the best known of all his monikers: the Timely Rain.

So now we know why He Tao greeted Song Jiang with such respect. But what poor He Tao did not know was that Song Jiang, being a good friend to men of valor on the Jianghu scene, was a good friend to none other than Chao Gai, since Chao Gai was, you know, a man of valor on the Jianghu scene. So when He Tao told Song Jiang that he was there to arrest Chao Gai, it startled Song Jiang, even though he didn't show it. While He Tao was talking, Song Jiang was thinking to himself, "Chao Gai is a close friend. He has committed a capital offense. If I don't rescue him and he gets arrested, he's going to lose his life!"

But Song Jiang managed to keep a calm exterior and led He Tao into believing that he was going to help. But as we can all guess by now, as soon as Song Jiang left He Tao, he rushed off to go alert Chao Gai that the poop had just hit the fan.

After riding for less than an hour, Song Jiang arrived at Chao Gai's estate. At that moment, Chao Gai was chillin' in his rear garden, drinking under a harbor of grape vines with Wu Yong, aka the Resourceful Star, Gongsun Sheng, the Dragon in the Clouds, and Liu Tang, the Red-Haired Devil. As for the other three members of the gang, the three Ruan (3) brothers, they had returned to their homes in Stone Tablet Village after the group split up their booty from the heist.

A workhand told Chao Gai that Song Jiang was at the door, and Chao Gai asked how many men he had with him. When the answer was none and that Song Jiang had rushed there to see him, Chao Gai figured something was up and hurriedly went out to welcome his friend. After a rushed greeting, Song Jiang took Chao Gai by the hand and ducked into a side room.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Chao Gai asked.

"Brother, you are still in the dark!" Song Jiang said. "I am your devoted friend; that is why I am risking my neck to come save you. That business on Yellow Earth Ridge has been exposed. Bai Sheng has been arrested and is in jail at Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture. He has named the seven of you, and the prefect sent an Inspector He and a group of men to our county with an order from the premier to arrest you guys. They have pegged you as the ringleader. Thank heaven this case landed in my lap. I just told the inspector that the magistrate was taking a nap and had him wait at a teahouse for me while I raced here to warn you. As the old saying goes, 'Of the 36 strategems, the best one is to run away.' You must flee right now. I need to get back and take the inspector to see the magistrate, and the magistrate will no doubt send people here tonight. Don't delay. If you slip up in the slightest, there is nothing I can do. Don't blame me then!"

Chao Gai was shocked. "Brother, I will never forget your great kindness!" he told Song Jiang.

“Don’t worry about that now, just worry about fleeing. Don’t dawdle. I have to go now.”

But Chao Gai held up Song Jiang and said, “Of the seven of us, three of them are the Ruan (3) brothers, and they have already gone back to Stone Tablet Village after taking their share of the loot. The other three men are in the back right now. Come meet them.”

Ok, we don’t really have time for this, but Song Jiang obliged Chao Gai and followed him to the rear garden, where Chao Gai introduced him to Wu Yong, Gongsun Sheng, and Liu Tang. Song Jiang gave them a quick greeting and then rushed out, telling Chao Gai, “Brother, take care, and leave quickly. I’m off.”

He then hopped on his horse, gave it two vigorous whips, and rode back toward Yuncheng County.

After Song Jiang disappeared over the horizon, Chao Gai asked his three comrades, “Do you know who that was?”

“Why did he leave in such a hurry? Who is he?” Wu Yong asked.

“You guys are still in the dark,” Chao Gai explained. “If not for him, our lives would be forfeit!”

His three sworn brothers were taken aback and asked if that meant word had leaked out.

“Thank goodness for that brother of mine,” Chao Gai said. “He risked everything to come warn us. Turns out Bai Sheng has already been arrested and is in prison. He has confessed. The prefect of Jizhou has sent an Inspector He to Yuncheng County with a group of men and orders from the premier to arrest us right away. Thank goodness my friend kept them at a teahouse for a while and rushed here to warn us. But when he returns to the courthouse and processes the paperwork, they will be sending men here to arrest us tonight. What should we do?!”

Wu Yong said, “If not for that guy coming to warn us, we would have all been trapped. Who is our savior?”

“He’s Song Jiang, a magisterial clerk in Yuncheng County,” Chao Gai told him.

"I had only heard of his great name but never met him. Even though we live near him, I have not had the pleasure," Wu Yong said.

Gongsun Sheng and Liu Tang both asked, "Is he the man known on the Jianghu scene as the Timely Rain?"

"The very same," Chao Gai said. "He and I are sworn brothers, but Professor Wu had not met him yet. He truly lives up to his reputation. A true brother."

Ahem. Hey guys, I hate to break up this Song Jiang admiration society meeting, but how about we get back to the reason he came here? Chao Gai now asked Wu Yong, "We are facing a crisis. What should we do?"

"Brother, no need for lengthy discussions. Of the 36 strategems, retreat is the best option."

"That's what Song Jiang told us to do as well, but where should we go?"

"I've already thought about that," Wu Yong said. "Let's pack up a few loads of stuff and head to the Ruan brothers' home in Stone Tablet Village."

"But they are fishermen; how can they take all of us in?"

"Brother, don't you get it? Their village is but a stone's throw away from Liangshan Marsh. Right now, the bandits on Liangshan are thriving. Even the authorities do not dare to mess with them. If we are pressed, we can just go join their gang."

"That's a great idea," Chao Gai said. "But what if they refuse to take us in?"

"We've got plenty of gold and silver," Wu Yong told him. "We'll just share some with them, and they'll take us in."

"It's settled then," Chao Gai said. "Let's move. Professor, you and Liu Tang will take a few of my workhands and take the loads of valuables to the Ruan brothers' home first, and then come back to meet us on land. Brother Gongsun and I will be right behind you once we take care of things here."

So Wu Yong and Liu Tang put the remaining loot from the heist into five or six loads and selected a few workhands to carry them. After they ate a full meal, Wu Yong grabbed his copper chains while Liu Tang took a long-handled broadsword, and they set out with an entourage of about a dozen people, carrying their loot toward Stone Tablet Village.

Meanwhile, Chao Gai and Gongsun Sheng busied themselves with tying up loose ends at the manor. The workhands who did not wish to go with them were given some money and told to go seek another master. The ones who were willing to tag along were told to pack up all the valuables around the estate.

While this was happening, Song Jiang had rushed back into town at Yuncheng County. He hurried back to the teahouse and saw the inspector He Tao waiting by the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Song Jiang said. “I had a relative from my village come to my house to discuss some family business, and it dragged on for a bit.”

He Tao shrugged it off and asked Song Jiang to introduce him to the magistrate, which Song Jiang promptly did, leading him into the courthouse. By now, the magistrate had returned to duty. Song Jiang brought He Tao in and told the men to put up the Keep Out signs so that no outsiders could hear their discussion.

The magistrate was shocked when he read the sealed orders from the prefect. He told Song Jiang, “The premier has sent someone here to wait for a report on this matter. We must dispatch men to go arrest this gang of bandits right away.”

“If we go in broad daylight, they might get wind of it,” Song Jiang said. “We should go at night instead. As soon as we arrest Chao Gai, we’ll be able to learn the whereabouts of the other six men.”

“That Chao Gai is a ward chief at East Bank Village and is reputed to be a man of honor,” the magistrate said. “Why would he be involved in this sort of business?”

But that's a question for later. Right now, the magistrate had to arrest Chao Gai first. So he summoned his two constables, Zhu Tong (2) and Lei Heng. Remember that we met these guys a couple episodes ago, when this story arc first began. Upon receiving their orders, they went with the sheriff and called up 100-some cavalry and infantrymen from the local militia. They also brought along He Tao and the two captains who were part of the gift convoy. The group set out, with the sheriff and the two constables on horseback and armed with broadswords and bows and arrows. They exited through the east gate and rushed toward East Bank Village.

It was about 8 o'clock at night when they approached the village. They first assembled in the temple near the village to hash out their plan of attack.

"Chao Gai's manor is straight ahead," said the constable Zhu Tong, aka the Lord of the Beautiful Beard. "There are two roads connecting to his estate, one in the front and one in the back. If we all attack the front door, he will slip out the back door. If we all go attack the back door, he'll escape from the front. Also, I know that Chao Gai is quite the fighter, and who knows about the other six guys, though no doubt they are not the gentle type. Their backs are up against the wall. If they make a desperate charge with help from their workmen, how can we hold them off? We should use misdirection and throw them into chaos, and then attack. Constable Lei Heng, how about we split up and each take half the men. I'll approach on foot, and hide by the back door. When the signal sounds, you guys just focus on attacking the front door and arrest whomever you come across."

"That sounds like a plan," said Lei Heng, aka the Winged Tiger. "Constable Zhu, you and the sheriff will attack the front, and I will cut off the escape route in the back of the estate."

"No brother, you don't understand," Zhu Tong said. "Chao Gai's estate has three escape routes. I know because I had made a mental note of it in the past. I know my way around those roads, even without a torch. You, on the other hand, don't know the ins and outs back there. It would be no laughing matter if we give ourselves away."

The sheriff agreed with Zhu Tong and told him to take half the men. But Zhu Tong now said he only needed 30. So he took 10 archers and 20 militiamen and went off to swing around to the back of Chao Gai's manor. The sheriff, meanwhile, got back on his horse, accompanied by Lei Heng and the rest of the men, and they rushed toward the front of Chao Gai's home with weapons brimming and torches blazing.

When they were a few hundred yards away from the estate, they suddenly saw plumes of smoke and fire shooting up from inside the walls. The fire was coming from the main parlor, and soon heavy black smoke was billowing and red flames were roaring toward the heavens. The men advanced another dozen steps or so and saw about 40 torches around the door. Lei Heng now hoisted his broadsword, and his men let out a roar as they kicked open the front gates and stormed into the manor. In the courtyard, the place was lit up as bright as day by torches, and in the light of the flames, Lei Heng and his men saw ... no one.

Just then, they heard loud cries coming from the back of the estate, telling the folks who had come in from the front to arrest everyone they saw. But ... umm ... we don't see anyone.

So as you may have guessed, something was up. Remember how Zhu Tong insisted on taking the back door? Well, like seemingly everyone in these parts, he was a friend of Chao Gai's and wanted to help him escape. That's why he told Lei Heng to take the front. But won't you know it, Lei Heng was also trying to help Chao Gai escape, so HE wanted the back door. In the end Zhu Tong won out and so Lei Heng had no choice but to take the front, but he made sure that he caused as much ruckus as he could before storming in, so as to let Chao Gai know they were coming.

Meanwhile, when Zhu Tong arrived at the back of the estate, Chao Gai still wasn't done packing. Chao Gai's men spotted Zhu Tong and company and told their master, "The authorities are here! We have to go NOW!"



So Chao Gai told his men to set the whole place on fire. He, Gongsun Sheng, and about a dozen workmen then let out a battle cry and charged out through the back gates with long broadswords in hand, shouting, "Get in my way and you die! If you want to live, stand aside!"

But just then, Zhu Tong's voice rang out from the darkness. "Chao Gai, stop! I, Zhu Tong, have been waiting for you!"

Chao Gai gave no answer as he was busy fighting his way out. As he approached, Zhu Tong conveniently stepped aside for a moment, opening up a path, which Chao Gai and company promptly took. Chao Gai then told Gongsun Sheng and his workmen to go on ahead, while he brought up the rear himself.

Zhu Tong, meanwhile, told his men to storm into the estate through the backdoor to tell the guys who came in from the front to help apprehend the outlaws. When Lei Heng heard that, he turned around, went back outside and instructed his men to split up and chase after the fugitives. He himself, meanwhile, just kind of pretended to be looking around for people to arrest.

As for Zhu Tong, once he got away from his own men, he chased after Chao Gai. Chao Gai saw him and said, "Constable Zhu, why do you keep chasing me? What did I ever do?!"

What did you ever do? I mean, there's that whole heist thing. But fortunately for Chao Gai, Zhu Tong was not actually chasing him. Looking around to make sure no one else was nearby, Zhu Tong said, "Brother Chao, don't you see what I'm trying to do? I was afraid that Lei Heng would be too stubborn and would not do you any favors, so I tricked him into attacking the front while I waited for you in the back. Didn't you see me step out of your way and let you through? Look, there's only one place for you to go: Liangshan."

"Thank you for saving me!" Chao Gai said. "I will repay you another day!"

While they were keeping up this charade of a chase, they suddenly heard Lei Heng shouting from behind, saying, "Don't let them escape!"

“Don’t worry,” Zhu Tong told Chao Gai. “You just keep going; I will throw him off your scent.”

Zhu Tong turned back and shouted, “Three of the bandits ran down the backroad to the east. Constable Lei, go get them, quick!”

So Lei Heng and his men went east, once again leaving Zhu Tong and Chao Gai by themselves. Zhu Tong kept up the fake pursuit slash real escort for a while, until gradually, Chao Gai disappeared into the darkness. Now, Zhu Tong suddenly went “Oh no I slipped,” and took a tumble. When the sheriff and his men caught up, they helped him to his feet.

“It’s so dark that I couldn’t see where I was going. I slipped and twisted my left leg,” Zhu Tong told them.

“The ringleader got away,” the sheriff said. “What should we do?”

“It’s not that I didn’t try to catch him,” Zhu Tong said. “But it’s really too dark; there was just no way. Besides, none of these militiamen are worth a damn. None of them dared to go forward.”

The sheriff now ordered the rest of the men to give chase, but they were all thinking, “Well, if neither of these two constables could even get close to those outlaws, what the hell are we going to do?”

So they just gave it a half-hearted effort and then came back and said, “It’s so dark. We couldn’t tell which way they went.”

Meanwhile, Lei Heng had also rejoined the pack after a fruitless pursuit. He was thinking to himself, “Zhu Tong is good friends with Chao Gai, so he probably helped him escape. There’s no point in me being the villain. Anyway, I was intending on letting Chao Gai escape, too. It’s just that now he doesn’t owe me anything. Besides, that Chao Gai is not one to be messed with.”

So Lei Heng also said, “These outlaws are too much. There’s no way to catch up to them.”

By the time the group returned to the now-empty manor, it was already 1 a.m. Inspector He Tao was waiting there for them, but when he saw them come back empty-handed after a whole night's pursuit, he went, "What the hell am I going to tell the prefect?!"

So, since everyone you were after got away, what do you do? This being the ancient Chinese legal system, the answer was obvious: You arrest the neighbors, of course. And that's exactly what the sheriff did, hauling a few nearby residents back to Yuncheng County.

Back at the county, the magistrate had been up all night, waiting for word on the mission. When word came, though, he did not like what he heard: All the bandits got away; we just have a few of the neighbors.

Well, you make do with what you got. So the magistrate had the neighbors brought in for questioning. They told him, "Even though we live near Chao Gai, there is still some distance between us and his estate. He often has various fighting men stay with him, but who would've guessed that he would do something like this?"

The magistrate, though, kept pressing and demanded to know where Chao Gai might have run off to. One of the neighbors said, "If you want to know that, you can ask one of his workhands."

"But he took all his workhands with him," the magistrate said.

"No, some didn't want to go and are still in the area," the neighbor informed him.

Aha! Finally, a break! So the magistrate immediately dispatched some men to follow that neighbor back to the village. Within four hours, they returned with two of Chao Gai's former workhands. Initially, the two men tried to deny any knowledge of the affair, but that's nothing a little torture won't fix. A few rounds of caning later, they fessed up and said, "Chao Gai was plotting with six people. We just recognized one of them -- a local scholar named Professor Wu who was serving as a teacher in the village. Another man was a Daoist priest named Gongsun Sheng. There was also a big, dark guy whose

last name was Liu. As for the other three, we don't know them. Professor Wu recruited them. We heard that they were three brothers named Ruan who lived in Stone Tablet Village and fished for a living. Everything we've said is the truth."

The magistrate obtained a written confession and then handed the two workhands over to He Tao, along with a reply to the prefect's orders so that He Tao could report back to his boss. Song Jiang, meanwhile, took care of the neighbors who had been hauled in, basically posting bail for them so they could go home and await the outcome of the case.

Upon returning to Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture, He Tao brought the two workhands to see the prefect. He told the prefect what happened and then repeated what the workhands had said. The prefect then ordered that Bai Sheng, the wine-peddler in the heist who had been arrested earlier, be hauled out from his jail cell and questioned again. Seeing that the truth was already coming out, Bai Sheng confessed and told them the identities of all seven conspirators. The prefect then threw him back in his cell and told He Tao to take some men and go to Stone Tablet Village to arrest the bandits.

To see if this fishing expedition turns out any better than the last one, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, what do you do when you have a bunch of uninvited guests show up at your doorstep with more money than you can count, asking to be let in? Join us next time. Thanks for listening.