

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 113.

Last time, Meng Huo had fallen for another of Zhuge Liang's tricks and had been routed in battle. He was fleeing into a canyon with a few dozen men when his path was blocked by a gloating Zhuge Liang. Seeing that Zhuge Liang didn't have that many guys with him either, an enraged and humiliated Meng Huo gave a Braveheart-esque speech and then charged forward, intent on taking out his frustration by leaving a few holes in his foe. But alas, this was not going to end well for him.

As he rode near Zhuge Liang, the ground under foot suddenly gave way, and Meng Huo and his men all fell into a deep trench. So yeah, you didn't really think Zhuge Liang was just going to put himself in harm's way without another trick up his sleeve, did you? From the woods behind him came the general Wei Yan along with a few hundred soldiers. They fished out Meng Huo and his men one by one and bound them all.

While that mop-up operation was happening, Zhuge Liang went back to his own camp, where he put out an offer of amnesty to the Nan Man forces and tribal leaders. By this point, most of them had already said the heck with this and scampered back to their home territories. Among the rest, those who had not been killed in battle all surrendered. Zhuge Liang once again treated them to wine, food, and kind words before letting them all go, which, once again, left the Nan Man soldiers deeply touched. Hey, can we do this again next week? We're starting to get used to this wine-and-dine thing.

Momentarily, the general Zhang Yi (4) arrived with Meng Huo's little brother Meng You (1) in tow. Now, Meng You himself was captured and released by Zhuge Liang once before, so this time, Zhuge Liang had to give him a little tsk-tsk.

"Your brother is misguided," he told Meng You. "You should be advising him better. Now he's been captured by me a fourth time. How can he face others?"

Meng You himself was mighty humiliated, and he threw himself to the ground and begged for forgiveness. Alas, today was not a good day to die.

“If I wanted to kill you, today would not be the day,” Zhuge Liang told him. “I will spare your life for now, so that you may talk some sense into your brother.”

So he ordered the guards to untie Meng You and help him to his feet. Meng You bowed with tears in his eyes before taking his leave.

Not long after this, the general Wei Yan came back to camp with Meng Huo in tow, and the fallen king of the Nan Man was getting more than a little tsk-tsk from Zhuge Liang this time. In fact, Zhuge Liang flew into a rage when he saw Meng Huo.

“You have been captured by me again! What do you have to say now?!”

“[Scoff] I mistakenly fell for your wicked scheme. I will never submit, even in death!” Meng Huo shot back.

Well, alright then. Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to take Meng Huo outside for execution, but Meng Huo showed no sign of fear. Instead, he turned back toward Zhuge Liang and said, “If you have the courage to let me go again, then I will definitely avenge these four rounds of humiliation!”

[Sigh] Oh dude. C’mon! You haven’t had enough of this yet? Zhuge Liang just laughed out loud when he heard this. Well alright, I’ll play along some more. So he ordered the guards to unbound Meng Huo and gave him some wine and offered him a seat. I guess we’ll just add that to his tab.

“I am treating you with courtesy for the fourth time now,” Zhuge Liang said. “And yet you still refuse to submit. Why?”

“I may be uncivilized, but I am not a schemer like your excellency, so how can I be willing to submit?” Meng Huo replied. And oh by the way, I love that novel has the king of an ethnic minority tribe

calling himself uncivilized, as if they measure their own levels of civilization according to the standards of the Han.

“If I let you go again, are you able to fight another battle?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“If your excellency captures me again, then I will submit wholeheartedly, offer up all of my possessions as reward for your army, and swear never to rebel again,” Meng Huo, but yeah, seems like we’ve heard this before, several times in fact. Zhuge Liang simply laughed and told him to go, so Meng Huo bowed in gratitude, gathered up a few thousand of his warriors, and headed south in a long procession.

As Meng Huo was traveling, he saw a dust cloud up ahead as an army approached, led by his little brother Meng You, who, having thanked Zhuge Liang for letting him go, had gone to regroup his scattered forces to come avenge his older brother, whom he was certain had been executed. But now, seeing that the other was very much alive, the two brothers embraced and wept as they recounted their own experience.

“We have been defeated time and again, and the Shu forces have won time and again,” Meng You said. “It is difficult to fight them. We should just hide in our caves and not come out, and wait for the Shu army to wither under the heat and retreat.”

“Where can we go to hide from them?” Meng Huo asked.

“There is a cave to the southwest, called Bald Dragon Hollow. The lord of that cave, King Duosi (0,1), is a good friend of mine. We can go to him.”

So Meng Huo sent Meng You to go see Duosi (0,1) first. Duosi hurriedly led his forces out to welcome them. Meng Huo then entered the cave, exchanged greetings, and recounted his setbacks against Zhuge Liang.

“My lord, do not worry,” Duosi told him. “If the Shu forces come here, I will see to it that not a single one of their men gets to go home. They will all die here with Zhuge Liang.”

Delighted at this assurance, Meng Huo asked Duosi what his plan was.

“There are only two roads leading to this cave,” Duosi said. “The one in the northeast is the road that you took to get here. The terrain on that road is smooth, the soil is rich, and the water sweet, making it passable for men and horses. If we use logs and boulders to block that cave entrance, not even a million men can advance.

“There is another road to the northwest. Now, that road has treacherous terrain and is extremely narrow. Even though there are small paths, they are riddled with poisonous snakes and scorpions. Also, at dusk, a miasma rises and does not subside until late morning or past noon. In fact, the six hours in the afternoon are the only time when it is passable. The water on this road is not drinkable, so it would be a tough journey for men and horses.

“Furthermore, there are four poisonous springs here. One is called the Spring of the Mute. Its water maybe sweet, but if you drink it, you will not be able to speak, and you will die within 10 days. The second is the Spring of Death. Its water is as hot as broth. If you bathe in it, your skin and flesh would rot to the bone, and you will die. The third is called the Black Spring. Its water is somewhat clear, but just a few drops splashes on you, your extremities will turn black and you will die. The fourth one is called the Spring of Languor. Its water is as cold as ice. If you drink it, you will lose the warmth from your breath, your body will grow limp, and you will die.

“Not even insects or birds live here, and no man from the Han has made it here since the general Ma (3) Yuan (2). So let’s block off the road to the northeast so that you can stay safely in our humble hollow. When the Shu forces see that the road in the east has been blocked off, they will take the road in the west. That road has no water source, so when they see the four springs, they will no doubt drink

from them. Even if they have millions of men, none of them will survive, and we won't even have to fight!"

So a quick aside here. Duosi mentioned that no one had made it to his hollow since the general Ma Yuan (2). That guy was a famous general of the Eastern Han who lived from the year 14 BC to 49 AD. One of the major accomplishments of his career was that he managed to subjugate the Nan Man regions, an area that roughly corresponded with North Vietnam. For this feat, he was given the lofty title of the General Who Tames the Deep, and he was apparently a revered figure in the territory of the Nan Man.

Meng Huo was delighted to hear Duosi's plan. He put his hands to his head and rejoiced, "Now I finally have a refuge!" He then pointed to the north and said, "Not even Zhuge Liang's clever tricks will work here! The waters of these four springs shall avenge my defeats!"

And so, Meng Huo and Meng You spent their days feasting with Duosi, waiting for Zhuge Liang to fall into their deadly trap.

Speaking of Zhuge Liang, after he let Meng Huo go for the fourth time, he waited a few days, but Meng Huo never came back with an army to present the battle that he had promised, so sigh, I guess we have to do this the hard way. Zhuge Liang ordered his army to march farther south. It was now the middle of June, and the weather was scorching hot. How hot was it? It was so hot that the novel dedicated two poems to tell us how hot it was. And since we haven't had a poem in awhile -- not since Liu Bei died, I think -- let's indulge.

The first poem goes something like this:

A scorching heat to turn the marshes dry,

A flaming sun that rules the empty sky --

Who could find in any other land

A zone of summer heat than this more damned?

And the second poem says:

The fire god unleashes his torrid power;

Upon the sky no shade of cloud dares show.

In scalding mists the lonely heron pants;

In steamy seas the giant tortoise frets.

Who would for this forsake companionship by cooling streams

Or idle walks through bamboo woods?

What has brought me to this far frontier,

On the march again, encased in gear?

I bet those last two lines were bouncing around the heads of more than one rank-and-file grunt in the Shu army as they trudged southward. But hey, the prime minister says we have to kill these barbarians with kindness, so what are you gonna do?

As the army marched, scouts brought word that Meng Huo had fallen back to Bald Dragon Hollow and had barricaded himself in by blocking the road to the entrance of the cave and reinforcing its defenses. What's more, the terrain ahead was too treacherous to advance.

Zhuge Liang consulted with his guide Lü (2) Kai (3), who said, "I have heard that there is another road that leads to that cave, but I don't know the details."

Another adviser, Jiang (2) Wan (3), now said to Zhuge Liang, "Meng Huo has been captured four times and is scared out of his mind. How can he dare to come out again? Right now the weather is

scorching and the army is exhausted. There is nothing to be gained from continuing this campaign. Why don't we go home?"

"That's exactly what Meng Huo is counting on," Zhuge Liang said. "As soon as we retreat, he would give chase. We have come this far, how can we turn back?!"

So Zhuge Liang dispatched the general Wang Ping and a few hundred soldiers to lead the way, using some recently surrendered Nan Man soldiers as guides as they searched for a northwest passage to Bald Dragon Hollow. Along the way, they came across a lovely little spring. The men had been starved of water on their trek, so before you could say "Don't drink the water," both men and horses were helping themselves to giant, soothing mouthfuls. After they had drunk their fill, Wang Ping and company headed back to tell Zhuge Liang that he had found a road forward, and some tasty water, too.

But by the time they got back to camp, they had to deliver their message through hand signals because none of them could speak anymore. Yeah, guess which spring they drank from. As he watched this group of gesticulating mutes pointing at their mouths, Zhuge Liang realized they had been poisoned, so he got into his small carriage and went out with a few dozen men to see what's going on.

They arrived at a clear pool of water so deep that you couldn't see the bottom. The water was piercing cold, and no one dared to try it. Dismounting from his carriage, Zhuge Liang scaled to a high vantage point and looked around. He was surrounded by tall cliffs, but there was no sound of birds, which made him deeply suspicious.

Suddenly, he spotted an old temple in the distance. Clambering up along vines and creepers, Zhuge Liang and company made their way to this temple. Inside the stone structure, there was a statue of a seated general, accompanied by a helpful tourist information plaque that explained that this was a temple dedicated to none other than Ma Yuan (2), the General who Tames the Deep, and that the locals had erected this temple to commemorate his pacification of the Nan Man. Yes, that would be the same

locals that he had pacified, putting up a statue to commemorate their own pacification. Hey, it's right there on the sign, so it's got to be true, right?

Anyway, bowing to the statue, Zhuge Liang said, "Having been entrusted with grave responsibilities by the First Emperor, I have come here on my lord's decree to pacify the Nan Man. After the Nan Man is pacified, I hope to conquer Wei and Wu to restore the House of Han. But my soldiers were unfamiliar with the terrain and mistakenly drank poisoned water, making them mute. Revered spirit, I hope that you will remember the benign justice of our court and use your divine powers to protect the army."

After this prayer, Zhuge Liang exited the temple to track down some locals for useful information. Right on cue, he spotted on a hill across the way an old man with an unusual appearance walking this way with a staff. Zhuge Liang invited him into the temple, and after trading greetings, they sat down on rocks.

"Sir, may I ask your esteemed surname?" Zhuge Liang inquired.

Ignoring the question, the old man said, "I have long heard of the name of the prime minister of the big kingdom, and now I have the fortune to meet you. Many of the Nan Man people owe their lives to you. That is no small kindness."

Zhuce Liang now asked about the water, and the old man was like, dude, you guys didn't actually drink the water, did you? Oh you did. [Scoff] Tourists.

"The water that your men drank was from the Spring of the Mute," he told Zhuge Liang. "Whoever drinks from it will not be able to speak and shall die within a few days. Aside from that spring, there are three other springs. In the southeast, there is a spring with icy water. If you drink that, your breath will have no warmth, and you will grow limp and die. That is the Spring of Languor. To the south there is a spring where if you get splashed with its water, your hands and feet will turn black, and you will die. That is the Black Spring. To the southwest there is a spring hot as broth. If you bathe in it, your skin and



flesh will peel off, and you will die. That is the Spring of Death. There is no cure for the toxic essence concentrated in those four springs. There is also a miasma that rises, and only the afternoon hours are safe for passage. The rest of the time, the miasma is thick, and contact with it is fatal.”

Oh great. So not only is the water all funky, but even the air is toxic, too? I guess we are not in China anymore.

“If this is the case, then it would be impossible to pacify the Nan Man territories,” Zhuge Liang said. “If we cannot pacify the Nan Man, how can we swallow up the Wu and the Wei to reinvigorate the House of Han? If I cannot live up to the First Emperor’s faith in me, I would rather die.”

Aww. Zhuge Liang is sad that not being able to subjugate the indigenous population to imperial rule would throw a monkey wrench into his grand plan for continental domination. But wait, the old man told him, “Do not worry, your excellency. I will point you to a place that will resolve your dilemma.”

“What great insight do you have? Please enlighten me!”

“A few miles to the west of here, there is a canyon. About seven miles inside the canyon is the Stream of Eternal Peace. Above this stream lives a high-minded man called the Hermit of Eternal Peace. He has not left the stream for decades. Behind his thatched house there is a spring called the Spring of Peace and Joy. If someone has been poisoned, drinking from the spring will cure them. A bath in its waters will cure skin eruptions and miasma sickness. Also, there is a type of grass that grows in front of the house called “leek-leaved rue.” If you keep a blade of this grass in your mouth, the miasma will not affect you. Your excellency should go ask for these at once.”

Bowing to express his gratitude, Zhuge Liang said, “I am grateful beyond words for your life-saving kindness. May I please ask for your esteemed surname?”

“I am the local mountain god. I have come on the command of the General Who Tames the Deep to provide guidance.”

After he spoke those words, the old man basically said open sesame, and the rock face behind the temple parted, and he disappeared behind them. Astonished, Zhuge Liang bowed again to the statue and then returned to camp.

Now, as I was writing this part of the script, it occurred to me that it would be much more entertaining, and probably makes more sense, to think of this whole exchange we just witnessed as an elaborate hoax by the locals to fleece unwitting tourists. Oh yeah, all the water around here is no good, deadly even. Everything kills you. Except for that one spring at that house up the road that can cleanse all the toxins from your body and cure ... umm ... miasma sickness, yeah that's it. Their gift shop has bottles of this stuff for sale. I think they're running a two-for-one special this week. And while you're there, why not buy a pack of the leek-leaved rue. I know, it looks just like a stalk of green onion, but trust me, it will protect you from this invisible but highly lethal air that's floating all around. Did you know that the air around here is 78 percent nitrogen? Yeah, you NEED some of that leek-leaved rue. Oh and by the way, I'm a mountain god sent here by the spirit of the local version of Cortez to help you. Now excuse me while I disappear behind this sliding door, I mean, solid rock face that I just opened magically with my mountain god powers. No no, don't try looking for a secret door. There isn't one, trust me. Now go get that two-for-one special before it's too late. Don't forget to tell them who sent you. Use the promo code "MountainGod."

Not wanting to miss out on the sale, Zhuge Liang set out for the Stream of Eternal Peace the next day, bringing with him incense, presents, and Wang Ping and the soldiers who did not read the travel advisory about drinking the local water. After entering a canyon, they went about seven miles before coming upon a farm enclosed by giant pine and cypress trees, luxuriant bamboo, and rare flowers. In the middle was a thatched cottage, filled with a fine fragrance. Hmm, inhale that good, non-lethal air.

Delighted that the old man slash mountain god's directions seem to be legit, Zhuge Liang knocked on the gate to the farm. A young lad answered the door. Zhuge Liang was just about to offer up his name when a green-eyed, yellow-haired man came out, wearing a bamboo comb, straw slippers, and a white robe tied with a black waist band.

"Are you the prime minister of the Han?" the man inquired.

"How did you know that, honored master?" Zhuge Liang replied with a smile.

"Who has not heard that your excellency was leading a grand army south?" the man explained as he invited Zhuge Liang into his living room, where they sat down as host and guest.

"The First Emperor entrusted his heir to me," Zhuge Liang said. "Now, on the command of my lord, I have led a grand army here to pacify the Nan Man and make them adhere to the ways of the imperial court. But Meng Huo went into hiding in the caves, and my men unknowingly drank the water from the Spring of the Mute. Last night, the spirit of the General Who Tames the Deep revealed himself and said that you have a medicinal spring that can cure them. I humbly appeal for your permission to use the holy water to save my men."

Ahh, so the ... umm ... spirit of the General Who Tames the Deep told you to come here, eh? Well, right this way, through the gift shop.

"I am but a useless man of the mountain," the hermit replied. "There was no need for your excellency to come personally. The spring is just behind the house."

So he told his young lad to lead Wang Ping and the other mutes to the spring to drink the "holy water." As soon as they drank it, they puked up the toxins and soon regained their power of speech. The young lad then led all the soldiers into the spring to bathe in this medicinal water. The first one is free, you know.

The hermit now served Zhuge Liang some cedar tea and cypress fruits. As they ate and drank, he told Zhuge Liang, "The Nan Man caves around here are filled with poisonous snakes and scorpions. And when the willow flowers drift into the streams and springs, their waters become undrinkable. You must dig into the ground to find safe drinking water."

Zhuce Liang then asked if the hermit could part with some of this leek-leaved rue he had heard about, and the hermit told Zhuge Liang's men to collect as many as they wish, telling them that if they keep a blade of this grass in their mouths, they would not be affected by the miasma.

Grateful for the hermit's assistance, Zhuge Liang bowed and asked him what his name was.

The hermit smiled and said, "I am Meng Huo's older brother, Meng Jie (2)."

Wait, what?

Zhuge Liang fell silent with amazement when he heard this, and I can only imagine some of his men spitting out blades of grass and staring up with an "oh crap what did I put in my mouth just now" look.

"Your excellency need not be suspicious; allow me to explain," the hermit said. "My parents had three children. I am the oldest, Meng Huo is the second, and Meng You the youngest. Our parents are dead. My two younger brothers are vicious and resist the imperial ways. I tried many times to dissuade them, but to no avail. So I changed my name and live here in seclusion. And now, my dishonorable brothers have rebelled, causing your excellency to venture deep into this wilderness. I deserve to die 10,000 times for this, so I come now before your excellency to answer for my offense."

Hearing this, Zhuge Liang sighed and said, "Only now do I believe in the ancient story that told of a robber and a sage being brothers, for I have witnessed it myself today."

He then said to Meng Jie (2), "I will inform the emperor and request that he make you king. What do you think?"

“I fled to here out of disdain for fame, so how can I harbor any desire for wealth or fortune?” Meng Jie replied.

Zhuge Liang now presented Meng Jie with the presents he had brought, but Meng Jie steadfastly refused. Profoundly moved, Zhuge Liang bowed and took his leave. So I guess Meng Jie really bungled that hoax, letting Zhuge Liang and his men leave with the holy water and the medicinal onions without paying a dime. But he probably earned himself a pretty nice review in the next Lonely Planet guide.

Upon returning to camp, Zhuge Liang ordered his men to start digging into the ground for water. They dug down 100-some feet, but did not find a single drop. Ok, maybe that was just a bad spot. Let’s try another one. So they switched locations and dug another 100-some feet. Still no water. So they tried another spot, then another, and then another. They dug more than a dozen holes, and still they found no water.

But the magic man in the straw slippers who was sent to us by a mountain god on the command of the spirit of a long-dead general said there would be water in the ground! Surely he knows what he’s talking about! What do we do now? I KNEW we should’ve stocked up on bottled water in the gift shop!

To see how many cases of bottled holy water Zhuge Liang will order from the Humble Hermit Emporium of Authentic Indigenous Cures, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!