



*The Tale
of the
Heike*



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Chapter I



[1] *Gion Shōja*

The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the *sāla* flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.

In a distant land, there are the examples set by Zhao Gao of Qin, Wang Mang of Han, Zhu Yi of Liang, and Lushan of Tang, all of them men who prospered after refusing to be governed by their former lords and sovereigns, but who met swift destruction because they disregarded admonitions, failed to recognize approaching turmoil, and ignored the nation's distress. Closer to home, there have been Masakado of Shōhei, Sumitomo of Tengyō, Yoshichika of Kōwa, and Nobuyori of Heiji, every one of them proud and mighty. But closest of all, and utterly beyond the power of mind to comprehend or tongue to relate, is the tale of Taira no Ason Kiyomori, the Rokuhara Buddhist Novice and Former Chancellor.

Kiyomori was the oldest son and heir of Punishments Minister Tadamori. He was a grandson of the Sanuki Governor Masamori, who was a descendant in the ninth generation from Prince Kazurahara of First Rank, the Minister of Ceremonial and fifth son of Emperor Kanmu. Prince Kazurahara's son, Prince Takami, died without office or rank. The clan received the Taira surname in the time of Prince Takami's son, Prince Takamochi, who left the imperial clan to become a subject soon after he was named Vice-Governor of Kazusa Province. Prince Takamochi's son was the Defense Garrison Commander Yoshimochi, who changed his name to Kunika in later life. During the six generations from Kunika to Masamori, members of the clan held provincial governorships but were not permitted to have their names on the duty-board in the Courtiers' Hall.

bow—a sign, apparently, that he was the Commander-in-Chief for that day's battle. The Retired Emperor scrutinized him and the others from behind a slatted window at the middle gate. "They look like gallant lads. Have them all give their names," he said. The warriors identified themselves as, first, the Commander-in-Chief Kurō Yoshitsune, and, next, Yasuda no Saburō Yoshisada, Hatakeyama no Shōji Jirō Shigetada, Kajiwara Genda Kagesue, Sasaki Shirō Takatsuna, and Shibuya no Uma-no-jō Shigesuke. There were six of them, counting Yoshitsune, and although the colors of their armor-braid may have differed, not one was inferior to any of the others in bearing or character.

At the Retired Emperor's command, Naritada summoned Yoshitsune to the edge of the eave-chamber. His Majesty asked for a full account of the battle. Yoshitsune made obeisance and reported in a matter-of-fact voice. "Yoritomo was astonished by Yoshinaka's revolt. He dispatched sixty thousand riders, led by Noriyori and myself and including more than thirty leading warriors. Noriyori is coming by way of Seta; he has not arrived yet. I defeated Yoshinaka's force at Uji and hurried here to defend this palace. Yoshinaka has fled north along the riverbed, but I have sent men in pursuit; they will undoubtedly have killed him by now."

The Retired Emperor was greatly pleased. "Excellent! But I am afraid some stragglers from Yoshinaka's army may come here to cause trouble. Guard this palace well." Making respectful assent, Yoshitsune secured the four gates. Meanwhile, warriors galloped to his side, and his force soon numbered more than ten thousand riders.

Yoshinaka had stationed twenty shaven-headed laborers* at the imperial residence with a view to carrying off the Retired Emperor westward and joining the Heike in case of an emergency. But now, upon hearing that Yoshitsune had already rushed to guard the palace, he resigned himself to the situation and galloped shouting into the enemy thousands. Time after time, he hovered on the brink of death; time after time, he managed to break through. "I would never have sent Imai to Seta if I had known things would turn out like this," he said, with tears streaming down his face. "Ever since the days when we played together with bamboo horses, we have sworn that if we met death it would be on the same spot. How bitter it would be to fall in different places! I must find out where he is." He galloped north along the beach. Again and again, he turned to meet enemy attacks between Rokujō and Sanjō; five or six times, he drove back the foe's cloudlike host with his small force. Then he crossed the Kamo River and made his way to Awataguchi and Matsuzaka. Last year, on his departure from Shinano, he had commanded fifty thousand horsemen; today, as he passed the Shi-no-miya riverbed, he and his companions numbered but seven riders. And how infinitely more piteous was the prospect of his solitary journey through the intermediate existence!

* *Rikisha*, men used as palanquin bearers, porters, etc.

[4] *The Death of Kiso*

Kiso no Yoshinaka had brought with him from Shinano two female attendants, Tomoe and Yamabuki. Yamabuki had fallen ill and stayed in the capital. Of the two, Tomoe was especially beautiful, with white skin, long hair, and charming features. She was also a remarkably strong archer, and as a swordswoman she was a warrior worth a thousand, ready to confront a demon or god, mounted or on foot. She handled unbroken horses with superb skill; she rode unscathed down perilous descents. Whenever a battle was imminent, Yoshinaka sent her out as his first captain, equipped with strong armor, an oversized sword, and a mighty bow; and she performed more deeds of valor than any of his other warriors. Thus she was now one of the seven who remained after all the others had fled or perished.

There were rumors that Yoshinaka was making for the Tanba Road by way of Nagasaka, and also that he was heading north through the Ryūge Pass. In actuality, he was fleeing toward Seta in the hope of finding Imai no Shirō Kanehira. Kanehira himself had started back toward the capital with furled banner, worried about his master, after having lost all but fifty of his eight hundred defenders at Seta. The two arrived simultaneously at Uchide-nohama in the vicinity of Ōtsu, recognized one another from about three hundred and fifty feet away, and galloped together.

Lord Kiso took Kanehira by the hand. "I meant to die at the Rokujō riverbed, but I broke through a swarm of enemies and came away here because I wanted to find you."

"Your words do me great honor," Kanehira said. "I meant to die at Seta, but I have come this far because I was worried about you."

"I see that our karma tie is still intact. My warriors scattered into the mountains and woods after the enemy broke our formations; some of them must still be nearby. Have that furled banner of yours raised!"

More than three hundred riders responded to the unfurling of Imai's banner—men who had fled from the capital or Seta, or who had come from some other place. Yoshinaka was overjoyed. "Why can't we fight one last battle, now that we have a force of this size? Whose is the band I see massed over there?"

"They say the commander is Ichijō no Jirō Tadayori from Kai."

"What is his strength?"

"He is supposed to have six thousand riders."

"Then we are well matched! If we must meet death, let it be by galloping against a worthy foe and falling outnumbered." Yoshinaka rode forward in the lead.

That day, Lord Kiso was attired in a red brocade *hitatare*, a suit of armor laced with thick Chinese damask, and a horned helmet. At his side, he wore a magnificent oversized sword; high on his back, there rode a quiver containing the few arrows left from his earlier encounters, all fledged with eagle tail feathers. He grasped a rattan-wrapped bow and sat in a gold-edged saddle astride his famous horse Oniashige [Roan Demon], a very stout and brawny animal. Standing in his stirrups, he announced his name in a mighty

voice. "You must have heard of Kiso no Kanja in the past; now you see him! I am the Morning Sun Commander Minamoto no Yoshinaka, Director of the Imperial Stables of the Left and Governor of Iyo Province. They tell me you are Ichijō no Jirō from Kai. We are well matched! Cut off my head and show it to Yoritomo!" He galloped forward, shouting.

"The warrior who has just announced his name is their Commander-in-Chief," Ichijō no Jirō said. "Wipe out the whole force, men! Get them all, young retainers! Kill them!"

The easterners moved to surround Yoshinaka with their superior numbers, each hoping to be the one to take his head. Yoshinaka's three hundred riders galloped lengthwise, sidewise, zigzag, and crosswise in the midst of the six thousand foes and finally burst through to the rear, only fifty strong.

As the fifty went on their way after having broken free, they came to a defensive position manned by two thousand riders under the command of Toi no Jirō Sanehira. Again, they broke through and went on. Again, they galloped through enemy bands—here four or five hundred, there two or three hundred, or a hundred and forty or fifty, or a hundred—until only five of them were left. Even then, Tomoe remained alive.

"Quickly, now," Lord Kiso said to Tomoe. "You are a woman, so be off with you; go wherever you please. I intend to die in battle, or to kill myself if I am wounded. It would be unseemly to let people say, 'Lord Kiso kept a woman with him during his last battle.'"

Reluctant to flee, Tomoe rode with the others until she could resist no longer. Then she pulled up. "Ah! If only I could find a worthy foe! I would fight a last battle for His Lordship to watch," she thought.

As she sat there, thirty riders came into view, led by Onda no Hachirō Moroshige, a man renowned in Musashi Province for his great strength. Tomoe galloped into their midst, rode up alongside Moroshige, seized him in a powerful grip, pulled him down against the pommel of her saddle, held him motionless, twisted off his head, and threw it away. Afterward, she discarded armor and helmet and fled toward the eastern provinces.

Tezuka no Tarō Mitsumori died in battle; Tezuka no Bettō fled. Only two horsemen remained, Imai no Shirō Kanehira and Lord Kiso.

"I have never noticed it before, but my armor seems heavy today," Lord Kiso said.

"You are not tired yet, and your horse is still strong. Why should you find a suit of armor heavy? You are discouraged because there is nobody left to fight on our side. But you should think of me as a man worth a thousand ordinary warriors. I will hold off the enemy awhile with my last seven or eight arrows. That place over there is the Awazu Pine Woods: kill yourself among the trees."

As the two rode, whipping their horses, a new band of fifty warriors appeared. "Get into the pine woods. I will hold these enemies at bay," Kanehira said.

"I ought to have perished in the capital. My only reason for fleeing here was that I wanted to die with you. Let's not be killed in different places; let's

go down together." Lord Kiso brought his mount alongside Kanehira's, ready to gallop forward.

Kanehira leaped down and took his master's horse by the mouth. "No matter how glorious a warrior's earlier reputation may have been, an ignoble death means eternal disgrace. You are tired; there are no forces following you. If you are isolated by the enemy and dragged down to your death by some fellow's insignificant retainer, people will say, 'So-and-So's retainer killed the famous Lord Kiso, the man known throughout Japan.' I would hate to see that happen. Please, please, go into the pine woods."

"Well, then . . ." Lord Kiso galloped toward the Awazu Pine Woods.

Kanehira dashed into the fifty riders alone, stood in his stirrups, and announced his name in a mighty voice. "You must have heard of me long ago; see me now with your own eyes! I am Imai no Shirō Kanehira, aged thirty-three, foster brother to Lord Kiso. The Kamakura Lord Yoritomo himself must know that such a person exists. Kill me and show him my head!" He fired off his remaining eight arrows in a fast and furious barrage that felled eight men on the spot. (It is impossible to say whether or not they were killed.) Then he drew his sword and galloped slashing from place to place, without meeting a man willing to face him. Many were the trophies he amassed! The easterners surrounded him and let fly a hail of arrows, hoping to shoot him down, but none of their shafts found a chink in his armor or penetrated its stout plates, and he remained uninjured.

Lord Kiso galloped toward the Awazu Pine Woods, a lone rider. The shadows were gathering on the Twenty-First of the First Month, and a thin film of ice had formed. Unaware that a deep paddy field lay in front of him, he sent his horse plunging into the mire. The animal sank below its head and stayed there, motionless, despite furious flogging with stirrups and whip. Lord Kiso glanced backward, worried about Kanehira, and Ishida no Jirō Tamehisa, who was hard on his heels, drew his bow to the full and sent an arrow thudding into his face. Mortally wounded, he sagged forward with the bowl of his helmet against the horse's neck.

Two of Tamehisa's retainers went up and took Lord Kiso's head. Tamehisa impaled it on the tip of his sword, raised it aloft, and announced in a mighty voice, "Miura no Ishida no Jirō Tamehisa has killed Lord Kiso, the man known throughout Japan!"

Kanehira heard the shout as he battled. "I don't need to fight to protect anyone now. Take a look, easterners! This is how the bravest man in Japan commits suicide!" He put the tip of his sword in his mouth, jumped headlong from his horse, and perished, run through. Thus, it turned out that there was no combat worthy of the name at Awazu.

[5] *The Execution of Higuchi*

Imai no Shirō Kanehira's older brother, Higuchi no Jirō Kanemitsu, had marched against the Nagano stronghold in Kawachi to attack Jūrō no Kurando Yukiie, only to find his quarry missing—gone, it was said, to