

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 77.

Last time, Sun Quan had used a little dirty trick to bring his sister, who was married to Liu Bei, back from Jing Province so that he could launch a war to take the province without putting her life at risk and, more critically, drawing their mother's ire. But just as he was preparing for war, he received two pieces of bad news.

First, he got word that Zhang (1) Hong (2), a long-time adviser who had retired due to illness, had died. As he lay dying, Zhang Hong wrote one last letter to Sun Quan, in which he advised Sun Quan to relocate his seat of power to Moling (4,2), where, Zhang Hong said, the mountains had an imperial air. Zhang Hong told Sun Quan that he should move there at once and make this auspicious place the base of his empire.

Upon reading this letter, Sun Quan wept loudly in front of his officials and said, "How can I dare to not follow Zhang Hong's advice?" And so he ordered a city of stone to be built at Moling (4,2).

In the meantime, he had to deal with a second piece of bad news. It was no biggie. Just a report that Cao Cao was marching south with, oh, 400,000 troops to avenge the defeat at Red Cliff. As Sun Quan discussed this matter with his staff, the general Lü (3) Meng (2) told him they needed to build ramparts at the mouth of the Ruxu (2,1) River to hold off Cao Cao's troops. But all the other generals were like, "Why would you need ramparts? We can just attack from shore or retreat into our boats."

To that, Lü Meng answered, "The fortunes of war are never constant; victory is never assured. If we have a sudden run-in with the enemy, with infantry and cavalry jostling together, we might not make it back to the water and our boats."

Sun Quan was quite impressed by Lü Meng's foresight and ordered several tens of thousands of men to build the ramparts.

Meanwhile in the capital Xuchang (3,1), Cao Cao's power and fortune were growing by the day, and his men were suggesting that maybe he was due for a promotion. But when you are already prime minister, what do you get promoted to? Well, one of his civil officials, Dong (3) Zhao (1), went to court and said to the emperor:

"No official in history has matched the prime minister's merits, not even the Duke of Zhou or the great statesman Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2). Over the course of 30 years, he has overcome all difficulties and wiped out the wicked to protect the people and restore the house of Han. How can he be treated the same as the likes of the other officials? He should receive the title of the Duke of Wei (4) and receive the nine dignities.

So what are the nine dignities? They are nine items that were considered the highest honors an emperor could bestow upon an official. The nine things are:

1. Gilded chariots drawn by eight horses.
2. Court dresses, which consisted of dragon-embroidered robes, headdresses, and shoes. And if you didn't know, the dragon is kind of a symbol for the emperor, so to be allowed to wear robes with dragons embroidered on them carries some rather significant implications.
3. Hanging chimes and music fit for an emperor.
4. Red doors in your house, which were a symbol of fortune.
5. An inner staircase that offers protection for every step
6. 300 Imperial Tiger Guards to secure your palace gates
7. A set of ceremonial axes that serve as emblems of command
8. A red-lacquered bow with a hundred red striped arrows, and 10 black bows with 1,000 black arrows.
9. Jade tablets and libation cups for ritual offerings.

Now each of these items was no doubt very nice and probably worth a pretty penny. But their importance lay in their symbolic value, since they are usually items reserved for the emperor's personal use. So when an emperor bestows these nine dignities upon a servant, well, I think you can guess what is implied.

But not so fast, someone said. It was Xun (2) Yu (4), whom, if you'd remember from the earlier episodes, was one of Cao Cao's top strategists and had been with him from the beginning of his rise. But now, Xun Yu spoke up against the suggestion of making Cao Cao the Duke of Wei.

"This must not be!" he said. "His excellency raised an army of justice to support the house of Han. So he must stick to his loyalty and integrity by following humble and retiring ways. The noble man shows his love for his fellow man through virtue, not this."

When Cao Cao heard this, he was mighty peeved, and his face changed color. But Dong Zhao (1) refuted Xun Yu and said, "We must not disappoint everyone else because of one man's resistance." So he submitted a memorial to the emperor requesting that Cao Cao be named the Duke of Wei and be granted the nine dignities.

To this, Xun Yu sighed and lamented, "I never thought I'd see such a day."

This further aggravated Cao Cao, who now held a deep grudge against Xun Yu for what he perceived as an act of betrayal by one of his longtime advisers.

In the 10th month of the year 212, Cao Cao mobilized his troops and marched South. He ordered Xun Yu to accompany him. Well, Xun Yu knew that Cao Cao was probably thinking about killing him, so he begged off the assignment on account of illness and stayed behind.

But when Cao Cao has you in his crosshairs, it's going to take more than that to slip away. One day, Xun Yu received a courier from Cao Cao, who delivered a box of food. On the box was Cao Cao's

handwritten inscription. Oh, how nice, Cao Cao got me Chinese takeout. Hey wait a second, I think there's a mistake. This box is empty ... oh ... I see.

Having served Cao Cao for so many years, Xun Yu understood his master's meaning perfectly. He proceeded to ingest poison and took his own life at the age of 50. Later, a poet lamented him thus:

A splendid talent, admired of all men!
His folly lay in serving Cao Cao's power.
Likened him not to Zhang Liang,
As Xun Yu was ashamed to face his emperor.

And if you remember from supplemental episode 5, legendary advisers, Zhang Liang was someone who helped found the Han dynasty and is regarded as one of the greatest advisers and statesmen in Chinese history. Xun Yu, the poet suggested, may have had similar talent, but his blunder was serving Cao Cao, i.e., the wrong master. So once again, we see the novel hammering home how important it is for men of talent to find the "right" master.

After Xun Yu died, his son reported the news to Cao Cao. And now, Cao Cao regretted what he had done, and he ordered an elaborate funeral for his longtime adviser and gave him a posthumous title of nobility. I'm sure Xun Yu's family appreciated his kindness.

Meanwhile, Cao Cao had a war to tend to. When his army arrived at the Ruxu (2,1) River, he ordered the general Cao Hong to take 30,000 armored cavalry to scout out the shoreline. They reported back that from a distance, they saw countless banners along the river bank and no way to tell where the enemy troops were massed.

Cao Cao was concerned by this report, so he personally directed his army forward and lined up his formation at the mouth of the river. Cao Cao himself led about 100 people to the top of a hill to take a look at the enemy. In the distance, they could see the Dongwu fleet lined up in a highly organized formation, with bright banners and shimmering weapons. In the flagship in the middle of the fleet, seated under a blue-green umbrella was none other than Sun Quan, flanked by his civil and military officials.

Impressed by what he saw, Cao Cao pointed with his whip and said, "If you're going to have a son, you should have one like Sun Quan! Not like Liu Biao's sons, who were nothing more than pigs and pups."

Just then, a signal sounded and from the south a fleet of ships swiftly approached, while from the barriers on the river emerged another squad. These forces threw Cao Cao's troops into disarray and they fell back uncontrollably. Just then, about a thousand riders arrived at the hillside. The man at the head of this force had jade-green eyes and a purplish beard. This was none other than Sun Quan, personally leading a force to attack Cao Cao.

Cao Cao was taken aback by this move, and by the time he turned around and fled, two of Dongwu's top generals, Han (2) Dang (1) and Zhou (1) Tai (4), had caught up. Fortunately for Cao Cao, he always bring Mad Tiger, aka Xu Chu with him. Xu Chu rode forward and kept the two enemy generals busy, allowing Cao Cao to escape back to camp. Xu Chu himself also fell back after about 30 bouts.

Once his defeated troops returned to camp, Cao Cao rewarded Xu Chu handsomely and chewed out everyone else, telling them that they would all lose their heads if they fled from the field of battle again.

Around 9 o'clock that night, loud cries suddenly arose from outside Cao Cao's camp. Cao Cao hurriedly mounted his horse to lead a response, but by now, fire had broken out all around his camp, and the Dongwu troops had stormed in. The two sides clashed until dawn, at which point Cao Cao's army was driven back about 20 miles before they could regroup and set up camp again.

After this latest setback, Cao Cao was feeling mighty concerned, and he tried to distract himself by reading books on military strategies. One of his advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), said to him, "Your excellency is well-versed in the art of war, so you must understand that speed is of the essence. This campaign took too long to get under way, allowing Sun Quan time to prepare and barricade the mouth of the river, making it difficult to attack. Why don't we return to the capital for now and make other plans?"

To this, Cao Cao gave no answer. After Cheng Yu left, Cao Cao lied down for a break. Suddenly, he heard the roar of the tides, sounding like the gallop of 10,000 unrestrained horses. Cao Cao quickly stepped outside, where he saw a red sun surging out of the river, radiating blinding light as it emerged. Cao Cao then looked up to the heavens, where, strangely enough, he saw two other suns glowing. Suddenly, the sun that was emerging from the river flew high up into the air and then crashed into the hills in front of Cao Cao's camp, and the impact sounded like thunder.

In the next moment, Cao Cao startled awake. It had all been a dream. It was by now noon, and Cao Cao decided to take about 50 men with him and ride out to the hills in front of his camp where the sun in his dream had crashed. While he was checking out the area, he noticed a squad of soldiers on the hills. The man at the front donned a golden helmet and a suit of gold-plated armor. It was none other than Sun Quan.

Sun Quan soon noticed Cao Cao as well, but he did not show any sign of alarm. Instead, Sun Quan reined in his horse and stood on the top of the hill, pointed his whip at Cao Cao, and said, "Your

excellency sits securely in the heartlands and enjoy the utmost wealth and prosperity. Why are you so greedy that you must encroach on the Southlands again?"

To this, Cao Cao answered, "You are a servant of the court, yet you show no respect to the throne. I have been tasked by his majesty to come wage war on you!"

"Have you no shame?" Sun Quan shot back with a laugh. "Who in the realm does not know that you hold the emperor hostage and control the lords through him? I am not disrespectful toward the House of Han. In fact, I am preparing to wage war on you to set the country to rights."

This response angered Cao Cao, and he ordered his officers to charge up the hill to capture Sun Quan, but you didn't think Sun Quan would just stand around and talk trash to Cao Cao without being prepared, did you? At the sound of a drum, two squads of Dongwu troops emerged from behind the hill, led by four generals. Three thousand Dongwu archers rained down arrows on Cao Cao and company, and they had no choice but to fall back. Dongwu's troops then gave chase until Cao Cao's elite Tiger Guards, led by the general Xu Chu, came out to rescue him. The Dongwu army gave up the chase at that point, and its victory songs echoed across the hills as it returned to base.

When Cao Cao returned to his camp after yet another defeat, he thought to himself, "Sun Quan is no ordinary man. The omen of the red sun means he will definitely become an emperor or king in the future." So, faced with both military setbacks and unfavorable omens, Cao Cao began entertaining thoughts of retreating, but he could not bear the thought of being ridiculed by Dongwu if he did.

So things dragged on like this for another month or so, with both sides claiming its share of victories and defeats in a series of battles. It was now the first month of the year 213, and it was the rainy season in the South. It poured nonstop, and the waterways flooded. So on top of being attacked by enemy forces, Cao Cao's troops now had to contend with camping in a muddy, watery mess.

This added to Cao Cao's consternation. His advisers were no help, as they were split between retreating and holding out a little longer until the warm spring arrived, at which time it would be the perfect weather for hacking your enemy to pieces.

While they were debating their next step, a messenger arrived from Dongwu bearing a letter from Sun Quan. Cao Cao opened the letter, and it said, "Your excellency and I are both servants of the Han. Instead of repaying the country and protecting the civilians, your excellency have rashly resorted to arms and destroyed lives. This is not the act of a benevolent man. Right now, with the spring rain pouring down, you should leave quickly. Otherwise, you will repeat the disaster at Red Cliff. Please think it over for yourself."

When he was done reading the letter, Cao Cao flipped it over, and on the back were written these words: "As long as you live, I cannot be at peace."

When he saw this, Cao Cao laughed and said, "Sun Quan does not disrespect me."

So give it up for Sun Quan for knowing exactly what button to push. With his ego placated, Cao Cao rewarded the messenger handsomely and gave the order to retreat, leaving an officer behind to defend the city of Wancheng (3,2) while he returned to Xuchang with his army. For his part, Sun Quan also led his troops back to Moling (4,2), his new seat of power.

So having repelled Cao Cao's invasion, it was time for Sun Quan to treat himself to a little R&R, right? Wrong. No sooner had he returned home did he begin talking with his staff about -- what else? -- retaking Jing Province. His senior adviser Zhang Zhao had an idea.

"Don't mobilize our forces against Jing Province, for Cao Cao would surely return if we do," Zhang Zhao said. "Instead, write two letters. Send one of them to Liu Zhang, telling him that Liu Bei offered to join forces with us to take the Riverlands. This would make Liu Zhang suspicious of Liu Bei. Send the

other letter to Zhang (1) Lu (3), the ruler of Hanzhong (4,1), and ask him to encroach on Jing Province. That will divide Liu Bei's forces. Then we can march on Jing Province, and victory will be ours."

Sun Quan agreed with this course of action and sent off the two letters.

Meanwhile in the Riverlands, Liu Bei had been camped out for a while at Jiameng (1,2) Pass, where he was keeping watch in case Zhang Lu decided to encroach on Liu Zhang's borders. Of course, that's not all he did. He also took the opportunity to shake hands, kiss babies, and generally make nice with the locals to earn their loyalty.

One day, Liu Bei received a letter from Zhuge Liang bringing him up to speed on two not so insignificant pieces of news: First, your wife, Lady Sun, has gone back home to Dongwu. Boy that sucks, doesn't it? Oh, and second, Cao Cao is at war again with Sun Quan.

When he got this news, Liu Bei said to his strategist Pang Tong, "Between Cao Cao and Sun Quan, whoever wins will no doubt set their sights on Jing Province. What should we do?"

"My lord, have no worries," Pang Tong said. "With Zhuge Liang there, I don't think Dongwu would dare to encroach on Jing Province. In the meantime, you can write to Liu Zhang and tell him, 'Cao Cao is attacking Sun Quan, and Sun Quan has asked for my help. He and I are neighbors and close allies, so I have no choice but to help him. Zhang Lu is content to stay within his own borders, so he will not dare to encroach on the Riverlands. I intend to lead my troops back to Jing Province to join forces with Sun Quan to defeat Cao Cao, but my army lacks provisions. I hope that on account of our kinship, you will immediately dispatch 30 or 40,000 crack troops, along with 100,000 bushels of grain to help me. Please do not delay.' Now, if Liu Zhang does send us the men and provisions, then we can make other plans."

Liu Bei did as Pang Tong suggested, and sent a messenger to Chengdu (2,1), the capital of Yi Province. To get to Chengdu, the messenger first had to go through Fu (2) River Pass. The pass was currently defended by two of Liu Zhang's officers, Yang (2) Huai (2) and Gao (1) Pei (4). Yang (2) Huai

(2) decided to accompany the messenger to Chengdu. Once there, the messenger delivered his letter, and Liu Zhang read it and asked Yang Huai why he had come as well.

“I have come specifically because of this letter,” Yang Huai answered. “Since he entered the Riverlands, Liu Bei has been spreading his benevolence around and earning the loyalty of the people. This does not bode well. And now he’s asking you for troops and provisions. You must not grant this request; otherwise it would be like adding wood to fire.”

“But Liu Bei is my kinsman. How can I not help him?” Liu Zhang said.

Now, one of his officers, Liu Ba (1) -- because there just aren’t enough guys named Liu in our story -- stepped forward and said, “Li Bei is a crafty hero. If we allow him to stay in Shu long-term, it would be like inviting a tiger into your house. If we send him troops and provisions, it would be like giving a tiger wings.”

After much deliberation, Liu Zhang, ever indecisive, decided to give a half-hearted answer to Liu Bei. He did send Liu Bei troops and grains, but instead of 40,000 men and 100,000 bushels, he only sent 4,000 old and weak soldiers, along with 10,000 bushels of grain. He also ordered Yang Huai and Gao Pei to keep a close watch on Liu Bei from their perch atop Fu (2) River Pass.

When Liu Zhang’s messenger arrived at the pass and delivered his master’s reply, Liu Bei was incensed.

“I’ve been toiling to stave off your enemy, while you hoard all the wealth and give me such stingy rewards! How can I convince my men to risk their lives?”

In a huff, Liu Bei tore the letter to shreds and started cursing out loud. The messenger was so frightened that he fled all the way back to Chengdu. Now, this strikes me as really out of character for Liu Bei. I mean, so far in the novel, when have we ever seen him just lose it like this? And this was a rather inopportune time for him to act this way.

“My lord, you give too much importance to humanity and honor,” Pang Tong said. “And now, your display of anger has put an end to your friendship with Liu Zhang.”

“So now what?” Liu Bei asked.

“I have three plans,” Pang Tong said, “You may pick one as you see fit.

“The best plan is to select your best troops and make a lightning strike on Chengdu. Alternatively, Yang Huai and Gao Pei are famous generals in Shu, and they are defending Fu (2) River Pass with strong armies. If you pretend that you are returning to Jing Province, they would surely come see you off, and you can capture and kill them at that time and take the pass. From there, first take the city of Fucheng (2,2), and then march on Chengdu (2,1). This is the second-best plan. As for the worst plan, you could return to Jing Province at once and make other plans from there. If you remain indecisive and stay here, you will be trapped, with no way out.”

And won't you know it, Liu Bei does the Goldilock thing.

“Hmm. The first option is too hasty, and your third plan too slow,” he said. “The second plan is just right. Let's do that.”

So Liu Bei wrote a letter to Liu Zhang, saying that Cao Cao had sent an army to attack Jing Province and that none of my officers there could stand up to this invasion, so I have to personally go take care of it. I don't have time to say goodbye in person, hence the letter.

Well, I don't know if Liu Zhang bought this line, but someone else did, and it was not someone that Liu Bei had intended to fool. Zhang Song, the man in Liu Zhang's court who had been secretly working to betray the Riverlands into Liu Bei's hands, heard about the letter and thought that Liu Bei was really leaving. So he wrote a letter to convince Liu Bei otherwise. He was just about to find a messenger to deliver it when his older brother came to pay him a visit. Caught off guard, Zhang Song quickly stashed the letter in his sleeve before welcoming his brother.

Over the course of their conversation, Zhang Song's brother noticed how distracted he looked and was a little suspicious. After talking for a while, Zhang Song got up to offer his brother some wine. In the middle of this, unbeknownst to Zhang Song, the letter fell out of his sleeve, and one of his brother's attendees picked it up. After the brothers took their leave of each other, the attendee showed the letter to his master. The letter said:

"Imperial uncle, what I had told you previously was absolutely sincere. Why do you keep delaying? The ancients valued the concept of being "rough in conquest, and smooth in rule." Right now success is within your grasp, so why are you abandoning this and returning to Jing Province? When I heard the news, I could not understand it. When you receive this letter, please attack at once. I will collaborate on the inside. Please do not delay!"

Zhang Song's brother was stunned. "My brother is committing an act that could lead to the execution of our entire family. I have no choice but to turn him in!" he thought to himself.

So he went to see Liu Zhang that night and told him everything. Liu Zhang was, as you can imagine, incensed.

"I have never mistreated Zhang Song. Why does he conspire against me?!"

Liu Zhang immediately gave the order to arrest Zhang Song and his whole family, his brother not included of course, and had them all executed in public. So the man who was trying to trick his master in order to help Liu Bei became the unwitting victim of a trick by Liu Bei intended to fool said master. Does that qualify as irony? Or poetic justice perhaps?

Speaking of poems, a poet later lamented Zhang Song thus:

Though gifted with a memory most rare,

Zhang Song let the crucial secret fall.

Before Liu Bei's kingly cause was crowned,

He fell to bloody swords before his town.

I'm going to interject here and say that I've always found it a bit troubling that Zhang Song was cast in a rather positive light in the novel, considering that what he was doing was really no better than any other villain who betrayed his own master in the novel. I guess when you're committing treason to help the kind and virtuous imperial uncle, you get a free pass? In any case, he is now dead, and let's move on.

So Liu Zhang, now with the veils finally lifted from his eyes, gathered his staff and asked them what he should do about Liu Bei. Huang (2) Quan (2), the official who had been telling him all along that this was going to happen, said, "We must not delay. Strengthen the defenses at all the strategic locations. Do not allow a single person or horse from Jing Province through."

Liu Zhang concurred and quickly sent word to all his officers throughout the province. So now that the cat's out of the bag, what is Liu Bei going to do? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!