

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 80.

Last time, Liu Bei had lost Master Young Phoenix, Pang Tong, to an ambush. So he asked Zhuge Liang to come to the Riverlands to bail him out. Zhuge Liang left Guan Yu in charge of Jing Province and set off. He sent Zhang Fei along the main land route while he himself traveled by water with the general Zhao Yun. Zhang Fei had little trouble from the locals until he reached Ba (1) County, where a stubborn general named Yan Yan dared to stand in his way.

So Zhang Fei sent a messenger to Yan Yan, and this messenger conveyed the following sentiments from Zhang Fei:

“Old fool. If you hurry up and surrender, then I will spare your civilians. If you resist, then I will stomp your city flat and leave no one, not even the old and the young!”

This messenger probably did not make it very far past “Old fool ...” before Yan Yan blew his lid.

“How dare that bastard be so rude! I am not one to submit to traitors!”

But Yan Yan did not shoot the messenger, since beheading was the preferred form of execution during this time. But seriously, Yan Yan actually allowed the messenger to keep his head.

“I will use you to deliver my message back to Zhang Fei!” he said.

But while the messenger got to keep his head, he was not able to keep everything ON his head. Yan Yan ordered his guards to cut off the guy’s ears and nose before letting him go. The poor schmuck scampered back to Zhang Fei in tears and told what happened and what Yan Yan had said. Zhang Fei took it quite well and said, “Hmm, upon further reflection, perhaps I was a little too ...”. No, no, just kidding. Actually, Zhang Fei was fuming so hard that he gnashed his teeth and his eyes grew wide. He immediately donned his armor and led a few hundred riders to the foot of the city walls to demand

battle, but Yan Yan had told his men to just defend the city and ride out the storm, so the city guards simply rained down insults of all stripes on Zhang Fei.

Zhang Fei was in no mood for this, and he charged to the drawbridge several times, but that was when the guards began raining down arrows in addition to insults, and each time Zhang Fei had to fall back. This went on until nightfall, and no one came out to give Zhang Fei the honorable combat he craved, so he had no choice but to go back to camp and stew in his anger.

The next morning, Zhang Fei again led his troops out to challenge for battle. This time, Yan Yan took a shot at him from the defense tower, and the arrow struck Zhang Fei's helmet, which was like pouring gasoline on the fire that was already raging inside him.

"You old bastard!" Zhang Fei yelled as he pointed at Yan Yan. "If I catch you, I will eat your flesh!"

Surprise surprise. This flesh-eating threat did not make Yan Yan any more inclined to come out of the city. So Zhang Fei cursed from morning till night again, but again went back to camp without a taste of battle.

On the third day, Zhang Fei again went to the foot of the city to demand combat, but was met with more of the same. Now, this place was a mountain town and it was surrounded by hills. Zhang Fei rode up to the top of one hill to get a look down inside the city, and he saw that all the soldiers were armed and ready, but they were lying in wait. He also saw civilians going back and forth, transporting rocks and boulders to be hurled down at enemies who try to scale the walls.

Ok, since insults weren't working, Zhang Fei now tried a little trickery. He told his cavalry to dismount, and told his foot soldiers to sit down on the ground like they were all exhausted. The idea was that the troops inside the city would take this as an opportunity to attack, giving Zhang Fei the

fight he wanted. But the guys inside the city were just like, “Yeah right. You don’t actually expect us to fall for that, do you?” So once again, Zhang Fei returned to camp unsatisfied.

Sitting in his tent that night, Zhang Fei had a stroke of genius. He told the bulk of his men to not bother going to challenge for battle anymore. Instead, they were to stay inside the camp for further instructions. He then sent only 50 soldiers to go hurl insults outside the city. The thinking was that Yan Yan would be lured out by the thought of an easy victory over just 50 guys. Once the plan was afoot, Zhang Fei was rubbing his hands, ready for a fight. But Yan Yan was not fooled by this either, and the scheme yielded no results after three days.

Zhang Fei then had another brilliant idea. Instead of sending his men to challenge for battle, he sent them out to forage for firewood and scout out the geography of the area. This went on for a few days, and Yan Yan was a little troubled by all the peace and quiet. I mean, the day just doesn’t feel complete without Zhang Fei’s troops slinging a fireball of yo mama jokes over the wall. So Yan Yan sent out about a dozen of his own soldiers, disguised as Zhang Fei’s men, and had them blend in with Zhang Fei’s foraging parties and slip into the enemy camp to gather intel.

That day, after his men returned to camp, Zhang Fei sat in the main tent, stamped his foot, and cursed, “Yan Yan, you old bastard! You’re pissing me off!”

A few of his men said to him, very loudly, “General, don’t be impatient. We have found a narrow path that would allow us to sneak around Ba (1) County.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?!” Zhang Fei replied, also very loudly.

“Oh, we just discovered it this last couple days,” his men said.

“We must not delay,” Zhang Fei said. “Prepare a meal at 9 o’clock tonight. Then at 11, the entire army will move out under the light of the moon. March with a twig in your mouths and remove the

bells from your horses so that we may sneak through quietly. I will be at the front, leading the way. The rest of you, follow me.”

So the word went out to the entire camp, including the spies from Yan Yan. Naturally, word of this plan soon got back to Yan Yan, who was delighted.

“I knew that fool would not be able to tolerate this,” he said. “[Scoff] If you’re taking the backroad, then your provisions and heavy equipment must be in the rear. I will cut off the rear of your column. We’ll see what you do then. You witless fool. You have fallen for my scheme!”

So Yan Yan ordered his troops to set out at the same time that Zhang Fei did and lie in wait in the woods on the way to the city, where they would deliver a nasty little surprise for Zhang Fei when he came through a particularly narrow part of the path.

Around 11 o’clock that night, Yan Yan spotted Zhang Fei at the head of his troops, heading this way. He let Zhang Fei through because he was waiting to attack the supply train in the back of the column. After the front of the column had moved about a mile away, the back of the column was coming up. Suddenly, the sound of drums rose up from all around, and Yan Yan and his men stormed out to attack the supply train. But just then, a gong sounded from behind them, and a squad of soldiers dashed onto the scene.

“Old scoundrel, don’t run! I’ve been waiting for you!” a man shouted.

Yan Yan turned and was surprised to see a general with a head like a panther, wide and round eyes, a swallow’s jaw, and a tiger’s whiskers, riding a black horse, and wielding a long spear. It was none other than Zhang Fei. But wait, wasn’t he supposed to be at the front of the column, a mile up the road? How did he get back here so quickly?

There was no time for Yan Yan to ponder this. Amid the clanging of the gongs, Zhang Fei and his troops swooped in. Yan Yan was caught off guard. After he and Zhang Fei fought for less than 10

bouts, Zhang Fei gave him an opening, and Yan Yan took the bait as he took a swing at Zhang Fei. Zhang Fei easily dodged the blow and reached out, grabbed Yan Yan by his belt, yanked him off his horse, and threw him to the ground, where Zhang Fei's men swarmed in and tied him up.

So how did Zhang Fei magically teleport onto the scene? Well, it turns out that the Zhang Fei at the front of the column was a fake Zhang Fei, and the one who captured Yan Yan was the real deal, hiding in the back of the column because he anticipated Yan Yan's plan. The entire night attack was just a ruse to lure Yan Yan out from behind his walls, and Yan Yan fell for it, hook, line, and sinker. As a result, not only did Yan Yan get captured, but most of his troops surrendered as well.

Zhang Fei did not stop there. He drove his troops to the city, and they stormed in. Zhang Fei made sure that no civilians were harmed and posted notices to put the residents' minds at ease.

After that was taken care of, it was time to take care of Yan Yan. Zhang Fei plopped himself down in the main hall of the administrative compound, and his executioners hustled a bound Yan Yan into the room. Yan Yan, though beaten, refused to be bowed.

"How dare you resist me instead of surrendering?!" an angry Zhang Fei yelled as he gnashed his teeth.

"You and your dishonorable lot invaded my territory!" a fearless Yan Yan shot back. "You can have a headless general, but never a surrendering one!"

Zhang Fei was incensed and immediately ordered the executions to do their work. But Yan Yan remained undaunted.

"Villain and thief! If you want to cut off my head, then do it already! Why get all pissed off?!" he shouted.

But this display of dignity and courage impressed Zhang Fei, and he quickly did a 180. He dismissed the executioners, personally untied Yan Yan, gave him a new set of clothes, and helped him into the top seat. Zhang Fei then bowed and said, with head lowered,

“I have offended you, please forgive me. Old general, I have long heard that you are a man of honor and courage.”

Well, apparently those few gestures and words of humility were enough to turn a soon-to-be-headless general into a surrendering one, because Yan Yan folded right away and surrendered. In the novel, this is where they put in a couple poems praising Yan Yan and Zhang Fei, but I gotta tell ya, when I read this part of the novel, I just thought, “Wow, that didn’t take much at all!” Yan Yan almost seemed like he was just looking for a reason to surrender, and Zhang Fei gave him a convenient pretext to do so while saving face. You know, “I didn’t want to surrender, but since he asked so nicely and all.”

Now that Yan Yan had switched sides, he quickly offered to make himself useful to his new friends. When Zhang Fei asked how he should proceed, Yan Yan said, “All the checkpoints from here to Luocheng (4,2) are under my jurisdiction, and all the officers are under my command. I have no way to repay your kindness, so I am willing to be the vanguard and convince all those officers to surrender.”

Zhang Fei was grateful for this and appointed Yan Yan to lead the way while he followed. Sure enough, everywhere they went, Yan Yan summoned the officers in charge to come out and told them to surrender. Whenever someone hesitated, Yan Yan would tell them, “Look, even I surrendered, much less you.” And that was apparently enough to convince those men to submit. So maybe the Riverlands weren’t so full of men willing to be headless generals after all.

While Zhang Fei was cruising along, Liu Bei had gotten word from Zhuge Liang telling him that reinforcements were on the way and that he should rendezvous at Luocheng (4,2). So Liu Bei assembled his staff to discuss how he should proceed.

“The enemy commander Zhang Ren comes to challenge for battle everyday, but we have steadfastly refused to go out,” the general Huang Zhong said to Liu Bei. “His troops must be lax and unprepared by now. We should raid their camp tonight. It’d be even better than routing them in daylight.”

Liu Bei consented and instructed Huang Zhong to attack the left side of the enemy camp and Wei Yan to attack the right side, while Liu Bei himself led the assault on the middle. They set out around 9 o’clock that night, and hey, what do you know? Zhang Ren really was caught off guard. Liu Bei’s troops stormed into his camp and set it on fire. The Shu soldiers all fled, and Liu Bei pursued them all the way to Luocheng that night. Zhang Ren and company managed to flee into the city, and Liu Bei set up camp on the main road.

The next day, Liu Bei led his troops to the foot of Luocheng and laid siege to the city, but Zhang Ren refused to come out to fight. The siege went on for three days with no success. On the fourth day, Liu Bei led an army to attack the west gate, while Huang Zhong and Wei Yan attacked the east gate, leaving the south and north gates unattended. There’s a reason for this. Outside the south gate laid mountainous paths, while outside the north gate laid the Fu (2) River, so there were geographical barriers blocking the enemy’s escape route in both of those directions.

Of course, this plan assumed that when the enemy troops came out of the north or south gates, they would keep fleeing north or south, but that’s not quite what Zhang Ren had in mind. After the siege on the fourth day had gone on from morning till dusk, he saw that Liu Bei’s troops at the west

gate were starting to tire. So Zhang Ren ordered his lieutenants Wu (2) Lan (2) and Lei (2) Tong (2) to lead an army out of the north gate. No, not to run away, but to turn toward the east gate and attack Huang Zhong and Wei Yan, who were busy laying siege to that side of the city. Meanwhile, Zhang Ren himself led an army out the south gate and turned toward the west gate to take on Liu Bei. Inside the city, civilians were conscripted into service and hustled onto the walls to beat drums and cheer on the soldiers.

Outside the city, Liu Bei had just instructed his troops to fall back, seeing that the sun was starting to set. But just as they turned around, roars rose up from atop the city walls, and Zhang Ren's troops arrived from the south gate, slashing through Liu Bei's ranks and throwing them into chaos. Huang Zhong and Wei Yan were presently engaged with Zhang Ren's two lieutenants and could not come help, so Liu Bei was on his own. He could not withstand the assault and did what he did best when the going got tough -- he got the heck out of there, spurring his horse down a narrow mountain path. But behind him came Zhang Ren and a number of enemy horsemen, hot on his tail.

Liu Bei furiously whipped his horse in an attempt to escape. Suddenly, he saw another squad of soldiers dashing onto the scene from in front.

"There's an ambush ahead and pursuers behind; heaven must want me dead!" Liu Bei cried out in lament.

But that lament soon turned to joy when he saw the guy leading the army in front of him. It was Zhang Fei, who as it turns out, had been coming down this road with his new buddy Yan Yan when he suddenly saw dust clouds rising in the distance, a telltale sign of battle. So Zhang Fei hurried forward and arrived just in time to cut off Zhang Ren's pursuit of Liu Bei.

Zhang Ren and Zhang Fei fought for about a dozen bouts before Yan Yan showed up with the rest of Zhang Fei's troops. Zhang Ren hurriedly turned back and fled into the city, pulling up the drawbridge behind him.



Zhang Fei now turned around and went to see Liu Bei and asked him, "Master Zhuge was coming on the river. How has he not arrived yet and instead allowed me to get this first merit?"

"The mountain paths are treacherous. And was there no enemy resistance? How did you manage to get here first?" Liu Bei asked him.

"All 45 checkpoints along this road surrendered thanks to the work of the old general Yan Yan," Zhang Fei said. "So I did not have to expend any effort to get here."

He then told Liu Bei about how he captured and then spared Yan Yan, to which Liu Bei was probably like, "Wait, YOU outsmarted someone?" Zhang Fei then introduced Yan Yan to Liu Bei, and Liu Bei thanked the old general.

"If not for you, how could my brother have reached this place?" Liu Bei said as he removed his own gold-plated armor and gave it to Yan Yan, who bowed in gratitude. Liu Bei was just about to hold a banquet to welcome his reinforcements when word came that things were not going well at the east gate.

So, over at the east gate, Liu Bei's generals Huang Zhong and Wei Yan were leading a siege when they were attacked by the Shu officers Wu Lan and Lei Tong. The Shu troops inside the city also charged out to attack. Huang Zhong and Wei Yan's troops could not hold their ground, and the two led their armies toward the east in defeat.

When Zhang Fei heard that there was more fighting to be had, he immediately asked Liu Bei to divide his forces into two and go help his generals. So with Zhang Fei leading the left flank and Liu Bei the right, they raced into the thick of things on the east side of the city.

Wu (2) Yi (4) and Liu Gui (1), the Shu generals leading the counterattack on the east side, quickly scrambled back into the city when they heard the roar of the enemy's reinforcements coming from

behind. The Shu officers Wu Lan and Lei Tong, however, had ventured too far away from the safety of the city in their pursuit of the defeated enemy. Their chase ground to a halt when Liu Bei and Zhang Fei swooped in and cut them off from the city. Huang Zhong and Wei Yan then turned their soldiers around and became the pursuer. Attacked on both sides and figuring that they were no match for the enemy, Wu Lan and Lei Tong valiantly surrendered with all the troops under their command. Liu Bei accepted their surrender and then marched his troops closer to the city.

Inside the city, Zhang Ren was feeling mighty peeved, seeing how he had now lost two more officers in Wu Lan and Lei Tong.

"The situation is dire," his fellow commanders Wu Yi (4) and Liu Gui (1) said. "If we don't seek a decisive battle, we will not be able to repel the enemy. Let's send someone to Chengdu to tell our lord about the situation and at the same time devise a scheme to counter the enemy."

"Tomorrow I will lead an army to seek battle," Zhang Ren said. "I will feign a retreat and head toward the north side of the city. Send a squad of men out of the city to split the enemy's army in two, and victory will be ours."

So it was settled. The next day, Zhang Ren led a few thousand men and made a lot of ruckus as they went out to pick a fight. Zhang Fei, of course, was itching for one, so he hopped on his horse and came out to trade blows with Zhang Ren. After less than 10 bouts, Zhang Ren turned and ran, turning a corner around the city wall. Zhang Fei was hot on his tail when suddenly, a squad of Riverlands troops darted out from inside the city, led by Wu Yi. This surprise attack did the trick, as Zhang Fei was cut off from the bulk of his men. Zhang Ren then turned around and helped surround Zhang Fei.

So the plan was going off without a hitch, until a hitch arrived in the form of an army that swept in from the bank of the river. The general at the head of this force dashed in with spear in hand and

captured Wu Yi alive after just one bout. He then fought off the enemy troops to rescue Zhang Fei. This was none other than Zhao Yun.

“Where is Master Zhuge?” Zhang Fei asked his comrade.

“The director general is already here,” Zhao Yun answered. “I think he must have met with our lord by now.”

So the two of them returned to camp with their prisoner in tow, while Zhang Ren scrambled back inside the city, having lost yet another top commander.

When Zhao Yun and Zhang Fei arrived in camp, Zhuge Liang was already there, and Zhuge Liang expressed his surprise that Zhang Fei had beaten him to the rendezvous. Liu Bei explained how Zhang Fei used his wit -- no seriously, HIS WIT! -- to capture Yan Yan and then his honor to convince the man to surrender, and how that made his trip a lot smoother.

“It is our lord’s great fortune that General Zhang can use strategy!” Zhuge Liang said with delight.

Zhao Yun now brought his prisoner Wu Yi forward to see Liu Bei.

“Will you surrender?” Liu Bei asked.

“Since I have been captured, how can I not surrender?” Wu Yi answered.

Umm, ok. So for all the talk about how there are no surrendering generals in the Riverlands, only headless ones, we see yet another Riverlands general who was all too willing to switch sides. In any case, Liu Bei was delighted and personally untied Wu Yi.

“Who is defending the city?” Zhuge Liang asked the latest turncoat.

“It’s Liu Zhang’s son Liu Xun (2),” Wu Yi said. “He is assisted by Liu Gui and Zhang Ren. Liu Gui is of no concern, but Zhang Ren is from this region and extremely bold. You must not underestimate him.”

“Alright, we will capture Zhang Ren first, and then the city of Luocheng,” Zhuge Liang said.

“What’s the name of the bridge to the east of the city?”

“Golden Goose Bridge,” Wu Yi answered.

Zhuge Liang then personally went to inspect the bridge and took a look along the river. When he returned to camp, he summoned the generals Huang Zhong and Wei Yan.

“A couple miles to the south of Golden Goose Bridge, both sides of the river are covered with reeds and are perfect for an ambush,” he told them. “Wei Yan, you take 1,000 spear-wielders and hide on the left side. Have your men aim for the enemy’s riders. Huang Zhong, you take 1,000 knife-wielders and hide on the right, and concentrate on cutting the enemy’s horses. Once you have scattered the enemy troops, Zhang Ren will no doubt flee toward the back roads in the eastern hills. General Zhang Fei will lead 1,000 men and set an ambush there to capture him.”

He then said to Zhao Yun, “Lead some men and hide on the north side of the bridge. Once I have lured Zhang Ren across, tear the bridge down, but keep your troops on the north side for appearances so that Zhang Ren will not dare to flee back that way but instead head south into our trap.”

While Zhuge Liang was busy laying his trap, Zhang Ren and company got some backup, as Liu Zhang sent a relief force led by a couple generals. Zhang Ren left one of them to help Liu Gui defend the city, while he and the other went out to face the enemy.

On the other side, Zhuge Liang came out with a ragtag bunch of men, crossed over the Golden Goose Bridge, and set up their lines. Zhuge Liang wheeled out to the front on his carriage, wearing a headscarf, holding a feather fan, and flanked by 100-some riders. He pointed at Zhang Ren from a distance and said:

“Even Cao Cao’s army of a million scattered with the wind at the mention of my name. Who do you think you are, that you dare to resist?”

Well, first of all, it seems like Zhuge Liang's retelling of the battle at Red Cliff gets a little more hyperbolic every time he tells it to an enemy. And secondly, when Zhang Ren saw how disorganized Zhuge Liang's troops were, he was far from intimidated.

"Everyone says Zhuge Liang's troop deployments are godlike; but looks like he's all reputation and no substance!" Zhang Ren scoffed.

With a wave of spear, Zhang Ren directed his troops to charge. And I'm going to hit the pause button just as the two sides are about to clash. To find out how this battle turns out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.