

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 29.

When we last left off, Cao Cao and Yuan Shao were in a standoff in Hebei (2,3), while in Xu Province, Liu Bei had captured one of the two lowly officers Cao Cao had sent to attack him, and Zhang Fei had the other officer, Liu (2) Dai (4), so scared that he won't come out of his camp to fight. After a few days of hurling all the insults he could think of to try to spur Liu Dai to give battle, Zhang Fei had an idea. He sent out word to his men that they were to prepare for a night raid around 9 o'clock that night.

During the day, however, Zhang Fei sat in his tent and drank, and after a few drinks, he pretended to be drunk. He then found some excuse to get ticked off at some unfortunate soldier and gave him a good whipping. After the beating, Zhang Fei ordered the soldier to be tied up.

"When I set out on my raid tonight," Zhang Fei said, "I will kill him as a sacrifice to my banner."

But at the same time, he also secretly instructed the guards to be rather derelict of their duty. The condemned man, seeing an opening, slipped out and escaped to Liu Dai's camp, where he spilled the beans about Zhang Fei's plans for a night raid. Liu Dai, seeing the very real wounds on this informant, believed him, so he set up an ambush where he left his camp empty and had his soldier lie in wait outside.

Night came, and Zhang Fei split his forces into three armies. The army in the middle consisted of only 30-some people, who were ordered to storm into the enemy camp and set it on fire. This, however, was just the decoy to make it look like Zhang Fei had fallen for the trap. His other two armies, meanwhile, were to sneak around to the rear of the enemy camp and when they saw fire, that was their signal to attack.

Around 11 p.m., Zhang Fei personally led a squad of elite troops to cut off Liu Dai's escape route. The decoy army then did as it was instructed and stormed into the enemy camp and started a fire. Liu Dai, thinking Zhang Fei had taken the bait, sprang his trap and charged out with his men. But that just sprang Zhang Fei's trap, and Zhang Fei's other two armies rushed in and threw Liu Dai's forces into chaos. Liu Dai fought his way out with some scattered remnants of his army, but he ran smack dab into Zhang Fei. The road was narrow, so there was no way to go around. Liu Dai had no choice but to try to fight his way past Zhang Fei, but yeah, good luck with that. After just one bout, Zhang Fei easily captured him, and the rest of Liu Dai's men surrendered.

When report of the night's victory reached Liu Bei, he said to Guan Yu, "Brother Zhang had always been rash and reckless. But now that he's using his head, I have no worries."

When they went out to greet their brother, Zhang Fei said to Liu Bei, "Brother, you always figured I'm rash and reckless. What do you think now?"

"If I didn't rile you up with my words, would you even be willing to try a little strategy?"

At that, Zhang Fei roared with laughter.

After having their little fun, Liu Bei saw Liu Dai being escorted over. He hurriedly dismounted, personally untied him, and said, "Please forgive my brother Zhang Fei's disrespectful ways." He then welcomed Liu Dai into the city, released Wang (2) Zhong (1), the other officer that he had captured, and treated them both to food and wine.

"Che (1) Zhou (4) was plotting to kill me, so I had no choice but to kill him," Liu Bei told his two well-treated prisoners. "Generals, when you two return to the capital, I hope you will put in a good word for me and explain what happened."

Wait, "when we return to the capital"? Sooo, I guess that means you're going to let us go? Well, as you can imagine, Liu Dai and Wang Zhong were all too happy to agree to Liu Bei's request.

“Thank you, my lord, for not killing us,” they told Liu Bei. “When we see the prime minister, we will vouch for you with the lives of our families.”

Liu Bei thanked them, and the next day he returned to them all their troops and send them off on their way back to Xuchang. But before Liu Dai and Wang Zhong had gone far, they heard the sound of a drum, and Zhang Fei darted out and blocked their path.

“I don’t know what my brother was thinking!” he shouted. “Why would you release an enemy officer that you’ve captured?”

As Liu Dai and Wang Zhong were quaking in their saddles, Zhang Fei charged toward them. But suddenly someone rode up behind him and shouted, “Mind your manners!”

This was Guan Yu, and his presence put Liu Dai and Wang Zhong at ease.

“Since our brother has released them, why do you not comply with his orders?” Guan Yu asked Zhang Fei.

“If we let them go now, they’ll be back again,” Zhang Fei said.

“Well, we can wait till they come back before we kill them,” Guan Yu said.

At this, Liu Dai and Wang Zhong just kept saying, “Even if his excellency threatened to exterminate our clans, we would not dare to come back. Please spare us!”

“Even if Cao Cao himself came, I would slaughter his army!” Zhang Fei said. “Fine, we’ll let you keep your heads for now!”

Breathing a huge sigh of relief, Liu Dai and Wang Zhong tucked tail and ran, while Guan Yu and Zhang Fei returned to see Liu Bei.

So Liu Bei has turned away two lowly enemy officers, but everyone in Xu Province knew that just meant Cao Cao was bound to pay them a visit in person, so Liu Bei had to think of something fast.

“Xu Province is the enemy’s target and we cannot stay here for long,” said Sun Qian (2), one of Liu Bei’s advisers. “Why don’t we station part of our forces at Xiaopei (3,4) and Xiapi (4,1). That way we can form a triangle and aid each other.”

Liu Bei took this advice and ordered Guan Yu to go garrison Xiapi (4,1). He also moved his two wives -- Lady Gan (1) and Lady Mi (2) -- to Xiapi as well. Liu Bei and Zhang Fei went to garrison Xiaopei, while Sun Qian (2), Jian (3) Yong (1), Mi (2) Zhu (2), and Mi (2) Fang (1) were left to guard Xu Province.

Back in the capital Xuchang, Liu Dai and Wang Zhong had returned and when they reported to Cao Cao, they actually lived up to their promise and relayed that Liu Bei actually had no intention of rebelling. But Cao Cao was not exactly in a mood to listen.

“You two have embarrassed the court! What’s the point of keeping you around?!” he scolded Liu Dai and Wang Zhong and shouted for the guards to take them outside and execute them. But the court official Kong Rong intervened.

“These two were never going to be a match for Liu Bei,” he said to Cao Cao. “If you execute them, it may hurt the army’s morale.”

Well, Cao Cao knew Kong Rong was right. So he relented and spared their lives, but he also stripped them of their ranks and reduced them to commoners. He then began talking about personally leading an attack on Liu Bei, but Kong Rong again disagreed.

“It’s the middle of winter; we cannot march right now,” he said. “Let’s wait till the end of spring. For now, we can send envoys to Zhang Xiu (4) and Liu (2) Biao (3) to convince them to support us. Once that’s done, we can make a move on Xu Province.”

So in case you need a refresher, Zhang Xiu had surrendered to Cao Cao once before, but that all went to hell when Cao Cao decided to sleep with Zhang Xiu’s widowed aunt just days after accepting

his surrender. So Zhang Xiu rebelled, and the fight that ensued killed Cao Cao's eldest son, his favorite nephew, and his prized general Dian (3) Wei (2). Liu Biao (3), the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province, had been helping Zhang Xiu cause sporadic trouble for Cao Cao since then.

So Cao Cao now sent an envoy to see Zhang Xiu with an offer of amnesty and asking for his allegiance. The envoy first went to see Zhang Xiu's most trusted adviser, Jia (3) Xu (3). Jia Xu kept the envoy in his house and went to see Zhang Xiu himself the next day to present Cao Cao's offer.

Just as they were talking, attendants reported that an envoy from Yuan Shao had arrived. Zhang Xiu summoned the messenger, who offered a letter from Yuan Shao that asked Zhang Xiu for his support against Cao Cao.

"How are things going in your lord's battle against Cao Cao?" Jia Xu asked Yuan Shao's messenger.

"The war is temporarily on hold because of the winter," the envoy replied. "My lord regards General Zhang Xiu and imperial protector Liu Biao as leaders of the land. That's why he has asked for your support."

At this, Jia Xu laughed.

"Go back and tell Yuan Shao this, 'You couldn't even get along with your own cousin. How can you do that with leaders of the land?'"

Jia Xu then tore up Yuan Shao's letter and dismissed his envoy.

But Zhang Xiu was not so sure about this.

"Yuan Shao is stronger than Cao Cao, and now we have destroyed Yuan Shao's letter and dismissed his envoy. What if he comes here for payback?" he asked Jia Xu.

"Why don't we go join Cao Cao?" Jia Xu said.

"There is bad blood between Cao Cao and me. How can he tolerate me?"

“There are three advantages to joining Cao Cao,” Jia Xu said. “First, Cao Cao is acting in the name of the emperor in waging war against the other lords. Second, because Yuan Shao is strong, he would not appreciate our small contingent if we joined him. On the other hand, because Cao Cao is weaker than Yuan Shao, he would be happy to have our help. Third, if Cao Cao wants to control the realm, he must put aside personal grudges and make his benevolence known across the land. I hope you will not have any second thoughts.”

This list was enough to convince Zhang Xiu, and he met with Cao Cao’s envoy, who further put his mind at ease that Cao Cao was ready to let bygones be bygones. So Zhang Xiu and Jia Xu immediately headed to Xuchang to surrender to Cao Cao. When Zhang Xiu saw Cao Cao, he prostrated himself at the steps to the court. Cao Cao immediately helped him up, held his hand, and said, “I have offended you. Please do not hold it against me.” He then gave Zhang Xiu a generalship and appointed Jia Xu as an officer in the Capital Guard.

This is one place where you really have to hand it to Cao Cao, to be able to look past the fact that Zhang Xiu killed three of his favorite people and not only let him live, but to heap upon him enough kindness to ensure his loyalty. I suppose that’s the kind of thing you have to do if you want to conquer an empire.

So now that Zhang Xiu has pledged his allegiance, Cao Cao asked him to write to Liu Biao to convince him to do likewise. Jia Xu advised Cao Cao that since Liu Biao loves to befriend luminaries of the day, it’s best to send a noted scholar to deliver the message. Xun Yu then suggested that Kong Rong, who had a sterling reputation throughout the land, should be the choice. But when Xun Yu went to see Kong Rong about this, Kong Rong said, hey, I would LOVE to go, but I have a friend who’s just the perfect choice.

“His name is Mi (2) Heng (2), and his talent is 10 times mine,” Kong Rong said. “He should be in the personal service of the emperor, not just tasked with minor assignments like this. I shall recommend him to the emperor.”

And so he did. Kong Rong wrote a lengthy memorial to the emperor, which I will not bore you with here. In short, he said that Mi (2) Heng (2) was a rare talent, a man of shining integrity, who has a photographic memory, and who’s totally down with the force and that good stuff.

When the emperor read this, he passed it along to Cao Cao. Cao Cao then summoned this Mi (2) Heng (2). When Mi Heng arrived, Cao Cao did not ask him to sit, which prompted Mi Heng to look toward the heavens and sigh.

“[Sigh] As vast as the heaven and earth may be, there is not one worthy man to be found.”

“I have dozens of men in my service who are heroes of the age. Why do you say there’s not one worthy man to be found?” Cao Cao asked.

“I would like to hear who these men are,” Mi Heng said.

“Xun Yu, Xun You (1), Guo Jia, and Cheng Yu are men of depth and vision, superior to even Xiao (1) He (2) and Chen (2) Ping (2), who helped found the Han dynasty. Zhang Liao, Xu Chu, Li Dian, and Yue (4) Jin (4) are unrivaled in their valor. Lü (3) Qian (2), Man (2) Chong (3) are my military aides. Yü (1) Jin (4) and Xu (2) Huang (3) are my vanguard generals. Xiahou Dun is a rare field commander, while Cao Ren is one of fortune’s favorite generals. How, then, can you say there are no worthy men?”

Mi Heng, however, laughed.

“Your excellency is mistaken,” he told Cao Cao. “I know of all those people. Xun Yu is fit to be an undertaker. Xun You (1) can tend to graves. Cheng Yu can be tasked with opening and closing shop. Guo Jia’s talent is in reading prose and reciting verse. Zhang Liao is suited to be a drummer boy. Xu Chu can be used to herd cattle. Yue (4) Jin (4) is good for receiving petitions and reading edicts. Li Dian can be courier. Lü (3) Qian (2) can be tasked with sharpening your swords, while Man Chong can be

put in charge of the catering. You can put Yü (1) Jin (4) to work lugging blocks and building walls, and Xu Huang can serve as a butcher. Xiahou Dun deserves the title “the Unscathed General”, while Cao Ren should be called the “Well-Bribed Governor.” As for the rest, they are all just clothes racks, rice bags, wine casks, and meat sacks.”

Well, as you can imagine, Cao Cao did not exactly take kindly to this guy disparaging every one of his most trusted advisers and generals. “What talent do YOU have?” he asked Mi (2) Heng (2) angrily.

“I,” Mi Heng answered, “have mastered the patterns of the heavens and the contours of the land. I have knowledge of the three great teachings and the nine minor traditions. With virtue equal to that of Confucius and his dearest disciple Yan (2) Yuan (2), I can make a king into a sage the likes of the legendary rulers Yao (2) and Shun (4).”

While Mi (2) Heng (2) was going on like this, the general Zhang Liao, who was standing by Cao Cao the whole time, was getting pretty irate, in part because Mi Heng said he was fit to be a drummer boy. He pulled out his sword and wanted to kill Mi Heng, but Cao Cao stopped him.

“I am missing a drum master for our ceremonies and banquets,” Cao Cao said. “Mi Heng can take that job.”

This was a pretty pitiful position for someone allegedly as talented as Mi Heng, but he did not refuse and instead accepted and took his leave.

“That man speaks vulgarly. Why did you not kill him?” Zhang Liao asked Cao Cao.

“He has a bit of a reputation,” Cao Cao said. “If I kill him, people will say I am intolerant. Since he’s so full of himself, I decided to humiliate him by making him a drummer.”



The next day, Cao Cao held a big feast and summoned his new drummer to provide the entertainment. As Mi Heng was about to enter, the guy who had his job before told him that the drummer must wear fresh attire, but Mi Heng walked in in his old, shabby clothes anyway. He then proceeded to play a rendition of the "Triple Tolling of Yuyang (2,2)." The tone and rhythm were so superb, and the notes resounded with such richness that all the guests were moved to tears.

When this tune was done, the attendants lectured Mi Heng about his clothes. As a big F-you, Mi Heng took off his old clothes and stood stark naked in front of all the guests, who all shielded their eyes. Mi Heng then took his sweet time putting on some new pants.

"You are in the hallowed hall of the imperial court!" Cao Cao scolded him. "How dare you act with such disrespect?"

"To abuse one's lord and to deceive one's sovereign is what I call 'disrespect,' " Mi Heng shot back. "I am merely showing the pure form my parents gave me."

"If you are so pure, then who is corrupt?" Cao Cao asked.

"You cannot distinguish between the talented and the incompetent; that shows your eyes are corrupt. Your failure to chant the Odes and the Documents shows that your mouth is corrupt. Your rejection of loyal advice shows that your ears are corrupt. You are ignorant of the past and present, which shows your whole being is corrupt. You cannot stomach the lords of the realm, which shows your belly is corrupt. You always harbor thoughts of usurpation, which shows your mind is corrupt. I am a well-known scholar, and yet you use me as a lowly drummer, making you a pale imitation of old villains who slighted Confucius and tried to ruin Mencius. If you want to become the leader of the lords of the realm, how can you hold men in such contempt?!"

So things were getting a little feisty in here now, and Kong Rong, who was present, was afraid that Cao Cao might not spare Mi Heng's life this time. So he asked Cao Cao to settle for sending Mi Heng to

do hard labor as a convict, but Cao Cao pointed at Mi Heng and said, "I am sending you to Jing (1) Province as my envoy. If you convince Liu Biao to surrender, then I will make you a high official."

Mi Heng did not want to go, but Cao Cao ordered his men to prepare three horses. Mi Heng was to ride on the middle horse, while a guard rode next to him on both sides to force him to go. But Cao Cao also ordered his advisers and officers to prepare a going-away banquet by the east gate to see Mi Heng off. There were, as you might guess, some hard feelings among that group toward the guy who called them a bunch of rice sacks or worse, so Xun Yu told everyone to not get up when Mi Heng arrived.

When Mi Heng did arrive, he dismounted and entered the banquet. When everyone remained seated, Mi Heng cried bitterly.

"Why are you crying?" Xun Yu asked.

"I am walking among corpses. How can I not cry?" Mi Heng said. So take THAT, you guys.

"If we are corpses, then you are a headless demon!" everyone else said.

"Oh, I have MY head. I am an official of the Han, rather than a part of Cao Cao's gang."

By now, everyone has just about had it with this guy, and they wanted to kill him. But Xun Yu stopped the mob. "Don't waste your blade on a rat," he said.

"I may be a rat, but I still have my humanity. You all, on the other hand, are just parasitic wasps," Mi Heng said.

So dude, do you EVER stop? Apparently not. I guess Mi Heng is just one of those guys who just keeps jabbing at you no matter what you say or do or threaten to do to him, until you just throw up your hands and walk away grumbling, which what everyone at this banquet did.

When Mi Heng arrived in Jing Province and met Liu Biao, he sang Liu Biao's praises, but made it perfectly obvious that he was being rather sarcastic. Liu Biao was unsurprisingly displeased, so he

ordered Mi Heng to go to Jiangxia (1,4) to see his commander Huang (2) Zu (3). Someone asked Liu Biao, "Mi Heng was mocking you, my lord. Why do you not kill him?"

"Mi Heng mocked Cao Cao time and again, and yet Cao Cao did not kill him because he did not want people to say he killed a noted scholar. So he sent Mi Heng to me, hoping to use me to kill him. I've sent Mi Heng to Huang (2) Zu (3) so as to show Cao Cao that I saw through his plot."

While everyone was praising Liu Biao for his intelligence, a messenger arrived from Yuan Shao. So Liu Biao now had an envoy from each of the two most powerful men in the empire, both asking him for his allegiance. He asked his advisers how he should proceed. One of those advisers, Han (2) Song (1), said,

"Right now Yuan Shao and Cao Cao are in a faceoff. If you have serious ambitions, then this is your opportunity to destroy your enemies. If not, then side with the better man. Cao Cao is adept at warfare, and many talented men have flocked to his banner. His intention is most likely to take out Yuan Shao first, and then move his army toward the Southlands. If he does that, you might not be able to resist him. But if you pledge the province and your allegiance to him now, Cao Cao would definitely treat you well."

"Hmm. Then why don't you go to Xuchang and feel out Cao Cao, and then we can make a decision," Liu Biao said.

"Sovereigns and officials are both bound to certain duties, my lord," Han (2) Song (1) said. "Right now, I am in your service, so even if I'm asked to risk life and limb, I will obey your orders. If you are going to pledge your allegiance to the emperor and prime minister Cao, then I can go represent you. However, if you remain indecisive, and then the emperor gives me a position when I arrive in Xuchang, then I would be the emperor's official and no longer yours."

Despite this warning, Liu Biao still persisted in his indecision. "Just go and get a feel for the situation. I have my own plans," he told Han (2) Song (1).

So Han Song went to Xuchang as ordered and met with Cao Cao. As he predicted, Cao Cao made him a privy counselor and the governor of Lingling (2,2). But Cao Cao's adviser Xun Yu was confounded by this.

"Han Song is here to feel out the situation," he said to Cao Cao. "He has not the slightest merit to his name, and yet you have given him a high office. Meanwhile, we have not heard anything from Mi Heng, and your excellency has not bothered to ask. Why?"

"Mi Heng went too far in mocking me," Cao Cao said. "So I am using Liu Biao to kill him. There's no need to ask about him anymore."

Cao Cao then sent Han Song back to Jing Province to convince Liu Biao to submit. When Han Song saw Liu Biao, he sang the court's praises and advised Liu Biao to send his son to court to attend to the emperor, or in other words, serve as a hostage. Liu Biao was irate when he heard this. He called Han Song a traitor and wanted to execute him, but Han Song shouted back, "General, I have not betrayed you! It is you who have betrayed me!"

Liu Biao's top adviser Kuai (3) Liang (2) also chimed in and reminded Liu Biao that hey, this was exactly what Han Song warned him would happen before Liu Biao insisted he go to Xuchang. Faced with this, Liu Biao decided to let Han Song go.

Around the same time, word came from Jiangxia (1,4) that Mi Heng had been killed by Huang (2) Zu (3). What happened was that when Huang Zu was feasting with Mi Heng, they both got a little tipsy, and Huang Zu asked Mi Heng who were the great men in the capital.

"There's Kong Rong and Yang (2) Xiu (4). Aside from them, there are no great men," Mi Heng answered.

“What do you think of me?” Huang Zu asked, fishing for a compliment, but boy was he barking the wrong tree.

“You are like the gods in the temple,” Mi Heng answered. “You receive offerings, but it’s all for nothing.”

“How dare you compare me with a wooden statue?!” Huang Zu raged. So he had Mi Heng executed. Even to the end, Mi Heng never stopped hurling insults at Huang Zu, so I guess he died as he lived, a cynic who spat in the face of authority.

When Liu Biao heard about Mi Heng’s death, he lamented the loss of such a noted scholar, and he ordered Mi Heng be buried on Yingwu (1,3) Isle. When Cao Cao heard about the news, though, he just smiled and said, “That rotten pedant. His sharp tongue did him in.”

But the whole B story of Mi Heng aside, there was still the larger issue of Liu Biao’s allegiance, or lack thereof. When Cao Cao saw that Liu Biao had not surrendered to him, he wanted to march south and put Liu Biao in his place, but Xun Yu convinced him to focus on Yuan Shao first, and then Liu Bei, before worrying about the south.

While Cao Cao is worrying about Yuan Shao and the like, let’s shift our attention to someone else he should be worrying about but wasn’t at the time -- the imperial in-law Dong (3) Cheng (2) and his little band of conspirators, who had been tasked by secret decree from the emperor to eliminate Cao Cao. Their group was now missing Liu Bei, who ran off to Xu Province, and Ma Teng, who had returned to Xiliang (1,2) to await further developments. Dong Cheng and the other conspirators who remained in the capital met day and night to try to think of a way to get rid of Cao Cao, but came up with nothing.

During the New Year ceremonies for the year 200, Dong Cheng saw that Cao Cao was increasingly arrogant and ruthless. Dong Cheng brooded over this until he fell ill. When the emperor heard that his

brother-in-law was sick, he sent the royal physician to tend to Dong Cheng. This physician was named Ji (2) Ping (2), and he was a famous doctor. He went to Dong Cheng's residence to tend to him day and night. While he was there, he often noticed Dong Cheng sighing, but Ji (2) Ping (2) did not dare to ask why.

On the 15th of the first month of the new year, which is a holiday, Ji (2) Ping (2) was planning to leave, but Dong Cheng invited him to stay for a meal. After they drank for several hours, Dong Cheng began to feel tired, so he loosened his clothes and fell asleep. Suddenly, his attendants reported that Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) and the other three conspirators were paying him a visit, so Dong Cheng went out to greet them.

"Our time has come!" Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) said!

"Do tell!" Dong Cheng asked.

"Liu Biao has allied with Yuan Shao, and they are mobilizing 10 armies, totalling 500,000 troops, and advancing on Xuchang. Meanwhile, Ma Teng and Han (2) Sui (4) have joined up and are advancing from the north with 720,000 troops. Cao Cao has mobilized all of his forces to deal with these two invasions, so security inside the capital is light. If we combine the servants from our five houses, we would have about a thousand men at our disposal. Cao Cao is feasting at home tonight. We can surround his residence and surprise him. We must not miss this golden opportunity!"

Dong Cheng was ecstatic and immediately called his servants to arms. He himself donned a suit of armor, grabbed his spear, and hopped on a horse. He and his fellow conspirators agreed to meet by the inner gate and move together.

Around 7 o'clock that night, they all met up with their men and advanced on Cao Cao's residence. Dong Cheng stormed straight into the private quarters with sword in hand. There, he spotted Cao Cao in the middle of a feast.

“Cao Cao, you rebel, stay where you are!” Dong Cheng shouted as he swung his sword at Cao Cao. As he struck, Cao Cao fell to the ground.

So has Dong Cheng ushered in a new golden age for the Han court? Who will be the power players in this new political landscape? Is Yuan Shao going to fill this power vacuum? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.