

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 15.

Before we pick up where we left off, I would just like to remind those of you who haven't done so to check out the podcast website, 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3. It's where I post transcripts of each episode, maps, character charts, and other resources related to the novel. Also, if you like the show, take a few seconds to rate it on iTunes to help others discover it. Thanks!

So last time, Cao Cao and Liu Bei were just about ready to have it out over Xu Province, but then Cao Cao had to call off his siege when he got word that while his back was turned, Lu Bu had sacked his base of power, Yan (3) Province. So Cao Cao agreed to Liu Bei's call for a truce and beat a hasty retreat to save his home base.

As he approached Yan Province, his brother Cao Ren met up with him and told him how Lu Bu was too much to handle and now had Chen Gong helping him out too. The situation was looking pretty dire. The provincial capital and the key city of Puyang (2,2) had been lost, and the only parts that remained in Cao Cao's control were three prefectures that two of his strategists had barely managed to hold on to.

However, Cao Cao was unfazed. "Lu Bu is all brawn and no brain. He is of no concern," he said. He then ordered his army to set up camp before figuring out his next move.

Meanwhile, Lu Bu had gotten word that Cao Cao and his army were approaching. He summoned two of his lieutenants, Xue (1) Lan (2) and Li (3) Feng (1).

"I have been meaning to make use of your talent for a while now," he told them. "You are to lead 10,000 men and defend Yan Province, while I personally go to defeat Cao Cao."

The two lieutenants accepted their orders, but when Chen Gong heard about this, he hurried in to see Lu Bu.

"General, I heard you're abandoning Yan Province. Where are you going?"

“I plan to station my army at Puyang (2,2) so that the two locations can support each other if one is attacked,” Lu Bu said.

“You’re in error,” Chen Gong told him. “Xue (1) Lan (2) will not be able to defend Yan Province. Instead, try this: Sixty miles to the south of here lie the treacherous paths around Mount Tai (4). You can lay an ambush of 10,000 men there. When Cao Cao hears that Yan Province has been lost, he will no doubt come here on the double. You are sure to defeat him if you attack while his army is halfway through those paths.

But Lu Bu would not listen.

“I have my own reasons for stationing my army at Puyang (2,2), reasons that are beyond you,” he said. And so he proceeded as planned, leaving Xue (1) Lan (3) in charge of Yan Province while he headed off to Puyang.

Meanwhile, as Cao Cao’s army approached the paths around Mount Tai (4), his adviser Guo (1) Jia (1) called for caution. “There might be an ambush here. We cannot go into those paths,” he said.

But Cao Cao laughed this off. “[Laugh] Lu Bu is an idiot. That’s why he left Xue (1) Lan (3) in charge of Yan Province while he himself went off to Puyang. There is no ambush here. Have Cao Ren lead an army and surround Yan Province. I will make for Puyang to attack Lu Bu.”

At Puyang, Chen Gong got word that Cao Cao was on his way there, so he offered up another plan for Lu Bu. “Cao Cao’s army is going to be tired after coming all this way. We would have the advantage if we take them on quickly. We cannot afford to let them rest up.”

But once again, Lu Bu dismissed Chen Gong’s idea.

“I have no equal in all the land. Cao Cao is of no concern. I will wait till he sets up camp, and then capture him.”

So when Cao Cao got near Puyang, instead of being attacked immediately, he had time to set up camp. The next day, he led his army out and lined up on the field of battle. On the other side, Lu Bu also lined up his army of 50,000, and they roared while drums rolled. Lu Bu led the way, and to his left and right were eight stout warriors. Two of them were named Zhang (1) Liao (2) and Zang (1) Ba (4), and they each commanded three subordinates.

Cao Cao pointed at Lu Bu and said, "I have never wronged you. Why did you steal my territory?"

Lu Bu shot back, "Everyone can vie for the territory of the Han. You have no special claim."

Lu Bu then ordered Zang (1) Ba (4) to go out and challenge for battle. The challenge was answered by one of Cao Cao's generals, Yue Jin. The two raised their spears and fought for 30-some bouts, with neither gaining the upperhand. On Cao Cao's side, Xiahou Dun now rode out to lend a hand, but he was met by Zhang (1) Liao (2). Seeing four generals tangle made it impossible for Lu Bu to hold back, so he hoisted his halberd and galloped into the fray. Knowing his reputation, Xiahou Dun and Yue Jin both turned and ran. Lu Bu ordered his men to sweep in, and they sent Cao Cao's army scurrying for 10 miles before Lu Bu called it a day.

After this initial defeat, Cao Cao gathered his generals to discuss their strategy. Yu Jin offered up an idea.

"I went up to the top of a hill today to survey the area. Lu Bu has a camp to the west of Puyang that is guarded by only a small force. Since we fell back today, their guard will definitely be down. Let's attack this camp. If we can seize it, that will cause trouble for Lu Bu's troops. This is a good plan."

Cao Cao took this advice and personally led 20,000 men on this mission, accompanied by six generals -- Cao Hong (2), Li Dian, Mao (2) Jie (4), Lü (3) Qian (2), Yu Jin, and Dian (3) Wei (2). They set off under the cover of night and traveled along backroads toward their target.

There was just one slight problem. Perhaps when Yu Jin called his own idea a good plan, he was

counting on Lu Bu tuning out Chen Gong like he usually did. Unfortunately for Cao Cao and company, this was one time when Lu Bu acted out of character. While he was rewarding his men for their victory, Chen Gong cautioned him about a night attack on the west camp.

“Cao Cao just lost today, how could he dare to come again so soon?” Lu Bu said.

“Cao Cao is an adept military strategist. We have to assume he will try to catch us off guard,” Chen Gong said.

So Lu Bu ordered three of his officers, Gao (1) Shun (4), Wei (4) Xu (4), and Hou (2) Cheng (2), to lead some troops to protect the west camp.

While these guys were on their way, however, Cao Cao had already arrived at his target, and his army overran the camp, easily scattering its meager defenses. It wasn't until around 1 a.m. that the relief force arrived, and the two sides tangled in a melee that lasted till almost dawn. At that point, the loud sound of drums were coming from the west, and a messenger reported that Lu Bu was personally coming to the rescue.

With this development, Cao Cao decided to abandon the camp and run away. Behind him, Gao (1) Shun (4), Wei (4) Xu (4), and Hou (2) Cheng (2) gave chase, while from ahead came Lu Bu. Yu Jin and Yue Jin double-teamed Lu Bu, but could not hold him off, so Cao Cao turned and fled toward the north. Suddenly, another army appeared from behind the hills, led by Zhang Liao and Zang (1) Ba (4). Cao Cao ordered Lü (3) Qian (2) and Cao Hong (2) to face them, but this did not turn out well either. So now Cao Cao turned and ran toward the west. Suddenly, with a wave of loud roars, another squad of troops arrived, led by four more of Lu Bu's generals -- Hao (3) Meng (2), Cao (2) Xing (1), Cheng (2) Lian (2), and Song (4) Xian (4). This force blocked Cao Cao's escape route. Cao Cao's officers put up a desperate fight, with Cao Cao leading the way in an attempt to break out, but they were turned back by a torrent of arrows.

With no way forward and no way out, Cao Cao now cried, “Can anyone save me?!!”

At this, one officer rode forward from among his cavalry and shouted, “My lord, have no fear!”

This was Dian (3) Wei (2), the hulk beast of a warrior whom we introduced a couple episodes back. Dian (3) Wei (2) leaped off his horse, stuck his twin halberds in the ground, and pulled out a bunch of small, dagger-sized halberds. He told his men, “When the enemy is within 10 paces, let me know!” He then strode forward and walked into the oncoming shower of arrows. From behind, Lu Bu led a few dozen riders in pursuit.

“Ten paces!” Dian (3) Wei’s (2) men soon shouted.

“Tell me when they’re within five paces,” Dian (3) Wei (2) ordered.

“Five paces!” his men shouted again just a moment later.

Dian (3) Wei (2) now turned and started flinging his small halberds at the pursuing enemy. Every single halberd found its mark and sent its victim tumbling off his horse. Dian (3) Wei (2) dispatched more than a dozen enemies like this, and the rest turned and ran away.

With the pursuers gone, Dian (3) Wei (2) then hopped back on his horse, picked up his twin halberds, and stormed into the enemy lines in front of him. The four officers leading that line were no match for him, and they all fled. Dian (3) Wei (2) then scattered the remaining enemy troops and rescued Cao Cao. By this time, Cao Cao’s other officers had caught up as well. Just as it was starting to get late and they were looking for a way back to their own camp, they suddenly heard cries from behind. At the head of a pursuing army was Lu Bu.

“Cao Cao, you villain! Stop!” Lu Bu shouted.

By now, all of Cao Cao’s men were exhausted. They all looked at each other helplessly and thought about running to save their own necks. Just then, though, help arrived from the south. It was a relief force led by the general Xiahou Dun. They blocked Lu Bu’s way forward and the two armies fought until dusk, when a torrential downpour broke up the party and sent everybody back to their respective camps.

When Cao Cao got back to camp, he rewarded Dian (3) Wei (2) handsomely for his heroics and gave him a command post.

At the opposing camp, Lu Bu sat down with Chen Gong to discuss their next move, finally recognizing that when he listened to Chen Gong, good things happened.

“Within Puyang there is a wealthy man named Tian (2),” Chen Gong said. “He has hundreds of servants and heads up the most influential house in the prefecture. We can have him send Cao Cao a letter that says something like, ‘Lu Bu is cruel and dishonorable, and the people are angry at him. He’s planning to move his army to Liyang (2,2), which means only his officer Gao (1) Shun (4) will be left in Puyang. If you make a night attack, I will be your inside man.’

“If Cao Cao falls for the trap, we’ll lure him into the city, start fires at all the gates and have soldiers set an ambush outside. Even if Cao Cao can plot the course of heaven and earth, he will not be able to escape.”

That last bit might’ve been JUST a little bit of an exaggeration, but the plan still sounded good, and Lu Bu went along with it and instructed the wealthy man Tian to send Cao Cao the bait. Cao Cao was at this moment trying to figure out how to bounce back from his defeat, when he got a letter that said,

“Lu Bu has left for Liyang (2,2). The city’s defenses are meager. I pray you will come soon, and I will be your inside man. Look for a white flag with the character “Honor” on top of the city wall. That will be the signal.”

Cao Cao was delighted upon reading the letter. “Heaven has willed Puyang to me,” he said. He rewarded the messenger handsomely and prepared his army. But his adviser Liu (2) Ye (4) preached caution.

“Lu Bu may be a nitwit, but Chen Gong is full of tricks,” Liu (2) Ye (4) said. “This could be a trap. If you do go, you should split your army into three squads. Have one enter the city, while the other two wait

outside as backup.

Cao Cao took this advice and set out for Puyang. When he got to the city, he scanned the top of the city walls and saw numerous flags. His heart rejoiced when he saw by the west gate a white flag with the word "Honor". Around midday, the city gate opened and two generals, Hou (2) Cheng (2) and Gao (1) Shun (4), lead an army out to face Cao Cao. Cao Cao sent out Dian (3) Wei (2), and he made straight for Hou (2) Cheng (2). Hou (2) Cheng (2) was no match and fled toward the city. Dian (3) Wei (2) pursued him to the drawbridge, where Gao (1) Shun (4) also proved to be no match and fell back into the city.

During the melee, one of Hou (2) Cheng (2) and Gao Shun's soldiers came over to Cao Cao's side. He claimed to be a messenger for Tian, and he gave Cao Cao another secret letter, which read:

"Tonight around 7 o'clock, listen for the sound of gongs from the city. That will be your signal to attack, and I will open the gates for you."

So Cao Cao ordered Xiahou Dun to lead a force stationed on the left side of the city, Cao Hong (2) to lead a force on the right, while he himself, accompanied by Xiahou Yuan (1), Li Dian, Yue Jin, and Dian (3) Wei (2), was lead the force that would enter the city. Li Dian tried to ask Cao Cao to remain outside the city while his officers entered the city, but was rebuffed.

"If I do not go myself, who else would be willing to put themselves at risk?" Cao Cao said. And so he led the troops from the front and they advanced on the city.

Around 7 that night, the moon had not yet risen, but Cao Cao heard the sound of a conch being blown from the west gate of the city, accompanied by a sudden burst of loud cries as torches appeared above the gate. The gate then opened, and the drawbridge was lowered.

Cao Cao gave his horse a good kick and stormed into the city at the head of his army. He galloped straight for the city magistrate's office, but he did not see a single soul on the streets. Quickly realizing that this was indeed a trap, Cao Cao turned and shouted for his army to retreat, but it was too late.

Explosives boomed from inside the magistrate's office, serving as a signal to spring the trap. Fire raged at all four gates of the city and the flames shot toward the heavens. Battle drums rolled and soldiers roared like raging rivers and tempestuous seas. Lu Bu's generals now closed in from all directions -- Zhang Liao from the east, Zang (1) Ba (4) from the west. When Cao Cao fled toward the north gate, he ran into Hao (3) Meng (2) and Cao Xing (1), which sent him scurrying toward the south gate. But there Gao (1) Shun (4) and Hou (2) Cheng (2) were blocking his way.

Accompanying Cao Cao at the moment was Dian (3) Wei (2), and he now galloped forward with fixed gaze and grit teeth. Seeing the man-beast charging toward them, Gao Shun (4) and Hou (2) Cheng (2) fell back until they were outside the city. But when Dian (3) Wei (2) had fought his way out to the drawbridge, he turned and noticed that Cao Cao was nowhere to be found. So he fought his way back into the city, where he ran into his comrade Li Dian by the gate.

"Where is our lord" Dian (3) Wei (2) asked.

"I don't know. I'm looking for him as well," Li Dian answered.

"You go outside the city to summon our reinforcements, while I go back inside to look for him," Dian Wei said, and the two went their separate ways.

Dian Wei stormed back into the chaos that has engulfed the inside of Puyang, but he could not find Cao Cao. When he fought his way to the other side of the wall, he ran into another fellow officer, Yue Jin.

"Have you seen our lord?" Dian Wei asked.

"I have made two rounds and still cannot find him," Yue Jin said.

"Let's both go back in and rescue him," said Dian Wei, and the two of them charged to the city gate. But just then, Lu Bu's soldiers started raining down fiery projectiles from the city wall above, and Yue Jin's horse balked and refused to go forward. That left Dian Wei alone once again, braving the smoke and fire and racing back into the city to continue his search.

So where was Cao Cao during all this? Well, he was right on Dian Wei's tail when Dian Wei was fighting his way out of the city the first time, but as soon as Dian Wei charged out, Lu Bu's troops cut off the path through the south gate. That forced Cao Cao to turn and head toward the north gate. In the midst of the fire and chaos, he stumbled right into Lu Bu, galloping toward him with halberd in hand. Cao Cao, though, covered his face with his hand and hurried past Lu Bu. Just as Cao Cao was about to count his blessings, though, Lu Bu turned around, caught up to him, and raised his halberd ... not to stab him, but to bonk him on the back of his helmet.

"Have you seen Cao Cao?!" Lu Bu demanded.

"He's the one on the yellow horse up ahead," Cao Cao said as he pointed into the distance.

Well, despite having fallen for the trap, this was Cao Cao's lucky day, as Lu Bu didn't recognize him in the chaos and sped off after whoever that unlucky guy on the yellow horse was. Cao Cao now turned and rode toward the east gate, where he finally met up with Dian Wei. Dian Wei then carved out a bloody path and the two rode to the city gate.

But they weren't out of the woods yet. Lu Bu's men were throwing down thorny vines and straws and they were catching on fire everywhere. Dian Wei used his halberd to fling these burning piles aside and led the way out. Cao Cao was right behind him, but just as Cao Cao was crossing the threshold of the gate, a burning wooden beam came crashing down and caught the rear of Cao Cao's horse. The horse crumbled to the ground. Cao Cao used his hands to push the beam off, and in doing so, burned his arms, hair, and beard. Dian Wei turned around to come to the rescue, and Xiaohou Yuan arrived as well. The two of them helped Cao Cao up and they ran through the fire to get out of the city. Xiahou Yuan let Cao Cao take his horse, while Dian Wei opened up an escape route with his halberd. The chaos reigned until dawn before Cao Cao made it back to his camp.

Despite this setback, however, Cao Cao was in surprisingly good spirits. When his officers came to see if he was ok, he looked up and laughed out loud, “[Laugh] I slipped up and fell for that brute’s scheme. I will definitely avenge this loss.”

“We must decide on a course of action quickly,” Guo Jia said.

“Hmm, then let’s play along,” said Cao Cao. “Spread word that I have died from severe burns. Lu Bu will no doubt come to attack us. I will lay an ambush in Mount Maling (3,2) and attack his army while they are passing through. Lu Bu will be mine for sure.”

“What a great plan!” Guo Jia said. Pay attention, kids. This kind of timely bootlicking is how you get to be a trusted adviser to a powerful warlord.

So Cao Cao’s soldiers put on mourning clothes and spread word that their leader was dead. This soon got back to Lu Bu in Puyang (2,2), and he wasted no time mobilizing his army and marching on Cao Cao’s camp. But as they approached, hidden soldiers sprang to action at the sound of a drum, and the fight turned into a rout. Lu Bu lost a chunk of his army and was lucky to escape. He fled back to Puyang, fortified his defenses, and refused to come out. And with that, a stalemate set in.

Mother nature now stepped in to enforce a temporary ceasefire. A sudden plague of locusts swept through the region that year, resulting in a famine. In the Northeast, grain prices skyrocketed to insane levels, to the point where some people were reduced to cannibalism to survive. The armies were not immune to this disaster, as Cao Cao was forced to lead his troops back to Juancheng (4,2) to find food, while Lu Bu led his army out of Puyang and withdrew to Shanyang (1,2) for the same reason. With that, the fighting ended ... for now.

So while we are in a lull in the fighting, let’s take this opportunity to jump back to Xu Province and see what’s going there. The imperial protector of the province, Tao Qian, was now 63 years old and he

came down a sudden and serious illness. As his condition worsened, he summoned his top two advisers, Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Chen (2) Deng (1), to discuss what to do.

“Cao Cao called off his siege on our city only because Lu Bu attacked Yan (3) Province,” Mi Zhu said. “Right now he has stood down his army because of famine, but he will surely come again next spring. Sir, the last two times you tried to yield control of the province to Liu Bei, he refused because you were still healthy. But now that you’re seriously ill, you can take this opportunity to yield to him again, and he would not refuse this time.”

Tao Qian was delighted by this idea, even though it was basically capitalizing on the fact that he’s on his deathbed. He sent a messenger to the hamlet of Xiaopei (3,4), where Liu Bei was stationed, and invited him to Xu Province to discuss military matters. Liu Bei came with Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and a few dozen riders. After Liu Bei made the customary inquiry about Tao Qian’s health, Tao Qian said,

“I’ve requested your presence for only one reason: My illness has reached a critical stage, and I am going to die any day now. I pray that you would take pity on the territory of your royal house and accept oversight of Xu Province. Please, let an old man die in peace.”

“Sir, you have two sons. Why not transfer control to them?” Liu Bei asked.

“My two sons are untalented,” Tao Qian said. “After my death, I hope you will frequently instruct them, but never let them oversee provincial matters.”

Liu Bei was running out of excuses, but he made one last attempt to decline.

“How can I bear such great responsibility alone?” he said.

“I will recommend someone who can assist you,” Tao Qian said. “His name is Sun (1) Qian (2),” Tao Qian said. He then turned to Mi Zhu and added, “Lord Liu is a hero of the times. You must assist him loyally.”

After this, Liu Bei still tried to refuse. With his last breath, Tao Qian pointed at his own heart and died. The army went into mourning and the officials immediately presented the tokens of power to Liu Bei.

And still, he declined. The next day, the people of Xu Province crowded in front of the imperial protector's office, kneeled on the ground, and wept.

"If Lord Liu refuses to oversee this prefecture, we are all doomed!" they cried.

Guan Yu and Zhang Fei now tried time and again to convince Liu Bei to just go with the flow, and finally he consented to take power, but only temporarily. He named Sun Qian (2) and Mi Zhu his assistants and also added Chen Deng (1) to his staff. He then brought his forces over from Xiaopei, posted announcements to calm the hearts of the people, and arranged for Tao Qian's funeral. Liu Bei and all the official donned mourning clothes, set up a huge altar, and buried Tao Qian on the plains of the Yellow River. Liu Bei then sent Tao Qian's final memorial to the court, wherein Tao Qian informed them that he was transferring control of the province to Liu Bei.

Word of this transfer of power soon reached Cao Cao, and as you can imagine, he did not like it one bit.

"I have yet to avenge my father's death, but now you, Liu Bei, have had Xu Province delivered into your hands without any effort!" Cao Cao said angrily. "I swear I will first kill Liu Bei, and then expose Tao Qian's corpse to avenge my father!"

And so he started getting his army ready for another campaign. But his adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) tried to talk him out of it.

"The Supreme Ancestor had the land within the passes, while the founder of the Eastern Han occupied the region within the rivers," Xun (2) Yu (4) said. "They both established deep roots in their base of power before expanding to the rest of the land. That way, when they advanced they could overpower their foes, and when they retreated, they were able to mount a stiff defense. That's the reason they both eventually reigned over all the land.

"My lord, your original base was Yan Province, and the Yellow and Ji (4) Rivers are strategically crucial

areas. This is your land within the passes and region within the rivers. If you try to take Xu Province now, if you leave too many of your troops behind to defend your base, then you won't have enough with you to do you any good. If you leave too few, then Lu Bu would take advantage and attack, and Yan Province would be lost. If you cannot conquer Xu Province, where would you find sanctuary? Right now Tao Qian is dead, and the people of Xu Province have accepted Liu Bei as their leader, and they will surely fight to the death for him. If you abandon Yan Province to attack Xu Province, that's giving up too much for too little, forsaking the core for the peripheral. I pray you will think it through."

This convincing argument swayed Cao Cao, but he was unwilling to just tell his army to go nowhere.

"We are in the midst of a famine. It's not a sustainable idea to just have soldiers sitting around," he said.

"What about the region of Chen to the east?" Xun (2) Yu (4) suggested. "Our army can find food in Runan (3,2) and Yingchuan (3,1). Remnants of the Yellow Turbans led by the likes of He (2) Yi (2) and Huang (2) Shao (4) are raiding cities in the area to stockpile large amounts of wealth and food. Such bandits are easy to beat, and when you beat them, you can use the food they've collected to feed your army. This would be a boon to the court and the common people, and in accordance with heaven."

That was all the convincing Cao Cao needed. So he left Xiahou Dun and Cao Ren to guard his home turf and personally led the rest of his army to the region of Chen (2). The Yellow Turbans there, led by He (2) Yi (2) and Huang (2) Shao (4), got word of this army's approach and came out to face it at Mount Yang (2). One look at these guys, and you get the idea that Xun (2) Yu (4) wasn't exaggerating when he told Cao Cao that it would be easy to beat these bandits. They were a rather ragtag group, so disorganized that they didn't even line up in battle formation.

Cao Cao set up his battle formation and sent Dian (3) Wei (2) out to challenge for battle. He (2) Yi (2) responded by sending out his second in command, who didn't even last three bouts before Dian (3) Wei (2) put him out of his misery. Cao Cao then directed his men forward, and they pursued the enemy all the

way over the mountain before setting up camp on the other side.

So this little venture is shaping up to be a walk in the park. To see how long it took Cao Cao to finish that walk and what he did afterward, tune in next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.

Thanks for listening.