

[ Earlier, during *1183*, the Heike won a battle against forces dispatched by Yoshinaka, another against Yukiie, Yoshinaka's uncle, and others against local opponents, thanks in large part to the prowess of Kiyomori's nephew Noritsune. Then, during the first month of *1184*, as the Genji forces fought among themselves, the Heike moved back to the old capital at Fukuhara and established a formidable stronghold nearby at Ichi-no-tani (now in Suma-ku, Kobe). "Flanked by mountains to the north and by the sea to the south, the position at Ichi-no-tani was narrow at the entrance and wide in the interior.

High cliffs rose above it like folding screens. From the base of the mountains on the north to the shallow waters on the south, the defenders had erected a high wall of huge boulders, and had installed branch barricades made by felling great trees. Where the sea deepened, a line of large vessels formed a rampart. At the front of the stronghold, a cloudlike host of armored bowmen from Shikoku and Chinzei stood in rows on archery platforms, each of them reputed to be worth a thousand men. Ten or twenty rows of saddled horses waited below the platforms, and there was a constant din of drums and battle cries. The drawn bows were like half-moons at the warriors' breasts; the glittering swords were like streaks of autumn frost across their hips. The countless red banners on the heights danced in the spring breeze like leaping flames" (Sec. 9-5).

It is now early in the second month of *1184*. Noriyori and Yoshitsune, Yoritomo's deputies, have marched westward, Noriyori toward the eastern front of the Taira stronghold, and Yoshitsune toward the rear; and Yoshitsune has just overrun an outlying Heike position at Mikusa, a mountainous area near the junction of Settsu, Tanba, and Harima provinces. ]

## 9.9. *The Old Horse*

Munemori sent a message to the Taira lords by Yoshiyuki, the assistant director of the stables of the right. "I have received intelligence that Yoshitsune has already routed the forces at Mikusa and penetrated our lines. The mountain sector is crucial; I want all of you to head for it." But every one of them asked to be excused. Then he dispatched a message to Noritsune, the governor of Noto. "I know we've called on you time and again, but won't you please go?" he asked.

Noritsune's answer was reassuring. "If a man wants to succeed in battle, he can't have anything else on his mind. He'll never win if he's like a hunter or fisherman, always thinking about his own comfort and avoiding inconvenience. I'm perfectly willing to have you send me into danger as often as you like. You can be sure there's one sector, at least, where the enemy will be wiped out." Munemori was delighted. He sent him ten thousand horsemen under the command of Etchu no Zenji Moritoshi.

Noritsune took along his older brother Michimori, the governor of Echizen, and established defensive positions in the hills (that is to say, the terrain below the Hiyodorigoe Road).<sup>10</sup>

Michimori had somebody bring his wife to the camp so that he might bid her a final farewell. Noritsune gave him a tongue-lashing. "They sent me to this front because they thought it was dangerous, and dangerous it certainly is. If the Genji dropped down out of those heights right now, there would be no time to take up arms. Even if a man has a bow in his hand, he won't get anywhere unless he fits an arrow to it; even if he fits the arrow, he won't

<sup>10</sup>. Hiyodorigoe appears to have been a road from Fukuhara across the Rokko Mountains to Mino District in Harima, too far north to have served as a point of departure for Yoshitsune's surprise attack (described below). According to some *Heike* texts, the Genji descended from a hill in the vicinity of Tekkaiyama, just above the coast at Ichi-no-tani. See Tomikura, *Heike monogatari zenchushaku*, 3(1): 145-48.

do any good unless he pulls the bow. If he's as feckless as you, he won't be worth a damn!" Michimori may have felt the justice of the rebuke, for he threw on his armor and sent his wife away.

At dusk on the fifth, Noriyori's Genii army began a slow advance toward Ikuta-no-mori from Koyano.<sup>rt</sup> Looking out toward Suzume-no-matsubara, Iyikage-no-matsu, and Koyano, the Heike could see places where groups of the enemy had bivouacked and lit beacons. As it grew darker, the fires resembled stars in a clear sky. Not to be outdone, they went through the motions of lighting beacons of their own at Ikuta-no-mori. When dawn approached, the fires in the distance were like the moon rising over the hills. For the first time, they understood the old lines about fireflies in a marsh.<sup>12</sup>

The Genji went about their work in businesslike, deliberate fashion, here pitching camp and resting horses, there pitching camp and feeding horses. The Heike, their nerves on edge, expected an attack at any moment.

At dawn on the sixth, Yoshitsune divided his ten thousand riders into two forces. He sent Toi Sanehira toward the western approach to Ichi-no-tani with seven thousand horsemen, and he himself circled around from the Tanba road at the head of three thousand horsemen, planning to swoop down from the Hiyodorigoe Road onto the rear of the stronghold.

"Everybody knows how dangerous Hiyodorigoe is," the warriors all said. "We're ready to be killed in battle, but we don't want to die in a fall. Isn't there somebody around here who knows these mountains?"

Hirayama Sueshige of Musashi came forward. "I do," he said.

"You were raised in the east," said Yoshitsune. "You can't know anything about mountains in the west that you've never laid eyes on before today."

"I don't think you mean that," Sueshige answered. "Poets know about blossoms at Yoshino and Hatsuse; brave men know what's behind an enemy stronghold." It was an arrogant-sounding speech.

The next person to come forward was Beppu Kiyoshige of Musashi, a youth of eighteen. "My father, Yoshishige, told me, 'When you lose your way in the mountains, whether it's because an enemy has attacked or just during a hunt, simply toss the reins over an old horse's neck and drive him ahead of you. You'll always come out onto a path.'"

"That's excellent advice," Yoshitsune said. "The classic tells us, 'Even when snow covers the plain, an old horse knows the way.'<sup>13</sup> He put a gold-trimmed saddle and a polished bit on an old whitish roan, tossed the tied

ii. Ikuta-no-mori (now in Ikuta-ku, Kobe) was the eastern terminus of the Taira stronghold, about *ro.s* km from Ichi-no-tani, the western terminus. Koyano, the place where Noriyori had camped, was in the area of the present *city* of Itami, Hyogo Prefecture.

*ra.* Anonymous (sxxx *rsyr*): haruru *yo no* / hoshi ka kawabe no / hotaru ka *mo / wa ga sumu kata no* / ama no taku hi ka ("Might they be stars in the clear night or fireflies by the riverbank? Or are they fires, kindled by the fisherfolk where I dwell?") The *Heike* author apparently knew the slightly different version recorded in a variant *Shinkokinshu* text, which reads "by the marsh" (*sawabe no*) instead of "by the riverbank" (*kawabe no*).

<sup>13</sup>, Unidentified.

reins over its neck, and drove it ahead of him into the depths of the unfamiliar mountains.

As was to have been expected so early in the second month, there were places where lingering patches of snow dappled the peaks like blossoms and others where the warriors heard warblers in the valley and made their way through thick haze. When they climbed, they were among cloud-capped peaks; when they descended, they encountered rugged, forested slopes and towering cliffs. The snow had not melted from the pines; the narrow, mossy track was all but invisible. Snowflakes scattered like plum blossoms in the blustering wind. Darkness settled down over the mountain trail while they whipped their steeds this way and that, and they all dismounted to make camp.

Musashibo Benkei brought an old man to Yoshitsune.

"Who's this?" Yoshitsune asked.

"He goes hunting in these mountains."

"Then you must know the area very well. Tell us the truth."

"Yes, of course I know it."

"I want to get down from here to the Heike stronghold at Ichi-no-tani. Can that be done?"

"Absolutely not! There's no way for a man to get down the gorge; it's three hundred feet long. Or the rock face, either; it's a hundred and fifty feet. It would be out of the question on horseback."

"Do deer go through?" Yoshitsune asked.

"Yes. When the weather turns warm, deer from Harima Province cross into Tanba Province to lie in the deep grass, and when it turns cold, deer go from Tanba Province to Inamino in Harima Province to feed where the snow is shallow."

"Why, it sounds like a regular racetrack! A horse can certainly go where a deer goes. All right, you'll be our guide."

The hunter protested that he was too old.

"You must have a son?" Yoshitsune asked.

"I have." He presented an eighteen-year-old youth called Kumao. They proceeded to put up the boy's hair, named him Washinoo no Saburo Yoshihisa (his father's name being Washinoo no Shoji Takehisa), and sent him to the vanguard to guide them. When Yoshitsune met his end in Oshu, estranged from Yontomo after the defeat of the Heike, it was that same Yoshihisa who died at his side.

### 9.12. *The Assault from the Cliff*

Other eastern warriors advanced after those encounters—the Chichibu, the Ashikaga, the Miura, the Kamakura, and, among the leagues, the Inomata, the Kodama, the Noiyo, the Yokoyama, the Nishito, the Tsuzukito, and the Shinoto. The massed armies of the Genji and the Heike mingled in combat, their riders charging in turn and competing to announce their names. Their shouts and yells made the mountains ring; the hoofbeats of their galloping horses reverberated like thunder; the arrows they exchanged fell like rain. Some men retired to the rear, carrying wounded comrades on their shoulders; some sustained light injuries and fought on; some suffered mortal blows and perished. There were those who rode alongside enemies, grappled with them, fell, and died in dagger fights; there were those who seized others, held them down, and cut off their heads; there were those who had their heads cut off. Neither side revealed a weakness for the other to exploit, and the main Genji force seemed unlikely to win without help, valiant though it was.

Now Yoshitsune had circled around to the rear, and had climbed to the Hiyodorigoe Road, behind Ichi-no-tani, toward dawn on the seventh. As he was getting ready for the descent, two stags and a doe ran down to the fortifications of the Heike, probably because they had been frightened by his men. Their appearance caused consternation in the stronghold. "Even the deer that live near here ought to be fleeing way back into the mountains to get away from us," they said. "It's very odd for these three to come down into the middle of a big army like this. The Genji must be going to drop down from those mountains up there."

Takechi no Kiyonori of Iyo Province stepped forward. "Whether they're up there or not, we can't ignore anything that comes from a hostile direction," he said. He shot the two stags and let the doe go.

Etchu no Zenji Moritoshi reprimanded him. "It was foolish to shoot the deer. You could have held off ten enemies with one of those arrows. You wasted precious arrows in order to commit a sin."<sup>14</sup>

Yoshitsune surveyed the distant stronghold. "Let's try sending some horses down," he said. They chased some saddled horses down. Some of the animals broke their legs and fell, but others arrived safely. Three reached the roof of Moritoshi's quarters and stood trembling.

"The horses won't get hurt if the riders pay attention," Yoshitsune said. "All right, take them down! Do as I do!" He galloped forward at the head of thirty horsemen, and all the others followed, down a slope so steep that the edges of the rear riders' stirrups touched the armor and helmets of the men in front. After slipping and sliding at great speed for seven hundred feet through a mixture of sand and pebbles, they pulled up on a ledge above a huge mossy crag, a vertical drop of a hundred and forty or fifty feet. They sat aghast, ready to give up.

Sawara no Jifiro Yoshitsura came forward. "In Miura, we gallop over places like that all day long, even if we're only chasing birds. This is a Miura racetrack!" he said. He dashed ahead, and all the others followed.

"Ei! Ed" They encouraged the horses in muffled voices, their eyes closed for the terrifying descent. What they were attempting seemed beyond mortal capacity, something demons might do.

Even before the last man reached the bottom, the party shouted a tremendous battle cry. There were only three thousand of them, but the echoes made them sound like a hundred thousand.

Murakami no Yasukuni's men put the torch to all the sleeping quarters and camps of the Heike. As luck would have it, a gale was blowing. Clouds of black smoke billowed up, and great numbers of Heike warriors panicked and galloped into the sea, desperate to save themselves.

There were many vessels ready to receive them at the water's edge, but what good could come of it when four or five hundred men in armor—or even a thousand—tried to crowd into a single ship? Three big ships sank before the onlookers' eyes when they were no more than three hundred and fifty yards from the shore. After that, orders were issued to let men of quality come on board, but to fend off those of lesser worth with swords and spears. Even though they knew what to expect, the ordinary soldiers clung to the vessels from which they were barred. Some lost whole arms and others forearms, and they ended as rows of corpses, reddening the water's edge at Ichi-no-tani.

Noto Governor Noritsune was a man who had fought time and again without suffering a defeat, but now, for some reason, he fled westward on his charger, Usuguro [Dusky Black]. He got on board a ship at Akashi Shore in Harima Province and made the crossing to Yashima in Sanuki Province.

<sup>14</sup> Buddhist doctrine proscribes the taking of life.

9.16. *The Death of Atsumori*

After the defeat of the Heike, Kumagae no Naozane walked his horse toward the beach. "The Taira nobles will be fleeing to the shore to get on board the rescue vessels," he thought. "I wish I could wrestle with one of their high-ranking commanders-in-chief!" Just then, he saw a lone rider splash into the sea, bound for a vessel offshore. The enemy was wearing a silk tunic embroidered with cranes, a suit of armor with shaded green lacing, and a horned helmet. At his waist, there was a sword with gilt bronze fittings; on his back, he carried a quiver containing arrows fletched with black-banded white eagle feathers. He held a rattan-wrapped bow and rode a white-dappled reddish horse, with a saddle trimmed in gold. When the horse had swum out a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, Naozane beckoned with his fan.

"I see that you're a commander-in-chief! It's dishonorable to show your back to an enemy! Come on back!" he shouted.

The warrior came back. As he left the water, Naozane rode up beside him, gripped him as hard as he could, and crashed with him to the ground. Holding him motionless, he pushed aside his helmet, intending to cut off his head, and saw that he was only sixteen or seventeen years old, with a lightly powdered face and blackened teeth — a boy just the age of Naozane's own son Naoie, and so handsome that he could find no place to strike.

"Who are you? Announce your name. I'll spare you," Naozane said.

"Who are you?" the youth asked.

"Nobody of any special importance: Kumagae no Jirō Naozane of Musashi Province."

"Then I don't need to give you my name. I'm the kind of opponent you want. Ask about me after you take my head. Somebody will recognize me, even if I don't tell you."

"He's bound to be a commander-in-chief," Naozane thought. "Killing this one person won't, change defeat into victory, and sparing him won't change victory into defeat. When I think of how I grieved when Naoie got just a little wound, it's easy to imagine how this young lord's father would feel if he heard that he'd been killed. I have a notion to let him go." Casting a swift glance to the rear, he discovered Sanehira and Kagetoki coming along with fifty riders.

"I'd like to spare you," he said, restraining tears, "but there are Genji warriors everywhere. You can't possibly escape. It will be better if I'm the one to kill you, because I'll offer prayers for you."

"Just take my head; don't waste time," the boy said.

Overwhelmed by compassion, Naozane could find no place to strike. His senses reeled, his brain seemed paralyzed, and he was scarcely conscious of his surroundings. But matters could not go on like that forever. In tears, he took the head.

"No life is as miserable as a warrior's. It's only because I was born into a military house that I've had this terrible experience. What a cruel thing I've done!" He pressed his sleeve to his face and wept.

But matters could not go on like that forever. He started to remove the youth's tunic, preparatory to wrapping the head in it, and found a flute in a brocade bag tucked in at the waist. "Poor fellow! He must have been one of the people I heard playing inside the stronghold just before dawn. There are tens of thousands of riders in our eastern armies, but I'd be willing to bet not one of them carried a flute to the battlefield. Those court nobles are men of refinement," he thought.

When Naozane's trophies were presented to Yoshitsune for inspection, they brought tears to everyone's eyes. It was learned later that the slain youth was Atsumori, aged seventeen, a son of Tsunemori, the head of the Palace Repairs Office.

After that, Naozane thought increasingly of becoming a monk.

The flute in question is supposed to have been a present from Retired Emperor Toba to Atsumori's grandfather Tadairon, who was an excellent musician. I believe I have heard that Tsunemori inherited it, and that he turned it over to Atsumori because the boy played so well. Saeda [Little Branch] was its name. It is deeply moving that music, a profane entertainment, should have led a warrior to a life of religion.

18. Court nobles began to blacken their teeth early in the 11th century.