

'Huarong Road'

Told by Xu Youliang

May 1989

At this very moment a big fellow leapt out from behind a stone tablet. It was Zhou Cang. Cao Cao didn't recognize him. He thought it was a robber. He wanted to enlist him on the spot as an adjutant. But Zhou Cang said:

"Maybe my family head wouldn't agree. I have to ask the family head."

Then Zhou Cang darted away over the mountain.

Cao Cao took a good look at this place and clicked his tongue: 'Why, what a wonderful place. Mountains on both sides, and here was the entrance to the main road. If somebody had prepared an ambush here and came rushing out now, they could bind my hands and take me along, take me along and bind my hands.'

"Ah ha, ah ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha.....!"

When all his counsellors heard this [they said]:

"Oh, please! Master!"

"Old Master!"

"You are laughing once more, Prime Minister!"

"Our Old Prime Minister is laughing again!"

"Please, don't laugh, Prime Minister! When we came to Yiling Mountain and everything looked so fine, you began to laugh, and by your laughter you caused Zhao Yun to sally forth. Oh, after that there was no smile on your face for a good while. But when we came to Calabash Gorge and were just about to have our meal, Your Honour began to laugh for the second time, and by your laughter you caused Zhang Fei to come out. We didn't even get our meal. Please, don't laugh anymore, lest your laughter will cause an ambush right here. Don't laugh! You shouldn't laugh!"

"Ambush me here and ambush me there! Hiding is the same as ambushing. How could I, your Old Master, cause men to prepare an ambush and go into hiding by laughing?"

"This is really preposterous! They had prepared ambushes in those places in advance. How on earth could they spring up at the sound of my laughter? Even if they were riding on the clouds, they couldn't be so fast. Where do such excuses come from?"

"Oh, Prime Minister, anyhow it's better not to laugh. As soon as you laugh, it has more effect than chanting a magic spell! Better not laugh! You have no reason to laugh, Prime Minister, so why do you laugh?"

They had been defeated to such a degree, so how could he laugh?

"I don't laugh at anybody else."

"Oh, who are you laughing at, then?"

"I am laughing at that bumpkin Zhuge Liang."

"Oh, you laugh at Zhuge Liang? Why do you laugh at Zhuge Liang?"

"Even if he knows a bit about strategy, his knowledge is not a hundred per cent complete. He has only grasped eighty per cent."

"Oh, Your Honour says that Zhuge Liang has only grasped eighty per cent, not one hundred per cent. What should he have done? What would you have done, Prime Minister?"

"If this old man had planned the operation, then take a look at this small road of Huarong: here we have mountains and forests, peaks and ridges, the terrain is very suitable! In this place it would certainly not be necessary to have many men. Just hand over a command, select one of the great generals together with five hundred picked troops and brave fighters, prepare an ambush here and suddenly burst forwards, then they could bind our hands and take us along, take us along and bind our hands!"

Oh, Old Master Cao, how clever you were at guessing! Five hundred brave fighters and one great general, that was quite right! You even got the number of men absolutely correct.

"Prime Minister, anyhow, it's better not to laugh! By the way, are you not waiting for that big fellow with the black face to come back? It looks like

that big fellow isn't coming back. He was telling a lie. As soon as the big fellow leapt out from his hiding place and saw that you, Prime Minister, were an official, he was scared and took to his heels."

"Hey, what a preposterous idea! Such a fellow may be rash and rude, but he would never break his promise."

Well, you don't know how to judge people. When such a man says one thing, he sticks to it. He could never break his promise.

"If we leave now, it is not the case that somebody else has broken his promise towards us, but we have broken our promise towards him. Let's wait a while."

"Well, let's wait a little."

They waited another while, and then they heard from behind the mountain, behind the stone tablet: Poo-poo-poo-poo! Sh-lang-lang-lang-lang.....! The big fellow leapt out in front of the stone tablet and stopped to the right of Cao Cao's horse. He didn't stand face to face? No, because in the position face to face, he would have to give way to his master. When he stopped to the right of the horse, the rascal could take the posture of 'two tigers mouth to mouth':

"Ahem!"

The moment Cao Cao saw him [he thought]: 'What do you think now? You said that person wasn't likely to return, but hasn't he come back? Oh, that kind of person is not likely to break his promise.'

"My dear warrior! Where is your master?"

"There!"

The rascal pointed towards the mountain.

"Over there, over there, doesn't my master come over there?"

Did they see anything? No, but they heard: Dong-dong-dong-dong.....
HUA-A-A-A-A-A!

"God help us!"

"Prime Minister, we told you not to laugh, but you insisted on laughing, and now your laughter has caused still another ambush. You must not laugh!"

The soldiers came streaming out. Didn't you say they were robbers? No, they were not. Robbers cannot fire guns and beat drums. If there is gunfire and drumbeat it is surely military. The troops sallied forth. Since the troops are sallying forth, shouldn't you be off, Cao Cao? It is Guan Yu who is hiding in this mountain. Isn't it better you try to make a break through? Even if he dared to flee, that big fellow was standing to his right, so if you tried to flee, he would beat you on your head with his cudgel, so that the brain would splatter out, and could you then escape? Cao Cao was so scared, he didn't dare to flee.

XY[1]

"He-e-e-ey! Kill them!"

From the mountain pass five hundred brave swordsmen dashed forward. Bending their bows, they advanced in an enveloping movement, blocking the mountain pass completely. In this scenery it was impossible to make out east and west. In front of the troops, a pole with a decorated flag protruded: TO-O-O-O-O-O-T! The pole was traced with golden patterns and had a golden calabash point. It was fitted with green tassels on both sides and furnished with black satin, twenty-four pendants with golden bells and two streamers fluttering in the wind to the left and right. The plain characters with which it was inscribed were not clearly distinguishable for Cao Cao. Let me, the storyteller, read them out to you: 'Marquis of Hanshouting, Flank General'. Cao Cao only saw the one very large character in the middle: 'Guan'.

"My God! Guan, Guan, Guan, Guan, Guan, Guan, Guan [close] ... "

instead of:

"Kai, kai, kai, kai [open] ... "

He was so scared he had forgotten the holy taboo. At this moment the waves parted and the billows split open: cling-clang, cling-clang..... Drawing his sword from the right, tassels fluttering to the left, a general charged

forwards on horseback ahead of his troops. He looked more magnificent than a young god. Heaving his silkworm brow, his phoenix eye bulging round, his handsome beard floating in the air, his five locks were standing on end, his moustache curling up at both sides:

Staunch was the Tiger General of the Han dynasty,
towering was the hero of those times.
His heart was like the red sun hanging in the space,
so big and so firm, far above the ordinary.
In martial arts he was on a level with Sun Zi,
in civil affairs he was equal with Confucius and Mencius.
Never before and never since did you behold such a handsome-bearded
duke,
his great name is praised in ten thousand generations.

Leading his troops, Guan Yu reined in his horse and lowered his sword.

Cao Cao and his military and civil officials looked as if they had been struck dumb by a thunderbolt. They didn't dare to move. 'Even if we were fresh troops and their men were put to rout, we would be no match for them. But on top of that we have been defeated to such a degree! We have been defeated to the point that only three hundred men remain out of our routed army. How could we really take up a fight with them? We are of course no match for them. They can bind our hands and take us along! Doomed! Let's flee! But whereto? On both sides there are mountains, and in the middle only this rugged path. We are sure to get caught by them. It is quite possible that this fellow called Guan Yu will do me in with one single blow of his sword, and for him, thanks to Heaven and Earth, this will be most welcome. I have now lived to this great age. A shortlived devil would have died several times. And is there any happiness I haven't savoured? But I am afraid I shall not be able to live through this happy day. If he captures me, his elder brother, Liu Bei, who swells from hatred towards me, will imprison me, first thing. If he remembers, I may get a little to eat. If he forgets, I'll have nothing to eat. He

will pull me out after three days and torture me. After five days he will pull me out, flog me, and humiliate me in every way! Today he will gladly pull out an eye, and tomorrow cut off my nose. The day after tomorrow he will cut off an ear. Little by little he will dismember my body and cut it to pieces, and only thereafter will he take my life. Oh woe! I, Cao Mengde [Cao Cao], have been accustomed to humiliate others, but how can I be humiliated by others? I am done for! Even if one lives more than a thousand years, one cannot escape death. If one is captured, one will die as well. It is better to die here and now.' Cao Cao lifted his hand and put it on the handle of his precious sword, 'Heaven's Support', at his side. He prepared to pull his sword and cut his own throat. If one had let him pull his sword, a white light would have flashed up and then a red light would have fallen down, the head of a man would have fallen down. Just at the moment when Cao Cao was about to pull his sword, there was someone behind his horse. Cao Cao's beloved counsellor Cheng Yu, also called Cheng Zhongde ǰXwell, learned people are brave. Aren't learned people very cowardly? When they are cowardly, they are extremely cowardly. But when they are brave, they are extremely brave. Once he has straightened out his thoughts, his courage increases. Master Cheng led his horse up behind Cao Cao and tugged at Cao Cao's sleeve, while speaking in a low voice. Cao Cao could hear it, but that fellow called Guan Yu opposite couldn't hear it. What did he say? He said:

"Prime Minister, please, wait a moment before you do something rash! General Guan Yu is haughty to the proud, but kind to the humble. He despises the strong, but is gentle with the weak. Moreover, in those days in Xuchang he was on good terms with you, Prime Minister! Why not appeal to his friendship now?"

Cheng Yu led his horse to the rear. Cao Cao heard this: 'Oh, what a good idea! Let me appeal to his friendship. I know that fellow called Guan Yu very well. But friendship won't do, this is a public matter, isn't it? Oh, that fellow called Guan Yu, if you are ruthless to him, he will be much more ruthless to you. But if you are generous to him, he will be manifold more generous to you. I am far from equal to him! General, spare my life! Well,

then he will wave his hand and let you off! He is haughty to the proud, but kindly to the humble. He despises the strong, but is gentle with the weak. To talk about friendship with him won't do, I'm afraid? Why not try and see what happens? If I do not succeed, it's not too late to die afterwards!

Cao Cao led his horse forwards a little, keeping a certain distance. The Black Dragon sword of Guan Yu couldn't reach him. At that moment the great battalion commander of more than a million men was XY[2] in a miserable state. He didn't look much like a great Prime Minister, more like a whimpering woman begging for pity: sorry and sad, weeping and wailing, mournful and grieved, bending his back, stretching out both hands, he looked up to Lord Guan Yu:

"Oh, Marquis, may I trust you have been in good health since we last met? Well ... ", he humphed at that point, "I rely on your Highness for protection, whether you will take rough measures or grant me a safe-conduct ... As yet, the sky is cold and the earth is frozen, the streams are icy and the grass is withered, where do you, My General, lead your men on duty?"

Cao Cao suppressed his feelings. That person named Guan Yu had come to arrest him, but he wouldn't admit it. '...As yet, the sky is cold and the earth is frozen, the streams are icy and the grass is withered, where do you, My General, lead your men on duty? ... ' What did he have in mind? Can you, please, tell me? Please, give me a hint!

"On special orders from our Military Counsellor I have come to wait upon you, Prime Minister!"

"Me?"

Pah! Cao Cao's heart quietened down, his mind was eased, the profuse sweat on his forehead dried up, he wasn't afraid any more. His life was thirty per cent guaranteed! So he actually thought his life was thirty per cent guaranteed? Yes! That person named Guan Yu had not forgotten that he owed him a debt of friendship. If he had forgotten their past friendship, he would have piled abuses on his head, like: "You old thief, you traitor!" 'When I greeted him, he said: "On special orders from our Military Counsellor I have come to wait upon you, Prime Minister!" He had even

said: " ... wait upon you, Prime Minister!", so that meant his life was thirty per cent guaranteed, didn't it?

"Oh, my General, as for my person Cao Cao, I was just standing here observing a stone tablet and pondering over old friendship, when at the rim of my ear I suddenly heard the sound of cymbals and drums coming from the mountains. My men reported: 'This is nobody else, but General Guan Yu who is leading his troops along this way.' I said: 'You don't have to be afraid! General Guan Yu has a deep friendship with me, Cao Cao!' My officials said: 'It cannot be! He has surely received orders from Counsellor Zhuge Liang, and harbours no good intentions. He has come to arrest you, Prime Minister!' Well, I said that my relationship with General Guan Yu cannot be compared to others. He would really not be willing to arrest me, Cao Cao. How could I imagine that you, General, actually had orders from your Military Counsellor to go to Huarong Road and arrest me, Cao Cao. Isn't this exactly what my men predicted?"

Cao Cao's talking was so sharp! The noble man can only guess about others, make an appraisal about others, make an estimate of others, but he cannot predict anything about others, or be predicted by others.

"Stop chattering! Dismount and get the shackles on!"
'Stop chattering! Dismount and get the shackles on! Hm!' Zhou Cang was standing at Guan Yu's side and getting upset! 'My dear hero, what are you telling him? You have a debt of friendship with him, but I do not have any debt of friendship with him. On your call, I'll jump over and bash my cudgel right on his head, so that his brain will splash all over!'

Cao Cao looked at them: 'There may be talk about friendship between me and that person by the name Guan Yu. But between me and that dark-faced big fellow, there will be no talking about friendship.'

"Oh General! Do ... do ... do ... you really mean this? Do you mean to disregard what happened in the beginning when we passed Xuchang and forget about the word FRIENDSHIP?"

If he had not mentioned friendship, that would have been the end of it! But when he mentioned friendship, Lord Guan spontaneously heaved his

silkworm brow, his phoenix eyes bulging out, his handsome beard floating in the air, his five locks standing on end, his moustache curling up at both sides: 'Oh, Master Cao, how could you get the idea to talk about friendship with me? That won't do! Friendship is something that exists between the two of us as a private matter. Today I have, however, received orders to arrest you, and that is a public matter, a matter of the state. Friendship is a private matter. How can I let private feelings outweigh public duty? That won't do! You ought not to talk to me about friendship! Moreover, even if you talk about friendship, I do not fall short in kindness towards you. A gentleman does not owe a debt of gratitude to a gentleman, and I do not fall short in our relationship. You granted me favours, and I have already paid back your kindness. The favours you granted me, I have by no means forgotten. What were these favours? Every three days a small banquet, and every five days a grand banquet, a horse for a thousand miles and a green brocade robe, plenty of gold and pretty girls, in rank acknowledged as Marquis of Hanshouting, with the title of Flank General. You granted me all these favours. Are you aware of what I did for you in return? I did you a few favours, too: At Baima Slopes I felled Yan Liang, and at the ferry-crossing of Yanjin I executed Wen Chou. So I had these two men finished off, and that was helpful to you. If I had not finished off Yan Liang and Wen Chou, how would you have done away with Ben Chu at Cangting and taken the territory of the four regions? How would you, Cao Cao, ever have been able to put your hand on such a large family property? The fact that you have been able to live on to this very day is due to me! If I had not executed Yan Liang and Wen Chou, you would never have been able to pull off your big plans. Yan Liang and Wen Chou told you themselves, face to face, on the battlefield: "Master Cao! The two of us would like to invite eight or ten of the great generals of your house, such as Zhang Liao, Xu Chu, Xu Huang and Xiahou Yuan, in order to let you see if we are afraid of them!" You were scared to death! Your life was in danger! So you asked my humble person to go to Baima and kill Yan Liang, and to execute Wen Chou at Yanjin.'

Yan Liang was killed at Baima, and Wen Chou died at Yanjin, and the heroes north of the River lost all their courage. Lord Guan thought: 'If he had not mentioned friendship, we might leave it at that, but since he did talk about friendship, then I'll have to tell him a thing about friendship. If I do not explain my views on friendship, I cannot arrest him. I had better settle my accounts with him on the question of friendship!'

"This humble person by name Guan Yu killed Yan Liang and executed Wen Chou, and thus repaid your favour!"

When Lord Guan had come so far, he looked ashamed in his face, he felt a little ashamed, ill at ease: 'Too bad! We don't look like grown ups, but more like two small children, falling on their bellies. When children want to get friends, they say: "I'll be your friend and you'll be my friend!" "I'll give you a rice crust to eat." "I'll give you a broad bean to eat." If one of them stops treating the other, they turn against each other: "You ate my rice crust just now!" "You also ate my broad bean!" Does that look like responsible grown ups?'

This certain person, Lord Guan, felt ashamed: 'I killed Yan Liang and executed Wen Chou, and so I have repaid you, I do not owe you a debt

XY[3] of kindness.'

"Quite right! You, General, killed Yan Liang and executed Wen Chou. Thus you repaid Cao Cao, that's quite right! But there is something you, General, have forgotten!"

If he had actually forgotten something, could one very well blame him? That's called 'aristocrats are forgetful'.

"You have forgotten about our parting at Ba Bridge. You, General, had received news from your elder brother, telling you to take leave of me, Cao Cao, and return to the Han clan. I escorted you at the head of all my civilian and military officials the whole way to Ba Bridge. I gave you one casket of gold and one autumn robe. The gold was meant to cover your expenses on the road. The autumn robe was meant as a souvenir. How could I guess that you, General, were not willing to receive the gifts, in spite of being pressed again and again? You would not receive the gold, and only after you had

declined again and again, did you finally accept the autumn robe. But you did not accept the gold. You, General, did not even dismount, but from horseback you lifted the robe over on the tip of your Green Dragon Sword and slipped it on. Thereafter as you, General, were nearing the bridge, you pointed at me, Cao Cao, with your Green Dragon Sword and said: 'This humble person, named Guan Yu, always requites a kindness. The rest of your favours remain for me to pay back. If we meet another day, how would I dare not to reward you with my life!'"

... 'This came from your mouth in the first place, Guan Yu, and then it entered my ear. But it was you who said so. If you don't want to repay me with death, wouldn't it be better to give way for me today? Wouldn't that mean you had repaid me?' ...

"General! Your behaviour was always exemplary: For example your three conditions at Tuntushan, that was an example of the General's wisdom. When Xuzhou fell, and you, General, and your men were hard pressed at Tushan, and you accepted the conditions of Zhang Liao in order to prevent the common people suffering severe tribulations, that was an example of the General's humanity. You have tried to the utmost to fulfil the oath of loyalty sworn in Peach Garden: 'The three of us will live together and die together', and that's an example of the General's loyalty. You never offended the rules of propriety between a monarch and his subjects, and so you showed due respect for your two sisters-in-law, and that was an example of the General's propriety. Thus you, General, possess the characteristics of the four words: humanity, loyalty, propriety and wisdom. How regrettable that you lack the one word: 'faithfulness'! You used to be willing to go to the end of the world for the sake of faithfulness, but this morning you have broken your faith to Cao Cao. And that is not because you, General, are not willing to let me, Cao Cao, through, but the order of your Military Counsellor is difficult to go against: 'With an assignment from above, the one below cannot follow his own disposition'. From the beginning I, Cao Cao was able to befriend you, General. After you left us at Ba Bridge and killed the commanders in the five passes, my officials said: 'General Guan is outrageous! On his own authority

he killed commanding officials of the royal court. Why do you, Prime Minister, not send your men out to pursue him?' 'Hey, let's go!' But I said: 'You don't understand! When General Guan killed my commanders of the passes, that was what he ought to do. Whoever had told them to obstruct the way for General Guan? Who had told them to obstruct the way for General Guan? The friendship between me and General Guan cannot be compared to that of others. It was fine that he killed them. If General Guan had not killed them, I, Cao Cao, would have killed them!' Oh, General! When you killed the commanders of the passes, I defended you and said you had done well. How did I hope to benefit from my friendship with you, General? Only so as to be prepared for a day like today!"

That old traitor had finally finished his mean speech! He might as well have said: "After you had left, Guan Yu, I let you kill my commanders of the passes. I even said you had done well, only so as to be prepared for a day like today!"

"Well! You, my General, cannot give way to me, Cao Cao, since the order of your Military Counsellor is difficult to go against. Well, that's it! In the beginning I was able to befriend you, General, and let you go after you had killed the commanders of the five passes. Why do I not befriend you today to the very end? It is better to present respectfully the neck of this humble person, Cao Cao, to Your Excellency to chop off my head. I will not allow anybody else the labour of the axe and halberd, but only ask you, my General, to do it!"

Cling-clang cling-clang.....Cao Cao rode up to him on his horse and stretched his head forward. Well, Lord Guan, now it is up to you to let the knife fall! Oh, do you think he would fix that? Just as if this was but a blow of Lord Guan's sword? Oh, no! There was something very strange about the life of Cao Cao, you can't imagine! While he spoke, he observed the expression and colour of Lord Guan's face. He observed how Lord Guan behaved at first: Drawing his sword from the right, with tassels fluttering to the left, he heaved his silkworm brow, his phoenix eyes bulging out, so awe-inspiring and murderous-looking! But as Cao Cao held forth with his long

speech for a while, Duke Guan while listening and listening, stopped heaving his silkworm brow. Listening and listening, he stopped glaring with his phoenix eyes. Listening and listening, his handsome beard stopped floating. Listening and listening, he listened until his sword sank. Listening and listening, his hand holding his sword, he turned the tip down and the grip up. Listening and listening, Lord Guan began to stroke his beard with one hand and look at Cao Cao. At first he stared at him with an angry look, but after listening for a while, his face became full of kindness. His angry look changed to kindness, because he couldn't sacrifice Cao Cao, when he saw his pitiful state. As soon as Cao Cao glanced at him, he understood that the man by name Guan Yu could not let the sword come down on him. He rode up to him:

"Cao Cao's neck for you to chop off! I will not let anybody else do the labour of the axe and halberd, but only ask you, oh General, to do it!"

At first there was quite some distance between them, so Guan Yu didn't mind. But little by little Cao Cao came nearer and nearer. Lord Guan was sitting on his carmine-brown steed, Red Hare, and looked at Cao Cao, sitting on his date-yellow colt, Flying Lightning. The beasts, heads high and tails swaying, began to neigh:

"Sh-sh-sh.....dr-r-r-r-r....."

The date-yellow colt, Flying Lightning, looked at the carmine-brown steed, Red Hare, and neighed again:

"Sh-sh-sh....."

When Cao Cao saw that, he exclaimed:

"Oh, General, do-do-do-do you see! Even our horses still remember the loyalty of their common manger! How much more should human beings like you and me?!"