

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 68.

Last time, Liu Bei and his new wife, Lady Sun, decided to try to flee back to Jing Province. So on New Year's Day, they slipped out of the city of Nanxu (2,2) while Sun Quan was busy partying with his officials.

It turned out that the party was a good time to run away, because Sun Quan got really hammered and passed out drunk in his private quarters. After the party broke up, some of the officials got word that Liu Bei and Sun Quan's sister had fled. By now, it was starting to get dark. These officials wanted to tell Sun Quan right away, but he was passed out and no one could wake him, and you weren't gonna grab the lord of the Southlands by the shoulders and shake him from his drunken stupor. So they let him sleep, and it wasn't until 7 o'clock the next morning that he woke up.

When Sun Quan finally heard that Liu Bei and Lady Sun had left, he quickly assembled his staff.

"If he gets away, it will cause trouble sooner or later," his adviser Zhang Zhao said. "We must chase him down."

So Sun Quan ordered two officers, Chen (2) Wu (3) and Pan (1) Zhang (1), to lead 500 crack troops and go bring back Liu Bei. After the two officers set out, though, Sun Quan was still seething over Liu Bei's departure, so much so that he grabbed the jade inkstone on his desk and hurled it to the ground, smashing it into a million pieces.

"My lord," the veteran general Cheng Pu said, "even though your rage may shake the heavens, I don't think Cheng Wu and Pan Zhang will be able to catch Liu Bei."

"They would not dare to disobey me!" Sun Quan said.

"Your lordship's sister has had a fascination with martial arts all her life," Cheng Pu explained.

"She is severe, resolute, firm, and forthright, so much so that all the officers are wary of her. If she has

left with Liu Bei, then she must have gone willingly. When the two officers catch up to them and are confronted by her, how can they move against her?”

When Sun Quan heard this, he became even angrier. He gave his sword to two other officers, Jiang (3) Qin (1) and Zhou (1) Tai (4), and told them, “Use this sword to bring back the heads of my sister and Liu Bei. If anyone disobeys, execute them at once!” So Jiang (3) Qin (1) and Zhou Tai (4) led 1,000 soldiers and went on their way.

As for Liu Bei and company, they were moving at double time, stopping only twice to rest over the course of the night. As they were approaching the borders of the city of Chaisang (2,1), they saw a huge dust cloud behind them in the distance, accompanied by word from the soldiers in the back that they were being chased.

“What should we do?” Liu Bei asked his general Zhao Yun.

“My lord, you go on ahead. I will fend them off,” Zhao Yun told him.

So Liu Bei hurried on ahead, but as soon as he went around a hill, he saw a squad of soldiers blocking the path up ahead. The two generals at the head of this roadblock shouted sternly, “Liu Bei, dismount and surrender now! We have been waiting for you on Commander Zhou’s orders!”

So as it turns out, Zhou Yu, who, if you’d remember, was recuperating from his injuries in Chaisang at the time, figured that Liu Bei might try to make a run for it. He also figured that if Liu Bei tried to escape by land, the most likely route would be through here. So Zhou Yu long ago ordered the officers Xu (2) Sheng (4) and Ding (1) Feng (4) to camp out here with 3,000 troops to watch for Liu Bei.

Liu Bei turned around and asked Zhao Yun, “The path ahead is blocked, and we are being pursued from behind. There is no way out. What now?!”

“Don’t worry, my lord. Master Zhuge gave me three strategies in silk pouches. I have opened the first two, and they both worked like a charm. He told me to not open the third one until the situation is dire. Now seems the time to open it.”

So they opened the last silk pouch, read the note from Zhuge Liang, and went ahh. Liu Bei then hurried over to Lady Sun’s carriage and said with tears in his eyes, “I have something that I must confess.”

“What is it, my husband? Tell me everything.”

“When Lord Sun and Zhou Yu plotted to offer your hand to me in marriage, they did not have your best interest in mind. Their intent was to detain me and seize Jing Province. Once they have Jing Province, they would no doubt kill me. They were using you as bait. But even so, I risked my life and came because I knew you have a brave and manly heart and would have sympathy for me. Yesterday, I heard that Lord Sun was about to move against me, so I lied and said that Jing Province was in danger as an excuse to get away. Fortunately, you stuck with me and have accompanied me here. But now, Lord Sun’s soldiers are chasing us from behind, and Zhou Yu’s men are blocking our path ahead. Only you can get us out of this. If you refuse to do this, then please kill me right here and now!”

When Lady Sun heard this, she became enraged. “Since my brother is not treating me like family, then how can I bear to see him again?! I will take care of our present dilemma.”

So she told her carriage driver to press ahead, and when they approached the soldiers blocking their road forward, she pulled up the curtain on her carriage and admonished the officers Xu (2) Sheng (4) and Ding (1) Feng (4).

“Are you two trying to rebel?!”

When they saw her, the two officers quickly dismounted, cast aside their weapons, and bowed in front of her carriage.

“We would never dare to rebel,” they said. “We were ordered by Commander Zhou to garrison troops here to wait for Liu Bei.”

“Zhou Yu, you traitor!” Lady Sun said angrily. “Dongwu has never mistreated you! Lord Liu is the imperial uncle, not to mention my husband! I have already told my mother and brother that we were going back to Jing Province. And now you two are blocking our path at the foot of a hill. Are you trying to rob us?!”

This little outburst put Xu Sheng and Ding Feng on their heels. They just kept repeating, “We would never dare! Your highness, please calm down. This has nothing to do with us. We were acting on Commander Zhou’s orders.”

“Oh, so you are afraid of Zhou Yu, but not me?! Zhou Yu can have you executed, but I can’t?!”

Lady Sun then proceeded to curse Zhou Yu for a little longer and then told her driver to keep going. At this point, Xu Sheng and Ding Feng were thinking, “We are her subordinates, so how can we go against her?” On top of that, they also noticed how angry Zhao Yun appeared to be at this moment, and who wants a piece of the man who cut through Cao Cao’s army singlehandedly? So they ordered their soldiers to stand aside and let Liu Bei’s party through.

After Liu Bei and company had gone off for a couple miles, Chen (2) Wu (3) and Pan (1) Zhang (1), the first two officers that Sun Quan had sent in pursuit, arrived on the scene. Xu Sheng and Ding Feng told them what happened.

“You were wrong to let them go,” Chen Wu and Pan Zhang told them. “We were sent by Lord Sun to bring them back.”

So the four of them joined forces and gave chase again. When Liu Bei heard the ruckus behind him, he said to his wife, “They are chasing us again. Now what?”

“Husband, go on ahead. General Zhao and I will take care of it.”

So Liu Bei took 300 of their 500 soldiers and went on ahead toward the bank of the river. Zhao Yun, meanwhile, stationed himself next to Lady Sun's carriage and told his men to spread out in a line, waiting for the pursuers.

So the four officers caught up, and when they saw Lady Sun, they once again had to dismount and bow to her.

"Chen Wu, Pan Zhang, what are you doing here?" Lady Sun asked.

"We have been ordered by Lord Sun to come invite your highness and Lord Liu to return."

"This is all your doing, you scoundrels!" Lady Sun said sternly. "You are trying to stir up trouble between my brother and me. I am married, and this trip is not an elopement. I have received my mother's instructions to return to Jing Province with my husband. Even if my brother comes in person, he would need to act with propriety. Yet, you two are coming armed to the teeth. Are you trying to assassinate us?"

This tongue-lashing left the four officers staring at each other in silence, like, "Are you going to talk back to her? I'm not." They were also thinking, "She and our lord will always be brother and sister. Besides, she's got Madame Wu on her side. Our lord is a filial son, so he would never dare to go against his mother. If they kiss and make up, the blame is going to fall on the four of us. So why not just do her a favor and let her go? Besides, we don't see Liu Bei among her ranks."

Also besides, they saw that Zhao Yun was looking pretty ticked off and appeared to be just waiting for a reason to start knocking some heads together. The four Dongwu officers weren't about to give him that reason, so they uttered their apologies and turned around, and Lady Sun ordered her entourage to resume their journey.

"Let's go see Commander Zhou and tell him about this," Xu Sheng suggested to the others. While they were taking their sweet time debating this, they saw another squad of troops hurrying onto the

scene. These men were led by the officers Jiang (3) Qin (1) and Zhou (1) Tai (4), the two guys that Sun Quan had given his sword to.

“Have you guys seen Liu Bei?” Jiang Qin and Zhou Tai asked their comrades.

“They came by here this morning. That was half a day ago.”

“Why didn’t you arrest him?” Jiang Qin asked.

When the other officers recounted what happened, Jiang Qin said, “That’s what Lord Sun was afraid of. We have his sword here, along with his instructions to kill his sister first, and then Liu Bei. If anyone resists, kill them on the spot!”

“But they have been gone a long time. What should we do?” the other four generals asked.

“His party is traveling on foot and cannot have gone too far,” Jiang Qin said. “General Xu, General Ding. You two should go report to Commander Zhou right away and ask him to send his navy to cut off their escape route on water. The rest of us will pursue along the bank. Whoever catches them first, kill them right away. Don’t listen to anything they say.”

His comrades agreed, and so they all went on their way.

As for Liu Bei and company, they had by now put some distance between themselves and the city of Chaisang, and they were finally breathing a little easier. They began to search along the river bank for boats to ferry them across the river, but found none, which made Liu Bei lower his head and mutter.

“My lord, we have escaped from the mouth of the tiger,” Zhao Yun said. “Now that we are approaching our own territory, I expect that Master Zhuge must have made preparations. Don’t worry.”

But Liu Bei was thinking about something else, too. He couldn't shake memories of the high life he was living back in Dongwu, and he could not help but shed a few tears at being separated from that life.

As Liu Bei sent Zhao Yun ahead to look for ships, he suddenly got word that, umm, the giant dust cloud is back again. Liu Bei found a high vantage point to check it out, and he saw a swarm of troops speeding this way.

"We have been running for two days," Liu Bei said with a sigh. "Both man and horse are exhausted, and now the pursuing enemy has caught up. We are doomed!"

In that moment of panic, however, they suddenly spotted about 20 small boats spread out in a line along the river bank.

"There are boats there!" Zhao Yun said. "Let's board them and row across to the other side and then worry about our next move!"

So the whole entourage hurried over and began to board the boats. Suddenly, they saw a man clad in a Taoist robe step out from the cabin of one of the boats, laughing as he greeted them.

"My lord, congratulations! I have been waiting here for quite a while."

This was, of course, none other than Zhuge Liang, and all the passengers who were in the boats were actually soldiers in the Jing Province navy. Liu Bei, naturally, was delighted.

Moments later, the four Dongwu officers who were giving chase on land arrived on the bank of the river, but by now, the boats were out of their reach. Zhuge Liang pointed at them and said with a laugh, "I foresaw this long ago. Go back and tell Zhou Yu to not try seduction again."

The Dongwu troops tried to fire arrows at the boats, but they were already out of range, and the four Dongwu generals could only look on in disbelief.

So Liu Bei was in the clear, right? Well, not quite. Just as his boats were making their way across, loud noises suddenly echoed across the surface of the river. They looked back and saw countless warships on their tail. Under the giant command banner was Zhou Yu himself, flanked by the generals Huang Gai and Han Dang. Zhou Yu's ships flew across the water and were closing fast. So now what?

Zhuge Liang ordered his boats to pull up on the north shore. Once there, they abandoned the boats and took off on horse and carriage. Zhou Yu followed suit and told his navy to dock their ships and give chase on land. Only a handful of Zhou Yu's officers had horses, while all the soldiers followed on foot. Zhou Yu led the way, followed closely by four officers.

"Where are we?" Zhou Yu asked.

His men told him that the borders of Huangzhou (2,1) was just up ahead. Also just up ahead was Liu Bei's entourage. In fact, Zhou Yu could see them, so he ordered his troops to press on at warp 9. But their pursuit was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a drum, whereupon a squad of swordsmen darted out from the hills, led by Guan Yu.

Startled, Zhou Yu turned and fled back from where he came. Guan Yu gave chase, and Zhou Yu spurred on his horse for more speed. Just then, two more squads of soldiers charged out. Both of these units belonged to Liu Bei, and they were led by Huang Zhong and Wei Yan, the two generals who had joined his ranks when he conquered the city of Changsha a couple episodes back.

The Dongwu forces, now under attack on three sides, were routed and lost many men. Zhou Yu managed to scramble back to the bank of the river, where he and his men hurried onto their ships and sailed off. As they were leaving, though, Liu Bei's soldiers had a little parting shot for Zhou Yu. Standing on the shore, they shouted in unison, "Commander Zhou's brilliant scheme brings peace to all! He has given away the lady and lost troops to boot!"

This chant, no doubt courtesy of Zhuge Liang, was repeated time and again for all to hear. Zhou Yu, listening to this mockery and seeing Liu Bei and company camped out on top of a hill in the distance, became incensed and wanted to go back ashore to fight it out, but his officers restrained him. Humiliated and impotent at the moment, Zhou Yu brooded on the thought of how he could possibly face Sun Quan now that his plan had imploded. The more he thought about this, the angrier he got, until suddenly, he let out an anguished cry of pain, lost consciousness, and collapsed as his old arrow wound burst open again.

It took a while before his men could bring him back around, and they continued their no doubt dejected journey home. In the meantime, Zhuge Liang called off the chase and returned to Jing Province with Liu Bei, whereupon they rewarded all their officers for their role in that day's success.

While Liu Bei celebrated, Zhou Yu trudged back to Chaisang to, once again, recover from his wound. The four officers that Sun Quan had sent in pursuit of Liu Bei went back to the city of Nanxu (2,2) to see Sun Quan. Needless to say, Sun Quan was ticked off. He wanted to send Cheng Pu at the head of an army to attack Jing Province, no doubt spurred on by the letter that Zhou Yu had written to him, urging him to do exactly that.

The civil adviser Zhang Zhao, however, spoke up against this.

"Cao Cao spends his days plotting revenge for his defeat at Red Cliff," Zhang Zhao said. "The only reason he hasn't mobilized his troops is because he fears an alliance between us and Liu Bei. If we turn on each other because of a moment's anger, Cao Cao would capitalize and attack, and then we would be in danger."

Another adviser, Gu (4) Yong (1), agreed.

"Cao Cao no doubt has spies here," he said. "If he gets word that there's discord between us and Liu Bei, he would no doubt try to ally with Liu Bei. If Liu Bei fears Dongwu, then he would no doubt

stand with Cao Cao. If that happens, when would the Southlands know peace again? The thing to do now is to send an envoy to the capital Xuchang and offer a memorial to the emperor recommending that he appoint Liu Bei as imperial protector of Jing Province. When Cao Cao hears of this, he would be wary and will not try to invade the South. This would also rescind any grudge Liu Bei might hold against you. Then, we can manipulate Cao Cao and Liu Bei and make them turn on each other, and we can use that opportunity to make a move.”

“Your words are very wise,” Sun Quan said. “But who can we send as the envoy?”

“There is someone here whom Cao Cao admires greatly,” Gu (4) Yong (1) said.

So this man that Cao Cao admired was named Hua (2) Xin (1), and he had quite a reputation as a scholar. There’s more backstory on him, but the novel doesn’t get into all that until many many chapters from now, so we’ll just have to wait. For now, it’s enough to know that Sun Quan dispatched Hua (2) Xin (1) to Xuchang to see Cao Cao.

Hua Xin arrived in the capital just in time for a special occasion. Cao Cao had assembled his officials at the city of Yejun (4,4) to celebrate the completion of the Bronze Bird Tower. So Hua Xin went to Yejun (4,4) to crash the party.

So we haven’t really talked much about Cao Cao in a while. I think the last time we saw him, he was limping back to the capital after his disaster at Red Cliff. Since then, he had often entertained thoughts of launching another attack on the South to seek revenge, but he was wary of a coalition between Liu Bei and Sun Quan, so he had been holding off.

But at this particular moment in the novel, which was the spring of the year 210, he dropped his thoughts of revenge for a little while and turned his attention to celebrating the completion of his retirement home, the Bronze Bird Tower. He assembled all his military officers and civil officials at the tower and threw a huge feast.

The tower overlooked the Zhang (1) River. It was actually a complex of three towers. In the center was the Bronze Bird Tower. On the left was a tower named Jade Dragon, and on the right was the tower named Golden Phoenix. Each tower stood more than a hundred feet tall and they were connected by two bridges, the same bridges, by the way, that gave Zhuge Liang the innuendo he needed to incite Zhou Yu to stand against Cao Cao. There were countless doorways, and the whole structure was painted gold and blue.

On the day of the party, Cao Cao wore a golden cap inlaid with jade, donned a fine green gown, and strapped on a belt of jade and pearl-sewn shoes. He took his seat atop a high level on the tower, while his officials and officers stood in rank.

For entertainment, Cao Cao first staged an archery competition among his officers. As incentive, he had his attendants bring out a fine red battle cloak and hang it on the branch of a poplar tree. Underneath the robe, he erected a target and drew a line a hundred paces away. The officers were divided into two groups. Everyone who was from Cao Cao's familial clan wore red, while everyone else wore green. Everyone carried strong bows and long arrows and sat atop their horses awaiting instructions.

And I would just pause and point out something that's not explicitly stated in the novel: So everyone who wasn't a member of Cao Cao's family wore green, but remember Cao Cao himself was also wearing green on this day. One could easily deduce that this was a rather crafty move by Cao Cao to show the officers outside his family the esteem in which he held them.

So anyway, back to the competition. Cao Cao send down these instructions: Whoever hits the bullseye will receive the red cloak. Whoever misses will be forced to drink a cup of water.

As soon as the instruction was relayed to the officers, one young man galloped out from the group wearing red. This was Cao Xiu (1), a distant nephew of Cao Cao's. And a quick aside: In 2010, they

actually discovered this guy's tomb, which is kind of cool. So anyway, Cao Xiu sprinted back and forth three times, then pulled back his bow and fired a shot that found the bullseye.

So, huzzah! Drums rolled and everyone shouted in approval. Cao Cao was quite delighted and said, "He is my clan's thoroughbred."

Cao Cao was just about to instruct his men to give the cloak to Cao Xiu when an officer from the green group rode out and shouted, "Your excellency should give the first shot at the cloak to someone outside of your family instead of showing nepotism to your own clan."

This was Wen (2) Pin (4), the best of the lot of officers who had surrendered to Cao Cao when he marched through Jing Province. So now Wen Pin wanted to show off his skills. As he rode, he fired an arrow that also struck bullseye.

So once again, huzzah! The drums rolled and the men roared in approval.

"Bring me my cloak," Wen Pin shouted. But just then, another officer rode out from the red group. This was Cao Hong, one of Cao Cao's cousins and a veteran general in his army. Cao Hong lectured Wen Pin sternly, "Cao Xiu was the first one to hit. Why are you trying to take what is his? Let me settle this for the two of you!"

So Cao Hong pulled back his bowstring and let fly an arrow of his own. This shot also found the bullseye, and everyone cheered. So, so far the contest hasn't been much of a challenge for anyone.

Cao Hong was just about to go take the cloak for himself when someone from the green side rode out and shouted, "There's nothing remarkable about what the three of you have done! Watch me!"

This man was Zhang He (2), who had defected from Yuan Shao to join Cao Cao way back in our narrative. Zhang He sprinted into the arena like the wind, twisted his body around and fired a shot with his back to the target. This shot also found the bullseye, drawing more huzzahs from the crowd.

So there were now four arrows stuck in the bullseye, and Zhang He said, “The cloak should belong to me!” But just then, another guy rode out from the red group and shouted, “What’s so special about shooting with your back to the target?! Watch me take the cloak!”

This was the officer Xiahou Yuan (1). Now, although his last name was Xiahou, he was a member of Cao Cao’s clan, because Cao Cao’s father was actually named Xiahou before he was adopted by a court eunuch with the last name Cao. Xiahou Yuan rode to the edge of the arena, turned and fired, and his arrow struck in the middle of the four arrows that were already on the bullseye.

“Is that shot worthy of the cloak?” Xiahou Yuan shouted rhetorically as the drums rolled.

Someone obviously did not think so. It was the general Xu (2) Huang (3) from the green group, who shouted, “Leave the cloak for me!”

“How can you top my shot?” Xiahou Yuan asked.

“Hitting a bullseye is nothing special. Watch me take the cloak!” Xu Huang said as he fired a shot, not at the bullseye, but at the poplar branch from which the cloak hung. The shot was true, the branch snapped, and the cloak fell to the ground. Xu Huang galloped over, picked up the probably-now-dusty cloak, put it on, rode back to in front of the tower and said loudly, “Thank you, your excellency!”

Everyone was admiring Xu Huang’s skills, and the archery competition came to a cl ... oh wait, somebody wasn’t quite ready to declare the contest over yet. To see who this was, and how this contest will be settled, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast.

Thanks for listening!