

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 67.

Last time, Zhou Yu and Sun Quan had concocted a scheme to get Jing Province back. They heard that Liu Bei's wife had just died, so they sent him a marriage proposal, offering him Sun Quan's younger sister. It was plainly obvious to everyone that this was a trap, and that as soon as Liu Bei showed up in the Southlands for his wedding, he was going to be taken hostage and ransomed for Jing Province. In spite of this, Zhuge Liang told him he should go. So despite his reservations, Liu Bei, accompanied by the general Zhao Yun, 500 soldiers, and three silk pouches containing strategies from Zhuge Liang, went to the city of Nanxu (2,2) to meet Sun Quan.

But when they got there, instead of directly going to see Sun Quan, they first paid State Elder Qiao (2) a visit and told HIM about the pending nuptials. State Elder Qiao then went to congratulate Madame Wu, mother of the bride. Except she knew nothing about this, since Sun Quan concocted this whole scheme without telling her, figuring there was no need since the marriage proposal was just a sham anyway.

So you can imagine Madame Wu's reaction. She sent someone to fetch Sun Quan. At the same time, she also sent some servants out into the city to see if the gossip on the streets confirmed what she had been told.

Soon, the servants returned from the streets and said, "It's true. Your future son-in-law is already resting at the guest house. His 500 soldiers are purchasing pigs, goats, and fruits in the city, making preparations for the wedding. The matchmakers are Lü Fan on the bride's side, and Liu Bei's adviser Sun Qian on the groom's side. They are welcoming Liu Bei at the guest house right now."

Madame Wu was startled. Momentarily, Sun Quan came in to see her. As soon as she saw him, she beat her chest and wept loudly.

“Mother, what is troubling you?” an alarmed Sun Quan asked.

“I must be nothing to you! When my sister was dying, what did she tell you?!”

And in case you forgot, Madame Wu’s sister was Sun Quan’s real mother. Both of women married Sun Quan’s father, and when Sun Quan’s mom was dying, she told him to treat her sister, our current Madame Wu, as if she were his mother.

“Mother, if something is bothering you, tell me what it is. There is no need for this!” a stunned Sun Quan said.

“When sons and daughters are grown, it is only right that they should marry. Thus has been the norm since antiquity. But I am your mother, so matters of marriage should be decided by me. Why did you not tell me that you offered your sister’s hand in marriage to Liu Bei? She is MY daughter!”

“Wh ... where did you get that idea?”

“If you don’t want something to be known, don’t do it. Every civilian in this city knows about this. Except me!”

And now, State Elder Qiao chimed in and piled on. “I have known about it for days, and I came to offer my congratulations to the queen mother.”

Busted like a little kid who just got caught doing something bad, Sun Quan had no choice but to come clean.

“You’re mistaken,” he told his mom. “This is Zhou Yu’s scheme to get Jing Province. We are using the marriage as bait to lure Liu Bei here, hold him hostage, and ransom him for Jing Province. If they refuse our demands, then we will execute Liu Bei. It’s a ruse, not real.”

But instead of calming his mother down, this explanation only added fuel to the fire. She became even more incensed and now turned her wrath toward Zhou Yu, cursing him aloud.

“You are the commander of all of Dongwu, and yet you have no good ideas for acquiring Jing Province except using my daughter as bait?! If you kill Liu Bei, then my daughter will become an unwed widow. Who would have her then? This plan would ruin my daughter’s life! A fine thing you guys are doing!”

State Elder Qiao joined in and told Sun Quan, “Even if you do acquire Jing Province with this scheme, you would be ridiculed by everyone in the land. How can you do such a thing?!”

Having been brow-beaten by his mother and nagged by State Elder Qiao, Sun Quan could say nothing. So he simply remained silent while his mother kept cursing Zhou Yu. After a little while, State Elder Qiao came up with an idea to resolve this situation.

“With things as they are, and since Lord Liu is a member of the house of Han, why don’t we go through with the wedding for real, so as to avoid embarrassment?”

“But he is too old for my sister,” Sun Quan objected.

“Imperial uncle Liu is a hero of our times,” State Elder Qiao countered, no doubt biased by the visit and the lavish gifts he received from Liu Bei when the latter first got into town. “It would not disgrace your sister to marry him.”

Of course, the final decision rested with Madame Wu, and she said, “I have not met Lord Liu. Let us arrange a meeting tomorrow in the Temple of Sweet Dew. If he does not meet my standards, then you may do as you please. But if I like him, then I will give him my daughter!”

Ever the filial son and not wishing to receive another tongue-lashing, Sun Quan agreed. After he took his leave, he summoned Lü Fan and told him to set up a feast at the temple the next day for Madame Wu to meet Liu Bei.

“Why don’t we have the officer Jia (3) Hua (2) lead 300 armed men and hide in the wings,” Lü Fan suggested. “If the queen mother does not approve of Liu Bei, then you just give the signal and our men will storm out and arrest him right there”

Sun Quan thought this was a great idea, so he instructed Jia (3) Hua (2) to go make the preparations.

Now, as for State Elder Qiao, after he took his leave of Madame Wu, he sent word to Liu Bei about tomorrow’s meeting and advised him to be on guard. Liu Bei then talked it over with his general Zhao Yun and his adviser Sun Qian. They decided that Zhao Yun would lead their 500 soldiers and stick close to Liu Bei during the banquet.

The next day, Madame Wu and State Elder Qiao arrived at the temple first, followed by Sun Quan and a group of advisers. Lü Fan, meanwhile, went to invite Liu Bei. Liu Bei was well-prepared. He wore a suit of light armor underneath his silk robes. His escorts all carried swords and followed closely as they made their way to the temple. Zhao Yun was in full battle dress and led the 500 men as escort.

When Liu Bei arrived at the temple, Sun Quan was there to receive him. This was the first time the two had actually met, and Sun Quan, who was much younger than Liu Bei, was actually a little bit intimidated by Liu Bei’s impressive appearance. After exchanging greetings, they went into the abbot’s quarters, where the banquet was set up and where Madame Wu was waiting.

This was Liu Bei’s moment of truth. He had to impress his future mother-in-law, or getting out of the temple would be a lot harder than getting in. But have no fear, Madame Wu was ecstatic when she saw Liu Bei.

“This is the son-in-law for me!” she said happily to State Elder Qiao.

“Lord Liu has the earmarks of an emperor,” State Elder Qiao chimed in. “Moreover, his virtue is known throughout the land. Congratulations, queen mother, on having such a great son-in-law.”

Liu Bei bowed and thanked the two, and the banquet commenced. Momentarily, Zhao Yun, with his sword by his side, came in and stood next to Liu Bei.

“Who is he?” Madame Wu asked.

“Zhao Yun of Changshan (2,1),” Liu Bei answered.

“The man who rescued your infant son at Changban (2,3) Hill?”

“The very same.”

“A true general!” Madame Wu praised as she ordered wine to be offered to Zhao Yun.

But Zhao Yun did not just come in to bum a drink. He whispered to Liu Bei, “Just now, while I was inspecting the premises, I discovered armed soldiers hiding in a room. This does not bode well. You should inform the queen mother at once.”

Liu Bei immediately fell to his knees in front of Madame Wu’s table and said with tears in his eyes, “If you wish to kill me, then please do so now.”

“What do you mean?” Madame Wu said with surprise.

“There are armed soldiers hiding in the corridors. What could they be there for if not to kill me?”

Well, guess who’s going to get another earful. Madame Wu flew into a rage and admonished Sun Quan. “Since Lord Liu is my son-in-law, then he is basically my child. Why have you hidden armed men in the corridors?!”

Sun Quan was so busted, and he just kind of went, “Umm, umm, I don’t know anything about that. Ask Lü Fan.” So they summoned Lü Fan, who went, “Umm, umm, I don’t know why those guys are there. Ask Jia (3) Hua (2).”

So Madame Wu turned her ire toward Jia Hua, who took it without a word, since he had to cover for Sun Quan. But pretty soon, he was wishing he hadn't, because Madame Wu called for the guards to drag Jia Hua outside and execute him. Oh boy, did this scheme ever backfire.

But Liu Bei now intervened.

"If you execute a general, it would not bode well for the bonds of kinship," he said to Madame Wu. "I would not be able to serve you as a filial son for long."

State Elder Qiao also helped beg for leniency, and with their combined power of persuasion, Madame Wu relented and told Jia Hua to scram, which he and the armed soldiers promptly did. So talk about embarrassing. The plan to kill Liu Bei imploded in the worst way possible and would have cost Sun Quan the life of one of his generals had it not been for the entreaties by, of all people, Liu Bei.

So after this little fiasco, Liu Bei went outside to freshen up. He noticed a large rock outside the temple hall. In the spur of the moment, Liu Bei pulled out the sword that one of his attendants was carrying and uttered a prayer toward heaven:

"If I am destined to make it back to Jing Province and establish my enterprise, then let me cut this rock in two with one swing of my sword. If I am fated to die here, then the rock will not open when my sword strikes."

The prayer said, Liu Bei brought the sword down on the rock. Sparks flew, and the rock split into two.

Sun Quan, who was standing behind Liu Bei just now, witnessed this and asked, "Sir, why do you hate this rock so much?"

"I am almost 50," Liu Bei answered. "Yet, I have not been able to rid the country of its villains. Because of this, I often lament my ineptitude. Now, I have the great fortune to become the queen

mother's son-in-law. I was asking heaven for an omen just now. I asked that if we are destined to destroy Cao Cao and revitalize the Han, then I would be able to cut the rock. And it turned out to be so."

This, of course, was a big fat lie, and Sun Quan suspected as much. He pulled out his own sword and said, "Let me also ask heaven for an omen. If we can defeat the traitor Cao Cao, then let me cut through this rock as well."

That might be what Sun Quan said, but what he was secretly thinking was, "If I am destined to regain Jing Province and make Dongwu flourish, then let me cut this rock in half!"

Sun Quan then brought his sword down on the rock, and where it landed, the rock also split open. The cuts by the two swords formed a cross on the rock, and apparently this rock remains to this day. They call it the Rock of Lament. Of course, if you ask me, somebody somewhere along the way during the centuries since the Three Kingdoms period probably came up with the idea to create this legend as a tourist trap. They probably even came up with this poem:

The treasured sword, the rock that split in two,
Engendering sparks where two sharp blades struck true:
Two houses' fortune heaven here ordained;
From this moment, threefold power reigned.

After damaging the temple's landscaping, Liu Bei and Sun Quan cast their swords aside and re-entered the temple hall hand in hand to continue the banquet. After a few more rounds of wine, Sun Quan flashed Liu Bei a look. Liu Bei caught his meaning and said, "I cannot drink anymore and must retire for now."

So Sun Quan got up to see him out. Freed from the banquet, the two of them walked outside the temple, where they stood and admired the view of the hills and river.

“This is the most beautiful scenery in the world!” Liu Bei said. And hey, sure enough, to this day, there’s a sign at the temple with the phrase “Most beautiful scenery in the world.” Tourist traps, I has them.

Liu Bei and Sun Quan looked on as the wind swept across the river. Great waves rolled and foamed, and white breakers snatched at the heavens. Among the breakers, a slip of a boat moved as if it were on flat land.

Seeing this, Liu Bei sighed and said, “It is true what they say, ‘Southerners sail; Northerners ride.’”

When he heard this, Sun Quan thought to himself, “Liu Bei is saying I am not adept at riding horses.” Not one to take a real or perceived slight lying down, Sun Quan told his attendants to bring his horse. He swiftly mounted the steed, galloped down the hillside, and then sped back to the top of the hill, where he smiled and said to Liu Bei, “So, Southerners can’t ride, huh?”

Liu Bei responded by hopping onto his own horse, riding down the hill and then back up again as well. The two then sat on their horses atop the hill, swung their whips, and laughed. To this day, that hill is known as “Horse Halting Hill.” And I’m guessing somebody somewhere is peddling genuine whips used by Liu Bei and Sun Quan on that day.

After leaving a sufficient number of tourist attractions around the temple, Liu Bei returned to his guest house, where he discussed his next step with his adviser Sun Qian. Sun Qian told him to keep working State Elder Qiao to get the wedding done as soon as possible, so as to avoid having things take an unpredictable turn.

So the next day, Liu Bei went to call on State Elder Qiao again. After they greeted each other and shared a cup of tea, Liu Bei said, “Many people in the Southlands want to do me harm. I don’t know if I can stay here for long.”

“Don’t worry,” State Elder Qiao said. “I will tell the queen mother, and she will protect you.”

Mission accomplished, Liu Bei took his leave, and State Elder Qiao went to see Madame Wu and told her that Liu Bei was worried about assassination attempts and wanted to leave.

“Who dares to harm my son-in-law?” Madame Wu said angrily. So for Liu Bei’s safety, she immediately had him move into the study in her residence while they picked out the date for the wedding.

Liu Bei then went to see Madame Wu himself and said, “I am worried that it would be inconvenient to have my general Zhao Yun on the outside and my soldiers without supervision.”

Madame Wu simply told him to move ALL of his entourage into her residence, which was exactly what Liu Bei was hoping for. So now he and his entire party were safe and sound under the queen mother’s roof.

A few days passed, and the wedding was held. It goes without saying that there was a huge party with many guests who made merry until nightfall. Once the feast ended, Liu Bei, flanked by two rows of red candles, made his way to the chamber of Lady Sun, his new wife. There, in the light of the flames, he could not help but notice that the room was filled with weapons and that the maids all stood at attention with swords and knives hanging from their waists.

This sight scared Liu Bei, who was probably thinking, “Oh man, I thought I was gonna get out of this with my head intact.” Noticing his apprehension, the princess’s stewardess told him, “Our mistress has always had an interest in martial arts. She often has her maids perform sword fights as entertainment. Hence the weapons.”

Liu Bei, displaying typical third-century Chinese chauvinism, replied, “That is hardly the proper thing for a lady to be watching. It makes me uneasy. Please remove the weapons.”

So the stewardess told Lady Sun, “The weapons are making your husband uneasy. Let’s remove them for now.”

“He has been fighting for half his life. Why should he be afraid of the sight of weapons?” Lady Sun said with a laugh. But, she obliged her husband and ordered the weapons to be removed. The newlyweds then proceeded to do what newlyweds do, and as it turned out, they took quite a liking to each other. At the same time, Liu Bei saw to it that all the maids were given fabulous gifts to ensure their loyalty. He then sent his adviser Sun Qian back to Jing Province to relay the happy news of the nuptials, while Liu Bei himself was treated to one feast after another and was doted on by the queen mother.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei’s new brother-in-law, Sun Quan, sent word to Zhou Yu in the city of Chaisang and told him, “At my mother’s insistence, my sister has married Liu Bei. Our ruse has turned into a reality. What do we do?”

When Zhou Yu read the letter, he was stunned. His brilliant scheme had just blown up in his face. After some restless moments, though, he came up with another scheme, which he relayed to Sun Quan in a letter that said:

“I never could have expected that my plan would turn out like this. Since the ruse has become a reality, then let’s turn it to our advantage. Liu Bei has the looks of a hero, not to mention generals the likes of Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun, as well as Zhuge Liang’s strategies. He is not one to subjugate himself to others for long. My humble suggestion would be to keep him under congenial confinement in Dongwu. Give him sumptuous quarters to sap his ambitions; send him beautiful women and amusements to beguile his senses. Try to alienate him from Guan Yu and Zhang Fei, and keep him as far away from Zhuge Liang as possible. Then we can attack Jing Province and achieve our goal. But if you let him go free, it would be like letting a dragon loose among the clouds. He would never again be content in a pond. I hope you will consider this carefully.”

After reading this, Sun Quan showed the letter to his top civil adviser, Zhang Zhao.

“Commander Zhou’s suggestion matches my thoughts exactly,” Zhang Zhao said. “Liu Bei comes from lowly origins. He has been drifting around the land and has never tasted wealth and status. If we give him a luxurious mansion with servants and riches, then he will surely become distant from his brothers and Zhuge Liang, and it’s bound to cause division among them. Then we can make a move on Jing Province. My lord, you should proceed as Commander Zhou suggests.”

So Sun Quan immediately ordered that the eastern palace and its garden be renovated for Liu Bei and his new bride, with no expenses spared. He also had the rooms filled with opulent furnishings, scores of female musicians, and riches and other fancy gifts. Sun Quan’s mother thought her son was doing all this out of the goodness of his heart and was delighted. As for Liu Bei, just as Zhou Yu had predicted, he was indeed hooked by the high life, and thoughts of Jing Province began to slip from his mind entirely.

While Liu Bei was enjoying himself, his general Zhao Yun and the 500 soldiers who accompanied him to Dongwu were kind of bored out of their minds. They were living in the outer quarters of the eastern palace, and they didn’t have much to do, so they just went riding and shooting outside the city every day.

Before you know it, the end of the year was approaching. One day, Zhao Yun suddenly remembered, “Master Zhuge gave me three silk pouches. He told me to open the first one when we first arrive, open the second one toward the end of the year, and open the third one when we find ourselves in dire straits. He said that these pouches contained miraculous schemes that can see our lord safely home. It’s getting to be the end of the year, and his lordship has been occupied with his woman and I haven’t seen him. I should open the second pouch and see what the plan is.”

Later that day, Zhao Yun showed up at Liu Bei's mansion and demanded to see him. When the maids told that Liu Bei that Zhao Yun had come on urgent business, Liu Bei called him in.

"My lord, dwelling in such splendid chambers, do you still remember Jing Province?" Zhao Yun said with a panicked look on his face.

"What has made you so panicked?" Liu Bei asked.

"This morning, Master Zhuge sent word that Cao Cao has mobilized 500,000 troops and is marching on Jing Province to avenge his defeat. The situation is dire, and your lordship must return at once!"

"I ... I need to discuss this with my wife first."

"If you do that, she would not let you go. Why don't we keep this from her and leave tonight? If we delay, everything will be lost!"

"You may go for now. I will proceed as I see fit."

Zhao Yun pressed Liu Bei some more before reluctantly taking his leave. Liu Bei then went to see his wife. When he saw her, he could not help but tear up.

"My husband, what is troubling you?" Lady Sun asked.

"[Sigh] I have spent my whole life drifting to and fro. When my parents were alive, I could not tend to them, and now that they are dead, I cannot offer sacrifices at their graves. That is terribly unfilial. The approaching new year reminded me of this. That's why I am unhappy."

"Stop lying to me," Lady Sun said. "I heard everything. Just now, Zhao Yun reported that the situation in Jing Province is dire. You want to go home; hence the excuse."

Busted, Liu Bei now kneeled and said, "My wife, since you already know, then I dare not keep it from you any longer. If I don't leave and Jing Province is lost, then I would become an object of ridicule. But if I do leave, how can I bear to leave you behind? That is what's bothering me."

"Since I am your wife, wherever you go, I should follow."

“That may be your intent, but would the queen mother and Lord Sun allow you to go? If you take pity on me, then let me take my leave of you, just temporarily.”

At that, Liu Bei turned on the tears.

“Husband, do not let this trouble you,” Lady Sun consoled him. “I will go beg my mother; she will no doubt allow me to go with you.”

“Even if the queen mother permits it, Lord Sun would not.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Lady Sun said, “When we go to pay our respects to my mother on New Year’s Day, we can say that we are going to offer sacrifices on the bank of the river. Then we can leave without telling my brother. What do you think?”

“If you can do that for me, I would never forget it!” Liu Bei said as he kneeled again. “Do not let this leak out.”

After settling on this plan with his wife, Liu Bei sent word to Zhao Yun that on New Year’s Day, he was to lead his soldiers out of the city first and wait along the main road for Liu Bei and Lady Sun.

So, on Chinese New Year’s Day in the year 210, Sun Quan assembled his staff in the great hall for a big party. While that was going on, Liu Bei and Lady Sun went to pay their respects to Madame Wu.

“My husband has been feeling sad in recent days because he’s thinking of his parents’ distant graves,” Lady Sun told her mother. “We would like to go to the bank of the river today and offer sacrifices to them, but I wanted to inform you frst.”

“That is a filial act, so of course I will allow it,” Madame Wu said. “Even though you have never met your in-laws, you should go with your husband to offer sacrifices, as befitting a daughter-in-law.”

So, with her mother’s blessings, Lady Sun and Liu Bei bowed and took their leave. Keeping Sun Quan in the dark, they headed out of the city. Lady Sun rode in a carriage, while Liu Bei rode on a horse. They

only took whatever they could carry with them, along with a few riders. Outside the city, they met up with Zhao Yun and his soldiers and set off toward Jing Province.

To see if their getaway is successful, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!