

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 42.

Last time, Wu Song arrived at the penal colony in Mengzhou Prefecture, where to his surprise, he was treated with the utmost courtesy. First, they spared him the customary caning that new inmates were supposed to get. Then, he was set up in a nice room and treated to good wine and food every day. All this, without a single coin exchanging hands. In fact, he had gone out of his way to insult the jailer and demand that the warden give him the caning, and yet here he was, living a cushy life while all the other inmates labored under the scorching sun.

Eventually, Wu Song couldn't stand it anymore and forced his attendant to tell him what was going on. The attendant let slip that the warden's son was the reason for this fine treatment, and so Wu Song demanded to see him. The son, Shi En, came to see Wu Song and said that he did have a favor to ask, but refused to tell Wu Song what it was, insisting that they wait for a few more months until Wu Song had regained his strength.

As we pick up where we left off, Shi En was doing another of his "Oh let's wait until after this other thing and only then can I tell you" tease. Wu Song was in no mood for that. I mean c'mon, I just lifted a frickin' 500-pound rock to show you how strong I am.

"Listen," Wu Song snapped, "If you want someone to do something for you, you can't be all wishy-washy like a woman! That's no way to get things done. Even if it's something that requires drawing blood, I'll do it for you. If any of my words are false, then I am not human!"

"Brother, please sit, and I'll tell you in detail," Shi En said.

"Young master, don't be so long-winded. Just tell me the important parts."

"Ok. Ever since my youth, I've been learning how to fight from masters on the jianghu scene," Shi En explained. "People around this prefecture gave me the nickname the Golden-Eyed Tiger Cub. Outside the east gate of this town, there is a market village called the Pleasure Forest. All the merchants from Shandong and Hebei Provinces go there to do business. There are more than 100 inns and about 30

gambling houses and money exchanges. With my own skills and the help of about 90 tough inmates, I opened a tavern in the Pleasure Forest. Every business there pays me a regular tribute, and even singing girls who pass through have to come pay their respects to me before they can ply their trade there. With all the businesses there, money kept flowing in. We would end up with two or three hundred taels of silver every month.

“But then, a Commandant Zhang was assigned here to command the stockade garrison. He brought with him a man named Jiang (3) Zhong (1). That guy is huge, so he got the nickname Jiang Menshen (2,2), or Jiang the Gate Idol. And he’s not just big, but also a good fighter too. He’s especially skilled at wrestling and scrumming. He boasted that he spent three years competing on Mount Tai (4) and never met his match, and that there’s no one like him in all the land. He tried to take over my business. I won’t let him, so he beat me up, to the point where I was laid up in bed for two months. That’s why I was all bandaged up when you saw me the day you arrived. I wanted to round up a group of men and go fight it out with him, but he has the soldiers from Commandant Zhang’s troops. If we start a melee, it would cause dissention with the stockade garrison. So I haven’t been able to avenge this wrong. I’ve long heard that you are a real man. If you could somehow help me get this off my chest, I would die without regret. But I was afraid you would be weakened from your journey, so I wanted to let you recover for a few months before I mentioned it. But my servant slipped up and told you, so I have no choice but to tell you the truth.”

So in case you missed it, let’s back up a bit. So a bully had moved in and taken over Shi En’s business by force. But what WAS that business? What do you call a setup where all the other shops had to pay you “tribute”, and the entertainers had to come grease your palms before you would let them work in these parts? Oh that’s right, a protection racket! So honestly, it sounds like we have a mob war going on here, and Shi En kind of strikes me as the Fredo of the family.

So, our honorable hero with unimpeachable character has just been asked to help someone take back their protection racket from a bully. Which side of this mess sounds like the lesser of two evils? Well, when Wu Song heard Shi En's story, he laughed out loud and asked, "How many arms and heads does that Jiang Menshen have?"

"Just one head and two arms. How could he have any more than that?" Shi En said, rather puzzled at the question.

Wu Song laughed again and said, "Oh, from the way you were describing him, I thought he must have three heads and six arms or something. If that were the case, then I might be afraid of him. But if he's just like everyone else, with one head and two arms, then what reason would I have to fear him?"

"It's just that I was weak and no match for him," Shi En said, which, yeah, just sounds so pathetic.

"I'm not bragging," Wu Song said, "but my skills have only ever been used to beat up bullies and unjust men. Well, since you've told me the story, what the hell are we still doing here? Take the wine with us and let's go right now. Watch me do him like I did the tiger. If I beat him too hard and kill him, I'll pay for it with my own life."

"Brother, please sit for a moment," Shi En said. "Wait for my father to get here, and then we should proceed cautiously. Tomorrow, let me send someone to go check out the situation. If Jiang Menshen is at home, then we can go the day after. If he's not home, then we'll worry about it later. If we give away our plan by going there when he's not in, then he'll have us at a disadvantage."

"Young master, no wonder he beat you up!" Wu Song said impatiently. "You don't act like a man at all! If we're gonna go, then let's go already! What's all this wait-till-tomorrow crap?! Let's go! Even if he's ready for us, who the hell cares?!"

Just as Shi En was struggling to keep Wu Song at bay, his father, the warden, appeared from behind the screen and said, "Hero, I've been listening for a while. It is my good fortune to make your

acquaintance, and you have parted the clouds for my foolish son. Please come join me in our private quarters for a moment.”

Wu Song followed him inside and the warden asked him to sit, but Wu Song said, “I am but an inmate; how would I dare to sit in your presence?”

“Hero, say no such thing. My foolish son was lucky to have met you. Don’t be too humble.”

So Wu Song thanked the warden and sat down across from him, but Shi En remained standing.

“Young master, why are you standing?” Wu Song asked.

“Since the hero has asked you to sit, and there are no outsiders here, just go ahead,” the warden told his son, so Shi En sat down as well.

The servants then set up a feast, and the warden personally poured a cup of wine for Wu Song and said, “Sir, everyone admires your heroism. My foolish son started his business at the Pleasure Forest not for greed, but merely to bolster our prefecture’s prestige.”

Umm, ok, sure. I’m missing the part where running a protection racket increases the allure of a place, but sure let’s roll with it.

The warden continued, “That Jiang Menshen took that place from us with his brute strength. No one but you can avenge this wrong. If you do not think too little of my son, then please empty this cup and receive four bows from him to recognize you as his elder brother and express his respect for you.”

You know, I can’t imagine Wu Song being all that jazzed about this, given his reaction to Shi En so far. But whatever the case, he said the proper thing, which was, “What talent do I have to be deserving of such courtesy? It’s too much!”

But nonetheless, Wu Song drank the wine and accepted four bows from Shi En and then Wu Song returned the gesture. I guess taking on a weak little brother was a small price to pay for wine. And Wu Song certainly had his fill of wine that day. In fact, he got so drunk that they had to have a servant help him back to his room to rest.

The next day, Shi En and his father talked it over and decided that Wu Song must be hung over, so they better put their vengeance quest on hold for another day. Shi En went to tell Wu Song that oh yeah we sent a scout and they found out Jiang Menshen wasn't at home, so we'll have to wait till tomorrow.

"I guess tomorrow is ok," Wu Song said. "It's just that I have sit on this rage for another day."

After breakfast and tea, Shi En invited Wu Song to go for a stroll around the stockade, and then they went to a guest room and talked shop about martial arts and sparred a bit. Around noon, Shi En invited Wu Song to his residence and treated him to quite a few cups of wine. Then, over lunch, Wu Song was all geared up for more wine, but Shi En just kept putting food in front of him, but no wine. That left Wu Song a little miffed.

After lunch, Wu Song went back to his room, and the two guys who had been tending him came again to help him take a bath. Wu Song asked them, "Why did your young master just give me meat but not much wine today?"

"To tell you the truth, constable," the servants said, "this morning the warden and the young master talked it over and decided to not let you go fight today. They were worried you would be hung over after last night and would mess it up. That's why they didn't dare to bring out a lot of wine today. They need you for the important mission tomorrow."

"Ah, so they were worried that if I'm drunk I would mess up their important thing," Wu Song said.

"Exactly," the servants told him.

That night, Wu Song pined for morning to come, and when it finally did, he washed up, put on a headscarf, a brown tunic, a red silk waist sash, leg wrappings that went up to his knees, and hemp sandals. He covered up the criminal tattoo on his face with a small bandage. Shi En then invited him over again for breakfast.

After breakfast, it was time to hit the road, and Shi En said, "There are horses in the stable in the back."

"I don't have bound feet, why do I need to ride a horse?" Wu Song scoffed. "But you must agree to one condition."

"Brother, whatever it is, just tell me and I'll agree."

"Once we leave town, we must operate on the principle of 'Don't pass a flag without having three.' "

"What does that mean?"

"Listen up," Wu Song said with a laugh. "If you want me to beat up Jiang Menshen, then once we leave town, whenever we come across a tavern, you must buy me three bowls of wine. Otherwise, we will not pass the flag outside the tavern."

When Shi En heard that, he said, "That Pleasure Forest is about 5 miles outside the east gate. There are probably more than a dozen taverns on the way. If you drink three bowls at each place, that's about 35 bowls. What would we do if you got drunk before we even arrive at our destination?"

Wu Song laughed out loud and told him, "You are worried I won't be able to fight when I'm drunk, but actually, if I have zero wine in me, I have zero skills. If I'm 10 percent drunk, then I have 10 percent skills. 50 percent drunk, 50 percent skills. When I'm totally drunk, I have strength that seems to come from nowhere. If I was drunk, how could I have killed that tiger on Jingyang Ridge? I need to be trashed; only then would I have the strength and spirit."

"Oh, I didn't know that was the case," Shi En said. "We have plenty of good wine here. I was just worried that you would mess up if you're drunk, so I didn't dare to bring it out last night and let you drink your fill. Since you actually fight better when you're drunk, then I can have two servants go on ahead with our own wine and some food and wait for us. And we can drink as we go."

"Now you're talking!" Wu Song said. "I need some courage to take on Jiang Menshen. Without wine, how can I show off my skills? Watch me knock him on his butt and let everyone have a good laugh!"

So Shi En sent two servants on ahead with the wine and food, along with some money. The old warden also discreetly picked out a dozen or so stout men and told them to follow at a distance to serve as backup if needed.

Wu Song and Shi En then left the stockade and went out the east gate of the prefectural seat. They had gone only a few hundred paces when they saw a tavern on the side of the road, with its flag bearing the character for wine hanging under the eaves. The two servants who had gone on ahead were waiting there. Shi En and Wu Song sat down, and the servants had already laid out a spread and now brought over a bowl of wine for Wu Song.

“I don’t want small bowls. Bring the big bowls, and give me three of them.” Wu Song demanded.

So the servants supersized his drink and Wu Song did not hesitate, quickly emptying three bowls and then getting up to go. As Shi En followed him, the two servants hurriedly packed up all their stuff and rushed on ahead again.

“That just whetted my appetite. Let’s go!” Wu Song said with a laugh.

It was the seventh month of the year. Although an autumn breeze was blowing, the heat of summer was still lingering in the air. Wu Song and Shi En unfastened their tunics as they walked. About another quarter mile later, they came across another tavern in the middle of nowhere. As they approached its door, Shi En paused and said, “This is just a rustic village wine shop. Does it count as a tavern?”

Wu Song was like, really? You’re gonna try that on me?

“It doesn’t matter if the wine’s any good. If it’s wine, then we’ll drink three bowls. Otherwise we won’t go.”

So they sat down and drank another three bowls and then resumed. And less than a mile later, they came across another tavern. And then another, and another, and another. Soon enough, they had

passed more than 10 places, and Wu Song chugged three bowls of wine at each stop. Shi En looked at him and saw that he wasn't totally trashed, yet.

"How much farther is it to the Pleasure Forest?" Wu Song asked.

"Not far. It's that grove up ahead."

"In that case, just wait for me somewhere out of the way. I'll go find him myself."

"Good idea," Shi En said. "I have a place to go. Brother, please be careful and don't estimate him."

"No problem. Just have your servants come with me. If there are more taverns ahead, I still need to drink."

So Shi En went off to find a safe place to wait for word, while Wu Song and the servants kept going. Another mile later, Wu Song had drunken another 10 bowls or so. It was now noon, and even though it was hot, a slight breeze was blowing. Wu Song was feeling all that wine, so he unbuttoned his tunic. Now, he was just about half drunk at this point, but he was acting like he was totally trashed as he staggered toward the Pleasure Forest.

"Jiang Menshen's tavern is straight ahead at that intersection," the servants pointed out.

"Since we're here, you guys go hide far away. Wait till I beat him up before you come over."

While the servants scampered away, Wu Song staggered to the back of the grove. There he saw a huge, muscular man, wearing a white tunic and holding a fly swatter, sitting in a folding armchair in the shade of a locust tree. He had big round eyes and yellow whiskers.

"That big guy must be Jiang Menshen," Wu Song thought to himself as he glanced at the man while continuing to act drunk.

He stumbled on for another 50 steps and arrived at the big tavern at the intersection. A flagpole stood in front, with a banner that said "Riverside View". Attached to a green rail in front of the door



were two gold-spangled banners. One said, "In drunkenness the universe is large," and the other read, "In the wine pot the days are long."

Off to the side of the tavern was a shed that held a butcher's table, a chopping block, knives, and skewers. On the other side of the tavern was another shed that housed a stove and steamer for cooking buns. Inside the tavern was a row of three giant vats of wine, half buried in the ground. Each vat was half-filled with wine. In the middle of the tavern was a counter, behind which sat a pretty young woman. She was Jiang Menshen's new concubine and used to be an opera singer in the pleasure houses on the west side of town.

Wu Song now staggered into the tavern and sat down on a bench by a table. He put both hands on the table and stared unblinkingly at the woman behind the counter. Noticing this, the woman turned away in annoyance.

Wu Song then glanced around the tavern and saw five or six waiters. He pounded the table and shouted, "Where is the host?!"

A lead waiter came over, looked at him, and said, "Sir, how much wine would you like?"

"Bring me two horns for a taste first."

So the waiter went to the counter and asked the woman for two horns of wine. He poured them into a bucket and heated up a bowl for Wu Song.

"Here sir, have a taste," he said as he handed the bowl to Wu Song.

Wu Song picked up the bowl, took a sniff, and immediately started shaking his head. "No good! No good! Give me something different!"

The waiter saw that he was dealing with a drunk, so he just went back to the counter and told the woman, "Mistress, just give him something else."

A minute later, the waiter returned with another bowl of wine. Wu Song took a sip and yelled, "This is crap too! Go get me something different right now, and I'll spare you!"

The waiter swallowed his annoyance and returned to the counter, telling the woman, "Mistress, please get him something else. Let's not sink to his level. He's drunk and looking for a fight. Just give him some of the really good stuff."

So Jiang Menshen's concubine scooped out some top-shelf liquor and the waiter brought a bowl over to Wu Song. He tried it and said, "Now this is more like it."

But then, with his next breath, he asked the waiter, "What's your master's last name?"

"His last name is Jiang (3)," the waiter answered.

"Well why the hell isn't it Li?!"

The woman behind the counter finally had heard enough and said, "Where did this drunk bastard come from? He's looking for trouble!"

The waiter tried to calm her down and said, "He looks like some country bumpkin from elsewhere. Don't listen to his BS."

"What did you say?!" Wu Song scowled.

"Oh we're just talking amongst ourselves, sir," the waiter quickly said. "Don't mind us. Just enjoy your wine."

But Wu Song was looking to stir up trouble, so he said, "Hey waiter, tell that woman behind the counter to come drink with me."

"Stop it with your nonsense!" the waiter scolded him. "She's our master's wife."

"So what? It won't kill her to have a drink with me!"

Jiang Menshen's concubine was pissed. She smacked the counter and cursed, "Damn crook! You want to die?!"

As she spoke, she pushed open the counter door and was about to charge out. But Wu Song was ready. He had already opened his tunic and stuffed the upper half into his waistband. He grabbed the bucket of wine and sloshed it all over the ground and then charged behind the counter. He grabbed the

woman by her waist and hair and carried her out from behind the counter and hurled her toward one of the giant vats, where she landed with a loud splash.

Wu Song stomped out from behind the counter, and a few of the waiters were already charging at him. Wu Song, though, reached out with one hand and seized one of them, easily lifting him into the air. With another splash, this waiter, too, found himself inside one of the giant vats.

Another waiter charged forward, but Wu Song grabbed him by the head and a second later, each of the three giant vats had someone in it. Two more waiters came sprinting toward Wu Song. A punch and a kick later, both of them were on the ground, unable to get up. Seeing three in the vats and two on the ground, everyone else who worked in the tavern scrambled.

“They must be going to tell Jiang Menshen,” Wu Song said to himself. “Let me follow them and kick his butt on the main street so everyone can see it and have a good laugh.”

So Wu Song stomped down the road, and by now, the fleeing waiters had alerted Jiang Menshen, who quickly leaped to his feet and came to have a look, just in time to run into Wu Song on the street. That Jiang Menshen was big alright, but he had been indulging in wine and women a bit too much lately and was out of shape. When he saw Wu Song, he figured Wu Song was drunk, so he just kept stomping forward, ready to show this troublemaker who was boss.

Suddenly, Wu Song’s fists came flying toward his face. But instead of making contact, Wu Song pulled back and turned around and retreated. Jiang Menshen was pissed and chased after him. But just as he got close, Wu Song’s left foot came flying through the air and caught him in the groin. Clutching his jewels with both hands, Jiang Menshen crumpled to his knees. Meanwhile, Wu Song whirled around and his right foot landed a kick on Jiang Menshen’s forehead, sending him sprawling backward.

Wu Song now stepped on Jiang Menshen’s chest and started pummeling him with his fists. Lying there helplessly, Jiang Menshen could not withstand this beatdown and soon pleaded for mercy.

“If you want me to spare you, then you must agree to three conditions!” Wu Song shouted.

“Hero, spare me!” Jiang Menshen begged. “Even if it’s 300 conditions, I’d agree, much less three!”

“First, I want you to leave this Pleasure Forest and return everything back to Shi En, the original owner, since you took them from him.”

“Of course, of course!” Jiang Menshen consented.

“Second, once I let you up, you must go round up all the leading men in the Pleasure Forest and have them apologize to Shi En.”

“I can do that.”

“And third, once you’ve given back everything, leave immediately and go back to your hometown tonight. Don’t you dare stay in Mengzhou Prefecture! If you stay here, I will beat your ass every time I see you. At best you’ll be half dead, and at worst, I’ll kill you. Got it?!”

“Got it! Got it! I agree to everything!”

Satisfied, Wu Song grabbed Jiang Menshen and pulled him to his feet. By now, Jiang Menshen’s face was swollen, his neck was crooked, and his forehead was bleeding.

Pointing at him, Wu Song said, “I only needed a few punches and kicks to kill that tiger on Jingyang Ridge, so an oaf like you is nothing! Quick, give Shi En back his stuff. If you dawdle, I’ll beat you again, and this time, I’ll take your life!”

Only now did Jiang Menshen realize who it was that beat him up, and he just kept pleading for mercy.

Now, Wu Song’s drunken beatdown of Jiang Menshen is one of the most memorable and iconic scenes from the novel, and in the TV adaptations of the book, this was always a really good fight scene, pitting the big, brawny Jiang Menshen against the tough-as-nails Wu Song. But as we just witnessed, the actual scene from the novel was much, much less dramatic, mainly because Wu Song was just so

awesome that the fight was over before it even began. And thanks to his awesomeness, Shi En was now back in the protection racket game.

To see what other totally legitimate business Wu Song will help uphold, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Wu Song finds that he has a new admirer in the area. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!