

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 100.

First of all, I want to wish everyone a belated merry Christmas. The fact that our last episode of 2016 also happens to be the 100th episode in our narrative seems a fortuitous omen of some sort. I'd like to thank everyone who has been listening to the show, rating the show in iTunes, supporting the show through donations, and telling other people about the show. You guys are awesome, and I would not have made it this far without your enthusiasm and support. So thank you. Happy holidays and here's to better things in 2017. And now, back to our originally scheduled programming.

So, we had some momentous developments in the last episode, didn't we? Cao Cao, the Darth Vader of Chinese history and literature, had just died. His eldest son Cao Pi assumed his title as King of Wei and then proceeded to consolidate his position by marginalizing his brothers. He took away one brother's army, scared another brother into committing suicide, and had just arrested his third brother, the literary genius Cao Zhi, for being disrespectful.

Horrified at seeing her sons at each other's throats, Cao Pi's mother, Lady Bian (4), had begged him to spare Cao Zhi. Cao Pi told her, oh I was never going to harm him; just take him down a peg or two.

After she left in tears, Cao Pi ordered that Cao Zhi be brought in to see him. Before Cao Zhi entered, however, one of Cao Pi's senior advisers, Hua Xin, spoke up.

"Was the queen mother asking your highness to spare your brother?"

"Indeed," Cao Pi replied.

"But given Cao Zhi's talent and knowledge, he will never be a content subject," Hua Xin said. "You should eliminate him now to avoid trouble later."

"But I cannot go against my mother's orders," Cao Pi lamented.

“Everyone says Cao Zhi is so gifted that he can compose poems off the cuff,” Hua Xin said. “But I don’t believe it. Your highness can summon him and test his talent. If he fails your test, then you can kill him. If he passes the test, then exile him. That will silence any criticism from the literati.”

Cao Pi went along with that idea. Momentarily, Cao Zhi entered and threw himself on the ground and apologized for his offense. But, showing that he was very much his father’s son, Cao Pi was unmoved.

“You and I may be brothers, but we are also lord and vassal,” Cao Pi said. “How dare you show such disrespect? When our father was alive, you often showed off your writings, but I always suspected that you were passing off others’ work as your own. Today, I command you to compose a poem within seven steps. If you succeed, you will be spared. If you fail, you will be punished severely, without mercy!”

“Please name the topic,” Cao Zhi said.

In the room there was an ink-brush painting depicting two oxens fighting under a mud wall. One of the oxens had fallen into a well and died. Pointing at the painting, Cao Pi said, “Use this painting as the topic, but your poem must not say anything along the lines of “Two oxens fighting under a wall, one oxen dying after a fall.”

Cao Zhi promptly took seven steps and spoke the following lines, imbued with symbolism:

“Two butcher's victims lowing walked along,
Each head bore curving bones, a sturdy pair,
They met just by a hillock, both were strong,
Each would avoid a pit newly dug there.

They fought unequal battle, for at length
One lay below a gory mass, inert.
It was not that they were of unequal strength
Though wrathful both, one did not strength exert.”

Cao Pi and his court were astonished, but Cao Pi refused to drop the matter. He pressed further and said, “Composing a poem in seven steps is still too easy, in my opinion. Can you compose a poem without a moment’s thought?”

“Please name the topic,” Cao Zhi said again.

“You and I are brothers,” Cao Pi said. “Use that as the topic. But you must not use the word ‘brother,’ or anything like that.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Cao Zhi spoke the following poem:

They were boiling beans on a beanstalk fire;
A plaintive voice came from the pot,
“O why, since we sprang from the selfsame root,
Should you kill me with anger hot?”

The metaphor here, of course, was inescapable. Cao Pi, aka the beanstalk, could not hold back the tears that now rolled down his cheeks. His mother now came out from behind a screen and said, “Why must you press your younger brother so?”

Hurriedly leaving his throne, Cao Pi answered, “The laws of the land must not be abandoned.”

Well, I’m not sure there are any laws on the books about doling out punishment based on ability to compose poems in ridiculously short timeframes, but that’s why it’s good to be king. You can just

make stuff up as you go. In any case, since Cao Zhi had passed his little test -- twice -- Cao Pi had no choice but to spare his life. But he did demote Cao Zhi to a lower marquiship before sending him away.

Having pushed all his brothers out of the way, Cao Pi now sat secure on his throne. He remade a bunch of laws and pushed the puppet emperor around even more than his father did. When word of this reached the Shu capital of Chengdu, Liu Bei was alarmed and gathered his officials.

“Cao Cao has died, and Cao Pi has succeeded him and is bullying the emperor even more than Cao Cao did,” Liu Bei said to his court. “And Sun Quan has submitted himself to Cao Pi. I intend to attack Dongwu first to avenge my brother. Then I will attack the Heartlands and exterminate the traitors.”

Before he was done talking, though, the officer Liao Hua stepped forward and fell to his knees in tears.

“The death of General Guan and his son should really fall on the heads of Liu Feng and Meng Da,” Liao Hua said. “We must bring those two traitors to justice!”

So in case you forgot, when Guan Yu was in dire straits, he sent Liao Hua to a nearby outpost to ask Liu Feng, who was Liu Bei’s adopted son, and Meng Da for help. But those two refused, standing by while Guan Yu met his end. So now Liao Hua wanted some payback.

Liu Bei was just about to order someone to go capture those two men, but Zhuge Liang intervened.

“We must play the long game,” Zhuge Liang said. “If we rush it, things will go south. We should promote those two and send them to separate locations first. Then we can capture them.”

Liu Bei agreed and sent an envoy to tell Liu Feng that he had been promoted to oversee the defense of the city of Mianzhu (2,2). But one of the court officials, a man named Peng (2) Yang (4), did not like what he was hearing. This Peng (2) Yang (4) had helped Liu Bei during his conquest of the

Riverlands, but he was also good friends with Meng Da, so he was alarmed to hear that his friend was now in Liu Bei's crosshairs. Peng Yang rushed home and wrote a letter to Meng Da, warning him of what was coming. He then sent a trusted messenger to deliver the letter.

The messenger, however, barely made it out the south gate of Chengdu before he was picked up by sentries under the command of the general Ma Chao. When he was brought before Ma Chao, the messenger spilled the beans. Ma Chao then went to pay Peng Yang a visit, and Peng Yang welcomed him with wine. After a few cups, Ma Chao began to try to goad Peng Yang into a little self-incrimination.

"His highness used to treat you very well, but why has he become indifferent to you recently?" Ma Chao asked.

Peng Yang, buzzing from the alcohol, cursed, "That old fool. I'll show him!"

"I have long held a grudge against him as well," Ma Chao piled on.

"General," Peng Yang said, "If you mobilize your forces and link up with Meng Da to attack from the outside, I will lead the troops of the Riverlands in an internal revolt. Success will be ours."

"You're quite right," Ma Chao told him. "Let's discuss this another day."

But in reality, as soon as Ma Chao took his leave, he brought the messenger and the letter to Liu Bei and told him everything. Liu Bei was incensed and immediately had Peng Yang arrested and interrogated. Now, Peng Yang was filled with regret, but it was too late. Liu Bei asked Zhuge Liang what should be done with him, and Zhuge Liang, showing a bit of a cold-blooded streak, told him, "Peng Yang may only be an idiosyncratic scholar, but if you keep him around, he will become trouble sooner or later." And so Liu Bei ordered Peng Yang to commit suicide in prison.

Peng Yang may be dead, but word of his demise, and the reason behind it, soon reached Meng Da. Meng Da was stunned and panicked. Just then, Liu Bei's envoy arrived, telling Liu Feng that he was

being transferred to defend Mianzhu (2,2). Sensing that something was not quite right, Meng Da summoned two fellow officers, Shen (1) Dan (1) and Shen (1) Yi (2). These two were brothers, and they were overseeing the defense of two nearby outposts.

When the Shen (1) brothers arrived, Meng Da told them, “The adviser Fa (3) Zheng (4) and I had rendered great service to his highness, but now Fa Zheng has passed away, and his highness has forgotten about my service to him and wants me dead. What should I do?”

“I have an idea that will put you out of his reach,” Shen (1) Dan (1) said. “My brother and I have long wanted to submit to the kingdom of Wei (4). You can write a letter to inform the King of Hanzhong that you are resigning from his service and then go join the service of Cao Pi, the King of Wei. Cao Pi will no doubt give you a high rank. The two of us will soon follow.”

So Meng Da wrote a letter and gave it to the envoy to take back to Liu Bei. That night, he set off with about 50 riders and fled to the kingdom of Wei.

The envoy returned to Chengdu and informed Liu Bei that Meng Da had gone off to Wei. Liu Bei, as you can imagine, was irate. And then he read Meng Da’s letter, which did not help either. It’s a long letter, filled with cultural and historical references that would take way too long to dissect, so I’ll just summarize.

Basically, Meng Da told Liu Bei, in the most respectful tone, that hey, you have set out to accomplish something great, something truly amazing, rivaling the great deeds of great men past. You have lots and lots of talented men in your service, while I have committed many faults, as I’m sure you know. In fact, you have so much talent around you that I feel ashamed to take my place among them. Besides, considering the long litany of talented and faithful officials throughout history who met their demise because their lords questioned their loyalty, I think it’s best for me to move on while

we are still on good terms. So I'm packing up and going off to seek a new home. Let's part on a good note and not bicker over who hung whose brother out to dry. Take care, bye.

"You traitor!" Liu Bei said angrily after reading the letter. "How dare you mock me with these words?!"

So Liu Bei was all ready to go and smack down Meng Da, but Zhuge Liang checked him and told him, "You can just send Liu Feng to attack him and set them at each other's throat. No matter if he wins or loses, Liu Feng will no doubt return to Chengdu afterward, and then we can eliminate him, killing two birds with but one stone."

Liu Bei agreed and sent the order to the city of Mianzhu (2,2), where Liu Feng was presently stationed. Liu Feng accepted the command and mobilized his troops to advance on Meng Da.

Meanwhile, Meng Da had already gone off to see Cao Pi, the new lord of the kingdom of Wei. Cao Pi summoned him and asked if this was a trick.

"Not so," Meng Da answered. "I could not save Guan Yu in his hour of need, so the King of Hanzhong wants to kill me. I have come to surrender out of fear for my offense. I harbor no other intentions."

Cao Pi, however, was not about to just take Meng Da at his word. Just then, word came that Liu Feng was heading toward the city of Xiangyang (1,2), declaring that he would fight no one but Meng Da.

"If you are truly sincere," Cao Pi said to Meng Da, "then go to Xiangyang and bring back Liu Feng's head. Then I will believe you."

"Your servant will use words to convince Liu Feng to surrender without a fight," Meng Da replied.

Cao Pi said sure, that works too, and he gave Meng Da a couple spiffy new titles and sent him to oversee the defense of Xiangyang and Fancheng, two of Cao Pi's key cities in Jing Province. So Cao Pi already had two generals, Xiahou Shang (4) and Xu Huang, stationed at Xiangyang, and they were preparing to attack Meng Da's territory. But now, Meng Da showed up on their doorstep as a new comrade. Their scouts reported that Liu Feng had set up camp about 15 miles outside the city, so Meng Da sent a messenger to deliver a letter to his former colleague, telling him that he, too, should switch sides.

But when Liu Feng read the letter, he became incensed.

"That traitor broke the bond between nephew and uncle and sullied the love between father and son, and he has turned me into a disloyal, unfilial man!" Liu Feng said angrily as he tore the letter to shreds and had the poor messenger executed. The next day, Liu Feng led his army toward the city to challenge for battle.

When word got back to Meng Da that his letter and his messenger now laid in pieces, he was also incensed, so he led his troops out to meet Liu Feng. Across the lines, Liu Feng stood under his banner, pointed at Meng Da with his saber, and cursed.

"You traitor! How dare you spew your nonsense?!"

"Your death is imminent, and yet you are still in the dark!" Meng Da shot back.

That was all the talking Liu Feng was prepared to do. He now rode straight for Meng Da. They traded blows for less than three bouts before Meng Da turned and fled. Liu Feng chased him for about seven miles when suddenly, a loud cry rose up as enemy troops sprang out of hiding, led by Xiahou Shang (4) on the left and Xu Huang on the right, with Meng Da turning around and charging back in the center.

Besieged on three sides, Liu Feng's army was crushed, and he fled nonstop toward his former outpost of Shangyong (4,1), with the enemy hot on his tail. But when he reached the city gates, he was greeted with a shower of arrows from above.

"I have already surrendered to Wei as well!" the city's commanding officer shouted from the command tower.

Enraged by this betrayal, Liu Feng wanted to attack the city, but by now the pursuing enemy troops had caught up, so Liu Feng had no choice but to run toward the next outpost, only to find that it, too, had surrendered to Wei. The enemy general Xu Huang now arrived on the scene, and Liu Feng was no match for him, so Liu Feng fled west toward the Riverlands. Xu Huang gave chase and decimated Liu Feng's forces, leaving him to limp into Chengdu with only 100 or so riders.

Once in Chengdu, Liu Feng went to see Liu Bei. Throwing himself on the ground in tears, Liu Feng recounted his defeat, but if he was looking for sympathy from dear ol' dad, he was barking up the wrong tree.

"Disgraceful child! How dare you come to see me?!" an angry Liu Bei scolded him.

"It's not that I didn't want to try to save my uncle," Liu Feng pleaded. "I was stopped by Meng Da's wicked words!"

But Liu Bei was unmoved.

"You eat and dress like men do; you're not made of clay or wood! How can you let a slandering traitor stop you?!"

And with that, Liu Bei was done talking. He ordered the guards to drag Liu Feng outside and execute him. Remember that not only was Liu Feng his adopted son, but he had also been by Liu Bei's side for quite a while, through thick and thin. So this was no small thing.

And to make matters worse, AFTER Liu Feng's head was lopped off, only then did Liu Bei learn that Meng Da had tried to talk Liu Feng into surrendering, but Liu Feng had rebuffed him by tearing his letter and executing his messenger. Moved by this display of loyalty, Liu Bei now felt pangs of regret over Liu Feng's execution. At the same time, he was still mourning the death of Guan Yu. Everything just snowballed, and soon, Liu Bei fell ill, forcing him to put his plans for revenge on hold.

While Liu Bei was sinking into melancholia, Cao Pi was riding high. After he inherited his father's title as the King of Wei, he handed out promotions and rewards for all his officials. Then he took an army of 300,000 and marched in style to his father's home county, where he threw a huge feast at his family's ancestral graves as a way of showing his forefathers that hey, look how far your descendants have risen. The residents of the county came out in droves to greet their native son and offered him wine, much like the reception that the Supreme Ancestor received when he went home after founding the Han Dynasty. So things were looking good.

But then Cao Pi got word that the old general Xiahou Dun was on his deathbed. Cao Pi rushed back to his home base of Yejun (4,4), but by then, Xiahou Dun had already died. I can't help but feel that Xiahou Dun deserved a better send-off than an off-screen death. He was with Cao Cao from almost the very beginning of Cao Cao's rise to prominence. He was a fierce warrior in his own right and definitely a bad ass. In case you forgot, this is the guy who, after taking an arrow to the eye, pulled out the arrow, along with his eyeball, and then swallowed said eyeball before killing the man who shot him. Well, Cao Pi definitely thought Xiahou Dun deserved a better sendoff, as he held a fancy funeral for the old war horse.

So we're now in the year 220. We are 36 years removed from the outbreak of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, which marked the beginning of the novel. In the eighth month of the year came reports of

some rather unmistakable omens. First, somebody somewhere saw a phoenix, which was followed by reported sightings of a unicorn in another part of the empire. That was followed by reports of a yellow dragon in the city of Yejun itself.

These reports got a bunch of Cao Pi's officials talking, and they all agreed that these were signs that it was high time for the Wei to officially take the place of the Han as the rightful ruler of the empire. Hmm, if I didn't know better, I would think somebody concocted all these reports of strange sightings as a justification for usurpation. But that's just me.

So anyway, backed by unconfirmed reports of fantastic beasts, 40-some officials, led by oldtimers like Hua (2) Xin (1) and Jia (2) Xu (3), went to the inner palace to see the Han emperor and told him,

“Reverently we observe that since the new King of Wei has assumed his title, his virtue has spread across the realm and benefitted all. Not even the great sage rulers of antiquity can claim to have done more. In our opinion, the House of Han has run its course. We hope your highness will emulate the ancient sage kings Yao (2) and Shun (4) and pass your mountains, rivers, and dynastic shrines to the King of Wei. This would be in accordance with the will of heaven and the desires of men, and you would get to enjoy the pleasures of a tranquil life. It would be a boon to your ancestral clan and to all the living souls of the realm! Having reached this conclusion, we have come to submit this formal petition.”

So uh, yeah, that's a bit of a shocker to the emperor, though seriously, if I were him, I'd have been expecting something like this for, oh, at least the last 10-plus years. But the emperor fell into a stunned silence. After a few awkward moments, he broke down and wept in front of his officials.

“Wielding a three-foot sword, the Supreme Ancestor slayed a white serpent to open his rebellion, then extinguished the Qin Dynasty and wiped out the rival kingdom of Chu to found the Han Dynasty,” the teary emperor said. “The dynasty has persisted from generation to generation for 400 years.

Although I am untalented, I have also not committed any sins. How can I bear to abandon my ancestors' grand enterprise just like that? Please, let the court reopen this discussion!"

But Hua Xin now came forward with a couple other officials and told the emperor, look, if you don't believe me, ask these two guys whether it's time for you to step aside. And the other two officials proceeded to regale the emperor with all the reports of mystical creatures and the stars in the night sky telling them that time was up for the Han, yadi yada.

The emperor's reaction to this was, unsurprisingly, incredulity.

"All these signs are hollow and preposterous," he said. "How can I abandon my ancestors' enterprise on such baseless delusions?"

But another senior official, Wang (2) Lang (3), came forward and said, "Ever since antiquity, that which rises must invariably fall; that which prospers must invariably decline. Every dynasty ends; every house falls. The House of Han has lasted for 400-some years to this day, and now it has run its course. You should retire now, without delay. Otherwise, who knows what would happen next."

Faced with this not-so-subtle threat, the emperor could do nothing but weep and retire to his private chambers. And as a sign of how far the once-august throne had fallen, the emperor's tears were greeted by mocking laughter from the officials as they left.

The next day, the officials gathered again in the main hall and demanded that the attendant go "invite" the emperor to join them. The emperor was too afraid to go out, and his empress asked why. Now remember, this empress was the daughter of Cao Cao, and she rose to her current status after Cao Cao had the previous empress executed for conspiring to kill him.

"Your brother wants to usurp the throne," the emperor told her as he sobbed. "He has sent the officials to force me to abdicate. That's why I don't want to go out there."

The empress flew into a rage when she heard this. “How dare my brother commit such a travesty?!”

But before she finished speaking, a couple of her kinsmen, the generals Cao Hong (2) and Cao Xiu (1), entered with swords by their sides and asked the emperor to go out to the main hall. This only riled up the empress even more.

“This must be the doing of you traitors!” she cursed them. “Your greed for wealth and rank has led you to plot treason! My father’s accomplishments were unrivaled and made the realm tremble, yet even he did not dare to covet the instruments of supreme authority. My brother has only just inherited his title, and now he’s thinking about usurping the throne. Heaven will not stand for this!”

When she was done denouncing her kinsmen, she wailed and went into her chambers. All the servants present were reduced to tears as well. But Cao Hong and Cao Xiu just shrugged. They demanded that the emperor go out to face his officials, and he had no choice but to change into his formal attire and follow them into the main hall.

“Your highness,” Hua Xin said, “please do as your servants suggested yesterday so that you may avoid calamity.”

Weeping again, the emperor said to the assembled officials, “You all have long received your living from the House of Han. Many of you are descendants of officials who had rendered great service to our house. How can you bear to do such a disloyal thing?”

“If your highness does not comply with the consensus,” Hua Xin said, “I fear that disorder will erupt in the inner sanctum at any moment. This is not a case of our disloyalty to you.”

Umm, ok. Not sure how you can argue that this was not a show of disloyalty, but sure, whatever. The emperor, bless his heart, still wasn’t ready to concede.

“Who would dare to kill me?” he asked.

To this, Hua Xin replied sternly, “Everyone in the land know that your highness does not possess heaven’s blessing to be a ruler of men. That is why there was chaos everywhere. If not for the King of Wei, there would be plenty of men ready to kill you. Yet, you still refuse to acknowledge his virtue and repay his kindness. Are you asking for people to assault you?”

Now, these were some pretty harsh words to be throwing in the face of an emperor, and the emperor was so alarmed that he tried to get up and run away. But Wang Lang (3) flashed Hua Xin a look, and Hua Xin stepped forward, grabbed the emperor by his imperial robes, and said angrily, “Will you abdicate or not? Let it be known, now!”

The emperor trembled and could not speak. Cao Hong and Cao Xiu were done waiting, so they pulled out their swords and shouted, “Where is the keeper of the imperial seal?!”

The guy whose job it was to hold the seal stepped forward right away. “I’m right here!” he said.

Cao Hong now demanded that he hand over the seal, but was rebuffed.

“The seal belongs to the emperor; how dare you demand it?” the keeper of the seal said.

Well, that sealed his fate. Cao Hong immediately ordered the guards to drag the guy outside for execution. The guy cursed everyone with his dying breath, but to no avail.

So now one person has died. Will the emperor be next? Find out on the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!