

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 112.

Last time, Zhuge Liang's forces had sneaked across the River Lu (2) to cut off the supply line of the barbarian king Meng Huo. At the same time, some of Meng Huo's own men, led by the general Dong (2) Tuna (2,4), had decided that they would much rather surrender to Zhuge Liang than to keep following their brutish king, who seemed destined for defeat anyway. So about a hundred of them headed to Meng Huo's tent to capture him.

When they got there, they found an unexpected present: Meng Huo had drunken himself into a stupor and was passed out in his tent. As Dong Tuna and company approached, they saw two guards standing outside the tent.

"You both have benefitted from Prime Minister Zhuge's kindness in sparing your lives," Dong Tuna said to the guards as he pointed with his knife. "This is your chance to repay him."

"General, you don't need to lift a finger; we will capture Meng Huo and offer him to the prime minister," the guards told him.

So they all stormed into Meng Huo's tent, and the inebriated king was easily subdued and bound. They then took their prisoner to the riverbank, where they hopped on some boats and headed to the north shore, sending word on ahead to let Zhuge Liang know that they were coming with a little present for him. And just like that, Meng Huo had fallen into Zhuge Liang's hands again.

Zhuce Liang was well aware of what had been transpiring, thanks to his spy network. He ordered his troops to stand ready and then instructed the tribal leaders to bring Meng Huo in, while the rest of the defectors were told to go back to their own camps to wait for word. Dong Tuna went in first and explained what happened, and Zhuge Liang rewarded him with gifts and kind words and sent him and the rest of the tribal leaders on their way.

Once they were gone, a couple executioners dragged Meng Huo into the tent, and Zhuge Liang couldn't help but smile.

"You gave me your word: If you get captured again, you would willingly submit. So what now?" Zhuge Liang asked his prisoner.

"You had nothing to do with this!" Meng Huo scoffed. "This was treason by my own people. How can I be willing to submit because of this?"

"What if I let you go again?" Zhuge Liang said, probably much to the chagrin and incredulity of his own men.

"I may be a barbarian, but I also understand the art of war," Meng Huo said, and I just love that the novel is so prejudiced against the Nan Man people that it would have their king refer to himself as a barbarian. "If you would let me go, then I will lead my forces to settle things with you again. If you capture me this time, then I will wholeheartedly surrender and will never dare to waver."

"Fine," Zhuge Liang said. "But if you still refuse to surrender the next time I catch you, you will get it good."

So Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to untie Meng Huo and then offered him food, wine, and a seat in the tent, like he was some visiting head of state dropping by for a friendly get-together. During the course of their exchange, Zhuge Liang said, "Ever since I left my thatched hut, I have won every battle that I fought and taken every city that I besieged. Why won't you and the Nan Man people submit?"

To this, Meng Huo made no answer. After the wine was drunk, Zhuge Liang told Meng Huo to accompany him for a horseback tour of his camp. As they went along, Zhuge Liang made sure to point out the impressive stores of grains and weapons.

"You would be a fool to not surrender to me," Zhuge Liang told his foe. "Look at my crack troops, fearsome generals, and ample provisions and weapons. How can you hope to defeat me? If you

surrender now, I will inform the emperor to make sure that you retain your status as king and that your descendants shall forever be leaders of the Man people. What do you think?"

"Even if I am willing to surrender, my people are not yet," Meng Huo replied. "If you would let me return home, then I will convince all my troops to surrender to you."

Zhuge Liang was enthusiastic about this apparent change of mind from Meng Huo. So he returned to the main tent with Meng Huo, where they drank until nightfall, at which point Meng Huo took his leave. Zhuge Liang personally escorted him to the river bank and dispatched a boat to send him back to his own camp. So long now. Don't forget, I'll be eagerly waiting for you and your men to come surrender. See you soon.

Alas, the first thing Meng Huo did upon returning to camp was to stage an ambush. He hid armed guards in his tent, and then sent a trusted messenger to summon Dong (2) Tuna (2,4) and A (1) Huinan (4,2), the two commanders who had betrayed him. The messenger told those two guys that there were orders from Zhuge Liang waiting in Meng Huo's tent. So in a moment of supreme shortsightedness, they went to Meng Huo's tent, where they were promptly cut down, and their bodies were dumped into a stream. Now really, if you think about it, Zhuge Liang kind of hung those two guys out to dry. He obviously did not believe Meng Huo would surrender, so even if he was going to let Meng Huo go, he could have at least sent word on ahead to those two defectors that hey guys, you should probably come over to this side or run to somewhere else safe.

Anyway, after getting a measure of revenge, Meng Huo dispatched some confidants to defend key locations while he personally led an army to Jiashan (1,1) Gorge to dislodge the blockade of his supply route that had been set up by the Shu general Ma Dai.

When he got to the gorge, however, there was no sign of Ma Dai. Upon questioning the locals, Meng Huo learned that Ma Dai had moved all the provisions out the previous night and had crossed back over to the other side of the River Lu (2) and rejoined Zhuge Liang's main army.

So Meng Huo had no choice but to return to his cave, where he said to his younger brother Meng You (1), "I've got a handle on Zhuge Liang's deceptions now. You may proceed in such and such a manner."

Armed with his brother's scheme, Meng You set out with about a hundred soldiers and headed toward Zhuge Liang's camp, bringing with them valuables such as golden pearls, cowry shells, elephant tusks, and rhino horns. Oh these exotic primitives and their non-copper-coin-based economy.

So Meng You and company had just crossed over the river when they were greeted with the sound of horns and a line of troops led by the general Ma Dai, the sight of whom surprised Meng You. Ma Dai asked Meng You what he was doing there, and then told him to stay put while Ma Dai sent a messenger to inform Zhuge Liang.

Zhuce Liang was meeting with his staff when the messenger arrived with word that Meng Huo's little brother was requesting an audience with treasures in tow. Zhuge Liang turned to the adviser Ma Su (4) and asked him, "Do you know why he has come?"

"I dare not say it out loud," Ma Su replied. "Allow me to write it on a piece of paper and show it to you to see if we are on the same page."

So Ma Su wrote something down and showed it to Zhuge Liang, who took a look and laughed out loud.

"I have already put in motion the plan to capture Meng Huo, and your thoughts are exactly the same as mine," he told Ma Su. Zhuge Liang then summoned Zhao Yun and whispered something in his ear. He did the same with the officers Wang Ping, Ma Zhong, and Guan Suo. Everyone then went about their business.

Soon, Meng You was brought into the tent, and he kneeled and said, "My brother Meng Huo was touched by your excellency's kindness in sparing his life. He had nothing to offer you except some golden pearls and cowry shells and such to give to your troops. He will prepare a separate gift for the emperor in the future."

"Where is your brother now?" Zhuge Liang inquired.

"He has gone off to the Silver Pit Hills to collect more valuables to repay your heavenly kindness. He will be here soon."

"How many men did you bring?"

"I dared not bring many, just about 100-some, all porters to carry the gifts."

Zhuce Liang asked Meng You to bring his entourage into the tent. When they came in, he saw that they had green eyes, swarthy complexions, yellowish hair, purplish beards, and gold earrings. Their hair were disheveled and their feet bare, and they were all tall and strong. Zhuge Liang asked them to sit down to a banquet, during which his officers all did their level best to tell Meng You and his men, "C'mon, just one more drink. Here let me get you another round."

Meanwhile, Meng Huo was waiting in his tent for news from his brother. Suddenly, two of his men came back to report. They told him, "Zhuge Liang was delighted with your gifts. He invited the whole party into his tent, where he threw a feast to welcome them. Your brother instructed us to tell you to make your move at 9 o'clock tonight. He will coordinate from the inside, and success will be ours."

Thrilled to have pulled the veil over Zhuge Liang's eyes for a change, Meng Huo called up 30,000 men and split them into three battalions. He then instructed his tribal leaders, "Each battalion will bring fire-starting material. When you get to the Shu camp tonight, start a fire as the signal. I will attack the center of their camp to capture Zhuge Liang."

So the Man forces set out and crossed over the River Lu (2) around dusk. Meng Huo led about 100 trusted men and headed straight for Zhuge Liang's main camp. They met zero resistance as they proceeded all the way to the camp entrance. Still finding no resistance, they stormed into the camp. And there, they found, well, still no resistance. It was an empty camp.

Uh oh.

As he poked around this empty camp, Meng Huo stepped into the main tent, and there, amid the flickering candle light, he saw his brother and his men, all passed out drunk. Looks like somebody partied a little too hardy. Of course, Zhuge Liang also helped by, you know, drugging the wine. So Meng You and his men were all dead drunk. When Meng Huo found them, the few that were still conscious couldn't even talk; they just pointed to their mouths.

Recognizing he had stumbled right into another of Zhuge Liang's traps, Meng Huo hurriedly saved his brother and his men and made a mad dash to join up with his main army. But it was too late. Ahead of them rose earth-shaking cries and countless torches. The Man forces scattered as an army arrived, led by the Shu general Wang Ping. Meng Huo was stunned and sprinted toward his left flank, but flames shot toward the heavens in that direction as another enemy force arrived, led by the general Wei Yan. Meng Huo now took off for his right flank, but just for symmetry's sake, more flames and enemy troops were waiting for him over there, too, led by the general Zhao Yun.

Hemmed in by these three armies, Meng Huo abandoned his soldiers and fled alone toward the river. On the river, he spotted a few dozen Man soldiers on a boat. He ordered them to come pick him up, and they rowed to the shore. As soon as he set foot on the boat, however, someone sounded the signal and everyone on board jumped him and took him prisoner. Turns out these weren't his men after all, but rather Shu soldiers in disguise, led by the general Ma Dai.

As the night's action wound down, Zhuge Liang put out an offer of amnesty, and countless Man soldiers surrendered. He consoled them all and did not do them any harm. Instead, he just told them to go put out what remained of the fire. Momentarily, Ma Dai arrived with Meng Huo in tow, while Zhao Yun came in with his brother Meng You. The other generals also returned, having captured various mini-bosses.

Pointing at Meng Huo, Zhuge Liang laughed smugly and said, "You sent your brother to pretend to surrender, but how can you fool me? You're my prisoner once again. Will you submit wholeheartedly now?"

Meng Huo, though, was not about to give him that satisfaction.

"My brother drank too much and fell for your wicked tricks and ruined my plan," he said. "If I had come first personally and had my brother bring the reinforcements instead, I would have succeeded. This defeat was heaven's work, not yours. How can I be willing to submit?"

Man, this guy talks a lot of trash for someone who's gone 0-for-3 against Zhuge Liang so far, and Zhuge Liang reminded him as much.

"This is already the third time; why won't you submit?" he asked Meng Huo, but Meng Huo simply lowered his head and made no answer.

"Fine," Zhuge Liang said with a smile. "I will let you go once again."

"If you are willing to release me and my brother, then we shall gather up our family's forces and stage a pitch battle against you," Meng Huo said. "If you capture me then, THEN I will wholeheartedly surrender."

"If I catch you again, I will not spare you," Zhuge Liang said. "So be careful and pay attention, read up on the art of war, reorganized your men, and employ some good strategy so that you won't have regrets later."

Zhuge Liang then ordered the guards to untie the prisoners and let them all go -- Meng Huo, Meng You, and all the tribal leaders. Meng Huo and company offered up their thanks, for the third time, and left.

When they crossed back over the river, they saw that the bank was lined with Shu soldiers and banners. As they approached the enemy camp, they saw the Shu general Ma Dai sitting high and mighty. Ma Dai pointed at Meng Huo with his sword and warned him, "If we catch you again, you will NOT get off so easily!"

And by the time Meng Huo got back to his own camp, he discovered that it had long been sacked by Zhao Yun, who now was sitting under a giant banner with hand on sword.

"Do not forget the prime minister's great kindness to you!" Zhao Yun reminded Meng Huo, who went away muttering, of course not, won't dream of it.

And as if he needed another reminder, as he was about to leave the area, the general Wei Yan was waiting on a hillside with 1,000 crack troops.

"I have already penetrated deep into your nest and seized your key locations," Wei Yan shouted sternly from his horse. "Yet you remain foolishly misguided and insist on resisting our grand army! When we catch you again, we will cut you to pieces, with no mercy!"

While Meng Huo and company scampered toward their own caves, Zhuge Liang crossed over the river, set up camp, and rewarded his troops for a job well done. And oh yeah, sorry we can't go home just quite yet because, you know, I decided to let the enemy leader go for the third time. But nevermind that, here, let me tell you how I caught that guy for the third time.

"When I caught Meng Huo the second time, I let him see all our camps with the intent of inducing him to stage a raid," Zhuge Liang told his officers. "I know that Meng Huo knows a little bit about military strategy, so I let him see large stashes of grain so that he would get the idea to attack us with

fire. He sent his brother to pretend to surrender so as to serve as the inside man. I have caught him and spared him three times because I am trying to win his heart, not exterminate his tribes. I am telling you this now. Please do not shirk the labor to come. Do your best to serve the kingdom.”

All the officers bowed and said, “Your excellency is a man of compassion no less than wisdom, and a man of courage no less than compassion. Even Jiang (1) Ziya (3,2) and Zhang (1) Liang (2) are not your equal.”

And if you need a refresher course on who Jiang Ziya and Zhang Liang were, consult supplemental episode 5, legendary advisers.

“How can I dare to compare with the ancients?” Zhuge Liang said. “Our success is all thanks to your efforts.”

This little pat on the back delighted his officers. So they remained on board with Zhuge Liang’s kill-them-with-kindness approach to waging this war.

On the other side, Meng Huo stomped back to his Silver Pit Cave in a foul mood. He immediately dispatched messengers with treasures to the 93 districts of the eight outer nations of the southwest, as well as to the smaller tribes in the Man region to ask for help. And they responded by sending several hundred thousand hardy warriors armed with shields and swords. On the agreed-upon day, these forces congregated like clouds to await Meng Huo’s orders.

But Zhuge Liang was not sweating it. In fact, he wanted this. “I was hoping the Man forces would get here to witness my abilities,” he said with a smile when his scouts informed him of Meng Huo’s movements. He then hopped into a small carriage and headed out with a few hundred riders to scout out the road ahead.

On their way, they came across a river. The water was not fast flowing, but there was not a single boat or raft to be found. Zhuge Liang ordered his men to collect some lumber and make some rafts for the crossing, but much to their surprise, all the wood they put into the water sank. Uhh, so now what?

Zhuge Liang asked his guide and adviser Lü (2) Kai (3) that very question, and Lü Kai (3) said, "I have heard that there is a mountain upstream, and that there are lots of bamboo growing on that mountain. Some of them are said to be quite thick. We can send men to go cut bamboo and build a bridge for our forces to cross."

Zhuge Liang did as he suggested and sent 30,000 men to the mountain and collected a few hundred thousand stalks of bamboo and floated them down river. So I guess Zhuge Liang was not a friend of the environment. In any case, at a narrow point down river, his men used the bamboo to build a long pontoon bridge. They then set up a row of camps on the north bank of the river. They used the river as their moat and the pontoon bridge as the gateway, and built a wall out of dirt. They then crossed over to the south bank and set up three large camps in a horizontal row to await the enemy.

Speaking of the enemy, Meng Huo was marching this way with a few hundred thousand soldiers, and he was in a foul mood after his latest capture. As they approached the river, Meng Huo led a vanguard of 10,000 soldiers armed with blades and shields and went to challenge for combat. Out came Zhuge Liang, donning a headscarf, clad in a cloak with crane patterns, holding a feather fan, riding on a carriage pulled by four horses, and flanked by his officers. Across the line, Meng Huo was clad in rhino hide, wearing a red headdress, holding a shield in his left hand, wielding a blade in his right, and sitting atop a red-haired ox. He spewed some choice profanities, and his troops charged.

In the face of this onslaught, Zhuge Liang ordered an immediate retreat as his forces fell back inside their camps and shut the gates. While they stayed in, the barbarian soldiers stripped naked and hurled insults at them from outside. Zhuge Liang's officers were not pleased at this, so they all came to ask for

permission to go teach the barbarians a lesson. But Zhuge Liang told everyone to sit tight, against the repeated entreaties of everyone else.

“The Man people do not respect the imperial influence,” Zhuge Liang said. “They have come in a mad rage and we should not meet them head on. Let’s stay on the defensive for a few days. Once they have cooled off, I will have a brilliant scheme to defeat them.”

So the Shu forces stayed in their camp for the next few days. Sizing up the enemy outside from a high vantage point, Zhuge Liang noticed that most of the barbarian soldiers were starting to get lax. So he gathered his officers and asked who among them dared to go out for battle. Everybody in the tent was rearing to go, so Zhuge Liang summoned Zhao Yun and Wei Yan and whispered something in their ears and sent them on their way.

Next, he summoned Wang Ping and Ma Zhong and gave them their secret orders. He then told Ma Dai, “I am going to abandon the three camps on this side of the river and retreat to the north bank. As soon as my army has retreated, you may disassemble the pontoon bridge and move it downstream so that Zhao Yun and Wei Yan can move their forces across to provide backup.

Once Ma Dai left, Zhuge Liang summoned the officer Zhang Yi (4) and told him, “After my army has retreated, keep a lot of lamps lit in the camp. Once Meng Huo realizes we are gone, he will no doubt come after me. You can then cut off his path of retreat.”

With everything in place, Zhuge Liang assigned only the officer Guan Suo to protect his carriage and told his army to fall back across the river. Even though they were gone, what the enemy troops saw was a camp that was still lit up like a Christmas tree, so they did not dare to advance.

The next morning, Meng Huo led a large force and marched all the way to the Shu camps. Only now did they realize that there was not a soul left in those three camps, only hundreds of carts of grain.

“Could this be a trick?” Meng Huo’s brother, Meng You (1), suggested.

“Hmm. Zhuge Liang has left all the bulky stuff behind,” Meng Huo said. “I suspect there must be some urgent business back in his kingdom, probably an invasion by either Wu or Wei. That’s why he set up the lamps to keep up appearances and left all his carts behind. We should give chase at once. We must not miss this opportunity.”

So Meng Huo personally led his vanguard and advanced to the river bank. As he looked to the north bank, he saw camps filled with banners erected in an orderly fashion, glorious as a brocade, a gorgeous, moving, multicolor wall that extended along the river. The sight of this impressive set up was enough to convince the Man troops to stay back, but Meng Huo told his brother, “Zhuge Liang is afraid we will give chase, so he is making a quick pause on the north bank. He will be gone within two days.”

Meng Huo garrisoned his troops on the river bank and sent men to cut down bamboo to make rafts for crossing the river, probably depleting the other half of the bamboo groves on those mountains. He also moved his boldest soldiers to the front of the camp.

But unbeknownst to Meng Huo, enemy forces had already snuck into his territory. That day, the wind was howling, and on four sides, fires and drums roared as the Shu forces arrived, sending the Man soldiers into disarray and leaving Meng Huo in a panic. He hurriedly led the warriors from his own clan and fought his way out of the melee, making a run for his old camp. But suddenly, an army charged out from his old camp, led by Zhao Yun.

Stunned, Meng Huo turned and ran back in the direction of the river and fled toward some secluded hills. But yeah, Zhuge Liang had that covered, too. The general Ma Dai charged out with a battalion, and they did their share of damage, leaving Meng Huo with only a few dozen weakened soldiers as they ran toward a canyon. But just then, dust clouds and raging flames appeared in the south, north, and west. Disheartened, Meng Huo and company fled toward the east.

No sooner had they gone past the mouth of canyon were they greeted in front of a large forest by a few dozen Shu soldiers flanking a small carriage. On the carriage was seated none other than Zhuge Liang himself.

Laughing loudly, Zhuge Liang shouted, “Meng Huo, King of the Man, heaven has ordained that you should come to this place in defeat. I have been waiting for you!”

Enraged, Meng Huo turned to his followers and said, “I have been humiliated three times by that man’s tricks! But we’re fortunate to run into him here. Charge with all your might and cut him and his carriage to pieces!”

At that, Meng Huo and a few riders galloped forth toward Zhuge Liang. To see how this showdown will turn out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!