

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 78.

Last time, Dai Zong and Li Kui finally tracked down the Daoist priest Gongsun Sheng. They told him they needed him to go help defeat the sorcery-wielding prefect of Gaotang, but Gongsun Sheng said he had to check with his master first. His master, a certain Priest Luo, refused. That prompted Li Kui to sneak into his sanctuary that night and bury an axe in his head because, hey, this is our standard recruitment practice when someone says no.

But the next day, they found Priest Luo sitting in his sanctuary and doing just fine, and definitely without an axe in his head, or even any scars from the previous night's encounter with Li Kui. This time, though, Priest Luo was singing a different tune, saying that Gongsun Sheng could go help his friends. Li Kui thought the priest had wised up thanks to his convincing argument the night before. Priest Luo even offered to help them get back quicker via cloud Uber. But as soon as Li Kui stepped onto his cloud, he had regrets. Priest Luo confronted him about the previous night and then decided that he needed to be taught a lesson. So, with a wave of his hand, Priest Luo sent Li Kui flying off to god knows where.

As we rejoin the narrative, we find ourselves in the office of the local prefect. The prefect was presiding over his courthouse at the moment, flanked by numerous officers. Suddenly, they heard a loud thud on the shingle roof, followed by the sound of something big rolling off. The next thing you know, a man had fallen seemingly out of the sky.

Once he picked his jaw off the floor, the prefect shouted, "Bring that knave over here!"

A dozen or so jailers immediately picked up Li Kui and dragged him over.

"What sort of devil are you?! How did you fall out of the sky?!" the prefect barked.

By now, Li Kui had scrapes all over his head, and he was so dazed that he couldn't say a word.

"He must be a sorcerer," the prefect said. "Men, bring something to quell his magic!"

Before Li Kui could react, the jailers had tied him up and dragged him out to the grass in front of the hall. The next thing you know, an officer came over with a basin of dog's blood and poured it right over

his head. Before Li Kui could protest, another officer came over with a bucket of urine and manure and doused him from head to toe. Unfortunately for Li Kui, these were what folks in olden times thought would foil the magic of sorcerers.

With excrement and blood covering every orifice on his face, Li Kui shouted, "I'm not a sorcerer! I'm a companion of Priest Luo!"

Now, everybody in the prefecture knew of Priest Luo and his magical powers, so the jailers did not dare to harm Li Kui. Instead, they brought him back to the hall and said to the prefect, "Priest Luo is a famous living immortal. If this guy is his follower, we must not torture him."

But the prefect chuckled and said, "I am well versed in all things past and present. I have never seen any immortals have such a disciple. He must be a sorcerer. Men, beat that knave, hard!"

The boss had spoken, so the jailers had no choice but to go to town on Li Kui with their bamboo poles, and they beat him until he was more dead than alive.

"Confess that you are a sorcerer, and the beating will stop!" the prefect shouted.

Seeing that he really had no other options, Li Kui confessed to being Li the Second, a sorcerer. The prefect put him in a big cangue and sent him to the dungeon.

But when Li Kui got to the dungeon, he told the jailers, "I am a divine warrior and general of the sun. How dare you put me in chains? I'm going to kill everyone in town."

All the jailers knew of Priest Luo's reputation, so they all came to ask Li Kui if he really was what he claimed to be.

"I am a divine warrior who serves Priest Luo," he told them. "I made a mistake and offended him, so he cast me here to teach me a lesson. He's going to come get me in a few days. If you don't treat me to some wine and food and take care of me, I'll make sure you and your families meet your doom."

So everyone ended up being afraid of him, and they bought him wine and meat. Li Kui decided to double down on his lie, and the more he lied, the more the jailers feared him. So they drew him a bath and gave him a change of clothes. But that still wasn't enough for him.

"If you shortchange me on wine and food, I'm going to fly off, and then you'll be in for it," he told his watchers. So, the jailers had no choice but to treat him like some VIP who was just visiting the jail.

Meanwhile, back at his sanctuary, Priest Luo told Dai Zong what Li Kui had done the previous night. Dai Zong went ah crap, and begged the priest for mercy. Priest Luo was in no hurry though. He kept Dai Zong at his sanctuary and asked him about Liangshan. Dai Zong told him how Chao Gai and Song Jiang were honorable and generous and were only carrying out justice on heaven's behalf, and how they have sworn to never harm the loyal, the brave, the filial, or the chaste. I'm guessing he left out the parts where they slaughtered innocents by the dozens or even hundreds as collateral damage, because Priest Luo was very pleased with what he heard. He kept Dai Zong at his sanctuary for five straight days, and each day, Dai Zong would kowtow to him and beg him to save Li Kui.

"You should rid yourself of such men," Priest Luo told him. "Don't bring him back with you."

"Master, you don't understand," Dai Zong said. "That Li Kui is foolish and doesn't have any manners. But there are also some good points about him. First, he's absolutely straight. He'll never take others' stuff. Second, he will never flatter people, but he will remain loyal till his death. Third, he harbors no lechery, greed, or treachery. He is bold and courageous. That's why Brother Song adores him. If I go back without him, I will not be able to answer to Brother Song."

So again, Dai Zong is leaving out some choice parts about Li Kui here, like how he split open a 4-year-old's head or how he's always just one missed meal away from resorting to cannibalism. But in any case, Priest Luo was convinced. He laughed and said, "I already knew that he is one of the Heavenly Spirits. Because people on earth are committing too many sins, heaven has sent him down here as

retribution. How can I dare to go against heaven's will and harm his life? I'm just letting him suffer a little bit. Let me fetch him for you."

The priest now called out, "Where are my warriors?"

A gale immediately whipped up in front of the hall, and as the wind passed, a stout divine warrior wearing a yellow headscarf appeared and asked, "Master, what are your instructions?"

"The man that you took to Jizhou Prefecture has served his time. Go to the prison and bring him back. Make it quick."

The divine warrior vanished. About an hour later, Dai Zong heard the sound of someone screaming approaching from above. As the sound got louder and louder, he suddenly saw Li Kui plop onto the ground with a thud.

"Brother, where have you been these last few days?" Dai Zong asked as he helped Li Kui to his feet.

Li Kui looked up, and as soon as he saw Priest Luo, he immediately fell to his knees and kowtowed nonstop, saying, "I will never dare to do it again!"

"From now on, check your temper," the priest warned him. "Help Song Jiang to the best of your abilities; do not have any stray thoughts."

"I will never dare to disobey your instructions!" Li Kui said again as he kowtowed some more.

Dai Zong asked again where he had been, and Li Kui recounted his little trip to jail and how it turned into a nice stay. "I was just sitting in the prison gazebo eating and drinking when that divine warrior jumped down from heaven," he said. "He broke my cangue, told me to close my eyes, and brought me here. It was all like a dream."

Gongsun Sheng chimed in and told him, "My master has more than 1,000 such warriors at his beck and call."

"Living Buddha! Why didn't you tell me that earlier?!" Li Kui shouted as he kowtowed some more.

"It would've saved me from doing something so foolish!"

Dai Zong also bowed and said, "We have been here for many days. The situation at Gaotang Prefecture is urgent. Master, I hope you will show compassion and let Mr. Gongsun accompany us to go save Brother Song. Once we have defeated Gao Lian, I will escort him back here."

"I didn't want to let him go at first, but because you value honor thus, I will allow it," Priest Luo said. He then turned to Gongsun Sheng and said, "I have some instructions for you."

Gongsun Sheng kneeled and asked for his master's instructions, and Priest Luo told him, "The magic you have learned is about on par with Prefect Gao Lian's. Let me teach you the Divine Method for Summoning the Five Thunderbolts. Follow my instructions, and you will be able to save Song Jiang, protect the state and the people, and deliver justice on heaven's behalf. Do not let mundane matters lead you astray. Remember what you have learned. As for your mother, I will send someone to look after her, so you don't have to worry. You are one of the stars of Heavenly Spirits. That's why I'm letting you go assist Song Jiang. I have eight words that you should remember: Stop at the You (1); return at the Bian (4)."

Now, like other cryptic instructions from divine or semi-divine beings in this novel, those lines are a foreshadowing device. We'll get back to them eventually. For now, Gongsun Sheng, Dai Zong, and Li Kui took their leave of Priest Luo, went back to Gongsun Sheng's house, where he packed up his stuff and said goodbye to his mother. They then left the mountain and started walking toward Gaotang Prefecture. Alas, I guess cloud Uber wasn't really a thing.

After 10 miles or so, Dai Zong said, "I'm going on ahead to let Brother Song know. Mr. Gongsun, you and Li Kui keep going on the main road. I'll be back to escort you."

He then told Li Kui, "Take good care of Mr. Gongsun on the way. If you mistreat him in the slightest, I'll make sure you pay for it."

“He has the same powers as Priest Luo; how would I dare to mistreat him?” said Li Kui, who’s had all the sorcery he could stomach on this trip. Dai Zong then strapped on his charms, activated his speedwalking powers, and took off.

Gongsun Sheng and Li Kui continued on their way. When evening descended, they found lodging at an inn. Still wary of Priest Luo’s powers, Li Kui tended to Gongsun Sheng with the utmost care and did not dare to act up in the slightest. After three days, they arrived at a town and were greeted with busy streets filled with people going about their business.

“I’m a bit tired from the last couple days’ journey; let’s find a bowl of weak wine and some noodles first,” Gongsun Sheng suggested.

So they ducked into a small tavern, sat down around a table, and ordered some food.

“Do you have any pastries?” Gongsun Sheng asked the waiter.

“We just sell meat and wine; we don’t have any vegetarian pastries,” the waiter replied. “But by the town entrance there’s a shop that sells date cakes.”

Li Kui volunteered to go get some, so he fetched some coins and went to the town market. He found the place and bought a pack of date cakes. Just as he was about to go back to the tavern, he heard a round of cheers from the side of the street as people shouted, “What great strength!”

He looked in the direction of the cheers and saw a crowd of people huddled around a big man wielding a large ribbed iron mallet. He was putting on a show, and the spectators were cheering nonstop. This guy was tall, his face was pitted with smallpox scars, and there was a big groove in his nose. His mallet must have weighed about 30 catties, which was more than 33 pounds. As he got more and more into it, the man suddenly swung his mallet into a paver stone on the street and smashed the stone to smithereens, drawing another round of cheers.

Li Kui couldn’t stand it anymore. He tucked the date cakes into his pocket, shoved his way past the spectators, and reached for the mallet.

“Hey, who the hell are you? How dare you take my mallet?!” the man shouted.

“You ain’t so hot! You don’t deserve these cheers! It sullies my eyes just to watch you,” Li Kui shot back. “Let me show you all a thing or two.”

“Fine, I’ll let you borrow my mallet,” the man said. “But if you can’t lift it, then you just earned yourself a fist to the face from me.”

Li Kui was like, puh-leeze. He took the mallet and swung it around as if it were a feather, and then set it back down without even breaking a sweat. Seeing this, the man kneeled, bowed, and asked for his name.

“Where do you live?” Li Kui asked him.

“Just up ahead,” the man answered. He then led Li Kui over to a house with a lock on the door. He unlatched the lock and invited Li Kui inside, where they sat on the ground. Li Kui looked around and saw hammers, anvils, stoves, and bellows.

“He must be a blacksmith,” Li Kui thought to himself. “We would have uses for him on Liangshan. Why don’t I ask him to join?”

He then asked the man for his name. The guy replied, “My name is Tang (1) Long (2). My father used to be a garrison officer at Yanan (2,1) Prefecture. Because of his blacksmithing skills, Old General Zhong took my father into his service. My father died a few years back. I am a gambling addict and ended up drifting around. I’m making my living here as a blacksmith. I love playing with weapons, and because I have smallpox scars all over my body, people call me the Gold Coin Spotted Leopard. Brother, what is your honorable name?”

Li Kui introduced himself, and Tang Long immediately bowed again, saying, “I have long heard of your great name. I never expected to meet you.”

Li Kui now told him, “You won’t get anywhere staying here. Why don’t you come with me to Liangshan and be one of our chieftains?”

“If you do not think me unworthy, then I am willing to follow you everywhere,” Tang Long said. He and Li Kui then swore an oath of brotherhood on the spot.

“I have no family,” Tang Long said. “Let me take you to the town market to have a few cups of wine to celebrate our oath. You can rest here tonight, and we will set out tomorrow morning.”

“I have a master at the tavern up the road, waiting for these date cakes,” Li Kui said. “Once he’s eaten, we must hit the road. We can’t delay; we have to go right away.”

“Why such a hurry?” Tang Long asked.

“My brother Song Jiang is fighting at Gaotang Prefecture. He’s waiting for this master to go save him.”

“Who is this master?”

“Don’t ask so many questions; just go pack up,” Li Kui said.

So Tang Long quickly put together a bundle and some silver, put on a broad-brimmed felt hat, strapped a short broadsword around his waist, and took a long-handle broadsword with him. He left everything else behind and accompanied Li Kui back to the tavern, where Gongsun Sheng was like, where the heck have you been?!

“What took you so long?” he said. “Any longer and I would’ve gone looking for you.”

Li Kui did not dare to talk back. He just introduced Tang Long. Gongsun Sheng was also delighted at the fact that they were adding a blacksmith to their operation. Li Kui now asked the waiter to go warm up the date cakes. The three men then drank a few cups of wine, ate the pastries, paid their bill, and hit the road again. They left the town and continued toward Gaotang Prefecture.

When they were two-thirds of the way to their destination, they saw Dai Zong speeding toward them. Gongsun Sheng asked him how the fight was going, and Dai Zong said, “That knave Gao Lian has recovered from his wound, so he has been challenging for battle the last few days. Brother Song just stayed on the defensive and did not dare to go out to meet him. He’s waiting for you.”



Li Kui then introduced Tang Long, and the four men hurried toward Gaotang Prefecture. When they were about a mile and a half way from the bandit camp, they were greeted by the halberd twins Lü (3) Fang (1) and Guo (1) Sheng (4), who were coming with 100-some men to welcome them. The four travelers hopped on horses and rode back to camp, where they were greeted by Song Jiang and Wu Yong. Once they sat down in the main tent, all the chieftains came to pay their respects. Li Kui also introduced the newest recruit Tang Long, and a banquet ensued.

The next day, Song Jiang, Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng got down to discussing how to defeat Gao Lian.

“Please order our troops to strike their tents and head out,” Gongsun Sheng said. “Let’s see how the enemy responds, and I will know what to do.”

So Song Jiang ordered his troops to move out and march to the foot of Gaotang Prefecture, where they set up camp. The next day, they made breakfast at 5 a.m., and got ready for a fight. Song Jiang, Wu Yong, and Gongsun Sheng rode out to the front of the lines as their men marched toward the city while waving banners, beating war drums, and shouting battle cries.

Inside the city, the prefect Gao Lian was by now fully recovered from his arrow wound. Last night he had already gotten word that Song Jiang was back again. So this morning, he put on his armor, opened the city gates, lowered the drawbridge, and rode out with his troops, including his 300 Flying Miracles, the special unit that carried out his magic.

The two armies lined up. On the Liangshan side, as the banners parted, Song Jiang rode out, flanked by five chieftains on each side, and accompanied by Wu Yong and Gongsun Sheng. On the other side, Gao Lian rode out, accompanied by about 30 officers.

Trotting out to the front lines, Gao Lian shouted, “You two-bit swamp bandits! If you want to fight, then let’s settle this. If you run, you’re no hero!”

Hearing this, Song Jiang turned and asked, "Who will go out and kill that scum?!"

One chieftain immediately galloped out with spear in hand. This was Hua Rong. Gao Lian asked which of his officers wanted to take Hua Rong on, and one of his top generals immediately rode out wielding twin sabers. The two warriors faced off. After trading a few blows, Hua Rong turned and rode back toward his own lines. His opponent gave chase, apparently being the only guy who didn't know that Hua Rong was famous for his archery skills. As his pursuer got closer, Hua Rong suddenly turned around and let fly an arrow. His aim was true, and his opponent fell dead to the ground.

As the Liangshan forces cheered, Gao Lian flew into a rage and decided to go back to what's worked for him. He picked up his bronze shield and banged it three times with his sword. Immediately, a swirl of yellow sand kicked up, as the skies darkened and a chorus of roars rose up from within his ranks. Here came that swarm of wild beasts again.

The Liangshan forces were just about to retreat again, but Gongsun Sheng pulled out his sword, pointed at the enemy, mumbled an incantation, and shouted, "Speed!"

A bright light shot out toward the enemy, and in the blink of an eye, the oncoming swarm of wild animals fluttered harmlessly to the ground. As the dust settled, everyone saw that they were nothing more than papercuts of tigers, leopards, and such.

With the enemy's spell broken, Song Jiang pointed with his whip, and his army charged. Wherever they went, the enemy's troops melted and their banners fell. Gao Lian hurriedly fell back into the city. When Song Jiang's forces got to the foot of the city, the drawbridge was already up, and boulders and logs were flying down from the city wall. So Song Jiang ordered his men to fall back. They returned to camp victorious, thanked Gongsun Sheng for his help, and rewarded the troops.

The next day, Song Jiang laid siege to the city, but no matter how hard they attacked, they could not breach the defenses. When evening approached, the Liangshan forces called it a day and returned to camp.

Around 9 p.m. that night, Gao Lian and his 300 Flying Miracles sneaked out of the city, armed with fire-starting material. Gao Lian took the lead, followed by 30-some riders as they galloped toward Liangshan's camp for a surprise attack. As they approached the camp, Gao Lian cast a spell from his horse. A swirl of black vapor rose up, and a strong gale blew, whipping up sand and pebbles. Under the cover of the dust, the Flying Miracles prepared their flames and charged into the bandits' camp, where they were greeted by ... no one. The camp was empty.

Just then, on a nearby hill, Gongsun Sheng waved his sword and cast a spell of his own, and a thunderbolt rose up from the ground inside the camp. Before the Flying Miracles could retreat, the camp was already on fire. Flames roared toward the heavens, and there was nowhere to run. And now, Liangshan forces that had been lying in wait this whole time rose up and surrounded the camp. None of the 300 Flying Miracles escaped. They were all slaughtered in the camp.

Gao Lian and his 30-some personal guards were the only ones who managed to get out alive. As they dashed back toward the city, a battalion of Liangshan troops appeared in pursuit. This was led by Lin Chong the Panther Head. Gao Lian scrambled into the city and pulled up the drawbridge. Only eight or nine members of his entourage made it into the city. The rest were all captured alive by Lin Chong.

Once he caught his breath, Gao Lian pressed the city's civilians into service, forcing them to join the defense atop the city wall. When the next day dawned, Song Jiang's forces had surrounded the city again.

With his troops decimated and his magic broken, Gao Lian now had no choice but to dispatch letters to two nearby prefectures asking for help. Both prefectures were overseen by people that his cousin Gao Qiu had elevated, so Gao Lian was sure they would answer his call. He sent two officers to charge out of the west gate, fight through the enemy lines, and go deliver the letters. They set out that very day, and quite surprisingly, they got through without much of a fight, and the Liangshan forces didn't even bother giving chase.

For the next few days, Gao Lian pined for the reinforcements he had requested. Then, one day, his men on the wall saw in the distance that Song Jiang's forces were falling into disarray. They hurriedly reported this to Gao Lian, and he rushed to the city wall to see for himself. In the distance, he saw two armies charging through the enemy lines amid a giant dust cloud and loud roars of battle. The bandit forces surrounding the city scattered and fled. The reinforcements had arrived!

Gao Lian was elated. He rounded up all his troops, threw open the city gates, and dashed out to join the battle. As he approached Song Jiang's lines, he saw Song Jiang riding away toward a backroad, accompanied by the chieftains Hua Rong and Qin Ming. Gao Lian gave chase, but just then, he heard a string of cannon shots from behind a hill.

That roused his suspicion, and he turned around, just in time to be greeted by an onslaught of enemies. Five hundred men led by the chieftain Lü Fang attacked from the left, while 500 more led by his halberd twin Guo Sheng attacked from the right. By the time Gao Lian fought his way out, he had lost more than half of his men. As he fled back toward the city, he was in for a surprise: The walls of the city were lined with the banners of Liangshan.

Startled, Gao Lian turned and looked all around, and he saw not a single soldier from the reinforcements that had arrived.

Ah crap.

So yeah, this was a trick. When Gao Lian sent his officers to go get help, the Liangshan forces had been ordered by their strategist Wu Yong to let the messengers go. Wu Yong then had his own troops pretend to be the reinforcements coming to the rescue. And that was enough to trick Gao Lian into opening his gates and charging into a trap.

To see what will happen to Gao Lian, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also, hey remember why we were fighting this war? Oh yeah, to save Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind. It's been weeks. Is that guy still alive? To find out, join us next time. Thanks for listening!