

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 59.

Last time, the plan to save Song Jiang blew up in his friend Dai Zong's face, and soon, both were being taken to the execution ground for their beheading. And apparently this was the entertainment event of the year in Jiangzhou Prefecture, because the streets were packed with spectators, with unruly snakecharmers, mouthy medicine peddlers, disgruntled porters, and impatient merchants all shoving their way to the front, waiting for the designated hour.

Suddenly, a guard declared, "It's noon!"

Prefect Cai, who was overseeing the execution, gave the order: "Behead the prisoners and report to me."

At that, two executioners opened the prisoners' cangues and raised their execution knives.

But just then, among the group of merchants parked at the front of the crowd on the north side of the execution ground, one of the merchants pulled out a small gong from under his shirt, stood on one of their carts, and banged the gong three times. And immediately, all hell erupted.

An earth-shattering roar rang out from the upper floor of a teahouse overlooking the execution ground, followed by the sight of a big, swarthy, half-naked man leaping from the teahouse into the crowd. He was wielding two big war axes, and in the blink of an eye, said war axes had been lodged in the heads of the two executioners.

Before anyone else could react, this big guy had pulled out his axes and was stomping toward the prefect. The guards tried to poke at him with their spears, but they could not stand in his way. So the soldiers quickly hustled Prefect Cai out of there.

While all that was happening, the group of snakecharmers on the east side suddenly pulled out sharp knives and started cutting down the guards. On the west side, the group of medicine peddlers let out a chorus of battle cries and started beating down the guards over there. And on the south side, the porters who had been denied access through the intersection picked up the poles they had used to carry

their loads and started whacking soldiers left and right. Back on the north side, the merchants pushed their two carts into the crowd to block people from coming over, while two of the merchants rushed over and scooped up Song Jiang and Dai Zong on their backs. The rest, meanwhile, pulled out bows and arrows, rocks, and short spears and started killing every soldier in sight.

So, to overstate the obvious, this was a rescue, and all the snakecharmers, medicine peddlers, porters, and merchants were none other than the chieftains of Liangshan. Seventeen of them to be exact, led by Chao Gai himself and accompanied by about 100 lackeys. And that big, dark guy who just leaped out of a teahouse? Of course that was Li Kui the Black Whirlwind.

So, how did all this come together? To cover that, let's pause and rewind to about 10 days ago.

In the bandit stronghold on Liangshan, Dai Zong had just left with the forged letter that was supposed to put the rescue plan into action. After seeing him off, the chieftains went back to the fortress and started feasting. Just as the party was getting fun, Wu Yong, the strategist who came up with the whole plan, suddenly went, Oh CRAP!

"Professor, what's wrong?" the chieftains asked.

"You don't understand. That letter of mine just cost Dai Zong and Song Jiang their lives!"

The chieftains were greatly alarmed and asked why. Wu Yong explained, "I only thought of one thing and forgot another. The letter contains a huge mistake!"

Xiao Rang, the guy who forged the letter, said, "But my handwriting mimicked the premier's exactly, and the language is also correct. Professor, where is the mistake?"

As long as we were playing the "not my fault" game, Jin Dajian (4,1), the engraver who made the seal, also chimed in and said, "The seal I carved is perfect as well. How could there be a mistake?"

Wu Yong said, "I overlooked one detail in the letter that Dai Zong took with him. Didn't the seal we put on it say "Cai Jing of Hanlin (4,2)"? That seal is going to get Dai Zong in trouble."

Jin Dajian asked, "But that's the seal I've seen on all of Premier Cai's calligraphy and essays, and I copied it exactly. How could there be any mistake?"

"You all don't understand," Wu Yong said. "That Prefect Cai is Premier Cai's son. Why would a father stamp a personal letter to his son with his official seal? That's the mistake, and it's my oversight. When Dai Zong gets back to Jiangzhou, he will surely be grilled about it. If the truth comes out, how much trouble will that cause?"

"Then let's send someone to catch him and tell him to come back!" Chao Gai said.

"How can we catch up to him? With his magic, he's probably more than 150 miles away by now. We cannot delay; we must go save them."

"How do we save them?" Chao Gai asked. "Do you have a plan?"

Wu Yong whispered some words in Chao Gai's ears, and Chao Gai immediately started handing out orders to various chieftains, and they all snapped to.

Fast forward back to the present, unpause, and everybody just resumed slashing and killing guards at the execution ground. In the midst of the fighting, Chao Gai and company noticed that the big, swarthy guy with the war axes was showing them all up with how many people he was killing. Now, HE wasn't part of their plan, and they didn't recognize him. All the sudden, though, it came to Chao Gai. Dai Zong had mentioned that somebody named Li Kui the Black Whirlwind had become best friends with Song Jiang, and that he was a brute of a man. Well, this guy matches the description.

"Hey you, the hero over there! Are you the Black Whirlwind?" Chao Gai shouted in Li Kui's direction. But Li Kui gave no answer. I mean, c'mon man, I'm working over here. He just kept swinging his axes here and there, mowing down everyone in his way. Chao Gai now told the two lackeys who were carrying Song Jiang and Dai Zong to just follow the big dark guy who was clearing a path.

By now, the intersection was littered with bodies of soldiers and civilians alike and blood flowed like rivers, while countless others were pushed to the ground and trampled. The chieftains abandoned their carts and such and they all followed Li Kui as he made his way out of the city. Bringing up the rear were the chieftains Hua Rong, Huang Xin (4), Lü Fang (1), and Guo (1) Sheng (4). From their bows, arrows flew like locusts, keeping everyone else at bay.

As the group made its way down to the riverbank, Li Kui at the front was covered in blood but still kept charging forward and killing anyone he came across. Behind him, Chao Gai shouted, "This has nothing to do with the civilians. Don't kill indiscriminately!"

Well, Li Kui didn't know what "indiscriminate" meant, nor did he stop to consult a dictionary. He just kept swinging his axes at heads, leaving a trail of bodies in his wake. The Liangshan chieftains followed him. But after they ran for another couple miles, they found their path cut off by the roaring river. Chao Gai went ah crap, but Li Kui now shouted, "Don't panic! Bring my brothers to that temple first!"

Everyone looked in the direction he was pointing and saw a big temple next to the river. Its gates were tightly shut, but that wasn't anything Li Kui's axes couldn't fix. Everyone flooded into the temple behind him and saw ancient pine trees everywhere. On the eaves of the main hall hung a plaque that said, "White Dragon Temple."

The bandit lackeys now carried Song Jiang and Dai Zong into the temple and set them down on the ground. Only now did Song Jiang dare to open his eyes. When he saw Chao Gai and company, he wept and said, "Brother, is this a dream?"

Chao Gai answered, "Brother, it's because you refused to stay on Liangshan that you've been subjected to this suffering."

Really man? You're gonna do the "I told you so" thing right now? Anyway, Chao Gai now asked Song Jiang who the big dark guy was, and Song Jiang told him, "He's Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. He thought

about breaking me out of jail several times, but I was afraid I would not be able to get away, so I didn't let him."

"Thank goodness for him today," Chao Gai said. "He showed no fear at all."

While they were busy getting some fresh clothes for Song Jiang and Dai Zong, they saw Li Kui stomping past with war axes in hand.

"Where are you going?" Song Jiang asked.

"I'm looking for the keeper of the temple so I can kill him! That bastard dared to shut the gates on us instead of welcoming us in. I was going to sacrifice him to the door god, but I can't find him."

Again, really? This is what you're occupied with at this moment? Song Jiang told Li Kui to not worry about that for the time being and come meet Chao Gai first. Upon their introduction, Li Kui tossed his axes aside and prostrated to Chao Gai, saying, "Big Brother, pardon my crude manners." He then met all the other chieftains, and found out that hey, he and the chieftain Zhu Gui, the Dryland Crocodile, were from the same village. What a small world.

While everybody was all busy with the introductions and such, the chieftain Hua Rong raised his hands and went, umm, excuse me.

"Brother," he said to Chao Gai. "You told everyone to follow Brother Li Kui, but now we're here and there's a river blocking our path. There's not a single boat to ferry us across. If the troops from the city pursue us, how can we fight them off? What should we do?"

"Don't panic," Li Kui said. "Let's charge back into the city again and kill that damn Prefect Cai as well."

Dai Zong had just regained his senses at that point, and when he heard that suggestion, he called out, "Brother, don't be reckless! There are about 7,000 troops in the city. If we charge back in there, we're doomed."

Ruan Xiaoqi, the youngest of the Ruan brothers, now said, "I saw some boats on the other side of the river. My brothers and I can swim across, commandeer a few of them, and come back to take everyone across. How's that?"

"That's the best plan we have," Chao Gai said. So the three Ruan brothers took off their clothes, armed themselves with sharp daggers, and dove into the water. When they were halfway across the river, however, they suddenly spotted three boats gliding this way from upriver. All the chieftains now rushed outside to get a closer look. They saw that each boat held about a dozen armed men.

This sight alarmed everyone, and Song Jiang lamented, "Woe is me!"

When the boats got closer, they saw that the man sitting at the front of the lead boat was carrying a shimmering five-pronged pitchfork. His hair was twisted up on top of his head and bound with a red cord. He wore a pair of white silk swimming pants, and he let out a shrill whistle. From his boat, he shouted, "Who are you people? How dare you gather at White Dragon Temple?"

As soon as Song Jiang saw this guy, his face lit up. "Brother Zhang Shun, save me!" he called out as he pushed his way to the front.

So yup, the guy leading the boats was Zhang Shun, aka White Streak in the Waves, one of Song Jiang's new friends and the guy who almost drowned Li Kui after a squabble over some fish. When he saw Song Jiang, Zhang Shun shouted in excitement and directed the three boats to row to the bank. By now, the Ruan brothers had swum back to this side as well. Everyone now gathered in front of the temple.

Song Jiang took a look at the rest of the guys on Zhang Shun's boats, and it turns out they were all acquaintances from his adventures on the way to Jiangzhou. There was Zhang Shun's older brother Zhang Heng, who had threatened to kill Song Jiang and take his stuff if he didn't jump into the river to a watery grave. There were the Mu (4) brothers -- Mu Hong and Mu Chun -- who had tried to chase down Song Jiang and teach him a lesson for, umm, paying a medicine peddler in their town. Oh, and that

medicine peddler, Xue (1) Yong (3), was also there. And on the third boat was Li Jun (4) the River Dragon, with his black tavern buddy Li (3) Li (4) and his smuggling buddies Tong (2) Wei (1) and Tong (2) Meng (3). And all these guys also had a dozen or so lackeys with them, be they workhands from the Mu brothers' estate or salt smuggling associates of Li Jun's.

This gang of heroes now came ashore, and Zhang Shun bowed to Song Jiang and said, "Ever since you got into trouble, we were all on pins and needles. Yet we had no opportunity to save you. Recently, we heard that Superintendent Dai was also arrested, and we didn't see Brother Li Kui. So I went to find my brother Zhang Heng, and we went to Old Squire Mu's (4) estate, where we gathered many acquaintances. Today, we were on our way to storm Jiangzhou Prefecture and save you, but who knew that you've already been rescued and brought here."

Umm, on your way to rescue Song Jiang eh? Well, let's just say that it's a good thing somebody else was thinking the same thing and did it already, because Zhang Shun's group, they would've gotten there oh about an hour or two too late. In any case, Song Jiang now introduced them to Chao Gai, and Zhang Shun and the other eight heroes in his group paid their respects. Those nine guys, combined with the 17 chieftains from Liangshan, plus Song Jiang, Dai Zong, and Li Kui, came out to 29 heroes at this little gathering at White Dragon Temple.

While everybody was all busy with the niceties, a bandit lackey rushed in and said, "Drums and gongs are banging away from inside Jiangzhou, and their army is leaving the city to give chase. From a distance, we saw countless banners and weapons. They're coming this way with armored cavalry and heavily armed infantry."

"Let's go kill them all!" Li Kui roared and ran out of the temple with axes in hand.

Watching this berserker cat run off, Chao Gai was like, fine, I guess we're doing this.

"We've gone this far, let's finish it," he said to the chieftains. "Everyone, follow me. Let's go wipe out the Jiangzhou army, and then we'll go back to Liangshan."

“We’ll follow your every command!” everyone shouted. So all 150 or so men let out a roar and charged outside, while Song Jiang and Dai Zong were helped onto the boats.

On the river bank, they saw about 7,000 enemy troops, led by riders in full suits of armor and wielding long spears, with infantry behind them. They were waving banners and shouting battle cries as they marched toward the temple. And Li Kui couldn’t be happier. Stripped to the waist, he raised his war axes and charged head on toward the enemy lines. Behind him, the chieftains Hua Rong, Huang Xin, Lü (3) Fang (1), and Guo (1) Sheng (4) followed.

Seeing that the oncoming enemies were all armed with long spears, Hua Rong was afraid that Li Kui would get skewered before he even made it into the enemy lines, so he pulled out his bow and let loose an arrow, which promptly brought down the first enemy rider. The rest of the cavalry apparently had never seen somebody get killed in battle before, because they were all taken aback by this and turned and fled for their lives. In their haste to run away, they trampled half of their own infantry.

With their job made considerably easier by the enemy’s cowardice, our heroes now charged forward and slaughtered their foes, covering the field with enemy corpses and staining the river red with their blood. They chased the enemy all the way back to the city. The Jiangzhou troops scrambled back inside the city while the city’s defenses rained down logs and boulders to prevent any of the outlaws from getting in. Once the gates were shut, the Jiangzhou troops were so scared that they stayed behind their walls for days.

Meanwhile, the outlaws dragged Li Kui away from the battlefield and returned to the temple, where they all boarded the boats and sailed to the Mu (4) brothers’ estate. Mu Hong, the elder brother, invited them all into the parlor, where his father, Old Squire Mu, came out to greet them and told them to go get some rest. Meanwhile, Mu Hong had his workmen slaughter an ox, along with a bunch of pigs, sheep, chickens, geese, fish, and duck, because it was party time.

As everybody drank and chatted, Chao Gai said to the heroes who brought the boats, "If not for you guys, we would've been done for."

That prompted Old Squire Mu to ask, "Why did you all take that deadend road?"

To which Li Kui replied, "I was just going wherever there were people to kill. I didn't tell them to follow me; they just decided to do it."

And everybody had a good laugh at that. So yeah, following Li Kui was probably not the most strategically sound option, but hey it worked out.

As the banquet continued, Song Jiang now rose and addressed everyone: "Heroes, if not for your rescue, Superintendent Dai and I would have met an untimely end. Your kindness today is as deep as the ocean; I have no way to repay it. Alas, what really eats at me is how that knave Huang Wenbing repeatedly spewed poison to do us in. How can I not seek revenge for that? Can I convince all of you to do me another huge favor and go attack his town and kill that knave, so that I can appease my anger? And then we can go home."

But Chao Gai wasn't so sure. "We can only stage a surprise raid once. How can we do it again? Besides, now those scoundrels will be ready. Why don't we go back to Liangshan, mobilize a large army, and come back along with Professor Wu, Priest Gongsun Sheng, and Lin Chong and Qin Ming?"

"If we go back to Liangshan now, we will not be able to come back," Song Jiang said. "First, it's far away. Second, Jiangzhou will no doubt be alerting all the checkpoints to tighten security. Let's not fool ourselves. This is the best opportunity; we must make our move before they are ready."

The chieftain Hua Rong raised another issue. "Brother, you're correct," he said to Song Jiang, "but we have no one who knows the roads here. We must send someone to go into the city to do some reconnaissance and to take a look at the roads around Huang Wenbing's town before we make our move."

At that, the chieftain Xue (1) Yong (3), aka the Sick Tiger, said, "I have traveled near and far on the jianghu scene and am very familiar with that town. How about I go?"

Song Jiang agreed, so Xue Yong set off that very day, while everyone else continued to discuss their strategy and prepare their weapons and boats for the mission. A couple days passed, and Xue Yong returned with another man, whom he introduced to Song Jiang.

"This man is Hou (2) Jian (4)," Xue Yong said. "He's a first-rate tailor. Needles and thread seem to fly in his hands. He also can handle weapons and once studied fighting skills from me. Because he's dark, skinny, and nimble, people call him the Long-Armed Ape. Right now he's working in Huang Wenbing's household. When I saw him, I invited him here."

Song Jiang was delighted and asked this Hou Jian to sit down and talk. And Hou Jian was also well-disposed toward these heroes.

When Song Jiang asked about news from Jiangzhou, Xue Yong said, "Prefect Cai did a tally and found that 500-some soldiers and civilians were killed, along with countless wounded. He has dispatched an urgent report to the court. Right now, the city gates are closed after midday, and anyone coming in or going out is scrutinized. As it turns out, Prefect Cai was not really to blame for your troubles. It was all the doing of that knave Huang Wenbing. Time and again he prodded the prefect to harm you and Dai Zong. After the raid at the execution ground, the city is on edge and has been working day and night to increase security. I also went to check things out at Huang Wenbing's town across the river, and that's when I ran into Hou Jian, and learned all the details from him."

Song Jiang asked Hou Jian how he came by all this intel, and Hou Jian said, "I have loved learning weapons since my youth, and I have never dared to forget Master Xue Yong's kindness in teaching me. Recently, Huang Wenbing hired me to go to his house to make some clothes. When I was leaving his house, I ran into Master Xue, and he mentioned your honorable name. I wanted to make your acquaintance, so I came to give you the details."

“That Huang Wenbing has an older brother named Huang Wenye (2,4). They are blood brothers, but that Huang Wenye has been nothing but kindness. He pays for the repair of roads and bridges, reveres the Buddha and patronizes monks, helps people in trouble, and gives to the poor. In town, they all call him Buddha Huang. But that Huang Wenbing, even though he used to be an official, only does wicked things and stirs up trouble. Everyone in town calls him Hornet Huang. The two brothers live in separate homes on a street with only one entrance and exit. They live by the north gate. Huang Wenbing lives on the side bordering the city wall, while Huang Wenye (2,4) lives on the side bordering the main street.

“When I was working at Huang Wenbing’s house, I heard him come home one day and say, ‘Prefect Cai would’ve been deceived if not for me. I advised him to execute the prisoners first, and then inform the court.’ When Huang Wenye heard that, he cursed his brother, saying, ‘You’re doing wicked deeds again. This is none of your business, why are you so determined to harm them? If there’s such a thing as the rules of heaven, then your comeuppance is right around the corner. You’re courting disaster.’ And these past couple days, after Huang Wenbing heard about your rescue, he has been quite alarmed. Last night he went over to Jiangzhou to call on the prefect and discuss this matter. He’s probably still not back yet.”

Song Jiang now asked, “How far away does Huang Wenbing live from his brother?”

“They just divided up what used to be one residence. Their houses are separated only by a vegetable garden,” Hou Jian said.

“And how many people live in Huang Wenbing’s household?”

“About 50 altogether.”

“Heaven must want me to get revenge, since it sent Hou Jian to me,” Song Jiang said. “But even so, brothers, I still must rely on all of you.”

Everyone present now said in one voice, “We will risk life and limb to rid the world of evils like this knave and to avenge you!”

Song Jiang then laid out some ground rules for everyone. “Huang Wenbing is the only one I hate,” he said. “This has nothing to do with the soldiers or civilians. And since his brother is humane and virtuous, we also must not harm him, or the whole land would think us dishonorable. So on this mission, you must not harm the civilians in any way. I have an idea; I hope you will help me.”

“We await your instructions,” everyone said.

So Song Jiang laid out his plan: “Old Squire Mu, may we trouble you to prepare about 90 sacks and about 100 bundles of firewood, along with 5 large boats and 2 small boats? Zhang Shun and Li Jun (4) will take the small boats and proceed in such and such a way. The 5 large boats will be manned by Zhang Heng, the Ruan brothers, the Tong brothers, and others who know how to swim, and they will do this and this.”

Next, he told Hou Jian, the new recruit who’s been working as a tailor in Huang Wenbing’s home, to take the chieftain Bai Sheng the Daylight Rat and sneak into Huang Wenbing’s town and lay low until the appointed hour. Then, the chieftains Shi (2) Yong (3) the Stone General and Du Qian the Skyscraper were told to disguise themselves as beggars and go wait on the left side of the gates to the town.

After those guys set out, everyone else prepared the supplies and weapons, and then they all boarded their designated boats. The only people left behind were Zhu Gui the Dryland Crocodile and Song Wan the Giant in the Clouds, who remained with Old Squire Mu and kept an eye out for news from Jiangzhou. All this done, they set out on a cool late summer night as the bright moon cast its rays down on a calm river that held up a mirror to the mountains in the distance.

To see how this quest for vengeance will go, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we wrestle with the moral complexities of this whole segment of the novel. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!