

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 26.

Last time, Lu Bu had just been betrayed by several of his own officers, who captured him while he was asleep and surrendered the city of Xiapi (4,1) to Cao Cao.

Once Cao Cao entered the city, he immediately ordered his men to stop the flooding of the city by returning the rivers that they had diverted to their original course, and he sent out announcements to put the general populace at ease. He and Liu Bei then took a seat in the tower over the White Gate, with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei standing behind Liu Bei. Cao Cao's officers then began to bring in the prisoners.

First up was Lu Bu. Lu Bu was a tall man, but at this moment, he was hunched over and bound tightly. When he entered, he cried out, "The binds are too tight. Please loosen them a bit!"

"When you are tying up a tiger, you have to make the binds tight," Cao Cao answered.

When Lu Bu saw Hou (2) Cheng (2), Wei (4) Hou (4), and Song (4) Xian (4) -- the three officers who had betrayed him -- standing to the side, he asked them, "I have treated you well. Why did you betray me?"

"You only listen to your wives, not to your officers. How can you say you treated us well?" Song Xian shot back. This response shut Lu Bu up.

A moment later, the guards brought in another prisoner -- one of Lu Bu's generals, Gao Shun.

"Do you have anything to say?" Cao Cao asked him.

Gao Shun said nothing, and this display of defiance angered Cao Cao, who ordered the guards to take Gao Shun outside and behead him.

Next, Xu Huang brought in Chen Gong, and Cao Cao couldn't help but engage in a little banter with the guy who had once saved his life.

"My old friend, how have you been?" Cao Cao asked.

"I left you because you have a depraved mind," Chen Gong said.

"I have a depraved mind? Then what are you doing serving Lu Bu?"

"Lu Bu may be a fool, but he's not treacherous like you."

"Well, you've always thought yourself so smart. So what happened?"

"If that man had listened to my advice, we may not have ended up prisoners."

"Well then, with things as they are today, what shall we do?" Cao Cao asked.

At this, Chen Gong answered loudly, "Today, I die!"

But Cao Cao was thinking about sparing Chen Gong, so he tried to open a door for him.

"Sir, you may long for death, but what about your old mother? And your wife and kids?" he asked Chen Gong.

"I have heard that those who rule according the principles of filial piety do not harm another's parents, and that those who rule with humanity will not cut off another's line," Chen Gong replied. "The fate of my mother and my wife and children are entirely in your hands. I am your prisoner. Please execute me without delay."

Cao Cao still wanted to try to convince Chen Gong to reconsider, but Chen Gong had already started walking out to the execution grounds and would not be stopped. Resigned to how this was going to turn out, Cao Cao rose with tears in his eyes and accompanied Chen Gong out. But Chen Gong refused to look back at him.

"Immediately escort Sir Chen's mother, wife, and children back to Xuchang and see to their needs as long as they live. Anyone who shows any neglect will be executed," Cao Cao told his attendants.

Chen Gong heard this, but he said nothing. Instead, he simply stretched out his neck and waited for the executioner's blade. Everyone present was moved to tears. After the execution, Cao Cao ordered that Chen Gong's remains be placed in an elaborate coffin and buried in Xuchang. Later, a poem praised Chen Gong thus:

In life, in death, an undivided will --

A steadfast hero of such bravery!

Only to a lord of rarest worth

Should a vassal pledge his fealty.

All homage for upholding his liege lord.

We sorrow as he bids his kin farewell.

At White Gate Tower he met his death unbowed:

The conduct of Chen Gong none can excel.

While Cao Cao was seeing Chen Gong off, Lu Bu whispered to Liu Bei, "Sir, you are a guest while I am a prisoner. Would you not say something on my behalf?"

To this, Liu Bei nodded. When Cao Cao came back up to the tower, Lu Bu said, "Your excellency, I was your main rival. Now, I submit. With you as the commander-in-chief and I your lieutenant, we can conquer the whole country."

"Hmm. What do you think?" Cao Cao asked Liu Bei.

"Sir, have you forgotten about Ding (1) Yuan (2) and Dong (3) Zhuo (2)?" Liu Bei replied.

In case you've forgotten, Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo both took Lu Bu as their adopted son, and I'm sure you remember the fate that befalls Lu Bu's adopted fathers. So when Lu Bu asked Liu Bei to say something on his behalf, this was not exactly what he had in mind.

"You, you are the most untrustworthy man!" Lu Bu seethed as he stared at Liu Bei.

Cao Cao was ready to put an end to this. He ordered the guards to take Lu Bu to the foot of the tower and strangle him. As he was being led away, Lu Bu looked back at Liu Bei and shouted, "Big ears! Have you forgotten when my marksmanship saved you?!"

Suddenly, another man's voice silenced Lu Bu.

"Lu Bu! Face death like a man! What is there to fear?"

Those present looked to see who had spoken, and it was Zhang Liao, one of Lu Bu's officers who had fought to the end before being taken prisoner. He was being escorted in as Lu Bu was being escorted out, and he just couldn't put up with Lu Bu's incessant complaining. Cao Cao ordered his guards to carry out the strangulation and then cut off Lu Bu's head to be placed on public display. And that was the end of Lu Bu. Later, a poet described his final hours thus:

The flood surged and swamped his last stronghold;

Lu Bu's own men led him bound before his foes.

What use now was his unrivaled steed?

And what good was his halberd indeed?

The tiger, looking for mercy, turned cowardly,

"Never give the eagle its fill" -- a wise policy.

Doting on his women and spurning Chen Gong's pleas,

He was reduced to vainly cursing Big Ear's treachery.

Someone else also wrote a poem commenting on Liu Bei's actions:

No mercy for the tiger when he's tied,

Especially when Ding Yuan and Dong Zhuo's bloody memory remains fresh.

Though, why not spare Lu Bu as a "son" for Cao Cao,

Knowing of his taste for father-flesh?

Ok, we interrupt this poetry reading to return to our originally scheduled programming, where Lu Bu had just been executed, and Cao Cao was now dealing with Zhang Liao. When he saw Zhang Liao, Cao Cao pointed and said, "This man looks familiar."

"We crossed paths inside the city of Puyang (2,2). How could you have forgotten?" Zhang Liao replied.

"Aah, so you remember it as well," Cao Cao laughed.

If you, unlike Cao Cao and Zhang Liao, do not remember, Puyang was the location of one of Cao Cao's previous battles against Lu Bu, where Cao Cao was lured into the city and almost got killed in the ensuing fire and melee.

"Such a pity," Zhang Liao said.

"What is such a pity?" Cao Cao asked.

"Such a pity that the fire that day wasn't strong enough to kill a traitor like you!"

Cao Cao did not take kindly to this. "You are a defeated general! How dare you make fun of me?!" he said as he drew his sword and walked over to kill Zhang Liao himself. But just then, one man grabbed Cao Cao's arm from behind while another kneeled in front of him and begged him to stop.

The man who held up Cao Cao was Liu Bei, while the one who kneeled was Guan Yu.

"Men of such loyalty should be kept in your service," Liu Bei said.

"I have long known that Zhang Liao is an honorable and loyal man," Guan Yu added. "I will stake my life on that."

Cao Cao, taking this convenient exit, laughed and threw down his sword.

"I, too, have always known that General Zhang is loyal and honorable. I was just teasing him."

So ha ha ha, everybody laugh at the funny joke. Cao Cao then personally untied Zhang Liao, offered him his own coat, and asked him to take the seat of honor. These gestures moved Zhang Liao,

and he surrendered. Cao Cao appointed him as a commander in the imperial corps and gave him an honorary lordship.

Cao Cao then sent Zhang Liao to go convince other detachments of Lu Bu's forces to surrender as well. Lu Bu's other top general, Zang (1) Ba (4), took this offer when he heard that Lu Bu was dead and Zhang Liao had surrendered. Cao Cao rewarded him handsomely and then sent him to convince the leaders of the Mount Tai (4) rebels to surrender, which they also did. Cao Cao also ordered that Lu Bu's wives and daughter be taken back to Xuchang, and this is the last that we'll hear of them.

With everything settled and the whole region now pacified, Cao Cao rewarded his army and then began the journey back to the capital. When he passed through Xu Province, the locals lined the road and burned incense, hoping that their sincerity would convince Cao Cao to grant them one little favor: Leave Liu Bei as the imperial protector of Xu Province.

"Lord Liu has rendered great service to the country," Cao Cao told them. "Let me take him back to the capital so that the emperor may bestow rewards on him in person, and THEN he can come back."

The locals thanked Cao Cao profusely, but of course, Cao Cao had his own motives, and there was no way he was going to leave a man like Liu Bei in a place where he was so popular. I mean, if these people were willing to serve him the flesh from their own wives, what WON'T they do for him?

So instead, Cao Cao ordered one of his trusted generals, Che (1) Zhou (4), to stay and oversee the province. When Cao Cao returned to Xuchang, he doled out rewards for everyone who went on the campaign, and he put Liu Bei up in temporary quarters near his own residence, which I'm sure was because Cao Cao enjoyed Liu Bei's company so much.

The next day at court, Cao Cao presented Liu Bei to the emperor and reported Liu Bei's service on the campaign. Liu Bei, donning court attire, prostrated on the ground. When the emperor inquired

about his family background, Liu Bei recounted his lineage. The emperor then ordered attendants to fetch the royal family tree and read it out loud to trace his relationship to Liu Bei. After a long list of “so-and-so begat so-and-so”, it was revealed that Liu Bei was the emperor’s uncle. The emperor was delighted and summoned Liu Bei to an adjacent room, where they carried out the proper greetings between uncle and nephew.

The whole time, the emperor was thinking, “All power now rests with Cao Cao and I have no say in anything. But now that I’ve found such a hero of an uncle, I have hope!” So the emperor named Liu Bei General of the Left and the Marquis of Yicheng (4,2). After the requisite welcoming feast, Liu Bei thanked the emperor for his kindness and left. From that point on, people all called Liu Bei imperial uncle Liu.

Cao Cao’s advisers, however, were alarmed by the emperor getting chummy with Liu Bei. When Cao Cao returned to his residence from court that day, they went to see him and told him that this might not bode well for him. But Cao Cao dismissed their concerns.

“Now that Liu Bei has been declared as the imperial uncle, I can order him around using the emperor’s authority, and he will have to obey,” Cao Cao said. “Besides, I’m keeping him in the capital. On the surface, he is near the emperor, but in reality, I have him under my thumb. What do I have to worry about with Liu Bei? What I AM worried about is grand commandant Yang (2) Biao (1). He is a member of Yuan Shu’s clan, and if he collaborates with Yuan Shu and Yuan Shao, that will be dangerous. I need to get rid of him immediately.”

So Cao Cao set it up so that someone falsely accused Yang (2) Biao (1) of collaborating with Yuan Shu and had him arrested. But the rest of the court wasn’t quite ready to just roll over and let Cao Cao have everything he wants just quite yet. Kong (3) Rong (2), the governor of Beihai (2,3) Prefecture, was in the capital at the time, and he went to see Cao Cao.

“Grand commandant Yang’s family has shown the highest of virtues for four generations; how could he be in league with Yuan Shu?” Kong Rong said.

“This is the wish of the emperor,” Cao Cao said.

But Kong Rong didn’t buy it, because c’mon, Cao Cao did hold nearly absolute power at court. You can’t seriously believe that he’s doing this just because the weak, young emperor said so. Well, Cao Cao knew he was in a weak position, so he relented and instead of executing Yang Biao (1), he just stripped him of his rank and sent him back home.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Another court official accused him of being high-handed and guilty of disobeying the emperor and arbitrarily arresting high ministers, which, yeah, he most certainly was. Cao Cao could not let this slide, and he immediately had this court official executed, which put everyone at court on edge.

With Cao Cao’s domination of the court growing by the day, his adviser Cheng (2) Yu (4) suggested that he take this opportunity to take the throne for himself.

“There are still too many people at court who are loyal to the emperor,” Cao Cao said. “We cannot move rashly. I will ask the emperor to participate in a hunt and use the opportunity to get the pulse of the court.”

So Cao Cao had his men make preparations for a hunt outside the city. He then went to quote unquote invite the emperor.

“It might not be proper for an emperor to go hunting,” the emperor said.

“Ever since antiquity, emperors and kings have participated in hunts year-round to demonstrate their prowess to the country,” Cao Cao said. “During this time of unrest, we should use this hunt as an opportunity to demonstrate our skills at arms.”



Well, the emperor was too afraid of Cao Cao to say no, so off they went. The emperor rode on his imperial horse, carrying the imperial bow, imperial arrows, and accompanied by the imperial entourage, which included, among others, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, all of whom donned their armor, carried bows, arrows, and their weapons, and led a few dozen horsemen. Cao Cao rode alongside the emperor at the head of the procession, and behind them followed Cao Cao's trusted officers. All the rest of the court officials had to stay far behind.

When they arrived at the hunting grounds, Liu Bei took his place next to the emperor, and the emperor said he would like to see Liu Bei demonstrate his marksmanship. So Liu Bei got on his horse, and when the hunting party roused a rabbit out of the grass, Liu Bei easily put an arrow in it, drawing praise from the emperor.

The hunting party then went around a hill, and a large deer was chased out from the thickets. The emperor shot three straight arrows at it, and missed them all. So he turned to Cao Cao and said, "You may take a shot."

Cao Cao was more than happy to, but first he asked the emperor for the imperial bow and arrow, which the emperor obediently handed over. Cao Cao needed only one shot to stick an arrow in the deer's back, bringing it down. When the court officials and officers who were following far behind saw that the deer had been dropped by one of the emperor's arrows, they figured that the emperor had brought it down, so they all knelt and shouted, "Long live your majesty!" in the direction of the emperor. But at that moment, Cao Cao rode out in front of the emperor to receive this congratulation. Everyone turned pale when they saw this, since it was a capital offense, if anyone dared to charge Cao Cao with it.

Actually, one man present did dare. It was Guan Yu, who was outraged at this sight. He gripped his saber and was just about to gallop out to cut down Cao Cao for this act of treason, but Liu Bei saw him

and waved at him and winked at him, doing everything he could to keep Guan Yu in check. Guan Yu saw this and backed off, and apparently no one noticed this.

Liu Bei then bowed to Cao Cao and said, "Your excellency has uncommon marksmanship."

"[Laugh] It's just thanks to his majesty, really," Cao Cao replied. He then rode back to the emperor and congratulated his majesty on, umm, something. But he did not return the imperial bow and instead just sharked it.

With the hunt over, the entourage held a banquet on site and then returned to the capital. Once they were back in their own home, Guan Yu asked Liu Bei why he had stopped him from killing Cao Cao.

"When you're aiming for a mouse, you have to be careful not to break something valuable," Liu Bei said. "Cao Cao was only half a horse's length from the emperor, and his confidants were all around. If you acted rashly because of a moment's rage, and things went south and the emperor was injured, the crime will fall on our heads instead."

"We did not kill that rebel today; he will no doubt be trouble down the road," Guan Yu said.

"Say no more," Liu Bei warned his brothers. "We must watch our words carefully."

Meanwhile, the emperor returned to his gilded cage and wept to his wife, Empress Fu (2).

"Ever since I've become emperor, rebels have sprouted up left and right," he said. "First under Dong Zhuo's tyranny, and then during the chaos of Li Jue and Guo Si, you and I tasted suffering that no one else can. And then Cao Cao showed up, and I thought he would be a loyal supporter of the throne, but he has usurped the government and is acting arbitrarily. Every time I see him, I am sitting on pins and needles. Today, during the hunt, he dared to accept the congratulations that were meant for me. He's going to make a move on the throne sooner or later; then what would happen to us two?"

“With all the court officials who live off the house of Han, is there not one among them who can save the country?” the empress asked.

Before she could finish speaking, a man suddenly came in and said, “Your majesties, please do not be worried. I know of someone who can rid the country of this plague.”

This man was none other than the empress’s father, Fu (2) Yuan (2).

“Father-in-law, do you also know of that rebel Cao Cao’s bullying ways?” the emperor asked.

“Who could miss what happened during the hunt?” Fu (2) Yuan (2) said. “But the court is full of people who are either Cao Cao’s relatives or his retainers. Only those who are relatives of the imperial house would remain loyal and stand against the rebel. Alas, I have no power, so I cannot do anything. However, Dong (3) Cheng (2), the brother of your concubine and the General of Cavalry and Chariots, would be up to the task.”

“Yes, he has come to my aid in times of crisis more than once,” the emperor said. “We can summon him to discuss this matter.”

“Your majesty,” Fu (2) Yuan (2) said, “your attendants all take their orders from Cao Cao. If this leaks out, it will bring calamity.”

“So what do we do?” the emperor asked.

“I have an idea,” Fu (2) Yuan (2) replied. “You can make a secret gift of a robe and a jade girdle to Dong Cheng, but sew a secret decree into the lining of the girdle. That way, he can read it at home, and no one would be the wiser.”

The emperor heeded this advice. He bit his finger and wrote a secret decree in blood, an act that’s meant to show how much this means to the emperor. The empress then sewed this decree into the lining of the jade girdle. The emperor then put on a silk robe and wore the girdle around his waist. He then summoned Dong Cheng.

When Dong Cheng arrived at the palace, the emperor said to him, "Last night, I was talking with the empress about our travails back when we were fleeing from Changan, and it brought to mind the great service you rendered during that time. So I summoned you to reward you."

Dong Cheng prostrated and thanked the emperor. The emperor then brought him to the ancestral temple and went to the wing commemorating the greatest servants of the royal house. After making an offering of incense, the emperor led Dong Cheng to view the paintings of the dynasty's greatest figures. In the middle was the likeness of the Supreme Ancestor, the founder of the dynasty.

"What were our Supreme Ancestor's origins? How did he establish the dynasty?" the emperor asked Dong Cheng.

Dong Cheng was stunned by this question.

"You mock me, your majesty!" he replied. "Who does not know about the Supreme Ancestor? He started out as a precinct master in Sishang (4,4). Wielding a sword the length of three spans, he slayed a white serpent and declared the beginning of his rebellion against the Qin (2) dynasty. Traversing the land, he exterminated the Qin in three years and wiped out the Chu (3) in five. Thus did he win control of the land and established our eternal empire."

"[Sigh] The Supreme Ancestor was such a hero, and yet his descendents are so feeble. How lamentable," the emperor said. He then pointed to the drawings of two men to the left and right of the Supreme Ancestor.

"Are these two Zhang (1) Liang (2) and Xiao (1) He (2)?" he asked.

"Indeed," Dong Cheng answered. "The Supreme Ancestor relied on their talents to establish the dynasty."

At this moment, the emperor's attendants were not right behind them, so the emperor whispered to Dong Cheng, "You should stand by my side like these two."

"Your servant has not done anything for the country; how can I dare to be compared to them?"

“I have not forgotten what you did in rescuing me while I was fleeing from Changan,” the emperor said. “I just haven’t been able to reward you with anything.”

The emperor then pointed at his girdle and robe and said, “I will give you this robe and girdle. When you’re wearing them, it would be like you’re standing next to me.”

Dong Cheng prostrated and thanked the emperor for this exceptional honor. As the emperor handed him the robe and girdle, he whispered, “You should take a close look; do not let me down.”

Dong Cheng got the message, and he put on the robe and girdle and took his leave of the emperor.

By now, the royal attendants had already sent word to Cao Cao about this visit from Dong Cheng. So Cao Cao came into court to see what was going on. Dong Cheng had barely stepped outside the palace gate when he saw Cao Cao coming from straight ahead. There was nowhere to hide, so Dong Cheng could only step to one side and bow.

“Sir, what brought you here?” Cao Cao asked.

“The emperor summoned me to give me this robe and this girdle,” Dong Cheng answered.

“Why?”

“For the service I rendered during the flight from the old capital.”

“Take off the girdle and let me take a look,” Cao Cao said.

Dong Cheng knew that there must be something in the robe and girdle, so he hesitated. This made Cao Cao even more suspicious. So he ordered his guards to take the girdle off FOR Dong Cheng. They did so, and Cao Cao took a very close look at the girdle.

“It really is a very nice jade girdle,” he said, laughing. “Let me take a look at that robe, too.”

Dong Cheng had no choice but to do as he said. Cao Cao held the robe up to the sun and took a long look at it. He then put on the robe and the girdle.

“Does it fit?” he asked his attendants, who, of course, said yes.

“Sir, would you be willing to let me have this robe and girdle?” Cao Cao asked Dong Cheng.

“They are gifts from his majesty; I dare not give them to anyone else,” Dong Cheng said. “But I can have a set made specifically for your excellency.”

“There’s something fishy about this gift,” Cao Cao said.

“What do you mean?!” Dong Cheng said with a tone of surprise. “Your excellency, if you want them, then keep them.”

“These are the emperor’s gifts to you. How can I take them from you?” Cao Cao said. “I was just teasing.” He then took off the robe and girdle and handed them back to Dong Cheng.

Dong Cheng, secretly counting his blessings and letting out a huge sigh of relief, took his leave and went home. There, he sat in his study until late into the night, studying the robe over and over, and yet he could find nothing.

“The emperor gave these to me and instructed me to take a close look,” he thought to himself. “There must be something to it, but what could it be?”

He then examined the the jade girdle, which was quite exquisite, but did not seem to hold any secrets either. After looking it over and over, Dong Cheng grew tired and was about ready for bed. Suddenly, a stray piece of the wick from the candle on the table fell onto the girdle and started to burn the backing. Dong Cheng quickly put out the fire, but there was already a burnt patch. Through this patch, he could see a piece of cloth, and through it, faint traces of blood. He immediately cut open the lining and discovered the emperor’s secret message, which read:

“I have heard that in the human order, the most important bond is the one between father and son, and that in the social order, the relationship between sovereign and servant is paramount. Lately, the rebel Cao Cao has usurped power, oppressed his liege, connived with his cohorts, and damaged

the order of the court. Reward and punishment are no longer up to me. I stay up each night worrying about the imminent disaster facing the realm. You are a high official and my relative. Consider how difficult it was to establish our dynasty. Please, in the name of loyalty and honor, exterminate the rebels and restore the dignity of the court for the sake of our ancestors. I have written this decree in blood and confided it to you. Remain vigilant, and do not fail our hopes. Decree written in the spring, the third month of the fourth year of the Era of Established Peace.”

Upon reading the message, Dong Cheng wept bitter tears and could not sleep that night. The next morning, he was sitting in his study again, reading the decree over and over. Yet, no idea was coming to mind. So he put the decree down on his desk and kept trying to think of a way to eliminate Cao Cao. But before long, the previous night’s insomnia caught up with him, and he fell asleep.

While Dong Cheng was asleep, he had a visitor: It was a courtier named Wang (2) Zifu (3,2). The doorman knew that he was good friends with Dong Cheng, so he just let Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) in, and Wang Zifu walked all the way into the study. There he saw Dong Cheng asleep against the desk. Under his sleeve was a piece of white cloth, and Wang Zifu could make out the word “emperor”. Suspicious, Wang Zifu picked it up, read it, and then hid it in his own sleeve. He then shouted to Dong Cheng, “You should be ashamed, to be sleeping so carefree!”

Dong Cheng startled awake and immediately noticed that a certain item had disappeared from his desk. He was mortified and didn’t know what to do.

“So, you are planning to kill Prime Minister Cao,” Wang Zifu said. “I’m going to turn you in.”

Well, that secret plot lasted all of one night. To see what level of hell is going to break loose when word of this gets back to Cao Cao, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.