

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 44.

Last time, Liu Bei made a miraculous escape from a deadly trap that Cai Mao had set for him, and then stumbled around until he came upon a recluse named Sima Hui (1). Sima Hui (1), who dubbed himself Master Water Mirror, told Liu Bei that there were talented men in the area whom he should seek out, guys who went by the monikers Sleeping Dragon and Young Phoenix. But he won't tell Liu Bei who those guys really were, which, yeah, thanks a lot. Liu Bei was just about to press him for details when Sima Hui's young servant hurried in and told them that a general and a few hundred soldiers were outside.

Alarmed, Liu Bei went out to see who this was. To his relief, it was his general Zhao Yun, who had been looking for him ever since Liu Bei fled from Cai Mao.

"I went back to Xinye (1,3) last night but you weren't there, so I set out overnight and searched all the way here," Zhao Yun said. "My lord, you should return to Xinye (1,3) at once, in case someone attacks us there."

So Liu Bei took his leave of Master Water Mirror and headed back toward Xinye with Zhao Yun. Within a few miles, they saw a squad of troops coming their way. It turned out to be Guan Yu and Zhang Fei coming to search for him, and they were all delighted to see each other. Liu Bei told the story of how his horse made a miraculous leap across the river to save him from Cai Mao, and everyone was astonished.

When they got back home to Xinye, Liu Bei discussed with his advisers about how to proceed. Sun Qian (2) suggested that he first write to Liu Biao to tell him what happened. Liu Bei agreed and sent Sun Qian to Jing (1) Province to deliver the message.

"I invited Liu Bei to Xiangyang (1,2) for a banquet. Why did he flee?" Liu Biao asked Sun Qian.

Sun Qian offered up Liu Bei's letter, which detailed how Cai Mao tried to ambush Liu Bei at the banquet and how it was only thanks to a miraculous leap by his horse that Liu Bei managed to escape. After Liu Biao read this, he was fuming. He immediately summoned Cai Mao.

"How dare you try to kill my brother?!" Liu Biao scolded Cai Mao angrily and ordered the guards to take him outside and execute him.

Cai Mao's sister and Liu Biao's wife, Lady Cai, immediately came out and cried and begged for mercy, but Liu Biao was still in a rage. Sun Qian, however, said to him:

"If you kill Cai Mao, then my master would not be able to remain here long."

That gave Liu Biao a way out, and he spared Cai Mao, though not before he gave him a stern tongue-lashing. Liu Biao then sent his eldest son Liu Qi (2) to accompany Sun Qian back to see Liu Bei and offer his apologies.

When Liu Qi arrived in Xinye, Liu Bei received him with a banquet. In the middle of the banquet, Liu Qi suddenly started to shed tears, which prompted questions from Liu Bei.

"My stepmother, Lady Cai, often harbors ill will toward me," Liu Qi said. "I don't know how to avoid disaster. I hope you will teach me, uncle."

Well, Liu Bei had already gotten himself into trouble once by unwittingly getting tangled up in Liu Biao's family business, so he was more careful this time. He just told Liu Qi to basically kill his stepmother ... with kindness and filial piety, and that everything will work out, which, honestly, was not much help to Liu Qi.

The next day, Liu Qi bid Liu Bei a teary farewell. As Liu Bei rode with him outside the city, Liu Bei pointed to his own horse and said to Liu Qi, "If not for this horse, I would be a dead man now."

"It's not the horse, uncle," Liu Qi said. "You are blessed by heaven."

After that, Liu Qi wept and said goodbye. Liu Bei turned around and rode back into the city. On the way home, he noticed a man on the street. He was wearing a linen head scarf, a plain robe, a black belt, and black shoes. As this guy walked toward Liu Bei, he was singing these lines:

Heaven and earth are topsy and turvy, O!

The “fire” is growing cold.

A stately hall is coming down, O!

It’s hard for one beam to hold.

But away in the valleys are worthy men, O!

Who long for a lord to whom to repair.

And though that lord is seeking the men, O!

Of me he is all too unaware!

When Liu Bei heard these words, he thought to himself, “Could he be the Sleeping Dragon or Young Phoenix that Master Water Mirror was talking about?” So Liu Bei dismounted, greeted the stranger, and invited him to the county office for a chat.

When Liu Bei asked his name, the man said, “My name is Dan (1) Fu (2). I have long heard that your lordship welcomes talented men, so I have been wanting to come serve you. But I did not dare to approach you too directly, so I started singing on the streets to get your attention.”

So this Dan (1) Fu (2) basically did the third-century version of sending a company a YouTube video of himself saying, “Hey I really want to work for you.” And it paid off. Liu Bei was delighted to meet him and treated him as an honored guest.

“My lord, may I have another look at your horse?” Dan (1) Fu (2) asked.

Liu Bei ordered the horse to be brought over. Dan Fu looked at it and said, "Is this not hex mark? Even though it is a fine horse, it will bring doom to its master. You cannot ride it."

"That has already passed," Liu Bei said as he recounted how the horse almost lost its footing in the river but then leaped across to the opposite bank while he was fleeing from Cai Mao.

"That was the horse rescuing its owner, not dooming him," Dan Fu said. "This horse will curse its master one of these days. But I have an idea to get around that."

"I am all ears," Liu Bei said.

"If your lordship have someone you hate, you can offer this horse to him," Dan Fu said. "Once the horse has brought doom upon that person, you can go back to riding it without worries."

When he heard this, however, Liu Bei's face changed color and he said sternly, "Sir, you just got here. Instead of advising me to be just and fair, you would have me do such harm to another for my own gain. Pardon me for not accepting your advice."

Dan Fu laughed at this response and explained, "I have heard that your lordship is honorable and virtuous, but I did not believe it so readily. So I tested you."

Liu Bei now changed color again and thanked Dan Fu, saying, "I cannot stake any claim to honor or virtue. I hope you will help me in that regard."

"When I was coming to Xinye, I heard the locals singing a jingle that goes, 'Since Imperial Uncle Liu took Xinye in his care, the people roundabout have enough to spare.' From that, it's plain to see that your honor and virtue have benefited the populace."

If this was an interview session, it went really, really well for Dan Fu, because Liu Bei appointed him as military adviser and put him in charge of training the army.

Meanwhile, in the capital Xuchang, Cao Cao was once again entertaining thoughts of conquering Jing Province. He sent his officers Cao Ren and Li Dian, along with Lü (3) Kuang (4) and Lü Xiang (2),

the brothers who defected from Yuan Shao, to garrison 30,000 troops at the city of Fancheng (2,2). From there, they were positioned to threaten Jing Province and to gather intel.

One day, Lü (3) Kuang (4) and Lü (3) Xiang (2) went to see Cao Ren and said, "Liu Bei is garrisoned at Xinye and is recruiting troops, buying horses, and stockpiling provisions. He obviously has great ambitions. We must take him down sooner than later. Ever since we surrendered to the prime minister, we have not rendered the slightest service. So we would like to take 5,000 crack troops to go take Liu Bei's head and offer it to his excellency."

Cao Ren was delighted and granted their request, so the Lü (3) brothers marched toward Xinye with 5,000 men. Liu Bei's scouts quickly reported this development, and Liu Bei sat down with his new military adviser to discuss how to respond.

"We must not allow the enemy to cross into our territory," Dan Fu said. "Have Guan Yu lead a squad of troops and attack from the left to counter the middle of the enemy's army. Have Zhang Fei lead another detachment to take on the enemy's rear. Your lordship and Zhao Yun will lead troops to meet the enemy head on. We will defeat them for sure."

Liu Bei did as Dan Fu suggested. He sent Guan Yu and Zhang Fei on their way, and then personally led 2,000 troops, accompanied by Zhao Yun and Dan Fu, and went out of the city to face the invaders.

Within a few miles of leaving the city, they saw a huge dust storm kicking up from behind a hill. This was Lü (3) Kuang (4) and Lü (3) Xiang (2) arriving with their troops. After the two sides lined up, Liu Bei rode out to his banner and shouted, "Who goes there?! How dare you encroach on my territory?"

Lü (3) Kuang (4) rode out and said, "I am the general Lü Kuang (4). I have come on the prime minister's orders to capture you!"

Liu Bei did not like this answer, so he told Zhao Yun to go out and take care of this upstart. Within just a few bouts, Zhao Yun's spear found its mark, and Lü Kuang (4) fell dead to the ground. Liu Bei

directed his troops to sweep forward. Lü Xiang (2) could not hold his ground, so he led his men and fell back. Just as they were running, Guan Yu and his troops dashed out from the side of the road and poured into the fleeing enemy. This cost Lü Xiang (2) the majority of his troops.

Lü Xiang himself managed to escape, but within just a few miles, another squad of soldiers blocked his way. The general at the front hoisted his spear and shouted, "I am Zhang Fei!" and made straight for Lü Xiang. Lü Xiang could not react in time and Zhang Fei ran him through with the spear. The rest of Lü Xiang's men scattered. Liu Bei's army arrived on the scene at that moment, and most of the defeated troops were captured alive. So Liu Bei returned home in triumph, feasted with Dan Fu, and rewarded his troops.

The remnants of the Lü brothers' soldiers fled back to Fancheng (2,2) to tell Cao Ren that the brothers had been killed and that most of the soldiers had been captured. Cao Ren was stunned by this news and met with his fellow officer Li Dian to discuss what to do next.

"The Lü brothers underestimated the enemy and paid for it with their lives," Li Dian said. "Right now, we should not make a move. We must notify the prime minister at once and ask him to mobilize a large army to take on the enemy. That is the best course of action."

"Not so," Cao Ren said. "We just lost two generals and many troops. We must not allow this defeat to go unavenged for long. A piddly little place like Xinye does not warrant calling on his excellency or a big army."

"Liu Bei is a hero among men; we must not underestimate him," Li Dian cautioned.

"Why are you afraid of him?" Cao Ren asked, as he was getting a little annoyed at this naysayer.

"As the Art of War says, if you know yourself and your foe, you will always triumph," Li Dian answered. "I am not afraid of battle; I am just afraid that we would not win."

"How dare you have doubts?" Cao Ren said angrily. "I will capture Liu Bei alive for sure!"

“General, if you go, then I will stay and guard Fancheng (2,2),” Li Dian said.

“No. If you do not go, then it shows that you really do have doubts,” Cao Ren said.

Well, Li Dian was left with no choice, so he and Cao Ren set out with 25,000 troops that night, crossed over the river, and marched toward Xinye, intent on razing it to the ground.

In Xinye, after celebrating their victory, Dan Fu said to Liu Bei, “Once Cao Ren gets word that we have killed his two generals, he will no doubt mobilize a large army to come attack.”

“How should we counter?” Liu Bei asked.

“If he mobilizes the bulk of his troops to attack us, then Fancheng (2,2) will be vulnerable, and we can take this opportunity to seize it,” Dan Fu said.

Liu Bei asked what he had in mind, and Dan Fu whispered a few things in his ears. Liu Bei was delighted by what he heard, so he began preparations. Just then, scouts reported that Cao Ren has led a large army across the river.

“Just as I expected,” Dan Fu said. He then asked Liu Bei to lead troops out to meet the enemy.

When the two sides met, Zhao Yun came out from Liu Bei’s side, while Li Dian rode out from Cao Ren’s side. After they fought for about 10 bouts, Li Dian figured that he could not hold his own, so he retreated back to his lines. Zhao Yun gave chase, but was turned back by arrows. So both sides returned to their respective camps.

When Li Dian reported back to Cao Ren in camp, he said, “The enemy is strong; we must not underestimate them. It’s best to return to Fancheng.”

But Cao Ren was in no mood for this wet blanket.

“Before we set out, you were already damaging my troops’ morale!” Cao Ren said angrily. “And now, you are throwing fights. You should be executed.”

So Cao Ren called for the guards to take Li Dian out and behead him, but the other officers begged for leniency, and Cao Ren caved. He spared Li Dian, but reassigned him to the rear of the army while Cao Ren himself led the vanguard.

The next day, Cao Ren's troops beat the war drums and advanced, lining up in a special formation. Cao Ren then sent a messenger to Liu Bei to ask him if he recognized the formation. This was basically a challenge: I dare you to come attack my formation.

Dan Fu found a high vantage point from which to study the formation. He then told Liu Bei, "This is called the 'Formation of Eight Impregnable Gates.' The eight gates, or joints between units, are Desist, Survive, Injure, Confound, Exhibit, Perish, Surprise, and Liberate. If you enter through the gates Survive, Exhibit, or Liberate, things will go in your favor. If you enter through Injure, Surprise, or Desist, you will suffer casualties. If you enter through Confound or Perish, then you're doomed.

"However, although the eight gates are deployed perfectly, the central axis is missing. If you storm in from the southeastern corner through the Survive gate, move west, and exit through the Exhibit gate, this formation will fall into chaos."

So Liu Bei sent out word for his men to hold their line. He then ordered Zhao Yun to lead 500 troops and attack the formation as Dan Fu instructed. Zhao Yun, hoisting his spear and spurring on his horse, led his men and dashed into the formation from the southeast corner. Cao Ren fell back toward the north to try to lure Zhao Yun in, but Zhao Yun ignored him and instead stormed out of the west gate. He then turned and fought his way back through toward the southeast corner. This threw Cao Ren's troops into disarray, and Liu Bei took the opportunity to attack, sending the enemy scurrying.

Dan Fu ordered a halt to the pursuit, and Liu Bei's army returned to the city. As for Cao Ren, after this setback, he was finally starting to see Li Dian's point, so he summoned Li Dian to figure out what to do.

“Liu Bei must have a capable man in his ranks; otherwise he could not have broken my formation,” Cao Ren said.

“Even though we are here, my mind is preoccupied with the safety of Fancheng,” Li Dian said.

“We will raid Liu Bei’s camp tonight,” Cao Ren said. “If we win, then we will figure out our next move. If we cannot win, then we will return to Fancheng.”

“You cannot,” Li Dian said. “Liu Bei will no doubt be prepared.”

But once again, Cao Ren got sick of Li Dian’s cautious ways.

“How can you wage war without taking chances?” he said. So he dismissed Li Dian’s advice again and decided to raid Liu Bei’s camp around 9 o’clock that night, with himself leading the front and Li Dian bringing up the rear.

In Liu Bei’s camp, Dan Fu and Liu Bei were just discussing things when northeast winds kicked up. This being an alternate reality where weather is a reliable predictor of events, Dan Fu said to Liu Bei, “Cao Ren must be coming to raid our camp tonight.”

“How should we counter?” Liu Bei asked.

“I already have something in mind,” Dan Fu said with a smile. So he handed out secret orders.

That night, around 9 o’clock, Cao Ren’s troops approached Liu Bei’s camp. But they saw fire shooting up all around the camp. Cao Ren now knew the enemy was prepared for him, so he hurriedly ordered retreat. At that moment, Liu Bei’s general Zhao Yun swept in with a squad of troops. Cao Ren did not have time to turn around and go back to his own camp, so he fled north toward the river.

When he got there, he started looking for boats to cross, but just then another squad of enemy troops showed up, led by Zhang Fei. Cao Ren put up a desperate fight before Li Dian helped him into a boat and cross over the river. As for Cao Ren’s troops, however, most of them drowned in the river.

After crossing to the other side, Cao Ren hurried to Fancheng (2,2). When he got there, he ordered his men to shout for the guards to lower the drawbridge. But at the sound of a drum from atop the city walls, a detachment of soldiers sprinted out of the city, led by a general who shouted, "I have taken this city!" This was none other than Guan Yu.

Stunned, Cao Ren turned and fled. Guan Yu gave chase, and Cao Ren ended up losing another big chunk of his troops. Now, he beat a hasty retreat all the way back to Xuchang. Along the way, he had his men ask around and found out that Liu Bei's victory was all thanks to his new military strategist, Dan Fu.

Now, as for Liu Bei, after this complete victory, he led his army into Fancheng, and the prefect of the County, Liu Mi (4), came out to greet him. Once order was restored to the city, Liu Mi (4), who was also a member of the imperial clan, invited Liu Bei to his house for a banquet. During the banquet, Liu Bei noticed a dignified looking man standing by Liu Mi's (4) side.

"Who is he?" Liu Bei asked Liu Mi.

"He is my nephew, Kou (4) Feng (1). He became my ward after his parents died," Liu Mi said.

Liu Bei took an instant liking to the young man and wanted to claim him as an adopted son. Liu Mi agreed and had the young man prostrate to Liu Bei, and they changed his last name to Liu, so he was now Liu (2) Feng (1).

Liu Bei brought his new son back to see his brothers and told the young man to call them uncle. But Guan Yu was not pleased to see his new nephew.

"Brother, you already have a son," he said to Liu Bei. "What use have you for the son of another man? This will cause trouble down the road."

"If I treat him as my own son, then he would no doubt treat me as his own father, so what trouble could there be?" Liu Bei said.

Well, Guan Yu was still not happy about this, but what's done is done, and he said no more. Meanwhile, Liu Bei and Dan Fu talked it over, and decided to leave Zhao Yun with 1,000 troops to oversee Fancheng, while Liu Bei led the rest of his troops back to Xinye.

The former guardians of Fancheng, Cao Ren and Li Dian, made it back to Xuchang and went to see Cao Cao. They both wept and prostrated on the ground, recounting their defeat and asking to be punished for their failure. Cao Cao, however, gave them a pass.

"Victory and defeat are common in war," he said. "But do we know who helped Liu Bei draw up these strategies?"

When Cao Ren told him it was Dan Fu, Cao Cao's reaction was, "Who the heck is Dan Fu?"

"His name is not Dan Fu," said one of his advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), with a smile. "This man grew up with a fondness for sword play. In his youth, he killed someone to avenge a friend and tried to conceal his identity and flee. But he was captured. When the magistrate asked him for his name, he refused to answer, so the magistrate tied him onto a cart and wheeled him around town while beating a drum, demanding that the townsfolk identify him. But even those who knew him did not dare to name him. Later, his collaborators helped him escape, and he assumed a new name and fled. He dedicated himself to a scholar's life, studying with all the learned men in our area, including Sima Hui (1). His name is Xu (2) Shu (4). Dan Fu is but an alias."

"How does Xu (2) Shu's (4) talent compare to yours?" Cao Cao asked Cheng Yu.

"He has 10 times my talent," Cheng Yu answered.

"What a shame that he serves Liu Bei!" Cao Cao lamented. "Now Liu Bei has added wings. What should we do?"

"Even though Xu (2) Shu (4) is there, if your excellency wants him in your service, it's not hard to bring him here," Cheng Yu said.

“How?”

“Xu Shu is very filial. His father died when he was young, but his old mother is still alive. His younger brother has recently passed away, so there’s no one to take care of his mother. Your excellency can have her brought to Xuchang and order her to write to her son to summon him. Xu Shu would come for sure.”

Cao Cao was delighted to hear this, so he immediately dispatched men to fetch Xu Shu’s mother. They returned within a day with her, and Cao Cao rolled out the red carpet for her.

“I have heard that your son Xu Shu is a rare talent,” he said to her. “But right now he is in Xinye, serving the rebel Liu Bei. This is like a piece of fine jade falling into a mud puddle. What a shame. I would like to trouble you to write a letter and summon him back to Xuchang. I will recommend him to the emperor, and he will be rewarded handsomely.”

At that, Cao Cao ordered the attendants to bring out paper, ink, and brush.

“What sort of man is Liu Bei?” Xu Shu’s mother asked.

“He is a nobody, pretending to be the imperial uncle. Completely untrustworthy. He is what they call a noble man on the outside, a base man within.”

When she heard this, Xu Shu’s mother said sternly, “Lies! I have long heard that Liu Bei is a descendant of Prince Jing (4) of Zhongshan (1,1), the great-great-grandson of Emperor Jing (3), that he is humble toward men of talent and treats others with self-effacing respect. He is renowned for his humanity. Young and old alike, and even the herdsmen and wood-gatherers know his name. He is a true hero of the land. He is a truly worthy master for my son. Now, as for you, you may be the prime minister of the Han in name, but in truth you are a traitor of the Han. Yet you dare to call Liu Bei a traitor and try to trick me into making my son abandon the light for the darkness. Have you no shame?!!”

At that, she grabbed the inkstone and tried to hit Cao Cao with it. Cao Cao was fuming after getting this earful from her, so he ordered the guards to drag her outside and execute her. But Cheng Yu quickly stopped them and went to see Cao Cao.

“Xu Shu’s mother is trying to make your excellency kill her,” he said. “If you do that, you will be saddled with a dishonorable reputation while confirming her virtue. Also, if she dies, then Xu Shu will be totally committed to helping Liu Bei so that he can seek revenge on you. Why not keep her here instead, so that Xu Shu’s mind will be here even if his body is elsewhere. Even as he serves Liu Bei, he will not be able to do so wholeheartedly. Besides, if you keep her alive, I have a way to lure Xu Shu here to serve you.”

Cao Cao consented and put Xu Shu’s mother in a house under watch. Cheng Yu went to visit her often and told her a bald face lie that he and Xu Shu were sworn brothers. He then proceeded to treat her like his own mother and often sent her gifts along with a handwritten note. As was the custom, Xu Shu’s mother always wrote a thank-you note. Once he got enough notes from her, Cheng Yu learned how to imitate her handwriting, and yeah, you can see where this was going.

So one day, in Xinye, a messenger arrived from Xuchang, asking to see Dan Fu. The guards led him in to see Dan Fu slash Xu Shu. When Xu Shu heard that there was a message from his mother, he quickly summoned the messenger, who told him, “I am a courier. Your mother asked me to deliver this letter.”

Xu Shu read the letter, which said:

Your younger brother recently died, leaving me without any family. In my hour of grief, Prime Minister Cao sent men to bring me to Xuchang. They said that you had turned against the court and they were going to hold me responsible. Fortunately, Cheng Yu intervened and saved my life. If you submit, then my life will be spared. When you get this letter, for the sake of the hardship your mother

endured to raise you, come at once to fulfill your filial duties. Then we can bide our time until we can return home and tend to our garden. That way, we can avoid calamity. My life hangs by a thread. I hope you will save me! Need I implore further?"

After reading this, Xu Shu's tears flowed like a spring. He went to see Liu Bei with letter in hand. To see how he and Liu Bei are going to resolve this, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.