

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 53.

Last time, Song Jiang was on his way to the penal colony in Jiangzhou (1,1) Prefecture. Along the way, he and his two guards stopped into a mountainside tavern for a quick drink, and won't you know it, it was one of those "black taverns" that served unsuspecting travelers ... as dinner. A bowl of drugged wine later, and Song Jiang and his guards were out like a light.

But before the tavern-keeper had a chance to turn them into food-court mystery meat, he got a visit from three of his buddies, and the leader among them said they had been camped out in the area for days hoping to meet Song Jiang when he came through there. The tavern keeper was like, "Nope, haven't seen them; can't help ya. But on a completely unrelated note, guess what I just did."

A minute later, they were all in the kitchen, checking out the tavern keeper's handywork. The leader of the group had the good sense to check the guards' paperwork for the men's identities, and everyone went, "Ooh, awkward." They rushed the unconscious Song Jiang into another room, opened his cangue, and poured the antidote down his throat. They then helped him into the front room of the tavern, sat him down in a chair, and propped him up while he slowly regained consciousness.

As he blinked, Song Jiang could just make out four guys standing in front of him, but he didn't recognize any of them. The leader of the group now told his two friends to help Song Jiang stay upright, while he kneeled and kowtowed.

"Who ... who are you? Am I dreaming?" a still groggy Song Jiang asked. He then turned and saw the tavern-keeper also on his knees.

"Sirs, please get up," he said to them. "What is this place? May I ask who you are?"

The leader of the group replied, "My name is Li (3) Jun (4). I've made my living as a helmsman for boats on the Yangzi River. Because I am quite at home in the water, people all call me the River Dragon. This tavern keeper is a local and makes his living as a smuggler. His name is Li (3) Li (4), and everyone calls him the Life-Taking Judge. As for these other two brothers, they are from the shores of the

Sundown River and they sell smuggled salt and stay at my house. They are also quite adept on boats and in the water. They are blood brothers. One is named Tong (2) Wei (1), with the nickname Dragon Emerging from a Cave, and the other is named Tong (2) Meng (3), with the nickname the River-Churning Clam."

As Li Jun (4) introduced them, his band of smugglers all bowed four times to Song Jiang. He asked them, "You drugged me just now, but how do you know my name?"

"I have an acquaintance who recently returned from doing business in Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture and mentioned your revered name," Li Jun explained. "He said you had been exiled to the penal colony at Jiangzhou. I've long wanted to go to your home county to pay my respects and make your acquaintance, but I haven't had the opportunity to do so. When I heard you were going to Jiangzhou, I figured you must be coming through here. I waited for you at the foot of the mountain for five or six days but had not seen you. I was bored today, so I came up here with these two brothers to buy a cup of wine. We ran into Li (3) Li (4) and he told us what he did and ..."

Once Li Jun finished recounting what happened, he asked Song Jiang why he was being exiled. So Song Jiang recapped his story again, which drew lots of sighs from his new fan club. Li Li the tavern-keeper now said, "Brother, why don't you just stay here instead of going to the penal colony to suffer?"

"The heroes of Liangshan already tried to keep me there," Song Jiang said, "but I steadfastly refused because I did not want to bring trouble for my father. So how can I stay here?"

Li Jun intervened and said, "Brother Song is a man of honor; he would not act recklessly. You guys go revive those two guards."

By now, Li Li's helpers had returned, so he grabbed them and had them help carry the two guards out of the kitchen and administered the antidote. The two of them came to, looked at each other, and said, "We must've been exhausted to pass out drunk so easily."

At that, everybody laughed, and the guards were like, ha ha ha that's funny what did we miss?

That night, Li Li treated everyone to a feast and they spent the night at his place. The next morning, he threw another feast and returned Song Jiang and the guards' luggage to them. Song Jiang and the guards then followed Li Jun and the Tong (2) brothers down the mountainside to Li Jun's home, where he welcomed them with more wine and food. There, he became sworn brothers with Song Jiang and kept him for a few days.

After that, Song Jiang insisted on resuming his journey, so Li Jun brought out some silver for the guards. Song Jiang then put his cangue back on, grabbed his bundle, and took his leave of his hosts. He and the guards then got back on the road to Jiangzhou.

After traveling for half a day, they entered a bustling town as noon approached. In the town market, they saw a group of people huddled around someone. Song Jiang squeezed into the throng and saw that they were watching a medicine peddler show off his fighting skills with spears and staffs. After he was done with the weapons, the guy then showed off some bare-hand moves, which greatly impressed Song Jiang.

"Great moves!" he raved.

Next, the peddler picked up a platter and said to all the spectators, "I have come from afar to work in your wonderful town. Even though my skills aren't anything amazing, I hope you will help me out. I may be praised in distant places, but as you can see, I'm just messing around. If you want some medicine, then please buy some. If you don't need medicine, then please spare a few coins. Please don't let my platter pass through empty."

So he made a lap around the crowd, but not a single person gave him so much as a coin. He then said, "Please be generous," and made another pass. And still, no one ponied up. Seeing this, Song Jiang told his guards to take out five taels of silver.

“Arms instructor,” Song Jiang called out to the peddler. “I am but a convict and don’t have much. But take these five taels as a meager token of my respect. Please don’t scorn them for being so paltry a sum.”

The peddler accepted the silver, held it in his hands and sighed aloud, “This Jieyang (1,2) Town is a well-known place, and yet there’s not a single person here who recognizes my abilities. Thank goodness for this gentleman. Even though he’s got legal problems and is just passing through, he still generously gave me these five taels of silver. They are worth more than 50 taels from someone else. Sir, please accept my respects and let me know your great name, so that I may sing your praises everywhere.”

“This is but a trifle,” Song Jiang said. “No need to thank me.”

But just then, the crowd parted and a big guy stomped in, shouting, “Hey you, convict! Where the hell did you come from?! How dare you come to this town and show us up?!”

As he spoke, the man raised both fists and threatened to punch Song Jiang. He then continued, “That bastard learned some BS moves from somewhere and came here to show off. I’ve already instructed everyone to ignore him. How dare you show off your money and give him silver and make our town look bad?!”

“What business is it of yours whether I give him my money?” Song Jiang said.

“How dare a crook like you talk back to me?!” the man roared as he grabbed Song Jiang by the collar.

“Why won’t I dare to talk back to you?” Song Jiang said, standing his ground.

The man now raised his fists and took a couple swings at Song Jiang. Song Jiang quickly ducked out of the way. The man then took a step closer. Song Jiang was just about to fight back when the medicine peddler rushed in from behind, grabbed the man’s headscarf with one hand and his waist with the other. With a hard poke to the ribs and a quick twist, the peddler had slammed the man to the ground. The man struggled to his feet, but was immediately sent back down by the peddler with a swift kick.

Song Jiang's guards now intervened and held the medicine peddler back. The big guy crawled to his feet, glared at Song Jiang and the peddler, and scowled, "You think you can get away with this?! Just you wait!" He then stomped off toward the south.

Song Jiang now asked the medicine peddler for his name, and he said, "My name is Xue (1) Yong (3). My grandfather was an officer under Old General Zhong, but he offended some senior bureaucrat and so never got promoted, and his descendants had to make their living selling medicine and showing off their fighting skills. I am known on the jianghu scene as the Sick Tiger. Sir, what's your name."

"My name is Song Jiang, and I am from Yuncheng county."

"Wait, are you the Timely Rain?"

"That's me."

Xue (1) Yong (3) immediately fell to his knees to bow to Song Jiang, but Song Jiang stopped him and said, "How about we drink a few cups?"

"Great! I've always wanted to make your acquaintance but had not had the opportunity."

So Xue Yong packed up his stuff and went with Song Jiang to a nearby tavern. But the tavern-keeper said, "We do have wine and food, but we dare not sell them to you."

"Why not?" Song Jiang asked.

"The big guy who just tussled with you has sent his men to pass along instructions. If I sell you anything, they would smash up my shop. I can't afford to make an enemy of him. He is the boss of this town. No one dares to disobey him."

"If that's the case, then he would definitely come stir up trouble if we stayed in this town," Song Jiang said.

"In that case, you go on ahead," Xue Yong said. "I'm going to close out the tab on my room, and I'll come find you in Jiangzhou in a couple days."

Song Jiang gave his new friend about 20 taels of silver and they parted ways. Song Jiang and his two escorts then went to another tavern to get some wine and food, but that tavern-keeper said, "The young master has already given us instructions, so how would we dare to sell you food? You're wasting your time."

So Song Jiang and his guards had no choice but to leave and go to another tavern, and another, and another. But at each place, they received the same answer. When they got to the outskirts of town, they saw a few small inns. But when they tried to seek lodging there, they were turned away at every place, all with the same answer: The young master told us not to serve you.

Getting a bad feeling about this, Song Jiang and company picked up the pace and hurried onto the main thoroughfare. By now, the sun was hugging the horizon and it was starting to get dark. Song Jiang and his guards were getting worried, since you really didn't want to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere when night descended.

Just then, they saw light poking through some distant woods down a backroad.

"There must be someone living there," Song Jiang said. "Let's go apologize for the intrusion, ask to stay one night, and leave tomorrow."

"But that's off the main road," the guards said.

"We don't have a choice," Song Jiang told them. "It may not be on the main road, but it's no big deal to walk an extra mile or two tomorrow."

So they hurried off the main thoroughfare and followed the backroad for less than a mile. There, behind the woods, they saw a large manor. They knocked, and a workhand opened the door with the typical warm and fuzzy greeting.

"Who are you? Why are you knocking on our door at this time of night?!"

Song Jiang answered respectfully, "I am an exiled criminal on my way to Jiangzhou. We missed our lodging spot today and have no place to spend the night. We would like to ask you to let us stay here, and we will pay you for the lodging tomorrow morning."

"In that case, stay here for a minute and let me go inform our master," the workhand said. "If he consents, you can stay."

So the workhand went inside and returned momentarily. "My master has invited you in," he said.

Song Jiang and the guards went inside to a thatched parlor to pay their respects to the old squire of the estate. The squire instructed his workhand to show them to a room and prepare some dinner for them. So the workhand took them to a thatched hut, lit a lamp, and then brought them three servings of rice, soup, and vegetables. Once they ate, the workhand cleaned up the dishes and left.

The guards then said to Song Jiang, "Sir, there's no one else here. Why don't we open your cangue so you can have a good night's rest and we can set out early tomorrow?"

Song Jiang consented, so the guards removed his cangue, and they went outside the hut to use the bathroom. On this night, the sky was lit up with stars. Behind the huts by a courtyard for husking wheat, there was a small path, which Song Jiang took note of. After using the bathroom, they went back into their hut, closed the door, and prepared for bed.

"Thank goodness that old squire took us in," Song Jiang said to his companions. As he was speaking, he heard noise outside. He peeked through the crack in the door and saw the old squire leading three workhands with torches, making the rounds and inspecting the wheat around the courtyard.

"This old squire is just like my father," Song Jiang said to the guards. "He has to personally oversee everything. Even at this hour he hasn't gone to bed yet and is making the rounds himself."

Just then, they heard someone outside the estate banging on the door and demanding to be let in. The workhands hurriedly opened the door, and about five or six men stomped in. Their leader was

holding a long-handle broadsword, while the rest were carrying wooden staffs and pitchforks. Song Jiang took a peek and went ah crap.

“That’s the guy who tried to beat me up back in town!” he whispered to the guards.

Then, they heard the old squire saying to the guy, “Son, where have you been? Who did you get into a fight with? What are you doing with weapons at this time of night?”

“Dad, you don’t understand! Is my brother home?”

“Your brother is drunk and asleep in the pavilion in the back.”

“I’ll go wake him. I need him to help me chase someone down.”

“Who did you fight with now? If you wake up your brother, he’s not going to let it go. Tell me what’s going on first.”

“Dad, you don’t understand. Today there was some medicine peddler in town. He didn’t come pay his respects to me and my brother before he started plying his trade in town, so I instructed everyone to not give him any money. But some convict from who knows where showed up and gave him five taels of silver, making our town look bad! I was just about to beat that crook, but the peddler knocked me down, beat me up, and kicked me! My waist still hurts. I’ve sent men to instruct all the taverns and inns to not serve them food or take them in, so that crook and his guards would have nowhere to stay tonight. Then, I rounded up a group of men from the gambling houses and went to the inn and caught that medicine peddler. We gave him a good beating and have him strung up in the home of the arms master right now. Tomorrow we’ll take him to the bank of the river, tie him up, and chuck him into the water to appease my anger. But we couldn’t catch up to that convict and his guards. There are no inns up ahead, so I don’t know where they went to seek shelter. I’m going to wake my brother and chase those bastards down.”

“Son, stop incurring bad karma,” the old squire said. “What business is it of yours that they had money to give to the medicine peddler? Why would you want to beat him? And even though you got



beaten up, your injuries aren't that bad. Listen to me and let it go. Don't tell your brother. If he found out you got beaten up, there's no way he would drop it. And then he'd go and kill someone! Just go sleep. It's the middle of the night. Don't go knocking on doors and angering our neighbors. Build some good karma for once."

But the old squire's son would not listen. Instead, he gripped his broadsword and stomped into the house, followed by his father. Meanwhile, inside their hut, Song Jiang said to the guards, "What rotten luck. What do we do? Who knew we would end up staying at his house? Let's sneak away. Otherwise if he found out, he would surely kill us. And even if the old squire won't tell him we're here, how can the workhands lie to him?"

"You're right," the guards said. "We can't delay. We must go now."

"Let's stay out of sight. We can sneak out through the back wall of the hut," Song Jiang suggested.

So they got their bags, and Song Jiang grabbed his cangue. They then pried open a hole in the wall in the back of the hut. Remember that these were thatched huts, so you didn't have to work that hard to pull the walls apart. They snuck out and fled along the backroads under the light of the moon and stars. They were in such a panic that they couldn't even worry about which path they were taking; they just ran.

After a couple hours, they came upon the reed-covered banks of a roaring river. This was the Sundown River, and there was no way across. Just then, they heard shouts from behind and saw torches in the distance.

"Oh heaven, please help us!" Song Jiang prayed as the three men took cover within the reeds. As the torches got closer, their hearts were pounding and they stumbled around the reeds, looking for a way out. But when they came out of the reeds, they found their path forward cut off by the river. To the side was a channel that was also too wide to cross.

Looking up, Song Jiang sighed and said, "If I had known this would happen, I would've stayed at Liangshan. Who knew I would meet my end here?"

Just then, a glimmer of hope appeared from within the reeds in the form of a small boat. Spotting this boat, Song Jiang called out, "Boatman, quickly! Row your boat over here and save the three of us. I'll give you a few taels of silver."

"Who are you people? How did you end up here?" the boatman asked.

"We're being pursued by bandits and stumbled upon this spot," Song Jiang said. "Quick, bring your boat over and ferry us to the other side. I'll give you some extra silver."

Extra silver, eh? The boatman immediately rowed over, and Song Jiang and the guards hopped on. While one guard used his staff to push the boat away from shore, the other tossed their bundles into the cabin. The boatman heard the bundles land with a loud thud and the clanging of metal, and he rejoiced in his heart. Sounds like these guys weren't kidding about the extra silver. So he grabbed the oar and rowed his little boat toward the center of the river.

By now, the pursuers had arrived on the bank as well. There were more than 20 of them, holding a dozen or so torches and led by two big men, each wielding a long-handle broadsword while the rest carried staffs.

"Hey you, boatman! Bring your boat back here!" they shouted.

Song Jiang and the two guards were lying down in the cabin, and they said to the boatman, "Don't go back! We'll give you lots of silver to thank you."

The boatman nodded and ignored the guys on the bank and kept rowing.

"Hey you, boatman! If you don't come back right now, we'll kill you, too!" the men on land shouted.

But the boatman just chuckled and ignored them.

"Who are you, boatman?!" the pursuers shouted again. "How dare you not come back?!"

Now, the boatman scoffed and replied, "Your daddy is called Zhang the Boatman. Stop your damn yelling already!"

Recognizing his voice, the leader of the group on land said, "Oh, Brother Zhang. It's you! Do you see me and my brother?"

"I'm not blind. Of course I see you."

"Then come back here; we want to talk to you."

"We can talk tomorrow. My passengers are in a hurry."

"My brother and I are after those three passengers."

"Well, they're my customers, so they're like my family. I'm inviting them out for a bowl of deck knife noodles."

Wait, deck ... knife ... noodles? What?

"Just come back here for a minute and we can discuss it," the leader of the men on shore said.

"These are my customers. You want me to row them back to you? What a joke!"

"Brother Zhang, you don't understand. My brother is after that crook. Just come on over here."

But the boatman kept rowing and shouted back, "They're my first customers in days. I can't just let you take them away! My apologies, but I'll see you guys another day."

As he listened to this back and forth from inside the cabin, a relieved Song Jiang whispered to the guards, "Thank goodness this boatman saved us. We must not forget his kindness. We're so lucky he was here to rescue us."

As the boat slowly crept farther and farther away from shore, the men and the torches on land became blurs of light in the distant reeds. As he looked on, Song Jiang said, "What good fortune. It's true what they say: When good people meet, evil people keep their distance. We've escaped calamity."

Just then, the boatman started singing a song:

Born and raised on the river's edge,  
Toward officials and heaven I'm fearless and bold.  
Last night the god Hua (2) Guang (1) tried to do me in,  
Before he left, I snatched his brick of gold!

So this Hua Guang the boatman just sang about is a Daoist deity that's often depicted as a god of fire. As Song Jiang and his escorts listened to their ferryman sing about robbing a god, they started to get a little antsy. But Song Jiang just thought, "Nah, it's just a song."

But just as they were talking about this in the cabin, the boatman put down his oar and said, "You, prick, and you two guards. Your kind is always squeezing us smugglers. And now you've landed in my hands! Do you want to eat deck-knife noodles or do you want to eat wontons?"

Huh? What?

"Sir, please don't joke around," Song Jiang said. "What do you mean by deck knife noodles and wontons?"

"I'm not joking around! If you want to eat deck knife noodles, then I have a sharp knife hidden right under this deck plank here. I don't need but one slash for each of you, and you'll end up dead in the water. Now, if you want to eat wontons, then hurry up and take off all your clothes and jump into the river to your watery graves."

Clutching his companions, Song Jiang lamented, "Ah crap! Luck never comes in pairs and disaster never travels alone."

"Enough! Talk it over and let me know which one you want!" the boatman barked.

"Sir, please hear me," Song Jiang pleaded. "It was not by choice that I became a criminal and an exile. Please take pity on the three of us."

“Stop wasting your breath! Spare the three of you? I’m not sparing any! I am Dog-faced Master Zhang! Even my father and mother would mean nothing to me. Shut your damn mouths and jump in the water already!”

“We will give you all our belongings, just spare us!” Song Jiang begged.

Yeah, but see, that offer has one slight flaw -- the boatman would get all their stuff anyway AFTER he killed them. In fact, that’s exactly what he was going to do. He was done listening and pulled out the sharp knife he had mentioned.

“What will it be?!” he roared.

Looking up and sighing again, Song Jiang lamented to his guards, “It’s all because I disrespected the laws of heaven and earth and the teachings of my parents that I committed my crime, and now I’ve brought you two down as well.”

Clutching him, the two guards said, “Sir, we’ll die together.”

Aww, isn’t that touching? Apparently not for the boatman, since he shouted again, “Take off your clothes and jump into the water, now! Make it quick or I’ll cut you and then throw you in!”

To see how long Song Jiang can hold his breath under water, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we see why he really, really should wear a nametag when he’s traveling. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!