

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 43.

Last time, Liu Bei was attending a private dinner party in his host and kinsman Liu Biao's home, but he committed the no no of talking politics at the dinner table. What's more, he got himself tangled up in Liu Biao's family business when he advised Liu Biao that he should not elevate his younger son to the status of heir over his older son. To make things worse, the mother of said younger son and Liu Biao's wife, Lady Cai, was eavesdropping and heard everything, and she was not amused.

For his part, Liu Bei quickly realized that he had unwittingly stepped into a quagmire, so he excused himself and said he had to go use the bathroom. As he was freshening up, Liu Bei noticed that his thighs had grown fat from not having ridden his horse a lot lately. This depressed him so much that he could not help but shed a few tears. When he returned to his seat, Liu Biao took note and asked him why he had been crying.

"[Sigh] I used to live in the saddle," Liu Bei said. "But I have been riding so little for so long that my thighs have grown fat. Time is flying by and I am about to reach old age, and yet I have accomplished nothing. That is why I'm sad."

"I heard that when you lived in capital, you and Cao Cao once discussed heroes of the realm over wine," Liu Biao said. "I heard that you named all the famous figures in the land, but that Cao Cao dismissed them all and said that you and he were the only heroes in the realm. Even with his power, Cao Cao did not dare to place himself before you. There's no need for you to worry about not realizing your ambitions."

Liu Bei, at the spur of the moment and with his discretion temporarily dulled by the wine he had been gulping, replied, "If I could just have a foundation, none of the mediocrities throughout the land would be of any concern."

To this, Liu Biao said nothing. But, mediocrity, you say? Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't I one of those names that you mentioned to Cao Cao? So this is what you think of me, eh?

Well, Liu Bei quickly realized he had misspoken, once again, so he got up and excused himself on account of being drunk, and returned to his guesthouse.

As for Liu Biao, even though he did not say anything, in his heart he was less than pleased with Liu Bei's words. When he retired to his bed chamber, Lady Cai made her displeasure with Liu Bei crystal clear to her husband.

"I heard what Liu Bei said from behind the screen," she told him. "He does not respect you. It's clear he has designs on Jing province. If you don't eliminate him now, he will be trouble later."

Liu Biao, however, responded with his trademark noncommittal silence. He again said nothing and just shook his head. Well, Lady Cai was hell bent on doing something about Liu Bei, so she summoned her brother Cai Mao (4) for a secret meeting.

"Let's kill Liu Bei at the guesthouse first, and then inform his lordship," Cai Mao suggested. Lady Cai agreed, so Cai Mao immediately went off to gather up his troops.

As for Liu Bei, he sat up at the guesthouse until about midnight. When he was just about to turn in for the night, someone opened the door and walked in. It was Yi (1) Ji (2), one of Liu Biao's advisers who had become good friends with Liu Bei. Yi (1) Ji (2), as it turned out, had gotten word of Cai Mao moving against Liu Bei, so he rushed over to tell Liu Bei to get out of town.

"But I have not yet bid my brother goodbye; how can I leave?" Liu Bei said.

"If you try to do that, you will die at Cai Mao's hand for sure," Yi Ji said.

Well, it's hard to argue with that. So Liu Bei thanked him, summoned his attendants, and rode off in the dark of the night toward Xinye (1,3), the county that he called home.

By the time Cai Mao and his men got to the guesthouse, Liu Bei was long gone, and Cai Mao could do nothing but stamp his foot. But then he got a brilliant idea. He wrote a poem on one of the walls of the house and then went to see Liu Biao.

“Liu Bei intends to betray you,” Cai Mao said. “He wrote a seditious poem on the wall of the guesthouse and left without taking leave of you.”

Liu Biao was understandably skeptical, so he went to the guesthouse to verify this. There, he saw four lines of poetry on the wall, which read:

So many years set back by adversity,  
Staring back at nothing but the same scenery.  
Yet in a pond no dragon is meant to lie..  
He will ride the thunder to the sky.

When Liu Biao finished reading this poem, he was fuming.

“I swear I will kill that dishonorable scoundrel!” he said as he pulled out his sword and started to stomp out. But after just a few steps, it suddenly hit him.

“In all the time I’ve known Liu Bei, I have never seen him write poetry,” Liu Biao thought to himself. “This must be someone’s attempt to sow discord between us.”

So Liu Biao turned around, went back into the room, and used the tip of his sword to scratch the poem off the wall. He then tossed his sword away and hopped on his horse.

“Our troops are ready; we can go to Xinye to capture Liu Bei,” Cai Mao said to him.

“Do not act rashly; we should plan it carefully,” Liu Biao said.

So Cai Mao's too-clever-by-half scheme fell through, but he was not giving up. Seeing Liu Biao unable to make up his mind, he and Lady Cai secretly plotted to hold a gathering of provincial officials at the city of Xiangyang (1,2), lure Liu Bei there, and kill him.

So the next day, Cai Mao said to Liu Biao, "We have had good harvests in recent years. We should gather all the officials at Xiangyang to convey our thanks. Your attendance is requested."

"I have not been feeling well lately and cannot go," Liu Biao said. "We can have my two sons serve as host of the event."

"They are young and might not be familiar with the proper protocols," Cai Mao said.

"In that case, we can invite Liu Bei to help greet the guests," Liu Biao said.

Well, that played right into Cai Mao's hands. So he dispatched a messenger to deliver the invitation to Liu Bei.

As for Liu Bei, after he fled back to Xinye, he knew that he had misspoken and stirred up trouble for himself, but he had not mentioned it to anyone else yet. Suddenly, a messenger arrived with the invitation for him to go to Xiangyang. His adviser Sun Qian (2) immediately cautioned him:

"My lord, yesterday you returned in a hurry and appeared so distracted. I figured something must have happened in Jing Province. And now this sudden invitation. You should not attend."

So now, Liu Bei had to tell his staff what happened. Guan Yu said, "Brother, you may think that you misspoke, but Liu Biao has not shown any intention to reproach you. You should not believe the words of outsiders. Xiangyang is not far from here. If you do not go, then Liu Biao and his people might indeed get suspicious."

"You're quite right," Liu Bei replied. But Zhang Fei begged to differ.

"This is a treacherous feast. It's best to not go."

The general Zhao Yun, however, proposed a solution.

“I can lead 300 men and accompany your lordship. I will guarantee that no harm will come to you.”

Liu Bei agreed, so he set out that day with Zhao Yun and 300 soldiers. At Xiangyang, Cai Mao came out to greet them and appeared both modest and attentive. Behind him followed Liu Qi (2) and Liu Qiong (2), the two sons of Liu Biao, as well as a group of military officers and civil officials. Seeing Liu Biao's sons present, Liu Bei's suspicion abated. He settled into his guest house to rest. Zhao Yun stationed the 300 soldiers around the house for protection, while he himself donned his armor, carried his sword, and never ventured a step away from Liu Bei.

Liu Qi (2), the elder son of Liu Biao, came to see Liu Bei and said, “My father is suffering from a respiratory ailment and cannot travel, so we asked you to help us greet the guests and thank the officials from our districts.”

“Normally I would not be so presumptuous, but since it is my brother's order, I will do as he wishes,” Liu Bei answered.

The next day, the officials from all nine districts of Jing Province had arrived. Cai Mao then went to conspire with Kuai (3) Yue (4), Liu Biao's top adviser.

“Liu Bei is a hero of our times,” Cai Mao said. “If he stays here long term, he will become a problem for us. We should eliminate him today.”

“But that might hurt our support from the people,” Kuai Yue said.

“Here's a secret order from our master to carry out his wish,” Cai Mao said.

“In that case, we must get ready,” Kuai Yue relented.

"The east, south, and north gates are all being watched by my brothers," Cai Mao said. "As for the west gate, there is no need to guard it because the path away from that gate is cut off by the rapids of the Tan (2) River. Even an army of tens of thousands would have a tough time crossing it."

"But Zhao Yun is always by Liu Bei's side," Kuai Yue said. "It'd be hard for us to make a move."

"I will hide 500 soldiers within the city," Cai Mao said.

"And we can set up a separate feast in the outer parlor for the military officers, and have our men invite Zhao Yun to attend," Kuai Yue said. "Then we can proceed."

Later that day, the party was on. Liu Bei rode to the city's administrative compound, where the banquet was being held. Servants led his horse to the rear garden, while all the officials gathered in the parlor. Liu Bei took his seat as the host, with Liu Biao's two sons sitting to both side of him, and the rest of the officials all took their spot in the order of their rank. Zhao Yun, meanwhile, stood next to Liu Bei with his sword by his side.

Two of Cai Mao's officers now came in to invite Zhao Yun to attend the banquet in the next room for military officers. Zhao Yun tried to beg off, but Liu Bei told him to accept the invitation. So yeah, Liu Bei, can you please make your bodyguard's job any more difficult? Nonetheless, Zhao Yun did as he commanded and went to the next room.

So here was Cai Mao's window of opportunity. He had his troops seal off the city and sent Liu Bei's 300 troops back to the guest house. He was just waiting till about the midway point of the banquet to make his move.

After three rounds of wine, Yi (1) Ji (2), the guy who had tipped off Liu Bei to Cai Mao's earlier attempt to kill him, raised his cup and approached Liu Bei. Yi Ji said in a low voice, "Please go freshen up."

Liu Bei caught his meaning and excused himself to go use the restroom. Yi Ji then finished his round of toasts and followed Liu Bei into the rear garden. There, he whispered in Liu Bei's ear:

"Cai Mao is plotting to kill you. There are soldiers stationed outside the east, south, and north gates. Only the west gate is still untended. You should flee at once!"

Liu Bei was shocked, so he immediately unhitched his horse, opened the exit in the rear garden, hopped on his horse, and galloped toward the west gate. He did not even bother to take his attendants with him, and that included Zhao Yun. When the guard at the gate asked him where he was going, Liu Bei did not answer. He simply whipped his horse and kept going. The guard could not stop him and instead rushed to inform Cai Mao. Hearing this news, Cai Mao immediately gave chase with 500 soldiers.

After storming out the west gate, Liu Bei had not gone far before he ran into a wide river of rapids, blocking his path. This was the Tan (2) River. Its waters were several rods deep and the waves were whipping. Liu Bei rode to the bank of the river and realized that he could not cross. When he turned around, though, he could see dust being kicked up in the distance in the west, which was a clear sign that a pursuing army was about to catch up.

"I'm done for!" Liu Bei said to himself.

He then turned around again and went back to the bank. There, he looked back and saw that the pursuers were almost upon him. In a panic and a pickle, Liu Bei had no choice but to spur his horse onward into the river. But before he had gone but a few steps, his horse's front legs suddenly gave out, and the horse dipped down so far that Liu Bei's clothes were drenched.

Liu Bei now whipped his horse even harder and shouted, "Oh hexmark! Are you really going to do me in today?!"

As soon as he uttered those words, his horse suddenly reared up and leaped out of the water, soaring some 20 feet up through the air, and landed on the west bank. By now, Cai Mao and his

soldiers had arrived on the east bank, and Cai Mao shouted, “My lord, why did you run away from the banquet?!”

“There is no bad blood between us,” Liu Bei said. “Why did you try to kill me?”

“I have no such intent. Please do not listen to slander,” Cai Mao protested.

But even as he did so, he was reaching for his bow and arrow. Liu Bei saw this and quickly rode off toward the southwest, leaving Cai Mao to wonder aloud to his men, “Which god was helping him?”

A famous scholar later wrote a poem describing Liu Bei’s escape, which was nothing short of miraculous. It’s kind of a long poem, so I won’t recite it here. Instead, there is [a link to it](#) on the website with the post for this episode. Go check it out if you are so inclined.

In any case, Cai Mao came up empty once again. He was just about to lead his troops back inside the city when he saw, uh oh, Zhao Yun rushing toward him with his 300 men. So Zhao Yun had been dragged off to the banquet in the other room. As he was drinking, he suddenly noticed soldiers moving about, so he rushed back into the other parlor and lo and behold, Liu Bei had vanished. So Zhao Yun rushed back to the guest house, but there, someone told him that Cai Mao had rushed off toward the west at the head of an army. So Zhao Yun quickly grabbed his spear, gathered his troops, and went after Cai Mao. As he sprinted out the west gate, he ran smack dab into Cai Mao.

“Where is my master?” Zhao Yun asked.

“His lordship fled from the banquet. I do not know where he went,” Cai Mao replied.

Now, if it was Zhang Fei or even Guan Yu that had accompanied Liu Bei, Cai Mao would probably be lying dead on the ground within the next 30 seconds. But Zhao Yun was meticulous and cautious, so he refrained from doing anything rash. He rode past Cai Mao and saw that the path was cut off by the river. He then turned back and interrogated Cai Mao some more.



“You invited my master to this banquet. Why did you then chase him with soldiers?”

“All the officials of the province are here. As the top officer, how can I not make security arrangements?” Cai Mao answered.

“Where did you chase my master off to?” Zhao Yun pressed him.

“I heard that he dashed out of the west gate, but when I got here, I did not see him,” Cai Mao said.

Zhao Yun, understandably, was a little skeptical. So he rode to the bank of the river and looked. On the opposite bank, he noticed a big wet spot.

“Could he have jumped across this river on his horse?” Zhao Yun thought to himself. So he ordered his men to spread out and search, but they found no trace of Liu Bei. By the time Zhao Yun returned from the river, Cai Mao had already gone back into the city. Zhao Yun then interrogated the guards at the gate, but they all said the same thing -- that Liu Bei had dashed out of the west gate on his horse. Zhao Yun thought about going back inside the city, but then thought better of it, just in case there was an ambush waiting. So he hurriedly led his men back toward Xinye instead.

So what did become of Liu Bei after his miraculous escape? Well, he was still in a bit of a daze as he rode away from the river, thinking the whole way, “Was it heaven’s will that I was able to leap across such a wide river in one bound?” As he was thinking about this, he continued to ride in the direction of Nanzhang (2,1).

By now, the sun was starting to set. As he was traveling, Liu Bei spotted a young boy riding on the back of a buffalo and blowing a short flute.

“[Sigh] I wish I were him,” Liu Bei sighed.

So why would Liu Bei wish to be that boy? Well, the young-cowherd-piping-on-a-buffalo motif is, in Chinese culture, the prototypical image of an idyllic, carefree life. Liu Bei, of course, has been living

anything but a carefree life in recent years, so you can't blame him for being a little envious. As he stood there on his horse and watched the boy, the boy also stopped his buffalo, put down his flute, and looked at Liu Bei for a long time before asking:

"General, are you Liu Bei, the pacifier of the Yellow Turbans?"

This caught Liu Bei by surprise. "You are just a village boy. How do you know my name?" he asked.

"I did not know, but whenever my master receives guests, they often talk about this Liu Bei who stands about 5 foot 7, with arms that reach past his knees, and eyes that can see his own ears. They say he is a hero of the times. Judging by your appearance, I guessed that you were him."

"Who is your master?" Liu Bei asked.

"His last name is Sima (1,3), and his first name is Hui (1). He also has a Taoist name, Shui (3) Jing (3)." Shui (3) Jing (3), by the way, literally means water mirror.

"Who are your master's friends?" Liu Bei asked again.

"He is friends with Pang (2) Degong (2,1) and Pang (2) Tong (3) of Xiangyang."

"Who are they?"

"They are uncle and nephew. Pang (2) Degong (2,1) is 10 years my master's senior, while Pang (2) Tong (3) is 5 years my master's junior. One day, while my master was picking mulberry leaves, Pang Tong came to visit, and they talked for a whole day under the mulberry tree without tiring. My master adores Pang Tong and calls him his younger brother."

"Where is your master now?"

The boy pointed off into the distance and said, "His residence is in those woods up ahead."

"I am indeed Liu Bei. Please take me to see your master."

So the cowherd led the way, and they traveled for about a half mile and arrived at the house. Liu Bei dismounted and walked into the compound. There, he heard the beautiful sounds of a lute, so he told the boy to not announce him yet. Instead, he stood and listened to the exquisite sounds.

But just then, the playing stopped, and a man came out with a smile and said, "The harmonies of the lute were somber yet distinct. Suddenly, through the melody, a proud, assertive tone surged up. That means some noble hero must have come to listen unobtrusively."

The boy pointed and said to Liu Bei, "This is my master, Master Water Mirror."

Liu Bei took a look at the man before him. He had the configuration of a pine tree and the bone structure of a crane. His physique and aura were utterly extraordinary. Liu Bei quickly bowed, with his clothes still dripping.

"Sir, you have dodged disaster today," Sima (1,3) Hui (1) said to him.

This also caught Liu Bei off guard. He then followed Sima Hui (1) into the parlor and sat down. Liu Bei noticed piles of books on Sima Hui's (1) desk. Outside the window were tall pine trees. A lute laid on a stone bench. The whole place had a pure, peaceful feel to it.

"What brings you here, sir?" Sima Hui asked.

"I was passing through the area," Liu Bei replied. "The young boy told me about you, so I have come to pay my respects. It's a great fortune to meet you."

Sima Hui laughed and said, "There is no need to conceal anything. You must have arrived here fleeing from trouble."

Called out on his little white lie, Liu Bei fessed up and told Sima Hui about what happened in Xiangyang.

"I guessed as much from your countenance," Sima Hui told him. He then asked Liu Bei, "I have long heard of your great name. Why has fortune frowned upon you so?"

"Fate has decreed that my life be not smooth; hence my present state," Liu Bei answered.

"Not so," said Sima Hui. "It's because you have no talent around you."

“Though I may be untalented,” Liu Bei said, “I do have the likes of Sun Qian, Mi Zhu, and Jiang (3) Yong (1) for civil officials, as well as Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun as military officers. They all serve me loyally, and I depend on them.”

“Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun are the equal of whole armies,” Sima Hui said. “But it’s a shame you don’t have someone who knows how to use them. As for the likes of Sun Qian and Mi Zhu, they are merely pasty-faced bookworms, not of a calibre to deal with these uncertain times.”

“I have often wanted to seek out talented recluses, but I have not met anyone,” Liu Bei said.

“Have you not heard of Confucius’ saying that even in a hamlet of 10 households, one is certain to find a man of loyalty and good faith? So why despair that you will not find talented men?”

“I am an ignoramus,” Liu Bei said. “I humbly beg for your guidance.”

“Have you heard of the children’s song that has been going around Jing Province?” Sima Hui asked. “It goes,

‘In the eighth year things start to waste;  
In the 13th year there remains not a trace.  
Heaven sends things where they’re due;  
The mudbound dragon mounts the blue.’

This jingle starts with the eighth year of the current era of imperial rule. In that year, Liu Biao’s first wife died. That was the beginning of chaos within his family. That is the “waste” mentioned in the song. As for the “not a trace” part, it means Liu Biao will die soon, and his officials and officers will scatter to the four winds. Now, as for the last two lines about heaven sending things where they’re due and dragons flying to the sky, they are alluding to you, general.”

Liu Bei was stunned to hear this. “I dare not ...” he said.

“The most extraordinary talents of the land are gathered here,” Sima Hui continued. “You should seek them out.”

“Where are these extraordinary talents? Who are they?” Liu Bei asked.

“Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix. If you get one of the two, you can bring peace to the realm.”

“Who are Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix?” Liu Bei pressed. But at this, Sima Hui merely rubbed his palms, laughed out loud, and said, “Good, good!” Liu Bei was just about to press him further, but Sima Hui cut him off.

“It’s getting late,” Sima Hui said. “General, you can stay here tonight. We will talk more tomorrow.” He then ordered the young boy to prepare a meal and to tend to Liu Bei’s horse.

After dinner, Liu Bei slept in a room adjoining the parlor. But with Sima Hui’s words bouncing around in his head, he found it hard to fall asleep. Late into the night, he suddenly heard someone open the front door and enter.

“Ah, what brings you here?” Liu Bei overheard Sima Hui saying. So Liu Bei quietly sat up in bed and eavesdropped.

“I had long heard that Liu Biao welcomes the virtuous and shuns the wicked,” the visitor replied. “So I went to present myself to him. But upon meeting him, I realized that he is all reputation and no substance. He may welcome the virtuous, but cannot make use of them. He may shun the wicked, but cannot chase them away. So I left a letter to bid him goodbye and came here.”

“Sir, you have the talent to be a king’s right-hand man,” Sima Hui said. “You should pick your master more carefully. How could you lower yourself to go before Liu Biao? Right now there’s a hero right in front of you; you just don’t know it yet.”

“You’re quite right,” the visitor answered.

Liu Bei was delighted as he listened in. "This must be either Sleeping Dragon or Young Phoenix," he thought to himself. He thought about going into the next room to introduce himself, but then thought better of it, as it would be a breach of etiquette. The next morning, he went to see Sima Hui and asked, "Who was that visitor from last night?"

"A friend of mine," Sima Hui answered.

Liu Bei then begged Sima Hui to make the introduction, but Sima Hui told him, "That person wants to seek an enlightened master, so he has already gone off."

Liu Bei won't give up though. He then asked for the visitor's name, but Sima Hui again just laughed and said, "Good, good!"

Well, Liu Bei probably didn't think his cryptic answer was good, but he couldn't do anything about that. So he then asked, "Who are Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix?"

But once again, Sima Hui just laughed and said "Good, good!"

Well, alright then. Since Sima Hui won't tell him the true identities of these supposedly extraordinary talents, Liu Bei then asked Sima Hui if he would be willing to go back to Xinye to assist him. But predictably, Sima Hui turned him down. I mean, c'mon, dude. I've got a cute little house in the woods, complete with my very own carefree-cowherd-on-a-water-buffalo-idyllic-life motif. You think I'm going to leave this behind to go join you in your sorry little hamlet?

"A carefree recluse like me is not fit for service," Sima Hui said. "There are people 10 times more talented to assist you; you should go visit them."

Well, Liu Bei was probably thinking, "How the heck am I going to visit them if you won't tell me who they are?!!" But just then, the young boy came in and said, "A general is outside. He has a few hundred men with him."

Uh oh. Has Cai Mao come looking for Liu Bei? And will Liu Bei ever get the names of the talented men that Sima Hui keeps teasing him about? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.