

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 89.

Last time, we left off in the middle of yet another conspiracy to overthrow Cao Cao. The conspirators attacked the camp of the royal guard in the capital Xuchang on the night of a major holiday celebration. The idea was to secure the emperor and the city, and then attack Yejun (4,4), the city where Cao Cao was living *la vida loca* as the King of Wei.

The rebels managed to wound the commander of the royal guard, Wang Bi (4), but he managed to slip away. First, he tried to find refuge at the home of his good friend Jin (1) Yi (4), only to learn, by accident, that his friend was actually one of the conspirators.

Shocked by this revelation, Wang Bi now turned and ran to the home of Cao Xiu (1), one of Cao Cao's nephews and officers. There, he told Cao Xiu about the coup, and Cao Xiu sprang into action. Donning his armor, he led about 1,000 soldiers out into the city and engaged in street fighting with the rebels.

While this was going on, the city was being engulfed in cries of "Exterminate all of Cao Cao's traitors; support the House of Han!" That, and flames, lots and lots of flames. The fire even reached the Tower of the Five Phoenixes, where, according to the conspirators' plan, the emperor was supposed to be safe and sound so that he could make a public denunciation of Cao Cao so as to give the uprising legitimacy. Oops. So much for that. Instead, the emperor was hiding deep inside his palace, while Cao Cao's people doggedly guarded the palace gates against any intruders. Or maybe, just maybe, a ragtag group of no-name conspirators and their house servants weren't quite up to the task of cutting their way through the palace guards.

And to make sure that this ill-conceived coup completely blew up in the conspirators' faces, an army loyal to Cao Cao arrived outside the city just now. It was led by Cao Cao's kinsman and trusted

commander Xiahou Dun, who was stationed a couple miles outside the capital and whose job it was to patrol the city. That night, when he saw fire flaring up inside the city, he immediately brought his troops to help. Somehow, the conspirators didn't account for this, which kind of boggles the mind. I mean, even if you and your little band of house servants did somehow take the city, how were you going to hold out against a siege by a professional army 30,000 strong?

Said professional army now surrounded the city and sent a force inside to reinforce Cao Xiu. So now, the conspirators, who only had about 1,000 untrained men, were going up against a much larger force, made up of seasoned soldiers led by veteran generals. Yeah, this will not end well for the conspirators.

The fight lasted until dawn. By then, the coup was dead, along with most of the rebels. The two lead conspirators, Geng (3) Ji (4) and Wei (4) Huang (2), only had 100-some men left inside the city. Their three fellow conspirators -- Jin (1) Yi (4) and the two Ji (2) brothers -- were supposed to provide reinforcement, but they had all been killed. Geng (3) Ji (4) and Wei (4) Huang (2) tried to flee from the city, but of course there's an army presently surrounding the capital, and the two of them were promptly captured alive, while their last remaining men were slaughtered.

With the rebellion crushed, it was now time to mop up. Xiahou Dun and his troops entered the city to help put out what remained of the fire and to round up the families of the five conspirators. They then sent word to Cao Cao, letting him know what happened. Cao Cao sent back the following instructions: Execute the conspirators and their entire families in public. Then bring all the court officials to the city of Yejun, where Cao Cao would deal with them personally.

The first part of those instructions made sense, since exterminating entire clans is pretty much standard operating procedure when dealing with failed coups. But what's up with taking all the court officials to Yejun? What did they do? We'll find out soon enough.

But first things first. The two remaining ringleaders of the coup were promptly taken to their public executions, and of course, like all the ringleaders of failed conspiracies before them, they did not go quietly. Instead, they cursed Cao Cao the whole way, promising to come back as ghosts and haunt him. The executioners yawned, smashed the prisoners' teeth in with the handle of their knives, and then used the sharp end to cut off their heads, followed by the heads of everyone in the five conspirators' families. Bloody, bloody business, but like I said, standard operating procedure.

Next, Xiahou Dun rounded up all the court officials and marched them to Yejun. Cao Cao had them brought to a training ground, where a red flag was erected on the left side and a white flag on the right. Cao Cao then told the officials, "When the conspirators set fire to the capital, some of you came out to help put out the fire, while others among you stayed home. Those who came out to put out the fire, go stand under the red flag. Those who did not come out, go stand under the white flag."

Now, if you were one of the officials standing there wondering what the hell is going on and your heard this, what would you do? Perhaps you would think, hey, I can't go wrong saying that I tried to help put out the fire, right? Well, that'd be what many of your colleagues thought as well, because two-thirds of the officials promptly ran to the red flag, while the other third went to the white flag.

Well, those of you who ran to the red flag? I'm sorry, but you chose ... poorly. Cao Cao ordered his guards to seize everyone under the red flag. When those officials protested, Cao Cao said, "You didn't come out to fight the fire; you came out to help the rebels." And then he ordered his men to take all 300-some officials who were under the red flag out to the bank of the nearby Zhang (1) River and execute them. Talk about living up to the caricature of being an evil, paranoid tyrant.

But the small group of officials who went to white flag made out really well. They all got rewards for ... umm ... not doing anything and thus being, presumably, loyal to Cao Cao. Then they were told

to go back to the capital and resume their posts, until the next time Cao Cao gets paranoid about something.

And to wrap everything up, Wang Bi, the commander of the royal guard who was wounded in the rebel attack, had by now died from his injuries, and Cao Cao gave him a fancy funeral. He then put his kinsman Cao Xiu (1) in charge of the royal guard, gave out promotions to a couple trusted civil officials, established a new system of lordships, titles, and offices, which were, of course, staffed with people loyal to him, leading to yet another massive turnover at the imperial court.

Oh and also, just to complete the circle, Cao Cao now realized that Guan (3) Lu (4), the seer who in the last episode warned him about an impending fire, was absolutely spot on in his prophecy. Cao Cao wanted to reward Guan Lu for this, but Guan Lu refused.

So hey, lost in all this excitement is the fact that we're about to have a war on our hands. In the last episode, before we got derailed by this half-baked uprising, Cao Cao had just gotten word that Liu Bei was encroaching on the region of Hanzhong, which Cao Cao had just recently added to his collection. In response, Cao Cao sent an army led by the general Cao Hong to deal with this.

So at this time, inside the territory of Hanzhong, Cao Cao had the generals Zhang He and Xiahou Yuan guarding key locations. Once Cao Hong arrived in the region, he led his forces straight toward Liu Bei's encroaching army. Liu Bei's army was led by Zhang Fei and Ma Chao. Zhang Fei and his lieutenant, Lei (2) Tong (2), were guarding the city of Baxi (1,1), while Ma Chao and his lieutenant Wu (2) Lan (2), headed up a strike force to attack the city of Xiabian (4,4).

Wu Lan was leading the vanguard, and he ran into Cao Hong while on a scouting mission. Wu Lan wanted to fall back, but one of his officers was like, hey, we should give the enemy a bloody nose. So this guy rode out to fight Cao Hong, but when a recurring character faces off against a new guy that I

don't bother to name, you can guess the outcome. The nameless officer was dead within three bouts, and Cao Hong directed his forces forward, routing Wu Lan.

When Wu Lan ran back to see his commander Ma Chao, Ma Chao was not pleased about Wu Lan getting into a fight without his permission, and losing that fight. Wu Lan blamed it all on the insubordinate, and conveniently dead, officer. Ma Chao ordered his troops to just hold down the fort at several key locations while he sent word back to Liu Bei and company in Chengdu to request further instructions.

On the other side, Cao Hong got a bit antsy after a few days passed with no movement from Ma Chao. He began worrying about a trap, so he decided to fall back to the city of Nanzheng (2,4). Once there, he got visit from his comrade Zhang He.

"General, why did you retreat after slaying one of the enemy's officers?" Zhang He asked.

"Ma Chao did not come out to fight me, so I was worried about a deception," Cao Hong answered. "Also, before I came here, I had heard that the marvelous diviner Guan (3) Lu (4) had predicted that our lord would lose a top officer in this area. I'm therefore wary and do not dare to advance lightly."

When Zhang He heard that last part, he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"General, you've spent half your life in battle. How can you let the words of a fortune teller cloud your judgement?! Though I'm untalented, I am willing to lead my troops and take Baxi (1,1). If we succeed, then the district of Shu (3) will easily belong to us."

"But Baxi is being defended by Zhang Fei, and he is no ordinary foe," Cao Hong cautioned. "You must not underestimate him."

"[Scoff] Everyone fears Zhang Fei, but I see him as but a child. I will definitely capture him!"

"And if you fail? What then?"

"Then I shall be punished according to military law."

That was good enough for Cao Hong. Once Zhang He wrote a military pledge, Cao Hong allowed him to go. Zhang He at this time had 30,000 troops under his command, and they were divided into three camps. Zhang He took half of the forces from each camp for his expedition, leaving the other half to defend the camps.

Word of this soon reached Zhang Fei in Baxi, and he conferred with his lieutenant Lei Tong. They decided to set an ambush in the mountainous location of Langzhong (2,1). Zhang Fei would go and meet the enemy with 10,000 men, while Lei Tong would lead 5,000 troops and stage a surprise attack.

So off they went. Zhang Fei met up with Zhang He about 10 miles away from Langzhong (2,1). Once the two sides lined up, the two commanding generals traded blows for 20-some bouts. Suddenly, loud cries rose up from the rear of Zhang He's army. Turns out that the men in the back had spotted flags of a Shu (3) army behind some hills and sounded the alarm. Zhang He did not dare to linger, so he turned and fell back. Zhang Fei and company gave chase from behind, while Lei Tong and his troops dashed out in front, sandwiching Zhang He between them. Zhang He was thoroughly beaten, and he ran. Zhang Fei and Lei Tong chased him all the way back to his base at Mount Dangqu (4,2).

Zhang He kept his forces divided into three camps on the mountain, had them fortify their defenses, and refused to come out to give battle. Zhang Fei set up his camp about three miles away. The next day, Zhang Fei went out to pick a fight, but Zhang He ignored him. Instead, Zhang He just sat atop the mountain, behind his strong defenses, ate, drank, and had his men play very loud music to taunt Zhang Fei. No matter how much Zhang Fei and his soldiers cursed him, Zhang He simply refused to go down the mountain, so Zhang Fei had no choice but to return to camp.

The next day, it was Lei Tong's turn to go and challenge for battle, and again, Zhang He refused to come down to fight. Lei Tong tried to have his men storm up the mountainside, but they were greeted

with a barrage of logs and boulders, sending Lei Tong into retreat. As he was falling back, troops from Zhang He's other two camps charged out and took a bite out of his forces.

On the third day, Zhang Fei was back, and once again, Zhang He refused to go out. Zhang Fei had his troops hurl all sorts of insults toward the top of the mountain, but they were returned in kind by Zhang He's men.

And so it went for 50-some days. After a while, Zhang Fei moved his camp to the foot of the mountain, where he spent every day drinking until he was hammered, cursing the enemy all the while.

Around this time, Liu Bei sent an envoy to the frontlines. When the envoy reported back that Zhang Fei was drinking himself into a stupor every day, Liu Bei was greatly alarmed and immediately consulted with Zhuge Liang.

"Oh, is that so?" Zhuge Liang said with a smile. "Well, there's probably no good wine on the frontlines, but there are many good breweries here in Chengdu. We should send General Zhang 50 jars of wine."

"But my brother has a history of getting drunk and messing things up," a befuddled Liu Bei said. "Why would you send him more wine?"

"My lord," Zhuge Liang laughed. "How can you not understand General Zhang after being his brother for all these years? Even though he has always been willful and hot-tempered, when we were conquering the Riverlands, he showed mercy to the enemy general Yan (2) Yan (2). That was not the action of a brute. Right now, he has been in a staredown with Zhang He for 50-some days. The drinking and cursing isn't a case of him overindulging in booze. It's his scheme for defeating Zhang He."

“But even so, he should not get overconfident,” Liu Bei said. “Let’s send the general Wei Yan to help him.”

So Zhuge Liang packed up three cart loads of the finest that Chengdu’s micro-breweries had to offer and told Wei Yan to deliver them to Zhang Fei. On each cart, they stuck a yellow banner that read, “Fine wine for use on the frontlines.”

When Wei Yan arrived at Zhang Fei’s camp, Zhang Fei happily received the wine. He then stationed Wei Yan and Lei Tong on his left and right flanks. When they saw a red flag in the center of the army, that would be their signal to attack. These preparations done, Zhang Fei ordered that the wine be placed in front of his tent and told his men to make lots of noise while he sat and drank.

Enemy spies soon reported this development to Zhang He, who went to the top of the mountain to take a look. He saw Zhang Fei sitting in front of his tent, chugging wine while two of his soldiers engaged in a wrestling match for his entertainment.

“Zhang Fei, how dare you disrespect me so?!” Zhang He said angrily.

Now, I’m not sure why Zhang He would be so incensed by this particular display from Zhang Fei after he had happily enduring being called every name in the book. And it’s not like Zhang Fei hadn’t been drinking himself stupid for the last 50-some days. But whatever the reason, Zhang He was really ticked off. So ticked off, in fact, that he decided to do something about it. He sent out word to his men that they were going to raid Zhang Fei’s camp that night, and that the troops from his other two camps were to come help him on the raid.

So that night, taking advantage of the faint moonlight, Zhang He led his troops down the mountainside and sneaked to outside Zhang Fei’s camp. From a distance, Zhang He could see that Zhang Fei’s tent was brightly lit by candles, and Zhang Fei was sitting inside, merrily drinking away.



With a loud cry, Zhang He led the way. As the battle drums rolled, he and his troops charged into the center of Zhang Fei's camp. Despite this commotion, however, Zhang Fei did not budge. Maybe it's all the booze. Zhang He did not hesitate. He galloped into Zhang Fei's tent and ran his nemesis through with his spear.

But wait, this wasn't Zhang Fei. This wasn't even a man. It was a straw man. By the time Zhang He realized that he's been tricked, a series of explosives went off, and an enemy general blocked his path of retreat. This guy's eyes were round and his voice thunderous. It was, of course, Zhang Fei. The real Zhang Fei.

Amid the light of flames, the two generals traded blows for about 50 bouts. Zhang He was holding his breath the whole time, waiting for the reinforcements from his other two camps. But unbeknownst to him, those reinforcements were not coming. They tried to come, but Zhang Fei's officers, Wei Yan and Lei Tong, had sent them scurrying and used the opportunity to capture both of those camps.

So no help was coming for Zhang He. And what's more, he soon saw fire on the mountain that he was supposed to guard. This was Zhang Fei's troops seizing the third and last enemy camp. With all three of his camps lost, Zhang He quit the fight and fled toward Wakou (2,3) Pass. Zhang Fei sent word of his victory to Chengdu, where Liu Bei was delighted to learn that his brother's alcoholism was really just a ruse.

As for Zhang He, by the time he fell back to Wakou (2,3) Pass, he had lost two-thirds of the 30,000 troops under his command. He sent a message to the general Cao Hong, requesting help. But Cao Hong was in no mood for this.

"He did not listen to my advice and insisted on attacking, and ended up losing a key strategic location. How dare he come beg for help now?!" Cao Hong said angrily as he refused to send help.

Thus denied, Zhang He had no choice but to make do with what he had. He sent two detachments of troops to lie in wait in the hills in front of the pass. Zhang He told them, "I will pretend to lose, and Zhang Fei will no doubt give chase. Then you guys cut off his path of retreat."

Later that day, Zhang He led a detachment of troops and advanced toward Zhang Fei's position. He ran into Zhang Fei's lieutenant Lei Tong. After trading a few blows, Zhang He turned and fled. Lei Tong gave chase, and sure enough, he ran right into Zhang He's ambush. Zhang He's hidden troops sprang out and cut off Lei Tong's return route, while Zhang He now turned around, charged forward, and easily stabbed Lei Tong off his horse.

Remnants of Lei Tong's troops ran back to tell Zhang Fei about his lieutenant's demise, and Zhang Fei personally went to meet Zhang He. After they fought for a few bouts, Zhang He tried to pull the same trick again as he turned and fled. But Zhang Fei did not give chase. So Zhang He turned around and fought a few more bouts before turning and fleeing again. Of course, this was such an obvious trick that even Zhang Fei would not fall for it. I mean, dude, you just pulled the same thing like five minutes ago. Instead of giving chase, Zhang Fei returned to camp to talk it over with Wei Yan.

"Zhang He used an ambush to kill Lei Tong and tried to trick me, too," Zhang Fei said. "Why don't we give him a taste of his own medicine?"

"How do we do that?" Wei Yan asked.

"Tomorrow, I shall lead an army forward, while you lead some crack troops and trail behind. Once Zhang He's hidden troops make their move, you can split your forces and attack them. Fill a dozen or so carts with firewood and straws. Use them to block the backroads and set them on fire. I will use this opportunity to capture Zhang He and avenge Lei Tong."

So the next day, Zhang Fei again marched forward with his army, and Zhang He again came out to meet him. After they fought for 10 bouts, Zhang He, incredibly, tried the same trick again as he feigned retreat. This time, Zhang Fei gave chase. Zhang He fought as he fled, leading Zhang Fei through the mouth of a canyon. Zhang He now turned his army around and engaged Zhang Fei in combat again, waiting for his hidden troops to storm out and attack from Zhang Fei's rear.

But of course, Zhang Fei had planned for this. The ambush was sprung and Zhang He's hidden troops stormed out of hiding, just in time for Wei Yan to arrive from behind them and flush them all into the canyon. Wei Yan now blocked the mouth of the canyon with his carts and set the carts on fire. Soon, the trees inside the canyon caught on fire as well, and Zhang He's troops were trapped amid thick plumes of smoke. Zhang Fei, meanwhile, led his own forces and stormed to and fro, wreaking havoc within the ranks of his trapped enemy. Pretty soon, Zhang He was routed, and all he could do was fight his way out of the canyon, flee back to Wakou (2,3) Pass, regroup his scattered troops, and stay behind his walls.

Zhang Fei and Wei Yan proceeded to lay siege to Wakou (2,3) Pass for days, but to no avail. So Zhang Fei moved his army back a few miles and then he and Wei Yan rode out with a few dozen men to scout out the backroads around the area. They spotted a few civilians who were carrying small bundles on their backs and clambering along the hillside by grabbing onto vines.

"Those civilians are the key to our taking the pass," Zhang Fei said to Wei Yan as he pointed with his whip.

Zhang Fei then told his soldiers, "Go ask those civilians to come see me. Be nice; don't scare them."

His men did as he asked, and when the civilians were brought to him, Zhang Fei summoned his rarely used nice voice to put their minds at ease. He then asked where they were from.

“We’re residents in Hanzhong,” they said. “We are on our way home, but we heard that there’s a war going on, and the main road is blocked. So we’re taking the long way home.”

“How far down this road is Wakou (2,3) Pass?” Zhang Fei asked.

“There is a backroad that branches off to the rear of the pass,” the civilians told him.

Zhang Fei was delighted by this intel. He brought the civilians back to his camp and treated them to wine and food. He then told Wei Yan to lead a detachment of troops to attack the front of the pass, while Zhang Fei himself would lead the light cavalry and sweep around to the back. So they set out, with the civilians leading the way for Zhang Fei, who had with him 500 riders.

Inside the pass, Zhang He was growing more restless with every day that passed without a relief force in sight. So when word came that Wei Yan was laying siege to the front of the pass, he promptly led his troops down the hillside to repel the enemy. But an urgent report soon came that fire had broken out in multiple spots on the backside of the pass and that enemy soldiers had appeared out of nowhere.

When Zhang He and his men hustled over to the back of the pass, they ran smack dab into Zhang Fei. Zhang He, caught off guard, was in no mood for a fight, so he fled along a backroad. The road soon got too treacherous for his horse, and with Zhang Fei bearing down on him from behind, Zhang He panicked and abandoned his horse, scampering up the hillside to continue fleeing on foot. Luckily for him, he was able to slip away, but by now, he only had about a dozen men with him.

At this point, Zhang He had no choice but to run back to the city of Nanzheng (2,4) to see his commander Cao Hong. And remember, Cao Hong was against Zhang He setting out on this fool’s errand from the beginning, so when he saw Zhang He crawling back with just a dozen men, out of the 30,000 he left with, Cao Hong was enraged.

“I told you to not go, but you insisted and even wrote a pledge,” Cao Hong said. “Now you’ve suffered heavy losses. What are you doing back here? Why haven’t you killed yourself yet?!”

Cao Hong then offered to take care of that last part for Zhang He, as he ordered the guards to drag the defeated general outside to be executed. To see if Zhang He can get out of this with his head intact, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!