

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 54.

Last time, Zhuge Liang had just ticked off Sun Quan by telling him that if he had any doubts about his own strength, then he should just throw in the towel now and surrender to Cao Cao. When a displeased Sun Quan asked him, "Well why doesn't your master surrender to Cao Cao?", Zhuge Liang basically told him, "My master is too great a man to surrender." This slight did not go over well with Sun Quan, and he stormed off in a huff, which caused his adviser Lu (3) Su (4) to admonish Zhuge Liang for his poor choice of words.

Zhuge Liang, however, simply looked up and laughed.

"How can he be so intolerant? I know how to defeat Cao Cao. But he didn't ask me, so I didn't tell him."

"If you really have a good idea, then I will ask my lord to come seek your counsel," Lu Su said.

"Cao Cao's millions are like ants in my eyes. I need only to raise my hand, and they would be crushed to dust."

Hearing this confident boast, Lu Su was convinced enough to go see Sun Quan, who at this time was still fuming.

"Zhuge Liang went too far!" Sun Quan said angrily.

"Your servant admonished him thusly, too," Lu Su said. "But he laughed and said that your lordship was too intolerant. He knows how to defeat Cao Cao, but will not share it lightly. Your lordship should ask him."

Sun Quan's demeanor did a 180 when he heard this. "So Zhuge Liang does have an idea! He was just inciting me with words. I almost ruined everything because of a momentary lapse in judgment."

So Sun Quan accompanied Lu Su back into the main hall and invited Zhuge Liang back in.

"I recklessly sullied your great name just now; please forgive me," Sun Quan apologized.

Zhuge Liang responded magnanimously. "My words offended you. Please forgive me."

Sun Quan then invited Zhuge Liang into the private quarters and served wine.

After a few rounds of wine, Sun Quan said, "Cao Cao's enemies included Lü Bu, Liu Biao, Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, Lord Liu, and me. Now, everyone has been wiped out except Lord Liu and me. I must not give the Southlands over to another man's control. Of that, I am certain. And none but Lord Liu can help me resist Cao Cao, but he has just suffered a defeat. So how can he withstand this coming calamity?"

"Despite my master's recent defeat," Zhuge Liang said, "Guan Yu still has 10,000 crack troops, and Liu Qi has another 10,000 at Jiangxia (1,4). Cao Cao's army is exhausted from the great distance it has traveled. When he was chasing my lord, his light cavalry traversed a hundred miles in one day. They are like an arrow at the end of its flight. It's too weak even to pierce silk. Besides, the northerners are not used to naval warfare. The soldiers and civilians of Jing Province obey Cao Cao only out of fear, not loyalty. If you and my lord can join forces and act as one, we will defeat Cao Cao for sure. Once he is defeated, Cao Cao will no doubt retreat back to the north, leaving Jing Province and the Southlands in a strong position and bringing about a tripod balance of power. Victory or defeat rests in your hands today. It is up to you."

These were exhilarating words to Sun Quan's ears. "Sir, your words have opened my eyes!" he said. "My mind is made up, and I have no reservations. We shall begin at once to discuss how to deploy our forces to destroy Cao Cao!"

He then ordered Lu Su to relay his intentions to his civil and military officials while Zhuge Liang returned to the guest house.

When Sun Quan's top civil adviser Zhang Zhao heard his master's decree, he said to the other officials, "Our lord has fallen for Zhuge Liang's scheme!"

So they immediately went to see Sun Quan to try to change his mind.

“We have heard that your lordship intends to fight against Cao Cao,” Zhang Zhao said. “But how do you think you stack up against Yuan Shao? Even when he had few troops and fewer officers, Cao Cao was able to defeat Yuan Shao in one fell swoop. Now that he is marching south with an army of a million, how can we take him so lightly? If you listen to Zhuge Liang and rashly respond with force, it would be like trying to put out a fire with kindling.”

Faced with this opposition, Sun Quan simply looked down without saying a word. Another of his advisers, Gu (4) Yong (1), said, “Liu Bei recently lost to Cao Cao and is trying to borrow our soldiers to repel his enemy. Why must your lordship allow yourself to be used by him? Listen to Zhang Zhao’s advice.”

But Sun Quan could not make up his mind then and there, so Zhang Zhao and company took their leave. After they were gone, Lu Su came to see Sun Quan and said, “Zhang Zhao and the others are trying to convince your lordship to surrender instead of resisting because they are looking out for themselves. I implore your lordship to not listen to them.”

But Sun Quan still remained quiet.

“If your lordship hesitates, then you will be led astray by the others,” Lu Su pressed.

“You may leave for now. Allow me to think it over,” Sun Quan said.

So Lu Su took his leave. At this moment, the officials of the Southlands were split about whether to fight or surrender, and could not come to any kind of consensus.

As for Sun Quan, he retired to his private quarters, but with so much on his mind, he could neither sleep nor eat in peace. When Madame Wu (2) saw him like this, she asked him what’s wrong. And a reminder here, this Madame Wu was not Sun Quan’s mother, but rather his mother’s sister, which would technically make her his aunt. But she and her sister both married Sun Quan’s father, so things

get really complicated. When Sun Quan's mother died, she told him to treat her sister like his mother, and he has done so, as a filial son would.

"Cao Cao has garrisoned his army on the river and intends to invade our territory," Sun Quan told Madame Wu (2). "Some of my officials advocate surrendering, while others say we should fight. If we fight, I'm worried that we would be overwhelmed numerically. If I surrender, I worry Cao Cao would not leave me alone. So I cannot make up my mind."

"Have you forgotten what my sister told you on her deathbed?" Madame Wu said. "She reminded you of what your brother Sun Ce told you when he died: If you cannot make a decision on an internal affair, ask Zhang Zhao. If you cannot make a decision on an external matter, ask Zhou Yu. So why not summon Zhou Yu and ask him?"

Sun Quan immediately sent a messenger to Poyang (2,2) Lake, where Zhou Yu was training the navy. As it turned out, though, Zhou Yu had heard that Cao Cao was approaching the Southlands, so he was already on his way back to Chaisang (2,1) to meet with Sun Quan, and he arrived before the messenger could leave.

Lu Su, Zhou Yu's best bud, was the first to go welcome him upon his return. After Lu Su brought him up to speed on what's been transpiring in his absence, Zhou Yu told him, "My friend, do not worry. I know what to do. Please go invite Zhuge Liang to come meet with me."

After Lu Su left, Zhou Yu had just settled in at home when Zhang Zhao, Gu (4) Yong (1), Zhang Hong (2), and Bu (4) Zhi (4), four of Sun Quan's top civil officials, came to pay him a visit. Zhou Yu invited them in. After a little small talk, Zhang Zhao asked him, "Commander, do you know the danger that the Southlands are in?"

"No, not yet."

“Cao Cao has garrisoned an army of a million on the Han (4) River. He sent a decree here yesterday, inviting our lord to meet him at Jiangxia (1,4). Although he may intend to gobble up the Southlands, he has not made a move yet. We have been advising our lord to submit for the time being to save the Southlands from disaster, but who knew that Lu Su would go to Jiangxia and bring back Liu Bei’s military adviser, Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang wants to settle his own score with Cao Cao, so he incited our lord into agreeing to fight, and Lu Su is still in the dark. We are hoping you will settle things.”

“Do you all share the same view?” Zhou Yu asked the others. And the other three officials all said yes.

“It has long been my intention to surrender,” Zhou Yu told them. “Please go home for now. When I see our lord tomorrow morning, I will know how to proceed.”

So Zhang Zhao and company took their leave. But momentarily, a group of military officers, led by the veterans Cheng (2) Pu (3), Huang (2) Gai (4), and Han (2) Dang (1), came to see Zhou Yu. Zhou Yu welcomed them in, and after exchanging pleasantries, Cheng Pu said, “Commander, do you know that the Southlands will soon belong to someone else?”

“No, not yet.”

“We followed the late General Sun as he established his domain,” Cheng Pu said. “It took hundreds of battles big and small to conquer the six districts we have now. But now, our lord is persuaded by his civil advisers to surrender to Cao Cao. What a disgrace! What a shame! We would rather die than suffer this humiliation. I hope you will advise our lord to fight. We will fight to the death.”

“Do you all share this opinion?” Zhou Yu asked the other officers present.

“We do not want to surrender,” they all said.

“I intend to fight Cao Cao. I would never surrender!” Zhou Yu said. “Please go home for now. When I see our lord, I will know how to proceed.”

So Cheng Pu and company took their leave. But no sooner had they disappeared when another group of civil officials, led by Zhuge Jin and Lü (3) Fan (4), arrived. So Zhou Yu invited them in and showed them the typical hospitality. Zhuge Jin then spoke.

“My brother Zhuge Liang has come from Jing Province to propose an alliance with Liu Bei to resist Cao Cao. The officials and officers are in disagreement over what to do. Since my brother is the envoy, I dare not say much, and instead have been waiting for you, commander, to make the decision.”

“What are your thoughts on this matter, sir?” Zhou Yu asked.

“If we surrender, we would be safe. If we fight, we would be in danger,” Zhuge Jin said.

Zhou Yu now smiled and said, “I have a plan. I will settle the matter in the main hall tomorrow.”

So Zhuge Jin and company took their leave, and right on their heels came another group, led by the generals Lü (3) Meng (2) and Gan (1) Ning (2). And so it went, with some saying fight, and some saying surrender. And Zhou Yu told them all, “No need to say too much. We will discuss this tomorrow in the main hall.”

After the visitors left, Zhou Yu could not help but chuckle.

Later that night, Lu Su returned with Zhuge Liang. Zhou Yu went out to the inner gate of his residence to welcome them. After the formalities, they sat down, and Lu Su got the conversation started by asking Zhou Yu, “Right now Cao Cao and his army are encroaching on the South, and our lord cannot make up his mind whether to fight or submit, and he is hoping that you will help him decide. What is your opinion, general?”

“Cao Cao acts in the name of the emperor, so we cannot resist him,” Zhou Yu said. “Besides, he is too powerful to be taken lightly. If we fight, we would surely lose. If we surrender, it would be an easy peace. My mind is made up: Tomorrow, I shall advise our lord to surrender.”

Wait, what? Lu Su was taken aback by Zhou Yu’s response.

“Sir, you are mistaken,” Lu Su said. “Our lord’s family has been established in the Southlands for three generations now. How can we abandon it to someone else just like that? When the late general Sun Ce died, his last words were to entrust external affairs of state to you. Now we are looking to you to protect our domain and be our rock. Why do you adopt the viewpoint of the pedants?”

“Countless people reside within the six districts of the Southlands,” Zhou Yu said. “If they suffer the ravages of war, then the blame would fall on me. That’s why I want to surrender.”

“Not so,” Lu Su insisted. “With your prowess and the natural defenses of the Southlands, Cao Cao may not yet get his wish.”

Of course, Zhou Yu is just playing Lu Su here and trying to feel out Zhuge Liang, but Lu Su did not catch on. While they were arguing, Zhuge Liang simply watched and chuckled.

“Why are you laughing, sir?” Zhou Yu asked.

“I am laughing at none other than Lu Su, for not recognizing which way the wind is blowing,” Zhuge Liang replied.

“Sir, why are YOU laughing at ME for not recognizing the circumstances?” Lu Su said.

“General Zhou is quite right in wanting to surrender to Cao Cao,” Zhuge Liang said.

“See, Master Zhuge is a man who understands the times,” Zhou Yu said. “He must agree with me.”

“Is that what you think, too?” Lu Su asked Zhuge Liang.

“Cao Cao is adept at warfare, and no one dares to stand against him,” Zhuge Liang said. “Those who dared -- Lü Bu, Yuan Shao, Yuan Shu, and Liu Biao -- have all been wiped out by him, and now

there's no one else. The only exception is my lord Liu Bei, who does not recognize the direction of the tides and insists on fighting Cao Cao. And now, he is alone in Jiangxia, and his fate is uncertain.

General Zhou's plan to surrender would ensure the safety of his family, not to mention guarantee him great wealth. So what if the sacred throne of the house of Sun is transferred to someone else? Chalk it up to heaven's will. What's to feel bad about?"

Lu Su was enraged by this response. "You would have my lord bend the knee and suffer humiliation at the hands of that traitor?!" he fumed.

"I have an idea," Zhuge Liang said, "It would not require any great sacrifices of wealth, power, or territory, nor would your lord have to cross the river to meet Cao Cao. Just send an envoy on a lone boat and deliver two people to Cao Cao's camp. Once he gets these two people, his army of a million will lay down their arms and leave."

"Who are these two people that can make the enemy leave?" Zhou Yu asked.

"For the Southlands to give up these two people would be like a great oak shedding a leaf or a giant granary missing one grain of millet," Zhuge Liang replied coyly. "But once Cao Cao has them, he would leave happily."

"Who are they?" Zhou Yu pressed.

"When I was living in seclusion, I heard that Cao Cao had built a new tower on the Zhang (1) River, called Bronze Bird Tower," Zhuge Liang said. "It's supposed to be quite an impressive sight, and he is choosing beautiful women from all around the realm to be kept there for his pleasure. Cao Cao is a lustful man. He has long heard that an old Mr. Qiao (2) who resides in the Southlands has two daughters, the elder named Da (4) Qiao (2), and the younger named Xiao (3) Qiao (2). They are supposed to possess beauty that can make fish sink, make geese fall out of the sky, make the moon seem dim, and make the flowers feel abashed. Cao Cao once swore this oath: 'One of my great wishes

is to pacify the four corners of the realm and achieve my imperial ambitions. My other great wish is to obtain the two Qiao women and keep them at Bronze Bird Tower to serve me in my old age. If I can do that, I would die without regret.'

"Right now, Cao Cao and his massive army are setting their sights on the Southlands, but the real objects of his desire are these two women. So why not go track down old Mr. Qiao, pay him handsomely for his two daughters, and send them to Cao Cao? Once he has them, he would be satisfied and would call off his invasion. This would follow the precedent from long ago, when Fan (4) Li (3) offered the beauty Xi (1) Ci (1) to the king of Wu (2) to obtain peace. You should act at once."

So the historical reference here to Fan Li is from the Spring and Autumn period. Fan Li was an adviser to the ruler of the kingdom of Yue (4). Yue was defeated by the rival kingdom of Wu (2), and so the king of Yue, as part of the peace terms, had to go serve as a hostage in Wu (2). Eventually, though, Fan Li managed to convince the king of Wu to let his master return home by offering him a beautiful woman named Xi (1) Ci (1). Of course, the king of Yue never gave up thoughts of revenge, and after returning home, he managed to rebuild his forces and eventually defeated his old enemy.

"What proof have you that Cao Cao is after these two women?" Zhou Yu asked.

"One of Cao Cao's sons, Cao Zhi (2), is a fantastic writer," Zhuge Liang said. "Cao Cao once asked him to write a piece called "Bronze Bird Tower Rhapsody." Its theme is the fitness of his family to take the throne and Cao Cao's desire to have these two women."

"Do you remember this rhapsody?" Zhou Yu asked.

"It's quite a lovely piece of writing, so I have memorized it."

"Can you recite it for me?"

So Zhuge Liang began to recite the Bronze Bird Tower Rhapsody. I'm not going to recite it here, because it's pretty long and it's not really necessary for you to hear the whole thing to understand what's going on. I'll post a link to the text of the rhapsody on the website with this episode. But for our purposes right now, this is the line from the piece that really matters:

"Aloft on either side, twin towers --
Left, Jade Dragon; right, Golden Phoenix --
Holding two bridges,
Rejoicing day and night."

So, you might ask, how does a line about towers and bridges prove Cao Cao's lust for these two women? Well, this is a play on words. In Chinese, the last name of the two women, Qiao (2), sounds just like the word for "bridge." Now remember that when Cao Cao built his Bronze Bird Tower, it had two bridges that connected the main tower to the two towers on either side. So this line could very well just be referring to an architectural feature, but Zhuge Liang is hinting that there's a second, more lurid meaning here.

Now, the earlier Chinese versions of the novel printed this line with the character for "bridge". But this was changed to the character of the two women's last name in later versions. There's a detailed note in Moss Roberts' translation of the novel explaining how this was perhaps an attempt to further vilify Cao Cao. But in any case, what you need to know here is that the line may have had a double meaning, where it may be referring on the surface to the architectural feature of the bridges while in reality it's a veiled reference to Cao Cao's desire to be holding the two Qiao women and make merry with them day and night. That's certainly the interpretation that Zhuge Liang is putting forth here for Zhou Yu.

When Zhou Yu heard this line, he became livid. He jumped up from his seat, pointed to the north, and cursed out loud, “Old scoundrel! You have gone too far!!”

Zhuge Liang quickly rose to restrain him.

“Back when the Xiongnu (1,2) tribe was harassing the empire’s borders, even the Han emperors would marry their princesses to the Xiongnu leaders in exchange for peace. So what’s the big deal with giving up two daughters of a commoner?”

“Sir, you do not understand,” Zhou Yu said. “That Da Qiao is the widow of our late general Sun Ce. That Xiao Qiao ... she is MY WIFE!”

When Zhuge Liang heard this, he fell to his knees and said, in a panic, “I had no idea! I have misspoken. Please, forgive me! Forgive me!”

So yeah, as you may have already guessed, Zhuge Liang totally knew, and he put on this whole charade in order to incite Zhou Yu and make sure he is firmly committed to resisting Cao Cao instead of trying to talk peace. I mean, what better motivation is there for a man to fight than to make him think that the price for peace would be his wife?

“I swear that it’s either me or that old traitor! We cannot both stand on this earth!” Zhou Yu said.

“You must think it through carefully so that you won’t have any regrets,” Zhuge Liang said as he pretended to try to steer Zhou Yu back to reason.

“The late general Sun Ce put his trust in me, so how can I subjugate myself to the traitor?” Zhou Yu said. “What I said earlier about intending to surrender was just meant to test you. When I left my station at Poyang (2,2) Lake, I already knew I wanted to take up arms against the north. Even the executioner’s axe upon my head would not soften my resolve! I hope you will lend me a hand and defeat Cao Cao together.”

“If you would have me, I will do whatever I can and be at your disposal,” Zhuge Liang said.

“Tomorrow, when I see my lord, we will discuss mobilizing our troops,” Zhou Yu said.

Mission accomplished, Zhuge Liang took his leave. With a few words, he had managed to get under Zhou Yu’s skin and manipulate him without him even realizing it. Rest assured, this will not be the last time that happened. Stay tuned.

Early next morning, Sun Quan reassembled his staff at the main hall. On the left side of the hall, 30-some civil officials lined up, led by Zhang Zhao and Gu (4) Yong (1). On the right were 30-some military officers, led by Cheng Pu and Huang Gai. The caps and robes of the officials rustled, while the swords and pendants of the officers jostled.

Shortly after everyone lined up, Zhou Yu came in to pay his respects to Sun Quan. After the formalities, Zhou Yu asked, “I have recently heard that Cao Cao has garrisoned his army along the Han (4) River and has sent a letter here. May I ask how your lordship intends to respond?”

Sun Quan handed Cao Cao’s letter to Zhou Yu. After reading it, Zhou Yu laughed and said, “That old scoundrel must think there are no talented men in the Southlands. How dare he approach us with such insolence?”

“What is your opinion?” Sun Quan asked.

“Have your lordship discussed this with your officials?”

“We have been discussing this for days. Some have advised me to surrender, while others want me to fight. I have not made up my mind yet. I hope you will help me decide.”

“Who has advised you to surrender?” Zhou Yu asked.

“Zhang Zhao and company,” Sun Quan answered.

So Zhou Yu approached Zhang Zhao. “I would like to hear your reasons,” he said.

“Cao Cao wages war in the name of the emperor and acts on behalf of the court,” Zhang Zhao replied. “Plus, he recently conquered Jing Province and his power is formidable. The only thing the Southlands had to repel Cao Cao was the Yangzi (2,3) River, but now Cao Cao has thousands of warships. If he advances on land and on the river, how can we stop him? So why not surrender for now and bide our time?”

“That,” Zhou Yu said, “is the viewpoint of a pedant! Since establishing their enterprise, our lord’s family has reigned in the Southlands for three generations now. How can we throw it all away just like that?”

“Then what do you propose?” Sun Quan asked.

“Cao Cao may be the prime minister of the Han in name, but he is in reality a traitor to the Han,” Zhou Yu said, invoking that same disparaging line that so many have used to describe Cao Cao before. “Your lordship, with your magnificent talent, are heir to your father and brother’s enterprise and ruler of the Southlands. You have skilled soldiers and ample provisions. You should be striding over the realm and helping to rid the country of its villains. How can you submit to that traitor instead?”

“Besides, Cao Cao has committed numerous cardinal sins on this campaign. First, the North is not yet pacified, as Ma (3) Teng (2) and Han (2) Sui (4) remain a thorn in his side, and yet Cao Cao has set off on a long campaign to the South.

“Second, the armies of the North are not familiar with naval battles, yet Cao Cao is trading his horses for ships to fight against the Southlands on the river.

“Third, we are approaching the height of winter, and his horses will lack for hay.

“Fourth, the soldiers of the North are not used to the local climate and have been ravaged by disease.

“With so much working against him, even though Cao Cao has a large army, he would surely lose. If you want to capture Cao Cao, now is the time. I would like to lead several tens of thousands of soldiers to Xiakou (4,3) and defeat him for you!”

So are Zhou Yu’s words enough to sway Sun Quan to resist Cao Cao? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.