

THREE KINGDOMS

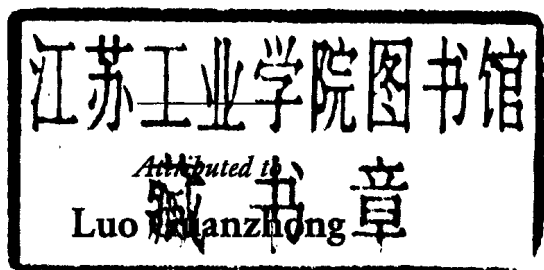
A HISTORICAL NOVEL

Attributed to
LUO GUANZHONG



THREE KINGDOMS

A Historical Novel



*Translated from the Chinese with
Afterword and Notes by*

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II

Chapter 48

Feasting on the Great River, Cao Cao Sings an Ode; Linking Its Boats, the North Prepares for War

A STOUNDED by the stranger's whispered words, Pang Tong turned and found himself looking at his old friend Xu Shu.¹ Tong became calm at once and, sure of their privacy, said, "If you reveal my plan, the inhabitants of the Southland's eighty-one departments will suffer disaster." "And what of the lives and fate of the eighty-three legions over here?" Xu Shu asked with a grin. "You don't mean to give me away?" Pang Tong pleaded. "I will always be grateful for Imperial Uncle Liu's kindness, and I intend to repay it. Cao Cao sent my mother to her death; I promised then I would never frame strategy for him. Of course I am not going to expose your very effective plan. The problem is, I am here with Cao Cao's army, and when they are destroyed, the jewel won't be distinguished from the rock. How do I avoid disaster? Suggest some device to save me, and I will sew up my lips and remove myself." Smiling, Pang Tong said, "Someone as shrewd and far-seeing as you should have no difficulty." "I crave your guidance," Xu Shu insisted, and so Pang Tong whispered a few vital words into his ear and received his heartfelt thanks. Thus Pang Tong left his friend and sailed back to the Southland.

That night Xu Shu secretly had a close companion spread rumors through Cao's camps. The following day the rumors were on everyone's lips. Soon informants reported to Cao Cao: "The whole army is talking about Han Sui and Ma Teng, saying they have rebelled and are on their way from Xiliang to seize the capital." Alarmed, Cao Cao summoned his advisers. "My greatest concern when I undertook this expedition," he said, "was the danger from the west, Han Sui and Ma Teng. Whether the current rumors are true or not, we must take measures."

Xu Shu came forward with a proposal: "I have the honor of being in Your Excellency's employ, but to my dismay have not in any way justified your confidence. I wish to request three thousand soldiers to take at once to San Pass to seal this key point of access against invasion from the west. In the event of an emergency, I will report immediately." Delighted, Cao said, "With you at the pass, I need not worry. Take command of the troops already there. I will give you three thousand more, mounted men and foot soldiers, and Zang Ba to lead the vanguard. Leave without delay." Xu Shu bid Cao good-bye and set out with Zang Ba.² Thus Pang Tong saved Xu Shu's life. A poet of later times wrote:

Cao's southern march—every day a trial,
As rumors spread of fresh calamity.
Pang Tong counseled Xu Shu what to do:
Once let off the hook, the fish swims free.

After dispatching Xu Shu to the north, Cao Cao's mind was easier. He rode to the riverbank to review the army camps and the naval stations. Boarding one of the larger ships, he planted in its center a banner marked "Supreme Commander." To his left and right the naval stations stretched along the river; aboard the ship a thousand crossbowmen lay in wait. Cao Cao stood on the deck. It was the thirteenth year of Jian An, the fifteenth day of the eleventh month (December 10, A.D. 208). The weather was clear and bright, the wind calm, the waves still. Cao Cao ordered a feast and entertainment for the commanders that evening. The complexion of the heavens reflected the advancing night as the moon climbed over the eastern mountains and beamed down, turning night to day. The Great River lay slack, like a bolt of white silk unrolled.

Aboard ship, Cao Cao was surrounded by several hundred attendants in damask coats and embroidered jackets. They all shouldered lances and each man held a halberd. The officers and officials were seated in order. Cao Cao took in the picturesque Southern Screen Hills. To the east he could see the boundary marked by Chaisang. To the west he contemplated the course of the Great River before it reached Xiakou. To the south he looked out on Mount Fan; and to the north he peered into the Black Forest of Wulin. Wherever he turned, the view stretched into infinity,



Feasting on the Great River, Cao Cao Sings an Ode

gladdening his heart. He spoke to the assembly: "We have raised this loyalist force to purge evil and dispel threats to the ruling family, for I have sworn to scour the realm, to calm the empire by my sure sword. The Southland alone remains outside our sphere. Today I possess a million heroic fighters. And with you to apply our commands, need we fear for our success? When we have received the submission of the Southland and the empire is at peace, we shall share with you the enjoyments of wealth and station to celebrate the Great Millennium."³ The audience rose as one to give their leader thanks: "May the song of victory soon be on your lips! May we live by Your Excellency's favor all of our days."

Cao Cao was gratified and ordered the wine sent round. The night of drinking wore on, and Cao Cao was well in his cups when he pointed south and said, "Zhou Yu! Lu Su! How little you know the appointments of Heaven. These defectors to our cause will be your ruin. You see, Heaven itself lends us aid." "Say no more, Your Excellency," Xun You warned, "lest the wrong people hear." Cao laughed and said, "Every man here—whether attendants or companions of our table—is in our deepest trust. Let us be free with one another." He turned toward Xiakou and, pointing again, said, "Liu Bei! Zhuge Liang! You have failed to measure your antlike strength in attempting to shake Mount Tai. What folly!" To his generals he said, "Now I am fifty-four. If we take the Southland, I shall have my humble wish. Long ago I befriended the patriarch Qiao, knowing that his two daughters were the beauties of the empire. To think that Sun Ce and Zhou Yu would take them to wife before me! Recently I built the Bronze Bird Tower on the River Zhang. If I win the Southland, I will take these women to wife and install them in the tower to pleasure me in my advanced years. And all my wishes will be satisfied!" With that he burst into laughter. The Tang dynasty poet Du Mu wrote these lines:

Half-rusted, broken in the sand, this halberd,
Scraped and cleaned, calls up an era past.⁴
Had that east wind not done Zhou Yu a turn,
Two Qiaos in spring would have gone to the tower.

Cao Cao was still laughing and talking when they all heard a raven cawing as it flew southward. "Why does the raven cry in the

night?" Cao asked. Those around him replied, "It supposes the brilliance of the moon to be the dawn. That is why it has left its tree and cries." Cao laughed again. Already drunk, he set his spear in the prow of the boat and offered wine to the river. Then he quaffed three full goblets and, leveling his spear, said to his commanders, "Here is the weapon that broke the Yellow Scarves, took Lü Bu, eliminated Yuan Shu, subdued Yuan Shao, penetrated beyond the northern frontier, and conquered the east as far as Liaodong. In the length and breadth of this land no man has withstood me. My ambitions have always been those of a man of action, a leader among men. And now the scene before us fills my soul with profound passion. I shall perform a song, and you must join me." Cao Cao recited:

Here before us, wine and song!
For man does not live long.
Like daybreak dew,
His days are swiftly gone.
Sanguine-souled we have to be!
Though painful memory haunts us yet.
Thoughts and sorrows naught allays,
Save the cup Du Kang first set.⁵
"Deep the hue of the scholar's robe;
Deeper, the longing of my heart."⁶
For all of you, my dearest lords,
I voice again this ancient part.
Nibbling on the duckweed,
"Loo! Loo!" the lowing deer.⁷
At our feast sit honored guests
For string and reed to cheer.
The moon on high beckons bright,
But no man's ever stayed it.
Heart's care rises from within,
And nothing can deny it.
Take our thanks for all your pains;
Your presence does us honor.
Reunited on this feasting day,
We well old loves remember.
The moon is bright, the stars are few,
The magpie black as raven.
It southbound circles thrice a tree
That offers him no haven.
The mountaintop no height eschews;

The sea eschews no deep.
And the Duke of Zhou spat out his meal⁸
An empire's trust to keep.⁹

As Cao Cao finished, the assembly took up the singing amid general enjoyment, until someone stepped forward and said, "Great armies stand opposed. Our officers and men are ready for action. Why does Your Excellency utter ominous words at such a time?"

Cao Cao turned to the speaker, imperial inspector of Yangzhou, Liu Fu (Yuanying) from Xiang in the fief of Pei, Cao Cao's home district. Liu Fu had started his career at Hefei where he established the provincial seat of government. He collected those who had fled or scattered, established schools, expanded the "soldier-tiller" acreage, and revived orderly administration. During his long service to Cao Cao he had many accomplishments to his credit.

On this occasion Cao Cao leveled his spear and asked, "And what do you find 'ominous' about my words?" Liu Fu replied, "You sang,

The moon is bright, the stars are few,
The magpie black as raven.
It southbound circles thrice a tree
That offers him no haven.

These are ominous words." "You dare to wreck our delight and enthusiasm!" Cao cried angrily. With a single heave of his spear Cao Cao pierced Liu Fu through, killing him. The assembly was aghast. The banquet was dismissed. The following day, sobered and wracked with remorse, Cao Cao wept as he told Liu Xi, the son who had come to claim the body, "Yesterday while drunk I did your father a terrible injustice, for which I can never atone. He shall be interred with the highest honors, those reserved for the three elder lords." Cao Cao sent soldiers to escort the coffin for burial in Liu Fu's native district.

* * *

The next day the new naval commanders, Mao Jie and Yu Jin, informed Cao Cao: "The large and small boats have been joined together. All flags and weapons are in order. Everything is at Your Excellency's disposal. We await your command to launch the attack." Cao Cao took up his position on a large ship in the center

of the fleet and called his commanders together for their instructions. Naval and land forces were divided into units under flags of five colors: yellow for the naval center, commanded by Mao Jie and Yu Jin; red for the forward, under Zhang He; black for the rear, under Lü Qian; green for the left, under Wen Ping; white for the right, under Lü Tong. The forward cavalry and infantry unit, under Xu Huang, flew a red flag; the rear, under Li Dian, a black flag; the left, under Yue Jin, a green flag; the right, under Xiahou Yuan, a white flag. Serving as reinforcement for naval and land forces were Xiahou Dun and Cao Hong. Protecting communications and overseeing the battle were Xu Chu and Zhang Liao. The remainder of Cao Cao's brave commanders returned to their respective squads.

When these arrangements were complete, three rounds of drumbeats thundered through the naval camp; Cao Cao's navy steered through the station gates and onto the river. The wind gusted sharply out of the northwest. The ships let out their sails, beating upon wave and billow yet steady as if on flat ground. On board the northerners, bounding and vaulting to display their courage, thrust their spears and plied their swords. The various units maintained ranks under the discipline of signal flags. Some fifty small craft patrolled the great floating war camp, monitoring its progress. Cao Cao stood in the command tower and surveyed the exercise, immensely pleased, thinking he had found the secret of certain victory. He ordered sails dropped, and all ships returned to the camps in good order.

Cao Cao proceeded to his tent and said to his advisers, "Divine decree has come to our aid in the form of Young Phoenix's ingenious plan. With iron bonds linking the ships, we can actually cross the river as if we were walking on land." To this Cheng Yu replied, "Though the linked ships are level and stable, if the enemy attacks with fire it will be hard to escape. This we must be prepared for." Cao Cao laughed loudly. "Despite your provident view," he said, "there are still things you do not know." "Cheng Yu's point is well taken," Xun You added. "Why is Your Excellency making fun of him?" "Any attack with fire," Cao explained, "must rely on the force of the wind. Now at winter's depth, there are only north winds and west winds—how could there be a south wind or

an east wind? Our position is northwest; their troops are all on the southern shore. If they use fire, they will only burn out their own troops. What have we to fear? If it were the season for a late autumn warm spell, I would have taken precautions long ago." The commanders bowed respectfully. "Your Excellency's insight," they said, "is more than we can match." Cao turned to his commanders and added, "The men from Qing, Xu, Yan, and Dai lack naval experience. If not for this expedient, how could they negotiate the treacherous Great River?" Just then two commanders rose and said, "Though we are from the north, we have some skill at sailing. To prove it, we volunteer to take twenty patrol craft direct to Xiakou, seize their flags and drums, and return."

Cao Cao eyed the two: Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan, formerly under Yuan Shao's command. "You men," said Cao, "born and raised in the north, may find shipboard hard to take. The southern soldiers, accustomed to moving by water, have honed their sailing skills. If I were you, I would not trifle with my life." "If we fail," the two replied, "we are content to accept what martial law decrees." "The larger boats have already been made fast," said Cao. "There are only small ones free. They hold twenty men each. Too few, perhaps, to engage the enemy." Jiao Chu said, "If we were to use the large ships, we would not impress the enemy. Let us have twenty small ones: ten for me and ten for Zhang Nan. Before the day is out, we will hit their camp and return with their standard and a general's head." Cao Cao said, "Then I shall give you twenty boats and five hundred crack troops, experts with long spears and crossbows. Tomorrow morning the flotilla will make a show of force from the main camp, and Wen Ping will escort you back with thirty patrol boats." Gratified and eager for battle, Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan withdrew.

Early the next day at the fourth watch the men were fed; by the end of the fifth they were ready, and drums and gongs sounded in the naval camp. The main fleet emerged and fanned out on the water, their blue and red flags forming a pattern above the Great River. Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan led their twenty scouting craft through the camp and onto the river. Then they raced south.

During the night the beating of drums and the din of battle preparation had reached the southern shore, where the defenders

watched Cao Cao's navy maneuvering in the distance. The Southland's intelligence brought word to Zhou Yu. He went to a hilltop to observe, but the force had already pulled back. The next day the same sounds from the north rent the sky. The southern warriors climbed quickly to a viewing place, from where they saw the twenty small boats moving south, breasting the waves. The news was sped to Zhou Yu, who called for volunteers. Han Dang and Zhou Tai stepped forward. Well pleased by their offer, Zhou Yu ordered a strict vigil at all camps as Han Dang and Zhou Tai led their five-boat squadrons from the left and the right out onto the river.

Now Cao's volunteers, Jiao Chu and Zhang Nan, were relying on little more than raw nerve. As their swift-oared boats approached the southern craft, Han Dang, wearing a breastplate, stood on the prow of his boat, a long spear in hand. Jiao Chu arrived first and ordered his archers to shoot, but Han Dang defended himself with his shield. Next, Jiao Chu crossed spears with Han Dang, but Dang slew him with a single thrust. Then Zhang Nan came forth, shouting, and Zhou Tai darted out from the side. Zhang Nan stood at the prow, his spear leveled. Arrows flew in volleys and counter-volleys. Plying his shield with one arm, his sword with the other hand, Zhou Tai leaped onto Zhang Nan's approaching boat and handily cut him down. Zhang Nan's body sank in the river, as Zhou Tai slashed wildly at his crew. The other attackers rowed swiftly back to the north shore. Han Dang and Zhou Tai gave chase but were checked in the middle of the river by Wen Ping. The boats of both sides took battle formation and set about the slaughter.

Zhou Yu and his commanders stood on the hilltop surveying the fighting craft and warships deployed along the river's northern shore. The flags and emblems were in perfect order. The southerners watched as Cao's commander Wen Ping met the furious attack of Han Dang and Zhou Tai, then fell back, reversed course, and fled. The two southern commanders gave swift chase, but Zhou Yu feared they might sail too far into the enemy's strength; and so he raised the white flag summoning them to return while the gongs were struck.¹⁰

Han Dang and Zhou Tai swung their boats around and rowed south. From his hilltop Zhou Yu watched Cao's warships across the

river crowding into the camp. Turning to his commanders, Zhou Yu said, "Their ships are as dense as reeds. And Cao Cao is a man of many schemes. What plan do we have for defeating them?" Before anyone could answer, they saw the tall pole in the center of the enemy camp snap in the wind and its yellow flag drift into the river. With a hearty laugh Zhou Yu said, "Not a good sign for them!" Then erratic winds blew up and whipped the waves against the shore. Caught by a gust, a corner of Zhou Yu's own flag brushed his face. Suddenly a dreadful thought came to Zhou Yu. With a loud cry he fell over backwards, blood foaming up in his mouth. The commanders rushed to his assistance, but their leader had lost consciousness. Indeed:

One moment laughter, the next a cry of pain;
What hope did the south have in its battle with the north?

What happened to Zhou Yu? Would he survive?¹¹

Read on.

Chapter 49

On Seven Star Altar Kongming Supplicates the Wind; At Three Rivers Zhou Yu Unleashes the Fire

AFTER Zhou Yu had been carried to his tent, the southern commanders came inquiring about his condition. Agitatedly they said to one another, "A million-strong host, set to pounce and devour us, holds the north shore. With our chief commander stricken, how can we cope with Cao Cao's army?" They sent a report to Sun Quan and called for a physician to treat Zhou Yu.

The turn of events caused Lu Su great anxiety. He went to Kongming, who asked, "What is your view?" "A blessing for Cao, a catastrophe for us," was Lu Su's reply. Kongming smiled and said, "Such an illness even I could cure!"¹ "What a boon that would be!" Lu Su responded, and the two men went to see Zhou Yu. Lu Su, entering the tent first, found the chief commander on his back, bedclothes pulled over his head. "Commander, how is your condition?" Su inquired. "My insides feel unsettled and tender, and the fits return from time to time," he answered. "What medicines have you been taking?" Lu Su wanted to know. "I reject everything, can't keep the medicine down," was his reply. "I have just seen Kongming," Lu Su said. "He says he can cure you, Commander. He's outside now. Should we trouble him to try his remedy?" Zhou Yu ordered Kongming admitted and had himself propped up to a sitting position on the bed.

"It is many days since we last met, my lord," Kongming began. "But I never imagined that your precious health was failing." "A man may have good luck when the day begins, bad luck when it ends. Who can tell beforehand?" Zhou Yu replied. "And the winds and the clouds above come when least expected," Kongming said, smiling. "You never can tell." At these words Zhou Yu lost his color and moaned. "Commander," Kongming continued, "do you

seem to feel vexation gathering inside you?" Zhou Yu nodded. "You must take a cooling tonic to dispel it," Kongming advised. "I have," was Zhou Yu's reply, "to no effect." "You must first regulate the vital ethers," Kongming explained. "When the vital ethers are flowing smoothly and in the proper direction, then in a matter of moments your good health will naturally be restored." Zhou Yu, sensing that Kongming must know his unspoken thought, tested him by saying, "What medicine would you recommend to get the vital ethers flowing in the proper direction?" "I have a prescription to facilitate this," said Kongming, smiling still. "I shall benefit from your advice," said Zhou Yu. Kongming called for writing brush and paper and, waving away the attendants, wrote sixteen words for Zhou Yu's eyes alone:

To break Cao's back
With fire we attack.
Everything is set, save
The east wind we lack!

Kongming handed the note to Zhou Yu, saying, "This is the source of the chief commander's illness." Zhou Yu was astounded and thought, "Truly beyond all belief. He realized my problem at once. I'll simply have to tell him the truth." And so with a chuckle he said, "Master, since you already know the cause of my suffering, what medicine shall we use to cure it? The situation is moving swiftly to a crisis, and I look for your timely advice." To this appeal Kongming answered, "Though I myself have no talent, I once came upon an extraordinary man who handed on to me occult texts for reading the numerology of the heavens. Their method can be used to call forth the winds and rains.² If the chief commander wants a southeast wind, erect a platform on the Southern Screen Hills, call it the Altar of the Seven Stars.³ It should be nine spans high, three-tiered, surrounded by one hundred and twenty flag bearers. On the platform I will work certain charms to borrow three days and three nights of southeast wind to assist you in your operations. What do you say?" "Never mind three days and three nights," Zhou Yu cried, "with one night's gales our endeavor can be consummated! But time is of the essence. Let there be no delay." "On the twentieth day of the eleventh month, the first day of the