

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 133.

Last time, after many, many tries, Zhuge Liang finally got his nemesis Sima Yi to take the bait, luring Sima Yi into a valley. As soon as Sima Yi, his two sons, and his army were inside, Zhuge Liang's men sealed off the entrance and set the place on fire, triggering the explosives that they had buried in the valley. Sima Yi and company found themselves trapped like rats. As the flames closed in, all Sima Yi could do was to pull his sons into his arms and wait for death.

As the fire inched closer, Zhuge Liang looked on from a nearby hill with delight. This was his finest hour. In a matter of minutes, Sima Yi would be dead, and the path to the Heartlands would be cleared, and his dream and lifelong work of reuniting the empire would be close to fruition. Once the Wei falls, it would only be a matter of time before Dongwu succumbs as well, and then ...

Wait, what's happening?

Out of nowhere, a powerful gale kicked up, and the sky quickly grew dark. Then, with the loud clap of a thunderbolt, a drop of rain hit the ground, then another, and then another.

No. You have GOT to be kidding me!

As Zhuge Liang looked on, the heavens opened up and a torrential rain poured down on him and on the valley below.

Soon, the fire inside the valley was extinguished, the landmines were silenced, and all the firework had gone out.

"Now is our chance to get out of here!" Sima Yi shouted. Given a new lease on life, he and his troops stormed out of the gorge. His reinforcements also arrived. The Shu general Ma Dai, who was responsible for setting the trap, did not have enough troops with him to make a fight of it, so he did not dare to give chase.

Watching Sima Yi disappear into the distance, Zhuge Liang sighed.

“Man may devise, but heaven decides. We cannot bend events to our will.”

So Sima Yi and his troops limped back to their camp on the south bank of the Wei River. But when they got there, they realized that the Shu forces had already taken it. Meanwhile, their comrades Guo Huai and Sun Li (3) were busy trying to fend off the attack on the pontoon bridges. When Sima Yi arrived with reinforcements, the Shu forces fell back. But Sima Yi wasn't going to take any chances. He burned his own pontoon bridges and set up camp on the north bank.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Wei forces were busy attacking the Shu base at Qi Mountain. But when they heard that Sima Yi had been routed and that their camp on the south bank of the river had been sacked, they lost heart and tried to retreat. What ensued was not pretty, as the Shu forces slaughtered them en masse. The Wei forces suffered something like 80 or 90 percent casualties, and the survivors all scrambled across to the north bank of the river.

Sima Yi now sent out an order to everyone in his camp: “We have already lost the camp on the south bank of the river. Any officer who speaks of fighting again will be executed.”

Soon, Guo Huai came to see Sima Yi and told him, “Zhuge Liang has been leading troops on reconnaissance missions in recent days. He must be looking for a place to pitch camp.”

Sima Yi said, “If he heads east along the hills, then we're in danger. But if he goes westward to the Wuzhang (3,4) Plain, then we will be fine.”

Scouts soon reported that Zhuge Liang had gone west and garrisoned his army on Wuzhang (3,4) Plain. Hearing this, Sima Yi put his hands to his forehead in a gesture of gratitude and declared, “Blessed be our lord!” He then ordered his men, “Stay on the defensive and do not go out. The enemy cannot hold out forever.”

As for Zhuge Liang, after he set up camp on Wuzhang Plain, he sent his troops to go challenge for battle every day, but to no avail. So now, Zhuge Liang tried a different tact. He sent a messenger to the Wei camp to deliver a gift and a letter to Sima Yi. The Wei officers brought the messenger to Sima Yi, and Sima Yi opened the gift box in front of everyone. Inside the box, he found a headdress and a garment. Well, this was a nice gesture of ... oh wait, it's a headdress and garment for a woman. Well, ok then.

Sima Yi now read the letter, and it said, "Sima Yi, you are a top general and commander of all the armies of the Heartlands. Yet, you have no taste for a real battle to settle things. Instead, you are content to huddle in the nest, careful to stay beyond the reach of spear or arrow, just like a woman! That is why I am sending you this headdress and garment. If you still refuse to come fight me, then you may receive this gift with humble thanks. If a spark of self-respect still burns within you, if your breast still holds a manly heart, then reply to me at once and meet me on the field at the time of your choosing."

So at this moment, all of Sima Yi's officers were raging mad at this blatant disrespect. And Zhuge Liang's messenger was probably quaking in his boots, expecting his head to hit the ground at any moment. Like, yeah you could've told me what was in that box before you sent me to deliver it.

As for Sima Yi, he could feel his anger welling up inside him. Yet, he swallowed hard and put on a wide smile.

"So, Zhuge Liang thinks I am a woman," he laughed. He then accepted the present and held a banquet to welcome the messenger, who was likely stunned and relieved at the same time.

During the banquet, Sima Yi asked the messenger, "Is Zhuge Liang eating and sleeping well?"

The courier replied, "His excellency rises early and stays up late. He personally oversees any infraction punishable by more than 20 strokes. He eats no more than a few pints of grain a day."

Hearing this, Sima Yi turned to his officers and said, “Zhuge Liang eats little and works too hard. How can he last long like that?”

After the banquet, the messenger returned to camp and told Zhuge Liang how Sima Yi received his gift with a smile. He also told Zhuge Liang what Sima Yi said about his eating and sleeping habits.

“He knows me too well,” Zhuge Liang sighed.

A member of his staff now said, “I have often seen your excellency looking over our books and records personally. That is unnecessary. Every governing system must have higher and lower levels functioning independently, much as the operation of a household requires the menials to farm and the maids to prepare food. In this way, no chores are neglected and all needs are supplied, allowing the master of the house to eat and drink carefree and at ease. If the master busies himself with every last detail, it leads to physical and mental exhaustion, and in the end, nothing gets done. Does that mean the master’s knowledge is inferior to that of the menials or the maids? No. It means he did not run his household appropriately. As the ancients have said, ‘It is for the three top ministers to sit and discuss the true way and for the imperial officeholders to act on policy.’ Look at two of the great Han ministers of old. Bing (3) Ji (2) worried about a panting ox but was indifferent to a man who had fallen dead by the roadside. Chen (2) Ping (2) did not know how much grain and money the state had taken in, and he said, ‘Others are in charge of that.’ Right now, your excellency wastes energy attending to every little detail, and for what? What Sima Yi said is correct.”

So before we go on, you might be wondering about those two old Han ministers that this staffer had just name-dropped, and you might be thinking, “Wait a minute. It doesn’t sound like being indifferent to dead people on the roadside and not knowing the size of the state’s treasury are signs of wise administration.” But in this context, they are. I’ll do a supplemental episode later to explain, but just roll with it for now.

Anyway, when Zhuge Liang heard these words, he wept and said, "It's not that I don't know this, but the First Emperor entrusted me with his son. I worry that others would not be as dedicated as I am."

That remark brought everyone present to tears. From that day forth, Zhuge Liang began feeling unsteady, and as a result, his officers did not dare to advance their troops.

Meanwhile, in the Wei camp, the Wei officers were all seething upon learning that Zhuge Liang had called their commander a woman, and they were extra disgruntled that Sima Yi was refusing to go fight the enemy even after that humiliation. They went to see him and said, "We are all famous generals of a great kingdom. How can we tolerate such humiliation by the people of Shu? Please let us settle this on the battlefield."

Sima Yi replied, "It's not that I am too cowardly to fight or that I suffer this humiliation willingly. But the emperor's decree made it very clear that our orders are to defend and not fight. If we make rash moves, we would be disobeying his command."

But the officers were not satisfied with that explanation, so Sima Yi said, "If you all insist on going out to fight, then let me inform his majesty first, and then we will all go fight together. How's that?"

Now, that was more to the men's liking. So Sima Yi wrote a memorial and sent it to Cao Rui, who was presently overseeing the defense of the key city of Hefei (2,2). The memorial said:

"My responsibilities exceed my talents, and I serve under your all-seeing guidance. Your majesty has ordered me to stay on the defensive until the Shu army breaks up of its own accord. Yet, Zhuge Liang has sent me female clothing and mocked me as being a woman. With all due reverence, I must make known to your majesty, in all your sagely wisdom, that I shall soon have to fight the enemy to the death so as to repay the benevolence of the court and avenge this ridicule of our army. With anguish greater than this vassal can master ..."

When he was done reading the letter, Cao Rui asked his officials, "Sima Yi has been staying on the defensive, so why is he now asking me for permission to fight?"

The senior official Xin (1) Pi (2) replied, "Sima Yi has no desire for battle. But he must have been pressed to write this letter because his men are up in arms after the ridicule by Zhuge Liang. He is hoping for a clear decree from your majesty to quell his officers' indignation."

So Cao Rui sent Xin Pi (2) to deliver a decree to Sima Yi's camp. The decree declared that the army was not to engage the enemy. Sima Yi received the decree and welcomed Xin Pi into the tent. Xin Pi declared on behalf of the emperor, "If anyone dares to suggest going out to fight again, they would be in violation of imperial edict."

Welp, so that was that. Sima Yi basically shrugged his shoulder and told his men, "See guys. I tried, but the boss said no, so what can I do?" And his officers had no choice but to swallow their anger and obey the edict. And word soon spread throughout camp that the envoy Xin Pi had decreed that Sima Yi must not go out to fight.

Once the officers left the tent, however, Sima Yi whispered to Xin Pi, "Sir, you really understand me!"

When word of this reached the Shu camp, the Shu officers relayed it to Zhuge Liang, who immediately laughed and said, "That is Sima Yi's scheme for restoring order to his army. He never had any desire for battle, so his letter requesting permission to go fight was just for show. Have you not heard of the saying that generals in the field can ignore their lord's command? Why would a commander so far removed from his lord request permission for battle? This was just because Sima Yi wanted to borrow Cao Rui's words to make his indignant officers fall in line. And now, he's spreading this news to our army to weaken our resolve."

In the midst of this discussion, the official Fei Yi had arrived. Zhuge Liang summoned him and asked what he was doing there. Fei Yi told him, "The Wei emperor Cao Rui personally led an army to repel the three-prong invasion by Dongwu. His official Man Chong devised a scheme that burned all of Dongwu's provisions and equipment. Also, the Dongwu troops were stricken by disease. Their commander Lu Xun sent a plan to his lord Sun Quan suggesting a two-prong assault. But his messenger was captured by the enemy. Because their plan had been leaked, the Dongwu army has retreated without accomplishing anything."

When he heard this, Zhuge Liang let out a long sigh, and all of a sudden, he collapsed to the ground. His officers worked frantically to bring him around. After a while, Zhuge Liang regained consciousness, but he sighed, "My mind is all in confusion. My old illness has returned. I fear I may not have long to live."

That night, Zhuge Liang went outside his tent and suddenly became very alarmed as he observed the night sky. Upon returning to his tent, he told his confidant, the officer Jiang Wei, "My end is near!"

"Why do you say that?" Jiang Wei asked.

"The guest stars in the Triple Platform are doubly bright, while the host stars are darkened. The ranged luminaries supporting them are dimmer still. With star patterns like this, my fate is clear."

But Jiang Wei said, "The stars may be so, but have you not a way to pray for a reversal?"

Well, as it turns out, Zhuge Liang does. I mean, sure, why not. The guy can do everything else, so what's the big deal with cheating death?

"I do have a way," he said, "but I don't know if heaven would answer my prayer. I want 49 armored soldiers. Have each man dress in black and carry a black flag. Station them in a circle around my tent. I will remain inside the tent and pray to the Northern Dipper. If the main lamp in my tent does not go out in the next seven days, then my life will be extended by a decade. But if the main lamp is extinguished,

then I am dead for sure. Everything I require shall be delivered by two young lads. Let no one else enter.”

So Jiang Wei quickly began making preparations as instructed. It was now the eighth month of the year 234. That night, the Milky Way sparkled brilliantly, and a crystalline dew formed in perfect droplets. The flags hung slack in the windless air. The night gong was silenced. Outside Zhuge Liang’s tent Jiang Wei and 49 armed men stood guard. Inside the tent, Zhuge Liang laid out fragrant flowers and sacrificial items. On the ground, he placed a ring of seven large lamps, surrounded by another ring of 49 small lamps. In the center of the rings, he placed one lamp that symbolized his life.

Bowing to heaven, Zhuge Liang now prayed. “I was born into an age of chaos. I would have gladly spent my years in the countryside. But the First Emperor paid me three visits and entrusted me with his son. So I have no choice but to continue humbly serving his cause, having vowed to bring the traitors to justice. I did not expect my guiding star would be on the brink of crashing and bringing my mortal hours to an end. With reverence I address this final text to the blue span above, hoping heaven will grant me its sympathetic attention and bend its rule by amending my allotted time so that I may fulfill my duties to the emperor, rescue the common people from their peril, restore the manners, morals, and traditions of the former era, and to perpetuate the holy rites of the Han. I dare not make such a prayer lightly. This comes from my heart.”

After this prayer, Zhuge Liang prostrated on the ground until dawn. The next day, he tended to business despite his illness, but he kept coughing up blood. Still, he pressed on. By day, he tended to the affairs of the army. By night, he paced in his tent and prayed to the Northern Dipper.

While this was going on, Sima Yi was staying put in his camp. One night, as he was observing the night sky, he suddenly rejoiced. He summoned the general Xiahou Ba (4) and said, “A guiding star has lost its position. Zhuge Liang must be sick and he will die soon. Lead 1,000 men to Wuzhang (3,4) Plain

and conduct recon. If the enemy is in disarray and does not come out to fight, that must mean Zhuge Liang is gravely ill. I will then attack.”

That night was the sixth night since Zhuge Liang began his prayer. The main lamp in his tent, the one that stood for his lifeline, remained bright, and Zhuge Liang was secretly rejoicing. Just one more night to go. With Jiang Wei watching inside the tent, Zhuge Liang, with hair hanging down, leaned on his sword and paced along the pattern of the Northern Dipper as a way to stabilize his guiding star.

Suddenly, loud shouts could be heard from outside. Zhuge Liang was just about to send someone out to see what’s going on when the general Wei Yan rushed into the tent and reported, “The enemy is here!”

But Wei Yan had stomped in so quickly that he had knocked over something. It was none other than the main lamp, and the flame went out.

Casting his sword aside, Zhuge Liang sighed, “Life and death are determined by fate. No prayer can change it!”

Realizing what he had just done, Wei Yan sank to his knees and begged for mercy. Jiang Wei was incensed and pulled out his sword, ready to kill Wei Yan. But Zhuge Liang stopped him.

“My life was destined to end. This was not his fault,” he said.

As Jiang Wei put away his sword, Zhuge Liang began coughing up blood again, and he collapsed onto his bed. But he told Wei Yan, “Sima Yi is guessing that I am sick, so he has sent some troops to test us. You must go out to fight them at once.”

So Wei Yan immediately led some troops out to take on Xiahou Ba. The sight of this resistance immediately sent Xiahou Ba running, and Wei Yan gave chase for about six or seven miles before returning, and Zhuge Liang ordered him to go back and defend his own camp.

With the immediately threat dealt with, Jiang Wei now entered Zhuge Liang's tent to check on him. Zhuge Liang said to him, "I had wanted to expend every last ounce of my strength to reclaim the Heartlands and reinvigorate the House of Han. Alas, it is heaven's will that I shall die soon. I have written down my life's knowledge in 24 scrolls, totaling 104,112 characters. They contain information on the Eight Principal Concerns, the Seven Precautions, the Six Dangers, and the Five Alerts. You alone, among all my officers, are fit to receive them. Do not treat them lightly."

Weeping, Jiang Wei kneeled and received the scrolls. Zhuge Liang then continued.

"I have designed a bow that releases multiple arrows at one time, but I haven't had the chance to test it. It fires 10 eight-inch arrows at one time. The sketches have been compiled into a volume. You can make the bow according to these designs."

After Jiang Wei received this, Zhuge Liang told him, "There is no need to worry too much about most of the paths in the Riverlands. But the area around Yinping (1,2) must be defended carefully. The terrain there may be treacherous, but in time, something will go wrong."

Having given Jiang Wei his final lessons, Zhuge Liang now summoned the general Ma Dai and whispered something in his ears. He then told Ma Dai, "After I am dead, proceed according to this plan."

Soon after Ma Dai left, the senior adviser Yang Yi (2) came in. Zhuge Liang called him close and handed him a silk pouch, along with this secret instruction: "Once I am dead, Wei Yan WILL rebel. When that happens and you are facing him on the battlefield, open this pouch, and someone WILL kill Wei Yan."

All these instructions given, Zhuge Liang lost consciousness until nightfall. In the meantime, news of his imminent death had been rushed back to the Shu capital. The emperor Liu Shan was shocked and immediately dispatched the official Li (3) Fu (2) to the front to ask Zhuge Liang important questions

about the affairs of state after he's gone. Li Fu (2) rushed to Wuzhang (3,4) Plain and told Zhuge Liang what he was doing there.

With tears rolling down his face, Zhuge Liang said, "Ill fate is taking me now, with my task half done. I have forsaken the emperor's cause and I have failed the empire. After my death, you all must serve and guide our lord with unstinting devotion. The existing laws must not be changed lightly. The people that I have been using must not be dismissed lightly. I have passed my military knowledge to Jiang Wei, and he will serve the country and continue my work. I am about to die, but I will write one last memorial to his majesty."

Having received these words from Zhuge Liang, Li Fu quickly took his leave to report back to the emperor. Zhuge Liang then struggled into his chariot and made a tour of each of his camps. As he did so, he could feel the autumn wind blowing into his face, chilling him to the bone.

"[Sigh] Never again will I take on traitors on the battlefield!" he lamented. "Oh infinite heaven, what could be sadder than this?!"

After many a sigh and lament, Zhuge Liang returned to his tent, whereupon his condition worsened. He now summoned the senior adviser Yang Yi and told him, "The likes of Wang Ping, Liao Hua, Zhang Yi (2), Zhang Yi (4), and Wu Yi (4) are all loyal and honorable men. They have withstood the trials of many battles and have rendered much service. They will be worthy of whatever you require of them. After I die, carry on just like before. Retreat slowly; do not rush. You are well-versed in strategy, so there's no need for me to give you too much instruction. Jiang Wei has the courage and the smarts to bring up the rear."

Weeping, Yang Yi prostrated and accepted the order. Zhuge Liang now called for brush, ink, and paper, and from his bed, he wrote his last memorial to the emperor. It said:

"Mortality is man's common lot; his years are numbered. Now death approaches, and I wish here to give full expression to my humble loyalty. I, Zhuge Liang, endowed with a nature both ordinary and

graceless, encountered a time of troubles. After I was granted military authority, major decisions were placed in my hands. I fielded armies for the Northern expedition but failed to reach the goal I sought. Now, stricken by unforeseen and incurable illness, I face imminent death, and I despair that my service to your majesty remains unfinished.

“I humbly beg that your majesty keep an honest mind and limit your desires, disciplining yourself and caring tenderly for the people. Serve the First Emperor in a spirit of filial piety; show humane generosity throughout your kingdom. Promote those not in the public eye to advance the cause of true excellence. Deny access to the vicious and depraved to strengthen the moral tone of the realm.

“My home in Chengdu, with its 800 mulberry trees and a meager plot of land, should provide for my children. On assignment outside the capital, I have acquired nothing of value. Beyond the food and clothing that your majesty’s officers have supplied, I have had no other income. Hence, after my death, no excess silks, no surplus wealth, nor any other violation of your majesty’s trust will be discovered.”

After writing this memorial, Zhuge Liang gave Yang Yi another set of instructions: “After I die, do not go into mourning. Make a large case. Put my corpse in it in a sitting position. Put seven grains of rice in my mouth and put a lit lamp under my feet. Have the army remain quiet as usual. Do not put out any mourning cries. This way, my guiding star will not fall, and my ghost will rise to help steady it. When Sima Yi sees that my star has not fallen, he will be suspicious. You can then order our camps in the rear to fall back first, then each camp will pull out gradually, one after another. If Sima Yi gives chase, do this and this, and he will flee for sure.”

That night, Zhuge Liang ordered his attendants to help him outside the tent. There, he looked up at the Northern Dipper and pointed at a star, saying, “That is my guiding star.”

As his men looked up in that direction, they saw a dim star that looked like it was about to fall out of the sky. Zhuge Liang pointed at it with his sword and uttered an incantation. After that, he quickly

returned to his tent and immediately lost consciousness. Just as his officers were in a panic, the court official Li Fu rushed back in. When he saw Zhuge Liang unconscious, he broke down and wept.

“I am too late! have failed my kingdom!”

To see what he meant by that, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.