

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 47.

Last time, on his third attempt, Liu Bei finally got to meet Zhuge Liang, and the man did not disappoint. Zhuge Liang quickly laid out his grand plan for Liu Bei to establish himself as a power player: Let Cao Cao have the north and Sun Quan have the South. Take Jing (1) Province first as your home base, then take Yi (4) Province to the west to build your own little empire. Then bide your time for the right moment to invade the northern heartland.

It was quite an impressive plan, and it made Liu Bei rise from his seat and bow in thanks. However, Liu Bei also voiced some concern.

“Master, your words have opened the thicket that had blocked my view and parted the clouds so that I can see the sky. However, the imperial protectors of Jing and Yi Province, Liu Biao and Liu Zhang, are both my kinsmen in the imperial clan. How can I bear to take what is theirs?”

“From studying the stars,” Zhuge Liang replied, “I can tell that Liu Biao is not long for this world. And Liu Zhang is not a worthwhile ruler. Both of these territories will belong to you in time.”

When he heard this, Liu Bei prostrated and pressed his head to the ground to show his gratitude and respect to Zhuge Liang. When he was done, he said, “Though I am of meager standing and worth, I hope you will not spurn me and will leave these hills to help me. I will obediently follow your enlightening instruction.”

So you, a man who has no army to call his own and who oversees a meager county, want me, a recluse of great repute, to leave my scenic, peaceful thatched hut in the monkey-filled bamboo groves -- monkeys!! bamboo groves!! for crying out loud! -- to help you beat seemingly inestimable odds and piece a fractured empire back together? Even if he was willing, Zhuge Liang could not let this opportunity to pass without bargaining for a bigger paycheck, more vacation days, or something.

“I have long been content to till the soil here,” he said to Liu Bei. “I am too lazy to answer the demands of the outside world. I cannot oblige.”

This response brought Liu Bei to tears.

“Master, will you not think of the poor souls of this land?” he said as he wept so hard that his sleeve was soaked through as he wiped his eyes.

Seeing how earnest Liu Bei’s entreaty was, Zhuge Liang relented.

“If you will have me, general, then I will do what little I can to help you.”

Liu Bei was ecstatic. He immediately called in his brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, who had been waiting out by the front gate this whole time, and told them to pay their respects and offer up the gold and gifts they had brought. Zhuge Liang tried to decline because, well, it’s the Chinese thing to do. Liu Bei insisted, which was also the Chinese thing to do.

“Think of this not as a formal petition for a man of great worth, but simply as a humble token of my appreciation,” he said to Zhuge Liang.

Since he put it that way, Zhuge Liang at last accepted.

That night, Liu Bei and his brothers stayed in Zhuge Liang’s home. The next morning, Zhuge Liang’s younger brother, Zhuge Jun (1), returned from running errands. Zhuge Liang told him, “The imperial uncle has bestowed on me the honor of paying me three visits. I have no choice but to leave and help him. You must tend to our fields here. Do not let them lie fallow. Once my task is done, I will return to live in seclusion once again.

In later times, a wistful poem commented on this remark:

About to soar, he felt himself drawn back;

His task complete, he will think of these parting words.

Only for the monarch and his pleadings

Did the star fall on the autumn wind-swept plains.

It's pretty difficult to overstate the significance of this moment, because it's here that the novel really turns and we actually begin to see how we'll end up with three kingdoms instead of one kingdom being run by Cao Cao and his invincible army. Zhuge Liang is pretty much THE pivotal figure in our story, and we will have ample opportunities to see why as we continue. But a momentous occasion like this cannot pass without at least one more poem, right? So here's one:

The Supreme Ancestor his snow-white sword drew

And the silver serpent in the Mangdang (2,4) Hills he slew.

He quelled the Qin, smote the Chu, and claim on the capital lay.

After ten scores passed, his line look as though it would not survive,

But in Luoyang did mighty Emperor Guang Wu its fortunes revive.

The throne remained secure until the reigns of Huan (2) and Ling (2):

Emperor Xian (4) was moved to Xuchang as court rules were faltering.

Bold spirits now rose at every turn:

Cao Cao seized power, with the times aiding his rise;

In the south, the Sun clan built their enterprise.

Lost and sorely tried, Liu Bei roamed the land.

Off in Xinye, he took to heart the people's lament.

Nanyang's Sleeping Dragon dreamed great dreams;

In his mind were strategies by the ream.

Thanks to the parting advice that Xu Shu made,

Three visits to the thatched cottage did Liu Bei pay.

Zhuge Liang, at the age of three times nine

Packed his books and lute and left his fields behind.

“Take Jing Province first, and then the west!”

Here was a plan that could alter paths preset.

Across the realm his words stirred wind and thunder.

With a smile did he juggle stars that held fate’s wonders.

Dragons ramped, tigers stalked, heaven and earth stood at peace.

Through all time, praise of his name shall never cease.

Once they returned to Xinye, Liu Bei treated Zhuge Liang as his teacher. They ate at the same table and slept on the same couch, spending all their time discussing the affairs of state.

“Cao Cao has created a lake in Ji (4) Province to train his navy,” Zhuge Liang told Liu Bei. “This shows he intends to invade the South. We should send spies across the river to check out the situation.”

Liu Bei agreed and sent men across the Yangzi (2,3) River to see what is up in the Southlands.

So what IS up in the Southlands? We haven’t visited this part of the empire since episode 36, a good 11 episodes ago. When we last left off, Sun Ce had died in the year 200, and his younger brother Sun Quan had taken over the family business of ruling the region. Sun Quan was just 18 years old at the time, but he managed to consolidate his hold on the Southlands and made a big effort to recruit talented people into his service. He even opened a guesthouse in Kuaiji (4,4) to welcome such men. Thanks to the third-century equivalent of a LinkedIn network -- aka scholars recommending their best buds -- Sun Quan managed to add a bunch of new faces to his staff of civil advisers and his officer

corps. I could rattle off a long list of names here, but I'll just skip it and address each of these characters as they come up over the course of the narrative.

But the early years of Sun Quan's reign were not all sunshine and lollipops. He faced both external threats and internal unrest. On the external front, in the year 202, Cao Cao had defeated Yuan Shao, who died soon thereafter. Riding high, Cao Cao sent an envoy to the Southlands demanding that Sun Quan send one of his sons to the court to serve as hostage, I mean, an attendant to the emperor. Sun Quan went back and forth on this, so his mother, Madame Wu (2), summoned the general Zhou Yu and the civil adviser Zhang Zhao (1) to discuss this. Remember that these two were the highest ranking military and civilian officials in Sun Quan's service, and the two guys to whom his brother had entrusted to aid him in his rule.

"This is a move by Cao Cao to control the lords of the land," Zhang Zhao said. "If we do not comply, it might incite him to invade the Southlands, in which case our situation will be dire."

However, Zhou Yu disagreed.

"General," he said to Sun Quan, "Since you have inherited your father and brother's power, the six districts of the Southlands have fallen in line, our troops are strong, our provisions plentiful, and our officers and soldiers willing to fight hard for you. So why would you allow yourself be forced into sending a son to Xuchang as a hostage? Once you do so, you will have no choice but to ally with Cao Cao. If he summons you, you would have no choice but to go, and then you will be a puppet. Why not refuse and wait to see how the situation evolves before deciding on a response?"

"Zhou Yu is quite right," Madame Wu (2) said. Sun Quan also agreed, so he thanked Cao Cao's envoy but said no thanks to the send-a-son-to-the-capital bit. That gave Cao Cao another reason to entertain thoughts of marching South, but since he was still engaged in his fight for control of the North at the time, he could not pull himself away for a southern campaign.

In November of the following year, Sun Quan launched an offensive against Huang (2) Zu (3), one of Liu Biao's top commanders who was defending the key location of Jiangxia (1,4). Remember that there had been bad blood between the Suns (1) and Liu Biao ever since the latter ambushed and killed Sun Quan's father Sun Jian (1) years ago. So now Sun Quan was after some revenge. Also, taking out Liu Biao and seizing complete control of the Yangzi (2,3) River was supposed to be the key step in Sun Quan's bid for control of the empire.

The two sides squared off on the river, and Huang Zu's troops were routed. Trying to seize the momentum, one of Sun Quan's officers, Ling (2) Cao (1), led the charge into the strategic point of Xiakou (4,3) on a small boat, but was shot dead by an arrow fired by one of Huang Zu's officers, a warrior named Gan (1) Ning (2). Ling (2) Cao's (1) son, Ling (2) Tong (3), who was just 15 at the time, valiantly charged ahead and recovered his father's body. From there, the tide of battle turned. Now facing an unfavorable situation, Sun Quan decided to call it quits for now and returned home with his army.

So those were the external issues. As for problems from within, they had to do with one of Sun Quan's younger brothers, Sun Yi (4), who was the governor of the city of Danyang (1,2). This Sun Yi (4) was an intransigent and hard-drinking man who often whipped his soldiers when he got drunk. It's not hard to imagine someone like that making enemies, and so he did. Among them were the district military inspector Gui (1) Lan (3) and the assistant governor Dai (4) Yuan (2). These two had long harbored thoughts of killing Sun Yi, and they found a willing collaborator in Bian (1) Hong (2), one of Sun Yi's attendants. Together the three concocted a scheme.

As it so happened, Sun Yi was holding a banquet for a gathering of the officers and county prefects under his jurisdiction. On the day of the banquet, Sun Yi's wife, Lady Xu (2), gave him a warning. Now this Lady Xu (2) was very beautiful and intelligent, and she was also apparently a skilled

diviner. That day, her divination predicted a coming calamity, so she advised her husband to skip the banquet. But he would not listen and went to the feast anyway.

That night, as the banquet broke up and Sun Yi was leaving, his attendant Bian (1) Hong (2) followed him with a hidden knife. Once they were outside, Bian Hong attacked and cut down Sun Yi.

But if Bian Hong thought he was going to be rewarded for this deed, he was in for a nasty surprise. His two collaborators, Gui (1) Lan (3) and Dai (4) Yuan (2), quickly pointed the finger at him and had him executed in public for assassinating the governor. The two then took the opportunity to loot Sun Yi's property, including his women.

Gui (1) Lan (3) was captivated by Lady Xu's beauty, so he told her, "I have avenged your husband's death, so you must give yourself to me or die."

"I cannot bear to be with someone else so soon after my husband's death," Lady Xu said. "Can you wait until the last day of this month? At that point I will make the necessary offerings and remove my mourning clothes. Then we can marry."

Gui Lan agreed. But this was one instance where demanding instant gratification would have been the smart thing to do. Because while he was waiting, Lady Xu was plotting. She secretly summoned two officers who were her husband's confidants.

When they went to her home to see her, she wept and said to them, "When my husband was alive, he often told me of your loyalty and honor. Right now the traitor Gui (1) Lan (3) and Dai (4) Yuan (2) have conspired to assassinate my husband, then blamed it all on Bian (1) Hong (2). They have taken my property and my maids, and now Gui Lan wants my body. I have told him yes for now to keep him at bay. You two should send someone to inform our lord Sun Quan and come up with a plan to kill the traitors and avenge this humiliation. I would be eternally grateful."

At that, she prostrated on the ground. The two officers were brought to tears by her words and told her, "We received great kindness from your husband. The only reason we did not follow him in

death is because we are planning to avenge him. How can we dare to not do our best to carry out your orders?"

Now, these two officers do have names, but this whole story is really a very brief diversion in our narrative, so I'm not going to throw out two more names that will never get mentioned again once we wrap up this story. In any case, it's not all that important to the story anyway. The two officers sent a secret message to Sun Quan and then devised a scheme to move against the traitors.

When the last day of the month arrived, Lady Xu first summoned the two officers and had them hide behind the curtains in her quarters. She then made the proper offerings to her dead husband and then removed her mourning clothes, bathed and perfumed herself, and dressed for seduction. She spoke and laughed with artful ease and grace. When Gui (1) Lan (3) heard about this, he was delighted and ready to get what was coming to him.

That night, Lady Xu had her maid invite Gui Lan to her home, where she drank with him in the main hall. When Gui Lan was good and drunk, Lady Xu asked him if he wanted to, ahem, go to her quarters. He, of course, said yes.

As soon as Gui Lan stumbled into her quarters, however, Lady Xu shouted, "Generals, where are you?!"

At that, the two officers jumped out from behind the curtain with knives in their hands. Gui Lan was caught off guard. The first slash of the blade sent him tumbling to the ground. The second slash finished him off. This deed done, Lady Xu then invited the other traitor, Dai (4) Yuan (2), to her home. When he entered the main hall, he was likewise cut down.

With the two traitors dead, Lady Xu and her comrades sent out orders to round up the traitors' families and execute them all. Thus is the way of these bloody political battles. Lady Xu then donned her mourning attire once again and laid the traitors' heads on her husband's altar as sacrifices.

Within a day, Sun Quan arrived with his troops. When he saw that the problem had already been taken care of, he gave the two officers who helped Lady Xu big promotions and put them in charge of defending Danyang (1,2). As for Lady Xu, Sun Quan took his sister-in-law back to his residence, where he would care for her the rest of her life. For her actions, Lady Xu earned praise throughout the Southlands for her strength of character. She even got a poem in the novel, which was no small feat for a woman:

So able and so chaste -- in this world all too rare! --
The widow turned two villains into her cunning snare.
Vassals base chose treachery, vassals loyal chose death;
To this Southland heroine does any man compare?

So now, all the rebels in the Southlands have been quelled, and Sun Quan boasted a navy that had more than 7,000 ships. He appointed Zhou Yu as his supreme commander and put him in charge of both the army and the navy.

In the year 207, which was the year when Cao Cao launched his campaign into the northern desert to finish off Yuan Shao's sons, Sun Quan's mother, Madame Wu (2), fell gravely ill. She summoned Zhang Zhao and Zhou Yu to her deathbed.

"I was originally a woman of the region of Wu (2)," she said. "But my parents died when I was little, and I moved to the region of Yue (4) (which by the way is present-day Vietnam) with my younger brother and later married into the Sun (1) family and bore four sons. When my eldest son Sun Ce was born, I dreamt that the moon was entering my body. Then when my second son Sun Quan was born, I dreamed that the sun was entering my body. The diviners said that these were auspicious

signs. Unfortunately Sun Ce died young and left the Southlands to Sun Quan. I hope you will all work as one to help him. I would die without regret!”

She then told Sun Quan, “You must treat these two gentlemen as teachers. Do not slight them. Also, my sister and I both married your father, so she should be considered your mother as well. After my death, treat her as you would me. And take good care of your younger sister and find her a good husband.”

With those words, she died. A grief-stricken Sun Quan wailed and duly prepared the proper funeral arrangements.

When spring rolled around, Sun Quan began discussions of attacking Huang (2) Zu (3) once again. Zhang Zhao, however, was against it.

“We are still in the first year of the mourning period,” he said. “It is not the time for military campaigns.”

But Zhou Yu was not so patient. “We cannot wait to avenge this humiliation,” he said.

With his top two advisers at odds, Sun Quan was struggling to make up his mind. Just then, one of his generals, the district commander Lü (3) Meng (2), entered and said, “I was guarding Dragon’s Gorge when Huang Zu’s officer Gan (1) Ning (2) came to surrender. I questioned him in detail and found him to be a man of considerable learning, strength, and honor. He used to lead a gang of desperados who made a living raiding on the river. He wore around his waist a brass bell, and the sound of it always sent people running. They called him Bandit of the Colored Sails because he used silk from the Riverlands in his boat’s sail. Later, he disavowed his old ways and led his gang to submit to Liu Biao. But when he saw that Liu Biao was unworthy, he wanted to come serve the Southlands, but Huang Zu convinced him to stay at Jiangxia.

“The last time we defeated Huang Zu, it was only because of Gan Ning that Huang Zu was able to reclaim Xiakou (4,3), but Huang Zu treated him with little respect. Huang Zu’s commander Su (1) Fei (1) often tried to recommend Gan Ning to Huang Zu, but Huang Zu always said, ‘He’s just a pirate; I cannot give him an important position.’ So Gan Ning held a grudge against Huang Zu. Su (1) Fei (1) knew what he was thinking, so he invited Gan Ning to his home for wine and told him, ‘I have recommended you to my lord many times, to no avail. Time flies, so you must think of your future. I will make you a magistrate in Zhu (1) County, and you can look for a new master from there.’

“So Gan Ning was able to cross Xiakou (4,3),” Lü (3) Meng (2) continued. “He wants to come serve the Southlands, but was afraid that we would hold a grudge against him for previously helping Huang Zu and killing our officer Ling (2) Cao (1). But I told him that your lordship thirsts for men of talent and will not hold old grudges. Besides, at the time, we were each acting out of loyalty for our own masters, so how can we hold that against him? So Gan Ning has crossed the river with his men to present himself to you. I beg to know your will.”

Sun Quan was jubilant upon receiving this news. “If I get General Gan, I will defeat Huang Zu for sure!” he said. So he told Lü Meng to bring Gan Ning in. After they exchanged greetings, Sun Quan told Gan Ning, “General Gan, your coming here has won our good will. Rest assured that we hold no grudges. I would like for you to teach me how to defeat Huang Zu.”

“The Han’s rule is hanging by a thread,” Gan Ning said. “Cao Cao will usurp the throne sooner or later, and he will surely try to take Jing (1) Province. Liu Biao is a man with no vision, and his sons are too foolish to keep what he has built. Your lordship should make a move on Jing Province sooner than later; otherwise Cao Cao will stake a claim to it first.

“Right now, you should first attack Huang Zu. he has grown old and senile and is obsessed with profit and gain. He infringes on the interests of his officials and demands much from his people, so

dissatisfaction is widespread. His military equipment is in disrepair, and his army lacks order. If your lordship attack him, he will be destroyed for sure. After that, you sweep westward, take Chu (3) Pass, and set your sights on the Riverlands. In this way will your hegemony be achieved.”

“This is precious advice,” Sun Quan said happily. So he ordered an offensive against Huang Zu, with Zhou Yu as the supreme commander, Lü Meng leading the vanguard, Dong (3) Xi (2) and Gan Ning as lieutenants, and with Sun Quan himself leading 100,000 troops.

Huang Zu’s spies quickly sent word of this invasion to his base at Jiangxia, and he hurriedly assembled his staff to prepare their defense. He made Su (1) Fei (2) his chief general and sent two other officers to lead the vanguard, mobilizing all of his forces to meet the enemy.

Huang Zu’s two vanguard generals each led a squad of warships and blocked the passage near Miankou (2,3). Each ship held a thousand archers and crossbowmen. They also used heavy ropes to link the ships to make them steady on the surface of the river, and then they waited for the enemy.

When the army of the Southlands arrived, Huang Zu’s war ships beat the drums and rained down a torrent of arrows, keeping the enemy at bay and even pushing them back a few miles.

But Gan Ning said to his fellow officer Dong (2) Xi (2), “We have come this far; we must not turn back!”

So they rounded up about a hundred small boats. Each boat held 50 veteran soldiers, including 20 rowers and 30 men who donned armor and wielded steel knives. Braving the oncoming hailstorm of arrows, these little boats dashed to the side of the enemy’s war boats and cut the heavy rope linking them. This caused the war boats to drift apart. Gan Ning then leaped onto the main war boat and cut down one of Huang Zu’s vanguard generals. The other vanguard general abandoned ship and fled toward shore. Lü Meng, however, jumped onto a small boat alone, rowed after this guy, pushed into

the mass of enemy boats, and started setting them on fire. Lü Meng then chased down the enemy general on the banks of the river and cut him down as well.

At this moment, Su (1) Fei (1), Huang Zu's chief general, had arrived on the banks with reinforcements, but the officers and troops of the Southlands all now stormed onto the banks to take him on, and they were way too much for him to handle. With his army routed, Su Fei tried to flee, but ran into one of the Southland's generals, Pan (1) Zhang (1). After just a few bouts, Pan Zhang captured Su Fei alive and took him to see Sun Quan, who ordered his men to lock Su Fei up in a prisoner's cart, to be executed later when they have captured Huang Zu.

Sun Quan then ordered his army to lay siege to Jiangxia (1,4) day and night. Huang Zu, with his army decimated and his officers killed or captured, knew he could not hold the city, so he abandoned the city and fled toward Jing Province. But when he and a few dozen riders dashed out of the east gate of the city, they ran smack dab into the waiting arms of Gan Ning, who guessed correctly that this was what Huang Zu would do.

"I did not mistreat you in the past," Huang Zu said to Gan Ning. "Why do you now press me so?"

Well, Gan Ning begged to differ on Huang Zu's assessment of the treatment he once received.

"When I was at Jiangxia, I rendered great service for you, but you kept calling me a pirate! What do you have to say for yourself now?"

Realizing that he wasn't going to get out of this by talking, Huang Zu turned and tried to run. Gan Ning scattered his guards and gave chase. At that moment, Gan Ning heard shouts rising up behind him as a few dozen more riders approached. Gan Ning recognized that they were led by the Southlands general Cheng (2) Pu (3). Gan Ning was worried about Cheng Pu stealing the credit for capturing Huang Zu, so he quickly fired an arrow into Huang Zu's back, dropping him from his horse. Gan Ning then rushed forward and cut off his head before returning with Cheng Pu to see Sun Quan.

So Sun Quan has killed one of Liu Biao's close friends and trusted commanders and taken a key strategic point. How will Liu Biao respond? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.