

## 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.

The work has many beautiful and famous sections, but it tends to be episodic. The selections given here are all from the latter part of the book. "The Death of Atsumori" takes place after the disastrous defeat suffered by the Taira at Ichi no tani. "Dan no ura" tells of the final Taira catastrophe, when soldiers, courtiers, and court ladies alike are drowned in the sinking ships. The remaining section, taken from the end of the book, tells of Kenreimon'in, the daughter of Taira no Kiyomori, consort of the Emperor Takakura and mother of the infant Emperor Antoku (who perished at Dan no ura). "The Tale of the Heike," which opens with the bell of the Gion Temple in India, closes with the tolling of the bell of the Jakko-in, a convent outside Kyoto.

## THE DEATH OF ATSUMORI

When the Heike were routed at Ichi no tani, and their nobles and courtiers were fleeing to the shore to escape in their ships, Kumagai

Naozane came riding along a narrow path onto the beach, with the intention of intercepting one of their great captains. Just then his eye fell on a single horseman who was attempting to reach one of the ships in the offing. The horse he rode was dappled-gray, and its saddle glittered with gold mounting. Not doubting that he was one of the chief captains, Kumagai beckoned to him with his war fan, crying out: "Shameful! to shew an enemy your back. Return! Return!"

The warrior turned his horse and rode back to the beach, where Kumagai at once engaged him in mortal combat. Quickly hurling him to the ground, he sprang upon him and tore off his helmet to cut off his head, when he beheld the face of a youth of sixteen or seventeen, delicately powdered and with blackened teeth, just about the age of his own son and with features of great beauty. "Who are you?" he asked. "Tell me your name, for I would spare your life."

"Nay, first say who you are," replied the young man.

"I am Kumagai Naozane of Musashi, a person of no particular importance."

"Then you have made a good capture," said the youth. "Take my head and show it to some of my side, and they will tell you who I am."

"Though he is one of their leaders," mused Kumagai, "if I slay him it will not turn victory into defeat, and if I spare him, it will not turn defeat into victory. When my son Kojirō was but slightly wounded at Ichi no tani this morning, did it not pain me? How this young man's father would grieve to hear that he had been killed! I will spare him."

Just then, looking behind him, he saw Doi and Kajiwara coming up with fifty horsemen. "Alas! look there," he exclaimed, the tears running down his face, "though I would spare your life, the whole countryside swarms with our men, and you cannot escape them. If you must die, let it be by my hand, and I will see that prayers are said for your rebirth in Paradise."

"Indeed it must be so," said the young warrior. "Cut off my head at once."

Kumagai was so overcome by compassion that he could scarcely wield his blade. His eyes swam and he hardly knew what he did.

but there was no help for it; weeping bitterly he cut off the boy's head. "Alas!" he cried, "what life is so hard as that of a soldier? Only because I was born of a warrior family must I suffer this affliction! How lamentable it is to do such cruel deeds!" He pressed his face to the sleeve of his armor and wept bitterly. Then, wrapping up the head, he was stripping off the young man's armor when he discovered a flute in a brocade bag. "Ah," he exclaimed, "it was this youth and his friends who were amusing themselves with music within the walls this morning. Among all our men of the Eastern Provinces I doubt if there is any one of them who has brought a flute with him. How gentle the ways of these courtiers!"

When he brought the flute to the Commander, all who saw it were moved to tears; he discovered then that the youth was Atsumori, the youngest son of Tsunemori, aged sixteen years. From this time the mind of Kumagai was turned toward the religious life.<sup>1</sup>

## T H E F I G H T A T D A N N O U R A <sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> He became the priest Rensei, as is related in the *Nō* play "Atsumori."

<sup>2</sup> This section has been considerably abbreviated.

<sup>3</sup> White was the color of the Genji, and red of the Heike.

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 Realm,<sup>4</sup> 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 Bodhisattva Hachiman,<sup>5</sup> 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 diviner 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 diviner, "the Genji will be destroyed, but if

<sup>4</sup> The "Ten Virtues" was an adjective used of the Emperor, and meant someone not guilty of any of the ten sins (killing living beings; lying, 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.

<sup>5</sup> The Shinto god Hachiman (the god of war) was officially also considered a bodhisattva.

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 serried 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

#### THE FORMER EMPRESS BECOMES A NUN

Kenreimon'in, the former Empress, went to Yoshida at the foot of Higashiyama and entered the cell of a monk called Keiei. It was old

<sup>6</sup> The *nembutsu* is an invocation to Amida Buddha practiced by members of the Jodo (Pure Land) sect.

and dilapidated, its garden was overgrown with weeds, and hare's-foot fern clustered thickly on the roof. The curtains were gone and the bedchamber exposed, and there was nothing to keep out the wind and rain. There were many kinds of flowers, but none to care for them, and no one was there to gaze at the moon streaming in every night. She who had formerly spent her days in the jeweled palace, within the brocade curtains, now suffered the unspeakable hardships of dwelling in this moldering cell, bereft of all her old companions, like a fish on the dry land or a bird torn from its nest, and she yearned for the times she had spent tossing on the sea.

On the first day of the fifth month of 1185 the former Empress cut short her hair and was instructed in the Way by the abbot of the Chōraku Temple. For the customary offering she presented him with the robe of the Emperor Antoku, one he had worn up to the time of his death, so that the perfume still clung to it. She had brought it with her to the capital from the far off Western Provinces, intending to keep it as a memento of him never to leave her person, but now, as she had nothing else to offer, and thinking moreover that it might be an aid to the Emperor's salvation, she handed it to the priest, weeping bitterly. The priest was so affected that he could utter no word, but pressing the sleeve of his black robe to his face retired weeping from her presence. This robe was afterward woven into a banner and suspended in front of the Buddha of the Chōraku Temple.

The Empress was appointed Imperial Consort at the age of fourteen, and at fifteen was raised to the rank of Empress. She was ever by the Emperor's side, helping him in the government by day and the only sharer of his love by night. At the age of twenty-one she bore a prince who was named Heir to the Throne, and when he assumed the Imperial dignity she became Retired Empress and took the name of Kenreimon'in.<sup>7</sup> She was the daughter of the Chancellor Kiyomori and as mother of the Emperor she was held in great reverence by the people. She was twenty-eight this year, and the beauty of her fair face was not yet dimmed; neither was the elegance of her

<sup>7</sup> Kenreimon'in was born in 1155.

slender form impaired; but what now availed the loveliness of her hair? She renounced the world and became a nun, but even when she had entered the True Way her grief was not assuaged. She seemed ever to see before her the figures of the Emperor and the Lady Nii and the others as they sank in the waves, and never in this life could she forget those melancholy scenes. She wondered why she had remained alive to bear such sorrows, and her tears were never dried.

It was not easy to keep awake on even the short nights of June, but if she did not fall asleep she would not dream of those who had passed away. Faintly the shadow of her single light fell on the wall outside, and all night the dismal drumming of the rain sounded on the lattice of the windows. And how it reminded her of the beloved past—this orange tree in blossom by the eaves that a former tenant had brought and planted there. Its heavy perfume was wafted into her chamber, and the notes of the nightingale were borne once and again to her ears.

The rest of the court ladies, who had thrown themselves into the sea but not with the same determination as the Lady Nii, had been roughly dragged out by the Genji soldiers and brought back to the capital. Young and old alike, they had all become nuns and were living in concealment in faraway valleys and dells in the mountains, wretched and emaciated in appearance and quite unrecognizable as their former selves.

The places where they lived have gone up in smoke, and the empty site, turned into overgrown moorland, is all that remains. No former intimate ever comes nigh. All is as unfamiliar now as his home to one who is bewitched by fairies and returns after seven generations.

#### THE FORMER EMPRESS GOES TO OHARA

On the ninth day of the seventh month the Empress's abode was ruined in the great earthquake. Its outer wall fell down, and she had nowhere to live. How the days had altered from the time the green-

clad palace guards stood continually before her gate, for now the tumble-down wall, more bedewed with moisture than the outside moorland, seemed as if it understood the change of times and represented the incessant shrilling of the insects. Though the nights grew longer, the Empress could not sleep. She brooded continually over her melancholy condition, and this, added to the natural sadness of autumn, became almost too much for her to bear. In the changed world there was none to feel sympathy for her, and all those of her affinity were gone, leaving none to cherish her in her need.

Only the wife of Takafusa and the wife of Nobutaka used to help her secretly. "Ah," she exclaimed, "in former days who would have ever dreamed that I should come to accept anything from such as these?" The Empress thought that she would like to go somewhere far away in the depths of the mountains to spend her days remote from all sound of unrest, for her present dwelling was too near the capital and attracted the eyes of curious passers-by. For some time she did not hear of any suitable spot, but a lady came to tell her of a place in the mountains of Ohara, north of the capital, called the Jakkō-in. "A mountain abode is very lonely, it is true," she answered, "but it would be good to live in a place remote from the troubles of this world." The matter was settled, and the wives of Nobutaka and Takafusa sent a palanquin to fetch her.

At the end of the ninth month she proceeded to the temple of the Jakkō-in. As they went along she gazed at the beauty of the autumn tints while the sun sank gradually behind the mountains. The dreary boom of the evening bell of a wayside temple, and the thickly lying dew on the grass as they went by drew tears from her eyes. A fierce gale was whirling the leaves from the trees in all directions. Suddenly the sky grew dark and the autumn drizzle began to fall; the cry of a deer sounded faintly, and the shrilling of the insects was incessant. Nothing was wanting to add to the sum of her afflictions, which seemed indeed such as few had been made to suffer. Even when she had been driven about from shore to shore and from island to island her melancholy was not to be compared to this.

The place she had chosen to dwell was ancient and surrounded by mossy rocks. The reeds in the garden were now covered with hoar-

frost instead of dew, and when she gazed on the faded hue of the withered chrysanthemums by the wall she could hardly fail to be reminded of her own condition. Entering before the Buddha, she prayed for the sacred spirit of the Emperor, that it might attain perfect Buddhahood, and for the departed spirits of all the Heike, that they might quickly enter the Way of Salvation. But still the image of the late Emperor was impressed on her mind, and wherever she might be, and in what world soever, she thought she could never forget it. They built for her a small cell ten feet square beside the Jakkō-in, and in it were two rooms; in one she put her shrine of Buddha and in the other she slept. There she spent her time continually repeating the *nembusu* and performing the Buddhist services, both by night and by day.

It happened that once, on the fifth day of the tenth month, she heard the sound as of someone treading on the oak leaves which had fallen and covered the garden. "Who can it be," she exclaimed, "that comes to disturb one who has thus renounced the world? Go and see; for I will conceal myself if it be anyone I do not wish to meet." One of the ladies went to look, and it was only a young stag that had passed that way.

#### THE PRIESTLY SOVEREIGN GOES TO OHARA<sup>8</sup>

In the spring of 1186 the Priestly Sovereign expressed a wish to go to Ohara and see the place where Kenreimon'in was living in retirement, but March and April were stormy and the cold still lingered. The snow did not melt on the mountains nor the icicles thaw in the valleys. Spring passed and summer came, and the festival of Kamo was already over when His Majesty proceeded to the recesses of Ohara. The summer grasses had grown up thickly, and as they parted them on the little-trodden road His Majesty, who had never

<sup>8</sup> A priestly sovereign (*hōō*) was an emperor who had abdicated and taken Buddhist orders. The sovereign in question was Goshirakawa (1127-1192).

been there before, was much affected by the lonely uninhabited look of the place.

At the foot of the western mountains they came to a small temple. This was the Jakkō-in. It might be described by the lines: "The roof tiles were broken, and the mist, entering, lit perpetual incense; the doors had fallen from their hinges and the moonbeams were its sanctuary lamps."<sup>9</sup> The pond and trees of its ancient garden were dignified; the young grass grew thick and the green shoots of the willow were tangled. The water plants on the pond, floating in the little waves, might have been mistaken for brocade. On the island the purple of the flowering wistaria mingled with the green of the pine; the late-blooming cherry among the young leaves was even more wonderful than the early blossoms. From the clouds of kerria roses that were flowering in profusion on the bank came the call of the cuckoo, a note of welcome in honor of His Majesty's visit.

The sound of the water was pleasant as it fell from the clefts of the timeworn rocks, and the ivied walls and beetling crags would have defied the brush of the painter. When His Majesty came to the cell of the former Empress, ivy was growing on the eaves and the morning-glory was climbing up them; the hare's-foot fern and the day lily mingled together, and here and there was a useless gourd-plant; here was the grass that grew thick in the path of Yen Yüan and the white goosefoot that keeps men at a distance, and here too was the rain that moistened the door of Yüan Hsien.<sup>10</sup> The cedar boards of the roof were gaping, so that the rain, the hoar-frost, and the dew of evening vied with the moonbeams in gaining entrance, and the place appeared almost uninhabitable. Behind was the mountain and in front was the moor, and the bamboo grasses rustled loudly in the wind. As is the way with those who have no friends in the world, she seldom heard any news from the capital, but instead the cry of the monkeys as they sprang from tree to tree and the sound of the wood-cutter's axe.

<sup>9</sup> A quotation from an unknown source.

<sup>10</sup> Yen Yüan and Yüan Hsien were disciples of Confucius. The allusions here to Chinese and Japanese literature would be tedious to unravel.

The Priestly Sovereign called to her, but there was no answer. After a while a withered-looking old nun appeared, and he asked her, "Where has the former Empress gone?" "Over to the mountain to pick some flowers," was the reply. "How hard it is," said His Majesty, "that since she renounced the world she has had no one to perform such services for her."

"This fate has come upon her in accordance with the Five Precepts and the Ten Virtues," said the nun. "Why then should she spare herself the austerities of mortifying her flesh?"

The Priestly Sovereign looked at this nun and noticed that she was clothed in pieces of silk and cotton roughly put together. He thought it strange that one of such appearance should speak thus, and asked who she was. For some time she could answer nothing, but only wept. After a while she controlled her feelings and replied, "I am Awa no Naiji, daughter of the late Shinzei. Once you loved me very deeply, and if now you have forgotten me it must be because I have become old and ugly." She pressed her sleeve to her face, unable to control herself any longer: a sight too pitiful to behold.

"Yes," said His Majesty, "it is you, Awa no Naiji. I had forgotten all about you. Everything now seems like a dream." He could not stop the tears, and the courtiers with him said with emotion, "She seemed to speak so strangely for a nun, but she had good cause."

Presently two nuns clad in dark robes were seen making their way slowly and painfully down through the rough rocks of the mountain-side. The Priestly Sovereign asked who they were, and the nun replied, "The one carrying a basket of mountain azaleas on her arm is the former Empress, and the other, with a load of bracken for burning, is the daughter of Korezane."

The former Empress, since she was living apart from the world in this way, was so overwhelmed with shame at seeing the visitors that she would gladly have hidden herself somewhere to avoid them, but she could not retrace her steps to the mountains nor was she able to go into her cell. The old nun came to her as she stood dumb-founded, and took her basket from her hands.

"Since you have renounced the world," said Awa no Naiji, "what

does it matter about your appearance? I pray you come and greet His Majesty, for he will soon be returning to the capital."<sup>11</sup>

### T H E P A S S I N G A W A Y O F T H E F O R M E R E M P R E S S

The boom of the bell of the Jakkō-in proclaimed the closing day as the evening sun began to sink in the west. His Majesty, full of regret at saying farewell, set out on his return journey with tears in his eyes. The former Empress, her mind occupied in spite of herself with thoughts of bygone days and shedding tears she could not restrain, stood watching the Imperial procession until she could see it no more. Again entering her cell, she prostrated herself before the Buddha. . . .

The former Empress continued to live on unhappily for some years, till at length she fell ill and took to her bed. She had been awaiting death for a long time, and now she took in her hand the cord of five colors that was fastened to the hand of the Buddha<sup>12</sup> and repeated the *nembutsu*, "Hail Amida Buddha, Lord who guide us to the Paradise of the West; in remembrance of thy Great Vow, I beseech thee receive me into the Pure Land." As she thus prayed, the daughter of Korezane and the nun Awa no Naiji, standing on either side of her couch, lifted up their voices in lamentation at their sad parting. As the sound of her prayer grew weaker and weaker, a purple cloud of splendor unknown grew visible in the west, and an unknown perfume of wondrous incense filled the cell, while celestial strains of music were heard from above. Thus, in the middle of the second month of 1213, the former Empress Kenreimon<sup>13</sup> breathed her last.

TRANSLATED BY A. L. SADLER

<sup>11</sup> The meeting between the former Empress and the Priestly Sovereign, here omitted, consists almost entirely of a recounting, by the Empress, of the events of the past few months.

<sup>12</sup> In Jōdo Buddhism, the believer on his deathbed grasps a cord attached to a picture of the Buddha, and is supposed thus to be drawn into Paradise.