

KABUKI VERSION OF THE ATSUMORI STORY

ICHI NO TANI FUTABAGUNKI (*The Chronicle of the Battle of Ichi no Tani*). *Jidaimono* of the Heike-Genji Cycle (see page 418). — Written by Namiki Sōsuke and his assistants. The original play, in five acts, was first staged in 1751 at the Toyotake-za, one of the two great puppet theatres of Osaka. It was later adopted by Kabuki. The part of Kumagai is considered one of the greatest rôles of the live theatre.

Of the long play, only two acts are still performed and form a complete play in themselves. They tell the story of a dramatic incident during the battle of Ichi no Tani, the fight between the experienced Genji warrior Kumagai Jiro Naozane and the Heike boy-hero Taira Atsumori. The death of Atsumori is described in detail in the *Heike Monogatari* and is the subject of two Noh plays, *Atsumori* and *Ikuta*. The *monogatari*, the dramatized account of the fight given by Kumagai in Act II, follows the description in the *Heike Monogatari* very closely. It is some of the finest poetry to be heard on the stage and gains through the interpretation of the living actor. It is interesting that it is in no way lifted from either of the Noh plays. In these, the two accounts of the fight dwell rather upon incidents before the battle and only briefly recount Atsumori's death.

Seventeen years before the play opens, **Fuji no Kata**, a lady-in-waiting to the Emperor, had among her ladies one named **Sagami**. Sagami fell in love with a warrior of the proscribed Genji faction, **Kumagai Jiro Naozane**. For a lady of the court to take a lover was an offence punishable by death, or at the best exile, and Kumagai was, moreover, of the enemy clan. Sagami was already with child, and her plight was desperate, but her mistress took pity on her. With the help of Fuji no Kata the pair were able to fly to Western Japan. They vowed eternal gratitude to her. Fuji no Kata was also at that time pregnant by her lover, who was the Emperor himself. She was married shortly after-

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wards to Tsunemori, the nephew of the all-powerful Taira Kiyomori. Her child, Atsumori, was brought up as Tsunemori's son. The debt of gratitude owed by Kumagai and his wife to Fuji no Kata was known to Yoshitsune. He also knew that in Atsumori's veins ran Imperial blood. On the eve of the battle of Ichi no Tani, Yoshitsune sensed that an inescapable destiny would cause Kumagai and Atsumori to meet on the field. Because of his debt, Kumagai must not kill Atsumori, nor must he shed Imperial blood. Yet as a soldier it would be shameful for him to spare an enemy. Therefore Yoshitsune determined to suggest to Kumagai the tragic but only way out of the dilemma. He caused the priest Benkei to write a notice and place it against a young cherry-tree growing before Kumagai's headquarters. The notice read: "Anyone lopping a branch from this tree must have a finger cut off." There is here a play on the words, "one branch," "one finger," and "one son," the hidden meaning of the notice being: "Anyone killing a son must kill his own son."

Act I: Sune on the seashore

In which Kumagai kills "Atsumori"

(but actually substitutes his own son)

Act II

Kumagai's Camp (Kumagai Jinya). The act opens just after the arrival of Kumagai's wife, Sagami, at her husband's headquarters, before which stands the cherry tree with its cryptic message. She has come for news of Kojiro who has just fought his first battle. Kumagai has not yet returned, but to her astonishment a woman appears. Sagami recognizes her as Fuji no Kata, whom she has not seen for sixteen years. Fuji no Kata tells Sagami that she has heard that Atsumori, her son, is dead by the hand of Kumagai. She has come to avenge him. She commands Sagami to assist her, and Sagami remembering the great debt she owes to her former mistress, reluctantly consents.

(The following short scene is generally omitted, but is interesting as it provides a logical explanation of the curious incidents at the end of the play.) Kajiwaru Kagetoki, one of Yoritomo's most trusted generals, is announced. He has come to consult Kumagai, but is told that he has gone to pray at a neighbouring temple. He orders his retainers to bring in an old stonemason, Midaroku, whom he has taken into custody for erecting a monument to Taira Atsumori. He questions Midaroku closely. Who ordered this monument? Midaroku answers that it was Atsumori's ghost, adding that the stingy spirit never gave him a penny for it. Kajiwaru is invited by Kumagai's chief retainer Gunji to enter and rest until his master returns. Kajiwaru does so, handing over Midaroku to Gunji for safekeeping.

A shout announces Kumagai's return. He walks slowly along the *hanamichi* deep in thought. He no longer wears armour, but is in ceremonial dress. He carries in one hand a rosary. As he advances, the chorus sing: "Kumagai has slain Atsumori in the flower of his youth. He knows now the vanity of this world. He has drunk the cup of sorrow to the dregs." Kumagai pauses, his hand falls to his side, and the beads tinkle against his sword sheath. He comes out of his *r  verie* and, after hiding the rosary, enters the camp.

Kumagai shows his displeasure at finding his wife there and asks her why she has come. Before she can answer, Fuji no Kata rushes upon him with a drawn dagger. Kumagai knocks the dagger from her hand and looks at her in amazement. When he realizes that it is indeed Fuji no

Kata, he makes deep obeisance, offering her his sword in homage. Fuji no Kata bids Sagami make good her promise and kill Kumagai. Sagami, weeping, cannot bring herself to do it. She asks her husband what can have possessed him to kill the son of their benefactress. Kumagai replies that on the battlefield no distinction can be drawn between enemies. He offers to describe to them what happened.

Kumagai begins the famous narrative (*monogatari*) which is one of the highlights of the play. Using only his fan and his sword, he describes the fight between himself and Atsumori. As he tells the story his open fan becomes first the two horsemen approaching each other. Then, as he speaks of the fighting, the closed fan imitates the strokes of the sword. When he has unhorsed Atsumori and thrown him down, he uses his sword to show how he raised the boy and brushed the dust from his clothes. He describes his emotions at the sight of Atsumori's youth, and how the lad begged for death, since he was already defeated. He was about to spare the boy when Hirayama, his fellow general, appeared and cried to him (Kumagai acts this dramatically) that to spare an enemy was the act of a coward. He realized then that he had no alternative and asked Atsumori whether he had anything to say before he died. Atsumori answered that although he sorrowed for his mother, he wished only for death. Kumagai stops speaking and Fuji no Kata tragically echoes his last words. She is brokenhearted, but has abandoned all thought of vengeance. Sagami tries to console her.

Kumagai retires to put on ceremonial dress before carrying Atsumori's head to Yoshitsune. Fuji no Kata asks to burn incense for the repose of her son's spirit and, while doing so, plays on a flute belonging to the boy. As she does so, a shadow appears on the closed paper doors of the inner room. Fuji no Kata breaks off in amazement, and the shadow vanishes. She flings open the doors to find only a suit of armour inside.

Yoshitsune himself is announced. He has come to identify the head in the privacy of Kumagai's headquarters, because he does not know how Kumagai may have interpreted his message delivered through the notice. Kumagai comes to receive him. He knows now that he can no longer

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spare the two women. That they should be present at the head inspection is something which he had no reason to expect. Reluctantly he prepares to present the head, but first he takes the notice-board from the cherry tree and places it before Yoshitsune. Slowly Kumagai lifts the cover of the head-box, but a cry from his wife makes him quickly replace it. (It is only at this point in the play that Sagami's cry tells the audience for certain that Kumagai has in fact adopted Yoshitsune's solution and has sacrificed his son.) Sagami struggles to approach the head-box, but Kumagai, in a sort of frenzy of grief, drives her off with the notice-board. He poses for a moment, while Sagami and Fuji no Kata (who still thinks the head is Atsumori's) weep together. Kumagai once more removes the cover and, his eyes fixed upon Yoshitsune, presents the head. He continues to gaze at his young commander throughout the inspection, partly because he cannot bear to look at his son's face, partly because he is not at all certain that this is, in fact, what Yoshitsune intended him to do. Yoshitsune slowly opens his fan and looks down at the head through the ribs, his face concealed. At length he closes his fan: "You have done well. This is indeed the head of Atsumori." Kumagai signals to Sagami that she may now approach the head and show it to Fuji no Kata. Sagami, caressing it with loving hands, bravely pretends that she believes it to be Atsumori's. Fuji no Kata can do no less than further the deception. Her joy is the easier to conceal



Kumagai

since she reads in Sagami's face the sacrifice which has now repaid her own kindness of long ago. They are interrupted by the sudden entrance of Kajiwara Kagetoki. He threatens to expose the deception to Yoritomo, who has ordered the most ruthless extermination of the family of Taira Kiyomori. Kajiwara goes off down the *hanamichi* full of anger. A moment later a scream is heard off-stage.

The old stone-mason, Midaroku, enters. Like Scott's "Old Mortality," he spends his last years erecting and caring for memorials to the heroes of his clan, and he has come to the battlefield to give decent burial to the fallen Heike soldiers. He now informs Yoshitsune that he has killed Kajiwara by throwing a dirk at him. This he has done that Yoshitsune's hands "may not be sullied by base blood." He is about to go on his way when Yoshitsune stops him, calling him "Munekiyo." When Midaroku pretends he does not know to whom Yoshitsune is speaking, the prince relates how the great Heike warrior Munekiyo saved the lives of his mother, his brothers, and himself when they were caught in a snowdrift in the mountains. Yoshitsune adds: "Although I was an infant then, I have never forgotten your face." Midaroku admits that he is indeed Munekiyo. It is in an attempt to atone for his fault in sparing the life of one destined to become the instrument of the Heike's downfall that he gave up his samurai rank in order to care for the Heike dead. Yoshitsune does not resent his words. He recognizes the debt he owes Midaroku and sees in it the means of solving the one remaining problem of smuggling the living Atsumori out of Kumagai's headquarters. He therefore orders a large case, ostensibly containing armour, but in which Atsumori is hidden, to be brought and presented to Midaroku.

Kumagai returns in full armour. Solemnly he begs Yoshitsune to absolve him from his warrior's vow and to allow him to relinquish his command. He lays before his lord the tightly bound lock of hair which marks the soldier and removing his helmet and cuirass reveals himself in the habit of a shaven-headed priest. The shock of the terrible action forced upon him by duty and honour makes it impossible for him to continue in the profession of arms. All he wishes to do is to spend the rest of his life praying for the release of his son's spirit. Yoshitsune, deeply grieving,

grants his request, and Kumagai turns away to take up the palmer's hat and staff. Yoshitsune bids him look once more on his child's face. From the depth of his sorrow Kumagai cries out: "Alas, the sixteen short years of his life have passed in a moment, like a dream—like a dream!"

As the curtain is drawn, Kumagai remains alone on the *hanamichi*. He sinks down beneath the burden of his grief.