

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 46.

When we last left off, Liu Bei had just come up empty on his trip to see Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang was not home, and there was no hint of when he might be back. As Liu Bei and his brothers headed back, they ran into one of Zhuge Liang's friends, Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2). When Cui Zhouping asked him why he wanted to see Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei told him that it was to ask for a way to end the chaos afflicting the realm.

But Cui Zhouping smiled and said, "Sir, you are bent on ending the chaos. As benevolent an intention as that may be, you should recognize that order and chaos have come and gone quite unpredictably since ancient times. When the Supreme Ancestor began his rebellion and toppled the corrupt Qin Dynasty, chaos gave way to order. But after 200 years of peace, Wang (2) Mang (3) usurped the throne, and order gave way to chaos. Then Emperor Guangwu (1,3) resurrected the Han, and chaos once again turned into order. It has been 200 years since then, and after such a prolonged period of order, we now find conflict all around us once again. This shows that we are entering another period of chaos, one that cannot be ended quickly.

"You are trying to ask Zhuge Liang to reverse the course of heaven, earth, and destiny, and I fear that it will be futile. As the saying goes, 'Adapt to heaven and enjoy ease; oppose it and toil in vain.' It is also said that 'None can deduct from the reckoning, or force what is preordained.' "

So Cui Zhouping was basically telling Liu Bei to just go with the flow and not fight it. Liu Bei, as you might imagine, was not so enthusiastic about this recommendation.

"Sir, there is great insight in your words," Liu Bei said. "However, I am a member of the House of Han, and I must try to maintain the dynasty's rule. I cannot leave such things to reckoning or fate."

“Well, I am a mere mountain rustic,” Cui Zhouping answered, “not fit to discuss the affairs of empire. You honored me with your profound question, and I expressed myself too rashly.”

In other words, dude, you asked, so don't blame me if you don't like the answer.

“Sir, you have honored me with your insight,” Liu Bei said. “Do you know where Zhuge Liang went?”

“Oh, I was just about to go call on him, so I don't know.”

“Would you be willing to accompany me back to Xinye County?”

“I am uncultured and too fond of leisure,” Cui Zhouping said. “I have long given up any desire for fame or success. But we might meet again someday.”

With that, Cui Zhouping made a deep bow and went on his way.

“[Scoff] We didn't see Zhuge Liang, but we ran into that lazy bookworm!” Zhang Fei said. “He wasted so much of our time on idle chit chat!”

“That is how recluses express themselves,” Liu Bei told him. And the three brothers rode back to Xinye.

A few days passed, and Liu Bei sent someone to see if Zhuge Liang had returned, and they reported back that yes, he had. So Liu Bei immediately ordered his men to prepare the horses. Zhang Fei, however, was a little put out.

“This guy is just a country bumpkin,” he said to Liu Bei. “Surely he's not deserving of a personal visit from you, brother. Just send someone to summon him here.”

This remark earned Zhang Fei an admonishment from Liu Bei.

“Have you not heard of the saying by the sage Mencius that ‘Trying to meet a worthy man in the wrong way is as bad as closing the door on an invited guest’? Zhuge Liang is one of the great talents in this world. How can I just summon him?!”

So once again, the three brothers set out for Longzhong (2,1) to call on Zhuge Liang. It was the middle of winter, the air was cold, and the sky was covered with gray, somber clouds. After they had traveled for a few miles, they turned into a cutting northern wind, and a heavy snow began to fall, making the mountains gleam like arrowheads of white jade and giving the woods a silvery sheen.

“It is bitterly cold, too cold even for battle,” Zhang Fei said. “Yet we are traveling all this way to see some useless bumpkin. Why don’t we go back to Xinye and get out of this snowstorm?”

“I want to show Zhuge Liang my determination and sincerity,” Liu Bei said. “If you are afraid of the cold, then you can go on back by yourself.”

“I am not afraid of death, so what’s a little cold? I just don’t want you to do all this for nothing!”

“That’s enough. Let’s just keep going.”

So they pressed on through the snow. As they neared Zhuge Liang’s thatched lodge, they suddenly heard the sound of a couple men singing from a wineshop on the roadside. The songs are kind of long and filled with historical and cultural references that would take too long to get into here, so I will not recite them. Instead, I will link to this passage online in the website post for this episode. So go read them there. In summary, though, the verses sang of great ambitions and waiting for the opportunity to realize them. When they were done singing, the two men clapped and laughed out loud.

Hearing the subject matter and air of their songs, Liu Bei thought, “Sleeping Dragon must be in there!” So he dismounted and entered the wineshop. Inside, he saw two men seated across from each other at a table. One had a light complexion and a long beard, while the other had a fresh, ageless look.

“Sirs, which one of you is Master Sleeping Dragon,” Liu Bei said as he greeted them.

“Who are you, sir? And what business do you have with Sleeping Dragon?” the man with the long beard asked.

“I am Liu Bei, and I would like to consult you about how to save the world and bring peace back to the people,” Liu Bei answered, thinking that this was Zhuge Liang.

“We are not Sleeping Dragon; we’re his friends,” the long-bearded man said. “I am Shi (2) Guangyuan (3,2), and this is Meng (4) Gongwei (1,1).”

So no dice again for Liu Bei, but he hid his disappointment well and said happily, “I have long heard of your names, and it is fortunate that I get to meet you. I have horses with me. Would you two like to accompany me to Sleeping Dragon’s residence?”

“We are lazy country folk,” Shi (2) Guangyuan (3,2) said. “We know nothing of the affairs of state, so you need not waste your time with us. Please go seek Sleeping Dragon yourself.”

So once again, Liu Bei gets the cold shoulder from Zhuge Liang’s friends, who were apparently just too cool to hang out with the imperial uncle. He bid the two goodbye and resumed his journey. When they arrived at Zhuge Liang’s home, he knocked on the door. When the young lad answered, Liu Bei asked, “Is your master at home today?”

“He is reading in the parlor,” the boy said.

Wow! That was ... kind of easy. Liu Bei was delighted and followed the boy into the residence. When they got to the inner door, he noticed a couplet on the wall, which read:

Only through austerity and quiescence can one’s purpose shine forth;

Only through concentration and self-control can one’s distant goal be reached.

Just as Liu Bei was reading this couplet, he heard someone singing inside. So he stood by the door and peeked in. In the parlor of the thatched hut, he saw a young man sitting by a stove, with his hands around his knees. The young man chanted these lines:

The phoenix winging on the air
Will choose no tree
Except the wu (2).
The scholar keeping to his lair
Will have no lord except the true.
Oh let me till these furrowed fields,
By this sweet home
That I call mine.
In books and song I place my dreams
And wait the time
The fates assign.

Well, if this sure sounds like someone who dubs himself Sleeping Dragon. So when the young man was done with his song, Liu Bei stepped into the room and bowed.

“I, Liu Bei, have long held you in admiration,” he said. “But I have not had the opportunity to meet you. Recently, thanks to Xu (2) Shu’s (4) recommendation, I came to pay my respects, but you were not home. Today, I have come in spite of the wind and snow, and now have the great fortune to catch a glimpse of your learned countenance.”

The young man quickly bowed in return and said, “General, are you Liu Bei? Here to see my brother?”

Wait, what?

“Are you not Sleeping Dragon either?” Liu Bei asked with surprise.

“I am Sleeping Dragon’s younger brother, Zhuge Jun (1),” the young man replied. “We are three brothers. The eldest, Zhuge Jin (3), is currently in the service of Sun Quan in the Southlands. Zhuge Liang is the second brother.”

“Is Sleeping Dragon at home?”

“Yesterday his friend Cui (1) Zhouping (1,2) came by and took him out sightseeing.”

“Where did they go?”

“They might be gliding across rivers and lakes on a small boat, or visiting monks and Daoists in the mountains, or going to meet friends in country villages, or strumming their lutes and playing chess in some cavern. My brother’s whereabouts are hard to guess.”

Well, Liu Bei was probably a little annoyed with Cui Zhouping right now. First he tries to talk Liu Bei into giving up his grand ambition altogether. And now he’s dragged Zhuge Liang to god knows where just as Liu Bei was coming to visit. But what are you gonna do.

“I can’t believe how rotten my fate is,” Liu Bei said. “That’s twice now that I have missed meeting this great talent!”

Zhuce Jun (1) asked Liu Bei to sit for a bit while he served tea, but Zhang Fei, already grumpy, was in no mood to linger.

“Since that scholar is not in, let’s go home, brother,” he said.

“Since we have come all this way, how can we leave without a brief word?” Liu Bei told him.

He then asked Zhuce Jun (1), “I have heard that your esteemed brother is renowned for his master of military arts. They say he applies himself to the subject daily. Can you tell me more?”

“I know nothing of that,” Zhuce Jun said.

“What’s the point of asking him?” Zhang Fei said. “Brother, the storm is picking up. Let’s go home.”

Liu Bei told Zhang Fei to shush, but then Zhuge Jun said, "Since my brother is not home, I dare not keep you long. He will come return your visit another day."

"I dare not trouble your brother to make the trip," Liu Bei said. "I will call again in a few days. May I borrow a brush and paper to leave a letter for your brother to express my sincerity?"

Zhuge Jun brought out the brush, ink, and paper. Liu Bei thawed the frozen bristles of the brush with his breath and wrote the following:

I, Liu Bei, have long held you in admiration. I have twice come to present myself, only to go away without meeting you, which greatly disappointed me. I am humbly mindful that as a remote kinsman of the imperial house, I have enjoyed prestige and rank far beyond my merits. Whenever I think of the sad state of the court, where our laws and customs are crumbling and being swept aside while countless contenders subvert the state and vicious factions abuse their sovereign, my heart breaks and my gall is rent. Whatever sincerity I may offer to the cause of aiding the house of Han is wasted because I lack strategy. I admire your humanity, compassion, loyalty, and honor. I pray you will unfold your mighty talents and vision, which are comparable to those of Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2) and Zhang (1) Liang (2). If so, the country and the court will be blessed! I am forwarding this to convey my intention to come pay homage to you yet again, after I have undergone further ceremonial purification.. I hereby respectfully offer my poor, simple sincerity and entreat your discerning consideration.

The letter written, Liu Bei took his leave and went back outside. Zhuge Jun accompanied him outside the residence to see him off. After reiterating how sincere he was, Liu Bei was getting on his horse when the young boy pointed in the distance and said, "The old master is coming!"

Liu Bei looked up and saw that on the other side of a small bridge came a man in winter headdress and fox furs and riding on a donkey. Behind him followed a youth in simple black clothing, carrying a gourd of wine. As he turned on to the bridge, the rider sang:

Nightlong, north winds chill,
Myriad-leagued, dusky clouds expand.
Caperingsnow through an infinite sky
Transforms the never-changing land.
He looks into the ether's vastitude:
Are jade dragons at war up there,
Strewing their scales every which way,
And filling up the hollow sphere?
Alone,
Sighing for the plum trees' battered blooms.

Well, anyone who's singing about dragons and using SAT words like vastitude has got to be Sleeping Dragon. That's what Liu Bei figured, so he quickly hopped off his horse again, went up to meet the rider, bowed, and said, "Sir, it must be for you to brave this cold! I have long been waiting for you!"

The rider seemed bewildered and hurried dismounted from his donkey to return the bow. Zhuge Jun, meanwhile, came up from behind Liu Bei and said, "This is not my brother. He is my brother's father-in-law, Huang (2) Chengyan (2,4)."

So yeah, Liu Bei's obsession with Zhuge Liang is totally messing with him now, since he seems to think everyone he comes across around these parts was Sleeping Dragon.

"I was listening to your song just now," he said to Zhuge Liang's father-in-law. "The words are so elevated and poignant."

"I was reading the 'Liangfu (2,4) Elegies' at my son-in-law's home once, and remembered that passage," Huang (2) Chengyan (2,4) said. "When I was crossing that bridge, I saw plum flowers near the fence, and they moved me to sing the words. I never expected an honored guest to be listening."

"Have you seen your son-in-law?" Liu Bei asked.

"I was coming to call on him."

Well, disappointed once again, Liu Bei took his leave and headed back. By now, the wind and snow had grown fierce. As he looked back at Sleeping Dragon Ridge, Liu Bei could not help but feel overwhelmed by sadness and uncertainty. He has made two not-so-short treks out here, and all he has done is meet seemingly everyone within six degrees of Zhuge Liang and listened to them sing, but not Zhuge Liang himself. It was like a giant musical number mocking his meager lot in life. As a poet later wrote:

That stormy day he sought the sage in vain,

And sore at heart, he starred home again.

The creek bridge, frozen; the land, sheer ice

his trembling horse has many miles to cross.

Pear-petal flakes descending from the skies,

Antic willow puffs darting at his eyes,

He turns and halts to view the scene behind:

Banked with snow, the silvered ridges shine.

After Liu Bei returned to Xinye County, time seemed to crawl by until spring rolled around again. This time, before he set out, Liu Bei took the extra precaution of asking diviners to cast for a propitious time to make the trek. Once the date was set, he abstained from meat and wine for three days, bathed, smeared himself with ritual oils, and changed his clothes.

All these earnest acts done, Liu Bei prepared to set out for Sleeping Dragon Ridge once again with his brothers. You can imagine Zhang Fei's reaction to this. But this time, even Guan Yu was feeling a little miffed.

"Brother," Guan Yu said, "you have already done Zhuge Liang too much honor by personally calling on him twice. I think this Zhuge Liang must be all reputation and no substance, so he's been avoiding you. Why are you so hung up on him?"

"Not so, brother," Liu Bei replied. "Have you not heard of how, during the Spring and Autumn Period, Prince Huan (2) of the kingdom of Qi (2) tried five times before meeting the recluse who turned out to be the great adviser Guan (3) Zhong (4)? Getting to meet a great talent like Zhuge Liang may require even more of us."

"Brother, you're wrong!" Zhang Fei cut in. "How can a mere country bumpkin be called a great talent? There's no need for you to go this time. I will go, and if he doesn't come willingly, I will tie him up and bring him here!"

This earned Zhang Fei another shush from Liu Bei.

"Have you not heard of how the founder of the Zhou Dynasty presented himself to the great strategist Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2)? If he can show such respect to a wise man, where do you get off being so disrespectful?! You can stay home this time. I will go with brother Guan."

"If you're both going, there's no way I will stay behind!" Zhang Fei said.

"If you go, you must not be rude."

After Zhang Fei reluctantly said fine, the three headed out once more.

When they were within a quarter mile or so of Zhuge Liang's house, Liu Bei dismounted and continued on foot. Along the way, they ran into Zhuge Jun (1), and Liu Bei greeted him and asked if Zhuge Liang was home.

"He came home last night," Zhuge Jun said. "You will get to meet him today."

After that, Zhuge Jun continued on his way.

"We will get to meet Master Sleeping Dragon at last!" Liu Bei said excitedly.

But Zhang Fei was less enthusiastic. "That Zhuge Jun is too rude!" he said. "He could have accompanied us to his house. Why did he just go on his way?"

"We each have our own business to tend to. Don't be unreasonable," Liu Bei shushed him.

When they arrived at the house and knocked, the young lad came to answer again.

"Young acolyte," Liu Bei said, "may I trouble you to tell your master that I have come to pay my respects?"

A little side note here: In calling the boy an acolyte, Liu Bei is showing tremendous respect for Zhuge Liang, because only attendants to great sages are generally referred to as such. Well, the acolyte slash boy answered, "My master is home today, but he is taking a nap in the parlor."

"In that case, hold off on telling him, Liu Bei said. He then told Guan Yu and Zhang Fei to wait by the front gate, while he slowly walked inside. He saw Sleeping Dragon, umm, sleeping on a couch in the parlor, so Liu Bei stood respectfully outside, at the foot of the steps leading into the thatched hut.

A good while passed, and Sleeping Dragon was still snoozin'. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were curious what was going on, so they went inside the gate to see. When they saw Liu Bei still standing there, Zhang Fei flew into a rage.

“That scholar is too arrogant!” he said to Guan Yu. “He knows my brother is standing at the foot of the steps, yet he still lies in his room pretending to be asleep! Let me go to the back of the house and start a fire. We’ll see if he gets up then!”

Guan Yu did all he could to restrain his brother, and Liu Bei now shushed them both and shoed them back out to the front gate to wait. When he turned around, he saw Sleeping Dragon turn, but then he simply rolled over and continued to sleep facing inward. The young attendant wanted to go wake him and tell him that he’s got visitors, but Liu Bei stopped him again.

Two more hours passed like this, and FINALLY, Zhuge Liang woke up. As he yawned and stretched, he recited these lines:

From this great dream who would waken first?

All along I’ve known my part to play:

To sleep in spring time, and to ask no more.

Though outside, longer, longer grow the days.

After he sat up, Zhuge Liang asked his attendant, “Are there any visitors from the outside world?”

“Imperial Uncle Liu is here. He has been waiting for a long time,” the lad answered.

Zhuce Liang immediately stood up. “Why did you not tell me earlier? Let me go change,” he said.

He then went into the back room. It was a while longer before he came back out with his attire tidied.

Finally, Liu Bei got to behold the man, the myth, the legend, the Sleeping Dragon. Zhuge Liang stood about 6 feet tall. His face was like gleaming jade, and he wore a plaited silken band around his head to hold up his hair. He was cloaked in a robe adorned with patterns of cranes, and he had the buoyant air of an immortal.

Liu Bei now prostrated on the ground and said, "I, Liu Bei, a distant relative of the house of Han and a foolish man from Zhuo (1) District, have long heard of your great name. It reverberates in my ears like thunder. I have previously twice come to pay my respects, but did not get to meet you, so I left a letter under my worthless name. I never learned whether it was brought to your discerning attention."

"I am but a simple rustic of Nanyang, negligent and indolent by nature," Zhuge Liang said. "I am indebted to you, general, for the great pains you have taken to come visit me."

After the pleasantries were over, the two sat down, and the attendant brought them tea. After tea, Zhuge Liang said, "Your concern for the people and the country was abundantly clear in your letter. But I am young and untalented. I fear you may be asking the wrong person."

"I doubt that Sima Hui and Xu Shu's praise for you is unfounded," Liu Bei said. "I just pray that you will not think me too lowly and unworthy of your edifying instruction."

"Sima Hui and Xu Shu are two of the land's top scholars," Zhuge Liang said. "But I am a mere tiller of the soil. I dare not discuss the affairs of state. Those two gentlemen have recommended me too highly. General, why would you pass up fine jade for an ordinary pebble?"

"A true man who possesses the talent to shape the times cannot waste his years among the groves and springs," Liu Bei said. "I hope you will take pity on the living souls of this land and enlighten me."

"I would like to hear your aspirations, general," Zhuge Liang said with a smile.

Liu Bei now dismissed everyone else, shifted his mat closer to Zhuge Liang's, and said:

"The house of Han teeters on ruin. Unscrupulous officials have stolen the mandate of rule. Despite my limitations, I have tried to promote the great principle of true allegiance throughout the

empire, but my shallow knowledge and inadequate methods have kept me from achieving anything. It would be a blessing if you would relieve my ignorance and keep our cause alive.”

To this, Zhuge Liang replied, “Ever since Dong Zhuo’s sedition, powerful figures have risen up all through the land. Cao Cao’s strength did not match Yuan Shao’s, yet he was able to defeat Yuan. This was not only due to luck, but also due to wise planning. Right now, Cao Cao has a vast army, and he controls the regional lords through his hold on the emperor. You cannot take him on right now.

“As for Sun Quan, his family has ruled the Southlands for three generations now, and he has a firm grip. His territory is difficult to reach, and his people are devoted to him. Thus, you can only try to gain the Southlands as an ally, not as a target for conquest.

“However, Jing Province commands the Han (4) and Mian (3) Rivers to the north. To the south it draws wealth from Nanhai (2,3). In the east it borders the Southlands, and to the west it offers access to the region of the Riverlands. This is a place to fight for. Only a worthy ruler can hold it. This is the land that heaven wants to offer you, general. Do you not want it?

“As for Yi (4) Province to the west, it is strategically located. It is an inaccessible frontier province with vast fertile wildlands. It is a kingdom rightly called Heaven’s Cornucopia. The Supreme Ancestor built the foundation of his conquest of the empire there. Right now, that province’s imperial protector, Liu Zhang (1), is feeble. His people are well off and his realm is thriving, yet he does not know how to care for either. The talented men of that region are wishing for an enlightened master.

“General, you are a member of the house of Han. You are known throughout the land for your trustworthiness and righteousness, as someone who seeks men of merit. If you control the provinces of Jing (1) and Yi (4), guard their strategic points well, come to friendly terms with the border tribes to the west and south, ally with Sun Quan to the east, and launch a program of reform within your territories, then you can wait for the situation to change. When the time is right, send a top general to lead an army north toward Luoyang by way of Wancheng (3,2), while you yourself launch an offensive

from the Riverlands through the Qinchuan (2,1) region. The masses will welcome you with open arms then. When that comes to fruition, your great endeavor will be complete, and the house of Han will be revitalized.

“THIS, general, is the course I would plot for you. It remains for you to consider it.”

When he had finished laying out this grand vision, Zhuge Liang asked his attendant to bring out a map and hanged it up. He pointed and said to Liu Bei, “This is a map of the 54 counties of the Riverlands. If you want to establish your hegemony, let Cao Cao have the north and the advantage of heavenly circumstances. Let Sun Quan have the south and the advantage of geography. You may have the hearts of the people. Take Jing Province first as your home base. Then take the Riverlands to make yourself the third leg in a tripod cauldron of power. Then you can set your sights on the northern heartland.”

Well, that was certainly a helluva grand vision from Zhuge Liang. But Liu Bei had just a teensy little hangup about the whole proposal. To see what his problem is, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.