

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 49.

Last time, Cao Cao had sent his general Xiahou Dun and 100,000 men to wipe out Liu Bei in Xinye County. Liu Bei's new adviser Zhuge Liang cooked up a plan to repel the invaders near the city of Bo (2) Wang (4), but most of the people he was giving orders to, including Liu Bei himself, were a bit skeptical.

So Xiahou Dun was marching his army toward Bo (2) Wang (4). He put half in front as the vanguard, and the rest marched in the back of the column, defending the provisions. It was autumn, and strong winds were starting to blow. As they marched, they saw dust being kicked up ahead, a sure sign of oncoming troops. So Xiahou Dun ordered his men to line up for battle, and he asked the guide where they were.

"Bo (2) Wang (4) is ahead. Behind that is the mouth of the River Luo (2)," the guide answered.

Xiahou Dun ordered the officers Yu (1) Jin (4) and Li (2) Dian (3) to hold the line, while he himself rode forward to scope out the oncoming force. When he saw them, he suddenly started laughing. When his men asked why, he answered, "In front of the prime minister, Xu (2) Shu (4) had praised Zhuge Liang to the heavens. But now I see how he deploys his troops. Look at the sorry state of his vanguard. Pitting such troops against me is like driving a herd of dogs and goats into a fight with tigers and leopards! I had told his excellency that I will capture Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang alive. And now, I'm going to make that happen for sure!"

So he rode out to meet the enemy. From the oncoming force, the general Zhao Yun rode out to meet him, and Xiahou Dun cursed him, saying, "You followers of Liu Bei are like lost souls chasing a ghost!"

This riled up Zhao Yun, and he rode forward to fight Xiahou Dun. After a few bouts, Zhao Yun turned and fled, just as Zhuge Liang had instructed. Xiahou Dun gave chase. After a few miles, Zhao Yun turned around and fought some more, but then turned and fled again.

Now, one of Xiahou Dun's lieutenants, Han (2) Hao (4), rode up and cautioned Xiahou Dun: "Zhao Yun looks like he's trying to lure us into a trap."

"[Scoff] With an enemy as sorry as this, even if they have traps all around us, I would not be afraid!" Xiahou Dun said. So he ignored the warning and kept chasing until he reached Bo (2) Wang (4) Hill. There, at the sound of an explosive, Liu Bei himself rode out with an army to face him.

"So this is their ambush," Xiahou Dun laughed as he said to Han (2) Hao (4). "I will not rest until I reach Xinye tonight!"

So he pressed his army forward, while Liu Bei and Zhao Yun kept running. By this time, it was getting dark. The sky was covered with clouds, there was no moon light, and a strong gale kicked up. Xiahou Dun kept pushing his troops ahead. As his officers Yu Jin and Li Dian, who were in the middle of the column, reached a narrow point where dry reeds crowded the road on both sides, Li Dian said to Yu Jin, "He who underestimates the enemy is doomed to defeat. The path south is a narrow mountain pass with thick woods. If the enemy attacks us with fire, what would we do?"

"You're quite right," Yu Jin said. "I will ride on ahead to warn the commander. You should stop the rear of the army."

So Li Dian rode toward the back of the army and shouted for them to stop. But when you've got some 50,000 men back there chasing an enemy, stopping them is easier said than done. Meanwhile, Yu Jin rushed toward the front of the column and shouted for Xiahou Dun to stop. When Xiahou Dun asked him what's up, Yu Jin warned him to watch out for a fire attack.

This snapped Xiahou Dun to his senses, and he immediately ordered his troops to stop. But before he was done giving that order, loud roars rose up from behind him, and the reeds surrounding them

were ablaze in a wall of flames. In the blink of an eye, they were surrounded by fire, which raged even more as the strong winds blew. This threw Xiahou Dun's army into chaos, and countless were trampled in the ensuing stampede.

At that moment, Zhao Yun and his troops turned around and attacked. Xiahou Dun fought his way through the fire and smoke and fled. Li Dian, in the back of the army, saw that things were not going well up front, so he turned and fled back toward the city of Bo (2) Wang (4). But in the glow of the flames, his path was blocked by a squad of soldiers led by Guan Yu, whom Zhuge Liang had stationed here as an ambush. Li Dian had no desire to take on Guan Yu, so he just found an opening and fled. His comrade Yu Jin saw that all the provisions had been set on fire by Guan Yu's troops, so he, too, fled along some backroads.

Xiahou Dun's other two lieutenants, Xiahou Lan (2) and Han (2) Hao (4), tried to come save the provisions, but they ran into another ambush, led by Zhang Fei. With a few bouts, Zhang Fei stabbed and killed Xiahou Lan, and Han Hao ran away.

The melee went on until dawn before Liu Bei's troops retired. By now, the field was littered with the bodies of Xiahou Dun's soldiers, and rivers of blood flowed. Xiahou Dun scraped together what remained of his army and limped back to the capital Xuchang.

A poet later commemorated Zhuge Liang's first victory thus:

With fire he broke the battle at Bo (2) Wang (4),

All smiles and small talk, giving each his cue.

Striking fear deep into Cao Cao's soul,

Thus Zhuge Liang scored a coup at his debut.

As Guan Yu and Zhang Fei returned to Xinye victorious, they could not help but sing Zhuge Liang's praises. Within a few miles, they saw Liu Bei's advisers Mi (2) Zhu (2) and Mi (2) Fang (1) leading a detachment of troops and escorting a small carriage. Seated on the carriage was none other than Zhuge Liang. Guan Yu and Zhang Fei immediately dismounted and prostrated in front of the carriage to show their respect.

Soon, Liu Bei, Zhao Yun, and the other officers Zhuge Liang had sent out all returned victorious, with lots of looted provisions to boot. They rewarded the troops and returned to Xinye, where the civilians prostrated on the side of the road, saying, "We are saved thanks to Lord Liu acquiring the service of an able man!"

When things had settled down a bit, Zhuge Liang said to Liu Bei, "Even though Xiahou Dun has retreated, Cao Cao will no doubt personally lead a huge army here."

"What should we do?" Liu Bei asked.

"I have an idea," Zhuge Liang answered. "Xinye is a small place and we cannot stay here long-term. I have heard that Liu Biao is gravely ill. We can take this opportunity to seize Jing Province as our home. That will give us enough to repel Cao Cao."

"Sir," Liu Bei said, "that may be a good suggestion, but I have received Liu Biao's kindness. How can I bear to take what is his?"

"If you don't do it now, you will regret it!" Zhuge Liang said.

But Liu Bei was resolute. "I would rather die than to do such a dishonorable thing," he said.

"Alright, let's talk about it another time," Zhuge Liang said.

We'll leave Liu Bei and company for now and jump over to the capital Xuchang. Xiahou Dun, having returned in defeat, tied himself up and went to see Cao Cao to ask for death, but Cao Cao spared him and asked what happened.

“I fell for Zhuge Liang’s trap and was defeated by fire,” Xiahou Dun said.

“You have been fighting in wars since your youth; how can you not know to watch out for that in narrow passages?” Cao Cao asked.

“Li Dian and Yu Jin also warned me,” Xiahou Dun answered. “I wish I had listened.”

Upon hearing this, Cao Cao rewarded Li Dian and Yu Jin. Xiahou Dun then asked Cao Cao to move against Liu Bei quickly.

“Liu Bei and Sun Quan are the only people I am concerned about; the rest are of no consequence,” Cao Cao said. “I will take this opportunity to pacify all of the Southlands.”

So he mobilized an army of 500,000 and divided it into five detachments. He put two of his veteran generals in charge of each of the first four detachments, while he himself led the rest of the officers in the fifth detachment. He also ordered the general Xu (2) Chu (3) to lead a vanguard of 3,000. This was the year 208, and they were slated to set out in the fall.

But before the campaign started, somebody at court dared to speak out against it. It was Kong (3) Rong (2), a character who has popped up in various spots in our narrative and was on good terms with Liu Bei on account of the fact that Liu Bei once saved his city from a rebel siege. Kong Rong had now risen to the rank of imperial mentor, and he had managed to talk Cao Cao into postponing an attack on Liu Bei in the past. Now, he spoke up once again.

“Liu Bei and Liu Biao are both members of the imperial house. We must not declare war against them lightly. As for Sun Quan, he reigns over six districts and has the geographic advantage of the Yangzi (2,3) River, which makes him a difficult target as well. If your excellency wages an unjust war now, you risk disappointing the hope of the people.”

But Cao Cao reacted angrily to this dissent.

“Liu Bei , Liu Biao, and Sun Quan are disobedient officials; how can I not declare war on them?!” he said as he dismissed Kong Rong in a huff and sent out a decree that anyone who dared to speak out against the campaign would be executed.

Thus rebuffed, Kong Rong walked out of Cao Cao’s residence, looked up to the heavens and sighed.

“[Sigh] How can the most dishonorable of men hope to triumph against the most honorable?”

Unfortunately for Kong Rong, his remark was overheard by a fellow court official who had a grudge against him because Kong Rong had always treated this guy with disdain. So this official went to see Cao Cao and told him, “Kong Rong belittles and slanders your excellency every single day. What’s more, he was good friends with Mi (2) Heng (2), and they always sang each other’s praises. When Mi (2) Heng (2) dared to mock your excellency before, he was acting on Kong Rong’s instructions.”

Now remember that this Mi Heng was someone that Kong Rong had recommended to Cao Cao as an envoy back in episode 29. This guy just had it out for the establishment and mocked Cao Cao and basically everyone else he came across relentlessly, until finally he crossed the wrong guy and was killed. Cao Cao did not kill him, but he was definitely not sad when he heard that Mi Heng was dead. So now, Cao Cao was incensed upon hearing the slander about Kong Rong. He immediately ordered Kong Rong be arrested and executed. And of course, that order went for the rest of Kong Rong’s family as well, because, as we have seen in other instances, this was just how things were done in ancient China -- the whole family pays for the transgressions of one man.

At that time, Kong Rong had two young sons. When the order for Kong Rong’s arrest came down, they were at home, sitting down to a game of weiqi (2,2), or as we call it today, Go. The family’s servants rushed in to tell them the horrible news.

“Your honorable father has been arrested by the court and is about to be executed,” they told the boys. “You need to flee!”

However, the two boys remained focused on their game and calmly replied, “When the nest is broken, how can any eggs be safe?”

Before those words had barely left their lips, soldiers arrived and took the entire family into custody. Everyone was beheaded in public, and Cao Cao ordered that Kong Rong’s body be put on public display.

Given the guilt-by-association nature of politics at the time, you would figure anyone who had sympathy for Kong Rong would take care to hide those feelings, lest they themselves suffer his fate. But one official named Zhi (1) Xi (2) had the audacity to throw himself upon Kong Rong’s body and weep. When Cao Cao heard this, he was irate and wanted to kill this Zhi (1) Xi (2).

However, his top adviser Xun (2) Yu (4) told him, “I have heard that Zhi (1) Xi (2) often told Kong Rong that his obstinacy would be his undoing. Right now, in mourning Kong Rong, he is showing himself to be a man of honor. We cannot kill him.”

So Cao Cao swallowed his rage and instead ordered that the remains of Kong Rong and his family be buried. This bloody business done, Cao Cao ordered his army to move out, leaving only Xun Yu to defend the capital.

While all this was happening, things were going to hell in a handbasket in Jing (1) Province. Liu Biao, who had been sick for a while, was deteriorating quickly, so he sent a message asking Liu Bei to come see him so he could tell Liu Bei his plans for after his death. Liu Bei arrived from Xinye (1,3) County with his brothers Guan Yu and Zhang Fei.

“My illness is beyond hope; I will be dead soon,” Liu Biao said to Liu Bei. “I must entrust my affairs to you, brother. My sons are untalented, and I fear they are not up to the task of overseeing my territory. After I die, brother, you may lead Jing Province.”

So cha ching. This was exactly what Liu Bei needed, and what Zhuge Liang told him he needed. Liu Bei had been hesitant to try to wrestle the province from Liu Biao because of how kind Liu Biao had been to him. But now Liu Biao is handing it to him on a silver platter.

But instead of saying ok, Liu Bei wept, kneeled, and said, “I shall do my utmost to help my nephews rule. I dare not harbor any other intentions!”

Just then came word that Cao Cao was personally leading a huge army this way. So Liu Bei quickly took his leave and hurried back to Xinye to prepare for the invasion. The news dealt Liu Biao a big shock, a shock he did not need in his present condition. After Liu Bei left, he sent out word to prepare his will, in which he declared that Liu Bei was to assist his elder son, Liu Qi (2), who would be the next ruler of Jing Province.

But of course, word of this soon leaked out to his wife, Lady Cai (4), who was incensed that her son, Liu Cong (2), was not getting the inheritance. So she ordered the doors to Liu Biao’s private quarters to be barred and ordered her brother Cai (4) Mao (4) and another confidant, the officer Zhang (1) Yun (4), to stand guard at the outer doors so that no one may enter while she took care of business, if you catch my drift.

At that moment, the elder son, Liu Qi, was stationed at the outpost of Jiangxia (1,4), an assignment that he requested to get away from his stepmother’s potentially murderous reach. When he heard that his father was on his deathbed, he rushed back to Jing Province to see him. But he was stopped at the outer doors by Cai Mao.



“Young master, your father entrusted you with the important task of defending Jiangxia,” Cai Mao said. “But you have left your post without order. What if the Southlands launch an attack? If you go in to see his lordship, he would no doubt be angry and admonish you, and it will make his condition even worse. That is not the act of a filial son. You must return to your post at once.”

Now, someone made of sterner stuff might tell Cai Mao to step aside, but Liu Qi, as we have established before, was a rather meek individual. Denied entrance, all he could do was stand outside the door and wait for a long time before returning to Jiangxia.

As for Liu Biao, he was just trying to hold on until he saw Liu Qi. But of course, his wife and her brother were just NOT going to let that happen. Liu Biao’s last gasp came one August day, as he let out a few loud groans and breathed his last. Later, a poet would lament him thus:

The Yuans held the Yellow River north,  
And Liu Biao the middle Yangzi (2,3).  
But women’s rule dragged their houses down,  
And without a trace they were gone.

So once again, we get another portrayal of a duplicitous, black-hearted stepmother who brings a proud house to ruins. This novel certainly has no shortage of them. After Liu Biao died, Lady Cai conspired with her brother Cai Mao and the general Zhang Yun (4) to forge a will in which her son, Liu Cong (2), was named the ruler of Jing Province. Only after this was done did they announce Liu Biao’s death.

Of course, this Liu Cong, while clever, was just 14 years old at the time, which meant the real power rested with his mother and her brother. Liu Cong now assembled his staff and asked them,

“My father has passed on. My older brother is presently stationed at Jiangxia, and my uncle Liu Bei is at Xinye. You all have made me the heir to my father. What if my brother and uncle come here with troops to challenge my rule? How would we explain?”

Before anyone else could reply, Li (3) Gui (1), a military adviser, spoke up.

“Young master, your words are quite right. The thing to do now is to quickly send word to Jiangxia to inform your brother of your father’s passing and invite him back here to be the ruler of the province, and ask Liu Bei to assist him. That way, we can repel Cao Cao to the north and resist Sun Quan to the south. This is a fail-proof plan.”

Well, of course that was not going to fly. Cai Mao admonished Li Gui and said, “Who do you think you are?! How dare you speak such nonsense and disobey our late lord’s last will?”

Li Gui shot back and said, “You all have conspired to forge his lordship’s will, deposing the elder son and making the younger son the heir. You Cais will be the architect of our province’s destruction! If our late lord’s spirit is present, he would surely punish you!”

You can probably guess what happened next. Cai Mao, incensed at being called out, ordered the guards to take Li Gui (1) outside and execute him. Li Gui cursed the Cais with his last breath, but to no avail. Now controlling the province through Liu Cong, the Cai clan took control of the various armies of the province. They put two officials in charge of defending the provincial capital, while Lady Cai and Liu Cong were to move to Xiangyang (1,2) as a preventative measure against any action by Liu Qi or Liu Bei. They buried Liu Biao on the plains outside Xiangyang, but even now, they continued to keep Liu Qi and Liu Bei in the dark about his death.

Lady Cai and Liu Cong had barely arrived at Xiangyang when word came that Cao Cao’s army was marching toward the city. Alarmed, Liu Cong immediately summoned his staff to discuss what to do. One of the officials, Fu (4) Xun (4), offered up this piece of advice:

“Even before Cao Cao’s army began marching here, we already had other problems to worry about. We have yet to deliver the news of your father’s passing to your brother or Liu Bei. If they mobilize their troops to reproach us for this offense, the province will be in danger. I have an idea that can assure the safety of the people of this province and allow your lordship to preserve your position.”

“What is your idea?” Liu Cong asked.

“Why not offer the province to Cao Cao?” Fu (4) Xun (4) said. “He will no doubt treat you very well.”

Uhh, ok, that’s a ... umm ... brilliant idea.

“What kind of suggestion is that?” Liu Cong admonished him. “I have just inherited my father’s work. How can I abandon it to someone else?”

But Kuai (3) Yue (4), one of the top advisers, chimed in in favor of the idea of surrendering to Cao Cao.

“We must take into account the big picture when deciding between resistance and submission,” he said. “The disparity between strong and weak cannot be overcome. Right now, Cao Cao is waging war in the name of the court. If your lordship resists, then you will be declared a rebel. Besides, you have just ascended to your position, and you face external concerns and internal unrest. The people of the province are scared at the mere news of Cao Cao’s pending arrival, so how can they put up a fight?”

“Well, your words are reasonable,” Liu Cong said as he began to waver in his conviction. “It’s not that I don’t want to follow your advice. It’s just that I am afraid I will become a laughingstock if I surrender my ancestor’s land to someone else.”

Before he was done speaking, though, another man boldly strode into the chamber and said, “The other officials’ advice is quite sound. Why not follow it?”

This was Wang (2) Can (4). He was a man of frail appearance and short stature, but had quite a reputation. When he was a kid, he went to visit Cai (4) Yong (1), the famous court official we had mentioned early in the novel. At the time, Cai Yong was hosting a party with an illustrious guest list. But when Cai Yong heard that Wang (2) Can (4) was there, he eagerly rose up to greet him, which surprised the guests.

“Who do you show such deference to a child?” they asked Cai Yong.

“This child has unusual talent, far beyond mine,” was the answer.

So what was Wang Can (4) known for? Well, for having a photographic memory. He once recited the entire text of a roadside inscription after seeing it just once. Also, if he watches other player play board games and then the board gets shuffled, he was able to put all the pieces back in their place. He was also adept at arithmetics and surpassed his contemporaries in rhetoric and poetry. He was appointed by the emperor to the position of an attendant in the Inner Bureau at age 17, but declined the job. Later, he moved to Jing Province to escape the chaos in the heart of the empire, and Liu Biao took him in as a retainer and treated him as an honored guest. So now, he has come to share the benefit of his wisdom with Liu Cong.

“General, how do you think you stack up against Lord Cao?” he asked Liu Cong.

“I am no match for him,” Liu Cong answered.

“Lord Cao has a strong army and fierce warriors. He is also wise and crafty,” Wang Can (4) said.

“He has scored countless victories, defeating foes like Lü (3) Bu (4), Yuan Shao, Liu Bei, and the Wuhuan (1,2). Right now, he is marching on Jing Province with a huge army that cannot be resisted. Fu (4) Xun (4) and Kuai (3) Yue’s (4) advice is the way to go. You must not hesitate, or you will regret it.”

This spiel was enough to sway Liu Cong. “You are quite right, sir,” he said. “But I must inform my mother first before proceeding.”

As soon as he said that, Lady Cai appeared from behind a screen and told her son, “Since these three good sirs all agree on this course of action, there is no need to inform me.” So Liu Cong set to writing a letter of surrender and ordered the official Song (4) Zhong (1) to deliver it to Cao Cao. Song (4) Zhong (1) traveled to the city of Wancheng (3,2), where he met Cao Cao and offered up the letter. Cao Cao was delighted. He rewarded Song Zhong (1) handsomely and told him to tell Liu Cong he must personally come out of Xiangyang to welcome Cao Cao’s army, and that he would make Liu Cong the ruler of Jing Province for life.

Song (4) Zhong (1) took his leave and started back toward Xiangyang. But just as he was getting ready to cross the river, he ran into a squad of soldiers on patrol, led by Guan Yu. Song Zhong did not have time to hide, and Guan Yu recognized him and started asking questions about what’s happening in Jing Province. Song Zhong was apparently a pretty bad liar, because it did not take long for him to get painted into a corner, and he spilled the beans about everything.

Guan Yu was stunned by the news and immediately seized Song Zhong and brought him before Liu Bei. When Liu Bei heard all that had happened, he began to wail. Zhang Fei had a suggestion on how they could cheer him up.

“Brother, with things as they are, let’s first execute Song Zhong, and then mobilize our army and cross the river,” he said. “First we take Xiangyang and kill Liu Cong and his mother. Then we face Cao Cao.”

So will Liu Bei take his brother’s advice? Find out next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.