

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 41.

Last time, Wu Song avenged his brother's murder and was sent to the penal colony at Mengzhou (4,1) Prefecture. Along the way, he and his two guards came across a black tavern, the type of place that drugged travelers, killed them, and chopped them up to serve to other travelers as meat. But Wu Song caught wise to the place pretty quickly and foiled their attempt to drug him. In the process, he became acquainted with the husband and wife team that owned the place, Zhang Qing the Gardener and his wife Sun Erniang, the Female Yaksha.

All three being gallant heroes, they became fast friends. As Zhang Qing invited Wu Song to sit down and chat, Wu Song asked him to first revive the two guards who were escorting Wu Song to the penal colony.

So Zhang Qing took Wu Song into the kitchen in the back of the tavern. On the walls hung several human skins, and six or seven human legs dangled from the rafters. Lovely place, really, and not being subtle about what they are doing at all. Wu Song saw the two unconscious guards stripped naked and laid out on the butcher's table, awaiting slaughter.

"Brother, please bring them around," Wu Song said.

But Zhang Qing asked, "Constable, what crime have you committed? Where are you being exiled to?"

So Wu Song recounted his story, which prompted Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang to shower him with praise. Zhang Qing then said, "I have something to say, but I don't know how you'd like it."

"What is it? Just tell me."

"I harbor no ill intentions, but rather than going to to the penal colony to suffer, why don't you just let us kill these two guards and you can stay here for a while. Then, if you're willing to become a bandit, I will personally escort you to Double Dragon Mountain to join us with Lu Zhishen and Yang Zhi. What do you think?"

“I appreciate you looking out for me, brother,” Wu Song said. “But there’s just one thing. I only take on bullies. These two guards have treated me with the utmost care on this journey. If I kill them, even heaven would not forgive me. If you really respect me, then help me bring them around and do not harm them.”

“Constable, since you’re such a man of honor, I will wake them.”

So Zhang Qing had his men take the two guards off the butcher’s table, and Sun Erniang brought them the antidote. Zhang Qing grabbed the guards by the ear and poured the antidote down their throats. Within an hour, both guards started to come around as if they had just awoken from a dream.

Looking at Wu Song, they asked, “How did we end up passed out drunk? What great wine they have here! We didn’t even drink that much and we were out! We need to remember this place so we can stop in here for more on the way back.”

Wu Song started laughing, and Zhang Qing and Erniang also broke into a raucous laughter. The two guards didn’t know what they were laughing at, but since everyone else was laughing, they decided to join in with a laugh, too. And so everyone had a good laugh, and Zhang Qing’s men went to prepare a chicken and a goose. Zhang Qing had them set up a table and some benches underneath the harbor of grapes behind the tavern, and then he invited his three guests to dine with him.

Wu Song asked the two guards to sit at the head of the table, while he and Zhang Qing sat across from them and Sun Erniang sat to the side. Zhang Qing’s men then kept the wine and food flowing, and Zhang Qing asked Wu Song to drink to his heart’s content. When night fell, Zhang Qing showed Wu Song the two steel knives that he picked up from the unfortunate mendicant monk his wife had drugged and killed a while back. They were indeed good knives that must have taken quite a bit of effort to craft.

They then chatted about the deeds of the various heroes on the jianghu scene, the looting, the pillaging, the killing, you know, the usual honorable stuff. While they were chatting, the two guards’ mouths grew wider and wider, until they were just looking on with mouths agape. And soon they were

kowtowing to Wu Song and Zhang Qing. I guess we shouldn't count on them to be repeat customers here again.

"You two have taken good care of me," Wu Song told them. "It would not be right for me to harm you. Don't be alarmed at the talk among us heroes from the jianghu scene. We are not the type to harm good people. Just drink. Tomorrow when we get to Mengzhou, I will express my gratitude."

Uhh, not the type to harm good people, huh? That sure isn't what it sounded like from where those guards were sitting. But with Wu Song's assurances, they calmed down, and the night passed uneventfully.

The next day, Wu Song wanted to resume his journey, but Zhang Qing refused to let him go. In fact, Zhang Qing kept him at the tavern for three days. Wu Song was touched by the kindness of Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang, and so he became sworn brothers with Zhang Qing, who was five years older. Then, at last, Wu Song took his leave. Zhang Qing set up a feast to see him off, and gave him 10 taels of silver. He also slipped the two guards a few taels of loose silver as well. These may be good, conscientious guards, but it never hurts to push a little silver around. Wu Song, never one to care for money, gave his 10 taels to the guards as well. Then, he put his cangue back on, and the guards reattached the paper seal. They took their leave of their hosts and resumed the journey to Mengzhou Prefecture.

They arrived in town before noon and went straight to the prefectural offices. The prefect reviewed the paperwork and issued a reply for the guards to take back. The prefect then sent Wu Song to the penal colony.

When they arrived at the penal colony, Wu Song looked up and saw a plaque that said "The Stockade of Peace and Quiet." The guards escorted Wu Song to a room and then took their leave, went to take care of the paperwork, and started back home.

As for Wu Song, while he waited in the room, a dozen or so prisoners dropped by to visit the new inmate. They told him, "Hero, you're new here. If you have letters from people with connections and silver in your bundle, then get them out and have them on hand. In a little while, when the jailer comes to get you, give them to him. That way, they'll go easy on you when they give you the prowess-killing caning."

Now as I've mentioned before, this prowess-killing caning was a standard welcome for any prisoner sent to a penal colony. They would usually get 100 strokes, and this was a most dreaded punishment, because how bad it ends up being depended greatly on how much bribe you could push around.

"If you don't give them any bribes, then they're going to be vicious," the other inmates told Wu Song. "We are prisoners just like you, so we wanted to give you a heads up. As the saying goes, 'When the rabbit dies, the fox mourns, as all are of the same animal kingdom.' We were afraid you won't know what's expected, being new here, so we came to tell you."

"Thank you all for letting me know," Wu Song said. "I do have some stuff. If that jailer asks for them nicely, then I'll give him some. But if he threatens me, then I don't have a single coin for him."

"Hero, don't do that," the inmates cautioned. "As the old saying goes, 'Fear not officials, except when they officiate over you.' Also, 'When you're under a low roof, you have no choice but to bow.' Be careful!"

Just then, someone said, "The head jailer is coming!" and everyone scattered.

Alone again, Wu Song opened his bundle and sat down. The head jailer came in and said, "Where's that new inmate?"

"That'd be me," Wu Song said.

The jailer looked at him and said, "Well you've got eyes. Do I really have to say it? You're the guy who killed the tiger on Jingyang Ridge and became a constable in Yanggu County, so I figured you knew the drill. And yet you're so slow! Well, here, you won't even be able to beat up a cat!"

"[Scoff] If you're asking me for a bribe, I've got nothing for you, except a pair of fists," Wu Song shot back. "I do have some money, but I'm keeping that to buy wine for myself. I'd like to see what you're gonna do. What? Are you going to send me back to Yanggu County?"

Those words sent the jailer stomping out in a fury. Some of the inmates now came back and said, "Hero, you stood up to him, but you're gonna pay for it in a bit! He's going to talk to the warden now; they're going to kill you!"

"[Scoff] I'm not afraid! Let's see how they'll handle me. I'll be civilized if they are. But if they want to pick a fight, I'll answer in kind!"

Just then, three or four guards showed up and loudly summoned Wu Song.

"I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere! No need to shout!" Wu Song yelled back.

The guards took Wu Song to the main hall, where the warden sat. Five or six soldiers brought Wu Song forward. The jailer told them to remove his cangue, and then he said to Wu Song, "You, prisoner, do you know that the founding emperor's laws command that every new inmate must receive 100 strokes? Guards, hold him down."

"No need to get all worked up," Wu Song said. "If you want to beat me, then beat me. No need to hold me down. If I try to dodge a single blow, then I'm no hero, and all the previous strokes won't count and you can start over. If I make so much as a peep, then I'm not a real man!"

The folks standing around couldn't help but chuckle and say to each other, "That lunatic must want to die. We'll see how much he can take."

But Wu Song wasn't done. He turned to them and said, "If you're gonna beat me, then beat me hard. Don't spare me at all, or it won't be any fun." And that prompted more laughter.

Still chuckling, a couple guards grabbed their staffs and prepared to deliver the blows. But just then, a man standing next to the warden intervened. This guy was about average height and looked to be 25

or so. He had a clear, fair complexion, and sported a mustache and goatee. He wore a black silk tunic. His head was wrapped in a white handkerchief, and one of his arms was in a sling made of white silk.

This man leaned over and whispered something in the warden's ear, and the warden said, "Wu Song, were you sick on the way here?"

Now, this was usually the cue that the warden was trying to let you off light. All you had to do was say oh yeah I was really sick, still am actually, and then the warden would just be like, ok we'll just postpone this caning. Remember that's what Lin Chong the Panther Head got when he was exiled to a penal colony. But Wu Song wasn't playing that game.

"I wasn't sick on the way here," he told the warden. "I was able to drink, eat, and walk."

The warden, though, kept up his end of the charade. "This guy must have been sick on the journey here," he said to everyone else. "I could tell by his complexion that he had just recovered. We'll postpone his caning for now."

The two guards standing next to Wu Song now whispered to him, "Quick, just say you're sick. His lordship is trying to help you. Just play along."

"No, no, no! Just go ahead and get the caning over with!" Wu Song said. "I don't want to have that hanging over my head. It'll bug the hell out of me!"

Everybody, including the warden, couldn't help but laugh. I mean, this was a first.

"I think this guy must've fallen ill and hasn't broken a sweat yet," the warden said as he chuckled. "That's why he's talking nonsense. Ignore him and just lock him up in a single room."

A few guards escorted Wu Song back to his single room, and then the inmates came by and asked, "Did you have a connection who wrote a letter to the warden?"

"No."

“In that case, sparing you the caning must mean they mean to do you harm, and that they’ll come finish you off tonight!”

“How are they gonna finish me off?”

“When night comes, they might feed you some dry brown rice and rotten fish. And then they’ll take you to the dungeon, tie you up, roll you up in a straw mat, stuff all your openings, and stand you up on your head against a wall. And you’ll be dead in less than half a watch. That’s called the ‘upside down bowl.’ ”

“Hmm. What else have they got?”

“They might also tie you up and pin you under a sack of sand, and you’ll also be dead before long. That’s called the ‘sack of earth.’ ”

“What other tricks might they have?”

“Um, well, those are the only two really serious ones. The other stuff isn’t that bad.”

Just then, a guard came in with a tray and asked, “Which of you is the newly arrived Constable Wu?”

“That’s me. What do you want?”

“Our warden sent me to deliver some food for you.”

The guard set the tray down, and Wu Song saw that it held a big jug of wine, a plate of meat, and a plate of noodles, along with a big bowl of sauce.”

“Hmm, they must be feeding me before they finish me off,” Wu Song thought to himself. “Fine, I’ll eat this and then see what happens.”

So Wu Song promptly emptied the jug of wine and polished off all the food, and the guard then took away the empty plates. Wu Song now sat in the room and chuckled, mumbling, “Let’s see how they’re gonna do me!”

As evening descended, the same guard returned with another tray.

“What are you doing here now?” Wu Song asked.

“I’m delivering dinner for you,” the guard replied as he laid out another big jug of wine, a few plates of vegetables, a big platter of pan-fried meat, a bowl of fish soup, and a big bowl of rice. Well, as far as last meals went, this was a pretty good spread.

“They must be coming to finish me off after this,” Wu Song thought to himself. “Eh, whatever! I might as well die with a full belly. Let me eat this and then worry about it.”

And so he ate and drank, and when he was done, the guard once again took away the empty bowls and plates.

A few moments later, that guard returned with a second guard. One of them carried a bathtub, and the other a big bucket of hot water.

“Constable, please take a bath.”

“What? They’re giving me a bath before they kill me?” Wu Song thought to himself. “Whatever. I’m not afraid of them, so let me wash up first.”

Once the guards filled the tub, Wu Song jumped in and had a nice soak. They then helped him towel off and get dressed. One guard poured out the bath water and took away the tub, while the other hung up a mosquito net and laid a rattan mat and a woven bamboo pillow on the bed so that it would be nice and cool when Wu Song lay down. The guard then said good night and left.

Umm, what the hell is this? That’s what Wu Song was wondering as he bolted the door. But then he just figured whatever, let’s see what happens. So he plopped down on the bed and went to sleep.

The night passed uneventfully. The next morning, shortly after Wu Song opened his door, he saw the guard from last night come in with a wash basin of hot water for him to wash his face and rinse his mouth. The guard then came back with a comb and combed Wu Song’s hair into a neat bun and bound it

with a headscarf. Another guard then came in with breakfast, which consisted of vegetables, a big bowl of meat and broth, and a big bowl of rice.

“You do whatever; I’m gonna eat,” Wu Song thought to himself.

After breakfast, they served him tea. After tea, the guard who brought breakfast came in and said, “Constable, this is not a good place to rest. Please come with me to another room, where it’ll be easier to tend to your needs.”

“Ah, HERE we go,” Wu Song thought. “I’ll go with him and see what happens.”

One of the guards gathered up Wu Song’s belongings and bedspread, while the other led Wu Song out of the single room. They headed down the hall and pushed open the doors to another room. This one had a tidy, clean bed, and all the furniture in the room were brand new. As Wu Song looked around, he thought, “I figured they were taking me to the dungeon, but they brought me here instead. This is actually a lot nicer than the last room.”

So Wu Song settled into the room. When lunchtime approached, the same guard again came in with a box in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. He opened the box and took out four types of fruits, a chicken, and a heap of steamed buns. He tore up the chicken and poured wine for Wu Song.

“Why is he doing this?” Wu Song couldn’t help but wonder.

And that evening, it was more of the same, as the guards brought him a nice dinner and then helped him bathe again before leaving him to rest.

“I thought it was gonna go the way the other inmates told me,” Wu Song thought. “But why are they treating me so well?”

The third day came, and it was just like the previous two. After another splendid breakfast, Wu Song left his room and went outside for a walk around the penal colony. He saw the other inmates slaving away, carrying water, chopping wood, and tending to other odd jobs. The sun was beating down on

them, and there was nowhere to find shelter. Wu Song approached some of the inmates with his hands behind his back and asked, "Why are you guys working in this heat?"

Those inmates looked at each other, laughed, and said, "Hero, you don't understand. Being assigned to this work is like heaven on earth for us! How would we dare to dream about sitting down in the shade? The inmates who don't have money for bribes are all locked up in heavy chains in the dungeon, barely alive and praying for death."

After that little chat, Wu Song took a stroll around the penal colony's temple. Next to the urn for burning written prayers stood a huge stone with a hole in the middle. This was used as a base for a flagpole, but there was no flagpole in it at the moment. Wu Song sat down on this stone for a while and then went back to his room to ponder his situation. Just then, the guard showed up with more food and wine.

And so it went for several days, and every day was the same thing: The guard brought Wu Song good food and wine, and Wu Song saw no evidence of any ill intent, which left him quite befuddled. Finally, one day when the guard brought him lunch, Wu Song stopped him from opening the lunch box and asked, "Who's your boss? Why do they keep sending me food and wine?"

"Like I told you before," the guard replied, "I am a servant in the warden's household."

"Tell me, who is telling you to bring me food and wine every day? What happens if I eat their food?"

"The warden's son told me to bring you food."

"I am a criminal and haven't done anything for the warden, so why is he sending me food?"

"That I don't know. But the young master said he'll explain after a few months."

"Well that's strange. He can't be trying to fatten me up before he kills me. What kind of BS riddle is this? As long as the story behind this food is not clear, I can't eat or drink in peace. Tell me, what kind of

man is your young master? Where has he met me before? Only then will I eat his food and drink his wine.”

“A few days ago when you first got here, he was the one in the hall with his head wrapped in a white handkerchief and his arm in a sling.”

“The one standing beside the warden, wearing a black tunic?”

“Right. That’s him, the warden’s son.”

“When I was about to receive my caning, he was the one who intervened and spared me, right?”

“Exactly. The young master spoke to his father and asked him to spare you.”

“Well that’s odd. I’m from Qinghe (1,2) County, and he’s from Mengzhou Prefecture. We’ve never met, and yet he’s showing me such respect. There must be a reason. Tell me, what’s your young master’s name?”

“His name is Shi (1) En (1). He’s skilled at combat, and everyone calls him the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub.”

“Hmm, he sounds like a good man,” Wu Song said. “Go invite him here to meet with me. Then I can eat his food. If you don’t bring him here to see me, then I’m not going to eat anything.”

“Sir, the young master instructed me to not tell you too much, and that he’ll come meet you in a few months.”

“Nonsense! Just go invite him already and have him come meet me.”

The guard was too afraid to do that, but that just riled up Wu Song even more. Sensing that Wu Song was getting impatient, the guard had no choice but to go find his young master.

A good long while later, Shi En appeared and bowed to Wu Song. Wu Song hurriedly returned the gesture and said, “I am a prisoner under your jurisdiction. I’ve never had the honor of meeting you. A few days ago, you saved me from a caning, and then you’ve been treating me to good food and wine

every day. And you haven't given me any assignments. I'm receiving rewards without rendering any service. That makes me uneasy."

Shi En replied, "Brother, I have long admired you, and your name fills my ears like thunder. I just hate that we had not met before because of the distance between us. But now, I'm fortunate to have you here and wanted to make your acquaintance. But I had no suitable gifts, so I was too embarrassed to meet you."

Wu Song asked, "Just now your man told me that you weren't going to talk to me until a few months from now. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Oh that country bumpkin is so useless," Shi En said. "How could he tell you that?!"

"Young master, don't give me that ceremonious crap. You've got me bursting with curiosity. What do you need from me?"

"[Sigh] Since that bumpkin has already let it slip, then I guess I have to tell you. Because you're a real man, I do have one thing I was hoping to ask for your help with. Only you can take care of this matter. But you've had a long journey and haven't recovered fully yet. Please rest for another four or five months. Once you've returned to full strength, then I'll tell you about it in detail."

Wu Song laughed out loud and said, "Young master, listen to me. Last year I suffered from malaria for three months, and even then, I just needed a few punches to kill a tiger on Jingyang Ridge, while I was drunk no less."

"No, now is not the right time to tell you," Shi En insisted. "Let's wait till you've recovered fully, and only then do I dare to tell you."

"So you think I'm weak? In that case, I saw that huge stone base by the temple yesterday. How much does that thing weigh?"

"Probably four or five hundred catties," Shi En said. And by the way, 500 catties is about 550 pounds.

“Let’s go see if I can move it,” Wu Song said.

“Let’s have some wine first,” Shi En suggested.

“Nah. Save it for when we come back.”

So the two went to the temple. All the inmates out working in the compound saw the warden’s son walking around with Wu Song, so they all bowed and paid their respects. Wu Song gave the stone base a nudge and laughed.

“This soft living is spoiling me; I’ll never be able to pick it up,” he joked.

“This stone weighs 500 catties. How can you take it so lightly?” Shi En said.

“Young master, you really think I can’t lift it?” Wu Song kept laughing. “Everyone, step back and watch me.”

He then took off his shirt and tied it around his waist. He wrapped his arms around the stone base, and with one jolt, lifted it up like it was a styrofoam rock from the set of a sci-fi TV show. Then he turned and slammed it back down on the ground, making an indentation almost a foot deep.

All the inmates were stunned, but Wu Song was just getting warmed up. He now put his right hand under the stone and with one motion tossed the stone about 7 feet up into the air. He then caught it in midair with both hands and gently placed it back in its original position. When he turned to face Shi En and the other inmates, they saw that his face wasn’t red, and his heart wasn’t racing. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

Shi En clutched Wu Song and fell to his knees.

“Brother, you’re no mortal! You’re truly a god!” Shi En exclaimed, backed up by a chorus of agreement from the inmates.

Shi En then invited Wu Song to his private residence and asked him to sit.

“Young master, now you HAVE to tell me what you need me to do for you,” Wu Song said.

“Please have a seat for a moment. Once my father has come and met you, then I can tell you.”

Oh c'mon man !! Enough of this!! To see if Wu Song would ever find out what the hell Shi En wanted from him, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Wu Song assumes the role of a drunken brawler. I know, that's TOTALLY out of character for him. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!