

THE TALE OF THE HEIKE

Heike Monogatari

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CHAPTER XVI

THE DEATH OF ATSUMORI

Naozane, seeing overwhelming victory for his side, said to himself: "The Heike courtiers are running away to the beach to their boats. Ah, I wish I could challenge a great general of the Heike!"

As he was riding to the beach, he caught sight of a fine-looking warrior urging his horse into the sea toward a boat anchored a little offshore. The warrior wore armor laced with light green silk cords over a twilled silk battle robe decorated with an embroidered design of cranes. On his head was a gold-horned helmet. He carried a sword in a gold-studded sheath and a bow bound with red lacquered rattan. His quiver held a set of black and white feathered arrows, the center of each feather bearing a black mark. He rode a dapple gray outfitted with a gold-studded saddle. He was swimming at a distance of five or six tan when Naozane roared at him: "You out there! I believe you are a great general. It is cowardly to turn your back on your enemy. Come back!"

Naozane beckoned to him with his fan. Thus challenged, the warrior turned his horse around. When he reached the beach, Naozane rode alongside, grappled with him, and wrestled him to the ground. As Naozane pressed down his opponent and removed his helmet to cut off his head, he saw before him the fair-complexioned face of a boy no more than sixteen or seventeen. Looking at this face, he recalled his son, Naoie. The youth was so handsome and innocent that Naozane, unnerved, was unable to find a place to strike with the blade of his sword.

"Now tell me who you are," asked Naozane. "Declare yourself! Then I will spare your life."

"You? Who are you?" replied the youth.

"I am a warrior of little importance. A native of Musashi Province, Kumagai no Jirō Naozane, that is who I am."

"I cannot declare myself to such as you. So take my head and show it to others. They will identify me."

"Ah, you must be a great general, then," replied Naozane. But he thought to himself: "The slaughter of one courtier cannot conclusively effect this war. Even when I saw that my son, Naoie, was slightly wounded, I could not help feeling misery. How much more painful it would be if this young warrior's father heard that his son had been killed. I must spare him!"

Looking over his shoulder, he saw a group of his comrades galloping toward them. He suppressed his tears and said: "Though I wish to spare your life, a band of my fellow warriors is approaching, and there are so many others throughout the countryside that you have no chance of escaping from the Genji. Since you must die now, let it be by my hand rather than by the hand of another, for I will see that prayers for your better fortune in the next world are performed."

To this, the young warrior replied simply: "Then take off my head at once!"

So pitiable an act was it that Naozane could not wield his blade. His eyes saw nothing but darkness before him. His heart sank. However, unable to keep the boy in this state any longer, he struck off his head. Frenzied with grief, Naozane wept until the tears rushed down his cheeks.

"Nothing is so bitter as to be born into a military family! Were I not a warrior, I should not have such sorrow! What a cruel act this is!"

He covered his face with the sleeves of his armor and wept. But he could no longer stand there weeping. Then as he was wrapping the head in a cloth, he found a flute in a brocade bag tucked into a sash around the boy's waist.

"What a tragedy! At dawn I heard the sound of a flute from within the Heike lines. It was this youth who was playing. Among the hundred thousand warriors on our side, there is no one who has carried with him a flute to a battlefield. What a gentle life these nobles and courtiers have led!"

Murmuring these words, he returned to his own army. When he presented the head to Yoshitsune for inspection, all the warriors shed tears in sympathy. It was soon recognized as the head of *Lord*

THE DEATH OF ATSUMORI

Atsumori, only seventeen years of age, a son of the chief of the Palace Repairs Division, Tsunemori.

It is said that the flute had first been possessed by Emperor Toba who gave it to Atsumori's grandfather, Tadamori, an excellent player of the instrument. It was then passed on to his son Tsunemori, who in turn gave it to Atsumori, since his surpassing talent on the flute deserved his possession of it. This flute was known as Saeda.¹

Even singing, an exaggeration of words and speech, can now and then cause enlightenment to awaken in a man. Simply the sound of this flute played by Atsumori inspired Naozane to pursue the way to the Buddha.²

¹ Literally "Small Branch."

² He became a disciple of Hōnen at Kurodani and called himself by the Buddhist name Rensei.