

Excerpts  
From Three Classical  
Chinese Novels

Translated by  
Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang



Panda Books

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*Chinese Literature*  
Beijing (37), China

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*Luo Guanzhong*

# The Battle of the Red Cliff

(An excerpt from *The Three Kingdoms*)



# The Three Kingdoms

## CHAPTER 43

### **Zhuge Liang Worsts the Scholars in Argument**

### **Lu Su Rejects the Majority Opinion**

HAVING left Liu Bei and Liu Qi, Lu Su and Zhuge Liang went by boat to Chaisang. Once aboard they took counsel together and Lu Su said, "When you see General Sun, don't tell him how powerful Cao Cao's army actually is."

"Don't worry," replied Zhuge Liang. "I know what to say."

When the boat arrived, Lu Su asked Zhuge Liang to wait in the hostel while he went to see Sun Quan.

Sun Quan was conferring in the audience chamber with his civil and military officers. As soon as he heard that Lu Su was back, he called him in and asked: "What did you find out on your trip to Jiangxia?"

"I know the general situation and shall report it to you later," replied Lu Su.

Then Sun Quan showed him a letter from Cao Cao, saying, "This arrived yesterday. I have sent the messenger back, and we are meeting now to decide on a reply."

Lu Su read the letter, the gist of which was as follows:

"At the emperor's command, I have led my army south to punish the guilty. Liu Cong has been captured, his people have surrendered, and I now command a force of a million picked men and a thousand able generals. I hope you will join me, general, in a hunting expedition at Jiangxia to attack Liu Bei, so that we can divide his territory between us and pledge everlasting friendship. Do not hesitate, but give me an early reply!"

"What have you decided?" asked Lu Su as he finished the letter.

"I have not made up my mind yet," answered Sun Quan.

Then Zhang Zhao\* said, "Cao Cao has a great army a million strong, and in the emperor's name he is conquering territory on every side. To resist him would be opposing the emperor. And the only natural barrier between us is the Yangzi, but now by conquering Jingzhou he has taken part of the river out of our hands, making it difficult for us to withstand him. In my humble opinion, our safest plan is submission."

All the other advisers chimed in, "Zhang Zhao's proposal accords with the will of Heaven."

Sun Quan thought hard but said nothing. Then Zhang Zhao continued, "Have no doubt about it, my lord. Submission to Cao Cao means peace for the people of Wu, and retaining the six provinces south of the Yangzi."

Sun Quan bowed his head and said nothing. Present-

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\* One of Sun Quan's chief advisers.

ly he went out and Lu Su followed him. Noting this, Sun Quan took his hand and asked, "What do you think?"

"Their advice is the worst possible thing you could do. They may surrender to Cao Cao, but not you."

"Why do you say that?"

"If men like myself went over to Cao Cao, we should be sent home and keep our official posts in the provinces. But in your case, where could you go? At the most you would be made a baron with one carriage and no more, one horse and just a few retainers. That would be the end of your kingship. The others are thinking of themselves. Don't listen to them but make up your mind quickly — this is an important decision."

"They have certainly disappointed me." Sun Quan sighed. "Your view of this is exactly the same as mine. Heaven must have sent you to me! But Cao Cao has just taken over Yuan Shao's army and the troops of Jingzhou too. I fear he may prove too powerful to resist."

Lu Su said, "I have brought Zhuge Jin's brother Zhuge Liang back with me from Jiangxia. You can find out the situation from him."

"What, is the Sleeping Dragon here?" cried Sun Quan.

"Yes, he's resting now in the hostel."

"It's too late to see him today. But tomorrow I shall assemble all my officials and introduce him to the bravest and the best of our men, after which we can discuss the matter."

With these instructions Lu Su withdrew. The next day he called on Zhuge Liang at the hostel and urged

him, "When you see my master today, don't tell him how powerful Cao Cao's army is."

Zhuge Liang replied with a smile, "I shall do as circumstances dictate. I can promise not to let you down."

Then Lu Su took him to Sun Quan's headquarters where they found more than twenty civil and military officers, including Zhang Zhao and Gu Yong, all seated in state with high headdresses and broad belts. Zhuge Liang was introduced to them one by one, and after an exchange of greetings he took the guest's seat. Meanwhile his air of refinement and commanding appearance had not been lost on Zhang Zhao and the others, who judged that he must have come to offer advice. Zhang Zhao led the way in trying to bait the visitor. "I am one of the most insignificant scholars of this district," he said. "But is it true, as I have long heard, that while living as a recluse in Longzhong you compared yourself to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi?"\*

"In some trifling respects I did," replied Zhuge Liang.

"I heard that Liu Bei called three times at your thatched hut and was as delighted to discover you as a fish getting back to the water, because he aspired to the conquest of Jingzhou and Xiangyang. But today those districts have fallen into Cao Cao's hands. What is the reason for that?"

Zhuge Liang reflected, "This Zhang Zhao is Sun Quan's foremost adviser. Unless I defeat him in argument, what chance have I with his master?" So he answered, "In my opinion, to take the land round the Han

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\* Famous statesmen in the seventh century and fourth century B.C.

River is as simple as turning over your hand. But my master Liu Bei has too much humanity and sense of justice to want to take the property of a kinsman. That accounts for his letting it go. Liu Cong is a fool who listened to bad advice and surrendered to Cao Cao without consulting others, enabling him to run wild. My master has stationed his troops at Jiangxia and has a good plan which I am not free to divulge."

Zhang Zhao said, "In that case, your deeds hardly match your words. You compare yourself to Guan Zhong and Yue Yi. But the one was a minister serving Duke Huan of Qi who became chief of all the barons and united the country. The other helped Yan, a weak state, to conquer more than seventy towns in Qi. These two men were truly great statesmen, where as you in your thatched hut led a frivolous existence, sitting idle all day long clasping your knees. Now that you have taken service under Liu Bei, you should do good and rid the people of evils, destroying rebels and traitors. In fact, before Liu Bei had you as his adviser, he managed to conquer some territory and take some cities, so that once he had you men expected great things of him — the very children imagined that wings had been given to a tiger, that the Han Dynasty would rise once more and Cao Cao would be destroyed. All the old ministers of Han and the hermits in mountain glades wiped their eyes and waited, believing that the time had come when the clouds would be scattered from the sky enabling the sun and moon to shine forth in splendour, and that you would rescue the people from hardships worse than flood and fire, restoring peace to the empire. Yet since you joined Liu Bei, his men have been flying before Cao Cao, abandoning their armour and spears. Failing to

serve Liu Biao\* well and relieve the people or to support his son and preserve his land, he has lost Xinye, escaped to Fancheng, been defeated at Dangyang and fled to Xiakou, unable to find a refuge anywhere. In short, since you became his adviser, Liu Bei has fared worse than before. Would this have been so with Guan Zhong and Yue Yi? I hope you won't take offence at my blunt, foolish talk."

After hearing him out, Zhuge Liang laughed and said, "A giant roc flies ten thousand *li*, but can the common birds understand his ambition? When a man falls dangerously ill, you must give him gruel first, then some mild restorative. Once his system is well regulated and quiet, you can give him nourishing meat and powerful drugs to cure his illness and preserve his life. If instead of waiting till humours and pulse are in harmony you give him powerful drugs and rich nourishment first, it will be difficult to restore him to health. Liu Bei was defeated at Runan and had to seek protection from Liu Biao. He had then less than a thousand men and none but Guan Yu, Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun as his officers. He was like a man dangerously ill and very weak. Xinye is a small mountainous district, sparsely populated and short of supplies, and Liu Bei simply used it as a temporary refuge, never intending to make it a permanent base. Yet with our scanty equipment, flimsy fortifications, untrained men and supplies sufficient for one day only, we burned Cao Cao's camp at Bowang and flooded his positions at Baihe, frightening his generals Xiahou Dun and Cao Ren into running away. To

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\* Liu Bei's kinsman, who ruled over Jingzhou. After his death, his son Liu Cong succeeded him, but soon surrendered to Cao Cao.



my mind, not even Guan Zhong or Yue Yi could have employed their troops to any better purpose. As for Liu Cong's surrender, Liu Bei had no knowledge of it and would not take advantage of the general confusion to seize his kinsman's estate. This shows his great humanity and justice. When he withdrew from Dangyang, several hundred thousand civilians, old and young, had flocked to join his just cause, and he would not abandon them; hence his army could only travel ten *li* a day; so he gave up attacking Jiangling and let himself be worsted. This again shows his great humanity and justice. The defeat of a small force by a great multitude is common enough in war. The first emperor of Han was defeated time and again by Xiang Yu, but finally triumphed in the Battle of Gaixia, and this shows Han Xin's brilliant strategy. Han Xin had served his sovereign for a long time without winning many battles for him; for affairs of state require a master plan. It is different in the case of boastful orators who deceive men with empty words: when it comes to talking, no one can surpass them; but in time of crisis when decisions have to be made, not one in a hundred shows any ability. In fact they become the laughing-stock of the whole world!"

Zhang Zhao had not a word to say after this, but another in that assembly demanded loudly, "But what of Cao Cào's power? There he is, encamped with a million men and a thousand generals, rampant as dragons and awe-inspiring as tigers. Already he has swallowed up Jiangxia!"

The speaker was Yu Fan and Zhuge Liang replied, "Cao Cao has merely taken over Yuan Shao's ant-heap and seized Liu Biao's flock of crows. Even if he had