

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 82.

Last time, with Liu Bei tightening the noose around his metaphorical neck, Liu Zhang was so desperate for help that he turned to his long-time nemesis Zhang Lu, promising to give him 20 districts if he helped repel Liu Bei's invasion. Zhang Lu agreed and sent his new acquisition, the general Ma Chao, to lead an army to attack Liu Bei.

Meanwhile, Liu Bei was on the move, marching toward the key city of Mianzhu (2,2), which laid between him and his ultimate destination, Liu Zhang's power base at the city of Chengdu. Liu Zhang had sent reinforcements to garrison Mianzhu, and this force was led by two men, Fei (4) Guan (1), who was Liu Zhang's brother-in-law, and Li (3) Yan (2). When they heard that Liu Bei was coming their way, Fei Guan sent Li Yan out to meet the enemy.

Li Yan led 3,000 men out to meet the oncoming force. Once they lined up, Liu Bei's general Huang Zhong rode out and faced Li Yan. They fought for 40-some bouts without either man getting the upperhand. Zhuge Liang now ordered the gong to be sounded to signal retreat.

Huang Zhong returned to his lines and asked, "I was just about to capture Li Yan, why did you call me back?"

"From what I can see, Li Yan cannot be defeated by force," Zhuge Liang said. "Tomorrow we will take him on again. At that time, you will pretend to lose and lure him into following you into a canyon, where we will stage an ambush to defeat him."

So the next day, Li Yan came to meet them again, and this time, Huang Zhong fought him for less than 10 bouts before feigning defeat and leading his men in retreat. Li Yan gave chase and followed them into the nearby canyon. After he entered the canyon, Li Yan suddenly realized he was being played and quickly turned around, but by then, Liu Bei's general Wei Yan had already blocked his path with a squad of soldiers.

Now, Zhuge Liang shouted to Li Yan from atop a hill: "Sir, if you do not surrender, I have strong crossbows set up on both sides, ready to avenge Pang Tong."

Well, this was enough to convince Li Yan to dismount, pull off his armor, and surrender, just like so many of his Riverlands buddies. Not a single one of his soldiers came to any harm. Zhuge Liang brought him to go see Liu Bei, who treated him with great kindness.

"Even though Fei Guan (1) is Liu Zhang's relative, he and I are very close," Li Yan said to Liu Bei. "I will go persuade him to surrender."

So Liu Bei sent Li Yan back to the city, where Li Yan told his friend how wonderful Liu Bei was. And oh yeah, if you don't surrender, there's gonna be hell to pay. Tempted by the carrot and mindful of the big stick, Fei Guan (1) quickly surrendered as well, flinging the gates open for Liu Bei. So now, Liu Bei had a clear path to Chengdu.

But before Liu Bei could make his next move, he got some bad news. An urgent dispatch arrived, telling him that Ma Chao was laying siege to Jiameng (1,2) Pass, the key city on the border between Yi Province and Hanzhong, and that the pass would surely fall without reinforcements. Liu Bei was greatly alarmed and consulted with Zhuge Liang.

"Only Zhang Fei or Zhao Yun would be up to this task," Zhuge Liang said.

"Zhao Yun is still out on campaign, but Brother Zhang is here," Liu Bei said. "We should send him right away."

"Don't say anything yet, my lord," Zhuge Liang told him. "Let me rile him up first."

Just then, Zhang Fei stomped into the room. He had heard the news

"Brother! I'm taking my leave of you to go fight Ma Chao!" he shouted.

Zhuge Liang, however, pretended to not have heard this. Instead, he said to Liu Bei, "Right now, Ma Chao is besieging Jiameng (1,2) Pass, and no one is a match for him. Our only solution is to go bring General Guan from Jing Province."

Well, you can imagine Zhang Fei's reaction. I mean, c'mon man, I'm standing RIGHT HERE!

"Director general," Zhang Fei said, "why do you hold me in such low regard?! I once turned away Cao Cao's army of a million all by myself, so what's a mere Ma Chao to me?!"

"General Zhang, when you turned away Cao Cao, he did not know your true situation," Zhuge Liang said. "But Ma Chao's valor is known throughout the land. In six battles, he beat Cao Cao so badly that Cao Cao had to cut his beard, toss away his cloak, and almost lost his life. Ma Chao is no ordinary foe. There's no guarantee that even General Guan could beat him."

"I'm going!" Zhang Fei insisted. "If I cannot beat Ma Chao, you may punish me according to military law!"

"If you are willing to write a pledge to that effect, then you may serve as the vanguard," Zhuge Liang said. "I'd also ask our lord to go as well. I will stay here at Mianzhu and wait for Zhao Yun to return before making further plans."

Just then, the general Wei Yan popped up and said, "Hey I want to go, too!" Zhuge Liang said, sure, why not? So he sent Wei Yan and 500 men on ahead as advanced scouts, while Zhang Fei followed and Liu Bei brought up the rear.

When Wei Yan reached Jiameng Pass, he ran smack dab into the enemy general Yang (2) Bai (2), who was the supervisor of the army that Ma Chao was leading. After just 10 bouts, Yang Bai turned and fled as he was no match for Wei Yan. Eager to claim the first merit, Wei Yan gave chase. But before him an army spread out. The man at their head was Ma Chao's cousin Ma Dai. Wei Yan thought that THIS was Ma Chao, so he wielded his saber and rode forth to tangle with him. After less

than 10 bouts, Ma Dai turned and fled, and Wei Yan gave chase. But this was a trick, as Ma Dai suddenly turned and fired an arrow that struck Wei Yan in his left arm.

Wounded, Wei Yan turned and fell back, and it was now Ma Dai's turn to give chase. When Ma Dai reached the foot of Jiameng (1,2) Pass, he suddenly heard a roar like thunder as a general galloped out of the pass to cut off his pursuit. This was, of course, Zhang Fei. He had just arrived and learned that the battle had commenced, so he hurried over just in time to rescue Wei Yan.

"Who are you?!" Zhang Fei shouted to Ma Dai. "Tell me your name before we fight!"

"I am Ma Dai of Xiliang."

"Oh, so you're NOT Ma Chao. Go away! You're no match for me. Tell Ma Chao to come here himself. Tell him that Zhang Fei is waiting for him!"

Ma Dai did not take kindly to this slight, so he hoisted his spear to battle Zhang Fei. But after less than 10 bouts, Ma Dai found out that he was indeed no match for Zhang Fei, so he turned and fled, for real this time. Zhang Fei was just about to give chase when Liu Bei, who had just arrived, rode onto the scene and called him back to pass.

"I was worried about your temper, so I rushed over," Liu Bei said. "Even though you've beaten Ma Dai, you should rest tonight and then face Ma Chao tomorrow."

The next morning, as soon as it was light out, the sound of battle drums echoed across the field outside the pass. Ma Chao had arrived.

Liu Bei went up on top of the pass to take a look. Amid the banners, Ma Chao rode out hoisting his spear, wearing a helmet adorned with a lion emblem, a belt decorated with various animal shapes, silver armor, and white battle robe. Impressed with both his get-up and his talent, Liu Bei muttered, "Everyone calls him Ma Chao the Splendid. He really does live up to his name."

Zhang Fei, though, was not impressed and wanted to go out and fight right away. Liu Bei, however, stopped him.

“Don’t fight him right now, not when he’s all amped up.”

So Zhang Fei waited, but Ma Chao did not make the wait easy. He demanded to fight no one except Zhang Fei, and Zhang Fei wished he could swallow Ma Chao right then and there, but Liu Bei kept holding him back.

By the time the afternoon rolled around, Liu Bei spotted signs of fatigue among Ma Chao’s men, so now he ordered 500 riders to accompany Zhang Fei out of the pass to meet the enemy. Finally, Zhang Fei was going to get the fight he’s been itching for.

When he saw Zhang Fei coming, Ma Chao pointed behind him with his spear, and his men backed up the distance of an arrow’s flight to give him some space. On the other side, Zhang Fei’s riders held their ground while more troops filed down from the pass.

Zhang Fei galloped out and yelled, “Do you recognize Zhang Fei?!”

“[Scoff] I hail from a distinguished family. Why would I recognize a country bumpkin?!” Ma Chao scoffed.

Yeah, that was like pouring gasoline on fire. Zhang Fei needed no further encouragement, and the two warriors got down to business as their spears clanged for 100-some bouts without a winner.

“Ma Chao is truly a tiger!” Liu Bei said as he watched the fierce showdown. But at the same time that he was impressed by Ma Chao, he was also worried about Zhang Fei, so he ordered his men to beat the gong and call Zhang Fei back, and both warriors returned to their own lines.

Zhang Fei took a quick breather and headed right back out again, this time sans helmet and donning only a headscarf. Ma Chao was not about to back down, so he came out to answer the challenge again. Liu Bei was now really concerned about Zhang Fei, so he donned his armor and personally came down from the pass to watch the battle.

The single combat raged on for another hundred-some bouts, and both Zhang Fei and Ma Chao fed off each other, growing stronger as the fight continued. It was only when Liu Bei sounded the gong again that they broke off their fight and returned to their lines.

By now, it was getting dark, and Liu Bei tried to convince Zhang Fei to go back to the pass for the night and pick this back up the next day. But Zhang Fei's blood was up, and when Zhang Fei's blood was up, there's no way he was going to leave the field.

"I would rather die than to go back!" he shouted.

"But it's getting dark; we can't fight anymore," Liu Bei tried to reason with him.

"Light a few more torches and prepare for a night battle!" Zhang Fei said.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Ma Chao switched to a fresh horse and rode back out to the front lines and shouted, "Zhang Fei, do you dare to have a night battle with me?!"

Zhang Fei promptly swapped horses with Liu Bei and came back out as well.

"I swear I will not return to the pass without capturing you," he yelled back at Ma Chao.

And so it was on. The two armies cheered and hollered while holding up thousands of torches, lighting up the night sky as if it were day. Under the glow of the flames, Ma Chao and Zhang Fei fought on.

But after just 20-some bouts this time, Ma Chao turned and ran.

"Don't run!" Zhang Fei yelled as he gave chase.

But Ma Chao wasn't really fleeing. This was a trick. As Zhang Fei closed in, Ma Chao discreetly took out a mallet, and when Zhang Fei got close, he quickly turned around and hurled it at Zhang Fei's face. Zhang Fei, though, was on the lookout for something along those lines, so he was prepared. When the mallet flew toward him, he leaned to one side, and the mallet whistled past his ear.

But even though he dodged the mallet, Zhang Fei turned around and ran. Now it was Ma Chao's turn to give chase. But as Ma Chao drew near, Zhang Fei took out his bow and arrow, turned, and fired a shot at Ma Chao. Ma Chao quickly dodged this sneak attack, and both warriors now returned to their respective lines.

At this point, Liu Bei stepped in to put an end to the fighting for the day.

"I treat people with honor and compassion, never deception," he shouted to Ma Chao. "General Ma, lead your army back and get some rest. I will not use this opportunity to attack you."

When he heard this, Ma Chao ordered his troops to return to camp while he personally brought up the rear, just in case Liu Bei wasn't quite as honorable as he gave himself credit for. But Liu Bei was good to his word and led his own troops back to the pass. Thus ended a daylong battle that saw Zhang Fei and Ma Chao tangle for more than 220 bouts without either gaining an advantage.

The next morning, Zhang Fei was for another 220 bouts, but just then came word that Zhuge Liang had arrived. When he saw Liu Bei, Zhuge Liang said, "I know that Ma Chao is a tiger warrior. If he and General Zhang keep fighting, one of them would surely come to harm. So I left Zhao Yun and Huang Zhong to defend Mianzhu and rushed over here. I'll use a little scheme to make Ma Chao surrender to your lordship."

"I am indeed very fond of Ma Chao for his valor," Liu Bei said. "So how do we get him?"

"I have heard that Zhang Lu intends to make himself the King of Hanning (4,2)," Zhuge Liang said. "His adviser Yang (2) Song (1) loves to get bribes. Your lordship can send a messenger to take the back roads into the region of Hanzhong and bribe Yang Song. Then send a letter to Zhang Lu and say, 'I am fighting Liu Zhang for the Riverlands to help you avenge your family. Do not listen to those who try to sow discord among us. Once I succeed, I will guarantee that you will get to be King of Hanning.'

“Then, tell Zhang Lu to recall Ma Chao. When that order to retreat comes, then we can concoct a scheme to make Ma Chao surrender to us.”

Liu Bei was delighted with this plan and quickly sent his trusted adviser Sun Qian (2) to Hanzhong with a letter and a sizable bribe. Sun Qian first went to see Yang Song, told him why he was there, and gave him the bribe. This did the trick, and Yang Song, who, as we said in the last episode, was no fan of Ma Chao’s anyway, brought Sun Qian to see Zhang Lu.

“But Lord Liu’s rank is only the General of the Left,” Zhang Lu said. “How can he guarantee that I would get to be King of Hanning?”

“He is the imperial uncle,” Yang Song told his master. “There’s no one better to present this to the emperor.”

Thus convinced, Zhang Lu immediately sent an envoy to recall Ma Chao’s army, while Sun Qian stayed with Yang Song and waited for word. Within a day, the messenger returned and said that Ma Chao refused to return before he accomplished his goal. This did not please Zhang Lu, so he sent another messenger, and then another. But both times, he was met with a no from Ma Chao.

Now, Yang Song took the next step to plot the demise of his nemesis. He had his men spread the following rumor: Ma Chao intends to take the Riverlands and declare himself the ruler of the region of Shu in order to avenge his father. He does not intend to serve Hanzhong. When this rumor reached Zhang Lu, he asked Yang Song for his take. And here’s what Yang Song suggested:

“Send a messenger,” he said, “to tell Ma Chao the following: ‘If you want to accomplish your goal, then you shall have one month to do it, but you must agree to three conditions. If you succeed, you will be rewarded; if you fail, you will be executed. First, you must conquer the Riverlands. Second, you must bring me Liu Zhang’s head. Third, you must fend off the troops from Jing Province. If you fail at any one of these, bring me your own head.’ ”



“At the same time,” Yang Song continued, “have your brother Zhang Wei (4) keep a tight watch at the key passes, just in case Ma Chao turns against us.”

Zhang Lu took this advice and sent another messenger to Ma Chao. When he heard the three conditions under which he would be allowed to stay on the frontlines, Ma Chao was shocked at this sudden turn of events, and he began discussing the idea of retreat with his cousin Ma Dai. But Yang Song was not about to give him that opportunity. Yang Song spread more rumors, this time saying that if Ma Chao did turn his army around, he must be up to no good. This was all the reason Zhang Lu’s brother Zhang Wei (4) needed to choke off the key passes and keep Ma Chao from entering Hanzhong.

So now, Ma Chao could neither advance nor retreat, and he was all out of ideas. This was the opportunity that Zhuge Liang had been waiting for.

“Right now, Ma Chao is stuck between a rock and a hard place,” he said to Liu Bei. “I will go to his camp and use a few words to convince him to surrender.”

“But you are my closest confidant,” Liu Bei said. “If something goes wrong, what would I do?”

So Liu Bei refused to let Zhuge Liang go, no matter how much the latter insisted that everything would be fine. Just then, word came that a man from the Riverlands had come to surrender, with a letter from Liu Bei’s general Zhao Yun vouching for his sincerity. Liu Bei summoned him in, and this turned out to be a man named Li (3) Hui (1). He was one of Liu Zhang’s advisers and one of the most vocal opponents to Liu Zhang inviting Liu Bei into the Riverlands. So what was he doing surrendering to Liu Bei now? That’s what Liu Bei wanted to know, too.

“I have heard,” Li Hui (3) said to Liu Bei, “that a wise bird chooses which tree to rest on, and a wise official chooses which lord to serve. When I advised Liu Zhang to refuse you, I was fulfilling my duty as his official. Since he refused to listen to my advice, I knew he was doomed. On the other hand, seeing

your compassion and virtue on display in Shu, I know that you will succeed. That is why I have come to join you.”

So, in other words, you saw which way the wind was blowing and decided to blow with it. But hey, Liu Bei was taking all comers at this point, so he gladly welcomed Li Hui, who immediately offered to make himself useful.

“I hear that Ma Chao is stuck right now,” he said to Liu Bei. “I met him once. I am willing to go persuade him to surrender. What do you think?”

“I’ve been looking for someone to go in my place,” Zhuge Liang said, which, if I was Li Hui and heard that, I might have second thoughts. But Li Hui wanted to go. Zhuge Liang asked what he would tell Ma Chao, and he was satisfied with Li Hui’s answer and sent him off right away.

So Li Hui went to Ma Chao’s camp, told the guards his name, and asked to see their commander.

“I know Li Hui to be skilled with words,” Ma Chao said. “He must be here to persuade me to surrender.”

So Ma Chao devised a little welcome for Li Hui. He told 20 armed men to lie in wait in his tent. At Ma Chao’s command, they were to jump out and cut Li Hui to pieces.

Momentarily, Li Hui entered. Ma Chao did not budge from his seat as he said sternly to Li Hui, “What are you doing here?”

“I have come to persuade you.”

“My sword has just been sharpened. If I don’t like what you have to say, then I shall test it on you!”

To this, Li Hui smiled and replied, “General, you are heading for a calamity. I fear that you might be testing your freshly sharpened blade on yourself before you get to test it on me.”

“What calamity?”

“I have heard it said that even the most wicked tongue cannot defame the looks of a true beauty, while the greatest flatterer cannot cover up the grotesqueness of a truly ugly face. The sun starts to set at noon, and the moon begins to wane when it is full. These are universal principles. General, Cao Cao killed your father and should be your mortal foe. Besides, you have bitter enemies in Longxi. Right now, you cannot help Liu Zhang fend off Liu Bei, nor can you break Yang Song’s hold on Zhang Lu. You have no place to call home and no master to serve. If you repeat your prior defeats, you would reap the scorn of the world.”

When Ma Chao heard this, he nodded and said appreciatively, “Sir, your words are quite right, but what choice do I have?”

“General, if you want my advice, then why do you have armed guards in your tent?”

Called out on his trap, Ma Chao was red-faced and immediately sent his guards away. Now, Li Hui said, “The imperial uncle treats talented men with respect, and I am certain he will succeed. That is why I left Liu Zhang to join him. Your honorable father once swore an oath with the imperial uncle to kill the traitor Cao Cao. Why don’t you abandon the darkness for the light. You would be able to avenge your father AND make a name for yourself.”

Ma Chao was delighted with this advice. So what did he do next? Well, he went searching for a present to prove his sincerity to Liu Bei. Yang Song’s brother, Yang Bai (2), was with Ma Chao’s army at the time, serving as supervisor. And of course, just like his brother, Yang Bai was no fan of Ma Chao’s, and vice versa. So now, Ma Chao called Yang Bai into the tent and tested his freshly sharpened sword on him, and what do you know? The blade was indeed quite sharp. Momentarily, Ma Chao was following Li Hui to Jiameng (1,2) Pass to see Liu Bei, with Yang Bai’s head in tow.

Liu Bei welcomed Ma Chao personally and treated him like an honored guest.

“Having found an enlightened master, it’s like the clouds have parted, and I can finally see the sky again!” Ma Chao said, with no hyperbolic language whatsoever.

So now that he had Ma Chao, and his aide Sun Qian had returned from Hanzhong, Liu Bei was ready to move on Chengdu, where Liu Zhang was holed up. First, he headed back to the city of Mianzhu. Just as he arrived, word came that two of Liu Zhang’s generals had also arrived with an army to take him on.

The general Zhao Yun immediately volunteered to go take care of this. While he headed out, Liu Bei treated Ma Chao to a feast on top of the city walls. Before they could even take their seats, Zhao Yun had returned with the heads of the two enemy generals and offered them up at the banquet, which I’m sure helped everyone’s appetite. It also impressed Ma Chao greatly.

Ma Chao now offered to do something for Liu Bei as well. “My lord, there is no need for your army to go to battle,” he said. “I will go and tell Liu Zhang to surrender. If he refuses, then my cousin Ma Dai and I will sack Chengdu and offer it to you.”

This promise delighted Liu Bei, and they spent the rest of the day drinking.

Meanwhile, the defeated army from Liu Zhang fled back to Chengdu, and Liu Zhang was so shocked that he ordered the gates to be shut. He hid behind his gates until word came that Ma Chao had arrived on the north side of the city with the relief force sent by Zhang Lu. Only now did Liu Zhang dare to ascend to the top of the city walls, but he immediately wished he had just stayed home.

Standing at the foot of the city were Ma Chao and Ma Dai, and they shouted for Liu Zhang to come have a word. When Liu Zhang appeared atop the city wall, Ma Chao pointed at him with his whip and said, “I WAS leading a relief force from Zhang Lu to come save Yi Province, but Zhang Lu listened to Yang Song’s lies and tried to kill me. I have already surrendered to the imperial uncle. You

should surrender as well, so as to spare the lives of your civilians. If you persist on your misguided path, then I will lay siege to the city!”

When he heard this, Liu Zhang’s face became the color of ash, and he was so angry that he collapsed on the wall. To see whether he will surrender or make a desperate last stand, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!