

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 140.

Last time, Jiang Wei had launched another invasion of the North, and Sima Zhao was sent to stop him. Sima Zhao did a pretty bad job of it, losing his top general and getting himself trapped on Iron Cage Mountain, a tight spot with just one road down from the top, and that was being blocked by Jiang Wei. At the top of the mountain, Sima Zhao and his 6,000 men were relying on a small spring for water, but that spring could only sustain about 100 people.

Seeing his men suffering from thirst and his only escape route blocked, Sima Zhao looked up to the heavens and sighed, "I am going to die here!"

One of his staffers now said, "Long ago, Geng (3) Gong (1), a great general of the Eastern Han, was trapped, but he prayed to a well, and a sweet spring flowed from it. Why not try that?"

Well, it's not like Sima Zhao had any other ideas, so prayer it was. He went to the small spring at the top of the mountain and prayed:

"I came on imperial decree to repel the Shu forces. If it is destined that I should die, then let this spring dry up, and I will slit my own throat and allow my men to surrender. But if my allotted time is not yet up, then I pray that heaven will soon bless me with a sweet spring so that we can save all my men!"

As soon as he finished this prayer, water started spouting out from the spring nonstop. So, I guess heaven has other plans for Sima Zhao.

Meanwhile, at the foot of the mountain, Jiang Wei figured he had Sima Zhao right where he wanted. He told his officers, "One of my great regrets in life is that the late prime minister was not able to capture Sima Yi when he had him trapped at Shangfang (4,1) Gorge. But today, I am going to capture Sima Zhao for sure."

But remember that Sima Zhao was not the only Wei contingent in the area. The general Guo Huai was also around, and when he got word that Sima Zhao had been trapped, he wanted to lead a relief

force to Iron Cage Mountain. But his second-in-command, the general Chen Tai (4), said, “Jiang Wei formed an alliance with the Qiang tribes with an eye toward taking the city of Nan’an (2,1) first. The Qiang have arrived. If you redeploy your troops now, the Qiang would no doubt attack us from the rear. You should first send someone to pretend to defect to the Qiang and defeat them from within. Once that’s done, then we can go lift the siege at Iron Cage Mountain.”

Guo Huai agreed and sent Chen Tai at the head of 5,000 men to go carry out his own plan. So Chen Tai went to see the king of the Qiang people, whereupon he took off his armor, entered the king’s tent, and wept, saying, “Guo Huai is too full of himself and has often wanted to kill me, so I have come to surrender to you. I know everything about Guo Huai’s army. I am willing to lead a raid on his camp tonight. Success is guaranteed. When you and your army arrive at the Wei camp, I will be there to help you from the inside.”

The king of the Qiang was delighted and ordered his top commander to go with Chen Tai on this night raid. Now, this commander wasn’t a total dummy. Instead of letting Chen Tai’s men lead the way, he separated Chen Tai from his own troops. The 5,000 men who came with Chen Tai were placed at the rear of the column, while Chen Tai alone was placed at the head of the column with the Qiang commander and Qiang soldiers.

That night, around 9 o’clock, the raiding party arrived outside the Wei camp. The camp gates were wide open. Chen Tai galloped through first, followed by the Qiang commander. But as the Qiang commander entered the camp, the ground below him suddenly gave way, and he and his horse fell into a hidden ditch. Chen Tai’s 5,000 men now started attacking the Qiang troops from their rear, while Guo Huai, who had been lying in wait all this time, attacked from the left. The Qiang soldiers were thrown into chaos. Countless were trampled to death, while even more surrendered, and the Qiang commander who fell into the ditch committed suicide.

Guo Huai and Chen Tai now led their victorious army and attacked the camp of the Qiang people. The king of the Qiang was captured before he could get on his horse, and he was brought before Guo Huai. Guo Huai immediately dismounted and personally untied the king. He consoled the king with kind words, saying, "The court has always thought you to be loyal and honorable. How is it that you came to help the Riverlanders?"

Those words apparently shamed the Qiang king, who now prostrated and apologized for his offense. Guo Huai said, great, I know a way you can make it up to us.

Around midnight that night at the foot of Iron Cage Mountain, Jiang Wei got word that his Qiang reinforcements had arrived. Jiang Wei was delighted. Now he could finish off Sima Zhao and move on to the next phase of his invasion. He told his men to invite their allies in. The main Qiang army remained outside the camp, while the king of Qiang and an entourage of about a hundred men entered and went to the main tent. Jiang Wei and Xiahou Ba now hurried outside to greet him. But before the king even said a word, his entourage pulled out their weapons and started attacking.

As it turns out, this Qiang army was actually made up mostly of Wei soldiers in disguise, and so was the king's entourage. Jiang Wei was totally surprised, and all he could do was get to a horse and flee. The combined Qiang and Wei forces now stormed into the Shu camp, scattering the Shu soldiers.

As for Jiang Wei, he had been caught off guard, so he didn't even have his sword or spear with him when he fled. All he had was the bow and quiver he wore around his waist. But he fled in such a hurry that all the arrows fell out of his quiver, so really, all he had was a bow.

As Jiang Wei fled toward the hills, from behind came a squad of Wei soldiers led by the general Guo Huai. Guo Huai could see that Jiang Wei didn't have any weapons, so he spurred on his horse and gave chase. As Guo Huai closed in, Jiang Wei drew his bow and pretended to fire a dozen times or so. Each

time, Guo Huai ducked when he heard the twang of the bow. But of course, he never saw a single arrow. So Guo Huai was on to Jiang Wei.

Now, Guo Huai put away his spear and drew his own bow and took aim at Jiang Wei, and unlike Jiang Wei, he DID have an arrow. When Jiang Wei heard the twang of Guo Huai's bow, he ducked. But not only did he dodge the shot, he also reached up and plucked the arrow out of the air. So, guess who has an arrow now? As Guo Huai resumed his chase and closed in, Jiang Wei took aim at his face and returned the arrow to sender. With a thud, the arrow lodged itself in Guo Huai's face, sending him tumbling off his horse.

Jiang Wei now rode forth to try to finish off Guo Huai, but Guo Huai's men had arrived, so Jiang Wei settled for taking Guo Huai's spear and fleeing. Guo Huai's men did not dare to give chase. Instead, they rushed their commander back to camp. There, they removed the arrow head, but could not stop the bleeding. Soon, Guo Huai bled out and died.

While all this was going on, Sima Zhao and his men had taken the opportunity to fight their way down the mountain, and they chased the defeated Shu forces for a while before calling it a day. So Jiang Wei managed to escape, and he was soon joined by Xiahou Ba. But their army was so far gone that they couldn't regroup, so they had to fall back all the way to Hanzhong, ending yet another unsuccessful Northern expedition. But despite suffering so many casualties, Jiang Wei avoided punishment because he had slain Guo Huai and Xu Zhi (4), two elite enemy generals. So the good canceled out the bad, sort of. I guess.

As for Sima Zhao, he returned in victory to the Wei capital Luoyang and resumed overseeing all the affairs of the court with his older brother Sima Shi. No court officials dared to say no to them, and even the Wei emperor Cao Fang felt as if he were on pins and needles whenever he saw Sima Shi enter the

court. Remember how Cao Cao used to have the same effect on the Han emperor? Well, turnabout is fair play.

One day, Cao Fang was holding court when he saw Sima Shi enter with his sword in tow. As we have mentioned before, usually when officials go to court, they are not allowed to bring their swords. To have permission to bring your sword into court was a tremendous honor reserved for the most elite of elite officials, or you know, if the emperor was just afraid of you. And Cao Fang was definitely afraid of Sima Shi. When he saw Sima Shi enter with his sword, Cao Fang immediately left his seat to greet him. But Sima Shi laughed and said, "How can we have the lord greeting the vassal? Your majesty, please sit in peace."

So Cao Fang sat back down, because Sima Shi told him he could. Then, the court officials began reporting various affairs of the state. Now, officially, they were reporting it to Cao Fang, but everybody knew who was in charge. Sima Shi made all the decisions without so much as even pretending to confer with the emperor. Soon, all the business was taken care of, and Sima Shi got up and left, accompanied by thousands of armed soldiers.

This display was just too much for Cao Fang. When he left the court that day, he retired to his private quarters, where he was attended by only three officials. One of them was the master of ceremony, Xiahou Xuan (2). Now, remember that this Xiahou Xuan was the nephew of the renegade general Xiahou Ba and a kinsman of Cao Shuang, the guy that the Sima family executed on their way to power. After Cao Shuang and his clan were executed, Sima Yi recalled Xiahou Xuan from the provinces to the capital so that he could keep a close eye on this potential troublemaker. Xiahou Xuan was now one of the few remaining court officials that Cao Fang trusted, along with the other two guys present: Li (3) Feng (1), the secretary, and Zhang (1) Ji (1), the director of the palace bureaus and Cao Fang's father-in-law.

Cao Fang now dismissed everyone and called these three officials into a private room. There, he took Zhang Ji's (1) hand and wept.

"Sima Shi treats me like a child, and views the court officials as mere blades of young grass," Cao Fang said. "Our enterprise will belong to him sooner or later!"

As Cao Fang wept bitterly, Li Feng said, "My lord, please do not worry. I may be untalented, but I am willing to summon the heroes of the realm under your majesty's decree to eliminate this traitor."

Xiahou Xuan also chimed in and said, "My uncle Xiahou Ba only defected to the Riverlands because he feared the Sima brothers would do him harm. If we eliminate them, he will surely return. I am a relative of the imperial house. How can I sit idly by and watch traitors throw the kingdom into chaos? I am willing to take them on by your decree."

"[Sigh] I just worry that it's impossible," Cao Fang lamented.

The three officials broke down in tears and said, "We swear to work as one to exterminate the traitors and repay your highness!"

Since they were so eager, Cao Fang obliged them. He took off his undershirt, bit his finger until it bled, and wrote a decree in blood on the shirt. Hey, remember the last time a beleaguered emperor did that in this novel? That turned out so well for him, didn't it? Well, Cao Fang knew his history. As he handed the decree to Zhang Ji (1), he said, "The former Han official Dong (3) Cheng (2) was executed by our founding emperor Cao Cao because he did not keep his plot a secret. You all must be careful and not let this leak out."

"My lord," Li Feng said, "Why do you speak such unlucky words? We are no more like Dong Cheng than Sima Shi is like the founding emperor. Please don't worry."

The three officials now left the emperor to carry out his decree. But as they approached the eastern gate of the palace, they saw Sima Shi walking this way with his sword and accompanied by a few

hundred armed men. The three officials quickly stood to one side to allow him to pass, but Sima Shi stopped and asked, "Why did you three leave the court so late?"

"His highness was reading in his private quarters, and we three were attending him," Li Feng explained.

"What was he reading?" Sima Shi pressed.

"A book about the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties," Li Feng answered.

"And did his majesty have any questions about the book?"

"He asked us about how the great advisers Yi (1) Yin (3) served the House of Shang and how the Duke of Zhou served the House of Zhou," Li Feng said. "We told his majesty, 'Right now, the regent marshal is like Yi Yin and the Duke of Zhou.' "

To this obvious attempt at flattery, Sima Shi simply scoffed. "I doubt you were comparing me to Yi Yin or the Duke of Zhou. In your heart, I am more like Wang (2) Mang (3) and Dong Zhuo."

So, obviously we all know Dong Zhuo, the ruthless warlord who bullied the weak Han emperor and tried to usurp the throne before he was killed. As for Wang Mang, he is basically the Chinese equivalent of Benedict Arnold -- the traitor to top all traitors. He was a high-ranking official in the final days of the Western Han Dynasty, and he ended up usurping the throne and founding his own dynasty, thus ending the Western Han. His own dynasty did not last long, only about 20 years, but it was long enough to earn him everlasting scorn for disloyalty and treason.

When Sima Shi made that comparison, the three officials quickly denied it, saying, "We are all YOUR retainers. How would we dare to say such a thing?"

But Sima Shi flew into a rage. "You liars! What were you and the emperor crying about in his private chamber just now?!"

The three officials were like, crying? What crying? We weren't crying. But Sima Shi raged on. "Your eyes are still red! How dare you deny it?!"

Recognizing that the cat was out of the bag, Xiahou Xuan said ah the heck with this. If I'm going down, I'm going to get my money's worth. So he spoke up sternly.

"We were crying because you bully your lord and are planning usurpation!"

Sima Shi now blew his lid. He ordered the guards to seize Xiahou Xuan. Xiahou Xuan tried to take a swing at Sima Shi, but not before the guards grabbed him and the other officials. Sima Shi ordered the three be searched, and sure enough, they found that Zhang Ji (1) was carrying a royal undershirt with bloody writing on it. At this point, Sima Shi probably didn't have to read the thing to know what it said. But he read it and it said exactly what he thought it said.

"So, you were plotting to kill me and my brother!" he said angrily. "There can be no mercy!"

So Sima Shi had the three officials executed in public by being cut in half, which was an even more gruesome death than having your head cut off. Along with them, of course, went their entire families. The three officials cursed nonstop. And even after the executioners had knocked out all their teeth, they refused to shut up until they laid dead in the marketplace.

But that was not the end of it. Sima Shi now stormed into the imperial quarters. There, Cao Fang and his empress were just talking about the whole secret plot. The empress, who was Zhang Ji's daughter, was telling Cao Fang, "There are so many eyes and ears hovering around the palace. If this leaks out, it will drag me down with it."

Sure enough, Sima Shi stomped into the room just then, sending the empress into a panic. With his hand on his sword, Sima Shi said to Cao Fang, "Your servant's father elevated your majesty to emperor. His merit was no less than that of the Duke of Zhou. And am I any less than Yi Yin in my service to you? Why then do you repay kindness with hatred and treat our service as an offense? Why did you attempt to conspire with a few piddly officials to kill me and my brother?! Why?!"

"I would never!" Cao Fang said.

Sima Shi now pulled out the blood decree and tossed it to the floor. "Then who wrote this?!"

Cao Fang was scared out of his mind. Trembling, he answered, "This, they, they forced me to do this. I would have never dared to entertain such thoughts."

Yeah, ok. That's real convincing. Sima Shi did not take his metaphorical foot off Cao Fang's throat.

"What is the punishment for such baseless slander against a senior official?!" he demanded.

Kneeling on the ground, Cao Fang pleaded, "Yes, I, I have committed a crime. I hope you can spare me!"

So, let's just take stock of this picture here. The emperor is on his knees, saying he had broken the law and begging one of his officials to have mercy on his soul. How pitiful was this? In fact, this was too pitiful even for Sima Shi.

"My lord, please get up," he said to Cao Fang. "But the laws of the land must not be cast aside."

Pointing at the empress, Sima Shi said, "She is Zhang Ji's daughter. She must die!"

Wailing bitterly, Cao Fang pleaded for leniency for his empress, but to no avail. Sima Shi had the empress dragged out to the east gate of the palace and strangled. Hey, guess who else did that on his way to supreme power? That's right, Cao Cao. Boy it's almost like the author is trying to draw a parallel here or something. And in case you missed the point, he threw in a poem for good measure:

Back when she was thrust barefoot from the palace ground,

Empress Fu (2) parted from her liege and cried for pity.

Today the Simas treated Empress Zhang in kind --

Thus did Heaven pay back Cao Cao's posterity.

So, what went around, came around, even if it took 52 years and 110 episodes. The next day, Sima Shi assembled the officials and told them, "Our lord is wildly depraved and barbaric, and he has fallen in

with unseemly company. He listens to slander and blocks the advancement of worthy men. He is not fit to rule. Therefore, I intend to follow the examples of Yi Yin and Huo (4) Guang (1) and elevate a different emperor so as to strengthen the imperial house and restore peace to the realm. What do you think?"

Now, note that Sima Shi mentions the names Yi Yin and Huo Guang. Both of them were famous officials from the past who stripped a depraved ruler of his position and were praised by posterity for doing so. So Sima Shi was citing precedents to justify his actions. Of course, he wasn't going to get any arguments from the court officials, all of whom replied, "Regent-marshall, you are acting in accordance with precedent and the will of heaven and men. Who would dare to oppose you?"

So Sima Shi and a bunch of other officials now went to see the empress dowager and told her what they intended to do. She asked Sima Shi who he wanted to elevate to emperor, and Sima Shi said, "The prince Cao Ju (4) is intelligent and filial, fit to be the ruler of the realm."

But the empress dowager said, "He is my uncle. If he becomes emperor, what would become of me? Cao Mao (2), a grandson of the former emperor Cao Pi, is gracious and courteous, and he knows when to be accommodating. He is fit to rule. You and the other officials should consider this matter carefully."

Sima Shi's uncles, Sima Fu (2), now chimed in and said, "The empress dowager is quite right. We should elevate Cao Mao (2)."

So everybody just went along with that suggestion. After all, what did it really matter who the new puppet was? Sima Shi sent someone to go fetch Cao Mao, who was presently a duke. But first things first, they had to officially ditch the current emperor. So the empress dowager went to court, summoned Cao Fang, and admonished him, saying, "You are depraved and barbaric, and you keep bad company. You are not fit to rule the realm. We will strip you of your title and return you to your old rank as a prince. Depart immediately for your fiefdom. You are not allowed to come to court without being summoned."

A sobbing Cao Fang prostrated in front of the empress dowager, turned over his seal, and then rode away in his chariot in tears. Only a handful of diehard courtiers who remained loyal to him went to give him a tearful goodbye. Of this, a poet later wrote these lines:

Back in the days when Cao Cao served the Han,
He wronged the widow and orphan of the clan.
And now that 40 years have come and gone,
His own widows and orphans are the wronged.

So exit puppet A, enter puppet B. Cao Mao (2), the soon-to-be emperor, was the son of one of Cao Pi's sons who did not inherit the throne. He was just hanging out in the provinces when one day, a memorial arrived from Sima Shi, I mean, the empress dowager, summoning him to the capital. So he went, and outside the west gate, he found all the court officials prostrated on the ground to welcome him. Cao Mao hurriedly bowed in return. One of the officials said, "Dude, what are you doing? You're the lord; you don't bow to your officials."

But Cao Mao replied, "I am also a subject. How can I ignore the rituals?"

The officials now asked him to get into the royal chariot and enter the palace, but Cao Mao begged off, saying, "I have been summoned by the empress dowager, and I don't know why. How can I dare to enter in a chariot?"

Ok, so we'll keep up this pretense for just a little longer. Cao Mao now entered the palace on foot, and he was greeted by Sima Shi. Before Sima Shi could say anything though, Cao Mao bowed to him. Sima Shi quickly helped him up, exchanged greetings, and then brought him to see the empress dowager, who told Cao Mao, "Even when you were young, I could tell that you had the look of an

emperor. Now, you shall be the lord of the realm. Try to be courteous, temperate, and frugal. Manifest your virtue and extend your benevolence. Do not dishonor the former emperors of our house.”

As expected, Cao Mao did the whole, “Who, me?” thing and tried decline the ... umm ... honor time and again before relenting. Sima Shi now instructed the officials to accompany Cao Mao to the Hall of First Principle, where they officially recognized him as the new emperor. And of course, for his contribution to the new emperor’s ascension, Sima Shi was given the golden battle axe that signified supreme military authority. He was authorized to enter the palace without having to bend over and walk in quick steps. He was allowed to bring his sword into court, and when he addressed the emperor in court, he did not have to announce himself first. So basically, everything that Cao Cao once had, Sima Shi now had, too.

So, all this went down in the year 254. But while Sima Shi now held even more power at court, out in the provinces, trouble was brewing. In the spring of the following year, word of what happened at court made it way to a couple generals. One was named Wu (2) Qiuqian (1,3), and he was the chief commander of Yang (2) Province, which laid in the southeast corner of Wei territory. The other man was Wen (2) Qin (1), the imperial protector of Yang (2) Province.

When Wu (2) Qiuqian (1,3) heard the news, he was enraged. His elder son also egged him on, saying, “Father, how can you simply remain in your post while Sima Shi usurps power and the state faces imminent destruction?”

That was all the encouragement Wu (2) Qiuqian (1,3) needed, and he immediately summoned Wen Qin (1) to discuss what to do. To see what they came up with, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!