

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 137.

Last time, the Wei emperor Cao Rui had died, and his 8-year-old son, Cao Fang (1), ascended to the throne. Being 8, he needed some adults to help him manage things. Those adults were Sima Yi and Cao Shuang, the son of Sima Yi's former colleague and sometimes-frenemy Cao Zhen. Things started out well enough between Sima Yi and Cao Shuang, until somebody reminded Cao Shuang how Sima Yi had showed up his late father time after time, though really, it was his father who usually did the heavy lifting in humiliating himself.

In any case, Cao Shuang decided to elbow Sima Yi out of the way, and he did so in a very cloak-and-dagger way. He convinced the emperor to promote Sima Yi to imperial guardian, a lofty title that just so happened to carry zero military authority. So Cao Shuang, as regent, hoarded command of the army, and with that came total control of the court.

In response, Sima Yi, well, just decided to stay home on account of ... umm ... illness. And his two sons also retreated from public life, settling into private lives of leisure instead. So now Cao Shuang, with a firm grasp on control of the court, spent his days drinking and making merry with his entourage. Their clothing and daily wares were the equal of those used by the court. Whenever a tribute of exotic curios arrived for the emperor, Cao Shuang skimmed the best for himself before sending the rest to the emperor. His residence was filled with pretty women, and even that wasn't enough. A eunuch from the inner palace wanted to suck up to Cao Shuang, so he picked seven or eight of the late emperor's attending ladies and secretly sent them to Cao Shuang. As you can imagine, getting busy with women who had served your former lord was a huge impropriety, but Cao Shuang didn't care. He just piled on. He chose 30 or 40 daughters from good families to serve as his private singers and dancers. He also built a multi-level painted gallery, commissioned gold and silver wares, and hired hundreds of artisans to work day and night on things to tingle the senses. So basically, he was living the debauched life of a spoiled, myopic aristocrat. Things usually end well for those people in this novel, right?

Another thing that Cao Shuang began doing quite frequently was to go on hunting expeditions outside the city with his entourage. One of his younger brothers told him, “You hold too much power to go hunting all the time. If somebody makes a move against you, it’ll be too late for regrets.”

But Cao Shuang scoffed. “I control the military. What concern is there?” So he dismissed cautions from his brother and another confidant and kept up with his hunting. And in this way, 10 years passed. Yes, you heard right. Ten years passed, just like that. See, I told you the timeline gets really compressed from here on out.

So, we’re now in the year 249, a decade after the young emperor Cao Fang ascended to the throne. All power rested with Cao Shuang. As for Sima Yi, Cao Shuang had kind of lost track of the man over the years. After all, Sima Yi had basically disappeared from public life years ago because of his health.

Around this time, the emperor had appointed one of Cao Shuang’s confidants, a man named Li (3) Sheng (4), as the imperial protector of Jing Province. Before Li Sheng (4) headed off to his new post, Cao Shuang told him to use this as an excuse to go pay Sima Yi a visit and see what the old man was up to these days.

So Li Sheng went to Sima Yi’s residence. After a few moments, he was invited into Sima Yi’s chamber. There, he found Sima Yi on his bed, propped up by two servant girls, with the covers over him, and his hair hanging down.

Li Sheng approached the bed and said, “Imperial guardian. I have not seen you in a while. But I didn’t expect to find your illness so severe. His majesty has appointed me as imperial protector of Jing Province, and I have come to pay my respects before I go.”

To this, Sima Yi replied, “Bing Province is near the northern border. You must prepare well for your journey.”

“No, I am the imperial protector of JING Province, not BING Province.”

“What? You just came from Bing Province?” Sima Yi replied with a smile.

“No, JING Province!”

“Ohhhh, you just came from JING Province!”

Flabbergasted by this exchange, Li Sheng turned and asked the attendants, “How did the imperial guardian deteriorate so badly?”

The attendants told him that Sima Yi was going deaf, which, yeah no duh. So Li Sheng asked for brush and paper and wrote out what he wanted to say. Sima Yi took a look and laughed.

“I am so sick that my hearing has gone,” he said. “Take care on your journey.”

Then, he simply gestured toward his mouth, and his maids served him soup. As soon as they fed him a spoonful, Sima Yi started coughing nonstop, spewing soup all over himself.

“I am old, weak, and sick,” he told Li Sheng. “My death draws near. My two sons are no good; I hope, sir, you will keep them in line. If you see the regent, please put in a good word for my sons.”

When he finished speaking those words, Sima Yi slumped over on his bed, heaving and panting. Li Sheng took his leave and reported back to Cao Shuang, who was delighted.

“If that old man dies, I would have no concerns!” Cao Shuang rejoiced.

A day later, Cao Shuang suggested to the emperor Cao Fang that he and all the court officials should go to the ancestral tombs to make an offering to his late father. Cao Shuang and his three brothers, along with his confidants, accompanied the emperor. But as they were about to leave the city, one of his confidants, an official named Huan (2) Fan (4), grabbed Cao Shuang’s reins and said, “My lord, you control the imperial guard. It’s not wise for you and all your brothers to leave the city. What if something goes wrong here?”

But Cao Shuang pointed at Huan (2) Fan (4) with his whip and scolded him. “Who would dare to rebel?! Stop it with your nonsense!”

So Cao Shuang, his entourage, the emperor, and most of the court officials headed off for a day of sacrifices and, more importantly, some good hunting.

As soon as they left the city, something began to stir. So yeah, that whole illness thing with Sima Yi was just an act. He had been lying low all these years, waiting for his opportunity to make a move. When Li Sheng visited him a day earlier, Sima Yi had put on a show so that Li Sheng would tell Cao Shuang how he was on death's doorstep and therefore lull Cao Shuang into complacency. Now that Cao Shuang and his faction had vacated the city, Sima Yi sprang into action. He immediately called up the officers who had fought by his side in the old wars, as well as several dozen commanders in his own household, and of course, his two sons.

First, he ordered two officials to go occupy the camps of Cao Shuang's forces, under the pretense of acting on Cao Shuang's authority. Next, Sima Yi led a group of veteran court officials to go see the empress dowager. They told her that Cao Shuang had betrayed the trust of the former emperor and was mucking things up in the kingdom, and that his offense warranted his removal from power.

The empress dowager was blindsided by this and said, "His majesty is out. What is to be done?"

Sima Yi replied, "Your servant has prepared a memorial to his majesty and a plan to exterminate the traitors. Do not worry."

Well, the empress dowager knew that it wasn't really up to her anyway. Sima Yi was just informing her so that he could get some official cover for the actions he's about to take. She had no choice but to give her consent.

Official sanction in hand, Sima Yi immediately ordered the grand commandant, Jiang (3) Ji (4), and the chief of the Secretariat, Sima Fu (2), to draft a memorial to the emperor, which he then sent to the Inner Bureau to be delivered to the emperor outside the city. Sima Yi, meanwhile, led a large force to go occupy the armory.

By now, word of Sima Yi's movements had reached Cao Shuang's household, and Cao Shuang's wife was in a panic, wondering what Sima Yi was doing mobilizing troops while the court was away. One of her guards told her that he would find out. So he led a few dozen archers to the tower above the main gate. There, they saw Sima Yi and his troops approaching. The archers let loose their arrows, keeping Sima Yi and his forces at bay.

From the rear of the column, one of Sima Yi's officers yelled, "The imperial guardian is acting on behalf of the state! Hold your arrows!" He shouted this three times, and finally, the archers stopped firing. Taking advantage of the moment, Sima Yi, protected by his second son Sima Zhao (1), rushed through the gate. They went outside the city and garrisoned on the bank of the River Luo (4), guarding the pontoon bridge that served as the passage back into the city.

While all this was happening, one of Cao Shuang's advisers, a man named Lu (3) Zhi (1), had caught wind of what was happening, and he hurried over to see the military strategist Xin (1) Chang (3) to discuss what to do. Xin (1) Chang (3) suggested that they should lead the troops under their command and break out of the city to go join up with the emperor. Lu (3) Zhi (1) agreed, so Xin Chang (3) rushed into his private quarters to get ready. There, he ran into his older sister, and she asked why he was in such a hurry.

"The emperor is out, and the imperial guardian has barred the city gates," Xin Chang said. "He must be plotting a coup."

But his sister said, "Sima Yi might not be plotting a coup against the throne. He might just be after Cao Shuang."

When Xin Chang said, well, who the heck knows, his sister told him, "Cao Shuang is no match for Sima Yi. He will lose for sure."

Xin Chang now asked, "But Lu Zhi (1) has asked me to go with him to join the emperor. Should I go?"

To this, his sister replied, "A man's primary duty is to his office. Even a stranger in trouble deserves our sympathy. To deny the service owed to one's master is an evil thing to do."

Thus persuaded, Xin Chang went with Lu Zhi. They and a few dozen riders stormed their way through the city gates and fled. Word soon reached Sima Yi, and Sima Yi was concerned that Huan (2) Fan (4), the guy who had told Cao Shuang that he really shouldn't leave the city, would follow suit. Sima Yi knew Huan Fan was a clever man and wanted to have him in his own service. So he immediately sent someone to summon Huan Fan.

Huan Fan consulted with his son, who told him, "The emperor is outside the city. You should go out through the south gate."

Huan Fan agreed, so he rode to the south gate. But by the time he got there, the gates had already been shut. Now, the officer guarding the south gate used to serve under Huan Fan, so they were on good terms. Huan Fan now pulled a document written on a bamboo sliver from his sleeve and told the guard, who was watching from the top of the wall,, "The empress dowager has decreed that you must open the gates."

The guard said ok, but I need to examine that bamboo first, but Huan Fan now put on a stern face and said, "You used to be my subordinate. How dare you act this way toward me?!"

Amazingly enough, that worked. The guard said alright alright, I'll open the gates. As soon as the gates swung open, Huan Fan galloped through. He then turned around and said to the officer, "The imperial guardian is rebelling. You should come with me at once."

The officer, who was loyal to Sima Yi, was like, oh crap! I KNEW I should've inspected that bamboo before letting him out. He tried to give chase, but Huan Fan was long gone.

When word of this reached Sima Yi, he fretted about losing a talent. "The 'Store of Wisdom' has been emptied; what should we do?" he said.

But Jiang Ji, the grand commandant, just waved it off. “A horse that is content in its stall is worthless. Huan Fan would not have helped us anyway.”

So Sima Yi turned his attention to Cao Shuang instead. He summoned a couple of trusted officials and told them, “Go see Cao Shuang and tell him that all I want is to take away his military command, nothing else.”

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the city, Cao Shuang was having a good ol’ time shooting animals when suddenly word arrived that, umm, there’s been a coup and a memorial from Sima Yi had arrived. Cao Shuang was so shocked that he almost fell off his horse. A messenger from the Inner Bureau now kneeled in front of the emperor and presented the memorial from Sima Yi. Cao Shuang opened it and ordered an official to read it out loud. It’s a long memorial, but it basically said Cao Shuang had betrayed the trust of the former emperor and that he was trying to concentrate all power in his own hands with an eye toward usurpation. Sima Yi then went on to say that other senior officials, such as Jiang Ji (4) and Sima Fu (2), agree that Cao Shuang should no longer be in charge of policing the imperial palace. And oh yeah, the empress dowager has signed on, too. So I have ordered that Cao Shuang and his brothers be stripped of their military authority and returned to merely lords. And I’ve got an army out by the pontoon bridge at the River Luo (4) to watch for any trouble. You know, just in case these guys try to make your highness do anything you don’t want to.

After hearing this memorial, the emperor Cao Fang turned to Cao Shuang and said, “The imperial guardian has made his statement. What’s your response?”

Well, Cao Shuang was all in a panic, and all he could do was look at his two brothers and ask them for ideas. One of them said, “I have often warned you, brother, but you refused to listen. And now look where it’s gotten us. Sima Yi is wiley beyond comparison; not even Zhuge Liang could beat him, much less the three of us. Why don’t we tie ourselves up and surrender, so that he may spare our lives?”

Just then, Lu Zhi (1) and Xin (1) Chang (3), the two guys who stormed out of the city to warn Cao Shuang, arrived and told him, “The city is under tight watch. Sima Yi has garrisoned the pontoon bridge at the River Luo (4). There is no way to get back in. You must decide your course of action quickly.”

Just then, Huan (2) Fan (4) also arrived, and he told Cao Shuang, “Since Sima Yi has rebelled, why don’t you move the emperor to the city of Xuchang, and call in troops from outside to attack Sima Yi?”

“My whole family is still inside the city,” Cao Shuang replied. “How can I go somewhere else to seek help?”

To this, Huan Fan replied, “Even an ordinary man tries to survive when his life is threatened. Your lordship attends the emperor and commands the realm. Who would dare to not answer your call? How can you just go back to meet your doom?”

But Cao Shuang could not make up his mind and instead was so conflicted that he cried. Huan Fan was in no mood for this. He now urged Cao Shuang on.

“Our stay at Xuchang would just be temporary. But there is more than enough grain there to last us for several years. My lord, you have forces stationed elsewhere, just south of the pass. You just need to summon them, and they will flock to your banner. I have brought you your seal of command. You must act quickly. If you delay, all is lost!”

And yet, Cao Shuang still could not make up his mind. Instead, he told his men, “Don’t push me. Let me think it through.”

Momentarily, the two envoys from Sima Yi arrived and told Cao Shuang, “The imperial guardian just felt that you held too much power. All he wants is to strip you of your military command, nothing else. You can return to the city at once.”

To this, Cao Shuang said nothing. Just then, another envoy arrived, and he told Cao Shuang, "The imperial guardian has sworn by the River Luo that he has no ulterior motives. I also have a letter from the grand commandant Jiang Ji. General, just give up your military command, and you can go home."

Cao Shuang was now starting to lean toward going home, but Huan Fan said, "It's do or die time. Do not listen to outsiders and bring doom upon yourself!"

Well, Cao Shuang was as indecisive as ever. In fact, it took him all night, and he still could not make up his mind. One moment, he would pull out his sword and grip it hard, as if he were about to declare that he had made up his mind and was ready to spring into action. But the next moment, he would sigh and retreat back into thought. He cried from dusk till dawn and still had not reached a decision, even though everyone else could plainly see that going home under the current circumstances would be suicide.

At dawn, Huan Fan entered Cao Shuang's tent and asked if he had reached a decision. Cao Shuang cast his sword to the ground and sighed.

"I will not go to war! I am willing to give up my rank and settle for just being a rich man!"

Huan Fan was in disbelief over how naive Cao Shuang was. Dude, do you REALLY think Sima Yi was going to let you just live on as a rich man? As Huan Fan walked out of the tent, he wept and lamented, "Cao Zhen often boasted of his own shrewd planning. But these three sons of his! How worthless they are!"

Of course, those of you who remember Cao Zhen's ... umm ... shrewd planning would probably say that the apples didn't fall far from the tree. But such was the state of the Cao clan, that the career of someone like Cao Zhen was being remembered as the good ol' days.

So now that Cao Shuang had decided to capitulate, he had to first give up his seal of command, the seal that Huan Fan had snuck out of the city. One of his loyal advisers gripped the seal and would not let

go, crying, "My lord! If you give up your command and surrender today, you will end up under the executioner's blade!"

"No, the imperial guardian will not break his promise to me," Cao Shuang said. I guess he's just lying to himself now. But in anycase, Cao Shuang handed his seal to Sima Yi's envoys. And no sooner had they departed with that seal did the troops scatter. No seal, no army.

Cao Shuang now only had a few riders with him. When they returned to the pontoon bridge outside the capital, Sima Yi sent out word that Cao Shuang and his brothers were to return to their residence for the time being, while everyone else was taken into custody while the emperor, or you know, Sima Yi, decided their fate.

When Cao Shuang and his brothers entered the city, no one was there to greet them. Everybody could sense a sinking ship, and nobody wanted to go down with it.

As a dispirited Huan Fan approached the bridge, Sima Yi pointed and asked, "Sir, what's wrong?"

Huan Fan said nothing, and just walked into the city with his head hanging low. Sima Yi then welcomed the emperor back into the capital.

As for Cao Shuang and his brothers, after they went home, Sima Yi locked their gates from the outside with big locks and ordered 800 townsmen to surround their residence and keep watch. Cao Shuang was understandably depressed. One of his brothers now suggested, "We don't have any food at home. You should write to Sima Yi and ask him to lend us some food. If he does so, then obviously he harbors no ill intentions toward us."

Cao Shuang did as he suggested, and Sima Yi immediately sent over a large shipment of grain. This delighted Cao Shuang. "Sima Yi never had any desire to harm me!" he said. And so he stopped fretting about Sima Yi.

Oh Cao Shuang. You really aren't that bright, are you? While Cao Shuang was entertaining fantasies about being allowed to go on living as just a rich man, Sima Yi was busy plotting his demise. Sima Yi had arrested the eunuch who had been sending Cao Shuang bribes, and after a sufficient amount of torture, the guy confessed to whatever Sima Yi needed him to confess to, namely that Cao Shuang and his confidants were plotting to usurp the throne.

Written confession in hand, Sima Yi now interrogated Cao Shuang's supposed accomplices, and they all confessed that they had been plotting to make their move that March, which was just a month away. Boy, it sure was a good thing that Sima Yi snuffed this out when he did, huh?

Sima Yi was then approached by the officer who was duped by Huan Fan into letting him out of the city. The guy told Sima Yi that Huan Fan had accused him of rebelling. Sima Yi's response? "Those who accuse falsely must be punished for the alleged crime." So yeah, I wasn't colluding! You are colluding. You colluder and spreader of fake news! So Huan Fan got thrown into prison as well.

So now, with a bunch of confessions in hand, Sima Yi had Cao Shuang, his brothers, and their accomplices all marched out to the marketplace and executed. He then exterminated their clans and confiscated their wealth for the treasury.

There was one member of the clan that avoided the executioner's blade. She was the wife of one of Cao Shuang's half brothers. Her husband had died early and she was widowed at a young age without any children. Her father had wanted her to remarry, but as a sign of her vow of chastity and devotion to her late husband's family, she sliced off an ear. And then, when Cao Shuang and his clan were executed, her father again tried to arrange another marriage for her. But she again refused, and this time, she cut off her own nose to show her determination. And also, yeah what man would have me now?

Her family was shocked by her latest move and said, "Life in the world is as light as the dust that moves from leaf to leaf. So why must you subject yourself to such pain? Besides, your late husband's clan has been exterminated by Sima Yi, so for whom are you preserving your chastity?"

To this, she replied, "I have heard that humanity means fidelity to one's integrity, for better or worse. Honor means an unchanging heart and mind even when one's life is at stake. The Cao clan was prosperous when I committed myself to remain faithful to the end. How can I abandon them in the hour of their destruction? That would be the act of an animal, and I would not have it!"

When Sima Yi heard about this, he was greatly touched by her constancy. So he gave her a boy to adopt and allowed this child to carry the Cao family name, so that the Cao line would not die.

There were a couple others involved in this whole affair who escaped with their lives. Jiang Ji mentioned to Sima Yi that the officials Lu Zhi (1) and Xin Chang (3) had stormed out of the city to join Cao Shuang, but Sima Yi said, "They were being faithful to their master, as honorable men ought to be." So instead of punishing them, he restored them to their former offices. Xin Chang was now very very glad that he listened to his sister and kept his honor and, incidentally, his head.

In fact, Sima Yi was in a very generous mood. He declared that all of Cao Shuang's retainers were pardoned, and that all officials were restored to their positions. The army and the civilians all went back to business as usual, and order was restored at court and in the kingdom.

Oh, and for his good work ... umm ... putting down a would-be usurper, Sima Yi was now promoted to prime minister, and the emperor Cao Fang bestowed upon him the Nine Dignities, the items that marked his special status. And remember, Cao Cao, on his way to the peak of his political career, also got those Nine Dignities. See some parallels there? Of course, good ol' humble Sima Yi declined the Nine Dignities, but Cao Fang simply would NOT hear of it and insisted that he take them. And from that moment on, the affairs at court were all overseen by Sima Yi and his two sons. Thank goodness they put down that would-be coup by somebody from the emperor's own clan.

But there were still some loose ends to tie up. To find out what these loose ends were, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!