

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 78.

Hey, guess what? We just passed the midway point of the novel, and guess what? We still don't have three kingdoms in this Romance of the THREE Kingdoms. But stay with me, because we're about to take a big step toward that this week.

So last time, we left Liu Bei in a bit of a dicey situation. His plot with Zhang Song to take over the Riverlands leaked out, and Zhang Song lost his head because of it. Not only that, Liu Zhang was -- at long last -- on to his dear kinsman's true intentions and ordered his men to strengthen defenses at all the key points.

While this was going on, Liu Bei was putting into action his own plan, which called for pretending that he was leaving the Riverlands. His first stop was going to be Fucheng (2,2), and he sent word on ahead to the two generals defending Fu (2) River Pass that he would like to bid them goodbye before he left.

The two officers, Yang (2) Huai (2) and Gao (1) Pei (4), had long been suspicious of Liu Bei, and they decided that this would be the perfect opportunity to assassinate him. So they each stashed a dagger under their clothes and took 200 men with them to go see Liu Bei.

Meanwhile, as Liu Bei was approaching the Fu (2) River, his military strategist Pang Tong advised him, "If Yang Huai and Gao Pei come to meet us without hesitation, we must be on guard. If they do not come, then we should lay siege to the pass without delay."

Just then, a strong gust of wind kicked up and blew over the command flag in front of them.

"What does this omen portend?" Liu Bei asked.

"This is a warning," Pang Tong answered. "Yang Huai and Gao Pei must be harboring thoughts of assassination. We must be vigilant."

So once again, stupid wind foils a perfectly good plan. Tipped off by Mother Nature, Liu Bei wore a suit of heavy armor and carried his sword. When word came that Yang Huai and Gao Pei had arrived, Liu Bei ordered his army to stop and rest. Pang Tong then secretly told the generals Wei Yan and Huang Zhong, "No matter how many men they are bringing with them, we must not allow a single one to escape." And the two generals quickly snapped to.

So Yang Huai and Gao Pei, along with their 200 men, walked into Liu Bei's ranks carrying wine and goats as presents. When they saw that Liu Bei had taken no precautions whatsoever, they were secretly delighted. They went into Liu Bei's tent, where Liu Bei and Pang Tong sat waiting for them.

"Imperial uncle, we heard that you were returning to Jing Province, so we have prepared some meager parting gifts for you," the two would-be assassins said as they offered wine to Liu Bei.

"Generals, you work hard to defend your pass. This first cup should be for you," Liu Bei said.

So the two officers drank the wine. Liu Bei then said, "I have a secret matter to discuss with the two generals. Everyone else, leave us."

So everyone, including the 200 men that Yang Huai and Gao Pei had brought, were escorted away from the tent. As soon as they were gone, Liu Bei shouted, "Men, arrest these two scoundrels!"

Before the last word had left his lips, two of his officers, Liu Feng (1) and Guan Ping (2), stepped out from behind the tent and each grabbed one of the two assassins.

"Your master and I are kinsman, so why are the two of you scheming to sow discord among us?!" Liu Bei admonished the two men.

Pang Tong then ordered that their two prisoners be searched, and sure enough, the guards found a dagger on each man. Pang Tong immediately ordered that the two be executed. Liu Bei, however, wasn't so sure he wanted to take such drastic measures.

“These two were intending to assassinate you, my lord,” Pang Tong said. “Their crimes cannot go unpunished.”

And so Pang Tong told the executioners to do their bloody work outside the tent. Meanwhile, the generals Huang Zhong and Wei Yan had already rounded up all 200 of the enemy soldiers. Liu Bei summoned them in and offered them wine to set their minds at ease.

“Yang Huai and Gao Pei were trying to sow discord between me and my kinsman,” Liu Bei told them. “They were also trying to assassinate me. That’s why they were executed. It has nothing to do with you all, so do not be worried.”

Greeted with this surprising act of leniency, the soldiers all bowed and expressed their gratitude. Pang Tong then told them, “I would like for you to lead the way for our troops and help us take Fu (2) River Pass. When it’s done, you shall be handsomely rewarded.”

The soldiers heartily consented. I mean, hey, I don’t have to die and you’ll reward me? Why the heck not? So that night, these 200 men led the way, and Liu Bei’s troops followed. When they arrived at the foot of the pass, the 200 men called out, “General Yang and General Gao have returned on urgent business! Open the gates at once!”

The guards inside the pass recognized the voices as those of their own men, so they opened the gates, and the rest was quite simple. Liu Bei’s army stormed into the pass and took it without any bloodshed as the soldiers inside all surrendered.

True to his word, Liu Bei rewarded the men and dispatched troops to defend the pass. The next day, he held a celebratory feast. After getting a little tipsy, Liu Bei turned to Pang Tong and said, “Is today not a happy occasion?”

To that, Pang Tong answered, “If you delight in invading someone else’s territory, then you are not leading a benevolent army.”

Liu Bei was pretty put out by this, and who can blame him, really? After all, it was Pang Tong who kept pushing him to get off the pot and make his move, and now Pang Tong is lecturing him? He told Pang Tong to scram, and Pang Tong simply got up, laughed out loud, and walked away while attendants helped Liu Bei to his bed chamber.

Around midnight, Liu Bei woke up with a massive hangover, compounded by pangs of regret when his attendants told him what he had said to Pang Tong. The next morning, Liu Bei invited Pang Tong over so he could apologize.

“I was drunk yesterday and offended you with my words. Please pay it no mind,” Liu Bei said.

Pang Tong reacted quite magnanimously, but Liu Bei continued his self-flagellation.

“It was all my fault,” he said.

“Both the lord and the servant were at fault,” Pang Tong replied. “It was not all on you, my lord.”

This made Liu Bei laugh, and the two were chummy once again.

Meanwhile, news of what had transpired reached Liu Zhang, and he was stunned.

“Who would have expected that this would really happen?!” he said.

Umm, how about everybody in the Riverlands except you? One of those guys, the adviser Huang (2) Quan (2), now suggested a response.

“We should immediately dispatch troops to garrison Luo (4) County and control the key road. That way, no matter how formidable Liu Bei’s troops are, they would not be able to pass through.”

So Liu Zhang dispatched 50,000 men to rush to Luo (4) County. This army was led by four generals: Liu (2) Gui (1), Ling (2) Bao (1), Zhang (1) Ren (4), and Deng (4) Xian (2). As they set out, Liu Gui (1) said to the other three, “I’ve heard that there resides a remarkable man in the Brocade Screen Mountain. His Taoist name is the High Priest of the Azure Realm, and he can foresee men’s fate. Since our army is passing through that mountain, why don’t we seek him out?”

“How can a true man consult a hermit about military affairs?” Zhang Ren (4) said.

“Not so,” Liu Gui (1) countered. “As the sage said, “Those who sincerely follow The Way have knowledge of the future.” We should ask this oracle whether good or ill lies ahead.”

After sufficient arm-twisting, Liu Gui convinced his fellow commanders to go with him. Following directions from a woodcutter, they found their way to the hermit’s residence in the mountain. There, they were greeted by a young acolyte, who asked for their names and then led them inside.

There, they found the oracle seated on a mat. The four generals bowed and asked about their futures. The priest answered, “I am but a useless hermit. How can I know the future?”

Liu Gui (1), however, kept asking, until the finally, the hermit asked the acolyte to bring brush and paper and he wrote down eight lines and handed it to Liu Gui. These eight lines read:

Dragon on the left, phoenix on the right,

Into the Riverlands he does fly.

The phoenix crashes to earth,

The dragon soars on high.

One loss, one gain,

This heaven has ordained.

Act according to the situation,

And stave off destruction.

But Liu Gui was still not satisfied. He pressed further and asked, “What about the four of us? What are our fates?”

“One cannot dodge fate, so what’s the point of asking?” the hermit replied.

Liu Gui wanted to ask some more, but the hermit did not answer, instead shutting his eyes and acting as though he was asleep., which was a clear signal for his guests to leave. As the four generals went back down the mountain, Liu Gui said, "One must not doubt the words of an immortal."

"[Scoff] That was a mad man," Zhang Ren scoffed. "Why believe anything he says?"

Once they arrived at Luo (4) County, they dispatched troops to defend all the key passages. The four generals then decided that they would split up. Two of them, Zhang Ren and Liu Gui, would keep watch inside the city, while the other two, Ling (2) Bao (1) and Deng (4) Xian (2), led 20,000 men and set up two camps in the mountains about 20 miles in front of the city to provide a first line of defense.

News of this soon reached Liu Bei at Fu (2) River Pass, and he summoned his officers to ask who dared to go take the two enemy camps. The old general Huang Zhong volunteered immediately, and Liu Bei told him to lead the troops under his command and set out.

But just then, the general Wei Yan spoke up. "General Huang is getting up there in age; how can he go on this mission? I may be untalented, but I am willing to go instead."

"I have my orders; how dare you compete with me?" Huang Zhong said.

"The value of elders do not lie in their sinews," Wei Yan retorted. "I have heard that Ling (2) Bao (1) and Deng (4) Xian (2) are famous generals in the region of Shu (3) and they are in their prime. Old general, I worry that you would not be a match for them. Would that not ruin our lord's grand enterprise? It's only out of good intentions that I am offering to go in your place."

Well, if there's one thing that old Chinese generals love to hear, it's the insinuation that they are past their sell-by date.

"You suggest that I am too old. Do you dare to match your skills with mine?!" Huang Zhong said angrily.

Wei Yan was not backing down. "Let's have a contest in front of our lord," he said. "Whoever wins will go on the mission. How's that?"

"Bring me my saber!" Huang Zhong shouted to a soldier as they stepped out of the meeting hall.

But alas, Liu Bei was not about to have two of his own generals going at each other.

"This will not do," he said. "My campaign to take the Riverlands relies entirely on the two of you. When two tigers fight, one would inevitably be wounded. That would ruin my enterprise. I will settle this for the two of you. No more fighting."

Pang Tong now also chimed in as a peacemaker. "There is no need to fight," he said. "Ling (2) Bao (1) and Deng (4) Xian (2) have set up two camps. The two of you can take the men under your command and each attack one camp. Whoever wins first gets the top merit."

This appeased the two, and they set out with their orders. But after they left, Pang Tong told Liu Bei that he should lead an army to go provide backup, just in case these two decided to go at it again en route. So Liu Bei left Pang Tong to defend the city, while he himself set out with 5,000 men, along with the officers Liu Feng (1) and Guan Ping (2).

As for Huang Zhong, after he returned to his own camp, he ordered his men to prepare breakfast at 1 a.m. that night, be done by 3 a.m., and set out at first light to advance along the left side of the canyon to attack Ling Bao's camp.

Well, that crafty rascal Wei Yan caught wind of Huang Zhong's plans and told his men that they were setting out at 11 p.m. so that they would be already at Deng Xian's camp by first light, which would give him a two-hour head start on Huang Zhong in the race to see who wins their battle first. So that night, Wei Yan and his troops set out. To ensure that they remained as quiet as possible, they took off the bells that typically adorned war horses, and the men all marched with a small twig in their mouths so that they would not say anything.

Midway to their destination, however, a thought occurred to Wei Yan.

“If I just raid Deng Xian’s camp, it won’t show off my skills. Why don’t I go attack Ling Bao’s camp first, win that fight, and then turn around and attack Deng Xian’s camp. That way, both victories would be mine.”

So now Wei Yan was just getting greedy. He ordered his troops to head down the left side of the canyon toward Ling Bao’s camp. As the early-morning light was just starting to pique, they were approaching their target. Wei Yan now told his men to take a quick rest and get their gear ready.

But while Wei Yan was dreaming about gobbling up all the glory, enemy sentries had long since reported his presence to Ling Bao, and to his credit, Ling Bao was prepared. At the sound of an explosive, his army charged out. Wei Yan galloped forth with saber in hand to meet Ling Bao. After they fought for 30 bouts, two more detachments of Riverlands troops showed up and attacked Wei Yan’s army. And Wei Yan’s soldiers, remember, had walked all night to get here, so they were already tired to begin with, and now they could no longer stand their ground and fell back.

Hearing chaos in the back of his line, Wei Yan gave up the fight with Ling Bao and retreated. Ling Bao’s troops gave chase and crushed Wei Yan’s army. Wei Yan and his men had not gone but a couple miles when the ground shook as drums rolled from behind the hills. This was more bad news for Wei Yan, as Deng Xian, the other Riverlands general, led a detachment of troops and charged out from the canyon, shouting for Wei Yan to surrender.

Wei Yan spurred on his horse as he tried to flee. Suddenly, his horse’s front legs gave out and threw him to the ground. Deng Xian caught up from behind and raised spear to run Wei Yan through. But just then, at the twang of a bowstring, Deng Xian fell to the ground. Just as his comrade Ling Bao was about to charge forward, a general galloped down from the hillside and shouted, “I am the old general Huang Zhong!”



Huang Zhong waved his saber and made for Ling Bao. Ling Bao was no match for him and quickly fell back. Huang Zhong gave chase and threw the enemy troops into disarray. Having rescued Wei Yan and killed Deng Xian, Huang Zhong now chased Ling Bao all the way to his camp. Ling Bao turned around to fight him, but after a dozen bouts or so, Huang Zhong's troops poured onto the scene, and Ling Bao had no choice but to abandon his camp and lead his defeated army toward Deng Xian's camp.

But when got there, he was in for a surprise, as this part of his camp was now flying completely different flags. As a stunned Ling Bao held up his horse and looked, he saw a general out front, cloaked in gold-plated armor and brightly colored robes. This was none other than Liu Bei, and he was flanked by the officers Guan Ping and Liu Feng.

"I have already taken your camp, where will you go now?!" Liu Bei shouted.

So what happened here was that Liu Bei was coming with reinforcement for his generals when he saw that they were already engaged with the enemy. So he took the opportunity to swoop in and take over Deng Xian's camp while he was out getting himself killed. Having lost both camps, Ling Bao now fled along some backroads in an attempt to run back into Luo County, where his other comrades were holding down the fort. But he had gone just a few miles when suddenly, soldiers sprang out from hiding along a narrow road and dragged him off his horse with hooks and tied him up.

So who were these guys? Well, so after Wei Yan's little plan to hoard all the glory blew up in his face, he figured that he was going to be in deep trouble with Liu Bei, so he better do something to make up for it. That something was to lead his troops here, lie in wait, and luckily for him, Ling Bao just happened to come this way and fell into his trap, giving him a gift-wrapped present to present to Liu Bei.

While this was going on, Liu Bei had erected a flag of amnesty and put out the word that any enemy soldier who surrendered would not be harmed, and if anyone kills a surrendering combatant, they would pay with their own lives. And once the enemy soldiers did surrender, he told them, "You all have families. If you're willing to surrender to me, then join my army. If not, you are free to go home." Well, as you can imagine, this made those soldiers quite happy.

After a while, Huang Zhong arrived with his troops, and the first thing he did when he came to see Liu Bei was to tell him how Wei Yan violated orders and should be executed for it. Liu Bei quickly summoned Wei Yan, and Wei Yan arrived with his prisoner Ling Bao in tow. This had the intended effect.

"Wei Yan did commit a transgression, but this makes up for it," Liu Bei said. He then ordered Wei Yan to thank Huang Zhong for saving his life and told him to knock it off with the glory hoarding from now on. Wei Yan gladly complied as he kowtowed and begged forgiveness for his offense. Liu Bei then rewarded Huang Zhong handsomely.

Now, as for Ling Bao, Liu Bei had him brought into the tent and untied, and then offered him wine.

"Are you willing to surrender?" Liu Bei asked him.

"Since you have spared my life, how can I not?" Ling Bao replied. "My comrades Liu Gui (1) and Zhang Ren (4) are my sworn brothers. If you would release me, I will go convince them to surrender as well and offer you the city."

Liu Bei was delighted by this and immediately gave Ling Bao a fresh set of clothes and a horse and told him to go to Luo (4) County.

"We can't let him go!" Wei Yan objected. "As soon as he gets away, he won't come back!"

"If I treat someone with honor and humanity, they would not wrong me," Liu Bei replied.

Well, Ling Bao apparently was not so touched by this honor and humanity thing, because when he returned to Luo (4) County, he did not mention a single word about how Liu Bei had spared him and let him go. Instead, he told them that he managed to kill a dozen men, seize a horse, and escape. The generals then sent word back to Chengdu asking for reinforcements.

The news that one of his top generals had been killed shocked Liu Zhang, and he quickly assembled his staff to discuss what to do. His eldest son, Liu Xun (2) volunteered to lead more troops to hold down Luo County. Liu Zhang's brother-in-law, Wu (2) Yi (4), volunteered to go along as well, and he also recommended two officers, Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2), to serve as lieutenants. So they set out with 20,000 men and headed to Luo County, where they were met by their comrades already inside the city. The commanders then got together to discuss their next move, and Ling Bao had an idea.

"This area borders the River Fu (2), and the currents are very strong," he said. "The enemy has set up camp by the foot of the hills, where it's the lowest. I can take 5,000 men to go redirect the flow of the river and use it to drown Liu Bei's army."

Wu (2) Yi (4) agreed to this plan and sent Ling Bao off on his mission, with the lieutenants Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2) leading an army to back him up.

Meanwhile, after his victory, Liu Bei left Huang Zhong and Wei Yan to each oversee one of the two camps they had captured and then returned to the city of Fucheng (2,2) to huddle with his adviser Pang Tong. Spies brought them word that Sun Quan and the Southlands had sent envoys to make nice with Zhang Lu (3), the ruler of the region of Hanzhong (4,1), and that they were intending to attack Jiameng (1,2) Pass, which one of the two passes that Liu Bei currently controlled in the Riverlands.

"If we lose Jiameng (1,2) Pass, our path of retreat would be cut off, and I will not be able to advance or fall back," a concerned Liu Bei said. "What should we do?"

At this moment, Meng (4) Da (2), a general from the Riverlands and one of the people who were in on the original plot to betray the region to Liu Bei, happen to be with Liu Bei. Pang Tong asked him, “Sir, you are from this region and are familiar with the geography. Can you go defend Jiameng (1,2) Pass?”

Meng Da agreed, but not before he recommended another person to go with him. This guy used to be an officer who served under Liu Biao in Jing Province, and he was named Huo (4) Jun (4). Liu Bei agreed and sent the two of them to Jiameng (1,2) Pass, and that was that.

Having dealt with the issue at hand, Pang Tong retired to his residence, but his attendant soon reported that he had a visitor. Pang Tong went out to greet his guest, and saw a tall man of majestic appearance. But his hair was cut short and disheveled, and his clothes were not exactly tidy either.

“Sir, who might you be?” Pang Tong asked.

The man made no answer. Instead, he stepped straight into the room and laid on the couch. A puzzled Pang Tong asked time and again for his visitor’s identity, and the man told him, “Just wait. I need to discuss the fate of the empire with you first.”

This made Pang Tong even more curious and suspicious, so he ordered his attendants to bring food and wine for his visitor. The guy did not stand on ceremony either, as he helped himself to the offering. After he had eaten and drunk his fill, he laid down and took a nap.

At this point, Pang Tong was a little bit bewildered, and part of him was worried that this guy might be a spy. Although if you ask me, spies usually don’t show up at your doorstep, eat your food, and sleep on your couch. But in any case, Pang Tong asked his men to go fetch Fa Zheng, the Riverlands official who was in on Operation Put Liu Bei in Charge. When Fa Zheng arrived, Pang Tong met him outside and told him about the strange visitor.

“Could it be Peng (2) Yang (4)?” Fa Zheng said as he stepped inside to take a look for himself.

As soon as the guest saw Fa Zheng, he jumped up and said, "How have you been, my friend?!" And the two of them clapped their hands and laughed. Meanwhile, Pang Tong was like, ok, somebody let me in on the joke here.

"His name is Peng (2) Yang (4)," Fa Zhang said. "He is one of the talents of Shu (3). His once rubbed Liu Zhang the wrong way with his blunt advice, so Liu Zhang cut his hair, put a metal ring around his neck, and sentenced him to slave labor."

Hearing this, Pang Tong greeted Peng Yang as an honored guest and asked him what he was doing there, aside from helping himself to a free meal and a nice nap.

"I have come to save all of your lives," Peng Yang told him. "But I cannot say anything until I meet General Liu."

To see what Peng Yang is talking about, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.