

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 79.

Last time, Liu Bei and company got a visit from a strange man named Peng (2) Yang (4), who made himself at home in the residence of Liu Bei's adviser Pang Tong. Peng Yang ate Pang Tong's food, drank Pang Tong's wine, and took a nap on Pang Tong's couch, all without so much as telling his host what his name was. It turns out that Peng Yang was a good friend of Fa Zheng, a Riverlands official who was helping Liu Bei, and he claimed that he was there to save the lives of tens of thousands of Liu Bei's men, but he would only reveal his secret to Liu Bei.

So Fa Zheng quickly alerted Liu Bei, and Liu Bei rushed over to meet this strange man who had apparently come to save his life and the lives of all his troops.

"General, how much troops do you have in your front camps?" Peng Yang asked him.

"Wei Yan and Huang Zhong are garrisoned there," Liu Bei answered.

"How can a commander not understand geography," Peng Yang said. "The front camp hugs the River Fu (2). If the enemy redirects the river's flow, no one would be left alive in your front camp."

This reminder brought Liu Bei to his senses, but Peng Yang was not done yet.

"Judging by the stars, something bad is going to happen. You must be careful," he told Liu Bei. Liu Bei thanked him profusely and treated him as an esteemed guest. He also secretly sent word to Wei Yan and Huang Zhong, warning them to be on the lookout for shenanigans with the river. So the two generals decided that they would take turns keeping watch each day and would alert each other if they saw the enemy coming.

That night, the rain began to pour and the wind was howling. Ling Bao saw this and decided that this was the perfect time to redirect the river. So he set out with his 5,000 men to the riverbank. But just as they were getting ready to do some channel digging, shouts came from the rear of his column.

Recognizing that the enemy was ready for him, Ling Bao quickly ordered his men to retreat. But it was too late. Wei Yan was charging this way with his troops, and the soldiers of the Riverlands trampled each other trying to get away.

Ling Bao was also trying to get away, but he ran smack dab into Wei Yan. After just a few bouts, Wei Yan captured Ling Bao alive. Ling Bao's backup, led by Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2), tried to come to his rescue, but Huang Zhong fought them off.

After the battle, Wei Yan took his prisoner to see Liu Bei. This time, Liu Bei was much less lenient.

"I treated you with honor and benevolence, yet you betrayed me!" Liu Bei admonished Ling Bao. "There is no mercy for you this time!"

And so Ling Bao was dragged outside and beheaded, while Wei Yan and Huang Zhong were rewarded for their good work. Liu Bei then held a banquet to welcome Peng (2) Yang (4).

As they were celebrating, they suddenly received word that Zhuge Liang had sent the official Ma (3) Liang (2) to deliver a message. Liu Bei summoned Ma Liang, who came in and told him, "Everything is ok in Jing Province. There's no need for your lordship to concern yourself with that."

Ma Liang then handed Liu Bei a letter from Zhuge Liang, which said: "I have been observing the night sky, and the pattern of the stars portend ill fortune for a commander near Luocheng (4,2). Please be careful."

After he read the letter, Liu Bei told Ma Liang to return to Jing Province first and that he would soon return as well to discuss this matter with Zhuge Liang. When Pang Tong heard this, he thought to himself, "Zhuge Liang must be worried that if I succeed in conquering the Riverlands, I would get all the credit. So he wrote this letter to interfere."

"My lord," Pang Tong said to Liu Bei, "I have also been observing the night sky and have seen the same stars as Zhuge Liang. But they portend your conquest of the Riverlands, not bad luck. As for the

part about ill fortunes for a commander near Luocheng (4,2) County, that has already come to pass with the execution of the enemy general Ling (2) Bao (1). There is no need for doubts. We should advance at once.”

With Pang Tong pressing him time and again, Liu Bei gave in and led his army out of the city of Fucheng (2,2) and headed to the camps held by his generals Huang Zhong and Wei Yan. Once they got there, Pang Tong consulted with Fa Zheng about the geography ahead. Fa Zheng drew up a map, which Liu Bei then compared to the map that Zhang Song had given him, and the two were an exact match.

“To the north of mountains lies the main road, which goes to the east gate of Luocheng (4,2),” Fa Zheng said. “On the south side of the mountains, there is a back road that goes to the west gate. The army can advance along either road.”

Pang Tong now suggested a two-pronged attack. He asked Liu Bei to lead half of the army and take the main road, while Pang Tong himself was to lead the rest of the troops along the back road, and they would lay siege on the city on two sides.

Liu Bei, however, wasn’t so sure about this plan.

“Horse and bow are second nature to me, and I have traveled my share of narrow back roads,” he said. “Master Pang, why don’t you take the main road and attack the east gate, and let me take the back road and attack the west gate?”

“There will no doubt be enemy troops blocking the main road, and your lordship can lead your troops against them, while I sneak down the back road,” Pang Tong countered.

“No, Master Pang, you must not,” Liu Bei insisted. “Last night, I had a dream that an immortal was striking at my right arm with a metal stave. When I woke up, that arm was feeling sore. It could signify bad luck for this mission.”

“It’s only natural for soldiers on the battlefield to be killed or injured,” Pang Tong said. “Why let a mere dream give you second thoughts?”

“What’s giving me second thoughts is Master Zhuge’s letter,” Liu Bei told him. “Maybe you should stay and defend the Fu (2) River Pass.”

“My lord, you’ve been fooled by Zhuge Liang,” Pang Tong said with a big laugh. “He just doesn’t want me to get all the credit for such a great feat, so he tried to plant seeds of doubt in your mind, and it’s that doubt that gave rise to your dream. What bad luck is there? I am willing to spill my brains and innards across the ground to bear witness to my sincerity. My lord, say no more. Let’s set out tomorrow.”

Well, Pang Tong ended up winning this argument, and so the order was given for the army to set out at first light. Liu Bei was going to take the main road, with Huang Zhong leading his vanguard, while Pang Tong would take the back road, with Wei Yan leading the way.

That morning, as Liu Bei and Pang Tong met up before they departed, Pang Tong’s horse suddenly acted up and threw Pang Tong out of his saddle. Liu Bei quickly dismounted and grabbed a hold of Pang Tong’s horse.

“Master Pang, why do you ride such a wild horse?” Liu Bei asked.

“I have ridden this horse for a long time, and it has never acted like this,” Pang Tong said.

“If it acts up on the battlefield, it could cost you your life,” Liu Bei cautioned. “Here, my white horse is very tame. You can ride it, and everything will be fine. I will take your horse.”

As the two exchanged horses, Pang Tong was moved by Liu Bei’s gesture and told him, “I can die 10,000 times and still would not be able to repay your lordship’s kindness!”

And with that, Pang Tong hopped on Liu Bei’s horse and set off. As he watched Pang Tong depart, Liu Bei could not help but feel unhappy.

Meanwhile, inside Luocheng (4,2), the city that Liu Bei and Pang Tong were going to attack, the Riverlands commanders were trying to figure out what to do after their redirect-the-river-to-drown-Liu-Bei plan blew up and cost the life of another fellow commander.

“There is a back road through the mountains to the east of the city,” the general Zhang Ren (4) said to his comrades. “This is the most critical passage. I will lead an army to defend it. You guys stay and defend the city.”

Just then came word from the scouts that Liu Bei’s army was coming from two directions. Zhang Ren quickly called up 3,000 men and lay in wait along the back road.

Soon, the general Wei Yan came through with the vanguard of the army led by Pang Tong, but Zhang Ren instructed his men to let this part of the enemy army pass through unmolested so as to lure the main body of the army into their ambush. Soon, the troops led by Pang Tong came upon the scene.

“The one on the white horse must be Liu Bei,” one of Zhang Ren’s men said as he pointed at a commander in the enemy ranks. Hearing this, Zhang Ren was delighted and immediately sent out instructions for his troops.

As for Pang Tong, he was passing through when he looked up and noticed how narrow road was sandwiched between high, densely wooded cliffsides. Summer was giving way to autumn at this time, and the trees were still covered with leaves. Pang Tong started to get a little suspicious, so he pulled up his horse and asked, “What is this place?”

One of the former Riverlands soldiers who newly surrendered answered, “This place is called Fallen Phoenix Slope.”

Well, if THAT wasn't a clear bad omen, then I don't what is. Master Young Phoenix certainly thought so, and he ordered the rear of his army to turn back at once. But just then, an explosive sounded from the hillside, and a shower of arrows rained down from the cliffs, all aimed at the rider of the white horse. Poor Pang Tong did not stand a chance. He was immediately riddled with arrows, ending his life at the age of 36.

A later poet lamented Pang Tong's demise thus:

Deep in the blue recesses of the Xian (4) Hills
Lay hid the modest cot of Pang Tong.
But now each village urchin knows his story,
And any village rustic tells his exploits.
He knew the empire must be triply rent,
And far he traveled lonely, to and fro.
None knew that Heaven would cast down his star,
Forbidding his return in glory clad.

Well, when we say that none knew that heaven would cast down his star, apparently kids in the Southeast knew, because shortly before this happened, there was a children's limerick circulating around the region. It goes:

They were two, the Phoenix and the Dragon,
And they would travel far to the west;
But on the road thither

The Phoenix died on the mountain slope.

The wind drives off the rain,

The rain sends off the wind.

It was the day of the Han restoration,

When the west was attained,

But in the attainment

The Dragon was alone.

So, so much for Pang Tong, as he was done in by his own impatience for glory. I should mention that in the 2010 TV series based on the novel, they put a little spin on this. Instead of having Pang Tong press forward in spite of warnings from wise Zhuge Liang, they had Pang Tong making a calculated self-sacrifice so as to give Liu Bei an excuse to formally declare war on Liu Zhang. I'm not sure I buy that though. You figure someone as smart as Pang Tong would have found another way to do that without having to sacrifice himself. Of course, you could also say that maybe Pang Tong would have been too smart to not see this ambush coming, especially with the warnings from Zhuge Liang, but I can more easily buy the blinded-by-hubris-and-ambition angle than I can the throw-my-life-away angle. But anyway, whatever his motivation, Young Phoenix is now Dead Phoenix, so let's move on and see what Liu Bei will do.

But first, Zhang Ren, the Riverlands commander who had ambushed Pang Tong, now turned his attention to the rest of the enemy troops. Pang Tong's army was trapped in this tight space and had nowhere to go. Most of them perished in the assault.

The front of the column, led by Wei Yan, had passed through unmolested, and now, Wei Yan finally got word that there was trouble in the back. He tried to turn around, but they were on such a

narrow mountain path that they could not actually engage in any kind of fighting. Zhang Ren, meanwhile, just blocked off both ends of the path and rained down arrows on Wei Yan and his men.

Wei Yan was about to panic when some of the recently surrendered Riverlands soldiers suggested that they fight their way through to the city of Luocheng (4,2), their original destination, and join up with the main road. Wei Yan had nothing to lose, so he led the way and carved out a path toward the city.

But just then, another squad of Riverlands troops arrived from the front, led by the officers Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2). Meanwhile, Zhang Ren was giving chase from behind. So again, Wei Yan was trapped, this time by enemy soldiers instead of sheer cliffs.

Wei Yan put up a dogged fight, but he just could not break through. Just as things were looking dire, the rear of the enemy troops in front of him fell into disarray, causing their commanders to fall back to see what's going on. Wei Yan took this opportunity to press forward. As he did so, he saw a general riding onto the scene with saber in hand.

"General Wei, I have come to rescue you!" this warrior shouted.

It was the old general Huang Zhong. And now, he and Wei Yan turned the table on the Riverlands troops, sandwiching them instead. The officers Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2) could not withstand this onslaught and they fell back in defeat.

Huang Zhong and Wei Yan now stormed all the way to the foot of the walls at Luocheng (4,2), where Liu (2) Gui (1), one of the commanders holding down the fort inside, charged out with an army to attack them. But then Liu Bei showed up with reinforcements, and they all ran back toward the camps from which they launched this ill-fated mission. The various detachments of Riverlands troops joined up and gave chase, and Liu Bei could not withstand their charge. He ended up abandoning the two camps and ran all the way back toward Fu (2) River Pass.

The enemy was hot on his tail, while Liu Bei and company were exhausted and in no mood to put up a fight. As they approached Fu (2) River Pass, the enemy was closing. Fortunately for Liu Bei, two of his officers, Liu Feng and Guan Ping, showed up just in time with 30,000 fresh troops. These guys did their job, as they not only fended off the pursuing enemy, but also turned the table and gave chase for a few miles, during which time they managed to recover many war horses.

Recovering horses was fine and dandy, but no number of horses was going to make up for losing a phoenix. After Liu Bei managed to scramble to the safety of the pass, he learned of Pang Tong's fate from one of the soldiers that had survived the disaster, and the news made Liu Bei turn to the west, where Pang Tong's body laid, and weep uncontrollably. He ordered a memorial service to be held, during which all the officers joined him in tears. Morale in Liu Bei's army was rock bottom right about now. Something had to be done.

"Now that we have lost Master Pang, Zhang Ren will no doubt come lay siege on this pass," Huang Zhong said to Liu Bei. "What should we do? Why don't we send someone to Jing Province to invite Master Zhuge here to discuss how to conquer the Riverlands."

And sure enough, just then, word came that Zhang Ren was challenging for battle outside the pass. Huang Zhong and Wei Yan wanted to go shut him up, but Liu Bei told them that with momentum squarely NOT on their side, they needed to stick to a defensive posture until Zhuge Liang could get there and tell everyone what to do. So while his troops fortified their defenses, Liu Bei wrote a letter and dispatched the officer Guan Ping to Jing Province right away.

Meanwhile in Jing Province, Zhuge Liang and company were celebrating the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month, which was a special holiday that was kind of the Chinese equivalent of Valentine's Day. At least, its origins were based on a story of literally star-crossed lovers. Maybe I'll tell that story

one day in a supplemental episode. But in any case, it was an occasion to party, and party Zhuge Liang and company did.

While they were feasting and speculating about what's going on out west, they suddenly saw a giant story crash from the western sky, with streaming light scattering all about in its wake. The sight of this astronomical phenomenon alarmed Zhuge Liang. He threw his wine cup to the ground, covered his face, and wept.

"Alas! Woe!" he cried.

When the others asked him what this was all about, Zhuge Liang told them, "I had previously calculated that the pattern of the stars boded ill for the army's director general, and that the location of the ill omen was at Luocheng (4,2). I wrote a letter to our lord and told him to be careful. But now I see the star falling in the west. Pang Tong must be dead!"

And then he went back to crying. "And now my lord has lost an arm!"

Everyone was stunned and in disbelief, but Zhuge Liang told them, "We will hear news in a few days."

And with that, the party came to an unhappy end.

A few days later, Zhuge Liang, Guan Yu, and others were sitting around when Guan Ping arrived from the Riverlands. All the officials was stunned by his arrival, though I'm not sure why, since Zhuge Liang told you guys days ago that this was going to happen. Guan Ping delivered Liu Bei's letter, which read:

"On the seventh day of the seventh month this year, Master Pang was shot and killed by Zhang Ren at Fallen Phoenix Slope."

When he read this, Zhuge Liang began to wail, and everyone else also broke down in tears. Collecting himself, Zhuge Liang said, "Since our lord is stuck at Fu (2) River Pass and can neither advance nor retreat, I have no choice but to go help him."

"But if you go, who will defend Jing Province?" Guan Yu asked. "This province is extremely important and cannot be treated lightly."

"Even though our lord's letter did not specify whom he wants to take over here, I already know his meaning," Zhuge Liang said as he showed Liu Bei's letter to the gathered officials. "In his letter, our lord entrusted Jing Province to me and told me to appoint people as I see fit. That may be so, but in sending Guan Ping as the courier, he has shown that his intent is for General Guan to take over this important responsibility. For the sake of their oath of brotherhood, General Guan will no doubt exert all his powers to defend this place and will not take the responsibility lightly."

And since Zhuge Liang offered, Guan Yu was not about to decline. He accepted right away, and Zhuge Liang held a feast to officially hand over the seal of command. Guan Yu extended both hands to accept the seal. Just as Zhuge Liang was about to place the seal in his hands, though, he said to Guan Yu, "This important task is all on your shoulders now, general."

"Once entrusted with an important task," Guan Yu said, "an honorable man shall persevere until death."

The utterance of the word "death" troubled Zhuge Liang. For a brief second, he entertained the idea of giving someone else the job, but seeing how he was already in the act of handing over the seal to Guan Yu, it just won't do to pull it back now.

"If Cao Cao encroaches, how will you respond?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"With force."

"What if Cao Cao and Sun Quan both encroach?"

"Divide my forces and repel them both."

“If you do that, then Jing Province will be in danger,” Zhuge Liang said. “I have eight words for you. If you remember them, then Jing Province will be safe.”

“Which eight words?”

“North -- repel Cao Cao. South -- conciliate Sun Quan.”

“Master Zhuge, those words are engraved upon my heart,” Guan Yu assured Zhuge Liang.

And with that, Zhuge Liang handed over the seal and ordered a group of civil officials, such as Ma Liang and Mi (2) Zhu (2), as well as military officers, such as Guan Ping, Zhou Cang (1), and Liao (4) Hua (4), to assist Guan Yu in defending the province. He then mobilized an army to head to the Riverlands. He gave Zhang Fei 10,000 crack troops, ordering him to take the main road and conquer his way to Bazhou (1,1), which laid to the west of Luocheng (4,2). He then put Zhao Yun in charge of another detachment of troops and told him to advance on the river. Zhuge Liang then set out behind them, and that they would all rendezvous at Luocheng (4,2).

That day, Zhuge Liang led his army of 15,000 and departed at the same time as Zhang Fei. Before they parted ways, Zhuge Liang told Zhang Fei, “The Riverlands are full of talented men. Do not underestimate the enemy. Keep a tight leash on your troops along the way so that they do not disturb the civilians and lose their support. We must show compassion everywhere we go. Also, do not abuse your soldiers by whipping our scourging them. I hope to see you soon at Luocheng (4,2). Do not be late.”

Zhang Fei was like, “No problem,” and he took off. Along the way, he indeed saw to it that no trouble came to anyone who submitted to his army. It was smooth traveling until he approached Ba (1) County. His spies reported back that the governor of the county, a man named Yan (2) Yan (2), was a famous general of the Shu region. And even though he was an old man, he had not lost any of his

strength, was adept at pulling strong bows and wielding a big saber, and had the might of 10,000 men. Currently, this Yan Yan was fortifying his defenses instead of raising a white flag.

When he received this intel, Zhang Fei ordered his troops to set up camp about three miles from the city and sent a soldier into the city to see Yan Yan to deliver a not so subtle message.

“Go tell that old fool,” Zhang Fei instructed his messenger, “If he hurries up and surrenders, then I will spare his civilians. If he resists, then I will stomp his city flat and leave no one, not even the old and the young!”

And if you were that messenger, you were probably thinking, “Oh crap!” I mean, we have seen that the survival rate for messengers in this novel is atrocious, and Zhang Fei’s message was not going to help those odds.

Meanwhile, let’s check in on Yan Yan, whose name, quite frankly, sounds like a giant panda at the zoo. But the characters of his name are not so cute and cuddly. His family name, which comes first, meant strict, while his given name meant countenance. So you can imagine what kind of man “Strict Countenance” might be.

When Yan Yan heard that Liu Zhang had invited Liu Bei into the Riverlands, he beat his chest and sighed: “This is like calling a tiger to defend you all alone in the hills!” And later, when he got word that Liu Bei had occupied Fu (2) River Pass, Yan Yan was incensed and often thought about leading his army to go attack Liu Bei. The only thing that kept him at bay was the fact that he was defending a key location on an important road.

When he heard Zhang Fei was approaching, Yan Yan was itching for a fight, so he called up the 6,000 men under his command and prepared for combat. But someone suggested that hey, remember how Zhang Fei managed to turn back Cao Cao and his army of a million men with just one roar? This guy is a tough customer. Why don’t we just fortify our defenses instead of going out to

fight. Within a month, he'll run out of provisions and will have to retreat. Besides, Zhang Fei is not exactly known for his patience, and he would take to whipping his own men at the drop of a hat. If we don't fight him, he will no doubt get angry and take it out on his troops. Once his troops' loyalty wavers, that'd be our chance to attack and capture him.

Yan Yan took this suggestion and ordered his troops to defend the city wall. Suddenly, they saw a soldier approaching from Zhang Fei's camp, demanding that they open the gates. Yan Yan let him in, and this guy announced himself as an envoy from Zhang Fei and he proceeded to deliver the entire message from Zhang Fei, exactly as Zhang Fei had conveyed it to him. And oh boy. Strap yourself in.

To see how many seconds this messenger had to live after he delivered his message, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.