

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 48.

Last time, Sun Quan and the troops of the Southlands had just defeated and killed Huang (2) Zu (3), a close friend and top commander of Liu Biao, the imperial protector of Jing (1) Province. Sun Quan had also captured the key city of Jiangxia (1,4), which Huang Zu was defending. Upon receiving Huang Zu's head, Sun Quan ordered that it be placed in a wooden box and taken back to the Southlands to be placed as an offering at the altar of his father, who had been killed in battle against Liu Biao years earlier. He then rewarded his troops handsomely, promoted Gan Ning, the man who defected from Huang Zu and then killed him in battle, to district commander, and began discussion of whether to leave troops to garrison the newly conquered city.

His adviser Zhang Zhao (1), however, said, "A lone city so far from our territory is impossible to hold. We should return to the Southlands. When Liu Biao finds out we have killed Huang Zu, he will surely come looking for revenge. We should rest our troops while he overextends his. This will guarantee victory. We can then attack him as he falls back and take Jing Province."

Sun Quan took this advice and abandoned his new conquest and returned home. But there was still the matter of Su (1) Fei (1), the enemy general he had captured. This Su Fei was friends with Gan Ning and was actually the one who helped him defect to Sun Quan. So Su Fei now secretly sent word to Gan Ning asking him to save his life.

"Even if Su Fei did not mention it, I would not forget," Gan Ning said.

When the army returned home, Sun Quan ordered that Su Fei be executed and that his head be offered up alongside Huang Zu's as sacrifices to his father's spirit. But Gan Ning now went to see Sun Quan, pressed his head to the ground, and wept.

“If not for Su Fei’s help, I would be a pile of bones underground and would not have been able to serve you,” Gan Ning said. “Even though Su Fei deserves to die for his offense, for the sake of his past kindness to me, I am willing to give up my position in exchange for his life.”

Sun Quan was touched by this, but he still had reservations.

“Since he had been kind to you, sir, I can spare his life for your sake,” Sun Quan said. “But what if he then flees?”

“If you spare Su Fei, he would be endlessly grateful. Why would he ever flee?” Gan Ning answered. “If he does flee, then I will lay my head at your feet.”

That was good enough for Sun Quan, and he pardoned Su Fei and only offered up Huang Zu’s head as a sacrifice.

After the ceremony, Sun Quan held a big feast to celebrate the victory. While the wine was flowing freely, one man suddenly started crying loudly, rose to his feet, pulled out his sword, and made straight for Gan Ning. Gan Ning quickly used his chair to keep his attacker at bay. Sun Quan looked and saw that the attacker was the officer Ling (2) Tong (3), whose father had been killed by Gan Ning during Sun Quan’s previous unsuccessful campaign against Huang Zu. While Sun Quan was magnanimous enough to let bygones be bygones when Gan Ning defected to him, you can imagine that Ling (2) Tong (3) would feel JUST a bit differently, and he was after revenge.

Sun Quan stopped Ling Tong and consoled him, saying, “When General Gan killed your father, you were serving different masters and both acting in the only way loyal men could. Now we are all one family. How can we bring up old scores? Let it go, for my sake.”

But Ling Tong was not about to let this go so easily. He kneeled and cried.

“Blood debts must be paid!” he shouted.

Sun Quan and the other officials tried to console him time and again, but Ling Tong was still glaring at Gan Ning with hatred in his eyes. To diplomatically defuse the issue, Sun Quan ordered Gan

Ning to lead 5,000 troops and 100 ships to go keep an eye on the strategic point of Xiakou (4,2), which would conveniently put him out of Ling Tong's way. Out of sight, out of mind. After Gan Ning thanked Sun Quan and went on his way, Sun Quan promoted Ling Tong to district commander, and Ling Tong could do little but swallow his hatred for now.

With this little blood feud kind of resolved, Sun Quan turned his attention to more important things, like preparing for the revenge attack that Liu Biao was sure to undertake. So he ordered new warships built, stationed troops to guard the banks of the river, and sent his uncle Sun Jing (4) to defend Wuhui (2,4). Sun Quan himself garrisoned the bulk of his army at Chaisang (2,1), while Zhou Yu trained the navy at Poyang (2,2) Lake.

That brings us back up to where we left off with Liu Bei. At this moment, he had convinced Zhuge Liang to help him, and on Zhuge Liang's advice, he had sent out spies to the Southlands. They reported back that Sun Quan had defeated and killed Huang Zu and was presently garrisoning his army at Chaisang (2,1). Just as Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang were discussing this development, a messenger arrived from Liu Biao, inviting Liu Bei to go to Jing Province to discuss something.

"This must be about the Southlands' victory over Huang Zu," Zhuge Liang said to Liu Bei. "Liu Biao must be wanting to talk about how to seek revenge. I will go with you, and respond as the situation dictates."

So Liu Bei left Guan Yu to defend Xinye, and ordered Zhang Fei to round up 500 soldiers to follow him and Zhuge Liang to Jing Province. As they were riding, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang, "What should I tell Liu Biao when I see him?"

"First, thank him for handling that unpleasantness with Cai (4) Mao (4) back in Xiangyang (1,2). If he orders you to go attack the Southlands, do not agree to it. Tell him you must first return to Xinye and organize your troops."

To this, Liu Bei agreed. When they arrived at Jing Province, they settled into a guest house and left Zhang Fei and his troops outside the city. Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang then went to see Liu Biao. After exchanging greetings, Liu Bei first apologized for what happened in Xiangyang (1,2). And in case you forgot, what happened in Xiangyang was that Liu Biao's officer and brother-in-law, Cai Mao, tried to ambush and kill Liu Bei and chased him all the way outside the city before an act of god saved Liu Bei.

"I know what happened to you in Xiangyang," Liu Biao told him. "I wanted to cut off Cai Mao's head and send it to you, but others begged me to spare him, so I checked my anger. I hope you will forgive me."

"What happened was not General Cai's fault," said Liu Bei, trying to appear magnanimous. "It must have been the work of someone beneath him."

"Now, Jiangxia has been breached and Huang Zu killed, so I have asked you here to help me devise a plan to avenge this defeat," Liu Biao said.

"Huang Zu brought this calamity upon himself because he was ill-tempered and did not know how to use talent," Liu Bei answered. "If we wage a war against the Southlands now, what would we do if Cao Cao attacks from the North?"

"I am old and frequently ill," Liu Biao said with a sigh. "I can no longer oversee things. Brother, you must help me. After I die, you can be the ruler of Jing Province."

"Brother, why do you say such a thing?!" Liu Bei said with surprise. "How can I dare to take on such an important responsibility?"

When he heard this, Zhuge Liang flashed Liu Bei a look. Liu Bei then said to Liu Biao, "Allow me some time to think of a good plan." He and Zhuge Liang then took their leave.

When they returned to the guest house, Zhuge Liang asked, "My lord, why did you refuse when Liu Biao offered you Jing Province?"

“He has treated me with kindness and respect,” Liu Bei answered. “How can I bear to steal what is his during his time of crisis”

“You are truly a humane and compassionate lord,” Zhuge Liang sighed.

While they were speaking, Liu Biao’s eldest son Liu Qi (2) came to see them. As soon as he came in, he wept and prostrated on the ground.

“My stepmother cannot put up with me, and my life hangs in the balance,” he said. “Uncle, I hope you will take pity on me and save me!”

So as we’ve mentioned before, Liu Biao was currently in the middle of a looming succession crisis, where his second wife, Lady Cai (4), wants him to leave his title to his younger son, whom she bore, instead of the elder son Liu Qi, who was born by his previous wife.

“But nephew, this is your family business. Why are you coming to me?” said Liu Bei, who was understandably wary since the last time he said anything to Liu Biao about this, it drew Lady Cai’s ire and almost cost him his life.

While this was going on, Zhuge Liang looked on with a faint smile. But when Liu Bei asked him for an idea, Zhuge Liang said, “This is a family matter. I dare not intervene.”

Soon thereafter, Liu Qi took his leave. Liu Bei saw him out and whispered in his ear, “Tomorrow I will ask Zhuge Liang to pay a return visit to you. You can do this and this. He will no doubt give you an idea.”

So the next day, Liu Bei pretended to have a stomachache and asked Zhuge Liang to pay a return call to Liu Qi, which was the proper courtesy. So Zhuge Liang went to Liu Qi’s home, and Liu Qi invited him into the private quarters. After tea was served, Liu Qi said, “Master Zhuge, my stepmother cannot tolerate me. I hope you will give me some advice to save my life.”

“This is not something that I dare to advise you on,” Zhuge Liang said as he got up to take his leave. But Liu Qi quickly stopped him.

“Since you won’t tell me, then I will not ask anymore. There is no need to leave.”

So Zhuge Liang sat back down, and Liu Qi then told him, “I have an ancient book that I would like for you to see.”

Being a scholar, Zhuge Liang was naturally curious about this ancient text, so he followed Liu Qi up a ladder to the second floor.

“Where is the book?” Zhuge Liang asked.

Liu Qi now kneeled and said with tears in his eyes, “My stepmother will not tolerate me. My life is in danger. Master, can you not spare one piece of advice to save me?”

Zhuce Liang was displeased by this deception and turned to leave, but lo and behold, the ladder had been removed, so he was stuck up here with Liu Qi.

“Sir, I am begging you for help,” Liu Qi said. “If you are refusing to talk because you are worried that this would get out, right now you and I are the only ones here. Whatever you say will remain between us. You may speak without concern.”

“Outsiders should not meddle in family affairs,” Zhuge Liang said. “So how can I give you any advice on this?”

“Sir, if you absolutely refuse to save me, then my life will be forfeit,” Liu Qi said. “I might as well die in front of you!”

So he pulled out his sword and tried to slit his own throat. Zhuge Liang quickly stopped him and said, “I have a suggestion.”

When he heard this, Liu Qi dropped to his knees and said, “I am all ears.”

“Have you not heard of the story of Shen (1) Sheng (1) and Chong (2) Er (3)? Shen (1) Sheng (1) stayed home and died, while Chong (2) Er (3) stayed away and lived.”

So a quick timeout is needed as I try to provide a little background for this story. Shen Sheng and Chong Er were both historical figures from the Spring and Autumn Period. They were both sons of the Duke of the kingdom of Jin (4). Shen Sheng was the elder, and Chong Er was the younger. They also had an even younger brother. All three of them were born to different mothers, so they were all half-brothers.

The mother of the youngest of the three brothers was their father's favored concubine, and of course she wanted him to make her son the heir. To do that, she constantly badmouthed the other two sons, Shen Sheng and Chong Er, to their father. Eventually, she implicated Shen Sheng in a cooked-up conspiracy to poison the Duke, and that forced Shen Sheng to commit suicide.

Chong Er, on the other hand, managed to flee into exile. He bounced around various kingdoms of China for 19 years before the stars aligned and he was able to return to his home and become the new Duke of Jin (4). He turned his kingdom into a power to be reckoned with, and for that, he was deemed one of the five hegemonies of the Spring and Autumn Period.

So Zhuge Liang's point to Liu Qi here was, "You need to get out of town."

"Huang Zu has just been killed, and someone needs to oversee the defense of Jiangxia," Zhuge Liang continued. "Why don't you ask your father to send you to garrison Jiangxia. That way, you will be able to dodge danger."

Liu Qi prostrated on the ground once again to thank Zhuge Liang for this lifesaving advice. He then ordered the ladder be brought back, and they both went back downstairs. Zhuge Liang took his leave, went back to the guest house, and told Liu Bei what happened, and Liu Bei was very happy at how things turned out.

The next day, Liu Qi did as Zhuge Liang suggested and asked his father to send him to Jiangxia. But Liu Biao was hesitant and asked Liu Bei what he thought.

“Jiangxia is an important location, no one else but your son can defend it,” Liu Bei said. “If you and your son will tend to the southern and eastern parts of the province, I am willing to hold down the fort on the northern and western side.

“I recently heard that Cao Cao has made a lake at Ji (4) Province and is training his navy there,” Liu Biao said. “He must be intending on invading the South. We must be on guard.”

“I already know about that; do not worry,” Liu Bei answered. He then took his leave and went back to Xinye, while Liu Biao sent Liu Qi and 3,000 troops to defend Jiangxia.

So now, let's go North and check in on Cao Cao. As it turns out, he had been tending to more than just training his navy. He was also shaking up the governing apparatus. During the Han dynasty, there were three positions that were considered the highest court officials. Consider them something akin to the emperor's cabinet, as they were the ones who made the call or helped the emperor make the call on all the important decisions. Well, Cao Cao now abolished these positions and added their functions to his role as prime minister. In their place, he created three new positions for civil officials and filled them with guys he trusted. One of these guys was a man named Sima (1,3) Yi (4), whose family has long been serving in the government. He was appointed as the chief of the Bureau of Documents. He's going to pretty much disappear from our narrative for a long while now, but rest assured, we WILL have ample cause to deal with him later, so just keep that name in the back of your mind.

So now that his civil staff was at full strength, Cao Cao gathered his military officers to discuss launching his long-awaited offensive against the South. One of his top generals, Xiahou Dun, reported, “I have recently heard that Liu Bei is training his troops daily at Xinye County. He will be trouble at some point. We should move against him soon.”



So Cao Cao appointed Xiahou Dun as the commander and four other officers -- Yu (1) Jin (4), Li (2) Dian (3), Xiahou Lan (2), and Han (2) Hao (4) -- as his lieutenants. He gave them 100,000 troops and sent them to the city of Bo (2) Wang (4) to keep a close eye on Xinye.

However, Cao Cao's top adviser, Xun (2) Yu (4), cautioned him, "Liu Bei is a hero, and now he has Zhuge Liang as his military strategist. We cannot underestimate him."

"[Scoff] Liu Bei is a rat! I will capture him!" Xiahou Dun scoffed.

But Xu (2) Shu (4), the adviser that Cao Cao had sharked from Liu Bei by detaining his mother, now chimed in: "General, you must not underestimate Liu Bei. Now that he has Zhuge Liang in his service, it's like giving a tiger wings."

"Who is this Zhuge Liang?" Cao Cao asked.

"Zhuge Liang goes by the moniker Master Sleeping Dragon," Xu Shu said. "He has the talent to plot the course of heaven and earth and design plans of divine perfection. He is truly a rare talent. Do not underestimate him."

"How does he compare to you?" Cao Cao asked Xu Shu.

"I dare not compare myself to Zhuge Liang," was Xu Shu's answer. "It would be like comparing the light of a firefly to that of the moon."

Before Cao Cao could ask his next question, which was probably "Does Zhuge Liang have a parent nearby that we can hold as hostage to force him to serve me", Xiahou Dun cut in.

"Xu Shu, you are making stuff up! In my eyes, Zhuge Liang is but a straw of grass. What is there to be worried about? If I do not capture Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang alive in one battle, I am willing to present my head to his excellency."

"In that case," Cao Cao said, "I look forward to your victory report to put my mind at ease."

So Xiahou Dun went off in a huff and set out with his army, dead set on wiping the floor with Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang.

Well, Xiahou Dun was not the only guy who was less than impressed with Zhuge Liang. There were at least a couple others, and they were none other than Liu Bei's own brothers, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. Ever since he acquired the services of Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei had been treating him with the great respect due to a teacher. His brothers, who were already put out by the fact that they had to make three treks to Zhuge Liang's home to meet him, were understandably put out by this, and they were also probably miffed about this new guy getting in the way of their bromance.

"Zhuge Liang is so young. What great knowledge can he possibly have?" Guan Yu and Zhang Fei once said to their brother. "You are treating him with too much deference. We have not seen him prove himself yet!"

Liu Bei, however, brushed this off.

"Zhuge Liang is to me what water is to a fish. Brothers, do not say such words again."

Well, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei were not happy about it, but they had no choice but to keep their grumblings under their breath.

One day, Liu Bei received a gift of a yak's tail. Now remember that Liu Bei used to weave mats, shoes, hats, and such for a living, so he took up the yak's tail and began to make a hat, just to keep in practice I guess. But when Zhuge Liang came in and saw this, he said sternly, "My lord, if this is what you are devoting your time to, then you must have forgotten your ambitions."

In other words, this is so far beneath you, man. Knock it off and act like someone who wants to be a big-time player.

Liu Bei threw the hat to the ground and apologized. "I was just killing time," he said.

"My lord, how do you judge yourself against Cao Cao?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"I am not his equal."

"You have but a few thousand men. How will you counter if Cao Cao's army shows up?"

"I have been thinking about that but have not come up with any good ideas yet," Liu Bei said.

"We can immediately start recruiting new soldiers, and I will train them to make them fit for battle," Zhuge Liang suggested.

Liu Bei followed this advice and soon recruited about 3,000 men from the population of Xinye, and Zhuge Liang trained them each day on battle formations and such.

Soon, word came that Cao Cao had dispatched Xiahou Dun with 100,000 troops and that they were marching on Xinye. When Zhang Fei heard this, he said to Guan Yu, "Well, now we can let that Zhuge Liang go fight the enemy."

Just as they were talking, Liu Bei summoned them and asked, "Xiahou Dun is coming here with an army. How should we respond?"

"Brother, why don't you send the water out?" said Zhang Fei, making a pretty clever play -- perhaps more clever than you would expect -- on the metaphor that Liu Bei used to praise Zhuge Liang.

"For strategy I turn to Zhuge Liang. But for courage, I rely on you two. Don't shirk your responsibilities," Liu Bei said.

After Guan Yu and Zhang Fei took their leave, Liu Bei invited Zhuge Liang over to discuss the situation.

"I am concerned that Guan Yu and Zhang Fei would not obey my orders," Zhuge Liang said. "If your lordship wants me to command the troops, I must have your seal and sword."

Liu Bei immediately gave Zhuge Liang those two objects, both of which were symbols of command. Basically, whoever held the seal and sword was in charge and everyone had to obey his orders. Now, Zhuge Liang summoned all the officers to hand out orders. When Zhang Fei heard that this was happening, he said to Guan Yu, "Let's go see what he's got."

With the staff assembled, Zhuge Liang said, "To the left of the city of Bo (2) Wang (4) is a mountain called Mount Yu (4). To the right is a forest called An (1) Forest. These are prime locations for ambushes. General Guan, you may lead 1,000 men to hide at Mount Yu (4). When the enemy arrives, let them pass and do not engage. Their heavy equipment and provisions will be in the back. When you see fire to the south, then you can attack and burn their provisions.

"General Zhang, you may lead 1,000 men to hide in An (1) Forest. When you see the fire to the south, move out and burn the provision storage for the city of Bo (2) Wang (4)."

Zhuge Liang then ordered Guan Yu's adopted son Guan Ping (2), and Liu Bei's adopted son Liu Feng (1) to each take 500 men, along with fire-starting supplies, and wait behind Bo (2) Wang (4) Hill. When night falls, they were to start a fire as the signal to spring the trap.

Zhuge Liang was not done yet, though.

"Send someone to Fancheng (2,3) to fetch General Zhao Yun, and have him lead the vanguard," Zhuge Liang said. "Tell him that he must LOSE. My lord, you may lead a detachment of troops and serve as his backup. Everyone, proceed according to your instructions. Do not be amiss."

Well, Guan Yu now raised his hand.

"While we are all going out to fight the enemy, what will you, director general, be doing?"

"I will be sitting here, defending this city."

This drew a guffaw from Zhang Fei. "So while we are all going out to slaughter, you are going to chill at home. How comfortable!"

Sensing insubordination, Zhuge Liang pulled rank. "The sword and seal of command are in my hands. Whoever disobeys my orders will be executed," he said.

Liu Bei also chimed in to get Zhuge Liang's back.

"Have you guys not heard of the saying that strategy devised in the tent can determine the outcome of battle a thousand miles away? Brothers, follow your orders."

Zhang Fei sneered and walked out to get his troops. Guan Yu said to him, "Let's go see if Zhuge Liang's plan actually comes to fruition. If not, then we can come settle this with him."

But these two were not the only ones who were a little skeptical. This was, after all, the first time Zhuge Liang had been put to the test, and nobody really knew if he was up to the task. So although they all followed his orders, they still harbored a degree of doubt.

Zhugue Liang, however, seemed to have no doubt.

"My lord," he said to Liu Bei. "You can go station your troops at the foot of Mount Bo (2) Wang (4) today. Tomorrow at dusk, the enemy will arrive. When they do, abandon your camp and run. But when you see the fire start up, turn around and attack. I will lead 500 soldiers, along with Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Mi (2) Fang (1), to defend Xinye."

Zhugue Liang then ordered two civil officials, Sun Qian (2) and Jian (3) Yong (1), to make preparations for a celebratory feast and get the honor roll ready to record everyone's merits in the coming battle. Despite such air of confidence, however, even Liu Bei still had some lingering doubts.

Alright, so Zhugue Liang is about to get his first test, and he and Liu Bei both have a lot riding on this battle. To see how things will play out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.