Genji & Heike

Selections from The Tale of Genji
and The Tale of the Heike

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stirrups. Too hard-pressed to escape to one of the many rescue vessels at the water’s edge, Shigehira crossed the Minato and Karumo rivers, galloped between Hasu Pond on the right and Koma Woods on the left, passed Itayado and Suma, and fled westward. His splendid mount forged farther and farther ahead, until there seemed little chance that the battle-weary Genji horses could overtake him. But Kagesue stood in his stirrups, drew his bow to the full, and sent off an arrow, hoping for a lucky hit. The arrow sank shaft-deep into Dōji Kage’s rump. When the horse faltered, Morinaga raised his whip and fled, possibly because he feared that Shigehira would take his horse.

“What are you doing, Morinaga? This isn’t the way you always swore to act! Where will you go after you desert me?” Shigehira asked. Morinaga pretended not to hear. He got rid of his red armor-badge and rode away as fast as he could.

The enemy was approaching and the horse was weakening. Shigehira rode into the sea, but the water was shoaling, too shallow to drown in. He dismounted, slashed his belt, and unfastened his shoulder-cord. Then he took off his armor and helmet and got ready to cut open his belly.

Takaie came up ahead of Kagesue, galloping with flailing whip and flapping stirrups. He jumped down. “It would be a mistake to kill yourself,” he said. “I’ll attend you wherever you go.” He mounted Shigehira on his own horse, tied him to the pommel, and escorted him back, riding a remount.

Thanks to his splendid, long-winded steed, Morinaga got away without any trouble. Later, he sought refuge with a Kumano monk, the Onaka Dharma Bridge. After the monk’s death, he went to the capital with the widow, a nun who was prosecuting a lawsuit, and everybody recognized him as Shigehira’s foster-brother. “He’s a shameless rascal!” people said. “Shigehira thought the world of him, but he refused to face death at his master’s side. Instead, the wretch turns up with a nun, of all things!” We are told that the criticism seems to have embarrassed even so dishonorable a man, and that Morinaga hid his face with a fan.

9.16. The Death of Atsumori

After the defeat of the Heike, Kumagae no Naozane walked his horse toward the beach. “The Taira nobles will be fleeing to the shore to get on board the rescue vessels,” he thought. “I wish I could wrestle with one of their high-ranking commanders-in-chief!” Just then, he saw a lone rider splash into the sea, bound for a vessel offshore. The enemy was wearing a silk tunic embroidered with cranes, a suit of armor with shaded green lacing, and a horned helmet. At his waist, there was a sword with gilt bronze fittings; on his back, he carried a quiver containing arrows fleged with black-banded white eagle feathers. He held a rattan-wrapped bow and rode a white-dappled reddish horse, with a saddle trimmed in gold. When the
horse had swum out a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, Naozane beckoned with his fan.

"I see that you’re a commander-in-chief! It’s dishonorable to show your back to an enemy! Come on back!" he shouted.

The warrior came back. As he left the water, Naozane rode up beside him, gripped him as hard as he could, and crashed with him to the ground. Holding him motionless, he pushed aside his helmet, intending to cut off his head, and saw that he was only sixteen or seventeen years old, with a lightly powdered face and blackened teeth—a boy just the age of Naozane’s own son Naoie, and so handsome that he could find no place to strike.

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

"Who are you?" the youth asked.

"Nobody of any special importance: Kumagae no Jirō Naozane of Mu-
sashi Province."

"Then I don’t need to give you my name. I’m the kind of opponent you want. Ask about me after you take my head. Somebody will recognize me, even if I don’t tell you."

"He’s bound to be a commander-in-chief," Naozane thought. "Killing this one person won’t change defeat into victory, and sparing him won’t change victory into defeat. When I think of how I grieved when Naoie got just a little wound, it’s easy to imagine how this young lord’s father would feel if he heard that he’d been killed. I have a notion to let him go." Casting a swift glance to the rear, he discovered Sanehira and Kagetoki coming along with fifty riders.

"I’d like to spare you," he said, restraining tears, "but there are Genji warriors everywhere. You can’t possibly escape. It will be better if I’m the one to kill you, because I’ll offer prayers for you."

"Just take my head; don’t waste time," the boy said.

Overwhelmed by compassion, Naozane could find no place to strike. His senses reeled, his brain seemed paralyzed, and he was scarcely conscious of his surroundings. But matters could not go on like that forever. In tears, he took the head.

"No life is as miserable as a warrior’s. It’s only because I was born into a military house that I’ve had this terrible experience. What a cruel thing I’ve done!" He pressed his sleeve to his face and wept.

But matters could not go on like that forever. He started to remove the youth’s tunic, preparatory to wrapping the head in it, and found a flute in a brocade bag tucked in at the waist. "Poor fellow! He must have been one of the people I heard playing inside the stronghold just before dawn. There are tens of thousands of riders in our eastern armies, but I’d be willing to bet not one of them carried a flute to the battlefield. Those court nobles are men of refinement," he thought.

18. Court nobles began to blacken their teeth early in the 12th century.
When Naozane’s trophies were presented to Yoshitsune for inspection, they brought tears to everyone’s eyes. It was learned later that the slain youth was Atsumori, aged seventeen, a son of Tsunemori, the head of the Palace Repairs Office.

After that, Naozane thought increasingly of becoming a monk.

The flute in question is supposed to have been a present from Retired Emperor Toba to Atsumori’s grandfather Tadamori, who was an excellent musician. I believe I have heard that Tsunemori inherited it, and that he turned it over to Atsumori because the boy played so well. Saeda [Little Branch] was its name. It is deeply moving that music, a profane entertainment, should have led a warrior to a life of religion.

9.18. The Flight

Shigemori’s youngest son, Moromori, the governor of Bitchū, got into a small boat with six companions. As they were starting off, one of Tomomori’s samurai came galloping up, a warrior named Seimon Kinnaga. “Isn’t that Lord Moromori’s boat?” he asked. “Let me go with you.”

They went back to the beach. But what good could come of it when a huge man dressed in full armor tried to jump from a horse into a boat? The tiny vessel veered and capsized, and one of Hatakeyama’s retainers, Honda no Jirō, galloped up with thirteen or fourteen men, raked Moromori from the water where he was struggling, and cut off his head. Moromori was fourteen.

Michimori, the governor of Echizen, had been one of the commanders-in-chief in the hills. That day, he was wearing a tunic of red brocade and a suit of armor laced with thick Chinese damask, and he was riding a blond chestnut horse with a saddle trimmed in silver. Wounded in the face and separated from his brother, Noritsune, he was fleeing eastward, looking for a quiet spot where he could commit suicide, when he was surrounded and killed by a party of seven riders led by Sasaki no Naritsuna of Ōmi Province and Tamanoi no Sukekage of Musashi Province. One of his retainers had stayed with him, but even he fled at the last.

The fighting at the eastern and western entrances continued for an hour, claiming the lives of countless Genji and Heike. Piles of dead horses and dead men rose like clustered hills in front of the archery platforms and under the branch barricades; the green bamboo-grass in the meadows at Ichinotani turned pale red. Quite aside from those who were felled by arrows and swords at Ichinotani and Ikuta-no-mori, or in the mountains or on the beaches, more than two thousand heads of the Heike were taken by the Genji to be exposed. Among the Taira dead were Michimori; his younger brother Narimori; Tadanori; Tonomakira; Moromori; Kiyosada; Kiyofusa; Tsunemori’s heir, Tsunemasa; and Tsunemasa’s younger brothers, Tatsutoshi and Atsumori.