

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 23.

Last time, we left off with Yuan Shu mobilizing seven armies to attack Xu Province after Lu Bu rejected his proposal of a marriage between his son and Lu Bu's daughter. One of Lu Bu's advisers, Chen Deng, suggested that Lu Bu try to turn the commanders of two of those seven armies -- Han (2) Xian (1) and Yang (2) Feng (4) -- against Yuan Shu. So Lu Bu sent Chen Deng to go see those guys.

Chen Deng took a few riders with him and went to the path leading to the city of Xiapi (4,1), where Han Xian (1) and Yang Feng (4) were going to attack. When they arrived, Chen Deng went to their camp.

"You are a servant of Lu Bu's. What are you doing here?" Han Xian asked him.

At this, Chen Deng laughed.

"I am a servant of the Han. Why do you say I am Lu Bu's servant? You yourself, general, was once a servant of the Han, but now you are servant to a rebel, which has wiped out all your previous service to the court when you helped the emperor escape from Changan (2,1). If I were you, I would've chosen a different path. Besides, Yuan Shu is distrustful by nature. You will come to harm at his hand in time. If you don't act now, you will regret it."

Upon hearing this, Han Xian sighed.

"I want to serve the house of Han once again, but I have no way back."

That was Chen Deng's cue to pull out the letter Lu Bu had written to Han Xian and Yang Feng asking them to join him. When Han Xian read it, he said,

"I understand. Sir, you can go back. General Yang and I will move against Yuan Shu. Tell General Lu that when he sees fire, that will be his signal to bring reinforcements."

So Chen Deng quickly took his leave and returned to report the good news to Lu Bu. Lu Bu then mobilized five armies -- each with 10,000 men -- to counter Yuan Shu's forces at the various cities that

they were going to attack. He himself set up camp 20 miles outside Xu Province to meet the main enemy force led by Zhang Xun (1). When Zhang Xun (1) encountered Lu Bu's army, he figured that he was no match for Lu Bu, so he ordered his forces to fall back seven miles and make camp and wait for reinforcements.

Around 9 p.m. that night, Han Xian and Yang Feng started fires everywhere in Zhang Xun's camp and let Lu Bu's forces in. Zhang Xun's army fell into chaos, and Lu Bu seized the momentum and routed him. As Zhang Xun fled, Lu Bu gave chase until dawn, when he ran smack dab into Ji Ling, who was leading Yuan Shu's reinforcements. Just as the two sides prepared to engage, Han Xian and Yang Feng swept in with their men, and that sent Ji Ling's army running.

Lu Bu then continued to pursue when another army appeared from behind the hills, sporting imperial regalia. There were streamers adorned with dragons, phoenixes, the sun, and the moon; feathered standards with the key stars of the four quadrants and the five directions of earth; as well as the gold mace, the silver battle-axe, the gilded axe, and the white yak-tail command banner. Under a golden parasol was Yuan Shu, donning a suit of gold-plated armor and with a knife swinging from each wrist.

"Lu Bu, you treasonous house slave!" Yuan Shu cursed aloud.

This riled up Lu Bu, and he rode toward Yuan Shu's lines. One of Yuan Shu's officers, Li (3) Feng (1), hoisted his spear to come meet him. Within three bouts, Lu Bu stabbed Li Feng (1) in the hand, and Li Feng tossed his spear and ran. Lu Bu directed his army to charge, and Yuan Shu's forces ran. Lu Bu gave chase and seized countless horses and armor.

While Lu Bu was busy collecting the spoils of war, Yuan Shu and his defeated army were fleeing. But before they had gone far, another army stormed out of the hills and blocked their path. The general at its head was none other than Guan Yu.

“Rebel, come meet your doom!” Guan Yu shouted.

Yuan Shu knew better than to try to tangle with Guan Yu, so he kept running, and his men scattered. Guan Yu chased them and mopped up for a while before calling it quits. This decisive battle ended any notion Yuan Shu had of taking Xu Province, and he collected his forces and went back to Huainan (2,2). Lu Bu, meanwhile, invited Guan Yu, Han Xian, and Yang Feng to Xu Province, where he threw a huge party to thank them and rewarded all the troops.

The next day, Guan Yu took his leave. As for Han Xian and Yang Feng, Lu Bu recommended them as protectors of two counties in the Shandong region. He had wanted to keep them in Xu Province, but Chen Deng’s father, Chen Gui (4), was against it.

“If you station them in the Shandong region instead, then within a year all the cities there will belong to you,” Chen Gui (4) said.

So Lu Bu consented and sent the two officers to their assigned counties instead, where they were to wait for the official appointment from the court. After they left, Chen Deng asked his father why he didn’t keep the two around since they might be helpful in plotting Lu Bu’s downfall.

“If they decide to help Lu Bu instead, it would be like helping a tiger add teeth and claws,” Chen Gui answered, and Chen Deng bowed to his father’s wisdom.

As for Yuan Shu, after he limped back to Huainan (2,2), he sent a messenger to the Southlands to ask Sun Ce to lend him some troops so he could avenge this embarrassment. But Sun Ce was not in a generous mood.

“Yuan Shu refused to return my imperial hereditary seal and declared himself emperor and broken his allegiance to the house of Han. That is high treason!” he said. “I was just about to mobilize my forces to go punish him. Why would I want to help that traitor?”

So Sun Ce refused the request. When this got back to Yuan Shu, he was livid.

“That young punk! How dare he?! I’m going to attack him first!”

But his senior adviser Yang (2) Dajiang (4,4) managed to talk Yuan Shu out of that silly notion. Meanwhile, Sun Ce was taking no chances and made sure to station men at key points along the Yangzi (2,3) River. He then met with his staff to discuss mounting and expedition against Yuan Shu.

“Although Yuan Shu has recently suffered a defeat, he still has ample troops and grain, so we should not underestimate him,” said Zhang Zhao (1), Sun Ce’s senior adviser. “Why don’t you write to Cao Cao and convince him to attack Yuan Shu first, and then we will serve as reinforcement. With that combined force, Yuan Shu will definitely be defeated. And if something does go wrong, we can then ask Cao Cao for help.”

Sun Ce took this advice and wrote to Cao Cao. At this time, Cao Cao had recently returned to the capital after his campaign against Zhang Xiu, which, as you would remember from the last episode, cost him the lives of his eldest son, his nephew, and most painfully, his top general Dian (3) Wei (2). When he returned to Xuchang (3,1), Cao Cao built a shrine for Dian Wei, took his son into his own home and appointed him to the imperial corps.

Soon after he received Sun Ce’s message, Cao Cao then got word that Yuan Shu, who was in need of grain, was plundering Chenliu (2,2), Cao Cao’s home prefecture. Seeing an opportunity here, Cao Cao mobilized his army for an expedition to the South. He ordered his general Cao Ren (2) to stay and defend Xuchang, while everyone else followed him on his campaign. He then rounded up 170,000 men and more than a thousand carts of provisions. He also sent word to Sun Ce, Liu Bei, and Lu Bu, telling them to rendezvous with him and combine their might against Yuan Shu.

When Cao Cao arrived at the border of Yu (4) Province, where Liu Bei was stationed, Liu Bei was already waiting for him. When Liu Bei entered Cao Cao’s tent, he offered up two heads.

“Who are they?” Cao Cao asked in surprise.

“These are the heads of Han Xian and Yang Feng,” Liu Bei answered.

“How did this come about?” Cao Cao asked.

“Lu Bu had ordered these two to the counties Yidou (0,1) and Langya (2,2),” Liu Bei said. “But they and their men plundered the villages and drew the wrath of everyone. So I invited them to a banquet under the guise of discussing business. During the banquet, I threw my cup down as a signal, and my brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei killed them, and all their men surrendered. Now I have come to ask for your forgiveness.”

“Sir, you have rid the country of an evil. That is a great service, not a crime,” Cao Cao said. He then rewarded Liu Bei handsomely and they together traveled to the border of Xu Province. There, Lu Bu came to greet them, and Cao Cao heaped lots and lots of praise on him. He appointed Lu Bu General of the Left and promised to send the seal of office once he’s back in Xuchang. This gesture delighted Lu Bu immensely. Cao Cao then stationed Lu Bu’s army on the left and Liu Bei’s army on the right, while he himself led the main force in the middle, with Xiahou Dun and Yu (1) Jin (4) serving as the vanguard.

When Yuan Shu heard that Cao Cao’s army was approaching, he ordered the general Qiao (2) Rui (2) to lead 50,000 troops as the vanguard to meet the enemy. The two sides met at the borders of Shochun (4,1). Qiao (2) Rui (2) rode out and tangled with Xiahou Dun, but was stabbed to death within three bouts. The rest of Yuan Shu’s vanguard fled back into the city. Just then came more bad news: Sun Ce had sent a navy to attack the west side of the city; Lu Bu was attack the east side; Liu Bei was attacking from the south; and Cao Cao was coming from the north with 170,000 men. Yuan Shu immediately assembled his advisers and generals to figure out what to do.

“Shochun (4,1) has suffered from flood and drought for several years, which has caused food shortages,” his senior adviser Yang (2) Dajiang (4,4) said. “And recently we’ve been at war, which has

disrupted the lives of the people and drawn their ire. It will be difficult to resist an invading army. Why don't we leave a force at Shochun. They won't need to fight. They just need to stall until the enemy runs out of food, at which point their soldiers will revolt. Meanwhile your majesty can lead the imperial guard across the Huai (2) River. That will put you in familiar territory while dodging the thrust from the enemy."

Yuan Shu heeded this advice. So he left four generals and 10,000 men to defend Shochun, while he took the rest of the men, as well as the entire treasury and moved across the Huai (2) River. As it turned out, Yang (2) Dajiang (4,4) was exactly right. With 170,000 men in his army, Cao Cao was burning through provisions like crazy. Compounding the problem, the surrounding districts were also suffering from food shortages and couldn't spare anything.

Facing an imminent disaster, Cao Cao wanted to take Shochun quickly, but Li Feng and company refused to go out and give battle. The stalemate went on for more than a month, and Cao Cao's provisions were gone. So he wrote to Sun Ce and managed to borrow 100,000 bushels of grain, but he did not distribute this food.

One day, the granary officer, a man named Wang (2) Hou (4), went to see Cao Cao about the food crisis.

"We have a lot of mouths to feed and not much grain. What should we do?" Wang (2) Hou (4) asked.

"You can distribute provisions in smaller rations to tide us over," Cao Cao answered.

"But what if that makes the soldiers angry?"

"I have a plan to deal with that."

So Wang Hou (4) did as Cao Cao ordered and doled out smaller rations. Cao Cao secretly sent men out to check the pulse of men in various camps, and sure enough, everyone was grumbling and accusing Cao Cao of cheating them. So Cao Cao secretly summoned Wang Hou (4).

“I need to borrow something from you to quiet the malcontents. Please do not refuse,” Cao Cao said.

“What would your excellency like to borrow?” Wang Hou (4) asked.

“Your head, so I can put it on public display.”

Wang Hou was shocked.

“I am innocent!” he said.

“I know you are innocent,” Cao Cao answered. “But if I don’t kill you, the soldiers will revolt. After your death, I will take care of your family. Do not worry.”

Before Wang Hou could say another word, Cao Cao summoned the executioners. They took Wang Hou outside the tent, beheaded him, and hanged his head on a pole for all to see, along with an announcement that read: “Wang Hou cut back on rations because he was stealing from the granary. He has been dealt with according to military law.” And now that, umm, justice, has been done, the discontentment died down.

The next day, Cao Cao sent out word to the commanders of his forces: If you do not give it your all to sack the city in three days, you will all be executed. To show that he meant business, Cao Cao went to the foot of the city walls to personally supervise the siege. As the siege commenced, arrows and rocks rained down from the top of the city walls. The action was so fierce and deadly that two of Cao Cao’s lieutenants tried to back away. When he saw this, Cao Cao drew his sword and killed them both on the spot, and then he got off his horse and helped transport soil to fill in the moat.

The sight of the prime minister getting his hands dirty compelled all the troops, from generals to the lowliest foot soldiers, to give it all they had. This proved too much for the city’s defenses. Cao Cao’s men stormed up to the top of the walls and released the drawbridge, and the main army flooded into the city.

The four generals that Yuan Shu had left in charge of the city were all captured in the fighting that ensued, and Cao Cao had them all executed in public. He then ordered Yuan Shu's imperial palace be set on fire, along with any and all royal regalia, because you just can't leave any trace of an imposter emperor. When all was said and done, the city of Shochun was stripped to the bone.

Cao Cao now discussed with his staff about whether to cross the Huai (2) River to pursue Yuan Shu. Xun Yu said, "Because of the floods and droughts in recent years, the supply of provisions is inconsistent. If we continue to advance, it will take a toll on both the army and the people, and it may not produce any benefits. Why don't we return to Xuchang for now. When the winter wheat is ripe and our provisions are plentiful, then we can resume."

Cao Cao, however, could not make up his mind. Suddenly, an urgent message made his decision for him. Word came that Zhang Xiu, who had fled to seek refuge with Liu Biao at the end of the last episode after losing to Cao Cao, was up to no good again. This time, he's got the counties of Nanyang (2,2) and Jiangling (1,2) in revolt. Cao Hong could not fend off the enemy and has lost a number of battles in a row, hence the urgent request for help.

Cao Cao immediately wrote to Sun Ce, ordering him to cross the Yangzi River and set up a formation so as to give Liu Biao something else to think about and keep him at bay instead of going off to help Zhang Xiu. Cao Cao then immediately ordered his army to retreat to tend to this crisis.

Before he left, though, Cao Cao had one item of business to take care of. He ordered Liu Bei to station his forces at, where else, Xiaopei once again. He then ordered Liu Bei and Lu Bu to kiss and make up and to agree to help each other out going forward instead of being at each other's throat. After this, Lu Bu led his forces back to Xu Province. Cao Cao then said to Liu Bei in private:

"I'm stationing you in Xiaopei because I am digging a pit to trap a tiger. If you would discuss this with Chen Guin (4) and his son, everything will no doubt go as planned, and I will lend you a hand as



well.”

After this, Cao Cao led his troops back to Xuchang. When he got there, he received a bit of unexpected good news. It had nothing to do with Zhang Xiu, however. Instead, word came that Li Jue and Guo Si, the two former powerbrokers of the court who had been defeated by Cao Cao, had been killed by their subordinates, who had brought their heads to the capital, along with the 200-some members of Li Jue’s clan. Cao Cao ordered that Li Jue’s entire clan be taken to the four gates of the city and executed, and the traitors’ heads were put on public display. Since nobody was a fan of Li Jue and Guo Si, the people all rejoiced, and the emperor assembled all the officials for a feast to celebrate the official end of a dark chapter and the return of quote unquote peace. The two guys who killed the traitors were rewarded with generalships and ordered to defend Changan.

After the celebration, Cao Cao reported to the emperor that Zhang Xiu was in revolt and needed to be pacified. The emperor then personally saw Cao Cao off in the fourth month of the year 198. Cao Cao left Xun Yu to hold down the fort at Xuchang and coordinate the troops, while he himself set off with his main army. As they marched, the wheat in the fields along the road were ripe for harvest, but the farmers were all in hiding since Cao Cao’s army was passing through, and if you hadn’t noticed in the 20-some episodes so far, wherever an army was on the move, there was a strong likelihood that chaos would follow.

Seeing this, Cao Cao summoned the leaders of the nearby villages and the officials of the various hamlets. He told them, “By the decree of the emperor, I am on an expedition to pacify rebels and rid the people of an evil. I have no choice but to march during the time of harvest. Wherever we pass, if anyone in my army, regardless of rank, tramples any of the fields, they will be executed. Military law is strict, so you guys should go about your business without fear.”

When they heard this, the people thanked him happily and crowded around the approaching army to show their appreciation. And it looked like everyone in Cao Cao’s army got the memo.

Whenever soldiers marched across wheat fields, they dismounted and carefully held aside the wheat stalks with their hands. The guy in front would not let go of the wheat stalks until he had passed it onto the guy behind him, and no one dared to step on so much as a kernel.

But then one day, as Cao Cao was riding on his horse walking down the road, a turtledove flew out of fields. This startled Cao Cao's horse, and it sprinted off, carrying him into a wheat field and trampling a good sized patch of wheat stalks.

Once he managed to regain control of the horse, Cao Cao summoned his first secretary and asked him to assess the penalty that should be handed down.

"But you are the prime minister. How can we talk of punishing you?" the first secretary said.

"If I violate the rules I myself set down, then who would follow it?" Cao Cao said.

At this, he pulled out his sword and looked like he was about to slit his own throat to carry out the rightful sentence. Everyone around him, of course, immediately rushed over to stop him. His adviser Guo (1) Jia (1) said,

"According to the Spring and Autumn Annals, the law should not apply to those in the highest positions. Your excellency is commanding the army. How can you commit suicide?"

So yeah, here you see the well-established Chinese tradition of the people in power being above the law. Cao Cao considered this for a while and then said, "Well, since the Spring and Autumn Annals say so, then I will spare myself the death penalty."

He then use the sword to cut off his own hair and threw it to the ground.

"Let the hair take the place of my head," he said. He then ordered a soldier to carry that hair to every unit in the army and tell them, "The prime minister trampled wheat. By law, he deserves to die. In this case, he has cut off his hair instead."

So if you were a soldier in Cao Cao's army, if you weren't taking his order about not trampling wheat fields seriously before, you definitely were paying attention now. Later, someone wrote a

poem about this incident:

Hundred thousand silver wolves, hundred thousand warrior hearts.

Can one man's words command this vast army?

When he sheared his locks in lieu of his head,

The depths of Cao Cao's craft were plain to see.

So basically, the poet was calling the whole thing an act, saying that Cao Cao was just putting on a show to make sure his orders get taken seriously. And that's certainly the most obvious interpretation, especially since the novel wants to depict Cao Cao as this crafty, Machiavellian character. But I think if you look a little deeper, you might also gain a measure of respect for the man here. Cao Cao, after all, was prime minister, and no one would dare to question him if he just gave himself a pass in this situation. And the other thing to keep in mind is that cutting off your hair was no small thing. People back then, even men, did not cut their hair. According to Confucian principles, the body was a sacred thing, given to you by your parents, and to take a blade to any part of it was sacrilege. So what Cao Cao did was no small gesture. I think this incident, along with the earlier incident with the poor granary officer, are among my favorite descriptions of Cao Cao in the novel, because they show us a lot of different dimensions to the man, both good and bad.

Alright, that's all the literary analysis I'm doing for now. Back to the business at hand. Zhang Xiu got word that Cao Cao was on his way, so he sent an urgent dispatch to Liu Biao to request backup. He also led an army and the officers Lei (2) Xu (4) and Zhang (1) Xian (1) to go meet Cao Cao. When they lined up, Zhang Xiu rode out, pointed at Cao Cao, and cursed: "Your virtue and honor are fake! You are without shame or integrity! Are you anything more than a beast?!"

Cao Cao did not take kindly to this constructive criticism, so he sent out Xu (2) Chu (3) to shut

Zhang Xiu up. Zhang Xiu sent Zhang Xian (1) out to counter. After just three bouts, Xu Chu cut down Zhang Xian (1), and Zhang Xiu's army was routed. Cao Cao pursued him all the way to the walls of Nanyang (2,2). Zhang Xiu ran into the city, closed the gates, and refused to come out. Cao Cao then began a siege.

However, the city was surrounded by a wide and deep moat, making it difficult to get close. So Cao Cao ordered his men to begin moving soil to fill the moat. He also had them fill sacks with dirt, and combine it with straws and sticks to make a crude ramp against the city wall. He also erected a ladder for peeking into the city. As this was going on, Cao Cao personally rode around the city and observed for three days. He then ordered his troops to pile up earth and bramble near the corner by the west gate and massed his men there, getting ready to scale the wall in that section.

Inside the city, Zhang Xiu's adviser Jia (3) Xu (3) saw this commotion and said to his master, "I know what Cao Cao is up to. We can play along. I noticed that he rode around the city for three days. He saw that the the earthen wall on the southeast corner had different colors, which told him that it was hurriedly built and not as sturdy. Also, the barrier of spikes and branches in that corner is half-wrecked. His intent is to attack there. Right now he is making a lot of noise in the northwest corner to try to draw us into concentrating our defenses there, and then he will try to stage a surprise night raid on the southeast corner."

"What should we do then?" Zhang Xiu asked.

"That's easy," Jia Xu said. "Tomorrow, gather your best soldiers, feed them well, and equip them lightly. Have them lie in ambush by the houses in the southeast end. Have the residents of the city dress up as soldiers and pretend to be defending the northwest corner. At night, if Cao Cao scales the wall by the southeast corner, let them in. When they climb into the city, sound the alarm and spring the trap, and Cao Cao will be ours."

Zhang Xiu did as Jia Xu suggested, and Cao Cao's scouts soon reported that Zhang Xiu had massed his men on the northwest corner while the southeast corner looked empty.

"I've got him now!" Cao Cao said. He ordered his men to prepare the equipment for scaling walls. During the day, he only directed his forces to attack the northwest corner. That night, around 9 p.m., he led his top troops to the southeast corner. They scaled the wall and cut through the barrier of spikes and branches. When they saw that there was no one around that section of the city, they all poured in. Just then, an explosive sounded, and Zhang Xiu's men sprang out of hiding. Cao Cao's forces quickly turned and tried to retreat, while Zhang Xiu personally led an army in pursuit. Cao Cao's army was routed and retreated out of the city and fled for many miles. Zhang Xiu chased them until dawn, at which point he led his forces back inside the city. Cao Cao tallied up the damage and found that he had lost some 50,000 men and countless equipment, and two of his generals -- Lü (3) Qian (2) and Yu (1) Jin (4) -- were wounded. So Cao Cao outsmarted himself into a bloody nose.

Inside the city, after Cao Cao fled in defeat, Jia Xu advised Zhang Xiu to write to Liu Biao and ask him to lead his forces to cut off Cao Cao's route of retreat. When Liu Biao got the letter, he was just about to mobilize his army, but he got a report that Sun Ce had stationed his troops at the strategic location of Hukou (2,3).

"This is Cao Cao's scheme," said Kuai (3) Liang (2), one of Liu Biao's top advisers. "Right now Cao Cao is on the run. If we don't attack him now, we will regret it later."

So Liu Biao left Huang (2) Zu (3) to defend the various points of entry into Jing (1) Province, while he himself led an army to Anzhong (1,4) County to cut off Cao Cao's escape route. When Zhang Xiu heard that Liu Biao had mobilized, he and Jia Xu led their own forces to go attack Cao Cao as well.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao's army was retreating slowly. When they passed by the Yü (4) River near the city of Xiangcheng (1,2), Cao Cao suddenly started to cry aloud. Everyone was surprised and asked why.

"I am reminded of the loss of General Dian Wei in this area last year, and that made me weep," Cao Cao said. He then ordered the army to halt and conduct a memorial service to mourn Dian Wei. Cao Cao personally offered incense and prostrated in front of the altar while weeping, a gesture that moved everyone in his army. It was only after he had finished mourning Dian Wei that he then mourned his nephew and eldest son, as well as the rank-and-file soldiers who perished in that fight. Even his horse, which had died from arrow wounds from that fight, received a sacrifice.

The next day, a messenger arrived from the capital with a message from Xun (2) Yu (4), warning Cao Cao that Liu Biao was blocking his path of retreat. Cao Cao wrote back and said, "I am traveling only a few miles a day, not because I don't know that the enemy is on my tail, but because I already have a plan. When I arrive at Anzhong (1,4) County, I will defeat Zhang Xiu for sure. Have no worries."

To see what tricks Cao Cao has up his sleeve this time, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.