

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This is episode 34.

Last time, Guan Yu had just stormed through four checkpoints on his journey to rejoin his brother Liu Bei, killing five of Cao Cao's officers in the process. And now, his traveling party approached the border of their next stop, Huazhou (2,1), which sat on the banks of the Yellow River. On the other side of the river laid Hebei, the territory under the control of Yuan Shao, where Liu Bei is currently taking refuge.

When the governor of Huazhou (2,1), Liu (2) Yan (2), heard that Guan Yu was near, he rode out to greet him. Guan Yu bowed from his horse and said, "How have you been, Governor Liu?"

"General, where are you headed?" Liu Yan (2) asked.

"I have taken leave of the prime minister and am on my way to search for my brother."

"But Liu Bei is currently with Yuan Shao, and Yuan Shao is the prime minister's enemy. How could his excellency allow you to go there?" Liu Yan inquired.

"We had a prior agreement," Guan Yu answered.

"Right now the key crossing of the Yellow River is being guarded by Qin (2) Qi (2), a lieutenant of Xiahou Dun's," Liu Yan said. "He might not allow you to cross."

"In that case, can you lend me a boat?"

"I do have boats, but I dare not lend them to you."

"But I once helped you out of a jam by slaying Yan Liang and Wen Chou when they were besieging your territory. Now I'm asking for one measly boat. Why do you refuse?"

"If Xiahou Dun finds out, it may cause me trouble."

Guan Yu figured that it was pointless to talk to Liu Yan, so he led his party forward to the river crossing, where Qin (2) Qi (2) greeted them with soldiers.

"Who goes there?" Qin Qi asked.

"It is I, Guan Yu, the Marquis of Hanshou (4,4) Precinct."

“Where are you headed?”

“To Hebei, to find my brother Liu Bei. I have come to borrow a boat to ferry me across.”

“Do you have authorization from the prime minister?”

So oh boy, here we go again. This was where the previous checkpoint officers went wrong, and Qin Qi is charging head first down the same path as well.

“I am not under the prime minister’s control. Why would I have his authorization?” Guan Yu said.

“I am guarding this crossing on the order of General Xiahou,” Qin Qi said. “Even if you have wings, you will not be able to fly across.”

Guan Yu was pretty irritated by this idle boast. “Do you know the fate of those who blocked my path along the way?” he warned Qin Qi.

“You can only kill no-name officers. Do you dare to kill me?” Qin Qi shot back.

“[Scoff] How do you compare to Yan Liang and Wen Chou?” Guan Yu asked.

Qin Qi, angered by the slight, galloped forward with knife in hand and made for Guan Yu. Within just one bout, however, Guan Yu’s saber lobbed off Qin Qi’s head. Guan Yu then told Qin Qi’s men, “The one who stood in my way is dead. The rest of you, stay. Prepare a boat and ferry me across the river.”

There was no way anyone was going to say no, having seen the fate of one who did. So the soldiers quickly prepped a boat. Guan Yu helped his sisters-in-law onto the boat, and they crossed the river into Yuan Shao’s territory. So make that five checkpoints run, and six officers slain on Guan Yu’s journey. This is one of the most famous episodes in the novel, and one that drew Guan Yu praise for millennia to come for his determination and loyalty, including this poem:

Forsaking rank and riches he took his leave.

By long and winding road did he his brother seek.

He covered the ground on a supreme horse;
With dragon blade he took each pass by force.
Placing loyalty and honor high above all,
The hero from that day forth kept the world in awe.
This single knight, before whom each foe fell,
Left the world a story that men will ever tell.

Upon crossing the river, Guan Yu and company continued their journey. Guan Yu, however, could not help but lament as he rode. "All the killing I have done along the way was not by choice," he sighed. "But when word gets back to Prime Minister Cao, he would surely think me an ingrate."

Just then, a rider approached from the north and shouted for Guan Yu to stop. Guan Yu pulled up his reins and looked and saw that it was Sun Qian (2).

"What news have you since we parted at Runan (3,2)?" Guan Yu asked.

"After you and your army departed, Liu (2) Pi (4) and Gong (1) Dou (1) recaptured the territory and sent me to Hebei to seek a coalition with Yuan Shao and ask Lord Liu to help devise a plan to defeat Cao Cao," Sun Qian said. "However, Yuan Shao's men were all jealous of each other. Tian (2) Feng (1) has been imprisoned. Ju (3) Shou (4) has gone into seclusion. Shen (3) Pei (4) and Guo (1) Tu (2) are fighting for power. Yuan Shao is too paranoid and cannot make up his mind. I discussed the matter with the imperial uncle, and we decided he should first try to extricate himself from that situation. Right now, he has gone to Runan (3,2) to meet up with Liu Pi (4). He was worried that you would unknowingly go to Yuan Shao and end up being killed by him. So he sent me to travel along this road to find you. What good fortune it is to run into you here. You should immediately go to Runan (3,2) to meet up with the imperial uncle."

Guan Yu then had Sun Qian go see the two ladies. They asked him for news, and he told them that Yuan Shao had twice threatened to kill Liu Bei, but Liu Bei has managed to slip away to Runan and that they can now go see him there. When they heard this update, the two ladies covered their faces and wept.

Guan Yu did not waste any time and immediately turned his entourage toward Runan. Just as they were traveling, however, a cloud of dust kicked up behind them as a detachment of 300 soldiers raced toward them. At its head was Xiahou Dun, one of Cao Cao's top generals.

"Guan Yu, stay where you are!" Xiahou Dun shouted as he approached.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what Xiahou Dun was doing there. Guan Yu had, after all, just killed one of his lieutenants at the river crossing. So Xiahou Dun came looking for revenge. Guan Yu told Sun Qian to escort the carriage and keep moving forward, while he himself turned around with sabre in hand and said to Xiahou Dun, "You are doing a disservice to his excellency's reputation for magnanimity in coming after me."

"[Scoff] The prime minister did not send any notification to the passes on your route," Xiahou Dun shot back. "You killed officers all along the way, including my lieutenant. You have gone too far! I have come to capture you so that the prime minister can deal with you!"

At this, he galloped toward Guan Yu with his spear and prepared for battle. Just then, a rider flew onto the scene, shouting, "Do not fight with General Guan!"

Guan Yu held his ground and did not move. This rider approached Xiahou Dun, took out a document from his shirt, and said to him, "The prime minister admires General Guan's loyalty and honor. His excellency was concerned that the general might run into resistance at the checkpoints, so he sent me to deliver his authorization to all the checkpoints."

"Does his excellency know that Guan Yu has killed the officers guarding the checkpoints?" Xiahou Dun asked.

“Not yet.”

“Well then, I will capture him alive and take him back to see the prime minister. His excellency can release him personally if he wants to.”

Guan Yu was ticked off at this remark. “Do you think I’m afraid of you?!” he said as he galloped toward Xiahou Dun, who prepared to exchange blows with him.

After less than 10 bouts, another rider hurried into the fray and shouted, “Generals, please pause!”

Xiahou Dun pulled back his spear and asked, “Is his excellency ordering me to capture Guan Yu?”

“No. His excellency was worried that the officers at the various checkpoints might try to stop General Guan. So he sent another document ordering them to let him pass.”

“Does his excellency know that Guan Yu has killed people along the way?” Xiahou Dun asked again.

“Not yet.”

“Well then, I cannot let him go.”

At this, Xiahou Dun ordered his men to surround Guan Yu. This, of course, only further fired up Guan Yu, and the two was just about to go at it again when another man rode onto the scene and shouted for them to stop. This, it turned out, was the general Zhang Liao, Xiahou Dun’s comrade and Guan Yu’s friend.

“I am here on the prime minister’s orders. When he heard that General Guan had killed the officers at the checkpoints along his journey, he was concerned that he would run into further resistance. So he sent me to bring word to all the checkpoints to let him go.”

So you really have to hand it to Cao Cao here. It’s one thing to honor a prior agreement and let a guy go even though he’s going to join up with your mortal enemy. But it’s something else to send three messengers to make sure his journey goes smoothly, even AFTER hearing that he had killed your

men. Of course, the checkpoint officers who were lying in a ditch with their heads cut off at that moment probably wished Cao Cao would've thought of this two days earlier. Thanks a lot, man.

But Xiahou Dun was not so magnanimous.

"My lieutenant Qin (2) Qi (2) was the nephew of General Cai (4) Yang (2)," he told Zhang Liao. "General Cai (4) entrusted him to me, and now he has been killed by Guan Yu. How can I just let it go?"

"When I see General Cai (4), I will deal with him," Zhang Liao said. "Since the prime minister is so magnanimous and has instructed that General Guan be allowed to go, you cannot disobey him."

So Xiahou Dun had no choice but to lead his men away. Zhang Liao then asked Guan Yu, "Where are you headed now?"

"I heard that my brother is not with Yuan Shao anymore," Guan Yu answered. "I intend to search near and far until I find him."

"Since you don't know his whereabouts, why not come back with me to see the prime minister?" Zhang Liao said.

"Nonsense!" Guan Yu answered. "My friend, when you see his excellency, please convey my apologies."

After that, Guan Yu took his leave, and Zhang Liao and Xiahou Dun went their own ways. Guan Yu then caught up to his party and told Sun Qian what happened. They then journeyed forth together.

After being on the road for a few days, the group was beset by a torrential downpour that soaked them and their luggage. In the distance, they spotted a manor house by a hill, so they went there to ask for lodging for the night. An old man came out to greet them. Guan Yu explained their purpose in coming, and the old man said, "My name is Guo (1) Chang (2) and my family has lived here for generations. I have long heard of your name, and it is our great fortune that you have dropped in."

So the old man told his servants to prepare a banquet to welcome the party and invited the two ladies to rest in the private quarters. Guo (1) Chang (2), meanwhile, sat in the parlor drinking with Guan Yu and Sun Qian, while their men tended to the horses and the luggage.

Around dusk, a young man, flanked by a number of others, entered the manor house, and he came into the parlor.

“My son, come pay your respects to the general,” Guo (1) Chang (2) said. He then turned to Guan Yu and said, “This is my humble son.”

Guan Yu asked the young man where he was coming from, and the lad said he had been hunting, and then he took his leave.

After his son left, Guo Chang (2) said with tears trickling from his eyes, “For generations, my family has tilled the land and studied the classics. Yet, my only son cares for nothing but hunting. What grave misfortune it is for our house!”

“But in this time of chaos, he can also make a name for himself if he can become skilled in the martial arts,” Guan Yu said. “Why do you say it is a misfortune?”

“If he would practice his martial arts, then he would be a man of ambition,” Guo Chang said. “But all he does is roam here and there, getting into trouble and making me worried.”

At this, Guan Yu sighed sympathetically.

Later that night, Guo Chang took his leave, and Guan Yu and Sun Qian were just about to go to bed when they heard horses neighing and men shouting from the rear courtyard. Guan Yu called for his attendants, but no one answered. So he and Sun Qian grabbed their swords and went out to investigate. In the courtyard, they saw Guo Chang’s son lying on the ground groaning, while Guan Yu’s attendants were brawling with the house servants.

When Guan Yu asked what's going on, his attendants said, "This guy tried to steal your Red Hare horse, but the horse kicked him. When we heard the ruckus, we came out to see what's up, but the house servants started a fight with us."

"You vermin! How dare you try to steal my horse!" Guan Yu said angrily and was just about to explode. But Guo Chang hurried over and begged him, "My unfilial son deserves to die for this offense, but his old mother dotes on him. I beg you to show mercy!"

"He really is unfilial," Guan Yu said. "Now I believe your words earlier. It's true: No one knows a son like his father. Fine, out of respect for you, I will spare him."

Guan Yu then ordered his attendants to keep a close eye on the horse and told the house servants to scram. He and Sun Qian then went back to rest in the parlor.

The next day, Guo Chang and his wife came into parlor to thank Guan Yu for not chopping off their kid's head the night before.

"Our worthless son had the gall to commit such an affront to you, general. Thank you for your mercy!"

"Tell him to come here," Guan Yu said. "I want to have a word with him."

"He went out in the middle of the night with a bunch of rafter to god knows where," Guo Chang answered.

Denied a chance to deliver a stern lecture about how there is no honor in being a thief, Guan Yu thanked Guo Chang for his hospitality, helped his sisters-in-law into the carriage, and set off again along a mountain path.

Before they had gone 10 miles, suddenly 100-some people rushed out from behind a hill. At their head were two people on horses. The man in the front wore a yellow turban and a battle gown, while the guy behind him was none other than Guo Chang's son.

"I was a lieutenant under Zhang (1) Jue (2), the General of Heaven!" the man in the yellow turban shouted. "Leave the red horse, and I will let you pass!"

Well, ain't this a laugh, since Guan Yu was no stranger to Zhang Jue, one of the leaders of the Yellow Turban rebellion, whom Guan Yu had helped vanquish.

"You ignorant bandit!" Guan Yu shouted back. "Since you followed Zhang Jue into rebellion, have you not heard of Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei?"

"I have only heard that Guan Yu was the one with a red face and long beard, but I have not met him. Who are you?" the bandit asked.

Well, since he asked, Guan Yu latched his sabre, untied the sack he used to protect his beard, and put his hairy masterpiece on display. At this, the guy in the yellow turban hopped off his horse, grabbed Guo Chang's son by the hair on the back of his head, dragged him in front of Guan Yu's horse, and kneeled.

When Guan Yu asked for his name, the man said, "My name is Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4). After Zhang Jue died, I have been without a master. So I rounded up a group of men and took to banditry. This morning, this scoundrel came and told us that a traveler with a fine horse was staying at his house and told us to come seize the horse. Who knew it would lead us to you, general."

Guo Chang's son now threw himself at Guan Yu's mercy, and Guan Yu once again spared him on account of his father. After the young man then skittered like a rat, Guan Yu asked Pei (2) Yuanshao (2,4), "How do you know my name without having met me?"

"Not far from here is Sleeping Ox Hill," Pei Yuanshao replied. "On that hill is a man named Zhou (1) Cang (1). He is very strong and has a striking face with a wiry, curled beard. He used to be an officer under the Yellow Turban leader Zhang (1) Bao (3). After Zhang Bao (3) died, he took to banditry. He often speaks of your great name but laments that he has no opportunity to meet you."

“Banditry is no life for gallant men like you,” Guan Yu lectured him. “From now on, you guys should return to the proper path; do not become mired in this life.”

Pei Yuanshao bowed and thanked Guan Yu for his advice. Just then, a group arrived on the scene.

“This must be Zhou Cang,” Pei Yuanshao said.

Guan Yu looked from atop his horse and saw a man with a dark face and a tall frame, riding on a horse and holding a spear, coming his way at the head of the group. When this man saw Guan Yu, he exclaimed, “That’s General Guan!” He then hurriedly dismounted and prostrated on the ground.

“My respects to you, general!” he cried.

“Gallant warrior, where have we met?” Guan Yu asked.

“When I followed Zhang Bao (3), I once caught a glimpse of your honorable visage. Unfortunately, I had mistakenly joined up with rebels and thus could not follow you. But today, I have the fortune to meet you. If it’s not too far beneath you, I am willing to serve as a mere foot soldier and carry your horse whip and follow you. If I can do so, I would die without regret!”

Zhou Cang’s man-crush moved Guan Yu, but he asked, “If you are to follow me, what happens to the men you’re leading?”

“Those who are willing to follow me can do so. Those who aren’t are free to leave.”

At that moment, all of Zhou Cang’s men said they were willing to follow. So Guan Yu dismounted and went to his sisters-in-law’s carriage to consult them. But here, he met some resistance.

“Brother-in-law,” Lady Gan (1) said, “since leaving Xuchang, we have traveled here by ourselves and weathered many a hardship without needing any troops. Previously, when Liao (4) Hua (4) tried to follow us, you declined. So why accept Zhou Cang and his men now? But of course, that’s just the view of us womenfolks. You should do as you see fit.”

Uh, sure, if you say so, Ms. Passive Aggressive. Guan Yu yielded to their wishes and told Zhou Cang, "It's not that I am untouched, but the two ladies would not allow it. Go back to your camp for now. Once I find my brother, I will send for you."

But Zhou Cang was not about to take no for an answer. He kowtowed and said, "I am but a brute who strayed into becoming a rebel. Getting to meet you today is like seeing the sun again. How can I return to my errant ways?! If it's not convenient for everyone to follow, then let my men go with Pei Yuanshao, and I will follow you on foot to the ends of the earth!"

Well, who can say no to that? Certainly not Guan Yu. So he relayed those words to his sisters-in-law, and they met him halfway.

"If only one or two follow us, that's ok," Lady Gan said.

Elated, Guan Yu told Zhou Cang to tell his men to go with Pei Yuanshao. But Pei Yuanshao was like, "Hey wait, you're not the only one with a man-crush on General Guan here. I want to come, too."

But Zhou Cang told him, "If you go as well, then our group will be disbanded. Take the reins of leadership for now, while I follow General Guan. Once we have a place to call home, I will come get you."

So Pei Yuanshao had to go away disappointed, while Zhou Cang followed Guan Yu as they set out toward Runan. After traveling for a few days, they saw in the distance a mountain hamlet. They asked one of the locals, and he told them, "This is called Gucheng (3,2). A few months ago, a general named Zhang Fei came here with a few dozen riders and chased out the local magistrate. He has taken over the town and is recruiting soldiers, buying horses, and stockpiling grain. He has gathered about 5,000 troops, and no one around here dares to fight him."

Guan Yu was elated upon hearing this. "I have not heard anything about my brother since we were separated at Xu Province. Who would have thought that he would be here!" So he sent Sun Qian on ahead to tell Zhang Fei to come welcome his sisters-in-law.

So let's back up and see how Zhang Fei came to be here. After the defeat at Xu Province, he holed up on Mount Mangdang (2,4) for about a month. Later, he left the mountain to go look for news on Liu Bei. On his way, he passed Gucheng (3,2) and went into ask the local magistrate for provisions. The magistrate refused, which, yeah, wasn't a very smart move. In a fit of anger, Zhang Fei ran him out of town and took over control of the town as a temporary home.

When Sun Qian went into town to meet Zhang Fei, they exchanged greetings, and Sun Qian said, "Lord Liu has left Yuan Shao and gone to Runan. And now General Guan has escorted the two ladies here. Please go welcome them."

When Zhang Fei heard this, he said nothing. He threw on his armor, grabbed his spear, hopped on his horse, and led about 1,000 men out through the north gate. Sun Qian was startled by this reaction, but dared not ask why, so all he could do was tag along.

When Guan Yu saw Zhang Fei coming toward him in the distance, he could not contain his joy. He handed his sabre to Zhou Cang and rode up to greet his brother. But he was in for a rude welcome. As he got near, he saw that Zhang Fei's eyes were glaring and his whiskers bristling. Letting out a thunderous roar, Zhang Fei tried to stab Guan Yu with his spear.

Stunned, Guan Yu quickly dodged the thrust and shouted, "My brother, what is this for?! Have you forgotten our pledge in the peach orchard?!"

"You have no honor!" Zhang Fei shouted back. "How dare you come to see me?!"

"Why do you say I have no honor?"

"You turned your back on our big brother and surrendered to Cao Cao for rank and riches. And now you're here to take me down! I will fight you to the death!"

"You don't understand," Guan Yu said. "And it's hard for me to explain. But the two sisters-in-law are here. Go ask them."

By now, the two ladies had heard the commotion outside their carriage, so they pulled back the curtain and said, "Brother Zhang, why are you acting like this?"

"Sisters-in-law, just wait a moment," Zhang Fei said. "Watch me kill this ingrate first, and then I will welcome you into the town!"

"Your second brother did not know your whereabouts, so he temporarily subjugated himself to the service of Cao Cao," Lady Gan (1) explained. "Now he knows your big brother is in Runan. He has stopped at nothing to escort us here. Don't misunderstand him."

Lady Mi (2) also chimed in. "When your second brother was in Xuchang, it was really because he had no choice."

"Do not be deceived by him," Zhang Fei said. "A loyal official would rather die than to be humiliated. A real man would never serve two masters!"

"Brother, you wound me," Guan Yu said.

Now Sun Qian interjected. "General Guan has come here specifically to look for you," he told Zhang Fei.

"Don't you go spouting that nonsense, too!" Zhang Fei hollered. "He must be here to capture me!"

"If I'm here to capture you, I would have brought an army," Guan Yu said.

"What do you call that?" Zhang Fei said as he pointed behind Guan Yu.

Guan Yu turned and saw in the distance a dust cloud kicked by by an approaching army. Judging from the banners, these were Cao Cao's soldiers.

"Now what do you have to say for yourself?!" Zhang Fei said as he tried stab Guan Yu again.

Guan Yu quickly stopped him and said, "Brother, stop. Watch me kill this approaching general to prove my sincerity."

“If you are sincere, then you will kill him before I’m done with three rounds of drumming,” Zhang Fei said.

Guan Yu agreed. Momentarily, the troops arrived. At their head was Cai (4) Yang (2), who wielded his knife and shouted, “So this is where you ran off to after you killed my nephew Qin (2) Qi (2)! I am here on the prime minister’s orders to capture you!”

Guan Yu did not even bother responding. He raised his sabre and started slashing. Zhang Fei personally beat the drums to cheer him on. Before the first round of drumming was done, Guan Yu’s blade had lobbed off Cai Yang’s head. Cai Yang’s soldiers fled, but Guan Yu captured the flagbearer and interrogated him.

“Cai Yang was irate when he heard that you killed his nephew,” the flagbearer said. “He wanted to come to Hebei to fight you, but the prime minister would not allow it and instead ordered him to go to Runan to attack Liu Pi (4). We did not expect to run into you here.”

Guan Yu then told him to repeat to Zhang Fei what he had just said. Zhang Fei grilled the guy about Guan Yu’s stay in Xuchang. After hearing the whole story, Zhang Fei was finally convinced. While they were talking, soldiers from inside the city rushed out to report that a dozen or so riders had just arrived at the south gate, their identity and purpose unknown.

Zhang Fei got suspicious, so they went to the south gate to investigate. There, they saw about a dozen lightly armed riders. When the riders saw Zhang Fei, they immediately dismounted. At their head were Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Mi (2) Fang (1), who, if you’d remember, were not only Liu Bei’s advisers but also his brothers-in-law since Liu Bei had taken their sister as one of his wives.

“After we were separated at Xu Province, we fled back to our home village to seek shelter,” Mi Zhu said. “Then we sent people out to look for news about you guys. We found out that General Guan had surrendered to Cao Cao and that our lord was in Hebei. We then heard that Jian (3) Yong (1) had also gone to Hebei. But we did not know you were here. Yesterday, we encountered a group of

travelers who told us that this town had been occupied by a general named Zhang. When they described his appearance, we figured it might be you, so we came to see. What great fortune that we have run into you!”

“Brother Guan and Sun Qian have just arrived with the two ladies, and we know my big brother’s whereabouts!” Zhang Fei told them.

The Mi brothers were elated at this news, and they went to see Guan Yu and the two ladies. Now, Zhang Fei finally welcomed his sisters-in-law into the town. Once they’ve settled in, the two ladies recounted all the obstacles that Guan Yu overcame in getting them there, at which point Zhang Fei wept bitterly and prostrated in front of his brother. The Mi brothers were also touched by Guan Yu’s tale. Zhang Fei then shared his own adventures since their separation, and the group feasted in celebration.

Alright, so we’ll close the episode on this high note, with everyone shedding tears of joy and getting drunk to celebrate their reunion. Next up on the agenda: Meeting up with Liu Bei. We will get to that and more in the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.