

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 52.

Previously, we left off with one of the most memorable sequences in the novel, in which Zhao Yun rescued Liu Bei's infant son, A Dou (1,3), and fought his way through swarms of Cao Cao's troops to escape. But no sooner had he left the bulk of Cao Cao's army behind did he run into two more detachments of enemy soldiers, led by two lieutenants under the command of Cao Cao's general Xiahou Dun. These two guys were brothers. One wielded a battle axe, while the other used a halberd, and they were shouting for Zhao Yun to surrender.

Zhao Yun, of course, paid no heed to their words and greeted them with his spear. Within three bouts, the elder brother, the axe-wielder, was stabbed off his horse. Zhao Yun took the opening and ran. The younger brother, however, gave chase. As he closed in, the tip of his halberd flashed around Zhao Yun's back. But Zhao Yun suddenly turned around, and the two were face to face right next to each other. Wielding his spear in his left hand, Zhao Yun blocked the halberd. At the same time, his right hand pulled out the prized sword that he had taken from Cao Cao's sword-bearer earlier in the day. Where the sword landed, half of his opponent's head and helmet went flying off.

Seeing their leaders killed, the enemy soldiers scattered, and Zhao Yun once again fled toward Changban (2,3) Bridge. Behind him rose earth-shaking cries of battle. This was Wen (2) Pin (4), one of the generals of Jing Province who had recently surrendered to Cao Cao. He was leading a detachment of troops in hot pursuit. By the time Zhao Yun reached Changban (2,3) Bridge, he and his horse were running on fumes. But fortunately for him, Zhang Fei was waiting on the bridge.

"Help me!" Zhao Yun cried.

"You go on ahead; I will deal with the enemy!" Zhang Fei told him.

So Zhao Yun galloped across the bridge and traveled for another seven or eight miles before he spotted Liu Bei and company resting under some trees. Zhao Yun dismounted, threw himself onto the ground, and wept bitterly. Liu Bei was also brought to tears.

After catching his breath, Zhao Yun said, "Even I were to die 10,000 deaths, I cannot atone for my crime! Lady Mi (2) was wounded and refused to take my horse. Instead, she killed herself by jumping into a well. All I could do was to knock over a mud wall to bury her. Then, I carried the young master in my bosom and fought my way through the enemy ranks. Thanks to your lordship's great fortune, I was able to escape. The young master was crying not too long ago, but I haven't felt him move in a while. I fear the worst!"

As he spoke, Zhao Yun unstrapped A Dou from his chest and took a look. Lo and behold, the baby was just fine. More than fine, in fact. He was sound asleep. That's probably a good tip to keep in mind the next time Liu Bei can't get the baby to go to sleep. Just have Zhao Yun strap him to his chest and point him toward the nearest enemy swarm.

"Thank heaven the young master is ok!" Zhao Yun exclaimed as he handed the baby to Liu Bei with both hands.

Liu Bei, however, took the baby and tossed him on to the ground.

"You useless brat! You almost cost me one of my top generals!" he said.

At this, Zhao Yun hurriedly bent down to pick up A Dou and fell to his knees in tears.

"Even if my brain and innards were scattered across the ground, I cannot repay your kindness to me!" he said to Liu Bei.

So hand it to Liu Bei here for a crafty move that showed Zhao Yun, not to mention everyone else present, how much he valued his officers. There's a reason he was able to win so many people's hearts despite his less-than-stellar record in battle up to this point. Of course, I'm not sure this was

exactly a glowing testament to his fitness as a parent. In any case, this touching act of child abuse was later remembered in a poem:

As the tiger sprang from Cao Cao's line;
Safe on Zhao Yun's breast the little dragon curled.
To express gratitude to his loyal officer,
Down before the horse did Liu Bei his own son hurl!

While this scene was playing out, Cao Cao's troops under the command of Wen (2) Pin (4) had arrived at Changban (2,3) Bridge. But the sight of Zhang Fei glowering at them from atop the bridge with spear in hand made them stop. When they looked more closely, they also noticed dust rising out of the woods on the other side of the bridge, which made them think an ambush was nearby. Now remember that this was the work of Zhang Fei, who had 20-some riders drag tree branches back and forth in the woods to kick up dust as a decoy. So, yeah, pretty smart thinking there on his part.

While Wen Pin hesitated to advance, more of Cao Cao's troops arrived, led by his most veteran generals, the likes of Cao Ren, Li Dian, Xiahou Dun, and so on. But once again, the sight of Zhang Fei on the bridge made them stop. Also, they've fallen for Zhuge Liang's tricks twice before already, so they were all cautious to a fault now. They spread out in a line on the west side of the bridge and sent a messenger to report to Cao Cao.

When Cao Cao heard this, he quickly rode to the front line to check out the situation for himself. From atop the bridge, Zhang Fei spotted a blue canopy and battle-axe banner coming to the front. He figured that this was Cao Cao, and he knew the enemy was suspicious, given that they haven't tried to storm the bridge yet.

"Here stands Zhang Fei! Who dares to come fight me to the death?!" he let out a roar.

Where his thunderous voice traveled, Cao Cao's men became unnerved. Cao Cao quickly ordered his men to take away his canopy, I guess to make himself less of a target. He then said to the officers by his side, "Guan Yu once told me that Zhang Fei could charge into an army of millions and take the heads of opposing top generals as easily as taking something out of a bag. We must not underestimate him today."

His had barely spoken those words when Zhang Fei boomed yet again: "Here stands Zhang Fei! Who dares to come fight me to the death?!"

Intimidated by Zhang Fei's ferocity, Cao Cao was starting to lean toward falling back. Seeing the rear of Cao Cao's troops starting to shuffle around, Zhang Fei gripped his spear even harder and shouted again, "Fight, or flight! Make up your mind!"

At the sound of this last roar, one of the low-level officers who was next to Cao Cao was literally scared to death, as his innards shattered and he plopped off his horse. This was enough to make Cao Cao turn around and run, and the rest of his officers and soldiers immediately followed as they fled back toward the west. They were like suckling babes trembling at the sound of thunder or sickly woodsmen confronted by the roars of tigers and leopards. Countless number of Cao Cao's soldiers tossed away their weapons and armor as they ran, while the tide of men and avalanche of horses trampled each other.

For shouting a guy to death and intimidating an entire army into fleeing just by the sound of his voice, Zhang Fei earned himself a pat on the back and a poem:

At Changban (2,3) Bridge his war blood rose:

Spear leveled, horse poised, eyes round-fixed.

With a single thunderous cry that shook the ground,

Alone he turned Cao Cao's mighty host around.

Like the rest of his men, Cao Cao was fleeing in terror. He even lost his cap and his hair came undone. After a while, two of his officers, Zhang Liao and Xu Chu, caught up to him and held up reins of his horse, and Cao Cao was still in a panic.

“Your excellency, please calm down,” Zhang Liao said. “There is no need to be so afraid of one man. If we immediately turn around and attack, we can capture Liu Bei.”

Only now did Cao Cao begin to regain some of his senses. He sent Zhang Liao and Xu Chu back to the bridge to see what’s going on.

As for Zhang Fei, he did not give chase as Cao Cao’s troops retreated. Instead, as soon as they were out of sight, he summoned the 20-some riders from the woods and called off the decoy. He had them take apart the bridge and then caught up to Liu Bei.

But when Zhang Fei told Liu Bei that he had disassembled the bridge, Liu Bei said, “Brother, you were certainly brave, but you made the wrong move.”

“How so?” Zhang Fei asked.

“Cao Cao is crafty. You should not have taken down the bridge. Now he will come after us for sure.”

“One shout from me was enough to send him scurrying for miles. How would he dare to come chase us again?”

“If you had not taken apart the bridge, then he would suspect that there is an ambush, and he would not dare to advance. But destroying the bridge is a sign that we do not have any troops and are afraid of him, so he would no doubt come after us. He has an army of millions, enough to fill in a roaring river. How can one meager destroyed bridge stop him?”

So, doh! But what's done was done, and Liu Bei and company immediately set off along backroads and headed toward the river crossing at Hanjin (4,1).

As for Cao Cao, just as Liu Bei expected, when he heard that the bridge had been taken apart, he immediately ordered 10,000 troops to build three pontoon bridges, to be completed that night.

"This might be one of Zhuge Liang's tricks," his officer Li Dian advised.

"Zhang Fei is just a brute. There is no deception," Cao Cao said, and he ordered his men to advance as soon as possible.

As Liu Bei and company approached Hanjin (4,1), they suddenly saw a dust cloud being kicked up behind them while the beating of drums and the cries of men reached the heavens and shook the earth.

"In front of us is the great river, and behind us, the enemy in pursuit. What should we do now?" Liu Bei said as he panicked. He immediately ordered Zhao Yun to prepare to face the oncoming enemy.

While his men gave chase, Cao Cao told them, "Liu Bei is like a fish in the pot, a tiger in the trap. If we do not capture him now, it would be like letting the fish back into the ocean or the tiger back to the mountain. Everyone, push forward with everything you've got!"

This spurred his men to press ahead even harder, but just then, the sound of drums rose up from behind a hill, and a squad of soldiers darted out and shouted, "We've been waiting for you!" At their head was a general wielding the green dragon saber and riding the red hare horse. This was, of course, none other than Guan Yu. He had gone off to Jiangxia (1,4) to ask for help from Liu Qi (2), Liu Biao's elder son. He managed to borrow 10,000 troops. When he heard about the battle at Changban (2,3) Hill, he quickly came here to cut off Cao Cao's pursuit.

As soon as Cao Cao saw Guan Yu, he slammed on the brakes and said to his men, “We have fallen for Zhuge Liang’s tricks again!” So they immediately turned around and retreated. Guan Yu gave chase for a few miles to keep up appearances, and then fell back to escort Liu Bei and company to the river crossing at Hanjin (4,1), where ships were waiting for them.

As he helped Liu Bei, Lady Gan (1), and the infant A Dou onto one of the ships, Guan Yu asked Liu Bei where his other wife was. Liu Bei told him what happened, and Guan Yu sighed, “Back when we were on the imperial hunt where Cao Cao publicly disrespected the emperor, if you had let me kill him as I wanted to, we would not have this trouble now.”

“Back then, I was worried about the emperor’s safety,” Liu Bei replied.

Just as they were speaking, they suddenly heard battle drums on the south shore of the river, and ships as numerous as a colony of ants sped toward them with the wind at their back. Liu Bei was alarmed, but when the ships drew closer, he saw a man wearing a white robe and silver armor standing at the head of one of the ships and shouting, “Uncle, how are you?! Pardon my intrusion!”

This was Liu Qi, who then came aboard Liu Bei’s ship and said while weeping, “I heard that you had been besieged by Cao Cao, so I have come to help.”

Liu Bei was delighted. They combined their fleets and traveled together. But just as they were talking, they noticed another fleet of warships spread out in a line across the river to the southwest, speeding toward them.

“I have already mobilized all the troops at Jiangxia (1,4),” Liu Qi said with alarm. “These ships blocking our way must be either Cao Cao’s or the Southland’s. What shall we do?”

But just then, Liu Bei saw a man sitting at the front of one of the oncoming ships. He wore a Daoist robe and a band around his head. It was none other than Zhuge Liang, whom Liu Bei had sent off to Jiangxia a day earlier to seek help. Behind him stood the adviser Sun Qian (2). Liu Bei immediately invited Zhuge Liang to his ship and asked how he came to be here.

“When I arrived at Jiangxia, I first ordered Guan Yu to come on land to reinforce you,” Zhuge Liang replied. “I figured Cao Cao would give chase and that you would not be coming from Jiangling (1,2), but rather from Hanjin (4,1). So I asked Master Liu Qi to come meet you first. Then I went to Xiakou (4,3) and mobilized all the troops there to come help.”

Liu Bei couldn't be happier about this development. With all his forces mustered, he now began to discuss how to defeat Cao Cao.

“The city of Xiakou (4,3) enjoys natural defenses and has money and grain,” Zhuge Liang said. “We can hold out there for a long time. My lord, you should go there. Master Liu Qi should return to Jiangxia and get the warships and weapons ready. This would set up our forces in a pincer formation, enough to repel Cao Cao. If we all return to Jiangxia, then we would be isolated.”

“Master Zhuge’s counsel is wise indeed,” Liu Qi said. “But I would like to invite you, uncle, to Jiangxia for a little while to get your forces in order. Then you can return to Xiakou.”

Liu Bei agreed. So he sent Guan Yu with 5,000 troops back to Xiakou to hold down the fort, while he and Zhuge Liang returned to Jiangxia with Liu Qi.

Now, let’s check in on Cao Cao. After being cut off by Guan Yu, he was afraid of more ambushes, so he did not dare to come give chase again. He was also worried that Liu Bei might try to attack the key city of Jiangling (1,2), so he led his troops there immediately. The officials overseeing Jiangling figured they were no match for Cao Cao, so they led their troops and civilians out of the city to surrender.

Cao Cao entered the city. He then handed out rewards and promotions to all the local officials to buy their loyalties. This done, Cao Cao sat down with his officers to discuss their next move.

“Liu Bei has gone to Jiangxia,” he said. “If he forms an alliance with Sun Quan (2), our problems would multiply. How shall we attack him?”

One of the advisers, Xun You (1), replied, “Now that our army’s prowess is on full display in the field, your excellency should send a messenger to the Southlands and summon Sun Quan. Ask him to come rendezvous with us at Jiangxia and help us capture Liu Bei. Tell him we will divide Jing Province with him and form an everlasting alliance. Sun Quan would no doubt be intimidated into submission. Then success would be ours.”

Cao Cao agreed to this plan and sent a messenger to Sun Quan. In the meantime, he mobilized 830,000 troops, including infantry, cavalry, and navy. But he let it be known far and wide that instead of 830,000, he was actually marching with a million men, because rounding up sounds so much better. In any case, the point is that he had A LOT of soldiers, and they advanced by land and water along the river. Their camps stretched 100-some miles from east to west.

While all this was going on in Jing Province, over in the Southlands, Sun Quan had garrisoned his army at Chaisang (2,1). He got word that Cao Cao’s army had reached Xiangyang (1,2), that Liu Cong (2) had surrendered, and that Cao Cao had taken Jiangling (1,2). So Sun Quan assembled his staff to discuss how they should respond.

“Jing Province is connected to our territory,” his adviser Lu (3) Su (4) said. “It has natural defenses and a lot of wealth and people. If we can control it, it would be the foundation for imperial aspirations. Right now, Liu Biao has recently died and Liu Bei has just suffered a defeat. I would like to request your permission to go to Jiangxia to convey our condolences for Liu Biao’s death. I would take that opportunity to persuade Liu Bei to convince Liu Biao’s commanders to make common cause with us and defeat Cao Cao together. If I can convince Liu Bei, then success would be ours.”

Sun Quan heeded his advice and sent Lu (3) Su (4) off to Jiangxia.

Meanwhile in Jiangxia, Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, and Liu Qi were discussing their next move.

“Cao Cao is too powerful for us to fight him right now,” Zhuge Liang said. “Perhaps we should go to the Southlands to seek refuge with Sun Quan temporarily. That will set the South and the North against each other, and we can benefit from their conflict.”

“But with all their talent, the Southlands must have grand ambitions,” Liu Bei said. “How can they be willing to take us in?”

But Zhuge Liang smiled and replied, “Right now Cao Cao is leading a massive army down the river. The Southlands would no doubt send someone here to get the lay of the land. When that person comes, I will go with them to the Southlands and, on the strength of my tongue, set the South and North at odds with each other. If the South wins, then we can join them in exterminating Cao Cao and seize Jing Province. If the North wins, then we can take that opportunity to take the Southlands.”

“That sounds good, but how can we get someone from the Southlands to come here?” Liu Bei asked.

Well, the answer arrived just as they were speaking, as word came that the Southlands had sent Lu Su to convey their condolences for Liu Biao’s death, and that his boat had already docked.

“It is done,” Zhuge Liang said with a laugh. He then asked Liu Qi, “When Sun Ce died, did you guys send your condolences?”

“The Southlands and our family have a blood feud; we killed their father Sun Jian (1), so why would we have such interactions with them?” Liu Qi replied.

“In that case, Lu Su is not here to convey condolences. He is here to scout out the situation,” Zhuge Liang said. He then turned to Liu Bei and said, “When Lu Su gets here and starts asking about Cao Cao’s movements, just pretend that you don’t know. When he presses you, tell him to ask me.”

Their plan set, they sent out word to welcome Lu Su into the city. Lu Su arrived and presented gifts. Liu Qi then introduced him to Liu Bei. After exchanging pleasantries, they invited Lu Su to the private quarters for wine.

"I have long heard of the imperial uncle," Lu Su said. "But I had not had the pleasure to meet you until today. I recently heard that you have been fighting against Cao Cao, so you must know his situation. May I be so bold as to ask you how many troops Cao Cao has?"

"I have few soldiers and even fewer officers," Liu Bei answered. "So as soon as I heard Cao Cao was coming, I ran. So I don't actually know his strength."

"I have heard that, with Master Zhuge Liang's strategy, you twice scorched Cao Cao's troops and scared them out of their wits," Lu Su said. "So how can you say you don't anything about his army?"

"If you want details, you'll have to ask Zhuge Liang," Liu Bei told him.

So Lu Su then asked to see Zhuge Liang, and Liu Bei summoned him. After they greeted each other, Lu Su said, "I have always admired your talent and virtue, but had not come to pay my respects until today. I would like to hear your analysis of the current situation."

"I know all about Cao Cao's devious plans," Zhuge Liang said. "But regrettably, we are not strong enough yet, so we are avoiding him for now."

"Is the imperial uncle staying here?" Lu Su asked.

"My lord is an old friend of the governor of Cangwu (1,2), so we will go there," Zhuge Liang said.

"But the governor of Cangwu has few troops and provisions. He cannot even save himself, much less take someone else in," Lu Su said.

"It is not a place to stay long-term, but we will go there for now and plan our next move," Zhuge Liang replied.

"My lord, General Sun, reigns over six districts and has crack troops and ample provisions," Lu Su said. "He is also respectful toward men of merit and has retained the services of many talented men

of the Southlands. Why don't you form an alliance with the Southlands and make grand plans together?"

"But my lord has never had any dealings with General Sun," Zhuge Liang said. "He is worried that his words would be in vain. He also has no one he trusts that he can send."

"Sir, your elder brother is currently an adviser in the Southlands and he yearns to see you," Lu Su said to Zhuge Liang. "I may be untalented, but I am willing to take you to go see General Sun and discuss this important matter."

At this point, Liu Bei interjected. "But Zhuge Liang is my teacher. I cannot allow him leave me for even a second. How can I let him go?"

Lu Su insisted, but Liu Bei kept playing bad cop and steadfastly refused to let Zhuge Liang go. After this charade went on for a bit, Zhuge Liang said, "With things as urgent as they are, please allow me to go this one time."

Liu Bei took the cue and relented. So Lu Su took his leave and returned to his boat with Zhuge Liang and set off for Chaisang (2,1). Just so you know, you should get used to this good-cop-bad-cop routine between Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang. It's going to be one of their favorite tactics when it comes to dealing with the Southlands.

Lu Su spent the journey to Chaisang prepping Zhuge Liang for his meeting with Sun Quan.

"Sir, when you see General Sun, you must not tell him the truth about how immense Cao Cao's forces are," Lu Su said.

"No need for you to keep reminding me," Zhuge Liang said. "I know how to answer him."

When the boat docked, Lu Su first put Zhuge Liang in a guesthouse while he went to see Sun Quan. At that moment, Sun Quan was meeting with his staff. When he heard that Lu Su had returned, he immediately invited him in and asked how his reconnaissance mission went.

“I have a general idea, but will need some time to report in full, my lord,” Lu Su said.

Sun Quan then showed Lu Su a message.

“This arrived from Cao Cao yesterday,” Sun Quan said. “I have sent the messenger back and am discussing with my staff on how to respond.”

Lu Su read the letter, which said:

“I, Cao Cao, on the order of his majesty, have been authorized to take action against state criminals. Our banners tilted southward, and Liu Cong (2) has bound his hands in submission. The people of Jing Province, sensing which way the wind blew, have transferred their allegiance to us. Now, I control an army of a million and a thousand top-flight warriors. I would like to rendezvous with you, General Sun, at Jiangxia, where we shall defeat Liu Bei together, divide his territory, and form an everlasting alliance. Please do not hesitate. I look forward to your speedy reply.”

When he was done reading, Lu Su asked Sun Quan what he intended to tell Cao Cao.

“I haven’t decided yet” was the response.

Sun Quan’s top adviser, Zhang Zhao (1), now interjected.

“Cao Cao has an immense army and wages war in the name of the emperor. Whoever resists him would be dubbed a traitor. The Yangzi River was our main advantage against Cao Cao, but now that he has taken Jing Province, he shares this advantage as well. He is too powerful to oppose. In my humble opinion, we should submit for the time being. This would be the safest course of action.”

At this, everyone else chimed in and said, “Zhang Zhao’s words are in accordance with heaven.”

However, those words did not seem to be in accordance with Sun Quan, as he simply remained silent.

“My lord,” Zhang Zhao pressed, “There’s no need for doubts. If you submit to Cao Cao, then the people of the six districts of the Southlands will be safe.”

Still, Sun Quan made no answer. Momentarily, he got up to go use the bathroom, and Lu Su followed. Knowing Lu Su's intent, Sun Quan grabbed his hand and asked, "What do you think?"

"What everyone was saying was not in your best interest, general," Lu Su replied. "It is ok for everyone else to surrender to Cao Cao, but not for you."

"Why so?" Sun Quan asked.

For Lu Su's explanation, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.