

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 17.

Last time, we left off with Cao Cao riding high. He had whipped some overmatched Yellow Turban rebels and chased Lu Bu off his turf. On top of that, while beating Lu Bu and his masters, Cao Cao managed to acquire some new territory. He now controlled much of the Shandong region. He reported his victories to the court, because he was, of course, doing all that for the glory of the empire, and the court rewarded him with a fancy generalship and named him the Lord of Feiting (4,2).

So we'll leave Cao Cao to bask in his newfound glory and jump to the capital Changan to check in on the imperial court, where things are about to hit the fan. At this time, the court was firmly under the control of two of Dong Zhuo's former lieutenants, Li Jue and Guo Si. If you remember, they had asked for clemency after Dong Zhuo was killed, but Wang Yun said no. Being backed into a corner, Li Jue and Guo Si raised an army and marched on the capital, where they defeated Lu Bu, killed Wang Yun, and seized control of the court. The emperor was forced to basically let them make up whatever titles they wanted for themselves. Li Jue had appointed himself regent, while Guo Si had named himself the regent-general. They did as they pleased and no one at court, least of all the emperor, dared to say anything.

Or, at least no one dared to say anything to their face, because there were certainly some whispers behind the scene. One day, two high-level officials, Yang (2) Biao (1) and Zhu (1) Jun (4), secretly said to the emperor,

"Cao Cao now has more than 200,000 troops at his command, along with dozens of advisers and warriors. It would be a boon to the country if we can get him to support the throne and wipe out the traitors."

At this, the emperor wept. "I have been bullied by those two traitors for far too long. It would be my great fortune if we can eliminate them."

"I have a plan," Yang Biao (1) said, "that can make the two traitors turn on each other. And then we can summon Cao Cao to lead his army here and wipe them out and restore order to the court."

“What is this plan?” the emperor asked.

“I’ve heard that Guo Si’s wife is extremely jealous,” Yang Biao (1) said. “I can send someone to talk to her and use her to turn the two traitors against each other.”

So yeah, once again the fate of the imperial house rested on playing games with a woman. With the emperor’s blessings, Yang Biao sent his wife to Guo Si’s residence on some concocted business. While there, she spoke to Guo Si’s wife.

“I’ve heard that General Guo is carrying on an affair with Li Jue’s wife and things are hot and heavy between them,” she said. “If Li Jue finds out, your husband would no doubt come to harm. You should put a stop to it, in his own best interest.”

Guo Si’s wife was taken aback by this ... umm ... “revelation”.

“No wonder he has been away from home overnight so much lately!” she exclaimed. “How could he do such embarrassing things? If you hadn’t told me, I would’ve never known. I’m going to be on guard from now on.”

Her job done, Yang Biao’s wife took her leave, and Guo Si’s wife thanked her time and again for the intel. And then she set to work on her husband, who would in short order discover just how much fury this woman scorned had in store, if only he had, you know, actually scorned her.

A few days passed, and Guo Si was about to head off to a banquet in Li Jue’s home as he often did, but his wife said, “Li Jue is unpredictable. Besides, the Court may not be big enough for two ambitious men. If he were to poison you, what would become of me?”

Guo Si ignored this at first, but after much pleading and nagging, his wife convinced him to stay home. Later that night, though, Li Jue sent some food and wine to Guo Si since he missed the feast. Guo Si’s wife received the delivery, but before presenting the food to her husband, she slipped some poison in it. But she wasn’t about to poison her husband. Instead, when Guo Si was just about to dive in, she said, “This food came from outside. You can’t eat it without testing it first.”

So how do you test for poison during the waning days of the Han dynasty? Well, you bring a dog in and give it some of the food. Yeah, it was a pretty rough time to be a canine in China, just like throughout most of Chinese history. The unfortunate dog ate the food and promptly died. Seeing this, Guo Si started to have his doubts about Li Jue.

A little bit later, after they both attended to business at court one day, Li Jue insisted that Guo Si go over to his house for a feast. Without his wife around to talk him out of it, Guo Si relented. They feasted late into the night, and Guo Si got totally blitzed. When he got home, though, he started getting stomach aches. Now, one would think that it's probably not that surprising for someone who's been eating a ton of food and consuming prodigious amounts of alcohol to feel the effects soon thereafter, but Guo Si's wife insisted it was poison and ordered the servants to induce vomiting.

Unfortunately for Guo Si, syrup of ipecac was still a good 1,500 years in the future. In second-century China, to induce vomiting, apparently you make the patient drink ... liquid poo. I know, I should have warned you to put away your lunch before listening to this episode. So the servant got an ample supply of said remedy, forced it down Guo Si's throat, and up came all the content of his stomach. When he had sufficiently recovered from this, umm, potentially life-saving treatment, Guo Si was pretty ticked off.

"I have been working with Li Jue to accomplish great things," he said. "But now he's trying to kill me for no reason! If I don't strike first, I will surely die by his hand!"

So he gathered up the soldiers under his command and set out to attack Li Jue. Word of this soon got back to Li Jue, who, not knowing that they were both being played, was equally ticked off at Guo Si, so he mobilized his own troops and went out to kill Guo Si. The two armies numbered in the tens of thousands, and they faced off in a free-for-all just outside the capital. As if that wasn't bad enough, the soldiers took this opportunity to pillage and plunder the residents.

The commoners weren't the only ones caught up in the chaos, however. The imperial court got what it wished for -- to have Li Jue and Guo Si turn on each other -- but soon got way more than it bargained

for. Li Jue's nephew Li Xian (1) led an army and surrounded the imperial palace. He put the emperor and empress on two carriages and escorted them out of the palace before Guo Si's forces could get there. The rest of the people in the palace, though, had to follow on foot. As they left via the back door, Guo Si's men arrived and started raining down arrows on the fleeing entourage, killing countless people. Li Jue, however, managed to fight off Guo Si's troops and escort the imperial litter out of the city and into his own camp.

Guo Si, meanwhile, took advantage of Li Jue's absence from the city to storm the palace, abduct all the palace maids, and set the palace on fire. If you're keeping track, this was the third time the imperial palace had been set on fire in our story so far, and remember that we're barely 10 percent of the way through the book. This was indeed a pitiful turn, so pitiful, in fact, that someone later bemoaned, in verse, how far the house of Han had fallen.

The Later Han revived the line of Liu:

Twelve sovereigns in succession ruled the realm.

But Huan and Ling's misguided ways brought down their shrines

As they let their eunuchs rule and doomed the house.

Witless He Jin, raised to guide the state,

Called tigers into court to clear the rats.

Vicious vermin out! Savage killers in!

Then Dong Zhuo, the western rebel, spread new bane.

But loyal Wang Yun deployed a subtle maid,

Who turned Lu Bu against his master.

With Dong Zhuo cut down, the realm again knew peace,

Till Li Jue and Guo Si avenged their lord

And plunged our hallowed realm in misery.
Their civil strife brought king and queen to grief.
Allegiance broken Heaven's Mandate failed:
Ambitious heroes carved our hills and streams.
Let every future king keep vigil keen
For our nation's precious harmony,
Lest living souls be ground into the earth
And stain our soil with blood unjustly shed.
To read these pages must break every heart,
As men once sighed for great Zhou's glory gone.
They warn the prince to stabilize his rule,
And watch who holds the sword that guards the laws.

There wasn't a whole lot of time to feel sorry for the house of Han, though. The next day, when Guo Si realized that Li Jue had absconded with the emperor, he and his forces advanced on Li Jue's camp. When they got there, Li Jue came out to meet them. The two sides tangled, and Guo Si got the worst of it, so he pulled his army back temporarily. Li Jue, meanwhile, moved the emperor and his entourage to Mei (2) Wu (4), the pleasure palace slash city that Dong Zhuo had built for himself. Li Jue then put his nephew, Li Xian (1), in charge of keeping watch over them. Li Xian (1) dismissed the imperial staff and reduced the provisions for the attendants, to the point where the emperor's servants were all showing signs of starvation. The emperor sent a messenger to Li Jue to request five bushels of grain and five sets of ox bones to feed his attendants, which didn't seem like an unreasonable request coming from the supposed ruler of the empire. But Li Jue did not take kindly to this.

"We send him food morning and night. What more does he want?" Li Jue said angrily. And just to

show the emperor that, hey, things could actually get much worse, Li Jue sent him rotten meat and moldy grain that were so pungent that they were inedible.

“How dare that traitor bully me so!” the emperor decried.

But Yang (2) Qi (2), the privy counselor, quickly advised discretion.

“Li Jue is temperamental,” Yang Qi (2) said. “With things as they are, your majesty must endure this for now. Do not cross him.”

The emperor knew he was right, and he could do little but lower his head and shed silent tears. Suddenly, a glimmer of hope arrived with the report that a large army was coming to rescue him, and making lots of ruckus along the way. The emperor dispatched an attendant to go find out who was leading this army, but the answer deflated him, as it came back that it was Guo Si marching this way. The emperor’s temporary excitement turned into concern, and soon shouts could be heard from outside the city as Li Jue led his men out to meet Guo Si.

When they had lined up across from each other, Li Jue pointed at Guo Si and cursed him. “I treated you well. Why did you plot to kill me?”

“You’re a traitor,” Guo Si shot back. “Why shouldn’t I kill you?”

“I am here to protect the emperor. How can you call me the traitor?”

“You’re abducting the emperor, not defending him!”

“Enough talk!” Li Jue said. “Let our men stay back and let just the two of us duke it out. Whoever wins gets the emperor.”

And so the two of them rode out and started hacking at each other. They fought for 10 bouts without a winner before Yang Biao (1), whose brilliant idea to turn the two against each other had started this whole mess, rode into the fray and shouted,

“Generals, please stop! I have invited the court officials to come broker a truce between you!”

So Li Jue and Guo Si agreed to stop for now and each retreat to his own camp. Yang Biao (1), Zhu Jun

(4), and 60-some other court officials then went to Guo Si's camp to try to convince him to hammer a truce. But instead, he detained them all.

"We came with good intentions. Why do you treat us so?" the officials asked.

"If Li Jue could hold the emperor hostage, why can't I hold the court officials hostage?" was Guo Si's answer.

"One of you has abducted the emperor, and the other has abducted the officials," Yang Biao (1) said. "What are your evil intentions?"

This ticked off Guo Si, and he pulled out his sword and was about to cut down Yang Biao (1), and it was only after a lot of convincing by another official that he decided to let Yang Biao and Zhu Jun go. But he kept the other officials locked up in his camp.

After they left Guo Si's camp, Yang Biao said to Zhu Jun, "We are servants of the court, but we can neither protect nor rescue our lord. We have lived in vain!"

At this, the two fell into each other's arms weeping, and they cried until they fainted. And later, when Zhu Jun got home, he soon fell ill and died shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, Li Jue and Guo Si fought every day for 50-some days in a row, leaving countless dead in their battles.

So as it so happens, Li Jue is the superstitious sort, and he often had sorceresses in his camp, beating drums and going into trances to communicate with the gods. His top adviser, Jia (3) Xu (3), tried in vain to talk him out of doing this. Noticing this discord between them, Yang (2) Qi (2), the privy counselor, secretly told the emperor, "Even though Jia (3) Xu (3) is Li Jue's confidant, I believe he is still loyal to you. You should ask him for advice."

Just as they were speaking, Jia (3) Xu (3) happened to come in. The emperor dismissed everyone in attendance, then wept, and said to Jia (3) Xu (3), "Would you take pity on the Han Dynasty and save my life?"

At this, Jia Xu prostrated himself on the ground and said, "That is your servant's wish. My lord, say nothing for now. I will find a way."

The emperor wiped away his tears and thanked Jia Xu. Shortly thereafter, Li Jue came to see the emperor with his sword by his side. which, if there was still any semblance of order, would have been a serious offense. The emperor went pale at the sight of this, but Li Jue wasn't there to do him any harm. Instead, he was fishing for a compliment.

"That disloyal Guo Si has imprisoned the court officials and tried to abduct you, my lord," Li Jue said. "If it weren't for me, you would have fallen into his hands already."

The emperor raised his folded hands to his forehead as a salute to say thanks, and this satisfied Li Jue and he left. And then Huangfu (2,3) Li (4), another official, came to see the emperor. The emperor knew that Huangfu Li was skilled in the art of persuasion and was also from Li Jue's hometown. So he dispatched Huangfu Li to try to talk the two sides into a truce.

Huangfu Li first went to Guo Si's camp. When he learned of the purpose for the visit, Guo Si said, "If Li Jue releases the emperor, then I will release the court officials."

Huangfu Li then went to see Li Jue and said to him,

"Because I, like you, sir, am from Xiliang, the emperor has sent me to try to convince you and Guo Si to work out a truce. Guo Si has already agreed. What about you?"

Li Jue, though, was a tough sell.

"I rendered great service to the court by defeating Lu Bu," he said. "And since then I have helped oversee affairs at court for four years and accumulated many great deeds that are known throughout the empire. Guo Si, on the other hand, is but a mere horse thief who had the gall to abduct the court officials and oppose me. I swear I am going to kill him! With my vast forces, I can easily overpower him."

"You are in error," Huangfu Li said. "Remember Hou (4) Yi (4), a king of the Xia Dynasty. He relied only on his great archery skills to rule and ignored all else. As a result, he was wiped out. If you want a more

recent example, remember prime minister Dong Zhuo, whose power you yourself witnessed. Yet because Lu Bu repaid his kindness with treachery, in the blink of an eye, his head was hanging at the gates of the capital. Power alone counts for little. Sir, you hold the rank of a top general and great power. Your kinsmen and descendants all occupy illustrious positions. You can't say the court has not lavished great kindness upon you. Yet right now Guo Si may be holding the officials hostage, but you sir are holding the emperor hostage. So who exactly has committed the greater offense?"

This went over about as well as you would expect. Li Jue was steaming, and he pulled out his sword.

"Did the emperor send you here to ridicule me? I'm going to cut off your head!"

But cavalry command Yang Feng interjected.

"If you kill the emperor's messenger before eliminating Guo Si, that would give him a convenient justification to declare war on us, and the various lords and nobles would join his cause."

Jia (3) Xu (3) now also joined in the pleading for cooler heads to prevail, and Li Jue calmed down momentarily. Jia Xu took the opportunity to push Huangfu Li out of the camp, but Huangfu Li wasn't about to leave without getting in a parting shot, even if it was out of earshot of Li Jue.

"Li Jue refuses to follow the emperor's decree for a truce. He wants to kill his lord and take the throne for himself!" Huangfu Li shouted.

"Stop it! You're going to suffer for those words," Hu (2) Miao (3), a privy counselor, said to Huangfu Li.

"Hu (2) Miao (3)! You're a servant of the court. Why are you in the company of this traitor?!" Huangfu Li scolded. "If the emperor suffers humiliation, his official should die! If Li Jue kills me, I would just be fulfilling my duty!"

And Huangfu Li kept going on like this for quite a while. When the emperor heard about this, he immediately sent Huangfu Li away back to Xiliang for his own good. But Huangfu Li took this opportunity to do something that hurt Li Jue much more than a few admonishments. The majority of Li Jue's army

were natives of Xiliang, and the army also relied on soldiers from the Jiang, a barbarian tribe from the Xiliang region. Huangfu Li now told every Xiliang native who would listen that Li Jue is plotting rebellion, and if you follow him, then trouble would haunt you to no end. Most of the soldiers from Xiliang believed him, and morale of the army plummeted.

When Li Jue caught wind of this, he was ticked off something fierce and sent an officer to go chase down Huangfu Li. But this officer knew Huangfu Li to be a loyal and honorable man, so he didn't even bother to give chase. Instead, he just reported back that Huangfu Li had disappeared without a trace.

Meanwhile, Jia (3) Xu (3) also secretly told the Jiang soldiers, "The emperor know that you guys are loyal and that you have fought long and hard for the country. He's secretly ordering you to return to your homes, and you will be rewarded handsomely." This had the intended effect, and the Jiang commanders, who were none too pleased with Li Jue anyway since he had been stiffing them on rewards for their service, took their armies and went home.

Jia Xu next told the emperor, "Li Jue is greedy and witless. Right now his army is falling apart and he's losing heart. You should tempt him with some important post."

The emperor took the advice and named Li Jue regent-general. Li Jue rejoiced at the news and attributed it all to the work of the sorceresses. So he rewarded them handsomely while ignoring his soldiers. This, as you might imagine, did not go down well with the rank and file. Yang (2) Feng (4), his cavalry commander, said to another officer, Song (4) Guo (3), "We have risked life and limb for him, yet our service doesn't stack up to the work of some sorceress in his mind!"

"Why don't we kill that traitor and rescue the emperor?" Song (4) Guo (3) suggested.

"Great idea. You set fire in the main camp as a signal, and I will lead my troops in from outside," Yang Feng (4) said.

The two agreed to set their plan into motion around 9 p.m. that night. Unfortunately, they sucked at conspiracy, and word soon leaked out to Li Jue, who had Song Guo executed. Meanwhile, Yang Feng was

twiddling his thumb outside the camp waiting for the fire, which never started. Instead, Li Jue led a force out and ran right into Yang Feng's troops. So they squared off inside the camp and fought in the dark until around 1 a.m. By then, things had turned against Yang Feng, so he retreated and led his army toward Changan.

Despite staving off this attempt at rebellion, Li Jue's army continued to weaken from all the defections and Guo Si's constant attacks. And now came word that Zhang Ji (4), his former subordinate, was on his way with a large army to convince Li Jue and Guo Si to come to some kind of peace agreement, and he was making it known that he would attack whomever refused to agree to a truce. Since Li Jue was in a bind anyway, this gave him a convenient exit. He sent a messenger to Zhang Ji (4) to express his desire for peace, and Guo Si also went along with it begrudgingly. Zhang Ji then asked the emperor to move to Hong (2) Nong (2), a district outside Luoyang where Zhang Ji had stationed his forces.

The emperor was delighted at this suggestion. "I have long been missing the eastern capital," he said. "It is fortunate that we now have the opportunity to return there." So he gave Zhang Ji a fancy generalship, and Zhang Ji offered up food and wine for the whole court, which was no doubt a sight for sore eyes and empty bellies. Guo Si released the officials he had been holding hostage, while Li Jue gathered up the royal entourage and began to move east, with a few hundred imperial troops escorting the emperor.

As the entourage passed through Xinfeng (1,1), they came upon Baling (4,2) Bridge, where, suddenly, with a loud cry hundreds of soldiers rushed onto the bridge and blocked the procession's path forward. These soldiers demanded to know who was trying to cross the bridge. Yang Qi (2), the privy counselor, rode forward and said, "Who dares to block the imperial procession?"

Two officers now emerged from the troops blocking the bridge and said, "General Guo Si has ordered us to guard this bridge and keep an eye out for spies. Even if someone says it's the emperor

trying to cross, we must see the emperor with our own eyes before we would believe it.”

Since they asked, Yang Qi pulled back the beaded curtain of the royal litter, and the emperor said, “I am right here. Why have you not stood aside?” Upon seeing the emperor in the flesh, all the troops shouted, “Long live your majesty!” and opened up a path for the procession.

After the emperor and his entourage had passed and moved on, the two officers who were guarding the bridge reported back to Guo Si what had happened. Guo Si did not like what he heard, though.

“I was just trying to appease Zhang Ji temporarily and then abduct the emperor and storm into Mei (2) Wu (4),” he said. “How dare you let him slip through?!”

So Guo Si had the two officers executed, and then led his army and chased after the emperor. As the entourage was approaching Huayin (2,1) County, they heard the cries of the pursuing army in the distance, and everyone turned pale.

“We had just escaped the wolf’s den, and now we are in the tiger’s mouth,” the emperor wept and lamented.

As Guo Si’s army drew near, however, drums began to roll and about a thousand troops appeared from behind a hill, led by an officer. His giant banner said “Yang Feng of Han”. So it turns out that Yang Feng (4), after his botched coup against Li Jue, had led his forces to the hills near here. When he heard that the royal entourage was passing through, he decided to come serve as its escort. After the two armies lined up, one of Guo Si’s officers rode out and called Yang Feng (4) a traitor. Yang Feng turned to his army and asked, “Where is Xu (2) Huang (3)?!”

At this, an officer galloped out with a giant battle axe. After just one bout, he cut down the enemy officer. Yang Feng (4) used the momentum to direct his army forward, and they put Guo Si’s troops to flight for about seven miles. After calling off his troops, Yang Feng went to see the emperor, who commended him for the timely rescue and asked who was the officer that had killed Guo Si’s general.

“His name is Xu Huang,” said Yang Feng, who led the man of the moment to see the emperor. The emperor rewarded Xu Huang handsomely for his service. Yang Feng then escorted the emperor to Huayin (2,1) while sending runners up ahead to clear the path. Another official offered up clothing and food for the emperor, who spent the night in Yang Feng’s camp.

But Guo Si wasn’t giving up that easily. After licking his wounds, he returned the next day. Xu Huang rode out in front of Yang Feng’s forces to meet the enemy, but he was just one man, and Guo Si’s army soon surrounded the emperor and Yang Feng. Things were looking dire, but just then, a wave of loud cries came from the southeast as a general led an army into the fray and sent the rebels scurrying. With this reinforcement, Xu Huang also pressed forward, and they routed Guo Si’s army.

The man at the head of this relief force turned out to be Dong (3) Cheng (2), an uncle of the emperor. After the emperor cried and told him about all that had happened, Dong (3) Cheng (2) consoled his lord and nephew.

“Worry not, your majesty,” Dong Cheng said. “General Yang Feng and I swear we shall kill those two traitors to restore calm to the realm.”

Figuring it’s probably not wise to linger too long, the emperor ordered the entourage to quickly resume its journey to Hong (2) Nong (2). So they set out overnight, and it was a good thing they did, because the two traitors who just a few days ago had been at each other’s throats were about to become strange bedfellows.

As Guo Si gathered up his tattered army and headed back, he ran into Li Jue.

“Yang Feng and Dong Cheng rescued the emperor and are headed to Hong (2) Nong (2),” Guo Si said. “If they get to the Shandong region and establish a foothold there, they would no doubt summon all the lords to wage war against us. If that happens, we would be in mortal danger.”

“Well, right now Zhang Ji and his forces are stationed in Changan and cannot leave there easily,” Li Jue said. “Let us temporarily combine our forces, go to Hong (2) Nong (2), kill the emperor, and split the

realm equally between us.”

And so the two joined up once again and headed for Hong (2) Nong (2), looting and pillaging all along the way, just to be jerks and to make themselves completely irredeemable. Hearing that the two traitors were in hot pursuit, Dong Cheng and Yang Feng turned around and met them in battle. But Li Jue and Guo Si had a big numerical edge, and they took full advantage of it, swarming Yang Feng and Dong Cheng’s forces. Yang Feng and Dong Cheng put up a desperate fight to hold out long enough for the imperial litter to get out. But all the courtiers, palace maids, the archives, and the emperor’s household goods had to be left behind. Guo Si’s men stormed into Hong (2) Nong (2) and ransacked the place. Yang Feng and Dong Cheng escorted the emperor as they fled toward Shanbei (3,3), while Li Jue and Guo Si split up and gave chase.

By now, things had gotten so desperate for the emperor that he had to take some desperate measures. While Yang Feng and Dong Cheng sent messengers to try to talk peace with their pursuers, they also sent a secret decree from the emperor to the Hedong (2,1) region to summon three leaders of the White Wave rebels, who were an offshoot of the Yellow Turban rebels. These three, Han (2) Xian (1), Li (3) Yue (4), and Hu (2) Cai (2), were nothing more than mere bandits, but they had some troops at their disposal and at the moment the emperor needed every last soldier he could muster. So the three rebel leaders were offered clemency and given posts, and they happily accepted and combined their men with Dong Cheng’s forces and braced for a showdown with the pursuing armies.

To find out how this patchwork defense force would hold up against the armies of Li Jue and Guo Si, tune in next time on the romance of the three kingdoms podcast. Thanks for listening,.