

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 59.

Last time, Pang Tong, AKA Young Phoenix, had just convinced Cao Cao that to prevent his troops from getting seasick, he should tie all his ships together. Cao Cao was ecstatic at this wonderful idea, so ecstatic that he overlooked the fact that this also made his fleet that much more susceptible to a fire attack.

But Pang Tong was not finished doing favors for Cao Cao just yet. He then told Cao Cao, "In my opinion, many of the talented men from Dong Wu are mad at Zhou Yu. I can go persuade them to defect to your excellency. That would leave Zhou Yu isolated and helpless, and you will capture him for sure. Once Zhou Yu is defeated, Liu Bei would be powerless."

"If you can do that, sir, then I will report your merits to the emperor and have you appointed to one of the top ministerial posts at court," Cao Cao said happily.

"I am not doing this for money," Pang Tong said. "I am trying to save civilian lives. When you excellency crosses the river, please do not harm them."

"I act on behalf of heaven; how can I bear to harm the people?" Cao Cao said.

Pang Tong, though, asked for this assurance in writing so as to have something to protect his clan, which he told Cao Cao was living on the river bank. Cao Cao happily consented and wrote an official edict guaranteeing the safety of the people of Dong Wu.

Pang Tong took this edict, thanked Cao Cao, and said, "After I leave, your excellency must attack soon. Don't let Zhou Yu catch on."

Cao Cao said of course, and Pang Tong took his leave. He went back to the bank and was just about to hop on his boat when a man wearing a Daoist robe and a bamboo hat suddenly grabbed him from behind.

“You’ve got some gall,” this man said. “First Huang Gai lets himself be beaten, then Kan Ze delivers a fake defection note, and now you come to tell Cao Cao to link his ships. You want to make sure that fire consumes every last thing, don’t you? Your vicious schemes may fool Cao Cao, but not me!”

Those words scared Pang Tong out of his mind for a brief second, but when he turned and saw who it was, he relaxed. It was Xu (2) Shu (4), Liu Bei’s former adviser who was forced to go to Cao Cao when Cao Cao held his mom hostage. Xu Shu and Pang Tong were no strangers to each other, as they all ran in the same circles back in the day.

Looking around to make sure there was no one else present, Pang Tong said to his friend, “If you expose my scheme, you will have doomed the civilians of Dong Wu.”

“Well, what about the lives of the 830,000 men here?” Xu Shu asked with a smile.

“Are you really going to expose my scheme?”

“I received tremendous kindness from the imperial uncle and have not been able to repay him. Besides, Cao Cao sent my mother to her death, and I have sworn to never offer a single idea to him. So why would I foil your brilliant idea? However, I am here with Cao Cao’s forces. Once he’s defeated, the soldiers of Dong Wu will not be too discriminating about whom to kill and whom to spare in the midst of battle. How can I avoid catastrophe? If you can show me a way out, I will find some excuse and go far away.”

“My friend, as learned as you are, this cannot be much of a challenge for you,” Pang Tong said with a smile. He then whispered a few words by Xu Shu’s ear. Xu Shu was delighted and thanked him. Pang Tong then got on his boat and sailed back to the other side of the river.

So what did Pang Tong tell Xu Shu? Well, when Xu Shu got back to camp that night, he sent his closest attendants to go spread a rumor around the camp. By the next morning, everyone in camp was talking about it.

What were they talking about? Someone found out and reported to Cao Cao. So someone, no one knew whom, had it, from a good source, mind you, that Han (2) Sui (4) and Ma (3) Teng (2), two guys who were garrisoning troops in the key western city of Xiliang (1,2), had mobilized their forces and were marching on the capital Xuchang. And remember that Ma Teng was one of the guys who was in on the failed conspiracy to assassinate Cao Cao, and what better time to make his move than when Cao Cao was away from his stronghold? The pieces seemed to fit, so Cao Cao was understandably alarmed and immediately gathered his advisers.

“When I set out on this southern campaign, the one concern I had was Han Sui and Ma Teng. Now, although we don’t yet know whether this rumor is true, we must be vigilant.”

He had barely finished speaking when Xu Shu stepped up and said, “Since your excellency took me into your service, I have not rendered the least bit of service. I would like to lead 3,000 men and rush to garrison the key pass of San (4). Then, if any emergency does arise, I will send word to you.”

Cao Cao was happy to see Xu Shu volunteer. Hey, maybe he’s finally put the whole “forced my mom to her death” thing behind him.

“If you go, then I have no worries,” Cao Cao said. “The pass of San (4) already has some troops, which you can command. I will also give you 3,000 more troops, with the general Zang (1) Ba (4) as your vanguard. Go immediately, without delay.”

Xu Shu took his leave, picked up his troops and went on his merry way. With that concern addressed, Cao Cao felt a little more at ease, and he turned his attention to inspecting his land and naval camps. As he toured his naval camp, he rode on a large ship that carried his banner in the center, and on the banner was the word “Supreme Commander.” To his left and right the naval camps

stretched along the river, and on his ship a thousand archers lied in wait, while Cao Cao stood on deck.

This was December 10 in the year 208. The weather was clear and bright, and the winds and waves were calm. Cao Cao sent out word that he was going to throw a big party on his ship that night with his officers. As night crept in, the moon climbed over the eastern mountains and cast down beams as bright as the sun. The Great River lay slack, as if it were an unrolled bolt of white silk.

Cao Cao sat on his ship, flanked by a few hundred attendants, all of whom were wearing fancy coats and embroidered jackets while carrying lances and halberds. His civilian officials and military officers took their seats according to rank. Cao Cao took in the picturesque view of the Southern Screen Hills. To his east he could see the boundary of Chaisang, the stronghold of his enemy. To his west he contemplated the flow of the Yangzi River before he reached Xiakou. To his south, he looked out on Mount Fan (2), and to his north he peered into the Black Forest of Wulin (1,2). Wherever he turned, the view stretched into infinity and made his heart glad.

“Ever since I raised this army in the name of justice, I have been ridding the country of evils and threats,” Cao Cao said to his staff. “It has been my wish to pacify the four corners of the empire and bring peace to the realm. The only region I have yet to conquer has been the South. Now, with the strength of my army of a million and your diligence, I will surely succeed. Once we have conquered the South, the realm will know peace, and we shall enjoy our wealth and celebrate the great peace together!

At this, all the officials stood up and said in one voice, “We hope to hear the song of victory soon. May we live by your excellency’s favor all of our days!”

So yeah, I think Cao Cao’s staff got together and rehearsed a little bit beforehand. Their words made Cao Cao very happy, and he ordered the wine to commence flowing. So they partied deep into the night. Around midnight, Cao Cao was getting tipsy, and he pointed toward the south bank of the

river and said, “Zhou Yu, Lu Su, you do not know heaven’s will. Defectors from your side will be your ruin! See, even heaven is on my side!”

One of his advisers, Xun (2) You (1), now urged a little discretion. “Your excellency, do not speak of such things, or it might leak out,” he cautioned.

But Cao Cao laughed and said, “All the gentlemen here, as well as the attendants, have my confidence. What’s the harm of talking about it?”

He then pointed toward Xiakou and said, “Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang, you are like ants trying shake Mount Tai (4). What fools!”

He then turned to his men and said to them, “I am already 54. If I can conquer the South, I shall fulfill my humble wish. Long ago, I befriended the old Mr. Qiao (2). I know that his two daughters are exceptional beauties. But who knew they would end up marrying Sun Ce and Zhou Yu. I have just built the Bronze Bird Tower on the Zhang (1) River. If I conquer the South, I shall take the two Qiao women and keep them at the tower to make me happy in my old age. That will more than satisfy me!”

He then started laughing out loud. A poet from the Tang dynasty later commented on this thus:

Half -rusted, broken in the sand, this halberd,
Scraped and cleaned, calls up an era past.
Had that east wind not done Zhou Yu a turn,
The two Qiaos in spring would have gone to the tower.

So what east wind was this poet talking about? Stay tuned. In the meantime, as Cao Cao was laughing, he suddenly heard the sound of ravens flying toward the south. He asked why the ravens were crowing at night, and his men told him that the moon was so bright, the ravens had mistakenly thought it was already morning and thus left their trees. This made Cao Cao laugh out loud again.

By now, Cao Cao was pretty wasted. He grabbed his spear and stood on the prow of the ship, where he poured offered wine to the river. He then quaffed three full goblets and said to his men, “With this spear, I pacified the Yellow Turbans, captured Lü Bu, exterminated Yuan Shu, tamed Yuan Shao, pushed deep into the northern frontier until I reached Liaodong (2,1), and stood astride over the empire. I have done justice to my ambitions. In this moment, this scene before us fills me with passion. Let me perform a song, and you all follow along.”

And so he started reciting a song. Now, I haven’t mentioned this, and the novel doesn’t really talk about it, but Cao Cao, in real life, in addition to his military and political exploits, was known as a pretty good poet, and this song is actually one of his more famous works. So let’s hear it.

Here before us, wine and song!
For man does not live long.
Like daybreak dew,
His days are swiftly gone.
Sanguine-souled we have to be
Though painful memory haunts us yet.
Thoughts and sorrows naught allays,
Save the cup the wine god first set.
“Deep the hue of the scholar’s robe;
Deeper, the longing of my heart.”
For all of you, my dearest lords,
I voice again this ancient part.
Nibbling on the duckweed,
“Loo! Loo!” the lowing deer.

At our feast sit honored guests
For string and reed to cheer.
The moon on high beckons bright,
But no man's ever stayed it.
Heart's care rises from within,
And nothing can deny it.
Take our thanks for all your pains;
Your presence does us honor.
Reunited on this feasting day,
We well old loves remember.
The moon is bright, the stars are few,
The magpie black as raven.
It southbound circles thrice a tree
That offers him no haven.
The mountaintop no height eschews;
The sea eschews no deep.
And the Duke of Zhou spat out his meal
An empire's trust to keep.

When he was finished, Cao Cao's men joined in and sang along, and everyone laughed heartily. I have posted on the website a gorgeous depiction of this scene from the Chinese copy of the novel that I have. Check it out. I think it does a good job capturing the feel of the moment: Cao Cao with his spear pointed high into the air in anticipated triumph, against a scenic backdrop of the mighty river that just rolls on and on.

But suddenly, into this inspiring scene came a party pooper. One of the officials in attendance stood up and said, “Our forces are on the brink of battle, and our soldiers are about to put their lives on the line. Why does your excellency speak such ominous words?”

The party came to a screeching halt, and Cao Cao looked and saw that the man who had spoken was Liu (2) Fu (4), the imperial inspector of Yang (2) Province. This guy started his career in the city of Hefei (2,2), where he established the provincial seat of government. He had collected refugees, established schools, expanded the amount of land that were worked by soldiers, and revived the administration. So all in all, he had done a great job under Cao Cao. But now, he had the audacity to play literary critic.

Cao Cao held his spear level and asked, “What ominous words did I speak?”

“The ominous lines were

‘The moon is bright, the stars are few,

The magpie black as raven.

It southbound circles thrice a tree

That offers him no haven.”

Liu (2) Fu (4) answered.

Well, that was the wrong answer, as Cao Cao became incensed. How dare you spoil my mood?! As he spoke, he raised his spear and ran Liu (2) Fu (4) through. Thus always to who dare to criticize the literary works of tyrants.

So, umm, I guess that means the party was over. All those in attendance certainly thought so, as they were shocked by this turn of events. The next day, Cao Cao woke up and was plagued with regret, and probably a massive hangover, too. Liu (2) Fu’s (4) son came and requested that he be allowed to escort his father’s body back to the capital for burial.

“Last night, I accidentally killed your father in a moment of drunkenness,” Cao Cao said with tears in his eyes. “I am remorseful beyond words. Your father shall receive a funeral befitting the highest of court officials.” Cao Cao also assigned some troops to help escort the casket back to the capital.

Cao Cao soon found something to push the remorse out of his mind. The next day, Mao (2) Jie (4) and Yu (1) Jin (4), the new naval commanders, came to Cao Cao and told him that all the ships had been linked together as Pang Tong had suggested, and they were just waiting for Cao Cao’s word to advance. So Cao Cao took a seat on his flagship and asked for a demonstration.

All his commanders hopped to, and his fleet sailed out of the naval camp and lined up on the river. A strong gust of wind blew from the northwest, filling the ships’ sails. As the ships glided over the waves, they remained as steady as if they were on flat ground. The Northern troops stood firm on the ships, jumping into the air, thrusting their spears, and plying their swords to show off their prowess. All the units maintained their ranks and moved according to signal flags, while 50-some small boats patrolled the camp.

As he watched from the command deck, Cao Cao was delighted by how impressive his navy looked and figured victory was guaranteed. He then sent out word to end the demo and for the ships to return to camp.

Once that was done, he assembled his staff of strategists and said to them, “If not for heaven’s help, how could I have received this great idea from Young Phoenix? Linking the ships together really did make traversing the river like walking on flat land.”

But one of his advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), expressed some concerns.

“Linking the ships may make them steady,” he said, “but if the enemy attacks us with fire, it would be hard for us to avoid them. We must guard against that.”

But Cao Cao laughed and told him, "Although your concern is warranted, you have overlooked something."

"Cheng Yu's words are quite right. Why does your excellency laugh?" asked another adviser, Xun You.

"To attack with fire, you must have the wind at your back," Cao Cao told them. "We are in the depth of winter. The wind only blows from the north and the west, but not from the south or east. We are to the northwest of the enemy. If they use fire, won't it, hehe, backfire? So what's there for me to worry about? Now, if we were in the season for a late-autumn warm spell, then I would already be on guard against that."

When they heard this, everyone bowed and declared, "Your excellency's insights far exceed ours."

"Well, our Northern troops are not used to riding on ships," Cao Cao said. "If we don't do this, we would not be able to traverse the obstacle of the great river."

Well, those words riled up two of his officers. They were Jiao (1) Chu (4) and Zhang (1) Nan (2), two guys who used to serve under Yuan Shao but defected to Cao Cao when they saw which way the wind was blowing. They stepped forward and told Cao Cao, "Even though we are Northerners, we know our way around a boat. We would like to take 20 patrol boats and go to the mouth of the river to capture the enemy's banners to show them that Northern troops are no strangers to the water.

"You two have grown up in the North and might not be that adept with a boat," Cao Cao said. "The forces of the Southlands spend a lot of time on the water and are very seasoned. Do not play games with your lives."

But this just riled up the two guys even more. "If we do not win, we are willing to accept military punishment!" they shouted.

Cao Cao tried to find another excuse to turn down their request. "All our warships have been linked together," he said. "We only have small boats left. They only hold 20 people each and might not be fit for battle."

"What would be the big deal with using the large warships?" Jiao (1) Chu (4) said. "We would like to ask for 20-some boats. We will each lead half of them and go to the Southland's naval camp today. We promise we will seize their banners and slay their officers."

With no way to dim their enthusiasm, Cao Cao consented. He gave them 20 boats and 500 crack troops armed with long spears and strong bows. He ordered them to set out at dawn the next day. He would also steer the large warships out onto the river to put on an impressive display in the distance, and he ordered another 30 boats to serve as reinforcements.

Jiao (1) Chu (4) and Zhang (1) Nan (2) went away very happy. The next day, they had their men begin making breakfast at 1 a.m., and they were ready to go by 3 a.m. The naval camp shook with the sound of battle drums and gongs as the warships left camp and fanned out over the river, their blue and red flags forming a pattern across the surface of the water. Jiao (1) Chu (4) and Zhang (1) Nan (2) led their 20 patrol boats and headed toward the enemy camp.

On the southern bank, the forces of Dong Wu had heard all the ruckus from the night before when Cao Cao was inspecting his fleet, and they spotted that fleet running drills in the distance, they informed Zhou Yu, but by the time Zhou Yu found a high vantage point from which to take a look, Cao Cao's drills were over. The next morning, when the sky suddenly shook with the sound of battle drums once again, the Dong Wu soldiers took a look and saw a bunch of small boats darting toward them. They immediately reported to Zhou Yu.

"Who will go out and face them?" Zhou Yu asked his officer corps.

Two officers -- Han (2) Dang (1) and Zhou (1) Tai (4) -- immediately volunteered. So Zhou Yu ordered the rest of his fleet to sit tight while these two generals each led five patrol boats and set out from the left and right flanks. As Cao Cao's boats approached, Han Dang, who wore a breastplate and wielded a long spear, stood at the head of his boat and waited for them.

First to arrive was Jiao (1) Chu (4), and he ordered his soldiers to fire a torrent of arrows at Han Dang's boat. Han Dang, however, blocked the arrows with his shield. Jiao (1) Chu (4) then attacked with his spear, but Han Dang struck first and stabbed him dead.

Jiao Chu's buddy, Zhang Nan (2), now let out a loud roar and charged forward. But the other Dong Wu general, Zhou Tai (4), steered his boat toward him. The two sides peppered each other with arrows as they approached each other. When they got close enough, Zhou Tai, wielding a shield in one hand and a knife in the other, leaped onto Zhang Nan's boat and chopped him down into the water with but one swing. He then proceeded to kill the other soldiers on the boat.

With their leaders dead, the other boats that Jiao Chu (4) and Zhang Nan had led into battle now turned and fled. Han Dang and Zhou Tai gave chase. Midway across the river, they ran into Cao Cao's reinforcements and they tangled. Soon, Cao Cao's reinforcements also fell back.

Watching from a hilltop, Zhou Yu saw how orderly Cao Cao's main fleet was. When he saw his vanguard triumph and start to give chase, he was worried they would press too hard and too close to Cao Cao's main fleet and get themselves into trouble. So Zhou Yu signaled for them to fall back, which they did.

As he watched Cao Cao's fleet return to camp, Zhou Yu said to his officers, "The enemy's ships are as dense as reeds, and Cao Cao is so crafty. How shall we defeat them?"

Of course, unbeknownst to his men, Zhou Yu already knew how to defeat them -- by fire, remember? He just didn't want to tip his hand yet. Before anyone could answer his question, they

suddenly saw a gust of wind kick up and blow down the main banner in Cao Cao's camp. The banner fell into the water and floated out onto the river.

"This is a bad sign for them," Zhou Yu laughed.

But just as he was enjoying himself, another gale kicked up, so strong that it blew waves onto shore. As this wind blew, one of Zhou Yu's banners flapped and one of its corners grazed Zhou Yu's face. That reminded Zhou Yu of something. He suddenly let out a loud cry, stumbled backward, and spat up blood. His men quickly picked him up, but he was unconscious.

The men hurriedly helped Zhou Yu back to his tent. All the officers came to check on him, and then they looked at each other and said with consternation, "The enemy boasts an army of a million and is poised to gobble us up. With our commander in such condition, what should we do when Cao Cao attacks?"

Well, all they could do at that moment was to send word of this to Sun Quan and send out men to look for a doctor.

Zhou Yu's friend and adviser, Lu Su, was extremely concerned, and he went to see Zhuge Liang and told him what happened.

"What is your opinion?" Zhuge Liang asked Lu Su.

"This is a great break for Cao Cao and a calamity for the Southlands," Lu Su answered.

Zhuce Liang smiled and told him, "I can cure Commander Zhou's illness."

"If that's the case, it would be a blessing to the country!" Lu Su exclaimed as he hurriedly brought Zhuge Liang to go see Zhou Yu. When they arrived at the tent, Lu Su went in first and saw Zhou Yu lying on his bed with his head under the covers.

"How do you feel, commander?" Lu Su asked.

"My chest hurts, and I feel woozy frequently," Zhou Yu answered.

"Have you had any medicine?"

“I am throwing up and can’t keep any medicine down.”

“I went to see Zhuge Liang just now, and he said he can cure your illness. He’s outside right now.

How about we ask him to take a look?”

Zhou Yu asked Lu Su to invite Zhuge Liang in, and told his attendants to help him sit up on the bed.

So what miracle cure is it going to take to make Zhou Yu feel better? And what exactly is bugging him anyway? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.