

THE TALE OF THE HEIKE

[Heike Monogatari]

"The Tale of the Heike" deals mainly with the struggle for power at the end of the twelfth century between the Taira family (Heike) and the Minamoto family (Genji). The Minamoto, under Yoritomo and his brother Yoshitsune, were successful, and the Taira completely crushed. Stories of the splendors and fall of the Taira, and of the acts of heroism and pathos which marked the wars, were soon being recited by ballad-singers. These stories were assembled, more or less in the present form, by the middle of the thirteenth century, although we do not know by whom or in what way.

CHAPTER I

GION TEMPLE

The bell of the Gion Temple tolls into every man's heart to warn him that all is vanity and evanescent.² The faded flowers of the sāla trees³ by the Buddha's death-bed bear witness to the truth that all who flourish are destined to decay. Yes, pride must have its fall, for it is as unsubstantial as a dream on a spring night. The brave and violent man—he too must die away in the end, like a whirl of dust in the wind.

If we examine the dynasties of ancient China, we see that there were Chao Kao⁴ in the Ch'in dynasty, Wang Mang⁵ in the Han, Chu I⁶ in the Liang, and An Lu-shan⁷ in the T'ang. They all destroyed themselves in a brief space of time, for they indulged in luxury and did not follow in the steps of their predecessors. They neglected traditional rituals and moral government and ignored the growing unrest in their country and the concern of their people.

Turning to our own country, we see Masakado⁸ in the Shōhei era, Sumitomo⁹ in the Tennyō, Yoshichika¹⁰ in the Kōwa, and Nobuyori¹¹ in the Heiji, who were all proud and violent in their own ways. Surpassing all these men, however, there comes to mind the recent Lord Taira no Kiyomori, the so-called Nyūdō¹² of Rokuhara,¹³ who was premier and a retainer of the emperor, and whose storied arrogance beggars both mind and tongue.

If we trace his ancestry, he was the heir of the emperor's retainer the lord high marshal Tadamori, and the grandson of Masamori, governor of Sanuki Province. Masamori, in turn, was a ninth-generation descendant of the prince of the blood Kazurayara, the lord high chamberlain for ceremonies and fifth in line of succession to Emperor Kammu's¹⁴ throne. The son of Prince Karurahara, Prince Takami, lived away from the court and died without official rank or title. Therefore his son, Prince Takamochi, agreed to as-

sume the status of a commoner. He was given the family name of Taira and appointed governor of Kazusa. His son, Yoshimochi, a military governor in the provinces, thereafter changed his name to Kunika, and the six generations from Kunika to Masamori all served as provincial governors. Their names remained unlisted on the scroll of visitors at the Imperial Palace.

¹ The Jcavana monastery, built at Srāvasti, in India, by a wealthy man named Anāthapindaka to honor Sakyamuni, the Buddha.

² The final phrase is from a *gāthā* (a Buddhist text in verse), containing the following quatrain:

All is vanity and evanescence.

That is the law of life and death.

In the complete denial of life and death

Is the bliss of entering Nirvana.

According to the Buddhist text *Gion Zōkyō*, there was a hall named Mujō-dō ("Evanescence Hall"), which was used for accommodating sick priests. There were bells in the four corners of the hall that tolled the words of this quatrain as the breath of the dying priests began to fail. That is to say, the priests imagined that they could forget all their earthly sufferings and enter Nirvana.

³ The *Nirvana Sutra* describes the Buddha's entrance into Nirvana in detail: at each corner of the Buddha's bed, which was made of seven kinds of precious stones, stood a pair of sala (teak or bo) trees. These eight trees bowed down toward the center of the bed, and their color changed to the white of cranes as the Buddha began to pass into Nirvana.

THE HEIKE HAVE ABANDONED THE CAPITAL AT
KYOTO (A STRATEGIC MISTAKE) AND TAKING THE
CHILD EMPEROR WITH THEM, HAVE MOVED TO FUKUHARA.
WHILE THERE KIYOMORI BEGINS TO BE HAUNTED BY
HIS MISDEEDS (WHICH INCLUDE KILLING SUSPECTED
ENEMIES, BURNING TEMPLES FOR SUPPOSEDLY
HARBORING HIS ENEMIES, AND GENERALLY ACTING THE
DESPOTIC TYRANT TO THOSE BENEATH HIM).

EVIL SPIRITS

Ever since Fukuohara had been made the new capital, the men of the Heike had been haunted by terrible nightmares. During the daylight hours they felt a strange uneasiness, and evil spirits appeared to them at night.

One night, while Kiyomori lay in his bed, the monstrous face of some strange creature—a face nearly one ken wide—appeared at his side and stared at him. Kiyomori lay very still and simply glared back. The face soon faded away.

As Kiyomori's palace had been but newly built, there were no large trees around it. One night, however, the crash of a falling tree was heard. A moment later, roars of laughter, as great as that of twenty or thirty men laughing all at once, rang out. "This must be the work of the tengu," thought the Heike. Kiyomori ordered a hundred bowmen to stand guard at night; and fifty of them to watch in the daytime. They were commanded to use whizzing arrows, and so they were called Guards with the Whizzing Arrows. When these guards shot arrows at places where they supposed a tengu to be, there was only silence. But when they shot their arrows at random, again the contemptuous laughter rang out.

One morning Kiyomori came out of his bedroom and made his way toward the courtyard. But as he passed through the wicket gate, he saw in the courtyard hundreds of skulls rolling and springing over one another, making grating sounds as they moved. Kiyomori cried out to summon his retainers: "Is someone here? Is anybody here?" But none of his attendants appeared. Then all the skulls gathered together, and united into one mountainous skull, perhaps fourteen or fifteen jō high, that seemed to fill the whole courtyard. From within this huge skull came the light of millions of great eyes. They seemed to be the eyes of living men as they glared steadily at Kiyomori. Kiyomori was quite undaunted; he

stood his ground and glared back. Then, like dew or frost that vanishes in the sun, the vision faded away, leaving not a trace behind.

Another strange thing happened. Kiyomori had a favorite horse, which was kept in the best of his stables and which he caressed morning and evening. He had ordered many of his attendants to take care of the animal. One night, however, a rat made its nest in the horse's tail and gave birth to little ones. "This is unnatural," said Kiyomori, and he ordered seven imperial diviners to discover what it meant. Their reply was: "Intense self-control."

The horse had been presented to Kiyomori by Oba no Saburō Kagechika, a native of Sagami Province, and was renowned as the finest in all the eight eastern provinces. Black all over save for a white blaze on his forehead, the horse, called Mochizuki,¹ was afterward given to Abe no Yasuchika, the chief of the Board of Divination.

Long ago, in the time of Emperor Tenchi, a rat built its nest in the tail of one of the emperor's horses and brought forth little ones. Shortly afterward an insurrection broke out in a far land. So it is recorded in the *Nihon Shoki*.²

A young retainer of the vice-councilor, Masayori, also had an ominous dream. In this dream he saw many nobles and court ladies, dressed in ceremonial robes, holding a conference. A court lady in a lower seat was evicting all who supported the Heike. The young man asked an old man who happened to be near him: "Who is that court lady?"

"She is Itsukushima Dai-Myōjin,"³ replied the old man.

Then a dignified old noble in a higher seat declared: "The sword of command was given into the hands of the Heike. Now it must be taken back and given to Yoritomo, who is in exile in Izu Province."

At his side sat another elder who, in turn, said: "After Yoritomo, I pray you to give it to my grandson."

Masayori's retainer asked the old man for the names of these elders. "The aged noble who said that the sword of command should be given to Yoritomo is the great bodhisatva Hachiman. The other who asked that it be given to his grandson is Kasuga Dai-Myōjin.⁴ I am Takeuchi Dai-Myōjin."⁵

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After awakening from the dream, the young man recounted it to many people. As soon as Kiyomori heard of it, he sent Suesada, the captain of the Imperial Guard, to Lord Masayori with this demand: "Your young retainer who had a strange dream—send him at once."

When the young man heard of the Priest-Premier's order, however, he went into hiding, and so Lord Masayori himself went to Kiyomori's palace and said: "The whole story about this dream is a fabrication."

Kiyomori pursued the matter no further, and nothing more was heard of it.

The Heike had protected the imperial family and had maintained peace in the land. But now because they had disobeyed the emperor, they were to be deprived of command.

On Mount Kōya Priest Nariyori, the former state minister, heard of these things and said: "Ah, the prosperity of the Heike is finally nearing its end. That Itsukushima Dai-Myōjin had once favored the Heike stands to reason. The goddess of Itsukushima is the third daughter of the Dragon King, the god whom the Heike revered above all others. I can understand why the great bodhisatva Hachiman should speak of giving the sword of command to Yoritomo. But I cannot understand why Kasuga Dai-Myōjin should wish it to be given to his grandson. Does he mean that after the Heike have been destroyed and the Genji have run their course, the noble descendants of Fujiwara Kamatari, the sesshō-kampaku, will become rulers of the land?"

A certain priest who often visited Nariyori said: "The gods are the incarnations of the Buddhas and bodhisatvas. They soften their holy light in order to befriend mortals. They appear in this world in various guises—sometimes as ordinary men, sometimes as female deities. Though Itsukushima Dai-Myōjin is a female deity, she possesses the Six Supernatural Powers⁶ and the Three Clear Conceptions, so it is not so difficult for her to take mortal form."

Nariyori had loathed the corruption of the world and had entered the true path. As a priest he devoted himself heart and soul to the attainment of enlightenment, and so all else should have been as nothing to him. Yet, when he heard that the government had acted justly, he was pleased; and when he heard of trouble, he was saddened. This is the way of all men.

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TAIRA NO KIYOMORI, THE MAN WHO BROUGHT THE HEIKE TO THE
HEIGHT OF THEIR POWER, SEES IN HIS SNOW COVERED GARDEN
A VISION OF THE SKULLS OF THE MEN AND WOMEN HE HAS SLAIN
TO REACH HIS EXALTED POSITION.





Waterfowl scare the Heike at the Fuji River. Mount Fuji in the background.

THE HEIKE HAVE BEEN FORCED OUT OF FUKUHARA AND HAVE BUILT A FORTIFIED CAMP NEAR THE FUJI RIVER. THEY HAVE SET THE MORNING OF THE 24TH AS THE TIME FOR THE NEXT MAJOR CONFRONTATION WITH THE GENJI. HOWEVER, THEY BECOME FRIGHTENED INTO ABANDONING THEIR CAMP BY RUMORS AND THE SOUND OF BIRDS TAKING OFF FROM THE MARSH, AND WHEN THE GENJI RIDE UP FOR BATTLE, THEY FIND NO ONE THERE.

So the days went by, and the twenty-third day of the tenth month came. Both the Heike and the Genji fixed the next day as the day of battle. They would shoot arrows from either side of the Fuji River, and the fighting would begin. On the evening of the twenty-third, however, the men of the Heike stood gazing toward the Genji camp. The farmers and inhabitants of Izu and Suruga, terrified by the approaching battle, had fled. Some had taken refuge on the plains, some had hidden themselves in the mountains, and some had taken to boats on the sea or on the river. They now kindled their cooking fires. At the sight of these fires, the soldiers of the Heike grew alarmed and said: "The campfires of the Genji are beyond count! The messenger yesterday spoke the truth. The plains, mountains, seas, and rivers are all covered with the soldiers of the enemy. We are lost!"

At about midnight the waterfowl in the marshes at the foot of Mount Fuji were startled by something. Suddenly the birds rose together with a whirring of wings, loud as the sound of a storm or a clap of thunder.

"It is the Genji coming to attack us! Yesterday Sanenori said, 'The Genji of Kai and Shinano will surely come around to take us from the rear.' If we are surrounded, we will be helpless. Let us retreat to the Kiso River and make our stand there." So saying, the soldiers fled, almost trampling on one another and leaving their gear behind. They were so confused that those who took bows forgot to take arrows, and those who took arrows forgot to take bows. Some sprang onto others' horses; some mounted horses still tethered and whipped them so that they galloped round and round the posts to which they were tied. Some had called for singing girls and prostitutes from the neighboring towns and were making merry with them. In the confusion, however, several of these women were kicked in the head or trampled underfoot. Their screams added to the uproar.

The next day at the hour of the hare (6:00 A.M.), more than two hundred thousand horsemen of the Genji advanced to the Fuji River and roared their battle cry three times. The heavens reverberated; the earth shook.

¹ The entire poem is as follows:

Ah, how loudly sounds—

As if the wild plain were small—

Kumgae no jirō Naozane walked his horse toward the beach after the defeat of the Heike. "The Taira nobles will be fleeing to the water's edge in the hope of boarding rescue vessels," he thought. "Ah, how I would like to grapple with a high-ranking Commander-in-Chief! Just then, he saw a lone rider splash into the sea, headed toward a vessel in the offing. The other was



Kumgae beckons to Atsumori.

attired in a crane-embroidered *nerimuki* silk *hitatare*, a suit of armor with shaded green lacing, and a horned helmet. At his waist, he wore a sword with gilt bronze fittings; on his back, there rode a quiver containing arrows fletched with black-banded white eagle feathers. He grasped a rattan-wrapped bow and bestrode a white-dappled reddish horse with a gold-edged saddle. When his mount had swum out about a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, Naozane beckoned him with his fan.

"I see that you are a Commander-in-Chief. It is dishonorable to show your back to an enemy. Return!"

The warrior came back. As he was leaving the water, Naozane rode up alongside him, gripped him with all his strength, crashed with him to the ground, held him motionless, and pushed aside his helmet to cut off his

head. He was sixteen or seventeen years old, with a lightly powdered face and blackened teeth—a boy just the age of Naozane's own son Kojirō Naotō, and so handsome that Naozane could not find a place to strike.

"Who are you? Announce your name. I will spare you," Naozane said.

"Who are you?" the youth asked.

"Nobody of any importance. Kumgae no jirō Naozane, a resident of Musashi Province."

"Then it is unnecessary to give you my name. I am a desirable opponent for you. Ask about me after you take my head. Someone will recognize me, even if I don't tell you."

"Indeed, he must be a Commander-in-Chief," Naozane thought. "Killing this one person will not change defeat into victory, nor will sparing him change victory into defeat. When I think of how I grieved when Kojirō suffered a minor wound, it is easy to imagine the sorrow of this young lord's father if he were to hear that the boy had been slain. Ah, I would like to spare him!" Casting a swift glance to the rear, he discovered Sanehira and Kayetoki coming along behind him with fifty riders.

"I would like to spare you," he said, restraining his tears, "but there are Genji warriors everywhere. You cannot possibly escape. It will be better if I kill you than if someone else does it, because I will offer prayers on your behalf."

"Just take my head and be quick about it."

Overwhelmed by compassion, Naozane could not find a place to strike. His senses reeled, his wits forsook him, and he was scarcely conscious of his surroundings. But matters could not go on like that forever: in cars, he took the head.

"Alas! No lot is as hard as a warrior's. I would never have suffered such a dreadful experience if I had not been born into a military house. How cruel I was to kill him!" He pressed his sleeve to his face and shed floods of tears. Presently, since matters could not go on like that forever, he started to remove the youth's armor *hitatare* so that he might wrap it around the head. A brocade bag containing a flute was tucked in at the waist. "Ah, how pitiful! He must have been one of the people I heard making music inside the stronghold just before dawn. There are tens of thousands of riders in our eastern armies, but I am sure none of them has brought a flute to the battlefield. Those court nobles are refined men!"

When Naozane's trophies were presented for Yoshitsune's inspection, they drew tears from the eyes of all the beholders. It was learned after that the slain youth was Tayū Atsumori, aged seventeen, a son of Tsunemori, the Master of the Palace Repairs Office.

After that, Naozane thought increasingly of becoming a monk.

The flute in question is said to have been given by Retired Emperor Toba to Atsumori's grandfather Tadlamori, who was a skilled musician. I believe I have heard that Tsunemori, who inherited it, turned it over to Atsumori because of his son's proficiency as a flautist. Saeda [Little Branch] was its name. It is deeply moving that music, a profane entertainment, should have led a warrior to the religious life.

vessel with its divine burden approached the ships of the Genji and Heike at Dan no ura both parties saluted it reverently, but when it was seen to direct its course toward the fleet of the Genji the Heike could not conceal their chagrin. To the further consternation of the Heike, Michinobu of the province of Iyo also came rowing up with a hundred and fifty large ships and went over to the fleet of their enemies.

Thus the forces of the Genji went on increasing, while those of the Heike grew less. The Genji had some three thousand ships, and the Heike one thousand, among which were some of Chinese build. Thus, on the twenty-fourth day of the third month of 1185, at Ta no ura in the province of Bungo and at Dan no ura in the province of Nagato, began the final battle of the Genji and the Heike. Both sides set their faces against each other and fought grimly without a thought for their lives, neither giving an inch. But as the Heike had on their side an emperor endowed with the Ten Virtues and the Three Sacred Treasures of the F calm,⁴ things went hard with the Genji and their hearts were beginning to fail them, when suddenly something that they at first took for a cloud but soon made out to be a white banner floating in the breeze came drifting over the two fleets from the upper air, and finally settled on the stern of one of the Genji ships, hanging on by the rope.

When he saw this, Yoshitsune, regarding it as a sign from the Great Bodhisatva Hachiman,⁵ removed his helmet and after washing his hands did obeisance; his men all followed his example. Just then a shoal of thousands of dolphins appeared and made straight for the ships of the Heike. One of the Heike generals called a diver and said, "There are always many dolphins about here, but I have never seen so many before; what may it portend?" "If they turn back," replied the diver, "the Genji will be destroyed, but if

⁴ The "Ten Virtues" was an adjective used of the Emperor, and meant someone not guilty of any of the ten sins (killing living beings, ying, obscene language, theft, adultery, cursing, being double-tongued, covetousness, anger, and foolishness). The Imperial Regalia, by which an emperor could prove his right to the throne, were the Sword, the Mirror, and the Jewels.

⁵ The Shinto god Hachiman (the god of war) was officially also considered a bodhisatva.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FINAL SEA BATTLE BETWEEN
THE HEIKE AND GENJI. YOSHITSUNE IS THE COMMANDER
OF THE GENJI FORCES. THE LADY NII IS KIYOMORI'S WIFE,
THE GRANDMOTHER OF THE CHILD EMPEROR.

THE FIGHT AT DAN NO URA

Yoshitsune, after his victory at Yashima, crossed over to Suwo to join his brother. Just at this time the High Priest of Kumano, who was under great obligations to the Heike, suddenly had a change of heart and hesitated as to which side he should support. He went to the shrine of Imakumano at Tanabe and spent seven days in retirement there, having sacred dances performed and praying before the deity. He received as a result an oracle commanding him to adhere to the white banner,⁶ but he was still doubtful. He then held a cock-fight before the shrine, with seven white cocks and seven red ones; the red cocks were all beaten and ran away. He therefore made up his mind to join the Genji.

Assembling all his retainers, to the number of some two thousand men, and embarking them on two hundred ships of war, he put the emblem of the deity of the shrine on board his ship, and painted the name of the Guardian God on the top of his standard. When this

⁶ He became the priest Rensei, as is related in the *Nô* play "*Sumori*."

⁷ This section has been considerably abbreviated.

⁸ White was the color of the Genji, and red of the Heike.

they go on our own side will be in danger." No sooner had he finished speaking than the dolphins dived under the Heike ships and passed on.

As things had come to this pass, Shigeyoshi, who for three years had been a loyal supporter of the Heike, made up his mind that all was lost, and suddenly forsook his allegiance and deserted to the enemy.

The strategy of the Heike had been to put the stoutest warriors on board the ordinary fighting ships and the inferior soldiers on the big ships of Chinese build; the Genji would be induced to attack the big ships, thinking that the commanders were on board them, and the Heike could then surround and destroy them. But when Shigeyoshi went over and joined the Genji he revealed this plan to them, with the result that they left the big ships alone and concentrated their attacks on the smaller ones, which bore the Heike champions. Later on the men of Shikoku and Kyushu all left the Heike in a body and went over to the Genji. Those who had so far been their faithful retainers now turned their bows against their lords and drew their swords against their own masters. On one shore the heavy seas beat on the cliff so as to forbid any landing, while on the other stood the serriced ranks of the enemy waiting with leveled arrows to receive them. And so on this day the struggle for supremacy between the Genji and the Heike was at last decided.

Meanwhile the Genji warriors sprang from one Heike vessel to the other, shooting and cutting down the sailors and helmsmen,—who left their posts and flung themselves in panic to the bottom of the ships. Tomomori rowed in a small boat to the Imperial vessel and cried out, "You see what affairs have come to! Clean up the ship, and throw everything unsightly into the sea!" He ran about the ship from bow to stern, sweeping and cleaning and gathering up the dust with his own hands. "How goes the battle, Tomomori?" asked the court ladies. "Oh, you'll soon see some rare gallants from the east," he replied, bursting into loud laughter. "What? Is this a time for joking?" they answered, and they lifted up their voices and wept aloud.

Then the Lady Nii, who had already resolved what she would do,

donned a double outer dress of dark gray mourning and tucking up her long skirts put the Sacred Jewel under her arm and the Sacred Sword in her sash. She took the Emperor in her arms and said, "Though I am but a woman, I will not fall into the hands of the enemy. I will accompany our Sovereign Lord. Let those of you who will, follow me." She moved softly to the gunwale of the vessel.

The Emperor was seven years old that year but looked much older than his age. He was so lovely that he seemed to shed a brilliant radiance about him, and his long black hair hung loose far down his back. With a look of surprise and anxiety on his face he asked the Lady Nii, "Where are you going to take me?"

She turned to the youthful sovereign, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and answered, "Perhaps Your Majesty does not know that he was reborn to the Imperial throne in this world as a result of the merit of the Ten Virtues practiced in former lives. Now, however, some evil karma claims you. Turn to the east and bid farewell to the deity of the Great Shrine of Ise and then to the west and say the *nembutsu*, that Amida Buddha and the Holy Ones may come to welcome you to the Pure Western Land.⁶ Japan is small as a grain of millet, but now it is a vale of misery. There is a pure land of happiness beneath the waves, another capital where no sorrow is. It is there that I am taking my Sovereign."

She comforted him, and bound up his long hair in his dove-colored robe. Blinded with tears, the child sovereign put his beautiful little hands together. He turned first to the east to say farewell of the deity of Ise and then to the west to repeat the *nembutsu*. The Lady Nii took him tightly in her arms and with the words, "In the depths of the ocean is our capital," sank with him at last beneath the waves.