

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 103.

Last time, on his way home from the capital, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind stopped in at one old squire's manor house and solved his family problems by killing his daughter and her secret lover when he caught them sneaking around. He then stopped in at the manor house of another old squire who was having problems with his daughter, except this guy's problem was that apparently Song Jiang and another bandit from Liangshan had abducted his daughter. Li Kui blew his lid when he heard that, and the next thing you know, he was back on Liangshan, threatening to kill Song Jiang.

After some war of words, Song Jiang said, "Don't make a ruckus just yet. That old squire is alive, as are all his workhands. Let's go see him and let him tell you if I was the one. If he says yes, then I'll stick out my neck for your axe. But if he says I'm not the one, what punishment should you receive for all the trouble you've just caused?"

"If you aren't the one, then I'll give you my head as well!" Li Kui said.

"Fine! All the brothers here can be our witnesses," Song Jiang replied. He then asked the chieftain Pei (2) Xuan (1) the Iron-faced Scribe, who was known for being a stickler for the rules, to write up two military pledges recording their agreement. Song Jiang and Li Kui each signed one of the pledges and gave them to each other for safekeeping.

Li Kui now said, "The abductor's accomplice must be none other than Chai Jin."

Chai Jin the Little Whirlwind, who had accompanied Song Jiang back from the capital, promptly offered to go with them as well. Li Kui scoffed, "Damn right you're coming along. If the old squire pegs you as the abductor, I don't care who you are, you'll get a taste of my axe."

"No problem," Chai Jin said. "You go on ahead and wait for us at the old squire's home. We don't want to cause any alarm when we show up."

“Quite right,” Li Kui said. He then said to Yan Qing the Prodigy, who had been there when the old squire told them about his daughter’s abduction, “Let the two of us go on back first. If these guys don’t show, then that must mean they are guilty.”

Later that day, Yan Qing and Li Kui showed up back at Old Squire Li’s estate. Li Kui told the squire, “I have told that Song Jiang to come here so you can see if he was the one who took your daughter. You, your wife, and your workhands must all take a good look at him. If it turns out he is the one, just tell it like it is. Don’t be afraid. I’ve got your back.”

Just then, a workhand reported that about a dozen riders just arrived. Li Kui told them to only ask Song Jiang and Chai Jin to come into the parlor and keep everyone else outside. As the two men came in and sat down, Li Kui stood to one side, gripping his axes and just waiting for the old squire to confirm their identity before he let loose.

Old Squire Li stepped forth and greeted Song Jiang with a bow. Li Kui now asked him, “Is he the one who abducted your daughter?”

The old squire opened his eyes wide, took a really close look, and then a second look, and then said, “No.”

Song Jiang turned to Li Kui and said, “So what are you gonna do now?”

“You two were glaring at the old man, so he must be afraid of you and didn’t dare to tell the truth,” Li Kui protested.

“[Sigh] Then go ask everyone on the estate to come take a look,” Song Jiang said.

Li Kui did so, and all the workhands on the estate came in, looked at Song Jiang, and all said, “He’s not the one.”

“Old Squire Li,” Song Jiang now said, “I am Song Jiang of Liangshan. And this brother here is Chai Jin. Your daughter must have been abducted by imposters. If you find out who they are, send word to our base, and I will get you justice.”

He then turned to Li Kui and said, “I’m not gonna bother with you here. Come back to the base, and we’ll deal with you then.”

Then, Song Jiang, Chai Jin and their entourage left and headed back to Liangshan.

“Brother Li, what will you do now?” a worried Yan Qing asked as he and Li Kui watched their fellow chieftains ride away.

“I got angry and got it wrong,” Li Kui lamented. “Since I wagered my head and lost, I’ll just cut it off myself and you can take it to Brother Song.”

“Wait, you don’t need to die,” Yan Qing said. “I’ll show you a way out. It’s called “Carrying a thornstick to ask for forgiveness.”

“What does that mean?” Li Kui asked.

So, let’s take a quick timeout for a little explainer. This saying, “Carrying a thornstick to ask for forgiveness,” has its roots in the Warring States period, some 1,400 years before the time of the novel. One of the many states at the time had a top general who had beef with a civil official. The general didn’t think the official had any talent, and couldn’t stand the fact that he nonetheless had the ear of their lord. So the general went out of his way to show up this official at every turn, and at every turn the official avoided confrontation and even ordered people from his own household to do the same.

The general thought it was because the official was ashamed. But later, a mutual friend told the general that “No, you dummy. That guy is just taking the high road so that you two don’t come to blows and cause even more tension in your own government, because then the rival states might take advantage.” When he learned that, the general was thoroughly ashamed of his actions, so he showed up

at the official's home, stripped to the waist and carrying a thorny branch on his back, asking the official to whip him with it as atonement for his earlier actions. The official, of course, graciously declined, and the two men became good friends instead.

Fast forward 1,400 years, and Yan Qing was telling Li Kui to carry a thornstick on his bare back, prostrate in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, and tell Song Jiang to whip him to his heart's content, banking on the hope that Song Jiang would not be able to bring himself to do it.

"That's a decent idea," Li Kui said, "but it's kind of embarrassing. Ahh, I should just cut off my head. That'll be tidier."

Uhh, hmm.

"Everyone on Liangshan is your brother, so who would laugh at you?" Yan Qing said.

Back in the Hall of Loyalty and Honor on Liangshan, Song Jiang, Chai Jin and the other chieftains were just discussing Li Kui when lo and behold, he came in stripped to the waist, carrying a thornstick on his back, and kneeled in silence with head bowed low.

Song Jiang couldn't help but chuckle and said, "You dark knave. Why are you carrying a thornstick? Do you think I have to spare you just because you did this?"

"It was my fault!" Li Kui answered. "Brother, just cane me a few dozen times with big sticks."

"No, we wagered our heads, so why are you bringing me a thornstick?" Song Jiang insisted.

"[Sigh] Fine, if you won't spare me, then just cut off my head. You would be within your rights to do so."

But now, everybody else chimed in and pleaded for leniency, so Song Jiang told them, "I'll spare him if he catches the two imposters and returns Old Squire Li's daughter to him."

Li Kui leaped to his feet and declared, "That's easy! It'll be like catching a turtle in a jug — just reach out and I've got them."

“Well, there are two of them, and they were on horseback, so how can you get close to them by yourself?” Song Jiang said. “I’ll send Yan Qing to go with you again.”

“I am willing to go at your command,” Yan Qing said. He then went and fetched his crossbow and wooden staff and accompanied Li Kui back to the old squire’s estate, again.

At the estate, Yan Qing asked the squire for details of his daughter’s abduction, and Old Squire Li said, “They came at sundown and left at midnight. We don’t know where they live and did not dare to follow them. The leader was short and skinny with a dark complexion. The other one was tall and stout, with short whiskers and big eyes.

After getting that info, Yan Qing and Li Kui reassured the old squire that they would get his daughter back. They then asked the workhands to cook some dried meat and buns, which they packed as provisions. They then left the estate and headed due north to search for the culprits. But there was nothing there but uninhabited wilderness. They traveled for a couple days and did not find any leads. So, they turned east and searched for another two days until they reached the borders of Lingzhou (2,1) and Gaotang (1,2) Prefectures, but didn’t have any luck there either. By now, Li Kui was getting really restless. They turned back toward the west and searched for another two days, again with no luck.

That night, the two men slept on the altar table in an ancient temple, but Li Kui could not fall asleep, so he got up and sat on the ground. Suddenly, he heard someone walking past the temple outside. Li Kui leaped to his feet and opened the doors just in time to see a man carrying a long-handle broadsword go around the temple and head down toward the foot of the mountain.

Li Kui was just about to give chase, but Yan Qing came running after him with weapons in hand, shouting, “Brother Li, hold up. I’ve got it.”

As he spoke, Yan Qing handed his wooden staff to Li Kui and loaded his crossbow. Under the dim moonlight, he took aim at the man, who was just walking with his head bowed.

“Don’t fail me!” Yan Qing shouted as he let fly a shot. The bolt struck the man on the right leg, sending him to the ground. Li Kui caught up to the guy, grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him back to the temple. There, he roared at the man, “Where did you stash Old Squire Li’s daughter?!”

“Hero,” the man replied, “I don’t know about any such thing, and I didn’t abduct any old squire’s daughter. I’m just doing some small-time transactions around here. I would never dare to do a big job like abducting someone’s daughter!”

But Li Kui was unconvinced. He now tied the guy up, and grabbed his axe. “If you won’t tell me the truth, then I’ll cut you into 20 pieces!”

“Please, let me up and I’ll talk.”

Yan Qing now played the good cop, removing his bolt from the poor guy’s leg.

“Who abducted Old Squire Li’s daughter?” Yan Qing asked as he helped the man up. “You’re operating around here; you must have heard something.”

The man said, “I’m just taking a wild guess, so it might not be right. But about 5 miles to the northwest of here, there is an Ox Head Mountain. There is an old Daoist temple on that mountain. Recently, two bandits took it over. One was named Wang (2) Jiang (1), and the other Dong (2) Hai (3). They are both thugs. They killed the priest and the acolyte, and then assembled an entourage of about five or six men, occupied the temple, and now they are robbing and pillaging. Wherever they go, they claim to be Song Jiang. They are probably the ones who abducted the woman.”

“That sounds about right,” Yan Qing said. “Don’t be afraid. I am Yan Qing the Prodigy from Liangshan, and this is Li Kui the Black Whirlwind. Let me treat your wound, and then you can lead us to these thugs’ lair.”

The man agreed, and so Yan Qing returned his broadsword to him and bandaged his wound. Then, as the light of the moon brightened slightly, Yan Qing and Li Kui helped the man to his feet, and he limped for 5 miles, leading them to Ox Head Mountain. It wasn’t a high mountain, and it lived up to its name as

it indeed looked like the head of an ox. The three men went up the mountain. Before dawn broke, they had arrived at the top. There, surrounded by an earthen wall, stood 20-some houses.

“Let’s scale the wall and jump in there,” Li Kui said to Yan Qing.

“Why don’t we wait until morning?” Yan Qing suggested.

But Li Kui had no patience for that. With one bound, he landed on the other side of the wall.

Someone inside one of the houses heard the noise and rushed out, charging at him with broadsword in hand. Yan Qing sighed and jumped over as well. The man who led them there, meanwhile, disappeared like smoke.

As the bandit from the temple charged at Li Kui, he suddenly took a blow right to the face from Yan Qing’s wooden staff, which sent him tumbling into Li Kui’s arms. Li Kui threw him to the ground and lodged an axe in his back, and that was all she wrote for that poor schmoe.

No one else came out from the houses, and Yan Qing said to Li Kui, “They must have a backway out of here. I’ll go block the back door. You guard the front door; don’t rush in there.”

Yan Qing then swung around to outside the back door and hid in the dark. Just then, he saw the back door of one of the houses creak open, and a man came out with key in hand to open the outer door. Yan Qing leaped out, and the sight of him sent the man scurrying toward the front of the house instead.

“Get him out front!” Yan Qing shouted.

Li Kui stomped over, and with just one swing of his axe, split the man’s chest open. He then cut off both corpses’ heads, and tied them together. But he wasn’t done. Li Kui’s blood was up, so he charged into the temple, knocking over the idols. Inside, he found the few accomplices cowering in the kitchen. He stomped over and killed them all with just a few swings of his axes.

He then headed toward a room in the back. There, he found a beautiful woman weeping on the bed.

“Are you Old Squire Li’s daughter?” Yan Qing asked.

The woman said yes and told him, "About 10 days ago, these outlaws abducted me and locked me here. They raped me every night. I cried every night and wanted to kill myself, but they kept a tight watch over me. Thank you for rescuing me. You're like my parents reborn!"

Yan Qing now tracked down the two horses that the bandits had in their possession, saddled them, and led them outside. He went back into the room to pack up all the valuables, which consisted of about 5,000 taels of gold and silver. Yan Qing told the woman to get on the horse, and tied the bundle of money and the two heads to the other horse. Li Kui then made a torch out of straw, lit it on a lamp, and set the place on fire. They then escorted the woman down the mountain and back toward her home.

The old squire and his wife were ecstatic to see their daughter come back alive. They kowtowed nonstop to the two chieftains.

"No need to thank the two of us," Yan Qing told them. "Just come to our base to thank my brother Song Jiang."

He and Li Kui then each rode a horse back toward Liangshan, declining the old squire's offer of food and wine. By the time they arrived, the sun was high in the sky, and the two went to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor with heads and gold and silver in tow to see Song Jiang. Yan Qing recounted what happened, which delighted Song Jiang immensely. He ordered the heads be buried and the money be stored away, while the horses were led to the stables.

The next day, the bandits threw a feast to celebrate Yan Qing and Li Kui's success. Old Squire Li also came to the base with gold and silver to offer his thanks to Song Jiang. Song Jiang, of course, refused to accept any of it. He treated the old squire to wine and food, and then sent him home. And all was well again on Liangshan.



The days passed quickly, and soon it was the third month of the year, and spring was in full bloom. One day, Song Jiang was just sitting around when his men reported that they had apprehended a traveling party of stout men who were escorting seven or eight carts and were carrying wooden staffs.

Song Jiang sized up the captives, who were all built like oxen. They kneeled and said, "We are from Fengxiang (4,2) District. We are on our way to Tai'an (4,1) Prefecture to offer incense. The 28th day of this month is the anniversary of the birth of the Emperor of Heaven, and we are going to be performing with our staffs on stage for three days. There will be tens of thousands of people there. This year, there is a famous wrestler there named Ren (4) Yuan (2). He is very tall and calls himself the Pillar of the Sky. He has boasted that no one can match him and that he's the best wrestler in the world. We heard that he has been competing at the temple's fair for two years and no one has bested him, and he has won some valuable stuff. This year, he's put up another announcement, offering to take on all comers. We are going there in part to offer incense, but also in part to see this Ren Yuan in action and to maybe steal a few tricks from him. My lord, please spare us."

After he heard all this, Song Jiang ordered his lackeys, "Hurry up and send these men back down the mountain; do not bother them at all. From now on, if you come across people who are on their way to offer incense, do not startle them. Just let them pass."

The travelers were relieved to get away with their lives, so they bowed to offer their thanks and left. Once they were gone, Yan Qing the Prodigy stood up and said to Song Jiang, "Ever since I was little, I have followed Magnate Lu and learned how to wrestle. I have not yet met my match. Today, I have a golden opportunity, and the 28th is drawing near. I'll go alone and accept this man's challenge. Even if I lose and get killed, I would not hold a grudge. If I win, then it will make all of us look good. But then there will no doubt be chaos there, so please send some reinforcements."

Song Jiang wasn't so sure about this, though. He said to Yan Qing, "Brother, we heard that guy is really tall and looks like a general of heaven. He must have immense strength. As scrawny as you are, even though you are skilled, how can you even get close to him?"

"It doesn't matter if he's big," Yan Qing said. "The only concern is whether he will fall into my trap. As the old saying goes, 'In wrestling, if you are strong, then fight with strength. If you are scrawny, then fight with wits.' I'm not bragging, but I can change strategies on the fly depending on how things go. I won't lose to that idiot."

Yan Qing's master, Lu Junyi, also spoke up on his behalf, telling Song Jiang, "He has been skilled at wrestling ever since his youth. Let him go as he wishes. I will go back him up on the appointed date."

"When can you leave?" Song Jiang asked Yan Qing.

"Today is the 24th day of the third month," Yan Qing said. "Tomorrow I will take my leave of you. I will spend one night on the road, and get there on the 26th. I will spend the 27th conducting reconnaissance, and then face that knave on the 28th."

So the next day, Song Jiang arranged a going-away banquet for Yan Qing. Yan Qing was dressed plainly like a peddler, covering up all his tattoos. Around his waist, he carried a drum rattle, and on his shoulder he carried a load on a pole.

Everyone couldn't help but chuckle at his disguise, and Song Jiang said, "You're dressed like a peddler, but can you give us a peddler's song?"

Yan Qing started shaking his drum rattle with one hand and beating out a rhythm with wooden clappers with the other, and he did an impeccable impression of a singing peddler. Everyone had a good laugh, and then they drank for a bit before Yan Qing bid everyone goodbye, went down the mountain, sailed across the marsh, and headed toward Tai'an (4,1) Prefecture.

As evening was descending, Yan Qing was just about to look for lodging when suddenly, he heard someone shout from behind, "Brother Yan! Wait up!"

He turned and let out a silent groan. It was none other than Li Kui the Black Whirlwind.

"What are you doing following me?" Yan Qing asked.

"You accompanied me on two recent trips," Li Kui said. "When I saw you go on this trip by yourself, I got worried, so I snuck off the mountain without telling Brother Song and came to help you."

"I have no need for you here; just hurry on back," Yan Qing said.

But Li Kui's temper flared. "What kind of damn hero are you?! I came to help you out of the goodness of my heart, and yet you think I'm up to no good. Well, I insist on going!"

Yan Qing thought it over for a minute and decided that the path of least resistance was to let him have his way, so he told Li Kui, "Fine, I'll take you along. But there are going to be people from all over gathering at the fair, and a lot of them might recognize you. You must agree to three things if you want to go with me."

"Deal!" Li Kui asked without hesitation.

"So, from now on, when we are traveling, we will walk separately, one in front and the other trailing behind," Yan Qing said. "Once we stop at an inn, you don't leave the room. That's the first condition. The second thing is that once we arrive at the inn at the fair, you must pretend to be under the weather and cover your head and face and pretend to be asleep, and you must not make any noise. Third, the day of the fair, when you are in the crowd watching the contest, don't make a scene. Can you do all three?"

"That's not so hard. I'll do as you say," Li Kui promised, and we of course know that Li Kui is always great at keeping promises to not act up, so I'm sure this will be an uneventful trip.

That night, the two men stayed at an inn. At 5 a.m., they got up, paid the bill, and made breakfast. As they ate, Yan Qing told Li Kui to get on the road first, and that he would follow about a quarter mile

behind. On the way, they saw a steady stream of people heading to the fair, and many were talking about the skills of Ren (4) Yuan (2), the wrestler who's hosting the contest. This was his third year issuing this challenge, and he had yet to meet his match. Yan Qing listened and took all the intel to heart.

Around noon, they were approaching the temple and saw a crowd gathered around there, looking up at a stage. Yan Qing put down his shoulder pole, squeezed to the front of the crowd, and saw two red columns, across which hung a plaque that said, "Wrestler Ren (4) You (2), the Sky-Supporting Pillar of Taiyuan (4,2)." Next to that were two columns of smaller characters that said, "Fists that punch the ferocious tigers of the south mountains; feet that kick the green dragons of the north sea."

Upon reading the sign, Yan Qing picked up his pole and smashed the plaque to pieces. He then kept walking toward the temple without saying a word. There were more than a few meddlers in the crowd of onlookers, and they quickly delivered word to Ren You that hey, somebody smashed your sign to show that they accept your challenge.

To see how this contest will go, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, Li Kui inevitably breaks his promise to stay out of trouble. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!