

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 58.

Last time, with his army in a staredown against Dong Wu's forces on opposite sides of the Yangzi River, Cao Cao sent two low-level officers to pretend to defect to Dong Wu so as to act as spies. Dong Wu's commander, Zhou Yu, was not fooled but played along. He and the old general Huang (2) Gai (4) then planned to have Huang Gai pretend to defect in order to carry out an attack by fire against Cao Cao. To make this happen though, they had to convince Cao Cao that Huang Gai was defecting for real, so Zhou Yu found some excuse to give Huang Gai a vicious public beating.

After that beating, Zhou Yu's confidant Lu Su went to see Zhuge Liang and asked why he did not intercede on Huang Gai's behalf when Zhou Yu was doling out his punishment. Zhuge Liang, however, saw through the charade and explained to Lu Su that he did not want to get in the way of Zhou Yu's scheme. He also asked Lu Su to not tell Zhou Yu that he had seen through the scheme, since the last time that happened, Zhou Yu tried to find an excuse to kill him.

After Lu Su took his leave of Zhuge Liang, he went to see Zhou Yu in his tent and asked, "Why did you come down so hard on General Huang today?"

"Are the other officers grumbling about me?" Zhou Yu asked.

"They are mostly unsettled," Lu Su answered.

"What about Zhuge Liang?"

"He also complained about how uncompassionate you were," Lu Su said, keeping his promise to Zhuge Liang this time.

"So I've fooled him as well this time," Zhou Yu smiled.

"What do you mean?" Lu Su asked.

“My beating Huang Gai today was a scheme. I want to have him pretend to defect, so I must first make him suffer so as to fool Cao Cao. Then we will have the opportunity to launch a fire attack and come out victorious.”

At this point, Lu Su was secretly impressed with Zhuge Liang’s keen insight into Zhou Yu’s mind, but he did not say anything, lest Zhou Yu’s blood starts to boil again and he starts getting more ideas about killing his supposed allies.

Now let’s check in on the guy who received the beating. As he laid in his tent recovering from his wounds, Huang Gai received visits from all his fellow officers. When they inquired how he was doing, he did not say anything and just let out some deep sighs. Then, his men said that an adviser named Kan (4) Ze (2) had come to visit. Huang Gai immediately invited him in and dismissed everyone else.

Now, this Kan (4) Ze (2) was a good friend of Huang Gai’s. He grew up poor but was very studious. When he did work for other people to scrounge a living, he would often borrow their books. He only needed to read a book once, and he would be able to memorize the whole thing. He was also an eloquent speaker and had been a courageous man ever since his youth. Seeing his talents, Sun Quan retained him as a consultant.

So Kan (4) Ze (2) came in and asked Huang Gai, “General, was there bad blood between you and Commander Zhou?”

“No.”

“Then ... was your punishment part of a scheme?”

“How could you tell?”

“I guessed as much from Commander Zhou’s expression.”

“I have received great kindness from three generations of our lord’s family and have no way to repay him,” Huang Gai said. “So I suggested this idea to defeat Cao Cao. I accept this suffering quite

willingly. There is no one in this army I can confide in, except you, because I know of your loyalty and honor. That's why I am telling you this."

"You are telling me this because you want me to deliver a letter to Cao Cao telling him about your intent to defect," Kan Ze replied.

"Indeed," Huang Gai fessed up. "Are you willing?"

Kan Ze agreed without hesitation.

"A man who does not make his mark in the world will decay like a plant," he said. "Since you have sacrificed your body in the service of our lord, how can I begrudge my worthless self?"

When Huang Gai heard this, he rolled off his bed and kneeled on the ground to express his gratitude.

"We must not delay," Kan Ze said. "Let's do this immediately."

Quite conveniently, Huang Gai had already written the letter. So Kan Ze took it and that very night, he disguised himself as a fisherman and took a small boat toward the northern shore. It was a cold and starry night, and around 11 o'clock, Kan Ze arrived at Cao Cao's naval camp, where he was promptly picked up by one of the patrols, who reported to Cao Cao immediately.

"Is he a spy?" Cao Cao asked his men.

"He is dressed as a fisherman, but claims to be Kan Ze, a consultant from Dong Wu, and that he has come to see you about some secret business," the soldiers replied.

Cao Cao told them to bring Kan Ze into the tent. In the candlelight, Kan Ze saw Cao Cao sitting rigidly at his desk.

"If you are an adviser for Dong Wu, what are you doing here?" Cao Cao asked.

"Everyone says that Prime Minister Cao thirsts for men of talent, but now that I've seen it with my own eyes, that doesn't seem to be the case," Kan Ze said. He then lamented, "Oh General Huang, you are sorely mistaken again!"

“I am about to go to battle against Dong Wu, and you have come here secretly, so how can I not interrogate you?” Cao Cao countered.

“General Huang Gai is an elder statesman who has served three generations of the ruling family of Dong Wu,” Kan Ze said. “Yet today, in front of everyone, Zhou Yu gave him a brutal beating for no reason. General Huang is outraged and vengeful, so he wants to defect to your excellency to seek revenge. He shared his plan with me. He and I are like family, so I have come to deliver his secret letter. Will your excellency accept his defection?”

Cao Cao asked for the letter, which Kan Ze offered up. It read:

I, Huang Gai, have received tremendous kindness from the Sun family and should not harbor any disloyalties. However, it is evident to all that the meager forces of our six districts are no match for your army of a million. This is known to all the officials of Dong Wu as well. Yet, that despicable Zhou Yu, out of shallow willfulness and an exaggerated sense of his own abilities, is attempting to smash a rock with an egg. He has also handed out rewards and punishments without reason. The innocent suffer, and the deserving are ignored. I, an elder statesman, was humiliated without cause. My heart is filled with contempt. I have heard that your excellency is always sincere and welcomes men of ability with true humility. I am willing to defect with my troops and render service to you to avenge this humiliation. I will also offer up the provisions and equipment in our ships. Weeping bitter blood, I speak bent to the ground. Please do not have any doubts.”

Cao Cao read the letter over and over for about a dozen times. Suddenly, he smacked his desk and said angrily, “Huang Gai is using the old trick of being flogged to win the enemy’s confidence! He has sent you here to deliver this fake letter of defection so that he can use the opportunity to make a move against me. How dare you try to pull one over on me?!”

He then ordered the guards to take Kan Ze outside and execute him. As the guards were grabbing him, Kan Ze showed no panic and instead looked up to the heavens and laughed out loud. This raised Cao Cao's curiosity, so he told his men to hold on for a second.

"I have already seen through your deception. What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"I am not laughing at you," Kan Ze said. "I am laughing at General Huang for his mistaken impression of you."

"What do you mean?"

"If you are going to kill me, then kill me. No need for so many questions."

"I have been well-versed in military texts since my youth," Cao Cao said. "I am quite familiar with the art of deception. Your scheme may fool others, but not me."

"Well then, what in that letter strikes you as a deception?" Kan Ze asked.

"Fine, I will point it out so that you will die without complaint," Cao Cao told him. "If this defection is real, then why does the letter not specify when he plans to defect? What do you have to say now?"

When he heard this, Kan Ze laughed out loud again.

"You've got some gall, to brag about being well-versed in military texts! I suggest you take your army and go home now. If you actually go into battle, Zhou Yu would capture you for sure! What an ignoramus! It's a shame I have to die by your hand!"

"Why do you call me an ignoramus?"

"You know nothing of strategies or logic. How are you not an ignoramus?"

"What specifically makes you say that?"

"You show no respect to worthy men. So why should I tell you? Kill me and be done with it."

"If your explanation is satisfactory, I would naturally show you respect."

"Have you not heard of the saying that there is no set time for betraying one's lord?" Kan Ze said.

"If Huang Gai specifies a date now, and then when the time comes and he can't find the right

opportunity to make his move while you make your move, then won't the whole plan be exposed? You can only act as the situation dictates. How can you set a specific date? You do not understand this simple logic and instead want to kill an innocent man. You are truly an ignoramus!"

When Cao Cao heard these words, his expression changed and he stood up and thanked Kan Ze.

"I could not see things clearly and offended you. Please do not hold it against me," he said.

"General Huang and I are coming over to your side with full hearts, like infants returning to their parents. There is no deception," Kan Ze told him.

"If you two can render this great service," a delighted Cao Cao said, "when it comes time to dole out rewards, you shall be first in line."

"We are not coming for personal gain," Kan Ze replied. "We are doing it because it is in accordance with heaven."

Kan Ze's righteous and dignified manner convinced Cao Cao, and Cao Cao served him wine. Momentarily, a guard entered and whispered something in Cao Cao's ears.

"Let me see it," Cao Cao said.

The soldier handed over a secret letter. As Cao Cao read it, his face showed delight. Kan Ze observed this and thought to himself, "This must be a report from his spies Cai Zhong and Cai He, telling him about the punishment that Huang Gai endured. That's why Cao Cao is happy -- this confirms to him that our defection is real."

Cao Cao now said to Kan Ze, "I would like to trouble you to return to the other side to make arrangements with General Huang. Send word back to me first, and I will have troops standing by to receive you."

“But I have already left the Southlands; I cannot return,” Kan Ze said. “I suggest you send another discreet messenger.”

“If anyone else attempts to do this, word will leak out,” Cao Cao said.

After a few perfunctory attempts at refusing the mission, Kan Ze relented.

“If I must go, then I cannot stay here long. I should leave right away.”

Cao Cao tried to give Kan Ze some gold and silk as a reward, but Kan Ze, maintaining his “I’m not in this for the money” act, steadfastly refused and took his leave. He sailed back to the southern shore and went to tell Huang Gai what happened.

“If not for your oratory skills, I would have suffered for nothing,” Huang Gai said.

“I am going to General Gan Ning’s camp right now to see what’s up with Cai Zhong and Cai He,” Kan Ze told him.

Kan Ze found Gan Ning in his tent, and Gan Ning welcomed him in.

“Yesterday, you tried to intercede on General Huang’s behalf and was humiliated by Zhou Yu. It seems really unfair to me,” Kan Ze said to him.

Gan Ning, however, just smiled and did not answer. At that moment, Cai He and Cai Zhong, the two spies that Cao Cao had sent to pose as defectors, came into the tent. Kan Ze flashed Gan Ning a glance, and Gan Ning caught his meaning.

“Zhou Yu is full of himself; he doesn’t care about any of us,” Gan Ning said. “After my humiliation, I am too ashamed to face the people of the Southlands!”

He then gritted his teeth, smacked his desk, and cried out loud in anger. Kan Ze then whispered something in his ear. Gan Ning made no answer and only hung his head and let out one long sigh after another.

Cai He and Cai Zhong watched all this and thought to themselves that these two guys seem like they might be in the mood to defect. So they tried to sound them out.

“General Gan, what is troubling you? And Master Han, what are you saying is unfair?” they asked.

“How can you understand our suffering?” Kan Ze said.

“Are you thinking of defecting to Cao Cao?” Cai He asked.

At that, Kan Ze pretended to be caught off guard, while Gan Ning sprang to his feet, pulled out his sword, and said, “You have exposed our plan. I must kill you to cover it up!”

The two Cais quickly assured them that was not necessary. “Do not worry,” they said. “We have our own secret to tell you.”

“What is it?” Gan Ning asked.

“We pretended to defect on Prime Minister Cao’s orders,” Cai He said. “If you two gentlemen want to submit to his excellency, we can make the introductions.”

“Seriously?” Gan Ning asked, playing along.

“We would not dare to trick you,” the two Cai brothers said in unison.

“If that’s the case, this is a gift from heaven,” a delighted Gan Ning said.

“We have already informed his excellency about the humiliation that you and General Huang suffered,” the Cais told him.

“And I have already delivered General Huang’s defection letter to his excellency,” Kan Ze chimed in. “And now I have come to see General Gan to convince him to defect with us.”

“When a man meets an enlightened lord, it’s only right that he should follow him,” Gan Ning said.

So the four of them shared some wine and their thoughts. The Cai brothers wrote a letter to Cao Cao, telling him that Gan Ning was willing to serve as their inside man. Kan Ze also wrote a letter and



sent someone to secretly deliver it to Cao Cao, saying that Huang Gai wants to defect, but can't find an immediate opportunity, but if you see ships with a blue-green flag, that would be him coming over.

Despite receiving these two letters, Cao Cao still wasn't quite sure how much stock to put in these supposed defections. It's all too easy to have someone pretend to defect, a fact he knew all too well. So he asked his advisers which one of them would dare to go to Zhou Yu's camp and ascertain the truth.

Jiang (3) Gan (4), the guy whose last trip to the other side of the river had led to Cao Cao being duped into executing his best naval commanders, now stepped forward and said, "My last trip to Dong Wu came up empty and produced nothing. I have been deeply ashamed. I am willing to risk my life and go again to find out the truth and report back to your excellency."

Cao Cao was delighted by his eagerness and sent him off on a small boat right away. Someone else was delighted when he heard that Jiang Gan was at Dong Wu's naval camp again. It was none other than Zhou Yu.

"My success rests on this man," Zhou Yu said excitedly.

He then turned to his adviser Lu Su and said, "Please go invite Pang (2) Tong (3) here and do this and this and this."

So some of you might remember the name Pang Tong from a few episodes back. His nickname was Young Phoenix, and he and Zhuge Liang were frequently mentioned in the same breath as men of immense talents. He used to live in the city of Xiangyang (1,2) in Jing (1) Province, but with all the unrest in that area lately, he had moved to the Southlands. Lu Su knew him and had recommended him to Zhou Yu.

Although Pang Tong had not yet come to see Zhou Yu, Zhou Yu had sent Lu Su to ask him for advice on how to repel Cao Cao. Pang Tong told Lu Su, "To defeat Cao Cao's forces, you must use fire.

But on the great river, if one ship catches on fire, the others can simply scatter. To succeed, you must trick the enemy into tying their ships together.”

When Lu Su relayed this strategy to Zhou Yu, the latter was quite impressed. Zhou Yu figured that Pang Tong was the only man who could successfully trick Cao Cao into doing what he proposed, but he had not sent Pang Tong on that mission because he was worried Cao Cao might be too crafty to fall for the deception. But now, when he heard that Jiang Gan had come to visit again, Zhou Yu was delighted. He sent word to Pang Tong to proceed with their plan, and then he took a seat in his tent and summoned Jiang Gan.

When Jiang Gan did not see Zhou Yu come out to greet him this time, he began to grow suspicious. So he had his men row his boat to a secluded spot on the bank and then he disembarked and went into camp to see Zhou Yu. When they met, Zhou Yu said with a look of anger,

“Jiang Gan, why did you trick me so?”

“I came to have a good chat with you because we are old friends,” Jiang Gan said with a smile.

“Why do you say I tricked you?”

“If you want to persuade me to surrender, you can forget it, unless the ocean dries up or the stone rots away!” Zhou Yu said. “Last time, on account of our past friendship, I threw a big banquet for you and shared a couch with you. But you stole my personal letters and left without saying goodbye. And then you reported back to Cao Cao and had him kill Cai Mao and Zhang Yun, foiling my plan. And now you have come again for no reason. You must be up to something! If not for the fact that we used to be friends, I would cut you in half right now! I was going to send you back across the river, but I am getting ready to destroy Cao Cao in a couple days. Yet, if I leave you in my camp, you will leak intel on my movements.”

Zhou Yu then instructed his guards: "Take Jiang Gan to the retreat in the Western Hills for now. After I have defeated Cao Cao, I will send him back across the river."

Before Jiang Gan could say anything, Zhou Yu had already turned and walked back into his own tent. The guards then fetched a horse and escorted Jiang Gan to the retreat in the nearby Western Hills, and two soldiers, umm, attended to him.

Jiang Gan was too upset to eat or sleep. That night, stars dotted the sky, and Jiang Gan strolled out to behind the house. There, he heard the sound of someone reading. He followed the voice until he came upon a few thatched huts by the cliffside. Light shot out from inside, and Jiang Gan went up to take a look. He saw a man sitting in front of a lamp, with a sword hanging up, reciting classic works of military strategy.

"This must be someone special," Jiang Gan thought to himself. He went up and knocked, and the man of unusual appearance came out to answer. When Jiang Gan asked for his name, he replied that it was Pang Tong.

"Master Young Phoenix?" Jiang Gan asked.

"Indeed."

"I have long heard of your great name," Jiang Gan said excitedly. "Why are you in such a remote spot?"

"Zhou Yu is too full of himself and cannot tolerate other men of talent," Pang Tong answered. "So I have retired to here. Who are you, sir?"

Jiang Gan introduced himself, and Pang Tong invited him inside the hut and they sat and talked.

"With your talent, you would prosper wherever you go," Jiang Gan said to Pang Tong. "If you are willing to serve Prime Minister Cao, I can make the introduction."

“I have long thought about leaving the Southlands,” Pang Tong said. “If you are willing to make the introduction, then we should go right now, lest Zhou Yu finds out and tries to do us harm.”

So the two of them left the hills that night, sneaked to the bank of the river, found Jiang Gan’s boat, and sailed across the river.

When they arrived at Cao Cao’s camp, Jiang Gan went in first to report. Even though he could not verify whether the defections were real, the fact that he brought Master Young Phoenix was more than enough to make up for it. Cao Cao personally went outside the tent to welcome Pang Tong and offered him a seat as an honored guest.

“Zhou Yu is immature and full of himself, and he refuses to take good advice,” Cao Cao said to Pang Tong. “I have long heard of your great name, and we welcome your gracious regard. I hope you will not deny us the pleasure of your instruction.”

“I have long heard that your excellency is adept at deploying troops,” Pang Tong said. “I would like to get a glimpse of your forces.”

Cao Cao, in total fanboy mode, said of course. He had horses prepped and showed Pang Tong his land headquarters first. As they looked from a high vantage point, Pang Tong said, “Your camp is backed up against woody hills, has easy signaling from front to rear, boasts proper exits and entrances, and has labyrinthine passages. Even if the military masters of old came back to life, they would not be able to do better than this.”

At that Cao Cao blushed and went all, “Aww schucks. I’m not worthy.” Then, they went to visit the naval camp. They viewed the 24 south-facing entrances. In each opening, attack boats and warships were laid out like a city wall, within which clustered smaller crafts. Channels provide passages within the camp, and everything proceeded in good order.

“Judging by your excellency’s deployment of troops, you truly live up to your reputation,” Pang Tong said, laying it on thick. He then pointed to the opposite side of the river and said, “Zhou Yu, Zhou Yu, your doom is at hand!”

Cao Cao was thrilled to be thus praised by no less a wise man than Young Phoenix. He invited Pang Tong back to his tent and threw a welcome banquet as they discussed military matters. Pang Tong thoroughly impressed Cao Cao with his insights and his ready answers.

Midway through the banquet, Pang Tong, acting a little tipsy, asked Cao Cao, “Do you have good doctors with you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Many of the soldiers in your navy appear to be sick. You must find good doctors to treat them.”

So as it turns out, Cao Cao was indeed having some health issues among his troops at this time. The soldiers of the North were not used to the climates of the South, and many had been nauseous and throwing up so much that a good number of men had died. This was one of the things bothering Cao Cao at the moment, so when Pang Tong brought it up, he naturally asked for ideas.

“Your excellency’s handling of the navy is good, but not quite perfect,” Pang Tong answered.

When Cao Cao pressed him for ideas, Pang Tong told him, “I have an idea that can ensure your troops will not get nauseous and secure success.”

Well, enough with the intrigue already, Young Phoenix. Do tell.

“On the great river, the tides swell and recede, and the winds and waves never subside,” Pang Tong said. “Northern troops are not used to being on ships or being tossed to and fro, that’s why they are getting nauseous. You can line up your ships 30 or 50 to a row, fasten them together with iron hoops, stem to stem and stern to stern, and then laid down wide planks between them. This way,

even horses can travel across the ships, not to mention your men. Then no matter how turbulent the water gets, you would have nothing to worry about.”

Cao Cao now stood up and thanked Pang Tong for this incredible suggestion.

“If not for your sage advice, how can I hope to defeat Dong Wu?” he said.

“It’s just my foolish opinion. You should take it or not as you see fit.”

Well, Cao Cao obviously saw fit, because he immediately told his blacksmiths to begin making iron hoops and chains to link the ships. When his men heard what he was doing, they were all excited because it meant no more throwing up. Little did they know that they were in for something much more horrible.

So Pang Tong has done his job and successfully tricked Cao Cao into linking his ships together. But he wasn’t quite done yet. He offered to do something else for Cao Cao and asked for something in return. To see what he offered and what he requested, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.