

# **THE FORTY-SEVEN RONIN**

James Murdoch



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# THE FORTY-SEVEN RONIN

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EVERY historian of the Tokugawa age is emphatic on the subject of the great debasement of the moral currency among the samurai class that began in the Regency of Sakai and culminated under Tsunayoshi in the Genroku and Ho–ei year–periods. Reference to this unpleasant matter has been made in the previous chapter; and although detail was not heaped upon detail, as might very easily have been done, enough was said to indicate that the moral fibre of the two–sworded men had indeed degenerated sadly. And yet it was just when things seemed to be moving downhill with breakneck speed that what the Japanese regard as one of the greatest feats of derring–do that has ever been accomplished within the four seas of the Empire was achieved. There is no tale better known in Japan than the story of the Revenge of Ako, or the Loyal League, while the story of the Forty–Seven Ronin, as it is usually known among Europeans, is the only episode in the Tokugawa annals with which foreigners are almost universally acquainted. The incident has become so famous that it has been deemed advisable to devote a short chapter to its consideration.

In a preceding chapter it was stated that when Iyemitsu reformed the etiquette of the Shogunal palace, he sent the chiefs of the two Koke houses of Kira and Osawa to Kyoto to undergo a special course of training in the ceremonial of the Imperial Court, and that the duty of superintending the reception of the Imperial Envoys at Yedo became an hereditary prerogative of the chiefs of these two families. It became the custom to impose on a Tozama Daimyo the task of defraying the expenses of the Envoy's sojourn in Yedo, and of attending upon and of introducing them at the Shogun's Court. In order to do this properly it was necessary for the host to put himself under a course of instruction from Kira or Osawa, and to discharge his commission under the direction of the Masters of Ceremony, as Kira and Osawa practically were. At this date it was Kira Yoshinaka who usually discharged the duties of the office. Like many of his fellow–officials he was venal, with a most pronounced itch in his palm, and unless the Daimyo, consigned to his tender mercies, took adequate steps to appease his greed, he was apt to make matters very unpleasant for him indeed. To be put to public shame, to be subjected to “loss of face”, was a terrible wound to the knightly honour of a feudatory, and Kira, in his position, could easily find the means of exposing his aristocratic pupils to ridicule, if not to contempt. In 1698, he made himself so unendurable to Kamei, Daimyo of Tsuwano in Iwami, that Kamei made up his mind to poniard him. However, that night Kamei apprised his steward of his intention, and the latter at once hurried off stealthily to Kira's mansion, with a load of costly presents. Next day Kira was exceedingly courteous to the Daimyo who, not knowing of the reasons which had brought about this complete change of demeanour, abandoned his anger and renounced his intention of killing him. Thus, by the cleverness of his steward, was Kamei, with all his house, saved from ruin.

In 1701, it was Asano Nagamori, Daimyo of Ako in Harima, that was saddled with the burden, or the honour, of receiving the envoys of the Emperor and the ex–Emperor. On this occasion, Kira must have pushed things too far, for although it was never known what individual incident it was that exhausted Asano's patience, the precise occurrence itself is clear enough from the following testimony of Kajikawa, an attendant of the Shogun's consort:

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“On 21st April I went to the palace. I entered the waiting–room, and there I heard that the Imperial Envoys were to be received earlier than had at first been determined. So I left the waiting–room and went in. In the great corridor I met two priests. I asked one of them to call Kira, but he came back and told me that Kira had gone to the Great Council Chamber. I then got him to summon Asano who was with Daté (Asano's colleague) in the great reception room. Asano came, and I gave him the message from my mistress. Just then I saw Kira coming from the reception chamber, and I went forward to meet him. We met at about twelve or fourteen yards from the corner pillar of the chamber, and I had just asked him whether it was true that the hour of reception had been changed,

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when behind his back I heard a loud voice: 'Have you forgotten the grudge I have owed you for a day or two?' At the same time, some one fell upon Kira from behind, and cut him on the shoulder. I looked at the speaker, and saw to my great astonishment that it was the Lord Asano. Kira turned round and received another cut on the forehead. He ran a few steps towards me, and then fell to the floor. Asano dashed forward to attack him once more, but I caught hold of his arm. By this time, other nobles had come to the rescue, so that Asano was easily disarmed. He was straightway taken to the Willow Chamber, all the while crying out that he had killed Kira, as he owed him a grudge for his insolence. As to Kira, he was carried, insensible, into the doctor's room."

Of course the penalty for drawing a weapon with lethal intent in the Shogun's palace was death—by *hara-kiri*.

The assault took place at ten in the forenoon. Asano was presently handed over to the custody of Tamura, Daimyo of Ichinoseki, in Mutsu, who sent ten samurai, thirty servants, and fifteen palanquin-bearers to fetch the culprit to his *yashiki*. There he arrived in a palanquin, meshed round with cords, at four in the afternoon. Meanwhile his fate had been settled, and he was presently informed that he had been condemned to disembowel himself. The reason for this unusual haste was that the Shogun wished to be merciful; Kira had not been fatally wounded, and it was well that Asano should not learn that this was so, for he could not then face his doom with resignation. At five o'clock (in the very same day) Shoda, the censor, arrived with the death-sentence. It had been purposed that the *hara-kiri* should take place in the great reception room of Tamura's *yashiki*, but the seneschals bethought them that it would be wanting in respect to let Asano die in the room where the censor sat. So they reared a dais of three mats, covered it with a rug, and hung it about with lighted lanterns. When it was ready Asano, in the ceremonial dress of the samurai (*Kami-shimo*), was escorted into the reception room where Shoda produced the sentence and read it out. Asano calmly returned thanks for being permitted to die as befitted a samurai, and then rising he proceeded to the dais attended by two assistant censors. As he sat down a dirk, wrapped in paper with only two inches of its steel exposed, was placed on a stand before him and one of the censors took his position behind him as his "second" with a naked sword poised ready in his hands. As Asano bent forward to grasp the dirk, the censors sword fell upon his neck. So Asano did not really disembowel himself.

The reason for this was that Asano's own dirk had been wrested from him in the palace, and, in the haste and confusion, it was a dirk by Bizen Nagamitsu and a precious heirloom in the Tamura family that was placed before him. So, lest it should be soiled, the assistant censor was speedy in his office of second, and struck off Lord Asano's head before he could use the dirk. That evening, Daigaku, Asano's younger brother, sent to receive the corpse, and that very night it was buried at the Temple of Sengaku-ji in Takanawa.

On 26th April, five days after the death of Asano, two of his vassals appeared at the Castle of Ako with intelligence of the calamity. Now, Ako was 420 miles from Yedo by the shortest route, so these men can have lagged but little on the way. That same night, fast upon their heels came Haru and a comrade with a letter signed by Toda, Daimyo of Ogaki in Mino, by Asano's uncle and by his younger brother, Daigaku, announcing that Asano had made away with himself and strictly charging the Ako retainers to surrender the Castle to the Bakufu commissioners without demur. On being questioned as to whether Kira was dead or not, Haru said that although he had repeatedly put the same query to Lord Toda, he had stubbornly refused to answer.

Two neighbouring Daimyo were presently instructed by the Bakufu to take charge of the Castle of Ako, and Araki and Sakakibara were the censors dispatched from Yedo to superintend its transfer. When this and the fact that Kira was still alive became known to the retainers, most of them resolved to draw up a petition, hand over the Castle, and then solemnly commit *hara-kiri* at the great entrance to the stronghold; for then, they reasoned, the Bakufu would be sure to punish Kira as he deserved. At the head of this party was Oishi Kuranosuke. But Ono Kurobei headed another section, who argued that such a step would only further offend the Yedo authorities. However, Oishi and sixty others entered into a written compact to carry out their purpose. There were others who did not actually sign the document, but who were nevertheless bent upon following their Lord "upon the dark path". Just then three more retainers came in from Yedo, and they refused to have anything to do with such a compact. But not, like Ono, from fear or prudence. Far from it, for they were clamorous for vengeance on Kira. In Yedo two of their fellows were even then hot upon Kira's tracks, but he was so strongly guarded by the troops of his son Uyesugi, Lord of Yonezawa, that all their efforts to kill him had proved abortive. A band of at least twenty stout and resolute men would be needed for any successful attempt. Asano's stewards in Yedo had been asked to help, but they had cravenly excused themselves, and hence the presence of the three zealots in Ako to find men

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more of their own mettle.

Meanwhile, Oishi had forwarded a petition to the Board of Censors, setting forth that, as Kira was still alive and in honour, the elders of Ako found it almost beyond them to hold their clansmen in control, and praying that the matter might be settled in a satisfactory manner. The messengers arrived in Yedo only two days after the two censors had left for Ako, and so there was nothing for it now but to give up the Castle. Between the 25th and 30th of May, the two censors inspected and took it over. In the inventory of its appurtenances there was an entry of some half-dozen ailing dogs duly provided for in terms of the law, and for this the clan Kara were highly commended. During these five days, Oishi repeatedly entreated the censors to ensure the succession of Daigaku (Asano's younger brother) to the headship of the clan. They promised to lay the matter before the Great Council, and at first the Great Council thought well of the proposal.

It was the prospect of Daigaku's succession that kept Oishi from making common cause with the zealots from Yedo. They strongly insisted that, as Kira was over sixty, he might die a natural death at any time, and so defraud them of their revenge. In the end Oishi talked them over, dwelling upon the harm they might do to Daigaku's prospects, and proposing that, in the event of Kira's death robbing them of their vengeance, they would commit *hara-kiri* in a body. And so things remained until 1702. In January of that year, Kira became *inkyō*, and was succeeded by his grandson, Sahyōe. In August, Daigaku, who, up to that time had been confined to his own house, was consigned to the ward of Asano, Daimyo of Aki. So Ako did not pass to Daigaku, and the house of Asano of Ako was irretrievably ruined. Then, Oishi Kuranosuke resolved upon taking revenge.

Meanwhile, Oishi had separated from his wife and two younger children, and had taken up his residence in Kyoto. He and his confederates broke up their households and sold their effects, a proceeding which made no small stir in Kyoto and Fushimi at the time. Intelligence of the incident was conveyed to Kira, and he thereupon redoubled his precautions. It was presently rumoured that some of the Ako-ronin had been seized at the various barriers, and some of those in Kyoto urged Oishi to postpone the journey to Yedo till next spring. When those already in Yedo heard of this they were furious; Yoshida (*aet* 61) and Horibe (*aet* 75) declared that at their age they could not be sure of living till next spring, and vehemently insisted upon prompt and immediate action. Oishi thereupon broke with the more cautious party in Kyoto and proceeded to Yedo, whither indeed the majority of the confederates had already gone. From this time Oishi ceased all communication with Asano Daigaku, so that he might in no way be implicated in the consequences of the project. For two months, after the break-up of his household, Oishi remained in Kyoto, and during this time it is probable that he did play the part of a roisterer to throw Kira off his guard, although the traditional account of his long and inveterate profligacy is certainly incorrect. The Kyoto conspirators left behind anticipated that Oishi's rashness would be his and their undoing, and accordingly they severed all connexion with him. By August, 1702, the confederates, who originally numbered over 120, were reduced to about sixty, and by December, various defections had brought the number down to no more than forty-seven.

Since the summer of 1702, Uyesugi of Yonezawa had been seriously ill, and Kira now frequently visited the sick man in his *yashiki* outside the Sakurada Gate, and often passed the night there, away from his own mansion across the River Sumida, in Honjo. Furthermore, Kira was passionately fond of *cha-no-yu*, and he often visited, and was visited in turn, by other votaries of the cult, so that altogether his movements were very uncertain. Now, it so fell out that in Honjo, there was a *cha-jin*, Yamada Sorin by name, and he was intimate with Kira. One day a certain merchant of Osaka called upon this Yamada, desiring to become his pupil, and he was accepted as such. This man was no Osaka merchant at all, but one of the confederates, who, as luck would have it, had learned *cha-no-yu* in his youth. He soon found out from Yamada that Kira was to have a tea-party in his own house on 23rd November. The date was, however, postponed to 6th December, and then again to 14th December. Now, the 14th was the very day of the month on which Lord Asano died, and the ronin thrilled with joy at the omen.

On the afternoon of that day, they set one of their number to watch at Kira's gate, and he presently reported that several visitors, including Yamada himself, had entered. Kira would surely be found at home that night. So late in the evening, the ronin assembled in a house near-by Kira's mansion, and made all their preparations. They dressed like officers of fire brigades, only over this dress they wore *hoari*, which they threw away at Kira's gate. Inside their sashes they twisted iron chains. They all had white sleeves to distinguish them in the darkness, and a piece of leather with their real and assumed names on the right shoulder. Darkness had fallen when they left their

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rendezvous and parted into two bands, one to assail the front, the other the back gate of the mansion. The latter section headed by Oishi's son and Yoshida, set ladders against the gate. A few scrambled over, seized and bound the porters, and then admitted their comrades. At the preconcerted signal, the other band, under Oishi himself, lit their torches, poured in through the front gate, battered in the doors of the entrance hall, and burst into the reception room. Four or five samurai opposed them, but these were very summarily disposed of, as were a page and a priest who fought most determinedly. The ronin quickly cut all the bowstrings, and snapped the shafts of all the spears in the armoury and elsewhere. Oishi had specially cautioned his followers to see to it that there should be no outbreak of fire. Kira's neighbours did at first fancy that the disturbance was caused by a fire, but, as they could see no flames, they sent their retainers up on the roofs of their *yashikis* to find out what was really occurring. Two of the ronin at once informed them of their purpose, and charged them not to interfere, as they would take hurt if they did so.

Some of the *ronin* broke in the door of Kira's chamber. Kira was not there, and all hurrying and scurrying to and fro in quest of him was in vain. One of them bethought himself of the charcoal shed, and when they entered it, plates, tea-cups, and lumps of charcoal came whizzing about their ears. When one of the band thrust his spear into the dark interior two men sprang out, and laid about them lustily, but they soon went down. Another man who drew his sword as a ronin thrust at him shared their fate. As far as age went, the ronin fancied that this corpse might be Kira's, but the face was so besmeared with blood that there was no sign of the scar left upon it by Lord Asano's dirk. But to their joy they detected the marks of an old cut upon the shoulder, and when they fetched one of the porters they had bound, he assured them that it was indeed Kira who lay before them. So, forthwith, they sounded their whistles to summon their comrades, and all assembled at the rear of the mansion. In a loud voice one of them called out to the neighbours on the housetops that now that Kira was dead their object was accomplished, and that they had no other purpose in view. Only six of the forty-seven were wounded, while, of the inmates of the mansion, sixteen men lay dead, and twenty sorely wounded, while twelve had made their escape. Sahyoye, Kira's grandson and successor, was himself wounded in two places.

With Kira's head the ronin left the *yashiki*, and proceeded towards the Eko-in. They had intended to commit *hara-kiri* there, but they found the gates closed. So they paused and bethought themselves that it would be well to await the sentence of the Shogun, as the world would then better understand their motives. They had also expected to be assailed; and the space in front of the Eko-in would have afforded them a vantage-ground. But no one interfered with them, so they proceeded across the Sumida, and passed on through the whole extent of the city to the Sengakuji in Takanawa. Here the ronin entered the cemetery, and placing Kira's head, duly washed and cleansed, before Lord Asano's tomb, they prostrated themselves in prayer to his spirit. (The head was then put in a box, and on the following day two priests took it to Kira's mansion.) They then went to the temple porch, laid down their weapons, and asked to see the Abbot, who was well acquainted with them all. Oishi handed to the Abbot a list of their names, telling him that two of them had just been dispatched to the Censorate with a written report of the affair. From ten in the morning till four in the afternoon they remained in the temple. Then they were summoned to appear at the censor's office, and they left Sengakuji in an ordered column, marching two abreast, Oishi and his son at their head, while six of the wounded and the aged were borne along in palanquins.

At Sengoku, the censor's mansion, the ronin, were officially examined, and then informed that they were to be consigned in four parties to the ward of as many Daimyo, which for lordless men was very flattering treatment indeed. After this, the censor ceased to speak as such, and for his own personal satisfaction proceeded to ask them many questions about the happenings of the previous night. It was to Hosokawa of Kumamoto (540,000 *koku*) that Oishi himself, with sixteen of his comrades, was entrusted, the others were distributed among the smaller Daimyo of Matsuyama, Chofu, and Okazaki. Hosokawa sent no fewer than 750 men to fetch the seventeen committed to his charge. It was past ten o'clock when the cavalcade reached his *yashiki* in Shirokane, and yet, late as the hour was, Hosokawa at once proceeded to the officers' room to meet them, and to load them with expressions of admiration and praise. He felt highly honoured, he assured them, to be entrusted with the care of such staunch and loyal samurai as they proved themselves to be; he begged them, though many attendants were set about them in obedience to the Shogun's order, to be quite at their ease, and to repose themselves after their laborious exertions. He then ordered supper to be set before them and withdrew. As for the other smaller Daimyo, they did not see the ronin that night, but, on learning what had taken place at the great Shirokane *yashiki*, they were not slow to take their cue from the powerful *Kokushu* Daimyo of Higo, and they personally bade the ronin

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welcome on the following day.

Meanwhile Yedo was in a ferment. The castle officials, no less than the clan samurai, were exceedingly anxious that the lives of the ronin should be spared. The Hyojosho had the matter submitted to it, and after due deliberation formulated the following propositions :—

1. Kira Sahyoye whose duty it was to have fought to the death, but who escaped with a few slight wounds, should be ordered to disembowel himself.

2. Such of Kira's retainers as had offered no resistance to the ronin should be beheaded; those who were wounded in the fight should be made over to their relatives.

3. Those in Kira's mansion who were not *samurai* should be cast adrift.

4. Iyesugi (Kim's son and Lord of Yonezawa) who did not so much as attack the ronin as they marched from Kira's mansion to Sengakuji should be punished. At the least, his domains should be confiscated.

5. The fact that the ronin staked their lives to avenge the death of their lord showed that they were truly loyal men. Their deeds accorded with the injunctions of the First Shogun which incite men to loyal and filial acts, and though their confederacy and their use of arms had the colour of a disturbance of the peace yet, had it been otherwise, they could not have accomplished their purpose.

6. The law forbade confederacies and the taking of oaths, yet that they harboured no malice against the Shogun was apparent from the quiet and peaceable manner in which they had surrendered the Castle of Ako in the previous year, and there was no doubt that nothing but absolute necessity had led to their forming a confederacy (in defiance of the law).

The report ended with a recommendation that the ronin should be left permanently under the charge of the Daimyo to whom they had already been respectively consigned. It bore the seal and signature of every member of the Hyojosho (High Court), of the three Temple Magistrates, of the four Chief Censors, of the three City Magistrates, and of the four Finance Magistrates. The Shogun Tsunayoshi himself was really anxious to save the lives of these men, but even he, in such a case as this, could not set aside the claims of the law. If the Princely Abbot of Uyeno had interceded for them, he would have been heard, and Tsunayoshi did go so far as to see His Eminence and indirectly hint that such a course on his part would be appreciated. But the Abbot either did not understand or did not choose to do so, and so the law had to take its course. On the forenoon of 20th March, 1703, each of the four Daimyo abovementioned received notice from the Great Council, with whom the final decision rested, that censors would be sent to pronounce sentence upon the men of Ako they had in ward. When these officials arrived the following sentence was solemnly read out:—

“When Asano, Takumi no Kami, who had been ordered to receive the imperial envoys, heedless of the occasion and the place, attacked Kira in the palace, he was commanded to perform *hara-kiri*; while Kira, Kodzuke-no-sake was pronounced innocent. Vowing vengeance for the death of your Lord, you, forty-six retainers of Takumi, leagued yourselves together and assaulted Kira's dwelling with missiles and weapons. The manner of your attack showed contempt for the authorities and now for your heinous crime it is ordered that you commit *hara-kiri*.”

At Hosokawa's, Oishi bent forward, and in the name of all thanked the censor for a sentence that enabled them to die as samurai. Araki, who was censor on this occasion, then expressed his concern at having failed to compass Daigaku's succession to the Ako fief, and also his sorrow for their doom, although the accomplishment of the revenge must be a source of keen satisfaction to them. He further informed them—although he was careful to say that he did so privately and not in his official capacity—that that very day Kira Sahyoye's estates had been confiscated, and the house of Kira ruined. Oishi voiced the gratitude of the ronin for the punishment meted out to the house of their foe, though indeed, he said, they had no cause for ill-will against Sahyoye himself.

Then one after another, according to their rank, they were summoned to the platform expressly reared for the purpose outside the great reception hall, and there in due order calmly made an end of themselves.

It must not be forgotten that at the time, Oishi and his comrades were lordless men, and so not legally entitled to the privileges of *samurai*. But, as a matter of fact, the death sentence on them was pronounced and carried out in a fashion that had never before fallen to the lot of mere ordinary retainers. The treatment accorded the whole band was such as was wont to be accorded great Daimyo, and other immediate feudatories of the Shogun.

For an exhaustive examination of all the official and other documents bearing upon this famous episode, we

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are indebted to Mr. Shigeno, one of the most scientific of modern Japanese historians. One result of his laborious researches is that, while a certain amount of the picturesque gets consigned to the limbo of the storytellers' hall (Yosé), the true story of Oishi Kuranosuke adds considerably to his moral and intellectual stature. The authentic evidence goes to show that his conduct throughout was marked with singular moderation and foresight, and, when it came to the point, determination and audacity. His single-mindedness for the honour and welfare of the house of Asano is apparent at every turn. Nor were his clansmen by any means unworthy of their leader. On the little fief of Ako, with its assessed revenue of 53,000 *koku*, there were in all 322 vassals drawing official stipends. To the feudal Japan of the time, with a dry-rot of moral decadence sapping the fibre of the city samurai so disastrously, it seemed nothing short of marvellous that among this number so many as forty–seven should have been found eager to follow their Lord to the “Yellow Streams”. And it must not be overlooked that among the other 275 there were not a few ready to persevere in case Oishi and his band should fail, as they fancied he would do. As for those who refused to co-operate in the enterprise, or who afterwards withdrew from the league, so much is to be said at least, that not one among them turned traitor or played the part of informer at the expense of his fellow-clansmen.

Whenever mention is made of the vendetta in old Japan this episode of the Forty–seven Ronin is at once cited as the typical case. But it is far from being a typical case, indeed it is a highly exceptional one. Before 1703, there were many instances of the vendetta in the Empire, but perhaps the best-known, and most often referred-to, were those of the Soga brothers, and of the Iga *Kataki-uchi*. The former occurred in Yoritomoto's days; five centuries before —the latter so late as Hidetada's time.

Then the year preceding the Ako episode saw the accomplishment of the Ishii–Akahori vendetta. It made a great sensation at the time and, had it not been so completely overshadowed by the episode of the Forty–seven Ronin, would doubtless have become one of the most often–told tales of the country.

In every one of these latter cases it was to punish the murderer, or at least the slayer of a father and not of a lord that the Avenger of Blood imbued his hands. Such a duty was strongly inculcated in the Chinese Classics. In the second book of the Book of Rites the law is thus laid down:—

“With the slayer of a father a man may not live under the same heaven; against the slayer of a brother a man must never have to go home for a weapon; with the slayer of a friend a man may not live in the same state.”

Here, be it observed, nothing is said about the slayer of a Lord. Nowhere it would seem did Confucius say anything authoritative as to how the murderer of a Lord was to be dealt with. The classical precedent for this in China dated from the Sengoku, or “Warring Country” period, several centuries after the compilation of the Canonical Books. A certain Yojo was in the employment of three successive Lords, the first two of whom treated him with no special consideration. He then took service with a certain Chikaku, who afterwards compassed the deaths of Yojo's two former masters, and who was in turn killed by one Cho Joshi. Now, Yojo had been held in high esteem by Chikaku, and he made three abortive attempts to avenge him. On the last occasion he was seized by Cho Joshi, who asked him why he was so eager to avenge Chikaku while he had shown himself so lukewarm about the murder of his first two lords. Yojo frankly replied that it was the nature of the treatment he had received in each case that had been the determining circumstance.

“This story,” remarks the commentator, “as well as many others bearing on the Chinese and Japanese custom of avenging the death of a master, shows that the execution of the vendetta was not held obligatory in cases where a retainer was not specially attached to his master and where the benefits he received were not sufficient to call for the risk or loss of his own life.”

In matters of loyalty and filial piety, Arai Hakuseki was at once a purist, and a great authority. In 1682 he entered the service of Hotta, the Tairo, who was assassinated in 1684.

“His son was very unfortunate,” says Arai, “and cut down the allowance of his samurai, and *many left his service*. I was not in confidential relations with him or his father but would not leave at such a time, for if one has enough for oneself and family *such desertions* are not loyal even though the service be unsatisfactory. It is natural that a samurai should be poor, yet he must maintain his station, but finally my funds gave out.”

And he left. Now Arai had originally been a vassal of Tsuchiya, Lord of Kururi in Kadzusa. After a short time as a *ronin* he became a vassal of the Hotta family. After another brief space as a lordless man he entered the service of the Daimyo of Kofu, who presently became the Shogun, Iyenobu. Thus, Arai had at least three different lords, and he would readily have taken service under a fourth, if Yoshimune had seen fit to utilize his talents. In

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Japan, no less than in feudal China, the high–sounding precept that “a faithful vassal should not serve two lords” was formally endorsed and approved. But when it came to the plain prose of practice, Arai's case is by no means the only contemporary one, which seems to indicate that the maxim was taken as a counsel of perfection. It might serve very well as a copy–book head–line, but, in the ordering of his life, the samurai plainly felt that the injunction was better honoured in the breach than in the observance. As a simple matter of fact, the despised plebeian now and then made a much better showing in this matter than did the samurai. When Arai became a *ronin* he was followed by two domestics who would not leave him, and who said they could provide for themselves somehow. Some of the famous Forty–seven Ronin were accompanied into beggary by their household servants and, in these cases, the servant not only provided for his own wants but for those of his (economically) helpless master as well. Scores of analogous instances crop up in the course of a perusal of the old documents of the Tokugawa age. It is true that in Japan there have been many cases of murderers of their lords being punished by their fellow–vassals. The instance of Kosai being killed by Miyoshi for compassing the death of their common chieftain, Hosokawa Masamoto, in 1507, and of Akechi paying the full penalty for the assassination of Nobunaga in 1582, will at once occur to the reader. But, in nearly all such cases, it usually jumped very nicely with the personal interest of the righteous vassal to assume the office of the Avenger of Blood. In the Ako vendetta, the case was vastly otherwise. To accomplish their purpose the forty–seven had perforce to outrage the law in one of its most strictly enforced provisions. There could be no hope of worldly material profit in any shape or form to any one sharing in any way in the plot. At the best it was death by *hara–kiri*, and death by decapitation as a common criminal was a by–no–means remote probability, while it was possible that all the members of their several households might be involved in their doom.

It will be observed that the *ronin* were punished not for the actual killing of Kira but for the *manner* in which they accomplished their purpose. The indispensable preliminaries for legalizing the vendetta had not been complied with. The so–called “Legacy of Iyeyasu” is a fabrication, penned a full century or more after the first Tokugawa Shogun was entombed among the forests and mountains of Nikko. But, in many of its articles, it sets forth the established

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customs and jurisprudence of Tokugawa feudalism correctly enough. One paragraph in it deals with the subject of the vendetta.

“In Japan, there is an old saying that the same heaven cannot cover a man and the slayer of his father, or mother, or master, or elder brother. Now, if a man seek to put to death such a slayer, he must first inform the Ketsudansho office at the Hyojosho, and say in how many days or months he can carry out his intention. This is to be entered in the records of the office. If he kills the slayer *without such previous intimation he is to be regarded as a murderer.*”

Now, to have made any such notification would have put Kira so thoroughly upon his guard that he could never have been touched; so much is recognized in the fifth and sixth paragraphs of the Hyojosho report on the episode quoted a few pages back. In the peculiar circumstances, it was generally considered that the *ronin* were punished for a mere technicality. Even Hayashi, the official Chinese scholar, wrote Chinese stanzas lauding them as heroes, and although the Bakufu spoke to him about the matter privately, no public censure was passed upon him. Ogyu Sorai, who had been Kira's lecturer or reader and who was a protégé of Kira's son, Uyesugi, issued a pamphlet in which he assailed the *ronin* for failing to commit suicide at the Sengakuji, without sending any notice to the censor at all. This gave rise to a great commotion among the Chinese scholars of the time, and an embittered controversy over this point went on for years. Modern authors have divided these writers into pro–Bakufu and anti–Bakufu according to the view they supported. This betrays a serious misconception of the actual circumstances of the time — it was only in the nineteenth century that perfervid loyalists began to exploit the episode of the Forty–seven Ronin for their own special purposes. The Shogun was inclined to save the *ronin*, from their doom, and the Great Councillors, though they had to administer the law, had the greatest admiration for, and sympathy with, the “criminals”. They, in common with every Daimyo in Japan, readily perceived that the incident could be turned to the greatest possible profit. Dr. Aston has well remarked on the “commanding position of loyalty in the *Table of Moral Precedence*” which, “in the morals and ideas of this period, overshadows and dwarfs all other obligations.” Before 1703, the tendency on the whole may have been in this direction, but it was only after the Ako vendetta that it became so pronouncedly dominant. The Japanese is frequently not merely a

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man of sentiment but a sentimentalist, and, in common with the generality of mankind, is ruled more by the figments of imagination than the calculations of reason. Now this episode was so startling and thrilling that it appealed to the imagination with greater force than any other single incident that could be named in the history of the empire. From Satsuma to Tsugaru it focussed the national attention — for the time men spoke of nothing else, thought of nothing else. Everything else was for the moment forgotten — except perhaps the Dog–Laws, which even Oishi had so faithfully obeyed. Two days after the attack on Kira's mansion, we hear of broadsheet accounts of it being hawked about throughout the whole city of Yedo. The popular writer was soon at work upon a more or less imaginative treatment of the whole incident, and, during the Tokugawa age, about one hundred different versions of the tale were published. In 1703, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), one of Japan's three greatest dramatists, was in the full vigour of his powers, and he at once seized upon the Ako vendetta as a theme. His play held the stage until 1744, when Takeda Idzumo (1691–1756) produced his thrice–famous *Chushingura*, the most popular play ever put upon the boards in Japan.

More than a century and a half later the tale was told to Sir Rutherford Alcock, the first British representative to Japan, then installed in the Tozenji, only a few hundred yards' distant from the tomb of the *ronin*, before which the incense has never ceased to smoke.

“As this story was recited to me I could not help reflecting on what must be the influence of such a popular literature and history upon the character as well as the habits and thoughts of a nation. When children listen to such fragments of their history or popular tales, and, as they grow up, hear their elders praise the valour and heroism of such servitors, and see them go at stated periods to pay honour to their graves centuries after the deed — and such is the fact, it is quite obvious that general talk and unhesitating approval of what with us, perhaps, would be considered great crimes, may have very subtle and curious bearings on the general character and moral training of the people. What its exact influence may be we cannot determine, perhaps, but that it is deep and all–pervading, affecting their general estimate of all deeds of like character, whether it be the slaving of a Regent, or the massacre of a Foreign Legation, is very certain, and presents a state of things well worthy of serious consideration.” In connexion with this episode, one rather important point remains to be adverted to. In view of the resolute daring displayed by Oishi and his comrades, it may well seem that the general moral degeneracy of the samurai of this age has been greatly exaggerated. We have no reason to distrust the accounts of contemporary writers who have touched upon the matter, but we must bear in mind that it was with Yedo and the state of things there prevalent that they dealt. Now, the Yedo of 1700 was to the rest of the empire what London was to England at large in the reign of Charles II. In spite of the scandalous and brazen–faced depravity of the English court and of the fashionable circles in the metropolis at that date, there were tens of thousands of households in the country where a sober, healthy, robust, and “God–fearing” family life was quietly and unobtrusively led. From such accounts as those Arai Hakuseki gives us of his father's life, <sup>[1]</sup> it is not unreasonable to suppose that a somewhat analogous state of things prevailed in contemporary Japan. In many of the castle–towns, on many of the outlying fiefs, the samurai were still under a tolerably strict and salutary regimen. The strenuous ferocity of Kato Kiyomasa's time had indeed been tamed; in many cases tamed only too effectually. But, in many remote country places, the fierce old spirit was by no means dead, it only slumbered and needed nothing but a suitable stimulus to rouse it to vigorous action. Still, it was gradually passing even in the country districts; it was by the old men (Yoshida *aet* 61; Horibe *aet* 75) of the former generation that Oishi's hand was finally forced. In Yedo, the resident *Ako rusu–i* made rather a poor showing — at first they absolutely refused to move in the matter, when appealed to. In Yedo, in truth, the case seemed well–nigh hopeless. On Iyenobu's accession an attempt was made to stem the *debâcle*. Tsunayoshi's favourites were cashiered, Yanagisawa found it advisable to shave his head and enter religion. The Shogun's harem was broken up and his forty “boys” restored to their relatives. Gambling was prohibited, actors were deprived of their swords and forbidden to associate with samurai; the wearing of silk *crêpe* and the visiting of temples in bodies by women were interdicted; and street walkers and private prostitutes were drastically dealt with. But something more than these negative or superficial measures was needed. Iyenobu had good intentions, and his counsellor, Arai, had ideas; but neither Iyenobu nor Arai was really capable of diagnosing the malady correctly, and devising and applying a radically effective remedy. That was to remain over as work for a greater man than either of the twain.