

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 134.

Last time, Zhuge Liang was on his deathbed. He had just lost consciousness when the court official Li (3) Fu (2) returned. Li Fu had come earlier on behalf of the emperor to ask Zhuge Liang for final instructions, and now, for some reason, he was back. When Li Fu saw that Zhuge Liang was unconscious, he wept and cried that he had failed his kingdom.

But moments later, Zhuge Liang opened his eyes again. As he scanned the tent, he spotted Li Fu standing by his bed.

“I know why you have returned,” Zhuge Liang said.

“I came on his majesty’s command to ask your excellency who should be entrusted with your responsibilities after you have passed on,” Li Fu said. “But in my distress, I forgot to ask you, so I have returned.”

Really, man? You had one job. ONE JOB! But Zhuge Liang had no time for that now. He said in a low voice, “After my death, Jiang (2) Wan (3) may be entrusted with the responsibilities.”

“And what about after Jiang Wan?” Li Fu asked. “Who can succeed him?”

“Fei Yi would do,” Zhuge Liang whispered.

“And what about after Fei Yi? Who then?”

But there was no answer. When everyone stepped closer, they saw that Zhuge Liang had expired. It was 23rd day of the 8th month in the year 234, and Zhuge Liang was just 54 years old.

So yeah, oh my god! Zhuge Liang, THE pivotal character of the novel, THE indispensable man for the kingdom of Shu, is dead. You can bet we’re going to have a poem, or three, before we move on. The first comes from Du (4) Fu (3), a great Tang Dynasty poet who lived some 500 years after Zhuge Liang, and whose work we have already referenced elsewhere in the novel.

The star that dropped last night upon his camp
Announced to all: "The master fell this day."
No longer from his tent will orders flow;
The Hall of Fame will honor his success.
Three thousand followers left masterless,
The hosts in his mind's eye denied their day.
Nor, in the green woods, clear and sunlit,
Will Zhuge Liang's fine-voiced chants be heard again.

The next poem also comes from another Tang Dynasty poet, and it goes something like this:

Ensnared in hills, the master hid his tracks;
By twist of fate a sage king sued three times.
Only in Nanyang (2,2) could "fish" and "water" meet:
"The dragon flies to heavenly Han -- a wholesome rain."
To Liu Bei's heir Zhuge Liang gave zealous care;
Serving the state, he poured forth his loyal heart.
And still today his calls to war live on;
How many readers can restrain their tears?

And finally, our third poem comes from another Tang dynasty poet. Yeah, you get the feeling that Tang dynasty poets were crushing hard on Zhuge Liang.

To set the times aright he backed Liu Bei;
With earnest zeal he took the orphan king.
His splendid gifts surpassed Guan (3) Zhong (4) and Yue (4) Yi (4);
His unique schemes outshined those of Sun Zi and Wu (2) Qi (3).
How awe-inspiring his two-part call to war!
How proud and grand his Eightfold Ramparts plan!
Such a lord as this -- all virtues' height --
Had never been, nor ever was again.

We now interrupt this Zhuge Liang admiration society broadcast to bring you some reactions from Zhuge Liang's contemporaries. One, a former Shu commandant name Liao (4) Li (4), had been arrogant enough to think that his talent and renown were second only to Zhuge Liang, which seems like a farce since, hey who is this guy and why hasn't he been mentioned in the novel at all? Anyway, he was so full of himself that he felt his talent was being under-utilized and he began to ignore his responsibilities. That led Zhuge Liang to strip him of his position and send him into exile. When Liao (4) Li (4) heard that Zhuge Liang had died, he wept and said, "Now I will forever be apart from the Han!"

Similarly, Li (3) Yan (2), the senior official who was exiled after concocting a bogus emergency to lure Zhuge Liang back from the front in order to cover up his own failings, literally cried himself to death upon hearing of Zhuge Liang's passing. Was he grieving for Zhuge Liang? Or was he worried about the future of the kingdom without the man who had been singlehandedly holding it together? Well, not quite. You see, Li Yan had been hoping all this time that Zhuge Liang would one day restore him to his position and give him a chance to atone for his mistake. Well, that wasn't going to happen now.

So I'm just going to point out right here that it strikes me as really odd that the two contemporaries whose reactions the novel mentions in the immediate aftermath of Zhuge Liang's death were both men

whom he had sent into exile and who were saddened by his death because of how it would affect their own futures. Hmm.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand. The night that Zhuge Liang died, the heaven despaired and the earth grieved. Even the moon waned. Yeah I know. Just roll with it. Acting in accordance with Zhuge Liang's final instructions, Jiang Wei and Yang Yi did not put out the call of mourning. Instead, they dressed Zhuge Liang's corpse and placed it in a large case. They assigned 300 trusted soldiers to guard it. They then sent out secret orders for all the camps to pull out one by one, with Wei Yan bringing up the rear.

Over in the camp of their enemy, Sima Yi was observing the night sky when he noticed a large, ruddy star whose light ended in a horn. This star streamed from the northeast toward the southwest and crashed in the vicinity of the Shu camp. There, it lurched and rose three times before landing with a low rumble.

"Zhuge Liang is dead!" Sima Yi rejoiced with surprise. He immediately mobilized his army to go on the offensive. But just as he set foot outside his camp, he paused.

"Zhuge Liang is adept at wizardry," he thought to himself. "He must be faking his own death to try to trick me because I have been refusing to fight. If I give chase, I would fall into his trap."

So instead, Sima Yi ordered his troops back to camp and only sent the general Xiahou Ba (4) to lead a few dozen riders to Wuzhang Plain on a recon mission.

Meanwhile, in the Shu camp, the general Wei Yan had just awoken from a strange dream. He dreamed that two horns had grown from his head. When he woke up, he wasn't sure whether that was a good or bad omen. The next day, Zhao (4) Zhi (2), the commander of the infantry, dropped by, and Wei

Yan asked him if he could explain the dream, since Zhao Zhi (2) apparently was quite good at such things.

After thinking on it for a bit, Zhao Zhi (2) replied, "This is a great omen. The unicorn and the dragon, both creatures of good fortune, have horns on their head. This means you're about to undergo a transformation and really take off."

Wei Yan was delighted by this fortune-cookie message and promised to thank Zhao Zhi (2) properly if the prediction came true. After taking his leave, Zhao Zhi had not gone far before running into the court official Fei Yi. Zhao Zhi relayed his conversation with Wei Yan and told Fei Yi, "This was not actually a lucky omen, but I was afraid Wei Yan would take offense if I told him the truth, so I explained it away by pointing to unicorns and dragons."

"How do you know that it's not a good omen?" Fei Yi asked.

"The character for horn is made up of the characters for "knife" and "use". To have a knife used on your head is a horrible omen!"

Fei Yi then told Zhao Zhi to keep this to himself, while Fei Yi went to see Wei Yan. After dismissing everyone else, Fei Yi told Wei Yan, "Last night around midnight, his excellency left this world. As he lay dying, he instructed us time and again to have you bring up the rear to keep Sima Yi at bay while our army retreats gradually and without raising the call of mourning. Here is the tally of command. You may mobilize your troops at once."

But not so fast. Wei Yan now asked who was in charge now that Zhuge Liang was dead.

"His excellency's responsibilities have been entrusted to Yang Yi," Fei Yi told him. "As for his strategies and military knowledge, those have been passed to Jiang Wei. This tally of command was sent to you by Yang Yi."

Now THIS did not sit well with Wei Yan.

“The prime minister may be dead, but I am still here,” he said. “Yang Yi is nothing more than an adviser. How can he shoulder such great responsibilities? He is only suitable for escorting the prime minister’s remains back to the Riverlands for burial. I will lead our army and attack Sima Yi, and I swear that I shall succeed. How can we abandon the great affair of the state just because of the prime minister?”

“But his excellency’s dying instructions were to retreat for the time being,” Fei Yi countered. “We must obey.”

Now, Wei Yan got mad.

“If he had listened to my plan way back when, we would have taken Chang’an by now! My present rank is General of the Forward Army, the Chief General Who Conquers the West, and the Lord of Nanzheng (2,4). How can I submit myself to bringing up the rear for some lowly adviser?!”

“That may be, general, but you must not act rashly and invite ridicule,” Fei Yi said. “Let me go see Yang Yi and explain the situation to him and convince him to yield command of the army to you.”

Wei Yan was appeased by that proposal, so he agreed to wait. But of course Fei Yi had no intention of convincing Yang Yi to transfer command to Wei Yan. He was just stalling for time. As soon as he took his leave, he rushed to the main camp to tell Yang Yi everything.

Yang Yi said, “On his deathbed, the prime minister told me in secret that Wei Yan would definitely harbor ulterior motives. I sent him that tally of command as a test, and it’s just as his excellency had predicted. I will have Jiang Wei bring up the rear instead.”

So Yang Yi led the main army and departed first with Zhuge Liang’s coffin, while Jiang Wei brought up the rear, retreating methodically just as Zhuge Liang instructed.

As for Wei Yan, he waited around his camp, but when Fei Yi did not return after a long time, he began to get suspicious. So he sent the general Ma Dai and about a dozen men to go check things out.

They reported back that, “Uh, the rear column was being commanded by Jiang Wei, and most of the front column had already fallen back into the gorge.”

Wei Yan was incensed. “How dare that useless pedant play me?! I will kill him!”

He then turned to Ma Dai and asked, “Sir, are you willing to help me?”

Ma Dai answered, “I have long despised Yang Yi, and I am willing to help you attack him.”

This delighted Wei Yan, and he mobilized all the troops under his command and headed South.

A little while later, the Wei general Xiahou Ba arrived on Wuzhang (3,4) Plain and did not see a single soul. He hurriedly back and told Sima Yi that all the Shu forces had retreated. Stamping his foot, Sima Yi said, “Zhuge Liang really IS dead! We must give chase at once!”

But Xiahou Ba checked him. “Commander, you must not go out lightly. Allow me to go first.”

But Sima Yi said that he had to go on this mission personally. So he rounded up his troops and set out with his two sons, making a mad dash for Wuzhang Plain. With their banners waving and war cries echoing, they charged into the Shu camp and found no one.

Sima Yi now said to his sons, “You two go round up more troops. I will lead this army and continue forward.”

So while his sons went off to get more troops, Sima Yi personally led his forces in pursuit of the enemy. When they arrived at the foot of a hill, they saw the Shu forces not too far ahead. The Wei troops now gave chase with everything they’ve got. But just then, an explosive went off from behind a hill, followed by loud cries of battle. All of a sudden, the Shu forces ahead turned around and began charging back this way. Meanwhile, a giant banner emerged from the trees, bearing the words, “Zhuge Liang, Prime Minister of the Han and the Marquis of Wuxiang (3,1).”

A stunned Sima Yi gathered himself and looked more closely. He saw a few dozen Shu officers escorting a four-wheel chariot, and in the chariot was none other than Zhuge Liang, clad in his usual attire of crane-pattern robe, head scarf, and feather fan.

“Zhuge Liang is still alive! I have fallen for his trap!” Sima Yi exclaimed in shock.

As he turned and fled, he could hear the Shu general Jiang Wei shouting from behind, “Rebels, stop! You have fallen for his excellency’s trick!” That sent a shiver down the spine of every Wei soldier, and they scattered, leaving behind their armor, helmets, and weapons as they stampeded over each other to get away. Countless Wei soldiers were trampled to death in the chaos.

Sima Yi, meanwhile, was spurring his horse and fleeing in terror. He had gone about 15 miles before two Wei officers caught up from behind and grabbed a hold of his rein, shouting, “Commander, do not be afraid!”

“Is it still there?” Sima Yi said as his hands reached for his head, just to make sure that it was still attached to his neck.

“Commander, don’t worry. The Shu soldiers are long gone,” the officers replied.

Only after catching his breath for a while did Sima Yi notice that these two guys were his vanguard generals Xiahou Ba and Xiahou Hui (4). Now, he slowly let go of his rein, and the three of them found their way back to camp along some backroads and sent out officers to scout the area.

Two days later, some local civilians came and told Sima Yi, “When the Shu forces retreated back into the gorge, the sound of their mourning shook the earth, and they hoisted white banners in their ranks. Zhuge Liang really is dead and only left Jiang Wei and a thousand men to bring up the rear. The Zhuge Liang you saw the day before was a wooden statue.”

So yeah. This elaborate Weekend at Bernie’s hoax was all part of Zhuge Liang’s final scheme, the one he passed on to his officers before he died. And it worked like a charm.

“[Sigh] I could read him in life, but not in death.” Sima Yi lamented.

And this little episode gave rise to a later saying among the people of the Riverlands that has persisted to this day: A dead Zhuge could put a live Sima to flight. And a poet later wrote:

That night from heaven’s pole a fireball fell,

But Sima Yi fled for fear his foe lived still.

And western mockers still remember how

He wondered if his head were on or no!

One last ridicule from his dead foe notwithstanding, Sima Yi now gave chase again, confident that Zhuge Liang was really, really dead. But by now, the Shu forces were long gone. He returned to camp and told his officers, “With Zhuge Liang dead, we can rest easy at last!”

So he now led his army back home. Along the way, they saw Zhuge Liang’s old camp sites. Seeing how organized the camps were, Sima Yi sighed and said, “He was truly a rare talent!”

And better yet, a rare talent who was now no more. So Sima Yi went back to the city of Chang’an, stationed his officers at various key locations, and then returned to the Wei capital Luoyang to report to his emperor.

Meanwhile, as the Shu forces retreated toward the entrance to the Saber Pass, they dropped their pretense and raised the call of mourning. All the rank-and-file soldiers stamped their feet and struck themselves as they wept bitterly. In fact, they wailed so hard that some of them literally cried themselves to death.

As the front column approached the entrance to the Saber Pass, they were suddenly greeted with flames that roared toward the sky and cries that shook the earth as an army blocked their way. The

stunned troops quickly sent word to Yang Yi, and he dispatched scouts to see what's going on. They came back and reported that it was the general Wei Yan. He had burned the Saber Pass gallery road and was now blocking the way forward.

"When the prime minister was alive, he expected Wei Yan would rebel in time," Yang Yi said. "And now it has proven true. What should we do now that he has cut off our path home?"

Fei Yi said, "Wei Yan no doubt has sent a message to the emperor accusing us of treason. That is why he has destroyed our way home. We must also send a message to his majesty to let him know that it is Wei Yan who is rebelling, and then figure out how to defeat him."

Jiang Wei now chimed in. "There is a small peak near here. Its terrain is treacherous but there is a road through it that takes us to the other side of the Saber Pass."

So they immediately wrote a memorial to the emperor and directed their army toward this backroad.

Meanwhile, in the Shu capital Chengdu, the emperor Liu Shan was on pins and needles over the condition of his prime minister. Then one night, he had a dream in which he saw the Damask Screen Hills outside the capital collapse. He woke up quite startled, and as soon as the sun rose, he assembled his court and asked them to interpret the dream.

Qiao (2) Zhou (1), the court historian and astrologer, said, "Last night I was observing the sky and saw a red star falling from the northeast toward the southwest. That portends grave news for the prime minister. And now your majesty's dream fits right in with that omen."

Well, that's not helping Liu Shan calm down at all. Just then, the official Li Fu (2) returned. Kowtowing with his head on the floor and tears flowing from his eyes, Li Fu informed Liu Shan that Zhuge Liang was already dead and relayed his dying words.

“Heaven has doomed me!” Liu Shan said as he broke into a loud wail. He cried so hard that he collapsed on his seat and had to be helped into his quarters. His mother, the empress dowager, also cried nonstop when she heard the news. All the court officials were grieved, and all the civilians wept as well. Basically, the entire kingdom went into mourning.

In the midst of this melancholy, which dragged on for days, Liu Shan received a memorial from Wei Yan, informing him that Yang Yi had rebelled. Liu Shan was stunned. The memorial said:

“You servant Wei Yan, the Chief General Who Conquers the West and the Lord of Nanzheng (2,4), bows before you in fear and offers this statement as I tremble. Yang Yi, usurping complete military authority, has led the army in rebellion. He has seized the prime minister’s sacred coffin and means to bring our enemies into our territory. I have burned the gallery road and stationed troops in defense.”

Upon reading the memorial, Liu Shan was a little puzzled. He said, “Wei Yan is a valiant warrior, more than a match for the likes of Yang Yi. So why would he burn the gallery road?”

His mother, the empress dowager, said, “I have often heard the First Emperor say that Zhuge Liang recognized that Wei Yan had the look of a traitor and often wanted to kill him. But he kept Wei Yan around on account of his bravery. We should not believe Wei Yan’s accusations about Yang Yi too easily. Yang Yi is a scholar. If the prime minister saw it fit to make him a senior adviser, then he must be reliable. If we only listen to Wei Yan, that would no doubt force Yang Yi and company to defect to Wei. This matter requires careful consideration, not rash action.”

While the court was busy debating how to respond, another memorial arrived, this one from Yang Yi. It said: “Yang Yi, senior adviser and general in charge of the retreat, bows before you in fear and offers this statement as I tremble. On his deathbed, the prime minister entrusted me with his responsibilities and instructed me to carry on according to his established practices, from which I have not dared to deviate. He ordered Wei Yan to bring up the rear on our retreat and appointed Jiang Wei as my second in command. But Wei Yan has disobeyed his excellency’s final instructions. He led the forces

under his command into Hanzhong on his own and burned the gallery road. He even tried to abduct his excellency's coffin. His intentions are not proper. Because he has turned against us so quickly, I had to alert your highness at once."

Upon reading Yang Yi's message, the empress dowager asked the court officials what they thought. The senior official Jiang (2) Wan (3) said, "In my unworthy opinion, even though Yang Yi is impatient and intolerant of others, he nevertheless managed supplies and devised strategies for many years under the late prime minister. And when his excellency was nearing his end, he entrusted Yang Yi with great responsibilities. That shows Yang Yi is not the kind to rebel. As for Wei Yan, he is vain and arrogant about his accomplishments, and everyone defers to him, except Yang Yi. So Wei Yan has been holding a grudge against him. Wei Yan must have been disgruntled that Yang Yi was given command of the army, so he burned the gallery road to cut off their path home. And now he has sent a message to accuse Yang Yi of treason. I am willing to stake my entire family's lives on Yang Yi's loyalty. But I would not dare to do so for Wei Yan."

Another official, Dong (2) Yun (3), also chimed in. "Wei Yan is vain and disgruntled and has often voiced his displeasure. Fear of the prime minister was the only reason he had not rebelled. Now that his excellency has just passed away, it is no surprise that Wei Yan would rebel. As for Yang Yi, his excellency employed him for his strong talent and aptitude for learning. He would not turn against us."

Liu Shan now asked what should be done if Wei Yan was indeed rebelling. Jiang Wan replied, "His excellency was always suspicious of him, so he must have left instructions for Yang Yi. Otherwise, why would Yang Yi fall back into the gorge? Wei Yan will fall for the trap. There's no need for your highness to be concerned."

So, even after Zhuge Liang had died, the answer to "what should we do" was still, "Zhuge Liang has taken care of it."

Soon after this exchange, another message arrived from Wei Yan, repeating the accusation that Yang Yi was rebelling. That was followed by another memorial from Yang Yi, lobbing the same charge at Wei Yan again. This he-said-he-said thing went on for several messages before the senior official Fei (4) Yi (1) returned to court and confirmed that it was Wei Yan who had rebelled.

“In that case,” Liu Shan said, “we should sent Dong (3) Yun (2) to go and pretend to help him reconcile with Yang Yi.”

While Dong Yun set out on his fake diplomatic mission, let’s go check in on Wei Yan. After he burned the gallery road, he garrisoned his troops on the south end of the gorge, controlling the passage. He figured that he had all his bases covered. But unbeknownst to him, Yang Yi and Jiang Wei had snuck around to his rear. Yang Yi was concerned about control of the key region of Hanzhong, so he sent his vanguard general He (2) Ping (2) with 3,000 troops to go take on Wei Yan, while Yang Yi and Jiang Wei escorted Zhuge Liang’s coffin and led the main army toward Hanzhong.

As He Ping headed toward Wei Yan’s location, his men beat drums and shouted battle cries. Word soon reached Wei Yan that Yang Yi had sent his vanguard to attack him. Wei Yan was enraged and immediately led his troops out to face He Ping. After they lined up, the two generals traded insults.

“Where is that traitor Wei Yan?!” He Ping shouted.

Wei Yan shot back, “You are helping Yang Yi rebel. How dare you call me a traitor?!”

To which He Ping replied, “His excellency’s body is not even cold yet. How dare you rebel?!”

He Ping then pointed at Wei Yan’s troops and said, “You men are all from the Riverlands, and your families are all in the Riverlands. When his excellency was alive, he treated you well. So you should not help that traitor now. Go home and wait for your rewards.”

When the rank-and-file under Wei Yan’s command heard those words, they all said, you know what? That sounds really good, a lot better than being out here in a fight against our own countrymen. So the

majority of them immediately deserted. Wei Yan was furious and rode straight for He Ping. After a few bouts, He Ping pretended to flee. When Wei Yan gave chase, he was greeted with a shower of arrows. When he turned around, he saw his own troops scattering in all directions. Enraged by their desertion, Wei Yan chased them and cut down a few, but the rest just kept running no matter how much he demanded that they stop and fall back into line.

So what's Wei Yan going to do now? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!