ICHINO TANI PUTABAGUNKI (The Chronicle of the Battle of Ichino Tani). Jidaimono of the Heike-Genji Cycle (see page 418). — Written by Namiki Souke and his assistants. The original play, in five acts, was first staged in 1751 at the Toyosuke-za, one of the two great puppet theatres of Osaka. It was later adapted by Kabuki. The part of Kumagai is considered one of the greatest roles 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 Ichino Tani, the fight between the experienced Genji warrior Kumagai Jiro Naosane 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 Iwashide. 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 Naosane. For a lady of the court to take a lover was an offence punishable by death, or at the best exile, and Kumagai war, 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-
words to Tsunemori, the nephew of the all-powerful Taite 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 Ichinotani, Yoshitsune sensed that an inevitable 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 head-quarters. The notice read: “Anyone leaping 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 jinrui). 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 Asumori, 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 incident at the end of the play.) Kajiwara 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 Asumori. He questions Midaroku closely. Who ordered this monument? Midaroku answers that it was Asumori’s ghost, adding that the stinging spirit never gave him a penny for it. Kajiwara is invited by Kumagai’s chief retainer Gunji to enter and rest until his master returns. Kajiwara 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 Asumori 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 unlace against his sword sheath. He comes out of his reverie 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 incites 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 Hiirayama, his fellow general, appeared and cried to him (Kumagai acts 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
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 Asumori’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 Asu-
мори.” 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 Asumori’s. Fuji no Kata can do no less
than further the deception. Her joy is the easier to conceal
since she reads in Segami's face the sacrifice which has now repaid her own kindness of long ago. They are interrupted by the sudden entrance of Kaijwa Kagenori. He threatens to expose the deception to Yoritsuna, who has ordered the most ruthless extermination of the family of Taira Kiyomori. Kaijwa goes off down the hanamichi full of anger. A moment later a scream is heard off-stage.

The old, stern, Marion, Midoroku, enters. Like Scott's "Old Mortality," he spends his last years erecting and crying 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 Kaijwa by throwing a dirk at him. This he has done that Yoshitsune, "may not be sullied by base blood." He is about to go on his way when Yoshitsune stops him, calling him "Munekiro." When Midoroku pretends he does not know to whom Yoshitsune is speaking, the scene relates how the great Heike warrior Munekiro saved the lives of his mother, his brethren, 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." Midoroku admits that he is indeed Munekiro. It is in an attempt to stone 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 Midoroku and sees in it the means of solving the one remaining problem of struggling the living,_Amuneiro out of Kumagai's headquarters. He therefore orders a large casket, ostensibly containing armor, but in which Amuneiro is hidden, to be brought and presented to Midoroku.

Kumagai returns in full armor. Simultaneously 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 mature, and Curves reveals himself in the habit of a shaved-headed priest. The shock of the terrible action forced upon him by duty and honor makes it impossible for him to continue in the profession of arts. 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 cites 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.