

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 38.

Last time, Yuan Shao's war against Cao Cao was going badly. One of Yuan Shao's advisers, Xu (3) You (1), switched sides and went over to Cao Cao. On his advice, Cao Cao staged a night raid on Yuan Shao's provisions and burned the place to the ground. When he heard this was happening, Yuan Shao, at the behest of another adviser, Guo (1) Tu (2), sent two of his top officers, Zhang (1) He (2) and Gao (1) Lan (3), to raid Cao Cao's camp, even though those two guys kept telling him it was a bad idea. Well, they were right. That raid ended poorly, and Zhang He and Gao Lan barely made it out of there alive.

When Guo (1) Tu (2) heard that the raid on Cao Cao's camp had failed, he was worried about Zhang He and Gao Lan coming back and holding him responsible since he was the one who insisted they raid Cao Cao's camp instead of going to rescue their provisions. So he lied to Yuan Shao and told him that those two officers had long wanted to surrender to Cao Cao, so they must have tanked the attack on purpose. Yuan Shao was irate and immediately summoned the two back to camp. But Guo Tu then made sure that they won't return by sending his own messenger on ahead to tell them that, "Hey, Yuan Shao wants to kill you."

So now, when Yuan Shao's messenger arrived to relay his command that Zhang He and Gao Lan return to camp, they asked him, "What does his lordship want?"

When the messenger replied that he did not know, Gao Lan pulled out his sword and killed the poor guy on the spot, which left Zhang He in shock.

"Yuan Shao would believe any slander, and he is doomed to be defeated by Cao Cao," Gao Lan said to his comrade. "How can we sit and wait for our death? Why not surrender to Cao Cao instead?"

"I've long had such intentions as well," Zhang He said.

So the two of them led their own troops and headed to Cao Cao's camp. Cao Cao's general Xiahou Dun advised caution against a potential deception, but Cao Cao said, "I will treat them with such kindness that even if they harbor other intentions, they will eventually come around."

So he summoned the two officers into camp, and they laid down their weapons and armor and prostrated on the ground.

"Generals, if Yuan Shao would listen to you, he might have avoided this defeat," Cao Cao said to them. "Your coming to me is like Weizi (2,3) abandoning the dying Shang dynasty and Han (2) Xin (4) going over to the Han."

So both of those references that Cao Cao just made were famous historical figures who joined the winning side during previous dynastic changes and played key roles in establishing a new regime. So Cao Cao was showering his new acquisitions with praise. He also showered them with rewards, making both adjutant generals and giving each a marquiship, which delighted them.

While the previous night's victory and the new acquisitions bolstered Cao Cao's army, they made the troops on Yuan Shao's side lose heart. Things only got worse from there for Yuan Shao. Xu You, the adviser who left Yuan Shao for Cao Cao, now pushed Cao Cao to keep up the pressure and attack. Zhang He and Gao Lan volunteered to lead the vanguard, and Cao Cao consented. So the two led a detachment of troops and mounted a night raid on Yuan Shao's camp.

They set out around 11 o'clock in three armies, and they all converged on the enemy camp. The melee lasted until morning before both sides called it quits. Yuan Shao, however, came out of the fight with the bloodier nose, having lost more than half of his army.

Now, one of Cao Cao's advisers, Xun (2) You (1), proposed another scheme.

"Spread rumors," Xun (2) You (1) said, "that you are sending an army to attack the cities of Suanzao (1,3) and Yejun (4,4), and another army to take Liyang (2,2) so as to cut off Yuan Shao's path

of retreat. When he hears this, Yuan Shao would no doubt panic and divide his army to stop us. That will be our opportunity to strike and defeat him.”

Cao Cao adopted this plan and ordered his troops to let it be known far and wide that they were moving on the aforementioned locations. When Yuan Shao heard this, he was indeed panicked and immediately dispatched his son Yuan Tan (2) at the head of 50,000 troops to go protect Yejun (4,4), which was his capital, and send the officer Xin (1) Ming (2) at the head of another 50,000 to protect Liyang (2,2). Both of those armies set off that night.

When Cao Cao got word that Yuan Shao had divided his army as expected, he mobilized the bulk of his own army, divided it into eight detachments, and stormed toward Yuan Shao’s camp. By now, Yuan Shao’s troops had lost their taste for combat, and they scattered in every direction, and it turned ugly real fast.

Yuan Shao didn’t even have time to don his armor. He just hopped on his horse in a simple robe and headband, followed by his youngest son Yuan Shang (4). Behind them were four of Cao Cao’s top generals -- Zhang Liao, Xu Chu, Xu Huang, and Yu Jin -- in hot pursuit. Yuan Shao managed to flee across the Yellow River. Then, leaving everything behind, including his maps, documents, chariots, gold, and silk, he fled with only 800 some horsemen. Eight hundred men, left from an army that started out over 700,000 strong.

Cao Cao’s troops gave chase for a while but could not catch up, so they called it a day. They did manage to collect everything Yuan Shao left behind, not to mention slaughtering 80,000-some enemies. There were so many dead that the earth ran red and countless were drowned in the river.

After this complete victory, Cao Cao gave all the booty his troops had captured to his soldiers as reward. Then, as his men were sorting through the various documents they had captured, they discovered a collection of letters. These were all secret correspondences that people in Xuchang or

within Cao Cao's own army had sent to Yuan Shao, presumably to get on his good side, you know, just in case his army of 700,000 should crush Cao Cao's army of 70,000.

"You should go through the list of names and execute all of them," some of Cao Cao's men suggested.

"When Yuan Shao was at the height of his power, even I myself were not sure I would survive, much less others," Cao Cao said. So, in an act of magnanimity and leniency, he ordered that all of the correspondences be burned, and nothing more was to be said of them. So even though Cao Cao is generally depicted as a villain in this novel, we have definitely seen moments where he demonstrates the qualities that make him a successful leader, and we see it again here.

While we are at it, there is one loose end for us to tie up. One of Yuan Shao's advisers, Ju (3) Shou (4), who had been imprisoned within the camp by Yuan Shao for offering advice not to his liking, was captured by Cao Cao's troops. Cao Cao and Ju Shou were old acquaintances, so you figure he would go easy on Ju Shou. But Ju Shou, probably expecting this, shouted the moment he saw Cao Cao, "I will NOT surrender!"

"Yuan Shao is a fool and refused to listen to you," Cao Cao said. "Why do you insist on remaining loyal to him? If I had you in my service earlier, I would have no worries about pacifying the realm."

So Cao Cao, much to Ju Shou's chagrin, treated him very well and kept him in the army. However, Ju Shou was not about to put up with this. One day, he tried to steal a horse and ride back to Yuan Shao but was caught. In a fit of anger, Cao Cao had him executed, which, I suppose, was exactly Ju Shou wanted because he did not show any sign of fear at all as he marched off to his death.

At this, Cao Cao sighed and said, "I have erred and killed a loyal and honorable man!" So he ordered a fancy funeral for Ju Shou and buried him at a river crossing, with a tombstone that read, "The Tomb of the Loyal Ju Shou."

Cao Cao did not sit on his laurels for long after his victory against Yuan Shao. With his foe on the run, he turned his army toward Ji (4) Province, one of the four provinces controlled by Yuan Shao.

Meanwhile, Yuan Shao and his 800-some followers limped into the city of Liyang (2,2) after they fled over to the north bank of the Yellow River. There, they were greeted by the general Jiang (3) Yi (4), and Yuan Shao brought him up to speed on what's happened.

Despite the resounding defeat, Yuan Shao still had a decent sized army, especially when the troops that had scattered during the previous battle regrouped after they heard that Yuan Shao was at Liyang. With this reassembled army, Yuan Shao set off on his retreat to Ji (4) Province.

Along the way, they spent a night camped on some desolate hills. During the night, Yuan Shao could hear from his tent the sound of men weeping in the distance, so he quietly went out to investigate. It turned out to be a group of soldiers who had just reunited after being separated in the previous fight. As they recounted the brothers, comrades, and kinsmen they had lost, they clutched each other and wept. They all said, "If we had listened to Tian (2) Feng (1), we would not have met with such disaster!"

Now, in case you need a refresher, Tian Feng was another one of those advisers who just didn't know when to stop offering unwanted advice. He had told Yuan Shao again and again that this was not the right time to fight Cao Cao, that he needed to play the long game instead. It got to the point where Yuan Shao threw him into prison and was going to execute him just as soon as he had finished beating Cao Cao.

But now, Yuan Shao was filled with regret. "I refused to listen to Tian Feng, and I have lost troops and officers," he thought to himself. "How can I bear to see his face when I return?"

The next day, as Yuan Shao's army was marching, they were met by reinforcements led by the adviser Feng (2) Ji (3). Yuan Shao said to Feng (3) Ji (2), "I refused to listen to Tian Feng and it led me to defeat. I am too embarrassed to see him when I get back."

Well, Feng Ji, as you might remember, was no fan of Tian Feng's. His slander had played a key role in landing his rival in prison, so of course he wasn't about to let Yuan Shao's regret and shame boost Tian Feng back to power. So he told Yuan Shao,

"When Tian Feng got word in prison that your lordship had suffered a defeat, he clapped his hands and laughed out loud, saying, 'Just as I expected!' "

Well, this latest bit of slander turned Yuan Shao from filled with regret to filled with rage.

"How dare that stupid pedant mock me?! I am going to kill him!"

So Yuan Shao immediately dispatched a messenger to Ji (4) Province with his personal sword in tow, with the order to execute Tian Feng.

Meanwhile, in the Ji (4) Province prison, one of the jailers had gone to see Tian Feng to offer him congratulations, which made Tian Feng curious as to why.

"General Yuan is on his way back after suffering a total defeat," the jailer told him. "That means he will surely seek your counsel once again."

Tian Feng, however, laughed and said, "My end is near!"

"Everyone is happy for you; why do you speak of death?" the jailer asked.

"General Yuan may appear broad-minded, but he is in fact deeply suspicious," Tian Feng said.

"Loyalty and sincerity count for little with him. If he had triumphed, he might have spared my life in his jubilation. But now he has lost and is humiliated, so I have no hope of living."

The jailer was still skeptical, but just then, Yuan Shao's messenger arrived and delivered his order to take Tian Feng's head. While the jailer was shocked, Tian Feng basically said, "I told you so." As all

the jailers wept, Tian Feng said, “A man in this world who chooses the wrong master is a fool. What is there to mourn about his death?”

With that, Tian Feng slit his own throat, and everyone who heard the news lamented his death.

As for Yuan Shao, after he returned to Ji (4) Province, he was in an agitated state of mind and ignored all matters of administration. Instead, he was primarily preoccupied with thoughts of succession, and he had a bit of a dilemma on that front. Yuan Shao had three sons. The eldest was Yuan Tan (2), who was currently overseeing Qing (1) Province. The middle son was Yuan Xi (1), who was guarding You (1) Province. The youngest son, the one by Yuan Shao’s second and current wife, was named Yuan Shang (4). This Yuan Shang (4) had grown up to be a handsome young man, and Yuan Shao doted on him, keeping him by his side.

After the defeat at Guandu, Yuan Shao’s current wife and Yuan Shang’s mother, Lady Liu (2), had urged her husband to make Yuan Shang (4) the heir to his title and power. In ancient Chinese culture, it was traditionally the eldest son who inherited the father’s title, and to go against this was often seen as a recipe for disaster. So you see the problem here for Yuan Shao.

Yuan Shao discussed the matter with his top four advisers: Shen (3) Pei (4), Feng (2) Ji (3), Xin (1) Ping (2), and Guo (1) Tu (2). As it so happened, Shen Pei and Feng Ji had always served Yuan Shang (4), while Xin Ping and Guo Tu had been serving Yuan Tan (2). Not surprisingly, they all thought their own master was the man for the job.

“Right now, our external threats have not yet been quelled, so we must settle our internal affairs soon,” Yuan Shao said to the four advisers. “I want to settle the issue of succession. My eldest son Yuan Tan is hot-tempered and prone to violence. My second son Yuan Xi (1) is weak and timid. My youngest son Yuan Shang has the looks of a hero and treats men of talent with respect. I intend to make him my heir. What do you all think?”

“Of the three, Yuan Tan is the eldest,” Guo Tu said. “Plus, he is currently stationed at another province. If your lordship rejects the elder and elevates the younger, it will be a recipe for strife. Right now our army has suffered a temporary setback, and the enemy is encroaching on our borders. We cannot add family squabbles to the mix. Your lordship should worry about defeating the enemy first. The issue of succession can wait for another day.”

Yuan Shao was thus caught in one of his trademark moments of indecision. But then word came that his second son Yuan Xi (1) had arrived from You (1) Province with 60,000 troops; and his eldest son Yuan Tan (2) had arrived from Qing Province with 50,000 troops. Also, his nephew Gao (1) Gan (4) had arrived from Bing (4) Province with another 50,000 troops. Delighted by these reinforcements, Yuan Shao turned his attention to reorganizing his army and preparing to repel Cao Cao.

As for Cao Cao, he and his newly victorious army were camped out along the river, and one day he received a visit from some of the locals, who had come to welcome their new overlord with food and wine. Cao Cao met with these locals, who were all old men with silver hair, and offered them a seat in his tent.

“May I ask how old you all are?” Cao Cao said to his visitors.

“Almost a hundred” was the answer.

“I apologize for my troops’ presence here disturbing your lives,” Cao Cao said to them.

“During the reign of Emperor Huan (2),” one of the old men said to Cao Cao, “a yellow star shined in the heavens above this region. A traveler who was well-versed in cosmology told us that it was an omen. That in 50 years, a true king would rise here. It has been exactly 50 years since then. Yuan Shao has been taxing us heavily, and all the people here have been displeased. Prime minister, you have raised an army of compassion and honor to seek justice on our behalf. With one battle at Guandu, you



destroyed Yuan Shao's army of a million. You have fulfilled the prophecy. Now our people can hope for peace."

At this, Cao Cao smiled and replied, "I dare not live up to such claims." He then offered the old men wine, food, and silk as reward. He also sent out word to the army that if anyone dared to kill any of the locals' livestock, they would be dealt with as if they had committed murder. This move no doubt earned him some cred with the locals.

While Cao Cao was reaping the rewards of his public relations campaign, he got word that Yuan Shao had scrounged up another army of some 300,000 men and was camped at Cangting (1,2), ready for a rematch. So Cao Cao advanced his army to meet him. When the two sides met, they lined up in their battle formations, and Cao Cao rode out with his officers, while Yuan Shao rode out with his three sons, his nephew, and his cadre of civilian officials and military officers.

"My friend, you are outmatched and outwitted; why not surrender?" Cao Cao said to Yuan Shao. "If you wait until the knife is on your neck, it will be too late."

Yuan Shao took offense to this suggestion and asked which of his officers dared to go out for battle. His youngest son, Yuan (2) Shang (4), wanted to show off in front of his old man, so he galloped out wielding twin knives.

Just as Cao Cao was asking his people who this kid was, one of his officers had already gone out to meet Yuan Shang. It was Xu Huang's lieutenant Shi (2) Huan (4), who had played a key role in one of the raids in the last episode. After just three bouts, Yuan Shang turned and ran, and Shi Huan gave chase. Unfortunately for Shi Huan, it was a trick. As he was busy pursuing, Yuan Shang turned and fired an arrow. The shot found its mark, piercing Shi Huan's left eye, and he fell dead to the ground. Seeing his son victorious, Yuan Shao ordered his army to sweep forward, and the two sides engaged in a scrum before they both retreated to their own camp.

Cao Cao gathered his staff to talk strategy, and the adviser Cheng (2) Yu (4) offered up an idea: Retreat up river, and lay down an ambush with 10 divisions, and lure Yuan Shao into the trap. "Our troops would have no fallback position, so they will fight with everything they've got, and we will surely defeat Yuan Shao," Cheng Yu said.

Cao Cao accepted this plan and sent out 10 detachments, each led by one of his top generals, and ordered them to take up position. Around midnight, Cao Cao ordered the officer Xu Chu to lead the main army and feign a surprise attack on Yuan Shao's camp. Yuan Shao responded by mobilizing all of his troops to fend off this raid. Xu Chu and his army turned and fled, and Yuan Shao led his army in pursuit. The roars of the men were unceasing, and they chased Cao Cao's troops until morning, when they reached the head of the river.

At this point, Cao Cao's troops had nowhere to run, and Cao Cao shouted, "We have nowhere to go! Let's turn and fight to the death!"

Heeding their commander's call, the troops turned and threw themselves at the enemy. Xu Chu led the way, flying into the enemy ranks and cutting down more than a dozen enemy officers. Yuan Shao's troops soon fell into chaos, and Yuan Shao turned and retreated.

Now, it was Cao Cao's turn to give chase. Just as Yuan Shao was falling back, at the banging of a drum, two detachments of Cao Cao's troops rushed out from left and right, led by the officers Xiahou Yuan (1) and Gao (1) Lan (3). Yuan Shao, flanked by his three sons and his nephew, managed to fight his way out. But they had not gone but three miles when two more of Cao Cao's officers, Yue (4) Jin (4) and Yu (1) Jin (4), stormed out and slaughtered Yuan Shao's troops to the point where their bodies covered the field and their blood flowed like rivers.

Yuan Shao had barely escaped this attack when two ore of Cao Cao's detachments showed up, led by Li (2) Dian (3) and Xu (2) Huang (3). Those guys did their share of damage, and by now, Yuan Shao and his sons were scared out of their minds. They fled back into their camp, where they tried to

regroup. Just as they ordered their men to start cooking a meal, however, Cao Cao's officers Zhang Liao and Zhang He came calling with two more detachments of soldiers. In no shape to mount a defense, Yuan Shao hurriedly hopped on his horse and fled toward Cang (1) Ting (2).

By now, Yuan Shao and his men were exhausted. Just as they paused to catch their breath, Cao Cao's main army arrived hot on their heels, and Yuan Shao was again running for his life. At that moment, the last two detachments that Cao Cao had laid down in ambush showed up, led by Xiahou Dun and Cao Hong (2), and they blocked Yuan Shao's path.

"If we do not fight with everything we've got, then we're done for!" Yuan Shao shouted. So he and his entourage made a desperate dash through the sea of enemy soldiers and somehow managed to escape, though his second son Yuan Xi (1) and nephew Gao (1) Gan (4) both suffered arrow wounds. What's more, his army had been obliterated.

Seeing his sorry state of affairs, Yuan Shao clutched his three sons in his arms and wept bitterly. Suddenly, he lost consciousness and fell to the ground. When his men brought him around, he started to cough up blood uncontrollably.

"[Sigh] I have been in dozens of battles; who knew I would suffer such a humiliating defeat? Heaven is against me!" Yuan Shao sighed. But then, he turned to his men and said, "You all must return to your respective provinces. I swear we will settle the score with that traitor Cao Cao yet!"

So as dire as his situation was, Yuan Shao wasn't licked yet. He ordered his advisers Xin (1) Ping (2) and Guo (1) Tu (2) to immediately accompany his eldest son Yuan Tan (2) back to Qing (1) Province to prepare for an invasion from Cao Cao. He sent his second son Yuan Xi (1) back to You (1) Province and his nephew Gao (1) Gan (4) back to Bing (4) Province to get their armies ready for deployment. Yuan Shao then returned to Ji (4) Province, accompanied by his youngest son Yuan Shang (4). He put Yuan Shang, along with his advisers Shen (3) Pei (4) and Feng (2) Ji (3), temporarily in charge of military affairs while he recuperated.

As for Cao Cao, he celebrated his victory by rewarding his troops and then sent out scouts to Ji Province to see what's up with his enemy. They reported back that Yuan Shao was bedridden, leaving his youngest son and his advisers were defending the city, while his other sons and nephew had returned to their home provinces. All of Cao Cao's officers urged him to attack quickly, but he hesitated.

"Ji Province has ample provisions, and Yuan Shao's adviser Shen (3) Pei (4) is very crafty. We will not be able to take the city quickly," Cao Cao said. "Right now crops have been planted. We cannot disrupt the harvest. Let's wait until after the fall."

Just as they were speaking, a message arrived from his adviser Xun Yu, who was holding down the fort in the capital Xuchang while Cao Cao was out a-conquerin'. The letter brought bad news: So remember how Liu Bei ended up in the region of Runan (3,2) a couple episodes back? Well, while we were busy touring the Southlands and joining the fighting in the north, Liu Bei was busy building himself an army, and he had amassed tens of thousands of troops with the help of the two guys previously in charge of Runan -- Liu (2) Pi (4) and Gong (1) Dou (1). And now, with Cao Cao off waging war, Liu Bei had left Liu Pi (4) in charge of Runan while he himself led an army to attack Xuchang, prompting Xun Yu to write to Cao Cao asking him to return at once.

Cao Cao wasted no time. He left Cao Hong (2) with a garrison up river to keep up appearances. Cao Cao then personally led the bulk of his army to Runan to meet Liu Bei. He ran into Liu Bei and company near Mount Rang (2). Liu Bei set up camp on the mountain and divided his army into three forces, with Guan Yu overseeing the southeastern camp, Zhang Fei the southwestern camp, and Liu Bei and Zhao Yun the southern camp.

When Cao Cao's army arrived on the scene, Liu Bei's army went out to meet them. Cao Cao lined up his troops and demanded to talk to Liu Bei. When Liu Bei rode out to his main banner, Cao Cao pointed at him with his whip and scolded him.

“I treated you as an honored guest. How could you forget my kindness and betray me?!”

“You may be the prime minister of the Han in name, but you are in truth a traitor of the Han!” Liu Bei shot back. “I am a relative of the imperial house and have been ordered by his majesty’s secret decree to put down the traitor!”

Then, Liu Bei began to recite the jade girdle decree out loud. And we already know that Cao Cao was just a little defensive about the whole blood decree thing, so he ordered his general Xu (2) Chu (3) to charge out for combat. On Liu Bei’s side, Zhao Yun hoisted his spear and galloped out to meet Xu Chu. The two fought for 30 bouts without a winner. Suddenly, thundering roars rose up as Guan Yu led his detachment and charged in from the southeast, while Zhang Fei and his troops charge din from the southwest. The three combined forces swept down on Cao Cao. Cao Cao’s army was fatigued from having just rushed onto the scene, so it could not withstand this charge and fell back in defeat. Victorious for the day, Liu Bei returned to camp.

The next day, Liu Bei ordered Zhao Yun to go out and challenge for battle, but Cao Cao’s troops did not budge from their camp. Liu Bei then sent Zhang Fei out to challenge for combat, but met with the same silence. This was looking a little suspicious to Liu Bei. And sure enough, his suspicions would soon prove to be well-founded.

To see what Cao Cao is up to this time, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.