

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 76.

Last time, the ruler of the Riverlands, Liu Zhang, was persuaded to invite Liu Bei and company into his territory to help him fend off external threats from Cao Cao and Zhang Lu (3). Of course, anyone with any sense in the Riverlands could see that this was a bad idea because Liu Bei was not likely to subjugate himself to a weakling like Liu Zhang, especially when there's a fat piece of land at stake.

Still, Liu Zhang persisted, and a couple of his officials resorted to extreme measures to try to change his mind. One of them, Huang (2) Quan (2), used his teeth to grip Liu Zhang's robes like a dog trying to pull its master back from danger, but Liu Zhang just gave his shirt a tug and freed himself, taking out a couple of Huang Quan's front teeth in the process.

Then, as Liu Zhang was about to set out to go welcome Liu Bei, one of his aides, Wang (2) Lei (4), had himself suspended in the air high above the city gate and threatened to cut the rope and plunge to his death if Liu Zhang did not heed his advice and turn back. But Liu Zhang's mind was made up, and he was not about to be deterred by such theatrics. So he called Wang Lei's bluff, rejected his advice, and scolded him.

Alas, Wang Lei was not bluffing. When he saw that Liu Zhang remained obstinate, he waved the sword in his hand and cut the rope from which he dangled. In the blink of an eye, Wang Lei laid dead on the ground below.

But Liu Zhang was undaunted and pressed on. He led 30,000 troops and headed to the city of Fucheng (2,2) with more than 1,000 carts of provisions and gifts to welcome Liu Bei.

Speaking of Liu Bei, he and his army were advancing toward their rendezvous with Liu Zhang. The cities along the way provided him with provisions just as Liu Zhang had instructed, and Liu Bei's soldiers remained on their best behavior, as one is wont to do when you're told that you would lose

your head if you dared to take a single thing from the civilians. So Liu Bei's journey into the Riverlands was smooth, and everywhere he went, civilians young and old lined the streets to get a glimpse of him and to welcome him by kneeling and burning incense. Liu Bei, in turn, did the usual rounds of handshaking and baby-kissing to get in good with the locals. And yet, Liu Zhang's spidey sense was still not tingling.

While Liu Bei was busy making nice with the civilians, his military strategist Pang Tong was busy plotting with Fa (3) Zheng (4), the envoy that Liu Zhang had sent to invite Liu Bei and one of the collaborators of the inside plot to betray the Riverlands into Liu Bei's hands. They had gotten word from their fellow collaborator Zhang Song (1) that Liu Zhang was going to meet Liu Bei at the city of Fucheng (2,2), and they decided to use that opportunity to make their move, but they also agreed that this plan should be kept hidden from Liu Bei for now.

When they arrived at Fucheng, which was about 120 miles away from Chengdu (2,1), the capital of Yi Province, Liu Zhang was already there and waiting. He immediately sent a welcome party. The two sides' armies set up camp on the River Fu (2), and Liu Bei entered the city to say hi to Liu Zhang. After the ceremonial greetings, they dropped the formality and spoke freely, weeping as they spoke of their brotherly affection for each other. They then feasted before returning to their respective camps.

When Liu Zhang returned to his camp, he told his officials, "Fools like Huang Quan (2) and Wang Lei (4) knew nothing of my kinsman's heart and held baseless suspicions. Judging from our meeting today, my kinsman is indeed a compassionate and honorable man.. With his help, what need have I to fear Cao Cao and Zhang Lu (3)? If not for Zhang Song, I would have missed this opportunity."

As he spoke, he removed the green robe he was wearing and told a courier to bring it, along with 500 taels of gold, back to the provincial capital Chengdu and give them to Zhang Song as a reward for coming up with the great idea of inviting Liu Bei into the Riverlands.

While Liu Zhang was gushing about how wonderful Liu Bei was, his staff was a little less enthusiastic. A bunch of military and civil officials cautioned him. "My lord, do not be too happy too soon. Liu Bei is soft on the outside but hard on the inside. We do not yet know his true intentions, so we must be on guard."

"You guys are too suspicious. How can my own kinsman harbor any ill intent?" Liu Zhang said. At that, all his officials had no choice but to sigh and take their leave.

In the other camp, Pang Tong went to see Liu Bei and asked him, "My lord, what do you think of Liu Zhang?"

"I thought he was a truly honest man," Liu Bei answered.

"Liu Zhang may be sincere, but his officials, like Liu Gui (1) and Zhang Ren (4), all looked dissatisfied," Pang Tong cautioned. "Right now, it's not certain how things will go. In my opinion, we should invite Liu Zhang to a feast tomorrow and have a hundred armed men lie in wait. Your lordship can throw your wine cup as the signal, and we can kill Liu Zhang right there, then storm into Chengdu. That way, we can succeed without breaking a sweat."

Now, this was a pretty vicious scheme, the kind of thing that villains in this novel would resort to, and not surprisingly, Liu Bei wanted no part of it.

"Liu Zhang is my kinsman and has treated me with sincerity. Besides, I have just arrived in the region of Shu (3) and my reputation here is not yet established. If I do this, neither heaven nor the people would tolerate it. Sir, only tyrants would resort to such a scheme."

“This isn’t my idea,” Pang Tong said, passing the buck. “Fa Zheng received a letter from Zhang Song telling him to get this done sooner than later.”

As they were speaking, Fa Zheng stepped into the tent and added, “I’m not doing this for myself, but to be in accordance with heaven’s will.”

“Liu Zhang is my kinsman; I cannot bear to kill him,” Liu Bei said.

“My lord, you’re mistaken,” Fa Zheng pressed. “If you do not do this, then Zhang Lu, whose mother died by Liu Zhang’s hands, would surely attack Yi (4) Province. Your lordship has made a long and difficult journey to get here. If you press on, you will succeed. No good can come of falling back. If you remain indecisive and drag this out, the whole plan will go bust. If the plot leaks out, you’d fall victim to someone else’s scheming. You have both the will of heaven and the people on your side, and the element of surprise. Why not take advantage of this to establish your enterprise. That is the best course of action.”

And so it went for a while, with Fa Zheng and Pang Tong both trying their darndest to convince Liu Bei to just go ahead and kill Liu Zhang now, but Liu Bei steadfastly refused.

The two advisers, however, weren’t about to let the matter drop so easily. In fact, they decided to take matters into their own hands. The next day, Liu Bei re-entered the city to resume feasting with Liu Zhang. The two were pouring their hearts out to each other and hitting it off. After the banquet had gone on for a while, Pang Tong secretly said to Fa Zhang, “With things as they are, it’s no longer up to our lord.”

So, taking the initiative, they told the general Wei (4) Yan (2) to go into the banquet hall to perform a sword dance. When the opportunity presented itself, Wei Yan was to lodge his sword in Liu Zhang’s chest.

So Wei Yan stepped into the hall with sword in hand and said, “Hey, we have no entertainment for this banquet. Let me do a little dance with this incredibly sharp and pointy weapon I have in my hand.” And if that wasn’t obvious enough to just about everyone present, Pang Tong also called in a squad of armed guards and stationed them just outside the hall. I guess these were the backup dancers?

Basically everyone at the banquet could see where this was headed. So one of Liu Zhang’s officers, Zhang (1) Ren (4), pulled out his sword and said, “It takes two to do a sword dance. Allow me to accompany General Wei (4).”

And now there were two guys waving pointy objects in a confined space, one trying to make a move on Liu Zhang while the other trying to foil his every attempt. After this tango went on for a bit, Wei Yan flashed a look to Liu Bei’s adopted son, Liu Feng (1). Liu Feng caught his meaning and grabbed his sword to join in the fun. But then three other officers from Liu Zhang’s entourage pulled out their swords and said, “Hey, we want in. Let’s all have a good laugh. Haha.”

Things were just about to boil over when Liu Bei grabbed a sword from one of his attendants, stood up, and declared, “My kinsman and I are celebrating our meeting. There is no cause for suspicion. This is not the feast at Hongmen (2,2); what need do we have for sword dances? Anyone who doesn’t drop his sword right now will be executed!”

And in case you need an explanation for the reference to the feast at Hongmen, check episode 27.

Meanwhile, Liu Zhang chimed in and said, “I am meeting with my kinsman. There’s no need to carry arms.”

So they ordered everyone in attendance to remove their weapons, and all the eager sword dancers went away grumbling. Liu Bei then called all the officers present up to his table and offered them a toast.

“My kinsman and I are of the same flesh and blood,” he told them. “We are working together on a grand enterprise. There is no ulterior motive. Please do not harbor any suspicions.”

After the officers bowed and said thanks for the drink, Liu Zhang took Liu Bei’s hand and wept.

“Brother, I will never forget your kindness!” He said. The two of them then drank until nightfall before taking leave of each other.

Once Liu Bei returned to camp, he immediately admonished Pang Tong.

“Sir, why did you all try to saddle me with such a dishonorable crime?! Never do that again!”

Thus scolded, Pang Tong sighed and took his leave.

Meanwhile, in Liu Zhang’s camp, his staff was telling him, hey look what happened today. Why don’t you go back to Chengdu immediately to stay out of harm’s way?

Liu Zhang, however, being the dimwit that he was, refused. “My brother Liu Bei is not like other people.”

His officers, probably burying their face in their hands in frustration, said, “Liu Bei may not harbor any ill intent, but his followers all want to gobble up the Riverlands to enrich themselves.”

“Do not try to sow discord between me and brother,” Liu Zhang told them, and so he refused to listen to his staff and instead continued to feast with Liu Bei every day.

Soon, word came that Zhang Lu (3), the guy ruling the territory to the north of the Riverlands, was preparing his troops for an attack on Jiameng (1,2) Pass. Liu Zhang asked Liu Bei to go repel this invasion. Liu Bei agreed without hesitation and set out with his troops that very day.

Once Liu Bei was gone, Liu Zhang’s men all tried to convince their master that he should order his generals to be on red alert at all the key strategic locations, just in case Liu Bei tried anything. Liu Zhang initially refused, but eventually, after much prodding, he relented and told the commanders

Yang (2) Huai (2) and Gao (1) Pei (4) to hold down the Fu (2) River Pass. Liu Zhang then returned to Chengdu. Meanwhile, Liu Bei arrived at Jiameng (1,2) Pass and immediately set himself to winning over the locals by keeping his army on a tight leash and spreading his kindness generously.

Let's leave Liu Bei to his charm offensive and Liu Zhang in his obstinate obliviousness for now and look back east for a bit. Spies from Dongwu had long since sent word back home that Liu Bei had gone off into the Riverlands. Sun Quan and his advisers gathered to discuss the situation. Somebody suggested that, hey, since Liu Bei is way off in the west, this was the perfect time strike. Send an army to cut off his return route, and then mobilize all the rest of Dongwu's forces and attack Jing Province.

Sun Quan was feeling this suggestion until suddenly, someone stormed in from behind the screen and shouted, "Whoever suggested this plan ought to be executed! Are you trying to kill my daughter?!"

This caught everyone off guard. It was Madame Wu, Sun Quan's mother, or stepmother, or aunt, or sister to his mother who also married his father, whatever.

"My daughter is my only child!" Madame Wu said angrily. "She is married to Liu Bei. If you attack him now, what will happen to her?!"

She then turned her ire toward Sun Quan. "You inherited your father and brother's enterprise and became the leader of 81 districts without lifting a finger. How can you still be so greedy as to forget about your family for some petty gain?!"

As we've seen before, Sun Quan does not know how to handle an angry Madame Wu, so all he could do was mutter agreement. "Honorable mother, I would never dare to go against your teaching."

He then told his advisers to break it up. Only then did Madame Wu leave, seething all the while.

After everyone had gone, Sun Quan was thinking how lamentable it would be to miss out on this golden opportunity to get Jing Province back. Just then, his senior adviser Zhang Zhao (1) came in and asked, “My lord, what’s bothering you?”

“What happened just now,” Sun Quan answered. I mean, dude, what else did you think it would be?

“That’s an easy problem to solve,” Zhang Zhao said. “Send someone you trust, along with 500 soldiers, and have them slip into Jing Province to bring a secret letter to the princess, telling her that her mother is critically ill and wants to see her. Have them escort the princess back to Dongwu immediately. Also, Liu Bei has just one son. Have her bring him along, too. Then Liu Bei will no doubt trade Jing Province for his son. Even if he refuses, there would be nothing to stop us from going to war then.”

“Great idea!” Sun Quan exclaimed. “I have a man named Zhou (1) Shan (4) who is very brave. He has followed my brother everywhere since he was young. I can send him.”

“Don’t let word of this leak out,” Zhang Zhao cautioned. “Send him off right now.”

So Sun Quan secretly dispatched Zhou Shan (4) and 500 soldiers. They disguised themselves as merchants and set sail on five ships, armed with an official letter, a cover story, and a bunch of weapons inside their ships. Once they arrived on the banks of Jing Province, they pulled up on shore and Zhou Shan (4) went inside the city alone. He went straight to Lady Sun’s residence and asked for an audience.

Lady Sun summoned him, and Zhou Shan gave her the letter. As soon as she read that her mother was on her deathbed, Lady Sun began to weep. Zhou Shan then told her, “The queen mother is critically ill and all she thinks about day and night is your ladyship. If you delay, you might not get to see her one last time. She has asked that you bring Lord Liu’s son, Ah (1) Dou (3), with you so she can see you both.”

“But the imperial uncle is off on a distant campaign,” Lady Sun said. “If I want to return home, I must first let Master Zhuge know before I can depart.”

“But what if he says that he must first let the imperial uncle know and seek his instruction before allowing you to leave?”

“But if I leave without a word, we might be stopped.”

“I have ships waiting on the river. All you need to do is get in your carriage and leave the city.”

Lady Sun, in a panic over her gravely ill mother, saw no other options. So she took the 7-year-old Ah Dou and got into her carriage. Accompanied by an armed entourage of about 30, they left the city and headed to the ships. By the time the servants in her residence got wise to what happened, she was already boarding the ship.

Everything was going off splendidly for Zhou Shan, and he was just about to disembark when suddenly, someone called out from the shore: “Hold on! Let me say goodbye to her ladyship first!”

Zhou Shan looked and saw that it was the general Zhao Yun. So Zhao Yun was out on patrol while this whole thing was going down. When he returned and learned what happened, he was stunned. Accompanied by just a few riders, he raced off toward the river bank and got there just as the ships were about to set sail.

“Who are you?! How dare you try to stop her ladyship?!” Zhou Shan shouted as he held a long spear in his hand. He then ordered the ships to set sail and for his men to display their weapons to show that it was best not to mess with them. Both the wind and the currents were at their back, so the ships were moving off quickly. Zhao Yun spurred on his horse and followed them along the river bank, shouting, “Her ladyship can go if she wishes, but I must see her to tell her one thing!”

Zhou Shan, though, was not about to stop for anything and the ships kept going. Zhao Yun chased them for a few miles when suddenly, he spotted a little fishing boat on the bank. Zhao Yun grabbed

his spear, abandoned his horse, got on the boat, and had just one follower along to row the boat toward Lady Sun's ships.

As they approached, Zhou Shan ordered his men to fire arrows, but Zhao Yun used his spear to deflect them into the water. Now, Zhao Yun's boat was within a few feet of Lady Sun's ship. The Dongwu soldiers stabbed at him with spears. Zhao Yun pulled out his sword, deflected the enemy's spears, and leaped onto the ship.

This move stunned all the Dongwu soldiers on board, and they fell back. Zhao Yun stormed into the cabin, where he saw Lady Sun holding Ah Dou in her arms.

"How dare you?!" Lady Sun admonished Zhao Yun.

Zhao Yun put away his sword, paid his respects, and asked, "Where is your ladyship going? Why did you not inform Master Zhuge?"

"My mother is gravely ill. There was no time to let him know."

"If your ladyship is going to visit your mother, why are you taking the young master along?"

"He's my son. If I leave him behind at Jing Province, there would be no one to look after him."

"Your ladyship is mistaken. This is my master's only child, and I rescued him from Cao Cao's million-strong army at Changban (2,3) Hill. How can you take him away?"

That remark made Lady Sun angry, and when she was angry, she was very much her mother's daughter.

"You are but a soldier in my husband's service. How dare you meddle in my family affairs?"

"My lady, if you wish to go, then go. But leave the young master."

"You must be trying to rebel, storming onto my ship like this!"

"If you refuse to leave the young master, I dare not let you go, even if it means my life."

Lady Sun was done talking. She ordered her maids to kick Zhao Yun out of the cabin, but Zhao Yun pushed them aside, then stepped forward and pulled Ah Dou from Lady Sun's arms and carried him to the front of the ship. But there was just one slight problem, or well, maybe two or three slight problems. Zhao Yun was alone, surrounded by armed enemy soldiers, and on a ship headed in the wrong direction. He wanted to steer the ship to shore, but there was no one to help him do that. He thought about settling this with his sword, but worried that it would not be proper since Lady Sun was still, after all, his master's wife. So he was stuck.

Lady Sun told her maids to get Ah Dou back, but yeah, good luck with that. Zhao Yun held Ah Dou in one hand and clenched his sword in the other, and nobody dared to go near him. Meanwhile, Zhou Shan was at the back of the ship, manning the rudder. His plan was to just keep going. I mean, once they were on Dongwu's side of the river, what was Zhao Yun going to do then?

Just as things were looking bleak for Zhao Yun, a dozen or so ships appeared downriver, with banners flapping and drums rolling. Zhao Yun thought this was reinforcement from Dongwu at first, but then, he saw a general standing on the lead ship with spear in hand, shouting, "Sister-in-law, leave my nephew before you go!"

This was none other than Zhang Fei. He was also out on patrol, and when he got word of what was happening, he made his way here to cut off the Dongwu ships. When the ships got close enough, Zhang Fei also leaped onto Lady Sun's ship with sword in hand. He was greeted by a saber-wielding Zhou Shan, but Zhang Fei was like, puh-leeze. With one swing of his sword, he sliced off Zhou Shan's head and tossed it at Lady Sun's feet.

"Brother-in-law, this is an outrage!" a stunned Lady Sun said.

"Instead of thinking about my brother first, you are returning home without letting anyone know. THAT is the true outrage!" Zhang Fei shot back.

“My mother is gravely ill. If I wait until I get word back from your brother, it would be too late. If you refuse to let me go, then I would rather throw myself into the river and die!”

Faced with this ultimatum from a woman with the temperament to make good on her threat, Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun decided that, since she’s technically their mistress, it would not do for them to force her to kill herself. So they contented themselves with taking Ah Dou home.

“Sister-in-law,” Zhang Fei said, “my brother is the imperial uncle. He’s not exactly a disgrace to you. After we part ways today, I hope you will remember his kindness and honor and return soon.”

With that, Zhang Fei scooped up Ah Dou in his arms and returned to his ship with Zhao Yun, allowing Lady Sun and the Dongwu ships to go on their way. Great songs were sung of Zhao Yun and Zhang Fei’s deeds on this day, including this poem about Zhao Yun:

In Dangyang (1,2) he once saved the little heir;
Now upon the river himself did he hurl.
The southern sailors felt their spirits die
Zhao Yun’s prowess has no match in this world.

And Zhang Fei got his own poem, too:

Once at Changban (2,3) Bridge at fury’s pitch,
The tiger growled and Cao Cao’s men gave ground.
Today he stood beside his menaced prince
And made a name for evermore renowned.

Their young prince rescued and their own reputations even more greatly enhanced, Zhao Yun and Zhang Fei headed home in high spirits. They had not gone far when they were greeted by a large fleet led by Zhuge Liang. Hey, there you are, Sleeping Dragon. Thanks for showing up to the party ... eventually. In any case, everyone returned home happy, and Zhuge Liang wrote to Liu Bei to tell him that, oh hey by the way, your wife went home, tried to abduct your son, we killed an envoy from Dongwu, which I'm sure will have no consequences whatsoever. So how's everything on your end?

Speaking of those consequences, when Lady Sun returned to Dongwu and told Sun Quan that Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun stopped her mid-river and killed Zhou Shan, he was incensed.

"Now that my sister has returned, there's no longer any familial ties between us and them! How can I allow Zhou Shan's death to go unavenged?!"

So he immediately summoned his staff to discuss attacking Jing Province. I can only imagine how awkward his sister must have felt, what with her brother about to wage war on her husband and, oh yeah, your mom's not really dying. We were just kidding. Sorry about that. Now excuse us while we plot your husband's demise. But hey, she's a woman, so her feelings don't really count in this novel, and this is pretty much the last time we'll hear of her. So whatever.

In any case, Sun Quan and his staff were talking about invading Jing Province when two pieces of news arrived that put those invasion plans on the backburner. To see what news he received, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!