

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 31.

Last time, we saw the conspiracy to assassinate Cao Cao fall apart, and most of the conspirators were promptly executed, with the exception of Ma Teng and Liu Bei, who were out of Cao Cao's reach at the moment. Cao Cao then mounted an expedition against Liu Bei in Xu Province. Liu Bei and Zhang Fei tried to raid Cao Cao's camp but were routed. With their forces gone, Zhang Fei holed up on Mount Mangdang (2,4), while Liu Bei ran off to seek refuge with Yuan Shao, once again leaving his family behind.

So after they successfully quashed Liu Bei's night raid, Cao Cao's forces easily took Xiaopei (3,4). They then moved on to Xu Province, where two of Liu Bei's civil officials, Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Jian (3) Yong (1), were no match for the might of Cao Cao. So they abandoned the city and fled. After that, Chen Deng, who had served Cao Cao while remaining secretly loyal to Liu Bei, flung open the city gates and welcomed Cao Cao.

After the usual routine of assuring the people of the city that they weren't about to be massacred, Cao Cao gathered his advisers to talk about how to take the city of Xiapi (4,1), where Liu Bei's brother Guan Yu was stationed.

"Guan Yu is there protecting Liu Bei's family," Cao Cao's adviser Xun Yu said. "He would no doubt defend the city to the last. We must take it quickly, or it might fall into Yuan Shao's hands."

"I have always admired Guan Yu's abilities," Cao Cao said. "I would like to have him in my service. Can we send someone to convince him to surrender?"

"Guan Yu has a deep sense of honor; he would not surrender," another adviser, Guo Jia, said. "Whomever we send might end up getting killed."

But at this moment, the general Zhang Liao stepped forward and said, "I have crossed paths with Guan Yu before. I am willing to go talk to him."

“Even though you have a connection with Guan Yu, I doubt words alone would sway him,” said yet another adviser, Cheng Yu. “I do have a plan to leave him with no other options. And then you can go talk to him. Then he would no doubt submit to the prime minister. Here’s the plan: Guan Yu is the equal of ten thousand men. We must outsmart him instead of outfight him. We can instruct the soldiers who came over to us from Liu Bei to go to Xiapi and tell Guan Yu that they were survivors of last night’s battle. Then they can be our inside men. When Guan Yu comes out for battle, we can lure him away from the city and cut off his path of retreat. Then we can talk him over.”

So Cao Cao ordered a few dozen of the defectors to go to Xiapi to see Guan Yu, and he took them without suspicion since they were part of Liu Bei’s army. The next day, Xiahou Dun led a vanguard of 5,000 men to Xiapi to challenge for battle. He had his men hurl curses and insults at Guan Yu, who was outraged and led 3,000 men out of the city to meet the challenge. After the two generals battled for a dozen bouts or so, Xiahou Dun turned and ran, and Guan Yu gave chase. Xiahou Dun ran a little, then turned and fought a little, and then turned and ran some more. He kept this up for a few miles, at which point Guan Yu suddenly realized that Xiapi might be in danger, so he halted his pursuit.

But just then, with the sound of an explosive as the signal, Xu Huang and Xu Chu led two squads of soldiers out of hiding and cut off Guan Yu’s path of retreat. Guan Yu tried to break through, but a torrent of arrows kept him at bay. Xu Huang and Xu Chu then rode forward to challenge him, and they tangled for a while before Guan Yu fought them off. Guan Yu now tried to once again turn back toward Xiapi, but Xiahou Dun now stood in his way and the two sides fought some more.

By now, it was dusk, and with no way home, Guan Yu could only lead his men to the top of a dirt hill for a breather. Cao Cao’s forces quickly surrounded this mound of dirt. From the top of the mound, Guan Yu could see flames inside Xiapi, roaring toward the heavens. That was the handiwork of the defectors that Cao Cao had planted inside the city. They opened up the city gates, and Cao

Cao's army stormed in. Cao Cao then had his men set up some bonfires just to make Guan Yu worry about what's going on in the city. The trick had the intended effect, as Guan Yu was so concerned that he tried several times to fight his way down the hill, but was turned back by arrows each time.

The next morning, around dawn, Guan Yu was preparing his men for another charge down the hill when he spotted someone riding up the hill. When the rider neared, Guan Yu recognized Zhang Liao.

"Are you here to fight me?" Guan Yu asked.

"No," Zhang Liao replied. "I was thinking about our past acquaintance and wanted to come talk." He then set aside his blade and dismounted. After the two greeted each other, they sat down on the top of the hill and talked.

"Are you here to talk me over?" Guan Yu asked.

"Not so," Zhang Liao answered. "Brother, you saved me once, so how can I not try to save you now?"

In case you had forgotten, Zhang Liao used to serve Lu Bu. When Cao Cao defeated Lu Bu, he had wanted to execute Zhang Liao, but Guan Yu and Liu Bei convinced him otherwise because they knew Zhang Liao was a man of honor.

"So you have come to help me fight, then?" Guan Yu asked.

"Not so either."

"If you're not here to help me, then what are you doing here?"

"Liu Bei and Zhang Fei's fates are still unknown," Zhang Liao said. "Last night, Prime Minister Cao sacked Xiapi, but did not harm the city's army or residents. He even sent people to protect Liu Bei's family so that they are not disturbed. I have come to tell you about this."

But Guan Yu got angry. "These words are meant to sway me!" he said. "I may be trapped, but I do not fear death. Return at once; I will come down to fight immediately."

But Zhang Liao laughed at this response.

“Brother, won’t those words make you a laughingstock throughout the realm?”

“How so? I am dying in the name of loyalty and honor.”

“Brother, if you die now, you would have committed three crimes,” Zhang Liao said.

“What three crimes?”

“When you and Lord Liu swore to be brothers, you pledged to die on the same day. Right now, Lord Liu has just suffered a defeat. If you fight to the death, what happens when Lord Liu reemerges and needs your help? Won’t you be betraying your oath? That’s your first crime.

“Also, Lord Liu entrusted his family to your protection. If you die in battle today, his two wives would have no one to depend on, and you would have betrayed his trust. That’s your second crime.

“Finally, your fighting skills are unrivaled, and you are well-versed in the classics and histories. But instead of helping Lord Liu support the house of Han, you would rather vainly rush to your death on a fool’s valor. How is that honor? That is your third crime. I cannot watch you commit these three crimes without pointing them out.”

Well, Zhang Liao knew exactly which buttons to push, because Guan Yu took those words to heart. He thought for a while, and then asked, “You say that I would be committing three crimes. So what would you have me do?”

“Right now, you are surrounded by the prime minister’s soldiers,” Zhang Liao replied. “If you do not surrender, you would surely die, and you would be dying for nothing. Why not submit to his excellency for now and then try to find out what happened to Lord Liu. Once you know his whereabouts, you can go join him. This way, you can protect his wives, uphold your oath, and keep your talents alive. You should consider those three pros.”

“Brother, you have laid out three pros for submitting, and now I have three conditions” Guan Yu said. “If the prime minister agrees to them, then I shall surrender. If not, I would rather die with those three crimes on my head.”

“His excellency is extremely generous. He would no doubt agree. What are your three conditions?”

“First, I have sworn an oath with the imperial uncle to support the house of Han. So today, I am surrendering to the Han emperor, not to Cao Cao.

“Second, the imperial uncle’s two wives must receive the stipend and treatment due to his position at court. No one, no matter how high their station, may approach their gates.

“Third, as soon as I know the imperial uncle’s whereabouts, no matter how far away he is, I will take my leave and go join him. Of these three conditions, if any one of them is refused, I would not surrender. Please relay them at once.”

So Zhang Liao took his leave and reported back to Cao Cao. When Cao Cao heard the first condition, he laughed and said, “I am the prime minister of the Han. Surrendering to the Han is the same as surrendering to me. That’s fine.”

When Zhang Liao repeated the second condition, Cao Cao also consented. “I will even double the imperial uncle’s stipend,” he said. “As for keeping outsiders away, that is the rule of any decent house, so of course.”

But now the whopper. Zhang Liao relayed the final, and no doubt most difficult condition -- that Guan Yu would be allowed to leave as soon as he found out where Liu Bei was. To this, Cao Cao was a little dubious.

“What’s the point of me keeping Guan Yu then? This one is hard to grant,” he said.

But Zhang Liao now put in a word on his friend’s behalf.

“Your excellency, Liu Bei has Guan Yu’s loyalty because he treated him well. If you treat him even better, then you would earn his loyalty. There is no need to worry about not winning him over.”

Cao Cao was swayed by this, and he consented to all three conditions. Zhang Liao then went back up the hill to tell Guan Yu.

“Even so,” Guan Yu said, “please have his excellency call off his troops and allow me to go into the city so that I can inform my brother’s wives before surrendering.”

When Zhang Liao relayed this further request, Cao Cao granted it without a second thought and ordered his men to fall back 10 miles. But Xun Yu had second thoughts.

“This may be a trick,” he said. And that is a justifiable concern. I mean, what if Guan Yu runs into the city and locks the gate behind him? But Cao Cao dismissed such concerns.

“Guan Yu is a man of honor. He would not break his word,” he said and ordered his troops to fall back.

Guan Yu led his men back into Xiapi, where he saw that, true to Zhang Liao’s words, the people of the city had not been disturbed. He went to the Liu Bei’s residence, where his two sisters-in-law, Lady Gan (1) and Lady Mi (2), came out to greet him. Guan Yu prostrated on the ground and said, “It was my fault that you two were disturbed.”

“Where is the imperial uncle?” they asked him.

“I do not know his whereabouts.”

“What do we do now?”

“I went out of the city to fight to the death and was trapped on a dirt hill,” Guan Yu said, “Zhang Liao advised me to surrender. I had three conditions, and Cao Cao has consented to them all and called off his troops to allow me back inside the city. But without your approval, I dare not proceed.”

“What are the three conditions?” the two ladies asked.

Guan Yu then listed the conditions, and Lady Gan said, "Last night, when Cao Cao's army sacked the city, we thought we were doomed. But they have not so much as harmed a hair on our heads. Not a single soldier has dared to enter our gates. Brother-in-law, since you have already struck an agreement, there is no need to consult us. But I just worry that Cao Cao would not allow you to go find the imperial uncle."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing," Guan Yu said.

"Brother-in-law, you can proceed as you see fit," the two ladies said. "No need to consult us womenfolk."

Thus reassured of the correctness of his masculine wisdom, Guan Yu took his leave of the two ladies and led an entourage of a few dozen riders to go see Cao Cao. Cao Cao went outside the gates of his camp to welcome Guan Yu, who dismounted and bowed. Cao Cao quickly returned the gesture.

"I am but a defeated general. Thank you for your kindness in sparing me," Guan Yu said.

"I have long admired your loyalty and honor," Cao Cao said. "Today, it is my great fortune that we meet. It has fulfilled my lifelong wish."

"I hope your excellency will keep your promise and consent to the three conditions that Zhang Liao relayed."

"I have given the word; I will not break it."

"If I find out the imperial uncle's whereabouts, then no matter how difficult the journey, I will go join him. When that day comes, there may not be time to properly take my leave of you. I hope you will understand."

"If Liu Bei is alive, then I will definitely let you go. But I worry that he might have perished in the melee. But don't worry. Let me see what I can find out."

So Guan Yu bowed and thanked Cao Cao, and Cao Cao welcomed him with a feast. The next day, Cao Cao disembarked for the capital with Guan Yu and Liu Bei's family in tow. Guan Yu had his sisters-in-law ride in a carriage while he rode alongside.

When they stopped for the night, however, Cao Cao, in an attempt to pervert the proprieties between a lord and his servant, arranged for Guan Yu and Liu Bei's wives to stay in the same room. Guan Yu, of course, would have none of this. So while Liu Bei's wives slept in the room, he stood guard outside, alone, all night, without showing any signs of fatigue.

When Cao Cao saw this, he came to admire Guan Yu even more. When they returned to Xuchang, Cao Cao gave Guan Yu a house. Guan Yu divided it into two sections, with his sisters-in-law staying in the inner section and him in the outer section. He posted 10 old soldiers as guards outside the inner section. You can't have these womenfolk showing their faces in public, after all, and you certainly cannot have strapping young lads guarding their residence.

Cao Cao then brought Guan Yu to court to see the emperor, and the emperor appointed him to the rank of adjutant general. The next day, Cao Cao threw a huge feast, where his advisers and generals all gathered and welcomed Guan Yu as the guest of honor. Cao Cao also lavished silk, gold, silver, and all sorts of riches on Guan Yu, who gave it all to his sisters-in-law to keep in storage.

If you couldn't tell already, Cao Cao was putting on an all-out charm offensive to win over Guan Yu. From the time Guan Yu arrived in Xuchang, Cao Cao would treat him to a small banquet every three days and a large feast every five days. He also sent Guan Yu 10 beautiful young women to, ahem, tend to him, but Guan Yu sent them all to the inner residence to tend to the two ladies. Every three days, Guan Yu would stand outside the entrance to the inner residence and bow and ask how the two ladies were doing. They would ask if he had heard anything about Liu Bei, and only when they

said “brother-in-law, you may go,” did Guan Yu dare to take his leave. When word of this trickled back to Cao Cao, it made him respect Guan Yu even more.

One day, Cao Cao noticed that Guan Yu’s green battle robe was looking pretty old, so he ordered a new robe made from the finest material. Guan Yu accepted the gift, put it on, but then he put the old robe back on top of the new one. When Cao Cao saw this, he laughed.

“Why are you so frugal,” he asked.

“This is not frugality,” Guan Yu answered. “The old robe was a gift from the imperial uncle. When I’m wearing it, it is like I am seeing my brother. I dare not forget my brother’s old gift because of your excellency’s new gift, so I’m wearing both.”

“You are such an honorable man,” Cao Cao said. But while he was praising Guan Yu, as you can imagine, Cao Cao did not exactly feel great about what Guan Yu told him.

On another day, while Guan Yu was at home, the servants suddenly reported that the two ladies were sitting on the floor weeping for reasons unknown. So Guan Yu straightened out his attire and kneeled outside the entrance to the inner residence and asked his sisters-in-law what’s up.

“Last night,” Lady Gan said, “I dreamed that the imperial uncle had fallen into a pit. When I awoke and discussed it with Lady Mi, we thought it was a sign that he’s dead. That’s why we are crying.”

“You cannot put too much stock in dreams,” Guan Yu said. “You had the dream because you miss the imperial uncle. Please do not let it concern you.”

As they were speaking, a messenger arrived from Cao Cao to invite Guan Yu to yet another feast. So Guan Yu took his leave of the two ladies and attended the banquet. Cao Cao noticed that Guan Yu looked like he had just been crying and inquired about it.

“My sisters-in-law were weeping over my brother, and I could not help but feel sadness as well,” Guan Yu answered.

Cao Cao smiled and tried to steer the topic of conversation away from Liu Bei, with the help of a little wine. After a few cups, Guan Yu was working on a nice buzz, and he stroked his beard and sighed, “I cannot serve the country, and I have betrayed my brother. I have lived in vain.”

So, sigh, here we go again. All Liu Bei, all the time. Cao Cao once again tried to change the topic.

“Do you know how many strands of hair you have in your beard?” he asked Guan Yu.

“A few hundred,” Guan Yu said. “Every autumn a few break off. During the winter I cover them with a black silk sack to keep the hairs from breaking.”

Sensing another opportunity to show Guan Yu what an awesome guy he was, Cao Cao ordered a gorgeous silk sack made for his beard. The next day at court, the emperor noticed that Guan Yu had a sack hanging in front of his chest, which, yeah, just makes you wonder what’s the deal. So he inquired, and Guan Yu said, “Your servant has a very long beard, so the prime minister gave me a sack to protect it.”

The emperor asked to see the beard, and Guan Yu complied. Thoroughly impressed by his facial hair, the emperor called Guan Yu the Man of the Magnificent Beard, and the nickname quickly caught on.

On yet another day, after yet another banquet, as Cao Cao was seeing Guan Yu out, he noticed Guan Yu’s horse looking rather emaciated and asked why.

“I am heavy. The horse feels the strain, so it’s often skinny,” Guan Yu said.

Well, it sure sounds like Guan Yu could use a new horse, doesn’t it? Cao Cao told his attendants to bring forth a horse. This fine steed was the color of fiery coal and had a magnificent stature.

“Do you recognize this horse?” Cao Cao asked Guan Yu.

“Is it Lu Bu’s Red Hare?”

“Indeed.”

Cao Cao then had the horse saddled and offered it to Guan Yu, which prompted Guan Yu to kneel to express his gratitude. But this made Cao Cao kind of unhappy.

“I have given you many beautiful women and lots of riches,” he said. “Yet you never kneeled to thank me for those. Today, I gave you a horse and you kneel. Do you value a beast more than people?”

“I know that this horse can travel more than 300 miles in a day,” Guan Yu said. “Now that I have it, when I find out my brother’s whereabouts, I will be able to see him in a day.”

Needless to say, Cao Cao was regretting this gift JUST a little bit. Later, someone wrote a poem about this:

Upon a realm divided shines this hero’s fame;
Staying by his sisters-in-law, he kept his honor clean.
The cunning chancellor showed false courtesy,
Little knowing Guan Yu would never bend the knee.

Well, this “all Liu Bei all the time” business was starting to get to Cao Cao, so he asked Zhang Liao, “I have treated Guan Yu well, but he still intends to leave, why?”

“Allow me to go find out,” Zhang Liao said.

The next day, Zhang Liao went to see Guan Yu.

“So, things have worked out pretty well since I recommended you to the prime minister, no?”

Zhang Liao asked.

“I am deeply grateful to the prime minister for his generosity,” Guan Yu said. “But even though my body is here, my heart is with the imperial uncle. He never leaves my thoughts.”

“Brother, you are in error,” Zhang Liao said. “A real man must have correct priorities. I doubt Liu Bei treated you better than his excellency, so why do you keep harboring thoughts of leaving?”

“I know Lord Cao treats me extremely well,” Guan Yu said. “But I have received the imperial uncle’s favor and have sworn to die together. I cannot turn my back on that. I cannot stay here, but I must render some service to repay Lord Cao before I leave.”

“But what if Liu Bei is dead? What would you do then?” Zhang Liao asked.

“Then I will follow him to the underworld,” Guan Yu said.

Realizing that there was no changing Guan Yu’s mind, Zhang Liao took his leave and reported back to Cao Cao. When he heard Guan Yu’s explanation, Cao Cao sighed.

“To follow one’s lord, always true to the first oath. That is a truly honorable man.”

Xun Yu, who was present, said, “Guan Yu says he must render service before leaving. If you do not give him the chance to repay you, then he might not leave.”

And with this, a light bulb went on in Cao Cao’s head, but we’ll leave him for now and go check in on Liu Bei. So ever since he went to crash on Yuan Shao’s couch, Liu Bei had been looking rather unhappy. When Yuan Shao asked him why, he said “I do not know the fates of my brothers, and my family is in the hands of the rebel Cao Cao. I cannot serve the country or protect my own family. How can I not be unhappy?”

“I have long wanted to attack Xuchang,” Yuan Shao said. “Right now spring has just arrived and it is the perfect time to mobilize the army.”

So Yuan Shao began to make plans to attack Cao Cao, but his adviser Tian Feng was against it.

“The time to move on Xuchang was when Cao Cao was attacking Xu Province and the capital was vulnerable,” he said. “Now Xu Province has fallen and Cao Cao’s army is keen. He is a formidable enemy. We should play the long game instead and wait for an opportunity.”

Yuan Shao said he would think about Tian Feng’s advice. He then asked Liu Bei what he thought. Liu Bei, of course, was for action right now.

“Cao Cao is a rebel who oppresses his lord. If your lordship does not take him on, you might disappoint the country.”

This swayed Yuan Shao, and he decided to mobilize his forces. Tian Feng once again advised against it, but this time, he was met with anger from Yuan Shao.

“The likes of you value books over arms and make me renege on my allegiance to the Han,” Yuan Shao said.

But Tian Feng did not yield. Instead, he prostrated so low that his head hit the ground.

“If you do not listen to my advice, this campaign will meet with disaster,” he said.

Yuan Shao became irate and wanted to execute Tian Feng. It was only with much pleading from Liu Bei that Yuan Shao backed off and instead merely imprisoned Tian Feng. When another of Yuan Shao’s advisers, Ju (3) Shou (4) saw this, he assembled his clansmen and divided all of his property among them. He told them, “I am accompanying the army on an expedition. If we are victorious, then there would be no limit to my wealth and influence. If we lose, then not even my life can be saved.” With that, his family bid him a teary goodbye.

Yuan Shao ordered one of his top generals, Yan Liang, to lead the vanguard and lay siege to the city of Baima (2,3), but Ju (3) Shou (4) was against this assignment.

“Yan Liang may be brave, but he is not fit to assume command alone,” Ju (3) Shou (4) said.

“The likes of you do not know what my top warrior is capable of,” Yuan Shao rebuked him.

So Yuan Shao's army set off toward Liyang (2,2), and Liu Yan (2), the governor of Dongjun (1,4), quickly sent word to Cao Cao for help, and Cao Cao immediately began to plan a response. When Guan Yu heard about this, he went to see Cao Cao and volunteered to be the vanguard, but Cao Cao told him, "I dare not trouble you with this. If I need you, I will definitely ask." So Guan Yu could do nothing but go home.

Cao Cao, meanwhile, set off with 150,000 men in three armies. Along the way, he got another urgent message from Liu Yan (2), so Cao Cao personally led a detachment of 50,000 men and hurried to Baima (2,3), where they set up shop on a hill. As Cao Cao looked out on the open plain in front of the hill, he saw Yan Liang's vanguard of 10,000 crack troops lined up in battle formation. The sight of this force made Cao Cao uneasy. He turned and said to Song (4) Xian (4), one of the officers who had betrayed Lu Bu, "I hear that you were one of Lu Bu's top warriors. You can go take on Yan Liang."

Song Xian accepted the order, hopped on his horse, grabbed his spear, and rode out to the front of the lines. On the other side, Yan Liang stood under his banner with his knife across his saddle. As Song Xian galloped near, Yan Liang let out a roar and rode out to meet him. Before they had reached three bouts, Yan Liang cut down Song Xian.

"He is truly a fearsome warrior," a stunned Cao Cao said.

Another of Lu Bu's former officers, Wei (4) Xu (4), now said to Cao Cao, "Yan Liang killed my friend. Allow me to avenge him!"

Cao Cao consented, and Wei Xu rode out and cursed Yan Liang. Yan Liang did not even bother answering. As soon as they tangled, Yan Liang cut down Wei Xu with one swing of his blade.

"Now who dares to go face him?" Cao Cao asked.

Xu Huang, one of his top generals, answered the call. He managed to last 20 bouts against Yan Liang, but nonetheless returned in defeat. Seeing this, everyone else trembled. Cao Cao ordered his army to fall back, and Yan Liang led his own forces back to camp as well.

Having lost two officers, Cao Cao was troubled. Cheng Yu said to him, "I will recommend someone who can take on Yan Liang."

"Who?" Cao Cao asked.

"Guan Yu is the only man for the job."

"I am afraid that once he renders service to me, he will leave me," Cao Cao said.

"If Liu Bei is still alive, he would no doubt have joined up with Yuan Shao," Cheng Yu said. "If you use Guan Yu to defeat Yuan Shao's forces, then Yuan Shao would suspect Liu Bei of collaborating with you and execute him. Once Liu Bei is dead, where would Guan Yu go?"

This delighted Cao Cao, and he immediately dispatched a messenger back to the capital to fetch Guan Yu. To see how Guan Yu would fare against Yan Liang, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.