

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 50.

Before we pick up where we left off, I would be remiss to not note the milestone of our 50th episode. It's taken us more than a year to get here, and we've got plenty more of the story to go. We are really just getting warmed up here. I have enjoyed the experience of producing this podcast immensely, and I want to thank all of you listeners out there for giving the show a chance, sticking with it, sending in comments, and telling other people about it. I've said this before, but it's worth repeating: You guys make the effort it takes to produce the show worthwhile. So thank you.

So, where were we? Ah yes. Liu Biao had just died, and before his body was cold, his wife, Lady Cai, and her brother Cai (4) Mao (4) had conspired to forge his will and make her son, Liu Cong (2), the new ruler of Jing Province. They kept word of all this, including Liu Biao's death, hidden from his elder son Liu Qi (2) and from Liu Bei.

Then, when they heard that Cao Cao's army was on its way, they quickly decided to surrender. So they sent an official named Song (4) Zhong (1) to deliver the message to Cao Cao. On his way back, Song Zhong was captured by Liu Bei's soldiers. They took him to Xinye (1,3) County to see Liu Bei, and he ended up telling Liu Bei everything. Zhang Fei then told Liu Bei that he should kill Song Zhong, then march on Xiangyang, where they would sack the city, kill Lady Cai and Liu Cong, and use the city as their base to fight Cao Cao.

But Liu Bei would have none of this.

"Enough already!" he said as he shushed Zhang Fei. "I will proceed as I see fit."

He then admonished Song Zhong. "You knew what was going on, so why did you not report this to me sooner? Even if I kill you today, it would do no good. So scram!"

Song Zhong, breathing a huge sigh of relief, thanked Liu Bei and made himself scarce. Just as Liu Bei was sitting around feeling bad, word came that Liu Biao's elder son Liu Qi had sent the official Yi

(1) Ji (2) to see him. Remember that Yi Ji had twice saved Liu Bei from conspiracies by Cai Mao to kill him, so Liu Bei was obviously glad to see him.

After they greeted each other, Yi Ji said, "My lord Liu Qi heard that his father had passed away, but that his stepmother and Cai Mao conspired to keep the news from us and made Liu Cong the new ruler of the province. After my lord sent men to verify that this rumor was true, he sent me here to tell you, in case you did not know. He also wants to ask you to join forces with him and go to Xiangyang to hold the Cais responsible."

"Sir, you have not heard the whole story," Liu Bei said. "You only know that Liu Cong has assumed command of the province. Do you know that he has surrendered it to Cao Cao?"

Yi (1) Ji (2) was shocked by this and asked how Liu Bei came by this intel, and Liu Bei told him how he had captured Song Zhong.

"If that's the case, my lord, why don't you go to Xiangyang under the pretense of mourning Liu Biao, lure Liu Cong out of the city, capture him, and wipe out his conspirators? The province would be yours."

"Yi Ji is quite right," Zhuge Liang chimed in. "My lord, you should do as he suggests."

But once again, Liu Bei was too soft-hearted. With tears streaming from his eyes, he said, "On his deathbed, my brother entrusted me to look after his sons. If I turn on his son and steal his territory now, how can I face him in the underworld after I die?"

"But if you don't do this, what would you do about Cao Cao? His army is already at Wancheng (3,2)," Zhuge Liang said.

"Why don't we relocate to Fancheng (2,2) for now to buy some time?" Liu Bei said.

Just then, scouts rushed in to report that Cao Cao's army was already at the city of Bo (2) Wang (4). Liu Bei hurriedly dispatched Yi Ji back to Jiangxia to get the troops there ready. He then consulted with Zhuge Liang on how to repel the enemy.

"My lord, do not worry," Zhuge Liang said to him. "Last time, our fire consumed most of Xiahou Dun's troops. This time, we'll give Cao Cao's army another taste of the same medicine. But we cannot stay at Xinye any longer. Let's go to Fancheng (2,2) as soon as possible."

So they sent men to post announcements at all four gates of the city, telling the residents that if they wanted to, they could accompany Liu Bei to Fancheng to escape Cao Cao's army. They then sent the adviser Sun (1) Qian (2) to the banks of the river to prepare boats to transport the civilians, while another adviser, Mi (2) Zhu (2), escorted the families of all the officials as they went on ahead to Fancheng.

Zhuce Liang then assembled all the officers to give them instructions. He told Guan Yu to lead 1,000 men to the upper end of the White River. "Bring along a large number of sacks, fill them with dirt, and pile them up to dam the river," Zhuge Liang told him. "Then, the next night around 11 p.m., when you hear commotion downstream, remove the sacks, flush the enemy with the torrents, and then attack."

Next, Zhang Fei was ordered to take 1,000 soldiers and lie in wait at the river crossing at Boling (2,2). "The flow of the river is fairly slow at this crossing," Zhuge Liang said. "So after the enemy gets flushed by General Guan's troops, they would no doubt flee in this direction, and you shall attack when they do."

Then, Zhuge Liang said to Zhao Yun, "Take 3,000 men, divide them into four detachments. You will lead one detachment and lie in wait by the east gate of the city, while the other detachments will wait by the other gates. Within the city, stash plenty of sulphur and other fire-starting material. Once Cao

Cao's troops enter the city, they will take up quarters in civilian homes. Tomorrow at dusk, there will be a strong wind. When the wind starts, order the troops at the other three gates to shoot fire arrows into the city. While the fire is raging inside the city, make a loud ruckus outside the city. Leave only the east gate unguarded so that the enemy will flee through there. You can then give chase and attack them from behind. At dawn, meet up with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei and lead your troops to Fancheng."

Finally, Zhuge Liang gave orders to Mi (2) Fang (1) and Liu (2) Feng (1). "Take 2,000 men. Have half of them carry a blue flag, and the other half carry a red flag. Go wait at Magpie Tail Hill, which lies 10 miles outside of Xinye. When the enemy approaches your location, have the troops under the red flag move out to the left, and the troops under the blue flag move out to the right. The enemy will be suspicious and will not dare to pursue you. Then you take your men and go lie in wait. When you see fire in the city, you can then give chase and attack the fleeing enemy. When you're done, go reinforce the troops at the upper end of the White River."

This elaborate trap set, Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei found a high vantage point outside of the city and waited for the play-by-play to commence.

While they're waiting, let's go check in on Cao Cao's army. The first detachment, some 100,000 strong, was marching under the command of the generals Cao Ren (2) and Cao Hong (2). And in front of them was a shock force of 3,000 ironclad soldiers, led by the general Xu Chu. Xu Chu's vanguard stormed toward Xinye, and around midday, they arrived at Magpie Tail Hill. There, they saw an army waving red and blue flags. These were the 2,000 men led by Liu Feng (1) and Mi Fang. Xu Chu pressed his army forward, and the enemy troops promptly turned and retreated to the left and right.

Seeing the enemy on the run, Xu Chu pulled up his horse and reined in his men, telling them, "There must be an ambush ahead. Let's hold up here for now." He then rode back to see Cao Ren and informed him of the situation.

“This is a decoy,” Cao Ren said. “There is no ambush here. Press on, and we will be right behind you.”

So Xu Chu rode back to the front of the column and led his vanguard forward into the woods after the enemy. But by then, there was no sign of the troops they had seen earlier. By now, the sun was starting to set. Xu Chu was just about to continue forward when suddenly, he heard loud music coming from above. He looked up and saw a cluster of banners atop a tall peak. Among the banners were two canopies. Under one was Liu Bei, and under the other was Zhuge Liang. The two of them were seated across from one another, drinking and seemingly just having a good ol’ time.

Xu Chu was enraged by this mockery, and he ordered his troops to find a way up the hillside. However, they were greeted with a hail of rocks and logs and could not advance. Just then, they heard loud roars from behind the hill, so they tried to find a way to get back there to pick a fight, but by then it was already too dark.

At this point, Cao Ren had caught up, and he ordered the troops to forget about Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang and instead go seize Xinye so they would have a place to rest for the night. When they arrived at the foot of the city, they found all four gates flung wide open. Cao Ren’s troops stormed in and found no resistance. In fact, they found no one at all. It was a ghost town.

“Liu Bei must have run out of ideas, so he took the civilians with him and ran,” Cao Hong said. “Let’s get some rest in the city tonight. Tomorrow at dawn, we will continue to advance.”

Cao Ren’s troops had been marching all day and were exhausted and starving. So they all broke into civilian houses and began to cook dinner, while Cao Ren and Cao Hong took up residence in the city’s administrative compound.

Around 8 o'clock that night, a raging wind whipped up, and soon the guards at the gate reported that a fire had broken out.

"Our men must have been careless when they were cooking and started a fire," Cao Ren said. "We must not panic."

But yeah, this was no accident. Those words had barely left Cao Ren's mouth when one urgent report after another rolled in, telling him that fires had also started by the west, south, and north gates. Knowing his troops could not possibly be that clumsy, Cao Ren figured he had stumbled into a trap, so he and his officers quickly mounted their horses. By now, the entire city was engulfed in flames, and the night sky was turned red by the fire, a fire that was even stronger than the one that had wiped out Xiahou Dun's army in the previous invasion. Now, it was time to panic.

Cao Ren and his officers rode through the smoke and flames, looking for a way out. Someone told them that the east gate was not burning, so they hurriedly stormed through that gate. Countless numbers of their soldiers trampled each other in the rush to escape.

Of course, their problems were just beginning. No sooner had they escaped the fire did they hear battle cries rise up from behind. This was Zhao Yun leading his detachment in pursuit. Cao Ren's troops were in no mood to fight and instead kept running for their lives. Just then, Mi Fang, who was leading one of the squads that had feigned a retreat earlier in the day, stormed out and took a bite out of the fleeing enemy. This was followed up by a similar sucker punch by Liu Feng (1), who was leading the other half of the decoy army from earlier in the day.

By about 1 a.m., what remained of Cao Ren's troops were exhausted, and most of them had suffered burns and injuries. They fled until they reached the banks of the White River. There, they were delighted to find that the water was not particularly deep. So both men and horses waded into the river to quench their thirst, making a loud commotion in the process.

Of course, there was a reason the water was not very deep at that spot, and that commotion was the signal that Guan Yu, who was waiting up river, had been waiting for. He now ordered his men to remove the sandbag dam that they had constructed, and Cao Ren's troops soon discovered, much to their horrifying chagrin, that this part of the river was actually much deeper when it wasn't dammed. A large number of Cao Ren's soldiers drowned when the raging torrents swept down, and Cao Ren and the remnants of his troops sprinted toward the shallow end of the river.

That route took them to the river crossing at Boling (2,2), just as Zhuge Liang had predicted. So of course they promptly ran into the waiting arms of Zhang Fei.

"Cao Ren, you scoundrel! Come meet your death!" Zhang Fei shouted.

The two sides scrummed, and things were looking dire for Cao Ren. Just then, Xu Chu appeared on the scene and engaged Zhang Fei in battle. But after a short back-and-forth, Xu Chu did not dare to linger for long, so he fled as well.

Zhang Fei now went to meet up with Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, and together they traveled up river, where Liu Feng and Mi Fang had already prepped boats for them. They all crossed the river and headed toward Fancheng, but not before Zhuge Liang ordered all the boats burned, just to make it a little harder for the enemy.

As for Cao Ren, once he was in the clear, he reassembled his tattered troops and brought them back to Xinye to regroup. He then went with Cao Hong to see Cao Cao, who was coming with the main army.

"Zhuge Liang, you country bumpkin! How dare you?!" Cao Cao said angrily when he heard what had transpired.

So now, Cao Cao flexed his muscle and marched his main army forward. This army was so immense that it covered the hillside as it marched. After they set up camp at Xinye, Cao Cao sent out troops to scour the nearby hills and to block the flow of the White River. He then divided his main army into eight detachments and had them all march on Fancheng (2,2).

But before his troops set out, one of his advisers, Liu Ye (4), offered up a suggestion.

“Your excellency just arrived in Jing Province,” Liu Ye (4) said. “You must try to win over the hearts of the people first. Right now Liu Bei has moved all of the civilians of Xinye to Fancheng. If our troops begin to lay siege, both of those cities will be reduced to ashes. Why not send someone to offer Liu Bei a chance to surrender first? Even if he refuses, the gesture would show our concern for the people. If he does surrender, then we can pacify Jing Province without battle.”

“Who should we send as the envoy?” Cao Cao asked.

“Xu (2) Shu (4) has a strong bond with Liu Bei,” Liu Ye said. “He is currently with the army, so why not send him?”

In case you forgot, Xu Shu (4) was Liu Bei’s strategist before Zhuge Liang, but Cao Cao detained his mother and forced him to leave Liu Bei. As a result, Xu Shu’s mother committed suicide, and Xu Shu swore to never offer any advice to Cao Cao. So understandably, Cao Cao was hesitant about sending him back to his old master since, hey, what if he doesn’t come back? But Liu Ye put his mind at ease.

“If Xu Shu doesn’t come back, he would become a laughingstock. So there is no need to worry about that,” Liu Ye said.

So Cao Cao summoned Xu Shu and said, “I had intended to raze Fancheng to the ground, but I pity the civilians within. Go talk to Liu Bei. Tell him that if he surrenders, he will be pardoned and given a title. If he continues on his misguided path, then his army and his civilians will share his fate and be destroyed. I know you are a loyal and honorable man, so I am tasking you with this mission. Please do not let me down.”



So Xu Shu set out and went to Fancheng, where Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang greeted him and they all sat around and reminisced about the good ol' days for a while. Xu Shu then said, "My lord, Cao Cao is sending me here to ask you to surrender in an insincere attempt to curry favor with the people. Right now he is marching eight detachments this way and has blocked the flow of the White River. I fear you will not be able to hold Fancheng. You must make plans immediately."

Liu Bei, predictably, tried to convince Xu Shu (4) to stay, but Xu Shu refused. "If I do not return, then I will become a laughingstock," he said. "My mother is already dead, and that is a grudge I shall never forget. Even though I am in Cao Cao's service, I swear I will never offer him a single piece of advice. Your lordship now has Sleeping Dragon assisting you, so there is no need to worry about achieving your ambitions. I will take my leave of you now."

So Liu Bei had no choice but to let Xu Shu go. When Xu Shu returned to Cao Cao and told him that Liu Bei had no intention of surrendering, Cao Cao was enraged -- though he could NOT have seriously expected Liu Bei to do otherwise. In any case, he immediately ordered his troops to march on Fancheng.

Inside Fancheng, Liu Bei once again turned to Zhuge Liang for ideas.

"We must abandon Fancheng at once and seize Xiangyang as a temporary respite," Zhuge Liang said.

"But what about the civilians?" Liu Bei asked. "They have followed me for so long, how can I bear to abandon them now?"

"We can send out word among the civilians that those who to follow us can, and those who don't can stay behind."

So they sent Guan Yu to the bank of the river to prepare boats for their escape, while the advisers Sun Qian and Jian (3) Yong (1) went out into the city and announced, "Cao Cao's troops are approaching. This city cannot be held for long. Civilians who want to follow us may cross the river with us."

When they heard this, all of the civilians shouted, "We would risk life and death to follow Lord Liu!"

So yeah, here's more over-the-top, pro-Liu Bei, man-of-the-people propaganda. But for the sake of the novel, let's just roll with it. So these civilians, old and young, men and women, all scrambled across the river. But this was no pleasure cruise or even an orderly crossing. It was utter chaos, and both banks of the river were filled with the endless sounds of people crying.

Witnessing this scene from his boat, Liu Bei wept and said, "It's all because of me that the people have to endure such suffering. How can I go on?!" At that, he tried to throw himself into the river, but was restrained by those around him. When word of this no-doubt heartfelt attempt at self-sacrifice reached the masses, everyone wept. When Liu Bei's boat reached the south bank, he looked back and saw that there were still civilians on the other side who had not yet crossed, and they were looking southward and wailing. Liu Bei immediately ordered Guan Yu to send the boats back. Only after all the civilians had been ferried across did Liu Bei get back on his horse and continue toward Xiangyang.

But if Liu Bei and company thought they were going to find respite in Xiangyang, they were sorely mistaken. When they got to the east gate of the city, they saw banners lining the city wall and the moat filled with barbed branches -- not exactly a red-carpet reception.

"Liu Cong, my good nephew!" Liu Bei shouted from atop his horse. "My only wish is to save these civilians. Please open the gates!"

Well, Liu Cong was too afraid to even show his face. Instead the officers Cai Mao and Zhang Yun (3) went to the top of the defense tower and ordered the guards to start firing arrows into the throngs outside. The civilians outside now all wept in the direction of the tower, begging for some compassion that was not coming.

Suddenly, an officer inside the city stormed up to the top of the tower with a few hundred men and shouted, “Cai Mao, Zhang Yun (3), you traitors! Lord Liu is a man of compassion and virtue. He has come to us to save these people. Why do you resist him?!”

This man was about six feet tall, with a face as swarthy as a red date. His name was Wei (4) Yan (2). Now, keep this guy in mind. He will become an important character later on. Wei Yan now cut down the guards at the gate, flung the gates open, and lowered the drawbridge.

“Imperial Uncle, hurry up and lead your troops inside!” Wei Yan shouted to Liu Bei. “Let us kill the traitors together!”

Zhang Fei was just about to gallop into the city, but Liu Bei quickly pulled him back, saying “Do not startle the civilians.”

While Wei Yan kept calling for Liu Bei to enter the city, another officer galloped out from inside the city and shouted, “Wei Yan, you no-name lackey! How dare you stir up trouble?! Do you recognize the general Wen (2) Pin (4)?!”

Wei Yan was angered by this name-calling, so he rode forward and tangled with Wen (2) Pin (4) while his men scrummed with the city’s guards. As the din of battle raged, Liu Bei lamented, “I came here to protect the civilians, but now I have led them into harm’s way. I will NOT enter Xiangyang!”

“In that case, Jiangling (1,2) is a key strategic location within the province. Let’s go take that as our foothold for now,” Zhuge Liang suggested.

“My thoughts exactly,” Liu Bei agreed. So they led the civilians and departed Xiangyang for Jiangling. Amid the chaos, a large number of the civilians within Xiangyang fled the city to join Liu Bei’s swelling entourage because they all just love him so much.

As for Wei Yan, after a long duel with Wen (2) Pin (4), he saw that the few hundred men who had followed him were all dead, so Wei Yan turned and fled as well. But he could not find Liu Bei amid the chaos, so he fled toward the city of Changsha (2,1) to seek refuge with the governor there. We will hear from him again, though not for a good while.

Catching up with Liu Bei, he was now traveling with more than 100,000 people, counting soldiers and civilians. This entourage included thousands of carts, and countless people who took whatever they could carry with them. Along the way, they passed Liu Biao’s grave, and Liu Bei paused to pay respects to his departed kinsman.

“Your dishonorable brother has neither virtue nor talent,” Liu Bei wept in front of the grave. “I have let you down! The crime rests entirely on me. The civilians are innocent. I pray that your spirit will save the people of Jing Province!”

And once again, the soldiers and the civilians all wept when they heard these words. As much as I hate to break up this lovefest, though, word came just then that Cao Cao’s army had already taken Fancheng and was now gathering boats and will soon cross the river to continue its pursuit.

Liu Bei’s officers now said to him, “Jiangling (1,2) is an important location and is sufficient for holding out against Cao Cao. But with these tens of thousands of civilians, we are traveling only a few miles a day. When will we make it to Jiangling at this pace? And how would we fight if Cao Cao’s troops catch up? We should leave the civilians behind and rush on ahead.”

“No,” Liu Bei said as he wept, once again. “To accomplish a great task, your foundation must begin with the people. These people have followed me, so how can I abandon them?”

This, of course, gave the civilians yet another cause to be touched and saddened by Liu Bei's commitment to them. A poet later praised Liu Bei's compassion for these common folks thus:

In dire straits, his heart was preoccupied with his flock.

Riverborne, the tearful leader won his army's love.

And still today men mark the site with solemn piety;

And older folks keep Lord Liu in cherished memory.

While Liu Bei's actions would earn him praise in later ages, at this particular time it was giving his staff heartburn. Zhuge Liang said to him, "The enemy will soon catch up. We should send Guan Yu ahead to Jiangxia to ask Liu Qi to send ships to meet us at Jiangling."

To this, Liu Bei agreed, so he wrote a letter and sent Guan Yu and 500 soldiers on ahead toward Jiangxia. He then ordered Zhang Fei to bring up the rear, and put Zhao Yun in charge of protecting his family. The rest of his officers all were sent to help the civilians keep moving forward, as this giant, pitiful mass of humanity trudged forward for just a few miles a day.

While this was going on, Cao Cao had set up shop in Fancheng, and he sent word across the river to Xiangyang, telling Liu Cong he wanted to meet. Liu Cong, however, was too afraid to go, so his officers Cai Mao and Zhang Yun volunteered to go in his stead.

One of Liu Cong's officers, Wang (2) Wei (1), said to Liu Cong in private, "General, you have submitted your surrender, and Liu Bei has fled. Cao Cao's guard must be down right now. If you stage a surprise attack at a strategic location, you can capture Cao Cao. If you do that, then your prowess will shake the realm and you will be able to pacify the heart of the empire. This is a rare opportunity. Don't miss it."

So is Liu Cong going to surprise Cao Cao? Find out in the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.