

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 30.

Last time, Dong Cheng had fallen asleep during a dinner with Ji (2) Ping (2), the royal physician. He was soon awoken by a visit from his fellow conspirators, who brought news that they had an opportunity to move against Cao Cao because security in the capital was light as Cao Cao had to move all his troops out to fend off two massive invasions. So the conspirators armed all their servants, surrounded Cao Cao's home, and stormed in. Dong Cheng found Cao Cao dining in the private quarters.

"Cao Cao, you rebel, stay where you are!" Dong Cheng shouted as he attacked. With one swing of his sword, Cao Cao fell to the ground.

And then ... Dong Cheng was startled from his slumber. It turned out that the whole thing was just a dream, but it was so real that Dong Cheng was still shouting "Cao Cao, you rebel!"

Well, Ji (2) Ping (2), Dong Cheng's dinner guest, was still around, and he heard EVERYTHING. So he stepped forward and shouted, "Are you thinking of harming his excellency?"

Dong Cheng, still waking up, was panicked and at a loss for words, but Ji Ping immediately put his mind at ease.

"Do not fear, sir," Ji Ping said. "I may be a mere doctor, but I have not forgotten about the Han. These past few days, I have seen you sighing, but did not dare to ask why. But I figured it out from listening to what you were saying in your dream just now. Please do not try to deny it. If there's anything I can do to help, even if it means risking the lives of my entire clan, I would have no regrets."

At this, Dong Cheng covered his face and wept. "I worry that you are not being sincere!" he said.

Well, to prove his sincerity, Ji Ping bit one of his fingers to swear an oath. Check that, he didn't just bite a finger. He bit OFF the tip of one of his fingers, so, ouch! And yeah, I guess he's sincere alright. Now convinced, Dong Cheng showed Ji Ping the blood decree from the emperor.

"With Liu Bei and Ma Teng gone and our inability to come up with a plan, this operation seems destined to fail," Dong Cheng said. "That is why I have fallen ill."

"Sir, there's no need to worry yourself," Ji Ping said. "That rebel Cao Cao's life rests in my hands. He often suffers from severe migraines. Whenever that happens, he summons me to treat him. The next time he summons me, I just need to slip him some poison and he will be dead for sure, all without needing a single soldier."

"If that's the case, then you, sir, will be savior of the Han dynasty!" Dong Cheng exclaimed.

With this plan in place, Ji Ping took his leave. Dong Cheng, feeling pretty upbeat now, returned to his private quarters. But there, he caught one of his servants, a man named Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2), whispering with one of his concubines in a secluded place. This ticked Dong Cheng off, and he immediately ordered his attendants to seize the two and wanted to kill them for their disobedience and infidelity. But his wife convinced him to spare their lives, so he settled for giving each one 40 strokes on their backs with a bamboo rod. He then locked up Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2).

But Dong Cheng should have invested in better locks and chains, because that night, Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2) managed to break out of his constraints, bust out of the room he was being held in, and hopped the outer wall of the compound to escape. And of course, he was in the mood for vengeance, so he went straight to Cao Cao's residence and said he had something important to report.

When Cao Cao summoned him, Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2) said, "Wang (2) Zifu (3,2), Wu (2) Zilan (3,2), Zhong (3) Ji (2), Wu (2) Shuo (4), and Ma Teng were convening in secret at my master's house. They

must have been conspiring against your excellency. My master brought out a length of white cloth, but I don't know what's written on it. And recently, I also saw Ji Ping bite his finger and swear an oath."

After receiving this intelligence, Cao Cao hid Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2) in his own home for the time being. For his part, Dong Cheng simply assumed that his servant had fled the city and did not pursue the matter further, which, yeah, was a big mistake.

The next day, Cao Cao pretended to have a migraine and summoned Ji Ping to treat him. Ji Ping, thinking that this was his chance, hid a pack of poison on him and went to Cao Cao's residence. Cao Cao was lying on his bed and ordered Ji Ping to treat him.

"This illness can be healed with one dose of medicine," Ji Ping told Cao Cao. He then began cooking the medicine. When it was ready, Ji Ping slipped in the poison and personally brought the potion to Cao Cao. Well, Cao Cao figured the medicine was poisoned, so he hemmed and hawed and stalled.

"You should drink it while it's hot, so that it would be most effective," Ji Ping said.

"You are familiar with the Confucian texts and the proprieties," Cao Cao said. "You should know that when a lord is sick, his official should taste his medicine first; if a father is sick, his son should taste the medicine first. You are one of my confidants, so why don't you taste this medicine before you offer it to me?"

"Medicine is for curing illnesses; why would you need someone to test it?" Ji Ping answered.

By now, Ji Ping had realized that the secret was out, so he stepped forward, grabbed Cao Cao's ear, and tried to force the medicine into his mouth. But Cao Cao swatted away the bowl. The liquid inside was so potent that as it hit the floor, it made the tiles crack.

Before Cao Cao could even say a word, his guards had already seized Ji Ping.

“I am not sick,” Cao Cao said. “I was testing you, and it turns out you really are trying to kill me.”

He then ordered 20 strong jailers to drag Ji Ping to the rear garden for questioning. Cao Cao sat in a gazebo, while Ji Ping was tied up on the ground. Ji Ping’s face remained calm and showed no hint of fear.

“You are a mere doctor, how could you dare to poison me?” Cao Cao said with a smile. “Someone must have put you up to it. Tell me who it is, and I will spare you.”

But Ji Ping was not talking. Or rather, he was not saying what Cao Cao wanted to hear.

“You are a rebel who oppresses his lord! I’m hardly the only one who wants you dead! Everyone across the realm wants to kill you!”

When Cao Cao kept grilling him, Ji Ping got angry.

“Killing you was my own idea, no one else’s,” he said. “Since I have failed, all that’s left is for me to die.”

Angered by Ji Ping’s refusal to talk, Cao Cao ordered the jailers to beat him, which they did for four straight hours, until Ji Ping’s blood covered the floor of the gazebo. Cao Cao then ordered his men to stop for fear of killing Ji Ping before the case was settled. He had his men lock up Ji Ping somewhere quiet.

The next day, Cao Cao invited all the senior officials to a banquet in his private quarters. Dong Cheng was the only one who did not show up, blaming an illness. But his collaborators were all afraid that Cao Cao would get suspicious if they did not show, so they attended.

After a few rounds of wine, Cao Cao said, “We have no entertainment for our banquet, but I have someone who can help everyone sober up.” He then summoned 20 jailers and said, “Bring him.”

Moments later, the jailers dragged in Ji Ping, who was now wearing a cangue, which is an ancient Chinese restraint like a pillory.

“This guy was scheming with wicked men to betray the court and assassinate me,” Cao Cao told everyone. “But now he has been foiled by the will of heaven. Let’s hear what he has to say.”

So Cao Cao first ordered his men to beat Ji Ping again, and they beat him until he passed out, at which point they splashed him with water to wake him. As soon as he regained consciousness, Ji Ping opened his eyes wide, grinded his teeth, and cursed Cao Cao.

“Cao Cao, you rebel! What haven’t you killed me yet?!” he said.

“You have six collaborators, so that would seven of you altogether, right?” Cao Cao asked.

But Ji Ping refused to answer and just kept cursing Cao Cao. At this point, the four collaborators in attendance -- Wang (2) Zifu (3,2), Wu (2) Zilan (3,2), Zhong (3) Ji (2), and Wu (2) Shuo (4) -- were sitting on pins and needles. Cao Cao ordered his men to keep beating Ji Ping and keep splashing him with water to keep him conscious. Yet, Ji Ping never wavered and showed no sign of begging for mercy. Denied a confession, Cao Cao eventually ordered his men to take Ji Ping away.

After this, umm, entertainment, the banquet broke up and the officials took their leave. However, Cao Cao asked the four collaborators to stay for dinner. These four were scared out of their wits by now, and they had no choice but to stay.

“I don’t mean to keep you, but I wanted to ask you something,” Cao Cao said to them. “What were you four discussing with Dong Cheng?”

“We haven’t been discussing anything of importance,” Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) replied.

“What was written on the white cloth?” Cao Cao pressed him. The collaborators tried to pull a “White cloth? What what cloth?” But now Cao Cao summoned Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2), the disgraced servant who betrayed Dong Cheng, to dispute the collaborators’ denial.

“Where did you see a white cloth?” Wang Zifu asked him.

“The six of you gathered in a private place and signed your names on the cloth,” Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2) said. “There’s no point in denying it.”

“This scoundrel was committing adultery with one of Dong Cheng’s concubines and was punished for it,” Wang Zifu said to Cao Cao. “So he’s making this up to try get revenge. You cannot believe him.”

“If Dong Cheng did not instruct Ji Ping to try to poison me, then who did?” Cao Cao asked.

The collaborators all said they had no idea, but this was getting them nowhere with Cao Cao.

“If you confess tonight, you might still be spared,” Cao Cao said. “If you wait until the truth comes out, it’ll be too late.”

Still, the collaborators maintained their innocence, at which point Cao Cao ordered them to be arrested and locked up.

The next day, Cao Cao led an entourage to Dong Cheng’s residence, and Dong Cheng had no choice but to come out and greet him.

“Why did you not attend last night’s banquet?” Cao Cao asked.

“I was stricken with a minor illness, so I dared not go out,” Dong Cheng said.

“You must have been sick with worry for the country,” Cao Cao said.

This caught Dong Cheng off guard, and he didn’t know what to say.

“Do you know about Ji Ping?” Cao Cao continued.

When Dong Cheng said no, Cao Cao scoffed. “How can you say you know nothing?” He then turned to his men and said, “Bring the cure for the imperial brother-in-law’s illness.”

As Dong Cheng watched helplessly, 20 jailers dragged in Ji Ping and threw him down at the foot of the steps. Ji Ping once again started cursing Cao Cao.

“This man,” Cao Cao said to Dong Cheng as he pointed at Ji Ping, “has implicated Wang Zifu and three others in a plot to poison me. I have already arrested them. There’s still just one person who is still at large.”

Cao Cao then turned to Ji Ping and said, “Who instructed you to poison me? Confess now!”

“It was heaven that instructed me to kill the rebel,” Ji Ping shot back.

This continued display of defiance angered Cao Cao, and he ordered his men to beat Ji Ping again. By now, Ji Ping’s body was covered with wounds from the repeated torture. As he sat and watched, Dong Cheng felt as if he was being stabbed in the heart.

After the beating went on for a while, Cao Cao asked Ji Ping, “Why are you missing a finger?”

“I bit it off when I swore to kill the traitor!”

“Well then, let’s cut off your other nine fingers to help you swear your oath,” Cao Cao said. He then had his men cut off the rest of Ji Ping’s fingers. Still, Ji Ping did not waver.

“I still have a mouth to eat the rebel, a tongue to curse the rebel!”

Well, since he mentioned it, Cao Cao obliged him and told his men to cut off his tongue. But at that moment, Ji Ping said, “Please don’t. I can’t take this torture anymore. I’ll confess. Please untie me first.”

When Cao Cao’s men untied him, Ji Ping stood up, bowed toward the palace gate, and said, “It is heaven’s will that your servant could not rid the country of this rebel!”

As soon as he finished bowing, Ji Ping ran head first into the stone steps and killed himself. Cao Cao showed no leniency even after his death, as he ordered his men to dismember Ji Ping and put his body parts on public display.

Cao Cao now turned his attention to Dong Cheng. He ordered his men to bring forth Qin (2) Qingtong (4,2).

“Do you know this man?” Cao Cao asked Dong Cheng.

“So that’s where this slave ran off to! I’m going to kill him!” Dong Cheng said angrily.

“He is witness to a treasonous conspiracy. Who dares to kill him?!” Cao Cao said.

“Your excellency, you cannot believe the words of an escaped servant,” Dong Cheng said.

“I have already arrested Wang (2) Zifu (3,2) and the others, and they have already confessed. There is no point in you denying it,” Cao Cao said. He then ordered his men to arrest Dong Cheng and search his sleeping quarters. Sure enough, they found the emperor’s decree and the pledge with all the conspirators’ names on it.

“The gall of you vermins!” Cao Cao said with a smile as he read the two documents. He then gave the order to arrest everyone in Dong Cheng’s house.

This done, Cao Cao returned to his residence and showed the decree and pledge to his advisers. He wanted to depose the emperor and put someone else on the throne, but Cheng Yu was against it.

“The reason your excellency can make your influence felt across the land and make the kingdom obey your commands is that you are acting in the name of the house of Han. Right now, we have not yet pacified the various lords of the realm. If you depose the emperor at this moment, it will give them an excuse to wage war against you.”

Cao Cao was swayed by this argument, so he decided to leave the emperor on the throne and settled for executing the five arrested conspirators and their entire families, which totalled some 700 people. Everyone who witnessed this massacre, be it officials or commoners, could not help but shed a tear.

But Cao Cao still was not mollified. There was still the matter of Dong Cheng’s sister, who was one of the emperor’s consorts. So Cao Cao stomped into the imperial palace with sword in hand to kill her. At this time, Consort Dong was five months pregnant. That day, the emperor was sitting in his private quarters, talking with Empress Fu (2) about why they had not heard anything yet from Dong Cheng. Suddenly, they saw Cao Cao enter with his sword and a look of anguish, which made the emperor turn pale.

“Does your majesty know that Dong Cheng was conspiring to commit treason?”

Scared out of his wits, the emperor said, "But Dong Zhuo has already been killed."

"Not Dong Zhuo, Dong Cheng!" Cao Cao shouted.

"I ... I really did not know," the emperor stuttered.

"[Scoff] Have you forgotten about your blood decree?" Cao Cao asked.

The emperor had no answer for this. By now, Cao Cao's guards had dragged Consort Dong into the room. Knowing Cao Cao's purpose, the emperor tried to beg for leniency.

"She is five months pregnant. Please show mercy," he said.

"If not for heaven's will, I would already be dead," Cao Cao said. "How can I leave her alive and open the door to trouble in the future?!"

Empress Fu (2) now also begged Cao Cao. "You can keep her confined until she gives birth before executing her."

"And what? Leave a rebellious seed to avenge his mother?"

Knowing that all hope was lost, Consort Dong wept and said, "Please allow me to die with my corpse intact and do not expose my body."

Now this, Cao Cao was willing to grant. He ordered his men to bring out a length of white cloth, the traditional instrument for imperial strangulations.

"Please do not hold a grudge against me in the afterlife," the emperor said to his consort as he and the empress both wept bitterly. But Cao Cao was unsympathetic.

"Stop stalling!" he shouted and ordered his guards to drag Consort Dong outside and strangle her.

So think about what Cao Cao has done here: He has executed 700-some people, including the emperor's brother-in-law, the emperor's lover, and the emperor's progeny. By any measure, this would be way over the line for someone who supposedly serves the emperor. But of course, we all know who's really calling the shots here. Someone later wrote a poem lamenting Consort Dong's death and the state of affairs that allowed it to happen.

The majesty that graced her could not save her.
Grieve for the dragon seed aborted with her life.
The supposed Royal One could only lift his hand
To screen from welling eyes his undefended wife.

Sated for the moment, Cao Cao summoned the palace security officer and instructed him that from now on, if any member of the imperial clan tries to enter the palace without his orders, they were to be executed without exceptions. If any palace guards fails to keep them out, they would suffer the same fate. He then put 3,000 trusted men into the ranks of the palace guards and put his clansman Cao Hong (2) in charge of them.

But Cao Cao had not quite killed everyone connected to the conspiracy. There was still the matter of Liu Bei and Ma Teng, who were both far away from the capital. So Cao Cao asked Cheng Yu what to do about those two.

“Ma Teng is garrisoning his army at Xiliang (1,2) and cannot be taken easily,” Cheng Yu said. “You should send him greetings to avoid him getting suspicious. Then you can lure him to the capital and deal with him then. As for Liu Bei, he is in Xu Province and has deployed his forces in a pincer formation. We should not underestimate him. Right now, Yuan Shao has stationed forces at Guandu (1,4) and harbors intentions to move on the capital. As soon as we move on Xu Province, Liu Bei would no doubt ask Yuan Shao for help. What would we do if Yuan Shao attacks the capital while we’re gone?”

“Not so,” Cao Cao said. “Liu Bei is a hero among men. If we do not attack him now, once he gains his wings, he would be difficult to defeat. As for Yuan Shao, even though he has vast troops, he is indecisive and therefore no concern.”

At that moment, another adviser, Guo Jia, entered, and Cao Cao asked him for his thoughts.

“Yuan Shao is indecisive and paranoid,” Guo Jia replied. “And his advisers are jealous of each other. Therefore he is of no concern. Liu Bei has just recently organized his forces, and their loyalties are not firm. If your excellency moves against him now, you can wipe him out with one battle.”

“My thoughts exactly!” Cao Cao said. And so he began to mobilize 200,000 troops and divided it into five armies, all advancing on Xu Province.

When Liu Bei got word of this he discussed with his adviser Sun Qian (2) and decided that the best course of action was to ask Yuan Shao for help. So Liu Bei wrote a letter and sent Sun Qian to Hebei. When he got there, Sun Qian first went to see one of Yuan Shao’s top advisers, Tian (2) Feng (1), and asked him to help make introductions and speak on Liu Bei’s behalf.

Tian Feng did so, and led Sun Qian in to see Yuan Shao. But they noticed that Yuan Shao looked emaciated and his attire was a mess.

“What’s wrong, my lord?” Tian Feng asked.

“My life is over!” Yuan Shao cried.

“Why do you say that, my lord?” Tian Feng asked.

“I have five sons, but the youngest one is my favorite. But he has been stricken with scabies and is on the brink of death. I am not in the mood to think about anything else.”

“But right now Cao Cao is leading an expedition against Xu Province,” Tian Feng said. “The capital is vulnerable. If we attack now, we can protect the emperor and save the common people. This is a rare opportunity. Please take advantage of it, my lord!”

“I know that’s the best course of action,” Yuan Shao said. “But my mind is distracted. I fear something may go wrong.”

“What is there to distract you?” Tian Feng asked.

“Of my five sons, the youngest one alone has great potential,” Yuan Shao said. “If something happens to him, I’m done for.”

So Yuan Shao refused to mobilize his army. Instead, he told Sun Qian (2), “When you return to Liu Bei, please tell him the reason I cannot come to his aid. If he runs into difficulties, he is welcome to come join me, and I will help him.”

Well, by modern standards, you can’t fault Yuan Shao too much for being concerned about the life of his son. But by the standards of the times, being a family man was more a liability than a strength for someone with ambitions of empire, and Tian Feng said as much as he stamped his staff into the ground in disgust.

“To lose such a golden opportunity because of a sick infant!” he sighed as he walked out. “Our cause is lost! What a shame!”

So Sun Qian had no choice but to go back to Xiaopei (3,4) and tell Liu Bei that no help was coming.

“What do we do now?!” a stunned Liu Bei said.

“Brother, do not be concerned,” Zhang Fei said. “Cao Cao’s army is traveling a great distance to get here, so they must be tired. If we raid their camp when they first get here, we can defeat them.”

“I had always thought you were all brawn,” Liu Bei said. “But you used deception to capture Liu Dai, and now this suggestion fits with the art of war.” So Liu Bei consented and prepared his forces for a raid.

Meanwhile, as Cao Cao led his army toward Xiaopei, a sudden gale kicked up and, with the sound of a loud crack, snapped one of the banners. Cao Cao ordered his forces to stop as he assembled his advisers to ascertain what this omen meant.

“Which direction was the wind blowing from? What color was the banner that broke?” Xun Yu asked.

“The wind came from the southeast and broke a blue-and-red banner on the side of our formation,” Cao Cao said.

“This means Liu Bei is coming to raid our camp tonight,” Xun Yu said.

Cao Cao nodded in agreement, and just then, the officer Mao (2) Jie (4) came in and asked Cao Cao if he knew what the omen meant. Cao Cao turned the question around and asked Mao (2) Jie (4) what he thought.

“I think it means someone is going to raid our camp tonight,” Mao Jie said.

Well, either there were a lot of fortune-tellers on Cao Cao’s staff, or this night raid idea was so obvious that everyone thought of it. I mean, even Zhang Fei thought of it, after all.

“Heaven is on our side,” Cao Cao said. “We must be on the lookout.” So he divided his army into nine squads. Only one squad would stay in the camp as lure, while the other eight lay in hiding outside.

That night, the moon was dim. Liu Bei and Zhang Fei each led a force out of Xiaopei, with Liu Bei on the left and Zhang Fei on the right. They only left Sun Qian to guard the city. Zhang Fei, thinking that his plan was about to succeed, led his light cavalry in front and stormed into Cao Cao’s camp. But there, they only found a small number of enemy troops. Just then, torches lit up all around the camp, and the cries of soldiers rose up in every direction.

Zhang Fei knew that he had fallen for a trap. Before he could get out of the camp, eight squads of enemy forces arrived from eight directions, led by Zhang Liao from the east, Xu Chu from the west, Yu (1) Jin (4) from the south, Li (2) Dian (3) from the north, Xu Huang from the southeast, Yue (4) Jin (4)

from the southwest, Xiahou Dun from the northeast, and Xiahou Yuan from the northwest. So not only was Zhang Fei surrounded, but he was surrounded by Cao Cao's best generals.

Zhang Fei rode here and there and tried to fend off attacks from all sides. But while he was busy doing that, his men were busy defecting. Remember, these guys were all Cao Cao's soldiers not that long ago, and now that things are going sour for Liu Bei, they quickly surrendered.

As Zhang Fei was fighting, he ran into Xu Huang, and they tangled for a long while. Then Yue (4) Jin (4) arrived from behind, and Zhang Fei knew he was outnumbered, so he carved out a bloody path and managed to break out, with only a few dozen riders by his side. He wanted to return to Xiaopei, but the path back to the city was cut off. He thought about going to Xiapi (4,1), where Guan Yu was stationed, but then he was concerned about being cut off in that direction as well. With nowhere to go, he decided to seek refuge on Mount Mangdang (2,4), which he had done once before when things did not go well in battle. So off he went.

Now, as for Liu Bei, when his forces neared Cao Cao's camp, roars rose up and an army stormed out behind him and cut him off from half of his troops. Then Xiahou Dun got there, and Liu Bei knew he was in over his head, so he turned and ran. When he looked back, Liu Bei saw that he only had 30-some riders with him. He tried to turn toward Xiaopei, but saw flames rising up in the city, which could not be good. So he turned toward Xu Province and Xiapi (4,1), but there was a sea of enemy troops between him and those destinations.

With no way to get through, Liu bei thought, "Yuan Shao had said if I run into difficulties, I can go join him. Why not take him up on it and seek temporary refuge there and figure out what to do next." So he rode toward Qing (1) Province, one of the provinces under Yuan Shao's control. Along the way, one of Cao Cao's generals, Li (2) Dian (3) blocked his way. Liu Bei alone managed to slip through and he continued to flee north, while Li Dian contented himself with picking off Liu Bei's entourage.

So now, Liu Bei was all alone. He traveled more than a hundred miles in one day to arrive at the capital of Qing Province. The guards asked for his name and reported to the province's imperial protector, who was Yuan Shao's eldest son, Yuan Tan (2). This Yuan Tan (2) had long admired Liu Bei, and when he heard that Liu Bei had arrived alone, he immediately open the gates, welcomed him to his official quarters, and asked why he was there. Liu Bei recounted details of his defeat and his purpose in going to Qing Province. Yuan Tan put Liu Bei up in the guesthouse. He then wrote to his father while sending his own troops to escort Liu Bei to see Yuan Shao.

Yuan Shao was delighted to see Liu Bei come his way. He led his staff more than 10 miles out of the county of Ye (4) to welcome Liu Bei, who bowed and thanked him.

"I failed to come to your aid because of my child's illness, and it has made me feel restless," Yuan Shao said. "But fortune has brought us together, fulfilling one of my lifelong dreams."

"I am weak and pitiful," Liu Bei said. "I have long wanted to join you, but never had the opportunity. When Cao Cao attacked, I even lost my family. I know that you welcome people from all over, so I have come to join you, shameful though it may be. I hope you will take me in. I promise to repay you."

Yuan Shao was delighted and invited Liu Bei to stay with him in Yi (4) Province. So that's where we leave Liu Bei for now. But what of his family back in Xu Province? And what about Guan Yu, who was presently in Xiapi (4,1), with no knowledge of what had happened to his brothers? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.