

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 56.

Last time, Sun Quan had agreed to join forces with Liu Bei to resist Cao Cao. However, his field commander Zhou Yu had a strange notion of alliance, because he kept trying to kill his allies -- first Zhuge Liang, and then when that failed, he set his sights on Liu Bei himself. He sent an invitation for Liu Bei to come visit his camp. During the welcome banquet, Zhou Yu was going to throw his cup as a signal for a bunch of armed soldiers to storm in and kill Liu Bei.

Liu Bei had an inkling that it could be a trap, so he brought his brother Guan Yu along. They took about 20 men with them and sailed down river toward Dongwu's camp. As they approached the camp, Liu Bei was quite impressed by the orderly deployment of the ships and troops, which made him happy since it meant he might actually stand a chance against Cao Cao now.

When Zhou Yu got word that Liu Bei had arrived, he asked how many ships he brought with him. When the answer was just one, he laughed and said, "He is destined to meet his end!"

So Zhou Yu set his ambush and came out to greet Liu Bei and escorted him and his entourage to the main tent. After the usual formalities, Zhou Yu asked Liu Bei to take the first seat.

"General, your name is renowned across the realm," Liu Bei said. "How dare an unworthy man like me accept such an honor from you?"

After the prerequisite back-and-forth "Oh no, I am so honored to have you here" and "No no no, I insist," they arrived at a mutually agreeable seating chart, and the welcome banquet began.

While all this was going on, Zhuge Liang happened to be in the area. When he heard that Liu Bei had come to meet with Zhou Yu, his spidey sense began to tingle and he hurried to the main tent. As he stood outside the tent and peeked in, he could see Zhou Yu's murderous intent on his face, and oh yeah, the armed soldiers hiding behind the curtains.

“What should I do about this?” Zhuge Liang thought with some panic. But just then, he glanced over at Liu Bei and saw that he was quite at ease as he talked and laughed. Behind Liu Bei stood a man with his hand on his sword. This was none other than Guan Yu.

“My lord is safe,” Zhuge Liang said with relief and delight. He was so confident, in fact, that he just turned around, left the camp, and waited on the bank of the river.

As for Zhou Yu, after a few rounds of wine, he stood up to offer a toast and, presumably, to chuck his cup and spring the trap. But suddenly, he noticed the guy standing behind Liu Bei with a hand resting on his sword. He immediately asked Liu Bei who this was.

“My brother Guan Yu,” Liu Bei replied.

“The one who slayed Yan (2) Liang (2) and Wen (2) Chou (3)?” a surprised Zhou Yu asked.

“The very same.”

This answer left Zhou Yu so frightened that cold sweat rolled down his back. He kept his composure, though, and offered a toast to Guan Yu. But the whole throwing-the-cup-and-killing-Liu-Bei plan evaporated right then and there.

Momentarily, Lu Su joined the banquet, and Liu Bei asked him if he could invite Zhuge Liang to the tent, but Zhou Yu again said no.

“There will be plenty of time to catch up with him after we have defeated Cao Cao,” he told Liu Bei.

Umm, ok. You’re acting a little odd. Liu Bei did not dare to ask again, and at that moment, Guan Yu flashed him a look. Liu Bei caught his meaning and stood up.

“I shall take my leave for now,” he said to Zhou Yu. “After we have defeated the enemy, I shall come to offer my congratulations.”

Zhou Yu did not try to keep him and saw him off at the gates of the camp. When Liu Bei and company arrived at the bank of the river, they found Zhuge Liang waiting for them in their boat, which delighted Liu Bei immensely.

“My lord, are you aware of the danger you were in today?” Zhuge Liang asked him.

Danger? What danger? An apparently oblivious Liu Bei asked.

“If not for General Guan, you would have died by Zhou Yu’s hand,” Zhuge Liang explained.

Only now did Liu Bei go, you know, I thought there was something a little off about this whole affair. Given Zhou Yu’s less-than-friendly posture, Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang to accompany him back to Fankou (2,3), where his troops were garrisoned. Zhuge Liang, however, refused.

“Even though I am residing in the mouth of a tiger, I am as secure as the Tai (4) Mountain,” he told Liu Bei. “But you should prepare your troops and ships for action. On the 20th day of November, have Zhao Yun come to the south shore with a small boat and wait. There must be no slip-ups.”

Liu Bei did not understand the meaning of these instructions, so Zhuge Liang elaborated, “When a southeast wind starts blowing, that’s when I will return.”

Liu Bei was still not clear on this whole thing, but Zhuge Liang urged him to leave ASAP and took his leave. So Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and their entourage began to sail back toward their base. Within a few miles, they saw 50-some boats coming down river toward them. At the front of one of the boats stood a general with spear in hand. This was Liu Bei’s brother Zhang Fei, who had come to provide backup just in case something did happen. But, thanks to Guan Yu’s presence, nothing happened, so they all returned to base together.

As for Zhou Yu, after he saw Liu Bei off and went back into camp, he got a visit from Lu Su.

“Since you managed to lure Liu Bei here, why did you not spring the trap?” Lu Su asked.

“Guan Yu is one of the most fearsome warriors of the land, and he never ventured a step from Liu Bei,” Zhou Yu said. “If I tried anything, he would no doubt have killed me.”

Just then, a messenger from Cao Cao arrived. Zhou Yu summoned him, and the messenger presented a letter. Zhou Yu took a look at the envelope, which said, “From the Han prime minister to Commander Zhou.”

Well, Zhou Yu was probably in a sour mood after his failed non-attempt on Liu Bei’s life, because he flew into a rage without even reading the letter. He tore the letter to smithereens, threw the smithereens to the ground, and ordered the guards to execute the messenger.

“When two states are at war, it is the custom to not execute each other’s messengers,” Lu Su said.

“I want to kill his messenger to demonstrate my prowess!” Zhou Yu barked back.

So his guards dragged the poor schmuck outside and chopped off his head. Zhou Yu ordered the messenger’s attendant to bring his head back to Cao Cao. He then ordered the general Gan (1) Ning (2) to be the vanguard, with fellow officers Han (2) Dang (1) and Jiang (3) Qin (1) heading up the left and right wings, and Zhou Yu himself leading the other officers as reinforcement. They were to make breakfast at 3 a.m. the next day and sail out with drums rolling and men roaring at 5 a.m. to attack the enemy.

On the other side of the river, Cao Cao was understandably irate when he saw the head of his messenger. He ordered the Jing Province officers who had surrendered, led by Cai (4) Mao (4) and Zhang (1) Yun (3), to lead the vanguard, while he himself lead the reinforcements. They sailed out to the Three Rivers area, where they saw Dong Wu’s warships coming toward them, spread out across the width of the river. At the head of Dong Wu’s fleet, a general shouted, “I am Gan Ning! Who dares to face me?!”

On Cao Cao's side, Cai Mao ordered one of his younger brothers to go answer the challenge. As the two ships approached each other, Gan Ning drew his bow and fired an arrow. At the twang of his bowstring, Cai Mao's brother dropped dead. Gan Ning then pressed his ships forward and rained down a hailstorm of arrows. This was too much for Cao Cao's troops, and at that moment, the left and right wings of Dong Wu's forces also poured into the enemy.

Now, most of Cao Cao's troops were northerners who did not know how to swim, much less fight on a river. So they were already stumbling around as their ships bobbed up and down on the water. That tends to make it a little hard to fight an oncoming foe who is well-versed in fighting in these conditions. Dong Wu's reinforcements then arrived and just piled on. Countless of Cao Cao's troops were struck by arrows or explosive projectiles.

This onslaught went from mid-morning to early afternoon, and the tide was in Dong Wu's favor. However, Zhou Yu was concerned about Cao Cao's numerical advantage, so he did not press his luck and instead ordered his ships to fall back.

After his fleet returned in disgrace, Cao Cao went ashore to reorganize his troops. He then summoned Cai Mao and Zhang Yun and gave them an earful.

"We outnumbered Dong Wu's forces, but were defeated by them. This must be due to your carelessness!"

To this, Cai Mao replied, "The navy of Jing Province had not practiced for a long time. And the troops from the North are not adept at naval warfare. That's why we lost today. Right now, we should first set up a naval camp, put the Northern troops in the center, with the Jing Province troops on the outside. Then we should drill each day until our men are ready. Only then can we put them into battle."

Cao Cao's reaction to this suggestion was, well, why the hell didn't you guys do this earlier?! Why do you think I put you in charge of my navy?! So Cai Mao and Zhang Yun scurried off to implement their suggestion. They built a massive camp on the river. They put the large ships on the outer rim, serving as the walls for this floating city. Inside, they set up 24 water lanes, along which small boats could go back and forth. At night, there were so many torches in the massive fleet that the light from the flames painted the sky and the surface of the water red. On land was a camp equally as impressive, stretching for a hundred miles without any breaks.

On the opposite side of the river, after Zhou Yu returned to camp, he rewarded his troops and sent word of that day's victory to Sun Quan. That night, Zhou Yu found a high vantage point and looked across the river. He saw that the western shore was lit up to the heavens. His men told him that this was the light from the torches in Cao Cao's army.

Zhou Yu was taken aback. The next day, he wanted to personally go scout out Cao Cao's naval camp. So he had his men prepare a large ship with two tiers. Think of it as a doubledecker bus on water. He had the ship equipped with drums and other instruments. Zhou Yu then boarded the ship with a number of officers equipped with bows and arrows, and they set sail toward Cao Cao's camp.

As they approached the front of the camp, they dropped anchor, and Zhou Yu ordered his men to play their drums and instruments while he observed how Cao Cao's camp reacted. As he looked on, he said with surprise, "This camp shows a mastery of the finer points of naval warfare!"

He then asked who was in charge of Cao Cao's navy. When his men told him that it was Cai Mao and Zhang Yun, Zhou Yu thought to himself, "Those two have lived in the South for a long time and are adept at naval battles. I must first find a way to eliminate them before I can defeat Cao Cao."

By now, Cao Cao had gotten word that Zhou Yu was outside checking out his camp. He immediately dispatched ships to intercept. When Zhou Yu saw movement within Cao Cao's camp, he

pulled up anchor, and his ship sped away as his men rowed as one. By the time Cao Cao's ships came out, Zhou Yu was long gone.

Cao Cao was not happy about this. He asked his staff, "Yesterday we lost a battle and some of our momentum. Today, the enemy managed to get a good look at our camp. How should I try to defeat them?"

He had barely finished speaking when one of his retainers, a scholar named Jiang (3) Gan (4), stepped forward and said, "Zhou Yu and I studied together in our youth. I am willing to go across the river and use my words to convince him to surrender."

"How strong is your friendship with him?" Cao Cao asked.

"Your excellency can rest easy. I will succeed for sure."

"What do you need?"

"Just a young boy as an attendant, and two servants to row me across. Nothing else."

Cao Cao was delighted and gave Jiang (3) Gan (4) wine to see him off.

So Jiang Gan, clad in a head scarf and plain robe, headed to Zhou Yu's camp on a small boat. There, he told the guards to relay to Zhou Yu that his old friend Jiang Gan had come to see him. At that moment, Zhou Yu was meeting with his staff. When he heard that Jiang Gan had come, he smiled and said to his officers, "The persuader is here." He then whispered instructions to his officers, and they all went to carry out their orders.

Zhou Yu then straightened up his outfit and went out to welcome his old friend, accompanied by a well-dressed entourage of a few hundred men. As Jiang Gan and his attendant approached, Zhou Yu bowed to welcome him.

"My friend, how have you been?" Jiang Gan said.

“My friend, have you come all this way to put in a good word for Cao Cao?” Zhou Yu replied.

Jiang Gan pretended to be put off by this greeting.

“I have come to catch up because it has been so long since we parted. Why do you suspect me of being here on Cao Cao’s behalf?”

“My ears may not be as attuned as the great musician Shi (1) Kuang (4),” Zhou Yu said as he laughed, “but I can discern good music and good intentions.”

“Well, if this is how you treat an old acquaintance, then I will take my leave of you,” Jiang Gan said, threatening to walk off in a huff. But Zhou Yu laughed and grabbed his arm.

“I was worried that Cao Cao had sent you here to persuade me,” he said. “But if that is not your intent, then there’s no need to leave so quickly.”

So Zhou Yu invited Jiang Gan into camp, and after the usual formalities, they sat down and Zhou Yu summoned the standouts of the Southlands to come meet Jiang Gan. Soon, the top civilian officials and military officers, all donning formal attire, streamed in in two rows. Even the lower-level officers were clad in silver armor. After introductions, they sat down on two sides and the banquet began. Victory music blared and wine flowed freely.

“This is my old school buddy,” Zhou Yu told everyone present. “Even though he has come from the northern bank of river, he is not here on Cao Cao’s behalf. So do not harbor any suspicions.”

Zhou Yu then handed his sword to one of his top generals, Taishi (4,3) Ci (2), and told him, “Carry my sword and supervise the banquet. Today we will speak only of our friendship. If anyone mentions Cao Cao or military matters, execute them immediately.”

Taishi Ci accepted the order and sat with his hand on the sword. This move alarmed Jiang Gan, so he dared not say much, especially not about Cao Cao or the war, which, as you can imagine, made it rather difficult to carry out his mission of persuading Zhou Yu to surrender to you know who.



Zhou Yu now continued. "I have not touched a drop of wine since I assumed command of the troops. But today, with my old friend here, and without any cause for suspicion, I shall drink until I am drunk."

He then laughed and began to drink heartily. One toast followed another, and soon Zhou Yu was acting a little inebriated. He took Jiang Gan by the hand and walked out of the main tent, where armed guards stood at attention with halberds in hand.

"Are my soldiers not formidable?" Zhou Yu asked.

"Ferocious as bears, and fierce as tigers," a wary Jiang Gan replied.

Zhou Yu then took him behind the main tent and showed him the mounds of grain.

"Are my supplies not ample?" Zhou Yu asked.

"It is as they say: Your troops are strong and your provisions plentiful," Jiang Gan said.

Zhou Yu now laughed out loud as if he were wasted.

"When we were students, who could have imagined that I would be where I am today," he said.

"This is hardly a surprise, given your immense talent," Jiang Gan replied.

Holding Jiang Gan's hand again, Zhou Yu said, "As a man of honor, I have found a lord who appreciates me. We share the bond of lord and servant and a connection like family. What I say, he does. What I propose, he approves. We have been through thick and thin together. Even if the greatest rhetoricians of history were to walk the earth again, delivering speeches like cascading streams and wielding their tongues like sharp swords, they would not sway me!"

At that, Zhou Yu laughed heartily again, while Jiang Gan's face was the color of ash. Zhou Yu then dragged Jiang Gan back inside the tent to rejoin the party. He pointed at his staff and said, "These are the cream of the crop of the Southlands. Today's feast should be called the Congregation of Heroes."

The drinking resumed, and when the sun went down, the party continued under candle light. Zhou Yu got up and performed a sword dance while chanting a song that he composed. The song goes like this:

In this life a man must make his name:

A good name is a comfort for all life long.

A lifelong comfort: Oh, let me feel the wine,

Flushed with wine, I will sing my wildest song.

When he was done, everyone present laughed. And so the party went, deep into the night, until Jiang Gan finally tried to take his leave.

“I cannot drink anymore,” he said.

So Zhou Yu broke up the party and everyone left, but Zhou Yu asked his old friend to stay.

“We have not slept on the same couch for many years,” he said to Jiang Gan. “Tonight, we shall sleep foot-to-foot.”

And so he grabbed Jiang Gan and drunkenly stumbled into his tent. There, Zhou Yu collapsed onto the bed in full attire and proceeded to throw up copiously. Umm, yeah, way to go, bro.

Not surprisingly, Jiang Gan found it hard to fall asleep. He was probably afraid of rolling over the wrong spot and getting Zhou Yu’s puke on his clothes. He just lay in bed and listened to the sounds outside. He lay there until he heard the drums that signaled it was 9 o’clock. The dwindling candle in the tent was giving off a faint light, and Jiang Gan could hear Zhou Yu snoring loudly.

Jiang Gan now looked around the tent. He noticed a pile of documents on Zhou Yu’s desk. So he got up and sneaked over to the desk to steal a peek. Turns out that these were all correspondences.

Jiang Gan rummaged through the pile, and hello, what is this? On the envelope of one of the letters was written the words, "From Cai Mao and Zhang Yun".

Hmm. Jiang Gan discreetly opened the letter and took a look. The letter said:

"We did not surrender to Cao Cao for rank or fortune. We were only compelled by circumstances. Right now, we have trapped the northern army in the heart of our camp. When the opportunity presents itself, we will cut off the traitor Cao Cao's head and present it to you. We will send more information soon. Have no doubts. Respectfully yours.

"So Cai Mao and Zhang Yun are in cahoots with Dong Wu!" a stunned Jiang Gan thought to himself. He quickly stashed the letter in his pocket. Just as he was about to go through Zhou Yu's stuff some more, Zhou Yu turned over on the bed, which prompted Jiang Gan to blow out the candle.

Zhou Yu now mumbled incoherently, "My friend, I will show you Cao Cao's head in a few days!"

To this, Jiang Gan just said something to the effect of "Uh huh."

"My friend, don't go!" Zhou Yu mumbled some more. "I will show you Cao Cao's head!"

Jiang Gan tried to ask him what he meant, but Zhou Yu was sound asleep again. Jiang Gan now lay in bed until about 1 a.m. when someone suddenly entered the tent and said, "Commander, wake up!"

Zhou Yu staggered awake and asked with surprise, "Who is this on the bed?"

"You asked your friend Jiang Gan to share your bed. Did you forget?" the man who came in answered.

"I usually never get drunk," Zhou Yu said with regret. "But last night I was trashed. I hope I did not let anything slip."

"Someone is here from the northern shore of the river," the other man said. But Zhou Yu quickly cut him off.

“Not so loud!” Zhou Yu said. He then called out to Jiang Gan in a low voice to see if he was awake, but Jiang Gan pretended to be sound asleep. So Zhou Yu slipped out of the tent. As soon as he left, Jiang Gan’s ears perked up as he tried to make out the conversation outside. He heard someone say, “General Cai and General Zhang said that there is no immediate opportunity to make their move ...” But that was all Jiang Gan could make out, as the rest of the conversation was too soft.

Momentarily, Zhou Yu came back in and called out to Jiang Gan again. Jiang Gan did not answer and kept pretending to be asleep. So Zhou Yu undressed and went back to bed.

Jiang Gan now thought to himself, “Zhou Yu is very attentive to details. If he discovers that his letter has gone missing, he would surely do me harm.” So around 3 a.m., Jiang Gan got up and called out to Zhou Yu, but Zhou Yu was asleep. So Jiang Gan got dressed and slipped out of the tent. He fetched his attendant and they headed out of camp. When the guards at the gate asked where he was going, Jiang Gan told him, “I don’t want to get in the way of the commander’s duties, so I am taking my leave for now.”

The guards did not question him further and let him go. Jiang Gan got on his boat and hurried back to the opposite shore to see Cao Cao.

“How did it go?” Cao Cao asked.

“Zhou Yu is too high-minded to be swayed by speeches,” Jiang Gan answered.

“So you failed, and made us look like fools,” a displeased Cao Cao said.

“I may not have been able to sway Zhou Yu, but I did discover something important for you excellency. Please tell everyone else to leave.”

Cao Cao did as he asked, and when they were alone, Jiang Gan presented the letter and told Cao Cao how he had discovered it. Cao Cao was incensed.

“The gall of those two traitors!” he said angrily.

He immediately summoned Cai Mao and Zhang Yun and told them, "I want you two to attack."

"But our troops are not sufficiently trained yet," Cai Mao said. "We must not advance too rashly."

"By the time they are sufficiently trained, my head would already have been presented to Zhou Yu!" Cao Cao shot back.

Cai Mao and Zhang Yun had no idea where that remark came from, and thus had no answer. They did not have any time to think of an answer, as Cao Cao ordered the guards to drag them outside and behead them. Moments later, the executioners presented their heads to Cao Cao.

But now, Cao Cao suddenly came to his senses. "I've been tricked!" he said to himself.

Other officers had by now heard about the executions and came to inquire. Cao Cao, not one to admit a mistake, told them that Cai Mao and Zhang Yun were executed for flouting military rules. The stunned officers sighed and groaned. Cao Cao now appointed two other officers -- Mao (2) Jie (4) and Yu (1) Jin (4) -- to head up the navy.

When word of this reached the opposite shore, Zhou Yu was ecstatic.

"Cai Mao and Zhang Yun were the only two people I was concerned about," he said. "Now that they are dead, I have no worries!"

"With your masterful tactics, we should have no problem defeating Cao Cao," his friend Lu Su said.

Now, Zhou Yu could have just accepted this compliment and moved on to the next thing. But no, he just could not leave well enough alone.

"I don't expect our officers to understand this scheme," Zhou Yu said. "But Zhuge Liang's knowledge is greater than mine. I doubt this plan fooled him. Why don't you go sound him out and see if he knows."

To see if Zhuge Liang is aware of Zhou Yu's scheme, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.