

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 71.

Last time, we left off with Cao Cao entertaining thoughts of launching another campaign against the South to put down Sun Quan and Liu Bei before they became too much trouble. But first, he wanted to eliminate a longtime thorn in his side -- Ma Teng, a general who was stationed in Xiliang, which was in the northwestern borderlands of the empire. Ma Teng, along with Liu Bei, had been part of a failed conspiracy to assassinate Cao Cao years ago, and the fact that he had a sizable army in the west had always kept Cao Cao up at night. So Cao Cao decided to use a little trickery: He was going to send an imperial decree giving Ma Teng a promotion and putting him in charge of leading a campaign against the South. This would give Cao Cao a chance to lure Ma Teng to the capital and get rid of him.

So let's pause for a moment and give you a little background on Ma Teng. He was the descendant of one of the most famous generals of the Han Dynasty. His father had been a justice of the peace in a county in the west during the reign of Emperor Huan (2), which was now more than four decades ago. His father later lost his office and was stranded in the west, where he took up with the Jiang (1) people, a powerful borderland tribe, and Ma Teng was the product of a marriage between his father and a woman of the Jiang tribe.

Ma Teng grew up to be tall, strong, even-tempered, and well-respected. During the final years of the reign of Emperor Ling (2) -- so about 20 years ago -- there were frequent attempts by the Jiang people to throw off the yoke of the Han, and Ma Teng raised a local militia to put down these uprisings. For this service, he was named the General who Conquers the West. He was close with Han (2) Sui (4), another general who was stationed in the west, and the two men became sworn brothers. This is important to know because Han Sui will soon become a key player in the next little part of our narrative.

So that's the background on Ma Teng. Now, back to where we left off, which was around the year 210 or 211. Cao Cao's imperial decree arrived in Xiliang, and upon receiving it, Ma Teng discussed the matter with his eldest son, Ma Chao (1), whom we first met back in episode 13 as a teenager who was already a fearsome warrior.

"I once answered the emperor's jade girdle decree and joined Dong (3) Cheng (2) and Liu Bei in an attempt to kill Cao Cao," Ma Teng told his son. "Unfortunately, Dong Cheng (2) was executed, and Liu Bei suffered one defeat after another. Being out here in Xiliang, I haven't been able to help Liu Bei. But now I hear that he has taken Jing (1) Province. I was just about to take up our old cause again, but now Cao Cao is summoning me. What should I do?"

"Father, Cao Cao is summoning you in the name of the emperor, so if you don't go, he would accuse us of disobeying his majesty," Ma Chao said. "You should take this opportunity to go to the capital and fulfill your mission."

However, Ma Teng's nephew, Ma Dai (4), advised caution. "Cao Cao is unpredictable. Uncle, if you go, you might be in danger."

"Father, I am willing to mobilize all the forces of Xiliang and accompany you," Ma Chao said. "We will storm into Xuchang and rid the land of an evil. What's there to worry about?"

"No," Ma Teng said to Ma Chao. "You will lead the Jiang troops and stay here to defend Xiliang. I will take your two younger brothers, along with your cousin Ma Dai (4), and go to Xuchang. When Cao Cao sees that you are still in Xiliang and that you have Han (2) Sui (4) to help you, he would not dare to harm me."

"If you are going, father, then you must not enter the capital lightly," Ma Chao said. "You must act as the situation dictates and watch for your opportunity."

"I will know what to do. Don't worry."

So Ma Teng called up 5,000 troops and told his two younger sons to lead the front of the column, while his nephew Ma Dai trailed behind with reinforcements. They marched to within five or six miles of Xuchang and set up camp. When Cao Cao heard that Ma Teng had arrived, he summoned an imperial officer named Huang (2) Kui (2) and told him,

“Ma Teng is going to lead a southern expedition. I am sending you with him to represent me as an adjutant general. Go to Ma Teng’s camp first to reward his troops. Tell Ma Teng that since the great distance from Xiliang makes it difficult to transport provisions, he is to take only a small detachment of troops and I will lead a large army to help him. Tell him to enter the capital tomorrow to present himself to the emperor, and I will take care of his provisions then.”

So Huang (2) Kui (2) went to Ma Teng’s camp as instructed, and Ma Teng welcomed him with a banquet. After one too many cups of wine, Huang Kui (2) was getting a bit tipsy and loose-lipped.

“My father was killed during the chaos under Li (3) Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (4),” he said. And in case you forgot, Li Jue (2) and Guo (1) Si (4) were two generals who muscled their way into power at court after Dong Zhuo was killed, and then they took to fighting each other and caused all sorts of mayhem, which led to the emperor falling into Cao Cao’s hands and the capital moving to Xuchang.

“I have always bitterly resented those men,” Huang (2) Kui (2) continued. “Who knew that we would now have another traitor who bullies his lord?”

“To whom are you referring?” Ma Teng asked.

“Who else but Cao Cao?! Sir, why do you ask me that?! How can you not know?!”

Ma Teng wasn’t quite sure whether Huang Kui (2) was sent by Cao Cao to feel him out, so he kept up appearances and shushed his guest. “There are eyes and ears nearby. Don’t speak such nonsense!”

“Sir, have you forgotten the jade girdle decree?!” Huang Kui (2) admonished him.

Well, since Huang Kui called him out, Ma Teng fessed up and told his guest his true intentions. Huang Kui (2) was eager to lend a hand.

“There is no good intention behind Cao Cao’s summoning you to enter the city to meet the emperor,” Huang Kui told Ma Teng. “You must not go lightly. Tomorrow, bring your troops to the foot of the city. If Cao Cao comes out to inspect the army, kill him on the spot, and the deed will be done.”

And so it was settled, and Huang Kui took his leave and went home. But the thought of Cao Cao and the bitter memories of his own father’s death had left him still fuming. His wife asked him several times why he was so put out, but he refused to tell her, which was good considering what he was up to. What was not so good, though, was that he was far less tight-lipped with his concubine. And his concubine was carrying on with his brother-in-law, Miao (2) Ze (2), who was frustrated at the fact that he had no way of getting her for himself.

When Huang Kui’s concubine saw how angry her husband was, she mentioned it to Miao (2) Ze (2), and he told her to try to find out why.

“You can say to him, ‘Everyone says imperial uncle Liu Bei is virtuous while Cao Cao is devious. What do you think?’ and see how he reacts,” Miao Ze told his lover.

So that night, when Huang Kui went to his concubine’s chamber, she indeed used those words on him after he had a few more cups of wine, and it riled him up.

“If even you, a woman, knows right from wrong, then how can I not?” Huang Kui said drunkenly. “I despise Cao Cao and I want to kill him!”

“How would you kill him?” his concubine asked.

“I have already planned it out with General Ma Teng. Tomorrow, when Cao Cao is inspecting the army outside the city, we will kill him.”

Well, you can probably guess how things went from there. Huang Kui’s concubine relayed his words to his brother-in-law Miao (2) Ze (2), and he promptly went to tell Cao Cao. So Cao Cao

immediately summoned four of his top officers and gave them each some instructions. He also had Huang Kui's entire family arrested.

The next day, Ma Teng marched his army toward the city. As they approached, they saw a cluster of red flags approaching. Among them was a banner bearing Cao Cao's name. Ma Teng figured that this was Cao Cao coming to inspect his troops, so he rode forward to meet them.

But suddenly, an explosive went off, and at that signal, the red banners parted, and a hail of arrows shot out. A general charged out, and it was Cao Cao's kinsman, Cao Hong (2). Recognizing that this was a trap, Ma Teng quickly turned around, but cries of battle now rose up from all around. From the left came troops led by the general Xu (2) Chu (3), and from the right were troops led by Xiahou Yuan (1). From behind came another squad of soldiers led by the general Xu (2) Huang (3). These troops cut off Ma Teng's army and surrounded him and his two sons.

Just as Ma Teng tried to fight his way out, one of his sons had already been slain by a shower of arrows. Ma Teng and his other son tried to break out but could not. They both suffered serious injuries, and their horses were also wounded. Eventually, they were both captured alive.

Ma Teng, his son, and Huang Kui (2) were brought in front of Cao Cao. Huang Kui protested his innocence, but Cao Cao shut him up by bringing out his brother-in-law. Seeing this, Ma Teng cursed Huang Kui loudly, "You damn pedant! You have ruined my great endeavor! It is heaven's will that I cannot rid the country of its traitor!"

Cao Cao told his men to take the prisoners outside for execution. As he was led away, Ma Teng cursed nonstop, but alas, it was all just sticks and stones to Cao Cao. So Ma Teng, his son, and Huang Kui all met an ignoble end.

After seeing his brother-in-law executed, Miao (2) Ze (2) now said to Cao Cao, "I wish for no reward except to take Huang Kui's concubine as my wife."

But boy did he have a surprise coming.

"For a mere woman, you betrayed your brother-in-law's entire family," Cao Cao said with a laugh. "What's the point of keeping a dishonorable scoundrel like you around?"

So Cao Cao had Miao Ze and Huang Kui's entire family, including his concubine, all publicly beheaded, a spectacle that induced a sigh from everyone who witnessed it. Well, at least this villain got his comeuppance.

Having executed the ringleaders of this little failed conspiracy, Cao Cao now sent out a call for the troops from Xiliang to surrender, saying that the whole conspiracy was all Ma Teng's own doing and had nothing to do with his soldiers. Meanwhile, Cao Cao also tightened security at all the checkpoints so that Ma Teng's nephew Ma Dai would not escape.

Speaking of Ma Dai, he was spared his uncle and cousins' fate because he was trailing behind with 1,000 men as reinforcement. Some of Ma Teng's soldiers managed to escape from the debacle outside the capital, and they told Ma Dai what happened. Stunned, Ma Dai had no choice but to ditch his army, disguise himself as a merchant, and slip back to Xiliang. Rest assured, there will be some repercussions from what has just transpired. We'll get to that soon enough.

But first, now that he has done away with the thorn in his side, Cao Cao turned his thoughts back toward attacking the South. Suddenly, he received word that Liu Bei was getting ready to invade the Riverlands, and this news left Cao Cao quite alarmed.

"If Liu Bei succeeds in taking the Riverlands, he would grow wings. THEN how would I defeat him?"

Just then, a court official named Chen (2) Qun (2) spoke up. "I have a plan to prevent Liu Bei and Sun Quan from helping each other, and it will deliver the Southlands and the Riverlands into your excellency's hands."

"What is this great plan?"

"Liu Bei and Sun Quan are allies. If Liu Bei intends to take the Riverlands, your excellency can send a top general to lead troops and join your forces at Hefei (2,2) to attack the Southlands. Sun Quan would no doubt ask Liu Bei for help. Liu Bei has his sights set on the Riverlands, so he would not want to help Sun Quan. Without help, Sun Quan is vulnerable, and the Southlands would surely belong to you. Once you have the Southlands, you can swoop down and take Jing Province as well. Once you have Jing Province, you can then move on the Riverlands, and the realm will be pacified."

Cao Cao liked that idea, so he immediately mobilized 300,000 troops and marched toward the Southlands. He also sent word to the general Zhang Liao (2), who was defending the key city of Hefei (2,2), to prepare provisions for the campaign.

Word of this soon reached Sun Quan, and he summoned his staff to discuss what to do.

"We should send a message to Lu Su," his adviser Zhang Zhao (1) suggested. "Tell him to send an urgent dispatch to Jing Province and ask Liu Bei to join us in resisting Cao Cao. Liu Bei owes Lu Su a favor, so he would no doubt agree to help. Besides, since Liu Bei is now your brother-in-law, honor would not allow him to refuse. If he comes to our aid, then the Southlands are secure."

So Sun Quan sent word to Lu Su. Lu Su then promptly sent a message to Liu Bei in Jing Province. Liu Bei read the message and then put the envoy up in quarters while he sent word to the city of Nanjun to ask Zhuge Liang to come and discuss this matter.

Zhuge Liang soon arrived. After reading Lu Su's letter, he told Liu Bei, "I have a way to make Cao Cao drop his designs on the South without needing to trouble the armies of the Southlands or Jing Province."

He then wrote a reply to Lu Su, telling him to rest easy, and that if Cao Cao's troops do encroach, that Liu Bei would have a way to fend them off. This was news to Liu Bei, and after the envoy left, he asked Zhuge Liang, "Right now Cao Cao is coming with 300,000 troops, along with his forces at Hefei. What brilliant plan do you have to repel them?"

"The thing that keeps Cao Cao up at night is the army in Xiliang," Zhuge Liang answered. "Now that he has killed Ma Teng, Ma Teng's son Ma Chao will become the leader in Xiliang and he will no doubt despise Cao Cao. Your lordship can write a letter to Ma Chao and ask him to invade Cao Cao's territory. How can Cao Cao think about coming South then?"

Delighted by this plan, Liu Bei immediately sent a letter to Xiliang.

Speaking of Ma Chao, he had been left behind by his father to hold down the fort in Xiliang. One night, he had a nightmare where he dreamed that he was lying in the snow and a swarm of tigers were biting him. After he startled awake, he was feeling uncertain and told his officers about his dream.

"This is an evil sign," said Pang (2) De (2), one of Ma Chao's trusted commandants.

"What do you think it means?" Ma Chao asked.

"Encountering tigers in the snow is a bad omen," Pang De said. "Could it mean that something has happened to your father in the capital?"

Before Pang De had finished speaking, a man stumbled in, fell to the ground, and wept. "My uncle and cousins are all dead!"



This was Ma Chao's cousin Ma Dai, who had just fled back from Xuchang. A stunned Ma Chao asked him what happened. After Ma Dai relayed the story of the failed conspiracy, Ma Chao fell to the ground in tears.

Once his men helped him to his feet, Ma Chao gritted his teeth in hatred of Cao Cao. Just then, word came that a message had arrived from the imperial uncle Liu Bei. Ma Chao took a look, and the letter said:

"My thoughts dwell on the misfortune that has befallen the House of Han. The traitor Cao Cao usurps power, wrongs his sovereign, and places the people in misery. Your honorable father and I both answered the emperor's secret decree and swore to kill that traitor. But now your father has died at the hands of Cao Cao. This crime must be avenged. If you can lead the troops of Xiliang and attack Cao Cao from the West, I shall lead the forces of Jing Province and check him from the South, and we shall capture Cao Cao, wipe out his gang, avenge your father, and reinvigorate the House of Han. This letter relays but a fraction of my thoughts. I await your response."

After reading the letter, Ma Chao wiped away his tears, wrote a reply, and sent the messenger off. He then mobilized the troops in Xiliang to go in search of vengeance. Just as they were about to set out, Ma Chao received an invitation from Han (2) Sui (4), the governor of Xiliang who was his father's sworn brother, asking Ma Chao to go to his house.

Ma Chao and his cousin Ma Dai went to Han Sui's home, and Han Sui showed them a letter he had received from Cao Cao, which said, "If you can capture Ma Chao and bring him to Xuchang, then I will make you the Marquis of Xiliang."

When he saw this, Ma Chao kneeled on the ground and said, "Uncle, please tie the two of us up right now and take us to Xuchang. It will spare you the trouble of resorting to arms."

But Han Sui helped Ma Chao to his feet and said, "I am your father's sworn brother. How can I bear to do you any harm? If you are mobilizing your troops, then I shall lend you a hand."

Ma Chao bowed and thanked him, and Han Sui told his men to drag Cao Cao's messenger outside and execute him to prove that he was sincere. Boy it sucks to be a messenger in these times. Han Sui then mobilized the eight detachments of troops under his command and joined up with Ma Chao. Their combined army of 200,000 then stormed toward the city of Chang'an (2,1).

Chang'an, if you remember, was the capital of the Western Han, and briefly served as the capital of the Eastern Han earlier in the novel as Dong Zhuo moved the court there when he was being pressed by the armies of the coalition against him. However, the capital was ransacked in the chaos following Dong Zhuo's death, and the court eventually relocated to Xuchang. While it wasn't the capital anymore, Chang'an was still a key strategic location, especially for anyone trying to invade the heart of the empire.

The governor of Chang'an was named Zhong (1) Yao (2). When he heard about the invasion force heading his way, he quickly sent word to Cao Cao and mobilized his troops to face the enemy, setting up their battle lines in the fields outside the city.

The vanguard of the Xiliang forces, about 15,000 men led by Ma Chao's cousin Ma Dai, swarmed onto the scene. Zhong (1) Yao (2) rode out to address them, but Ma Dai was in no mood to talk. Wielding his saber, Ma Dai took on Zhong Yao (2), and Zhong Yao turned and fled before they had completed one bout. Ma Dai chased him all the way back inside Chang'an, and the main Xiliang army, led by Ma Chao and his commandant Pang De, soon arrived and surrounded the city.

Taking the city, however, proved to be much tougher than defeating the enemy in a fight on the open field. It wasn't for nothing that Chang'an served as an imperial capital for centuries. It had tall,

strong walls and wide, deep moats, which made it impossible to take with a quick siege. Ma Chao found this out first hand, as he laid siege to the city for 10 days but could not breach it.

Pang De now suggested a different tact.

“Inside Chang’an, the soil is tough and the water is salty, not suitable for consumption,” he said. “Besides, there’s no source of firewood. We have surrounded the city for 10 days, and the troops and civilians inside must be starving. Why don’t we fall back for now and do this and this and this, and Chang’an will be ours.”

So what does this and this and this entail? Well, first, Ma Chao sent out word for his army to retreat, while he himself brought up the rear. All the various detachments of his troops did as commanded and pulled out one by one. The next day, Zhong (1) Yao (2) could see from the city walls that the enemy had left, but he suspected a ruse, so he sent out scouts.

The scouts reported back that the enemy had indeed retreated and were a long ways off. This news put Zhong Yao’s mind at ease, and he allowed the city gates to be opened so that soldiers and civilians could go out to fetch water and collect firewood.

But this respite only lasted four days. On the fifth day, word came that Ma Chao’s troops were on their way back again, and both the soldiers and the civilians of Chang’an rushed back inside the city, shutting the gates behind them.

That night, around midnight, a fire broke out by the west gate. Zhong Yao’s brother, who was overseeing the defense of that gate, rushed onto the scene to put out the fire, but just then, a man galloped out from around the corner, wielding a saber and shouting, “Here is Pang De!”

Caught off guard, Zhong Yao’s brother did not stand a chance, and he fell under Pang De’s blade. So what happened here was that Ma Chao had fallen back to give the city some breathing room so that it would open the gates and let people in and out again. Then, when Ma Chao’s troops came

back, the people all rushed back inside the city, and Pang De blended in with the fleeing masses and slipped in as well.

Now, Pang De scattered the soldiers defending the west gate, threw open the gates, cut the chains holding up the drawbridge, and let his comrades in. Just like that, Ma Chao had taken Chang'an.

When Ma Chao's troops poured in through the west gate, Zhong Yao, the governor of the city, quickly escaped through the east gate. He sent word to Cao Cao about what had happened, and just like that, just as Zhuge Liang predicted, Cao Cao canceled his plans for a Southern campaign so that he could deal with the crisis at hand.

First, he summoned two of his top generals, Cao Hong and Xu Huang.

"Take 10,000 men and go take over for Zhong Yao at Tong (2) Pass," he told them. "If that pass falls within 10 days, you will be executed. Beyond 10 days, you will not be held responsible. I will be right behind you with the main army."

After the two officers left, another general, Cao Ren, said to Cao Cao, "Cao Hong is impatient; he might botch his mission."

"Hmm. Then you escort the provisions and follow them as reinforcement," Cao Cao said.

So let's follow Cao Hong and Xu Huang to the front lines. They rushed to Tong (2) Pass, which was a key location because it was basically the gateway from the West into the heartland, and it has been the site of many a battle over the course of Chinese history. After they relieved Zhong Yao, Cao Hong and Xu Huang did as Cao Cao commanded and only worried about holding the pass instead of going out to fight. Or at least, until Ma Chao showed up.

Once he arrived at the pass, Ma Chao led his troops out and had them badmouth Cao Cao's entire progeny as a way to goad the enemy into fighting. This assault on his honor was too much for Cao Hong, and he wanted to go out and shut Ma Chao up, but Xu Huang checked him.

"This is Ma Chao's attempt to lure you out to fight," Xu Huang said to Cao Hong. "You must not go. Once his excellency arrives with the main army, he will know how to proceed."

That's all well and good, but Ma Chao kept up the verbal assault, having his troops take shifts denigrating Cao Hong's family name. For eight days, Cao Hong wanted to go fight, and for eight days, Xu Huang did everything he could to keep his comrade at bay.

On the ninth day, Cao Hong noticed that the Xiliang troops were looking pretty tired and lax, as most of them had left their horses to graze outside the pass while the men slept on the ground. Well, this looked like a good opportunity to get some payback for all the nasty stuff they've been saying, and that wet blanket Xu Huang was off inspecting provisions at the moment, so no one was around to stop Cao Hong from charging out with 3,000 men.

BUT ... as you may have guessed, this was a trick. To see what happens to Cao Hong, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.