

【三國演義】



CHINESE CLASSICS

Three Kingdoms

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VOLUME II



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THREE KINGDOMS

Volume II

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Chapter 33

Cao Pi Exploits the Yuans' Troubles and Marries Lady Zhen

Guo Jia Bequeaths a Plan to Secure Liaodong

As Cao Pi bared his sword before the sobbing women, a red light flashed before his eyes.¹ Putting up his weapon, he asked, "Who are you?" One of them replied, "I am Lady Liu, wife of the late General Yuan Shao." "And her?" Cao Pi said. "Lady Zhen," was the reply, "the wife of Yuan Xi, General Yuan Shao's second son. When the general sent Yuan Xi to administer Youzhou, Lady Zhen did not want to travel so far and stayed with us." Cao Pi drew Lady Zhen toward him, lifted her disheveled hair, and wiped her soiled face with his sleeve. With a face fair as jade, her skin flower-fresh, she was a beauty whose glance could topple kingdoms. Cao Pi said to her, "As the son of Prime Minister Cao Cao, I shall protect your family. Set your mind at ease." So saying, he posted himself inside the chamber, his hand on his sword.

Cao Cao arrived at Ye, the city he had conquered. Xu You approached him on horseback and, pointing to the gate with his whip, addressed the prime minister by his childhood name, Ah Man. "Without me," Xu You boasted loudly, "would you be entering in triumph today?" Cao Cao laughed, but his commanders were outraged.

Cao Cao rode first to the residence of Yuan Shao and asked the guard, "Has anyone entered?" "The young master is within," was the reply. Cao Cao scolded Cao Pi for violating his ban, but Lady Liu bowed and appealed to the prime minister, "If not for your son, our family would have perished. Allow me to offer Lady Zhen to serve in his household." Cao Cao summoned the woman, who prostrated herself. Cao Cao looked at her and said, "The perfect wife for my son!" and gave Cao Pi permission to take Lady Zhen as his wife.²

After taking control of Ye, Cao Cao made an offering at the grave of Yuan Shao. Making his kowtow, he wept bitterly. He then turned to his officials and said, "Years ago, when he and I were fighting Dong Zhuo, Yuan Shao asked me, 'If we cannot prevail now, which region would you choose to hold?' I asked his preference, and he replied, 'To my south, firm possession of the Yellow River; to my north, security against the rugged regions of Yan and Dai: if I had the desert peoples on my side I could then turn my attention south of the river and make a bid for empire that might well succeed!' I replied to Shao, 'I prefer employing men of intelligence and energy and guiding them by my lights. That way I can accomplish whatever I set out to.' Our conversation seems as recent as yesterday. Now Yuan Shao is gone, and I can't help shedding a tear for him." The assembly was deeply moved. Cao Cao provided Yuan Shao's widow, Lady Liu, with gold, silk, and grain. He forgave all taxes for the current year in areas affected by the fighting. Then, after informing Emperor Xian, he assumed the protectorship of Jizhou himself.

One day Xu Chu was riding in through the east gate

when he met up with Xu You, who hailed him and said, "Without me you could never have taken this city." Angered, Xu Chu said, "We all risked our lives in many a bloody battle for this place. What are you boasting about?" "You commonplace good-for-nothing!" Xu You taunted him. At those words Xu Chu lost his temper and killed Xu You; then he took the head to Cao Cao and described for him how Xu You had provoked him. "He and I were old friends," Cao Cao said, "so he felt free to tease us. Did you have to kill him?" He rebuked Xu Chu and buried Xu You lavishly.

Cao Cao ordered Jizhou scoured for men of worth and talent. People recommended Cavalry Commander Cui Yan (Jigui) from Dongwu in Qinghe. Cui Yan had retired on the pretext of illness after several futile attempts to counsel Yuan Shao on the defense of the northland. Cao Cao summoned Cui Yan, appointed him aide to the assistant inspector of Jizhou, and said to him, "The population registers I examined yesterday list three hundred thousand people. We have a considerable province here." Cui Yan responded, "The entire empire is going to pieces. The nine provinces of the realm³ have been sundered from each other, and the plains of this one are covered with those who died in the battles between Yuan Shao's sons. What have the people to hope for unless Your Lordship will look into the moral and social conditions here and alleviate the crisis instead of calculating what the province may yield?" Cao Cao was abashed. He apologized and treated Cui Yan as an honored guest.

With Jizhou secured, Cao Cao sent for news of Yuan Tan. Yuan Tan had plundered Ganling, Anping, Bohai,

Hejian, and other areas. He went on to attack Zhongshan after hearing that Yuan Shang had fled there. But Yuan Shang had no inclination to fight. He escaped to Youzhou to beg refuge of Yuan Xi. Yuan Tan accepted the surrender of all Yuan Shang's men and prepared to retake Jizhou. Cao Cao ordered Yuan Tan to present himself, but he would not come. Cao Cao angrily broke off the prospective marriage and marched against Pingyuan. In response Yuan Tan turned to Liu Biao for help.

Liu Biao consulted Liu Xuande, who said, "The conquest of Jizhou has strengthened Cao Cao enormously. He will capture the Yuan brothers shortly, and there's nothing you can do about it. Bear in mind that Cao Cao has had his eye on this city of yours for a long time. I'm afraid all we can do is continue training the soldiers and improving our defenses while avoiding reckless moves." "Then," Liu Biao asked, "how shall I explain to Yuan Tan our refusal to help him?" "We can do it in a roundabout way," Xuande suggested, "by urging both brothers to settle their differences." On this advice Liu Biao wrote first to Yuan Tan:

A man of honor will not turn to hostile lands to escape civil broils. Some time ago I was advised that you had bent the knee to Cao Cao, thus setting at naught your late father's unpaid blood debt and abandoning your fraternal responsibilities. Your actions have dishonored the alliance that once bound your father and me. Even if Yuan Shang failed you as a brother, you should have yielded to his demands all the same, waiting for the turmoil to subside before sorting out the rights and wrongs. Would that not have been the nobler course?

Liu Biao next wrote to Yuan Shang:

Yuan Tan is hasty-tempered by nature. He has become confused about right and wrong. The first thing is to get rid of Cao Cao and avenge your late father; after that you can sort out your conflicting claims. Is this not the wiser course? Unless you relent, you and your brother will end up like the hunting dog and the rabbit. Both ran themselves to death, and a passing farmer picked them up.

Liu Biao's letter gave Yuan Tan no hope. He knew he could not withstand Cao Cao alone and abandoned Pingyuan for Nanpi. Cao Cao pursued him. It was the harshest time of winter. No supplies could be moved on the frozen river. Local laborers ordered by Cao Cao to chop up the ice and pull his boats forward ran away. In a rage Cao Cao demanded their arrest and execution, and the laborers gave themselves up. Cao Cao said to them, "If I spare you, my orders will command no respect. But it would be sheer cruelty to kill you. Go and hide yourselves in the hills so that my men don't find you." The people wept for gratitude and departed.

Yuan Tan led his men forth to confront Cao Cao, and the two armies deployed. Cao Cao rode out, and pointing his whip at Yuan Tan, said scornfully, "I treated you all too well, and you betrayed me." "You invaded my territory," Yuan Tan retorted, "and seized my cities— and you owe me a wife. Yet you say I betrayed you!?" Cao Cao sent Xu Huang into the field. Peng An met him. The two horsemen clashed; Xu Huang downed his opponent swiftly. The defeated Yuan Tan retreated to Nanpi, where Cao Cao hemmed him in. In panic Yuan Tan sent Xin Ping to negotiate a surrender.

Cao Cao said to Yuan Tan's envoy, "This fellow Tan is

one way one day, another way the next. How can I trust him? You should stay with me. Your younger brother Xin Pi has already been of great use to me." "Your Excellency," Xin Ping replied, "you mistake me. As I understand it, 'the servant shares in his lord's glory — or his humiliation.' I have served the Yuans a long, long time. Could I turn my back on them now?" Cao Cao realized Xin Ping was too resolute to be won over, and sent him back. Yuan Tan received Xin Ping's report and said, "Isn't your brother already in Cao's service? What loyalty can I expect from you?" Overwhelmed with indignation at this charge, Xin Ping collapsed and died soon after. Yuan Tan regretted his words.

Guo Tu advised Yuan Tan, "We will have to drive the people out of the city and follow with the army to stage a last-ditch battle." Yuan Tan approved. That night they rounded up the inhabitants of Nanpi, armed them, and told them to stand by. The next morning, with a mighty hue and cry, the crowd herded together and streamed through all four gates toward Cao Cao's positions. Then, shielded by the populace, the army emerged and a general melee ensued. The battle raged until noon with no clear outcome; the slain covered the ground. Determined on a decisive victory, Cao Cao dismounted, climbed a hill, and struck the drums himself. At the signal his men and officers resumed their advance. This time, giving their utmost, they routed Yuan Tan's army. Civilian losses were enormous.

With a thrust of energy Cao Hong broke through a defending line and came face-to-face with Yuan Tan. Slashing fiercely, Hong cut him down. In the confusion Guo Tu

dashed back to the city, but Yue Jin felled him with a perfect shot: man and mount toppled into the moat. Cao Cao entered Nanpi and comforted the populace. Suddenly, another contingent appeared, led by Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan, lieutenants to Yuan Xi. Cao Cao maneuvered to engage them, but unexpectedly they threw down their arms in surrender. Cao Cao granted them lordships. Zhang Yan, leader of the Black Hill bandits, also surrendered with one hundred thousand. Cao Cao made him General Who Pacifies the North.

Yuan Tan's head was set on display at the north gate. Despite Cao Cao's threat to execute any mourners, a man in plain cap and hempen mourning coat was found weeping below the severed head. Brought before Cao Cao, the offender identified himself as Wang Xiu, assistant to the imperial inspector of Qingzhou. Wang Xiu had been driven from his post for his forthright criticism⁴ of Yuan Tan; nonetheless he came to pay his respects. Cao Cao demanded, "Did you know of my ordinance?" "I did," Wang Xiu replied. "And you have no fear of death?" Cao Cao asked. "I received office from Yuan Tan," Wang Xiu answered, "and not to mourn him would be disloyal. One cannot stand before the world holding life dearer than honor. If you would let me collect my lord's remains and inter them, I will accept the punishment of death without regret."

Cao Cao remarked, "Many indeed were the loyal servants of the north. And if the Yuans had made good use of them, I would never have set my sights on this territory." Cao Cao allowed Wang Xiu to bury Yuan Tan's body, treated him as an honored guest, and made him an officer

in the Metals and Weaponry Division. Cao Cao then asked Wang Xiu, "Yuan Shang has taken refuge with Yuan Xi. How can I defeat him?" But Wang Xiu refused to reply, and Cao Cao remarked, "Truly a loyal servant to the Yuans."

Guo Jia advised Cao Cao, "Let the former Yuan generals, Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan, launch the attacks." Cao Cao approved the plan and strengthened the force with separate commands under Lü Kuang, Lü Xiang, Ma Yan, and Zhang Yi. They attacked Youzhou in three field armies. Cao Cao also dispatched Li Dian and Yue Jin to help Zhang Yan defeat Gao Gan, Yuan Shao's nephew, in Bingzhou.

Rather than face Cao Cao's army, Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi abandoned Youzhou and hurried to Liaoxi, taking refuge with the Wuhuan people.⁵ At the same time the new imperial inspector of Youzhou, Chu of the Wuhuan, led the provincial officials in a joint vow to transfer their allegiance to Cao Cao: "We are surrendering to His Excellency Cao Cao, one of the great heroes of our age. Whoever violates this order dies." Each official stepped forward and validated his vow with a smear of sacrificial blood. Only Assistant Inspector Han Heng refused. He threw his sword to the ground and declared, "I have benefited from the kindness of the Yuans, the son as well as the father. Now in their hour of defeat I have neither the wit to save them nor the courage to die for them; I am lacking in loyalty. But to turn and serve Cao Cao is more than I can bring myself to do." The officials paled. Imperial Inspector Chu said, "Any great enterprise must rest upon the highest ethical principles. Our success depends

on no one man. If such be Han Heng's bent, let him suit himself." Dismissing Han Heng from the assembly, the imperial inspector surrendered his army to Cao Cao, who with great satisfaction appointed Chu as General Who Quells the North.

Unexpectedly, Cao Cao was told that the assault on Bingzhou had failed: Yue Jin, Li Dian, and Zhang Yan could not break Gao Gan's defense at Wine Jar Pass. Cao Cao marched to the battleground. After learning of the commanders' difficulties, he called a general meeting. Xun You advised using the false surrender ploy, and Cao Cao approved. He summoned the recent defectors Lü Kuang and Lü Xiang to carry out the tactic.

The Lü brothers came to the pass with a few dozen men and called out, "We are former commanders of Yuan Shao's who have been forced to surrender against our will. Cao Cao is treacherous and unreliable and has used us ill. We want to work for our former lord again. Let us in at once." Gao Gan warily allowed only the two brothers up to the pass. They disarmed, left their horses, and went in to tell Gao Gan, "Cao Cao has only just arrived. Attack his camp tonight before they dig in. We will take the lead." Gao Gan accepted the proposal.

Following the Lü brothers with more than ten thousand men, Gao Gan approached Cao Cao's camps. Suddenly a roar went up behind him, and an ambush was sprung from all sides. Gao Gan dashed back to the pass but found it already in the hands of Cao Cao's commanders, Yue Jin and Li Dian. Gao Gan turned north and rode to seek refuge with the chief of the Xiongnu. Cao Cao took control of the pass and sent men after the fugitive.

Gao Gan entered the territory of the Xiongnu nation and came before their khan.⁶ Dismounting and pressing himself to the ground, Gao Gan said, "Cao Cao has devoured my homeland. Now he has designs on yours. With your assistance we could protect the north." But the khan rebuffed him. "I have no quarrel with Cao Cao," he said. "Why should he invade my land? Are you trying to foment hostilities?" Thus rudely dismissed, Gao Gan began riding south to Liu Biao, his last hope. En route District Commander Wang Yan killed him and sent the head to Cao Cao, for which he received a lordship.

* * *

With Bingzhou secured, Cao Cao began planning to attack the Wuhuan to the west. Cao Hong and others argued, "Yuan Xi and Yuan Shang have lost their men and officers. They are powerless, refugees in the remote desert. If we go after them now, the capital could fall: we could not reach it in time to meet an attack from Liu Biao and Liu Xuande. Rather than take that risk we should march home."

Guo Jia, however, said, "My colleagues are wrong. You are feared across the realm, my lord, while the desert tribes will be off guard, secure in their remoteness. A sudden strike is bound to succeed. Remember that Yuan Shao and the Wuhuan had close ties and that as long as the Yuan brothers survive, they will be a threat. Liu Biao, on the other hand, is an armchair strategist. He knows he can't dominate Liu Bei. If he gives Liu Bei a major task, he will lose control. If he gives Liu Bei a trivial task, he will refuse. The capital only appears to be vulnerable during this extended campaign. Actually, there

is little risk." "Sound advice," Cao Cao decided and led the entirety of his forces, supported by thousands of supply wagons, to carry the war to the Wuhuan.

When Cao Cao came to the vast sea of yellow sand with its sudden windstorms and treacherous terrain, daunting to both man and beast, he wavered and consulted Guo Jia once again. Unfortunately, the adviser, unused to the punishing climate of the north, was lying ill in a wagon. Cao Cao wept and said, "Because of my wish to conquer the desert, you have been subjected to hardships that have broken your health. Now I will not know peace again." "I am grateful for Your Excellency's kindness," Guo Jia said. "My death could not requite one ten-thousandth of my debt." "The way is too dangerous," Cao Cao said. "I think we should turn back. What's your opinion?" "In war," Guo Jia answered, "speed is precious. On a march of this length the supply train requires too much time. You'd be better off with a small force that can reach the Wuhuan before they suspect anything. But you'll need someone who knows the routes." Cao Cao left Guo Jia recuperating in Yizhou.

Someone recommended Tian Chou, a former commander of Yuan Shao's, as a guide. Cao Cao called him for advice. "In summer and autumn," Tian Chou told him, "the routes are flooded, too deep for wagons and horses but too shallow for boats. I would turn back and go across Baitan through the defile at Lulong. You'll come out on open land. Advance to Liucheng and you should catch them unawares. Tadu can be overthrown in a single battle." Cao Cao accepted this advice, appointed Tian Chou Queller of the North, and assigned him to lead the way.