

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 63.

Last time, Li Kui insisted on going home to bring his elderly mother to Liangshan so that she could get a taste of the good life. After making him promise to not drink and not get into trouble, Song Jiang let him go, and then quickly regretted it. So Song Jiang sent the chieftain Zhu Gui, the Dryland Crocodile, to follow Li Kui and keep an eye on him. Zhu Gui met Li Kui near their home county and pointed him toward the main road that led to his village. But Li Kui was like, “Nope. I’m taking the backroads, tigers and bandits be damned.” Zhu Gui couldn’t stop him, so he just let Li Kui go. I mean, his home village isn’t that far off now. What could POSSIBLY go wrong?

So Li Kui set out around 5 a.m. that morning and promptly took the backroads. Suddenly, a little white rabbit jumped out onto the path and started sprinting ahead of him. Li Kui chased the bunny for a while and had a good laugh. Then, he continued on his way.

As he approached a grove of about 50 large trees whose leaves were turning red with the cool autumn breeze, a big man suddenly jumped out and roared, “If you’re smart, pay the toll so I don’t have to take your stuff.”

Li Kui sized up this guy. He wore a red headscarf and a padded gown made from rough cloth. He wielded two axes, and his face was smeared with black soot.

“Who the hell are you?! How dare you do your business here?!” Li Kui shouted.

“My name? When I tell you my name, it’ll scare you so bad that your innards will explode,” the robber said. “Your daddy’s name is the Black Whirlwind. Leave your money and bundle, and I’ll spare you life and let you pass.”

Li Kui roared with laughter. “You damn mother! Who the hell are you?! Where the hell did you come from? How dare you use my name for this BS?!”

As he spoke, Li Kui raised his broadsword and sprinted toward the robber. That guy was no match for him and turned to flee, but it was too late. Li Kui stabbed him in the leg, sending him to the ground. The next thing you know, the robber had Li Kui's foot on his chest and Li Kui in his face, roaring, "Do you recognize me?!"

"Sir, sir! Please spare my life!" the man begged.

"I am the hero Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. Turns out you're sullyng my good name."

When the robber heard that, he just went ah crap!

"Sir, my last name IS Li (3), but I'm an imposter," he said, trembling. "Because of how famous you are on the jianghu scene, even gods and demons quake at the mention of your name. So I stole your name to scrounge out a living here. If I see any lone travelers, all I have to do is utter the name Black Whirlwind, and they would ditch their luggage and run away. But I've never actually harmed anyone. My own unworthy name is Li Gui (3). I live in the village up ahead."

So just a quick side note here: This imposter's name, Li Gui (3), obviously sounds like Li Kui (2). But there's also a second layer of meaning here. The character Gui (3) means ghost, but it's also used colloquially to refer to someone who's a scoundrel. So that character is doing a lot of heavy lifting here in terms of character-building.

Anyway, all those nuances were lost on the real Black Whirlwind. He was just busy teaching this imposter a lesson, possibly the last lesson this imposter would ever learn.

"You damn scoundrel! You're ruining my name by robbing people. And you dare to wield two axes like me? Well then, let me give you a taste of the axe."

As he spoke, he took one of the axes from his doppelganger and was just about to bring it down on the guy's head, but the imposter cried out, "Sir! If you kill me, you'd be killing two people!"

"What do you mean?!" Li Kui asked, pulling back the axe.

“Ordinarily, I would not dare to rob people. But I have a 90-year-old mother at home and no one else to tend to her. That’s why I borrowed your great name to scare some folks and take their stuff so I can feed my mother. I really haven’t hurt anyone. If you kill me, then my mother would surely starve to death.”

Now, Li Kui usually wouldn’t think twice about splitting someone’s head in two, much less someone who was pretending to be him. But those words gave him pause. “I’m on my way home to get my mother,” he thought to himself. “If I end up killing a man who’s caring for HIS mother, then neither heaven nor earth would forgive me. Ah fine! I’ll spare this rogue.”

So Li Kui took his foot off the chest of his imposter, who got up, retrieved his axes, and kneeled to thank him.

Li Kui told him, “I am the real Black Whirlwind. Don’t you dare to sully my name from now on.”

“Now that you’ve spared me, I’m getting out of this line of work,” his counterpart said. “I will never dare to use your name to rob people again.”

Li Kui now told him, “Since you have a filial heart, I’ll give you 10 taels of silver to pursue another line of work. Go on.”

The imposter Li Gui (3) took the silver, bowed in gratitude again, and limped off. As he watched the knave disappear, Li Kui couldn’t help but laugh and say to himself, “That guy never could’ve expected to run into me. Alas, he’s a filial man, so he will surely pursue another line of work. It wouldn’t have been right to kill him. Let me get back on the road myself.”

And so he picked up his broadsword and continued walking along the backroads.

As noon was approaching, Li Kui was getting hungry and thirsty. But he was in the middle of nowhere, and there wasn’t a tavern in sight. As he walked on, he suddenly noticed two thatched huts on

a hillside in the distance. He rushed over to the huts, just in time to run into a woman who was coming out from the back. She wore a wild flower in her hair and her face was covered with powder.

Putting down his weapon, Li Kui greeted her and said, "Madam, I am a traveler passing through. I am hungry and there is no tavern around here. I can give you a string of coins in exchange for some wine and food."

Noting his ferocious appearance, the woman did not dare to say no. So she replied, "There's nowhere to buy wine, but I can make you some rice."

"That's fine. But make a lot. I'm starving like hell."

"How about one pint of rice?" she asked.

"Make it three."

So the woman started a fire in the kitchen stove, went to the stream side to wash the rice, and then started cooking it in her wok. While she was busy working in the kitchen, Li Kui went around the hill behind the house to relieve himself. Just then, he spotted a man limping over the hill, and Li Kui quickly ducked behind the house and listened.

The woman was just about to go up the hillside to pluck some vegetables. When she opened the back door, she saw the man staggering toward her.

"Husband, how did you hurt your leg?" she asked.

"Oh wife, I came this close to never seeing you again. Can you believe my rotten luck? I went out there hoping to rob some lone traveler. I waited for two weeks without any business. Then today I got one, and who do you think it was? Turns out it was the real Black Whirlwind! How could I be a match for him? He stabbed me in the leg and sent me to the ground. He was just about to kill me, but I lied and said, 'If you kill me, you'd be killing two people.' He asked me why, and I told him I had a 90-year-old mother at home who would surely starve to death without anyone to care for her. That idiot believed me and spared me. He even gave me silver and told me to use it to pursue another line of work. I was

afraid he would wise up later and come after me, so I left the woods, found a quiet place to rest for a spell, and then came home from the back of the mountain.”

Just then, the woman shushed him. “Not so loud,” she whispered. “Just now a big dark man came here and asked me to make rice for him. Could it be him? He’s sitting in front of the house right now. Go take a look. If it is him, then you go and find some drug. We’ll mix it into his food. Once he passes out, we can kill him and take his money. Then we can move into town and start up a business there. Won’t that be better than robbing people here?”

As he listened to this exchange, Li Kui could feel his anger rising. “That bastard! I gave him silver and spared his life, and yet he’s plotting to kill me. This cannot stand!”

So Li Kui stomped over to the back door. The imposter Li Gui was just about to step outside, and Li Kui grabbed him by the chest. Seeing this, the woman quickly ran out through the front and scampered away. Meanwhile, Li Kui pinned his doppelganger to the ground, pulled out the broadsword hanging from his waist, and ran it across the scoundrel’s neck, cutting off his head. He then stomped out through the front door to look for the woman, but she had already disappeared without a trace.

Oh well, one severed head was good enough for now. Li Kui now came back into the house and searched around. There were only a couple bamboo hampers with some old clothes in them. He threw the clothes aside and found a few scraps of silver and a couple pieces of jewelry, which he promptly pocketed. He then went over to the headless corpse of the imposter and retrieved the silver he had given the man. He wrapped all these things in his bundle and then went to check on the food.

By now the rice was ready, but there was nothing to go with them, not even vegetables. Oh well, beggars can’t be choosers. Li Kui started tearing into the rice, but after a few big gulps, he suddenly started laughing and said, “What an idiot I am. There’s perfectly good meat right here; why didn’t I think of it?”

As he spoke, he pulled out his short handle broadsword, walked over to the headless corpse, and sliced off a couple pieces of flesh from the thighs. He washed them in the stream, got some burning embers from the stove, and roasted the flesh over it. Yeah, dark meat is always the better cut.

After satiating his hunger with this makeshift barbecue, Li Kui dragged the corpse of his doppelganger into the house, and then he set the whole place on fire. And then Li Kui got back on the road.

By the time he got to his home village, the sun was hugging the western horizon. He rushed to his old house, pushed open the doors, and stomped in.

"Who's there?" he heard his mother's voice coming from inside.

Li Kui looked in the direction of her voice and saw his mother sitting on her bed, reciting Buddhist scripture. As he approached, he noticed something -- both her eyes had gone blind.

"Mom, it's me, Iron Ox! I'm home!"

"My child! You've been gone for so long. Where have you been these last few years? Your older brother can only find work as a hired hand. He can barely get by, much less take care of me. I miss you so much that I've used up all my tears and lost my vision. How have you been?"

When she asked that question, Li Kui thought to himself, "If I tell her that I've become a bandit on Liangshan, she would never come with me. I'll just tell her a lie."

So he replied, "I've become a government official! I've come to get you."

His mother was joyous at this great news, but she said, "That's great, but how can you travel with me?"

"I'll carry you on my back to the main road, and then we'll get a cart."

"Wait for your brother to get home and discuss it with him."

"Why wait for him? Let's go, just the two of us."

Li Kui was just about to pick up his mother and leave when his older brother Li Da (2) walked in with a jar of rice.

“Brother, I haven’t seen you in so long,” Li Kui said as he bowed.

But Li Da flew into a rage at the sight of his younger brother. “You! You scoundrel! What are you doing back here?! Are you here to cause more trouble for others?!”

Their mother intervened and said, “Iron Ox is a government official now. He came to take me with him.”

But Li Da shot back, “Mom! Don’t listen to his BS. When he killed someone, it was me who had to wear a cangue and chains and suffer. And now, I’ve heard that he was in cahoots with the bandits of Liangshan. He stormed an execution, made a ruckus in Jiangzhou, and is a bandit now. The day before, documents came from Jiangzhou ordering his arrest. They were going to haul me into court, but thankfully a rich man spoke to the judge on my behalf and explained that my brother had disappeared from home for more than 10 years, with no word on his whereabouts, so maybe it was just someone else by the same name who committed all those offenses. He also spent money on my behalf, so I didn’t have to take a caning from the authorities. Right now they are offering 3,000 strings of coins for his arrest. Turns out you are alive and now you are back here spewing nonsense!”

Trying to get a word in, Li Kui said, “Brother, don’t get upset. Come with us to Liangshan and live the high life. Won’t that be great?!”

But Li Da flew into an even bigger rage. He wanted to beat Li Kui, but knew he was no match for his brother. So he threw the jar of rice to the ground and stomped out.

Li Kui now thought to himself, “He must be going to gather up some people to come arrest me. I should leave now if I want to get away. Let me leave him a 50-tael ingot of silver. He’s never seen such a giant piece of silver. When he comes back and sees that, he won’t come after me anymore.”

So he left the giant silver ingot on the bed and then said, “Mom, I’ll carry you.”

“Where are you carrying me off to?”

“Don’t you worry about it. I’m taking you to a better life. I’ll carry you. It’s no problem.”

So Li Kui put his blind mother on his back, picked up his broadsword, and hit the backroads.

A little while later, his older brother returned with a dozen or so workhands from his employer’s home. They sprinted into his house but saw no sign of Li Kui or his mother. Instead, Li Da saw the giant piece of silver on the bed. He thought, “Iron Ox must have left this silver and run off with mom to who knows where. He must have backup. If I go after him, I might die at his hand. He must be taking mom to his bandit lair to live the good life.”

With things as they were, Li Da just told his entourage, “Who knows which backroad Li Kui took. There are so many backroads around here, how can we find them?”

Seeing that he was not inclined to go searching, the workhands just stood around for a while scratching their heads, and then they all broke up.

Meanwhile, Li Kui was trying to put as much distance between him and his brother as he could, so he carried his mother and hurried down the most remote backroads he could find. As evening descended, he arrived at the foot of a peak. He recognized this peak and knew that there would be no households to seek shelter at until they crossed over to the other side. So, with a bright moon lighting his way, he climbed the peak.

As he was walking, his mother spoke up. “My child. Can you find me some water? I’m thirsty.”

“Mom, wait till we get over to the other side of this peak. Then we can find a house to stay at for the night and make some dinner.”

“I ate some dry rice for lunch, and now my throat is parched,” she said.



“My throat is bone dry too,” he answered. “Let me carry you to the top of the peak, and then I’ll find some water for you.”

“My child, I really can’t take it anymore. Please, help me.”

“I’m exhausted, too,” Li Kui said as he staggered to the top of the peak. He set his mother down on a large boulder under a pine tree. He stuck his broadsword into the ground and told her, “Mom, rest here for a bit while I go find water for you.”

Standing up, Li Kui could hear the sound of flowing water. He followed it and wound his way around a few hills and saw a clear, rushing stream. He went over, scooped a few handfuls of water into his mouth, and then thought to himself, “How do I get this water back to mom?”

He stood and looked around, and on a hilltop in the distance, he spotted an old Daoist temple.

“Got it!” he said to himself. Grabbing onto vines, he climbed up the hill and made his way to the temple. He pushed open the doors and inside, he spotted a stone incense urn. He tried to pick it up, but the urn was built into the base and would not budge. So Li Kui mustered his strength and with one ferocious tug, pulled the entire urn and base out of the ground. He then slammed the base against a step, breaking off the urn. He took the urn back down to the stream, soaked it in the water, wiped it clean with some grass, and then filled it up halfway with clean water. Hoisting the stone urn with both hands, he retraced his steps back up the peak.

When he returned to the pine tree, however, there was no sign of his mother. His broadsword was still standing in the ground. He called out to his mom, telling her he had fetched the water. But there was no answer. He walked around and called out again. And again. And again. But still, there was no answer.

Li Kui was starting to panic now. He tossed the urn aside and started looking everywhere for his mom. About 30 paces from the pinetree, he spotted something on the grass. It was a faint trail of blood.

Li Kui was even more worried now. He followed the blood trail. It led him to the outside of a large cave. Standing at a distance, he spotted two tiger cubs outside the cave. They were gnawing on something. They were gnawing, on a human leg.

“I came all this way from Liangshan and worked so hard to carry my mom here, only to have her eaten by you!” Li Kui thought to himself. “Who else could those tigers be eating if not my mom?!”

Consumed by rage, his whiskers stood up on end, and Li Kui charged forward and started stabbing at the tiger cubs with his broadsword. One of them bared its fangs and claws and came at him, but he dispatched it with one thrust. The other cub darted into the cave, but Li Kui followed it inside and killed it as well. Then, he laid down and waited inside the cave.

Moments later, tiger mom appeared from outside.

“So, it was you who ate my mother!” Li Kui thought as he set down the long-handle broadsword and unsheathed the short-handle broadsword.

As the mother tiger approached the cave entrance, she turned around and began to back her way into the cave. Just then, she felt a sharp pain jolting through her as a sharp object pierced her rear. Li Kui had stabbed so hard that he plunged his short broadsword all the way into her belly. Letting out a painful roar, the mother tiger ran off with the broadsword still inside her and leaped across a ravine.

Li Kui picked up his long-handle broadsword and gave chase. He saw the wounded beast tumbling down the rocky hillside and was just about to pursue when suddenly, a wild gale kicked up, blowing leaves and loose tree bark into the air. In the shimmering moonlight, a huge, fearsome tiger leaped out and pounced toward Li Kui. But Li Kui showed no sign of panic. As the tiger was coming down, he raised his broadsword and pierced its throat, and that tiger immediately went limp, backed up a few steps, and collapsed by the cliff.

So if you're keeping score at home, Li Kui just quadrupled Wu Song's tiger-slaying record, though granted, he had weapons with him and two of those four tigers were cubs. In any case, having nudged this majestic megafauna a little closer to the endangered species list, Li Kui now returned to their lair and searched it thoroughly, just in case there was another one lurking somewhere. But there wasn't. By now, he was exhausted, so he stumbled back to the temple and slept there. When morning came, he returned to the bloody scene to collect the only thing left of his mother -- a couple bones left from her legs. These he wrapped in a cloth. He dug a pit behind the temple, buried her remains there, and had a long cry.

After the travails of the night, Li Kui was hungry and thirsty. He packed up his bundle and broadsword and slowly made his way down the peak. On the way, he came across a few hunters who were preparing bows and arrows. When they saw this guy coming down the mountain all covered in blood, they were taken aback and asked him, "Hey you! Are you a spirit? How dare you cross this peak alone?"

Li Kui may be devastated and exhausted, but he still had some wits about him. He knew better than to reveal his true identity, given the bounty on his head. So he told them, "I'm a traveler. Last night my mother and I were crossing this peak. She was thirsty. When I went to look for water, she was carried away by a tiger. I found the tiger's lair. I killed the two cubs first, and then two adults. I slept in the Daoist temple until morning before coming down."

All the hunters cried out, "We don't believe you! How can you single-handedly kill four tigers?! Even ancient heroes only killed one tiger each. Those two cubs aren't anything to be afraid of, but those two grown tigers are no joke! Because of them, we've received multiple canings from the local authorities for not being able to kill them. Ever since that family of tigers took up residence on that peak, no one has dared to cross it for the last four or five months. You must be joking. We don't believe you!"

“I’m not from here,” Li Kui said. “Why would I lie to you? If you don’t believe me, then go up there with me and see for yourself. Bring some men to carry the tigers down.”

“If you’re telling the truth, then you’ve done great service, and we will thank you in kind,” the hunters said.

The hunters then let out a whistle, and about 50 men appeared in the blink of an eye, all carrying hooks and spears. They followed Li Kui back up the peak. By now, it was completely light out, and they could see the bodies of the two cubs by the lair in the distance, one inside the cave and the other just outside. The mother tiger was found by the cliff, while the adult male was found near the temple. The hunters were ecstatic as they tied up the tigers to poles and carried them off the mountain. They invited Li Kui to accompany them to go collect the reward.

Meanwhile, the group sent word to the prominent families of the area, and they all came to greet the hero. They carried the tigers to the home of a local wealthy man, an old squire Cao (2). This squire Cao was a retired petty official. He wasn’t exactly an upstanding man. In fact, he gained his wealth only recently through various crooked deals. So you know, kind of par for the course as far as officials go in this novel.

Old squire Cao personally came to welcome Li Kui. After they sat down in his thatched parlor, he asked how Li Kui had come to kill the tigers, and Li Kui recounted the night’s events, which left everyone stunned.

Squire Cao then asked the hero for his name, and Li Kui just answered, “My family name is Zhang. I have no given name. People just call me Zhang the Bold.”

“You really are a bold hero,” Squire Cao said. “Otherwise, how could you have slain four tigers?!” He then instructed his men to prepare food and wine for the hero.

Meanwhile, word of the valiant deeds of this Zhang the Bold had spread through all the nearby villages like wildfire, and everybody packed into Squire Cao's estate to have a look at the tigers and the hero who slayed them. While Li Kui sat in the parlor and drank, the crowd gawked. But someone in the crowd recognized him, and this person knew that he was not Zhang the Bold.

To see who had recognized Li Kui, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we see the fallout from Li Kui's actions on this trip. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!