

CHAPTER XVI. THE DEATH OF ATSUMORI.

Now 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 Jirō Naozane came riding along a narrow path on to the beach, with the intention of intercepting one of

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their great captain's. Just then his eye fell on a single horseman who was attempting to reach one of the ships in the offing, and had swum his horse out some twenty yards from the water's edge. He was richly attired in a silk hitatare embroidered with storks, and the lacing of his armour was shaded green; his helmet was surmounted by lofty horns, and the sword he wore was gay with gold. His twenty four arrows had black and white feathers, and he carried a black-lacquered bow bound with rattan. The horse he rode was dappled grey, 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 show an enemy your back. Return! Return! " Then the warrior turned his horse and rode him 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 enquired; " Tell me your name, for I would spare your life. " " Nay, first say who you are "; replied the young man. " I am Kumagai Jiro 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 defeat into victory, and if I spare him, it will not turn victory into defeat. When my son Kojiro was but slightly wounded at Ichi-no-tani, did it not make my heart bleed ? How pitiful then to put this youth to death. " And so he was about to set him free, when, looking behind him, he saw Doi and Kajiwaru coming up with fifty horsemen. " Alas ! look there ", he exclaimed, the tears running down his face ", though I would spare your life, the whole country side swarms with our men,

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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 re-birth in bliss. " " Indeed it must be so ", said the young warrior, " so take off my head at once. " Then Kumagai, weeping bitterly, and so overcome by his compassion for the fair youth that his eyes swam and his hand trembled so that he could scarcely wield his blade, hardly knowing what he did, at last cut off his 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! " And he pressed his face to the sleeve of his armour and wept bitterly. Then, wrapping up the head, he was stripping off the young man's armour, when he discovered a flute in a brocade bag that he was carrying in his girdle. " 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 who has brought a

flute with him. What esthetes are these Courtiers of the Heike ! " And when he brought them and showed them to the Commander, all who saw them were moved to tears; and he then discovered that the youth was Taiyū Atsumori, the youngest son of Shūri-no-taiyū Tsunemori, aged seventeen years. From this time the mind of Kumagai was turned toward the religious life and he eventually became a recluse.

The flute of Atsumori was one which his grandfather Tadamori, who was a famous player, had received as a present from the Emperor Toba, and had handed down to his father Tsunemori, who has given it to Atsumori because of his skill on the instrument. It was called 'Saeda'.^{*} Concerning this story of Kumagai we may quote the saying that "even in^{*} the most droll and flippant farce there is the germ of a Buddhist Psalm."

^{*}Saeda. ' Little Branch'.

^{*}even in, etc. i.e. how much more does a serious incident. like this turn the mind to religion.