

FATHER RETURNS

KIKUCHI KAN

TRANSLATED BY M. CODY POULTON

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As a novelist, playwright, critic, and book and magazine editor, Kikuchi Kan (1888–1948) was one of the most powerful figures in Japanese letters before the war. A student of Irish literature at Kyoto University, his early work as a dramatist during the Taishō era was strongly influenced by George Bernard Shaw and John Synge. His plays, as well as his editorship of *New Tides in Thought* (*Shinshichō*) and *New Tides in Theater* (*Engeki shinchō*), helped spark the thirst for theater and drama in the first and second decades of the twentieth century. Kikuchi’s first hit as a playwright was with a production in 1919 of *The Loves of Tōjūrō*, about the seventeenth-century kabuki actor Sakate Tōjūrō and starring Nakamura Ganjirō I, the inheritor of the realistic acting style innovated by Tōjūrō. This success was followed the next year by a production of *Father Returns* (*Chichi kaeru*), featuring another popular kabuki actor, Ichikawa Ennosuke II (1888–1963), in the title role. (Ennosuke II, formerly called Danko, was the “Actor D” whom Osanai addressed in his open letter, quoted in the introduction to part I.) Together with Morimoto Kaoru’s *A Woman’s Life* (*Onna no isshō*) and Kinoshita Junji’s *Twilight Crane* (*Yūzuru*), *Father Returns* has been one of the most popular Japanese plays of the twentieth century.

Kikuchi preferred one-act plays that were critically incisive and realistic and that presented a powerful social message. “The spirit of modern theater, regardless of where it is from,” he wrote, “is a reaction against and attack on existing customs and morals. Here in a country like Japan, customs and morals have latched like a scab onto our social lives. The work of a modern dramatist

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must be to peel off this scab.”¹ Adapted from *The Return of the Prodigal* by the minor playwright St. John Hankin, the work has been called a textbook for one-act plays because of its strong dramatic structure, economic dialogue, and psychological realism. On stage, *Father Returns* lasts no longer than about thirty minutes, but its impact was profound, moving to tears even the confirmed cynic and novelist Akutagawa Ryūnosuke. With great economy, it shows what happens to a family when their father, who had abandoned them some twenty years earlier, comes home. As can be seen in such fictional works as Natsume Sōseki’s *And Then* (*Sorekara*) and Shiga Naoya’s *Reconciliation* (*Wakai*), inter-generational conflict and the decline of the Meiji patriarchy was a theme of many writers’ works in this period.

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A six-mat tatami room in a modest middle-class house. Upstage center is a chest on which sits an alarm clock, and downstage is a long wooden charcoal brazier where a kettle is steaming. A low dining table has been set out. KEN’ICHIRO has just returned from his work at City Hall; he has changed into a kimono and is relaxing, reading the newspaper. His mother, OTAKA, is sewing. It is early October, around seven in the evening, and already dark outside.

Time: Around 1907.
Place: A town on the coast of Shikoku.²

Characters

KURODA KEN’ICHIRO, age twenty-eight
SHINJIRO, his brother, age twenty-three
OTANE, their sister, age twenty
OTAKA, their mother, age fifty-one
SOTARO, their father, age fifty-eight

KEN’ICHIRO: Where’s Otane gone, Mum?
OTAKA: Off to deliver some sewing.

1. Kikuchi Kan, “Engeki zuihitsu,” quoted in Oyama Isao, *Kindai Nihon gikyokushi* (Yamagata: Kindai Nihon gikyokushi kankōkai, 1968), 2:514.
2. *Nankaidō no kaigan ni aru shō tokai*: literally, “a small city on the Nankaidō coast.” Nankaidō refers to the old provinces adjoining the eastern region of the Inland Sea, from modern Wakayama Prefecture to Hyōgō Prefecture along the Honshū coast and including the islands of Awaji and Shikoku. Kikuchi no doubt is alluding to his birthplace, Takamatsu, in Kagawa Prefecture.

KEN'ICHIRO: Don't tell me she's still doing that. Surely she doesn't have to anymore.

OTAKA: Yes, but she'll need a decent kimono when she gets married.

KEN'ICHIRO (*Turning over a page of the paper*): What became of that offer you told me about?

OTAKA: They kept begging me to give her away, but it seems she didn't fancy the man at all.

KEN'ICHIRO: He had money. Would have made a fine match.

OTAKA: Maybe so, but one can have a small fortune and spend it all and, when all's said and done, still have nothing to show for it. Why, our house had some twenty, thirty thousand yen in bonds and real estate when I first came, but your dad blew it all away living high off the hog. He might just as well have fed it to the wind. (KEN'ICHIRO *says nothing, as if recalling unpleasant memories.*) I learned the hard way, so I'd rather Otane married for love than money. Even if her husband's poor, so long as he's got a good heart, life shouldn't be too hard on her.

KEN'ICHIRO: Ah, but how much better it'd be if he had both.

OTAKA: And if wishes were horses . . . Otane may be pretty, but we're hardly well to do. . . . Besides, the smallest wedding outfit these days will easily cost you a couple of hundred yen.

KEN'ICHIRO: Otane's had a hard time of it ever since she was a kid, and all because of dad. We ought to make sure at least she's married off properly. Once we've got a thousand saved up, I suggest we give her half of it.

OTAKA: That's hardly necessary—even three hundred would do. I'll feel even more relieved when you get yourself a wife. Everyone says I had bad luck with a husband, but good luck with kids. I didn't know what I was going to do when your dad left us. . . .

KEN'ICHIRO (*Changing the subject*): Shin's late.

OTAKA: That's because he's on duty tonight. Shin said he's getting a raise this month.

KEN'ICHIRO: Is that so? He did so well in high school I'd imagine he's not happy staying a primary school teacher. There's no telling how far he'll go if he sets his mind to it and studies some more.

OTAKA: I've had someone on the lookout for a wife for you too, but so far no luck. The Sonoda girl would be a good match but her family's more respectable than ours, so they may not want us to have her.

KEN'ICHIRO: Surely we can wait a couple more years at least.

OTAKA: In any case, once Otane's married off we really do have to get you a wife. That'd fix everything. When your dad ran off, I was left with three babes in arms, wondering what on earth I was going to do.

KEN'ICHIRO: There's no sense dwelling on the past. What's done is done.

(*The front door rattles open and SHINJIRO returns. For a mere primary school teacher, he is an impressive-looking young man.*)

SHINJIRO: I'm back.

OTAKA: Welcome home.

KEN'ICHIRO: You're dreadfully late tonight.

SHINJIRO: I had so much to do I was at my wit's end. My shoulders ache something awful.

OTAKA: We've been holding supper for you.

KEN'ICHIRO: You can have a bath after you've eaten.

SHINJIRO (*Changing into a kimono*): Where's Otane, Mum?

OTAKA: Went to deliver some sewing.

SHINJIRO: Hey, Ken'ichi, I heard something interesting today. Principal Sugita told me that he'd seen somebody who looked like Dad in Furushinmachi.

KEN'ICHIRO and OTAKA: Eh!?

SHINJIRO: Mr. Sugita was walking down the street in Furushinmachi—you know, where all the inns are—when he saw someone ahead, about sixty years old. The man looked vaguely familiar, so he caught up to him and had a good look at him from the side. He could almost swear it was Dad, Mr. Sugita said. If it's Sōtarō, then sure as you're born, he'll have a mole on his right cheek. If so, I'll hail him, he thought, but when he got closer, the man slunk off down that side street by the Water God's shrine.

OTAKA: Mr. Sugita was an old friend of your dad's—the two took lance lessons together in the old days—so, if anybody ought to know him, it'd be him. Even so, it's been some twenty years now.

SHINJIRO: That's what Mr. Sugita said. It's been twenty-odd years since he'd seen him, so he couldn't be sure, but then again, this was somebody he'd chummed around with since when they were kids, so he couldn't swear he was completely mistaken.

KEN'ICHIRO (*An uneasy light in his eyes*): So Mr. Sugita didn't call out to him then.

SHINJIRO: He said he was ready to say something if the man had a mole.

OTAKA: Well, I suppose Mr. Sugita was wrong after all. If your dad had come back to this town, then there's no way he wouldn't stop at the old homestead.

KEN'ICHIRO: He'd never dare set foot in this door again, let me tell you.

OTAKA: Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, he's dead. It's been twenty years.

SHINJIRO: Didn't you say somebody ran into him in Okayama? When was that?

OTAKA: Why, that was ten years ago already. That was when the Kubo boy, Chūta, made a trip to Okayama. Your dad had brought some lions and tigers to town for a show, he said. He treated Chūta to dinner and asked about us. Chūta said he wore a gold watch on his *obi* and was all decked out in silk—cut a real figure, he did. But that's the last we've heard of him. That was the year after the war, so I guess it must be twelve, thirteen years ago already.³

SHINJIRO: Dad was quite the eccentric, wasn't he.

3. Otaka is referring here to the Sino-Japanese War of 1895/1896.

OTAKA: Ever since he was young, he had no taste for the family studies⁴ but preferred to spend his time prospecting for gold and whatnot. So it wasn't just the high life that got him in debt. He lost a small fortune exporting patent medicines to China.

KEN'ICHIRO (*Looking even more perturbed*): Let's eat, Mum.

OTAKA: Yes, yes, let's eat. I clean forgot. (*Leaves for the kitchen. From offstage.*) Mr. Sugita must've been mistaken. If he was still alive he'd be getting on. Surely, he would've sent us a postcard at least.

KEN'ICHIRO (*More seriously*): When was it Mr. Sugita ran into that fellow?

SHINJIRO: Last night about nine, he said.

KEN'ICHIRO: How was he dressed?

SHINJIRO: Not very well, apparently. Didn't have a coat on.

KEN'ICHIRO: That so?

SHINJIRO: How do you remember him?

KEN'ICHIRO: I don't.

SHINJIRO: Surely you do. You were eight then. Even I have a foggy memory of him.

KEN'ICHIRO: I don't. I used to, but I made a point of forgetting.

SHINJIRO: Mr. Sugita talks about Dad a lot. Says he was quite good looking when he was young.

OTAKA (*Bringing supper out of the kitchen*): That's right. Your dad was very popular. When he was a page for his lordship, one of the ladies-in-waiting gave him a chopstick box with a love poem inside.

SHINJIRO (*Laughing*): Why the hell would she do that? Hah hah hah hah.

OTAKA: He was born in the Year of the Ox, so that'd make him fifty-eight now. If he'd stayed put here he'd be enjoying his retirement now. (*Pause. The three begin to eat.*) Otane should be home soon. It's getting quite cold out, isn't it?

SHINJIRO: I heard a shrike today, mum, in that big elm at Jōganji. It's autumn already. . . . Oh, I've got some news for you, Ken. I've decided to get my English certificate. There aren't any good math teachers, you know.

KEN'ICHIRO: Good idea. So you'll be going to the Ericsons'?

SHINJIRO: That's what I thought. They're missionaries, so I don't have to pay them anything.

KEN'ICHIRO: In any case, if you want to show the world you can stand on your own two feet, you know you can't rely on your dad's reputation. So hit the books. I was thinking of taking the senior civil service exam myself, but they've changed the rules, and now you have to be a high school graduate, so I've given up the idea. You graduated from high school, so you've got to give it your best shot.

(*The front door opens and OTANE returns. She is a pale-complexioned young woman of above-average good looks.*)

4. *Ie no gakumon* is the Confucian learning that would have been a tradition in a samurai family like theirs.

OTANE: I'm home.

OTAKA: You're late.

OTANE: They had more work for me. That's what held me up.

OTAKA: Have some supper.

OTANE (*Sits. Looking rather worried*): When I got back to the house just now, Ken'ichi, there was this strange old man loitering across the road, just staring at our doorway.
(*The other three start.*)

KEN'ICHIRŌ: Hm.

SHINJIRŌ: What did he look like?

OTANE: It was so dark I couldn't tell for sure, but he was tall.

(*SHINJIRŌ goes over to the window and looks outside.*)

KEN'ICHIRŌ: Anybody there?

SHINJIRŌ: Uh uh. Nobody. (*The three children are silent.*)

OTAKA: It was the third day after Obon when he left home.

KEN'ICHIRŌ: I'd rather you didn't bring up the past anymore, Mum.

OTAKA: I used to feel as bitter as you do, but as I get older, my heart's not as hard as it used to be.

(*All four eat their supper in silence. Suddenly, there is a rattling at the front door.*

KEN'ICHIRŌ's and OTAKA's faces register the greatest emotion, but the nature of that emotion differs radically.)

MAN'S VOICE: Hello?

OTANE: Yes? (*She makes no move to rise, however.*)

MAN'S VOICE: I wonder—is Otake there?

OTAKA: Yes! (*Goes toward the front door as if sucked toward it. Henceforth, we can hear only their voices.*)

MAN (*Offstage*): Otake, is it you?

OTAKA (*Offstage*): It's you! My God . . . how you've changed.
(*Their voices are filled with tears.*)

MAN (*Offstage*): Well . . . you look . . . well. The children must be all grown up by now.

OTAKA (*Offstage*): Indeed. They've turned into fine young grownups. Come see for yourself.

MAN (*Offstage*): Is it all right?

OTAKA (*Offstage*): Of course it is.

(*Returning home for the first time in twenty years, the haggard father, SŌTARŌ, is led into the living room by his old wife. SHINJIRŌ and OTANE stare at their father, blinking in disbelief.*)

SHINJIRŌ: Is this Father? I'm Shinjirō.

SŌTARŌ: Why, what a fine young man you've become! When I left, you were hardly a toddler.

OTANE: Father, I'm Otane.

SŌTARŌ: I'd heard there was a girl, but, my, you're a pretty one.

OTAKA: Well, my dear . . . where to begin? It's a fine thing the children have turned out so well, don't you think?

SÔTARÔ: They say kids'll grow up even without their parents' help, and I guess they're right, aren't they? Hah hah hah. (*Laughs.*)

(*But no one joins him in his laughter. KEN'ICHIRO remains silent, leaning on the table.*)

OTAKA: Dear. Ken and Shin have both turned into fine young men. Ken passed the regular civil service exam when he was only twenty, and Shin here never fell lower than third place in middle school. The two of them now pull in about sixty yen a month. And Otane, well, as you can see, she's a fine-looking girl. We've had proposals from some fine places, let me tell you.

SÔTARÔ: Why, that's a fine thing indeed. I myself was doing quite well till about four, five years back. Had myself a troupe of some two dozen, touring the country. Then, when we were in Kure, our show tent burned down and we lost everything. After that nothing went right and before I knew it, I was an old man. I started to miss my old wife and kids, so that's why I crept back here. Be good to me, 'cause I don't expect I'll have much longer to live. (*Looks at KEN'ICHIRO.*) What d'ye say, Ken'ichirô? Won't you pass the cup to me? Your dad's not much used to drinking the good stuff these days. Ah, but you'd be the only one to remember my face, wouldn't you? (*KEN'ICHIRO does not respond.*)

OTAKA: Come, Ken. Listen to your dad. It's been years since the two of you met, so you ought to celebrate.

SHINJIRÔ (*Takes the saké cup and offers it to SÔTARÔ*): There you go.

KEN'ICHIRO (*Abruptly*): Stop it. You've no right to give it to him.

OTAKA: What are you saying? Ken!

(*SÔTARÔ gives him a sharp look. SHINJIRÔ and OTANE hold down their heads and say nothing.*)

KEN'ICHIRO (*Goads him*): We have no father. How could *that* be our father?

SÔTARÔ (*Barely restraining his rage*): What did you say!?

KEN'ICHIRO (*Coldly*): If we had a father, then Mum wouldn't have led us all by the hand to the breakwater and made us jump in with her. I was eight then. Luckily, Mum picked a spot that was too shallow, otherwise we'd have all drowned. Had I a father, I wouldn't have had to go work as an errand boy when I was ten years old. It's because we had no father our childhood was so miserable. Shinjirô, have you forgotten how, when you were in primary school, you cried because we couldn't afford to buy any ink and paper? Or how you cried when we couldn't buy the textbooks you needed and your classmates made fun of you because you'd brought handwritten copies to school? How could we have a father? A real father wouldn't have let us suffer like that!

(*OTAKA and OTANE weep; SHINJIRÔ fights back the tears. Even the old man begins to lose his rage and succumb to grief.*)

SHINJIRŌ: But, Ken, see how much our mum's willing to forgive. Surely you can find it in you to let bygones be bygones.

KEN'ICHIRO (*Even more coldly*): Mum's a woman, so I don't know what she thinks, but if her husband's my father, then he's my enemy. When we were kids and times were bad or we were hungry and complained to Mum, she'd say, "It's all your dad's fault. If you're looking for somebody to blame, then blame your dad." If that man's our father, he's the one who's given us nothing but grief since when we were just kids. When I was ten and running errands for the prefectural office, our mum was at home making matchboxes to make ends meet. One month she didn't have any work and the three of us had to go without lunches. Have you forgotten? The reason I studied so hard was so I could show that bastard. I wanted to get back at the man who abandoned us. I wanted to prove to him that I could lose a father and still grow up to be a man. Do I remember him ever loving me? I don't think so! Till I was eight, he spent all his time out drinking, thanks to which he got up to his head in debts, then ran off with another woman. The love of a wife and three children still didn't amount to any more than that one woman. And when he disappeared, so did the passbook with sixteen yen in it that Mum had put away for me.

SHINJIRŌ (*Holding back his tears*): But brother! See how old Dad's become.

KEN'ICHIRO: It's easy enough for you, Shin, to glibly call him "Dad"! Just because some stranger you've never seen before comes crawling into our house and says he's our father, you suddenly feel sorry for him?

SHINJIRŌ: But Ken, we're his own flesh and blood. No matter what happens, our duty's—

KEN'ICHIRO: To look after him, you say? Off he went and had the time of his life. Now he's old and can't get by any longer, he says, so he comes home. I don't care what you say. I haven't got a dad.

SŌTARŌ (*Indignantly, but his anger is entirely feigned and carries no power or conviction*): Ken'ichirō! How dare you speak like that to your own father!

KEN'ICHIRO: You may be my father, but you sure didn't raise me! You threw away the right to be my father when your children died, there on the breakwater, twenty years ago. Whatever I am today I made myself. I don't owe anybody anything.

(*Everyone falls silent. Only OTAKA's and OTANE's quiet sobbing can be heard.*)

SŌTARŌ: Right then, I'll leave. I've been a man of some means, I'll have you know. I made a small fortune in the past, and no matter how far I've fallen I'm still able to feed myself. Well, sorry for the trouble I've caused you all. (*Indignantly makes to leave.*)

SHINJIRŌ: Wait, please. I'll look after you, even if my brother won't. Ken'ichi's your own flesh and blood, so even he'll come 'round soon enough, I'm sure. Wait! I'll do whatever I can to look after you.

KEN'ICHIRO: Shinjirō! What has this man ever done for you? I still bear the scars of his beatings, but what have you got to show for him? Nothing. Who paid for your primary school? Have you forgotten it was your big brother who paid for your tuition

out of the wretched salary I made as an errand boy? The only real father you ever had was me. All right, go ahead and help that man out if that's what you want. But if you do, I'll never talk to you again.

SHINJIRŌ: But—

KEN'ICHIRO: If you don't like it, you can leave. And take that man with you.

(*The women continue to cry. SHINJIRŌ says nothing.*)

KEN'ICHIRO: Thanks to the fact we had no father, I scrimped and saved, working late into the night, just so my little brother and sister didn't have to suffer like I did. I put you both through middle school.

SŌTARŌ (*Weakly*): Say no more. I must've put you all out by coming back. I won't trouble you again. I've got enough wits about me to figure out how to fend for myself. I'll be off, then. Otaka! Look after yourself. I guess it's a good thing I left you, after all.

SHINJIRŌ (*Following his father as he attempts to leave*): Have you got enough cash on you, sir? Surely you haven't had supper yet.

SŌTARŌ (*His eyes shining as if appealing to him*): No, no. Thanks anyway. (*He stumbles at the entranceway and collapses on the lower step.*)

OTAKA: Be careful!

SHINJIRŌ (*Helping him up*): Do you have some place to go?

SŌTARŌ (*Remains seated, dejectedly*): Who needs a home? I'll die on the road. . . . (*As if to himself.*) I'd no right to come beating on your door, but still, I got older and weaker and found my feet naturally wending their way back to where I was born. It's been three days since I came back to town, and every night I'd stand outside the door here, but I couldn't bring myself to cross this threshold. . . . All said and done, I'd have been better off if I hadn't come. Anybody would make a fool of a man who came home penniless. . . . When I turned fifty, I started to long for my old home again, and I figured I'd bring back a thousand or two at least and beg your forgiveness, but when you're older it's that much harder to make a living. . . . (*Stands up.*) No matter, I'll make do somehow. (*He weakly gets to his feet and, turning back, gazes at his old wife before opening the door and leaving. The other four family members remain silent for some time.*)

OTAKA (*Appealingly*): Ken'ichirō!

OTANE: Brother!

(*There is a tense pause that lasts some time.*)

KEN'ICHIRO: Shin! Go, find Dad and bring him back.

(*SHINJIRŌ flies out the door. The other three wait anxiously. SHINJIRŌ presently returns, his face pale.*)

SHINJIRŌ: I took the street south and looked for him, but there was no sign of him. I'll go north this time. Come with me, brother.

KEN'ICHIRO (*Anxiously*): How could you have lost him! He can't be lost!

(*The two brothers madly rush out the door.*)

CURTAIN