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CHAPTER VI

THE FORTY-SEVEN RŌNIN

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 Hō-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 Akō, or the Loyal League, while the story of the Forty-Seven Rōnin, 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 Shōgunal palace, he sent the chiefs of the two Kōke houses of Kira and Osawa to Kyōto 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 Daimyō the task of defraying the expenses of the Envoy's sojourn in Yedo, and of attending upon and of introducing them at the Shōgun'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 Daimyō, 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, Daimyō 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 Daimyō 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. [1]

In 1701, it was Asano Nagamori, Daimyō of Akō 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 Shōgun's consort: ---

"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

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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, 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 Shōgun'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, Daimyō 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 Shōgun 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) Shōda, 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 Shōda 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. [1]

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 Akō with intelligence of the calamity. Now, Akō 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, Daimyō of Ōgaki in Mino, by Asano's uncle and by his younger
brother, Daigaku, announcing that Asano had
made away with himself and strictly charging the Akō
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 Daimyō were presently instructed by the
Bakufu to take charge of the Castle of Akō, 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 Ōishi Kuranosuke. But Ono Kurobei headed
another section, who argued that such a step would only
further offend the Yedo authorities. However, Ōishi 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, [1] 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
Akō to find men more of their own mettle.

Meanwhile, Ōishi had forwarded a petition to the Board of
Censors, setting forth that, as Kira was still alive and in
honour, the elders of Akō 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 Akō, and so there was nothing for it now but to give up
the Castle. Between the 25th and 30th of
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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, Ōishi 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 Ōishi 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 Ōishi 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 *inkyo*, and was succeeded by his grandson, Sahyōye. In August, Daigaku, who, up to that time had been confined to his own house, was consigned to the ward of Asano, Daimyō of Aki. So Akō did not pass to Daigaku, and the house of Asano of Akō was irretrievably ruined. Then, Ōishi Kuranosuke resolved upon taking revenge.

Meanwhile, Ōishi 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 Akō-*rōnin* had been seized at the various barriers, and some of those in Kyoto urged Ōishi 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. Ōishi thereupon broke with the more cautious party in Kyōto and proceeded to Yedo, whither indeed the majority of the confederates had already gone. From this time Ōishi 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, Ōishi remained in Kyōto, 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 Kyōto conspirators left behind anticipated that Ōishi'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 Honjō. 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 Honjō, there was a *cha-jin*, Yamada Sorin by name, and he was intimate with Kira. One day a certain merchant of Ōsaka called upon this Yamada, desiring to become his pupil, and he was accepted as such. This man was no Ōsaka 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 *rōnin* 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.
assail the front, the other the back gate of the mansion. The latter section headed by Ōishi'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 rōnin quickly cut all the bowstrings, and snapped the shafts of all the spears in the armoury and elsewhere. Ōishi 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 rōnin 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, teacups, 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 rōnin thrust at him shared their fate. As far as age went, the rōnin 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. Sahyōye, Kira's grandson and successor, was himself wounded in two places.

With Kira's head the rōnin left the yashiki, and proceeded towards the Ekō-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 Ekō-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 rōnin 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. Ōishi 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, Ōishi and his son at their head, while six of the wounded and the aged were borne along in palanquins. [1]

At Sengoku, the censor's mansion, the rōnin, were officially examined, and then informed that they were to be consigned in four parties to the ward of as many Daimyō, 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 Ōishi himself, with sixteen of his comrades, was entrusted, the others were distributed among the smaller Daimyō of Matsuyama,

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Chōfu, 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 Shōgun'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 Daimyō, they did not see the rōnin 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 Kokushū Daimyō of Higo, [1] and they personally bade the rōnin 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 rōnin should be spared. The Hyōjōsho had the matter submitted to it, and after due deliberation formulated the following propositions:---

1. Kira Sahyōye 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 rōnin 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 rōnin 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 rōnin 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 Shōgun 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 Shōgun was apparent from the quiet and peaceable manner in which they had surrendered the Castle of Akō 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 rōnin should be left permanently under the charge of the Daimyō to whom they had already been respectively consigned. It bore the seal and signature of every member of the Hyōjōsho (High Court), of the three Temple Magistrates, of the four Chief Censors, of the three City Magistrates, and of the four Finance Magistrates. The Shōgun 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 Daimyō 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 Akō 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, Kōdzuke-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.” [1]

At Hosokawa's, Ōishi 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

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at having failed to compass Daigaku's succession to the Akō 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 Sahyōye's estates
had been confiscated, and the house of Kira ruined. Ōishi voiced the gratitude of the *rōnin* for the punishment meted out to the house of their foe, though indeed, he said, they had no cause for ill-will against Sahyōye 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, Ōishi 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 Daimyō, and other immediate feudatories of the Shōgun.

For an exhaustive examination of all the official and other documents bearing upon this famous episode, we 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 Ōishi 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
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 Akō, 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 Ōishi 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 Rōnin 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. [1]

Then the year preceding the Akō episode saw the accomplishment of the Ishii-Akahori vendetta. [2] 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. [3]

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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 Yojō 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 Yojō's two former masters, and who was in turn killed by one Chō Jōshi. Now, Yojō 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 Chō Jōshi, 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. Yojō 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 Tairō, 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 rōnin he became a vassal of the Hotta family. After another brief space as a lordless man he entered the service of the Daimyō of Kōfu, who presently became the Shōgun, 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 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 *rōnin* 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 Rōnin 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 Kōsai 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. [1] 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 Akō 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 rōnin 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 Shōgun was entombed among the forests and mountains of Nikkō. 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 Hyōjōsho, 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." [1]
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 Hyōjōsho report on the episode quoted a few pages back. In the peculiar circumstances, it was generally considered that the rōnin 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. Ogyū 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 rōnin 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 Rōnin for their own special purposes. The Shogun was inclined to save the rōnin, 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 Daimyō 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 Akō vendetta that it became so pronouncedly dominant. The Japanese is frequently not merely a 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 Ōishi 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 Akō vendetta as a theme.

His play held the stage until 1744, when Takeda Idzumo (1691-1756) produced his thrice-famous Chūshingura, the most popular play ever put upon the boards in Japan. [1]

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 Tōzenji, only a few hundred yards' distant from the tomb of the rōnin, 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." [2]

In connexion with this episode, one rather important point remains to be adverted to. In view of the resolute daring displayed by Ōishi 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, [1] 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 Katō Kiyomasā'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 Ōishi's hand was finally forced. In Yedo, the resident Akō *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.
[1] Kira's full name and territorial title were, Kira Yoshinaka (according to Brinkley, Yoshihide) Kozuke no Suke. Kozuke is a province to the north-west of Tokyo. The title Suke is peculiar. The usual title of feudatories of all degrees was "Kami", a word which has many meanings according to the ideographs in which it is written, but generally involving the idea of superiority in rank or office. In this case, it was applied to the provincial Governors of former times and from them transferred to the feudatories under the Tokugawa. Suke was an assistant or helper, and in three fiefs in the Empire it was substituted for Kami in describing the feudatories, not that they were of any lower degree in rank than their fellow feudatories, who were known as "Kami" but because the latter title in these three cases were reserved for princes of the Imperial family. Ako was a fief in the province of Harima with a revenue which had been reduced to 20,000 koku at the time of the Restoration, though at this period it was of much greater wealth and power. Koke, which has previously in this volume been translated "Chamberlains", here signifies "noble houses".---J. H. L.
[1] The following from Titsingh is fairly correct. "All, military men, and persons holding civil offices under the Government are bound, when they have committed any crime, to rip themselves up, but not till they have received an order from the Court to that effect; for if they were to anticipate this order, their heirs would run the risk of being deprived of their places and property. For this reason all the officers of the government are provided, in addition to their usual dress, and to that which they put on in the case of fire, with a suit; necessary on such an occasion, which they carry with them whenever they travel from home. It consists of a white robe and a habit of ceremony made of hempen cloth and without armorial bearings. The outside of the house is hung with white stuffs; for the palaces of the great and the places at which they stop by the way when doing to, or returning from, Yedo are hung with coloured stuffs tin which their arms are embroidered---a privilege enjoyed also by the Dutch envoy. As soon as the order of the Court has been communicated to the culprit, he invites his intimate friends for the appointed day and regales them with sake. After they have drunk together some time, he takes leave of them; the order of the Court is then read to him once more. Among the great this reading takes place in the presence of their secretary and the inspector; the person who performs the principal part in this tragic scene then addresses a speech of compliment to the company; after which he inclines his head towards the mat (takes up the dirk from the stand before him, and cuts himself with it across the belly, penetrating to the bowels. One of his
confidential servants, who takes his place beside him, then strikes off his head. Such as wish to display superior
courage, after the cross cut, inflict a second longitudinally,
and then a third in the throat. No disgrace is attached to
such a death, and the son (usually) succeeds to his father's
place.

"When a person is conscious of having committed some
crime, and apprehensive of being thereby disgraced, he
puts an end to his own life, to spare his family the ruinous
consequences of judicial proceedings. This practice is so
common that scarcely any notice is taken of such an event.
The sons of all people of quality exercise themselves in
their youth for five or six years with a view that they may
perform the operation, in case of need, with gracefulness
and dexterity, and they take as much pains to acquire this
accomplishment as youth among us do to become elegant
dancers or skilful horsemen; hence the profound contempt
of death they imbibe even in their earliest years. This
disregard of death, which they prefer to the slightest
disgrace, extends to the very lowest class among the
Japanese."

[1] In 1664, the last of the Uyesugi of Yonezawa died
childless. Kira's son was then adopted as head of the
Uyesugi House but the domains of the clan were reduced
from 300,000 to 150,000 koku.

[1] The City Companies of Firemen were not instituted until
a score of years later. The tradition that makes the ronin, wear coats-of-mail, with the forty-seven characters of the syllabary for their distinguishing badges, is without any foundation.

[1] The document (saimon) which the rōnin in Mitford's story are said to have placed before the tomb is a fiction of later times. That which Mitford saw must have been written afterwards. In 1721, Sengaku-ji was burned down and most of the ronin relics then perished in the flames. The official account of their doings styled Sengaku-ji Kakiage, prepared under orders from the Shōgun, is not really authentic. The Abbot of Sengaku-ji finding no means of getting any information in his own temple after the fire, borrowed an account penned from hearsay by Shōten, who, in 1703, was Abbot of the neighbouring temple of Kogaku-ji.

A Satsuma man caused a stone to be raised to the memory of Hayano Sampei, a page of Asano, who killed himself rather than serve another master, nearly a year before the execution of the vendetta. On this stone appears the name of the man who erected it. Hence the story of the Satsuma man spitting upon Ōishi lying drunk in a Kyoto gutter. It has no other foundation, but it is current through all Japan, and not only implicitly credited, but the subject of numerous paintings by artists of high degree ---J. H. L.

[1] The province of which Kumamoto is the principal town.
It will be noticed that the number of the band is here officially given at 46 and not 47. At the Sengaku-ji when Ōishi handed in a list of their names, the Abbot counted them over, and found no more than forty-four, two men having gone to the censors. When the rōnin assaulted Kira's mansion, they had posted a placard setting forth their reasons for doing so, and had all signed the document. The names then ran to 47; and the last among them was a certain Terazaka. It was this man that had disappeared. Whenever questioned on the matter, the rōnin answered that Terazaka, being a mere Ashigaru, had run away after the attack, probably from love of life. Accordingly he was branded as a coward. But, in 1704, Terazaka appeared before Sengoku, the Censor, and begged to be punished according to law as he had taken part in the night attack in Kira's mansion. The censor reproved him severely for what was tantamount to finding fault with the Shōgun's government, at the same time secretly furnishing him with money for travelling expenses. On the night of the attack Terazaka had been dispatched by Ōishi to convey the tidings of their success to Lady Asano and to Daigaku who was then in Hiroshima. Terazaka afterwards lived at the Sokeiji in Yedo, dying at the age of eighty-two.

The story of the Iga vendetta is given in Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan* under the title of "Kazuma's Revenge". His version is, however, incorrect in some details. The learned translator is, of course, not to be held responsible for that,
for his purpose was merely to reproduce the legends that were most famous in the Japan of his time. His volume has become a classic, and it is well worthy of the distinction, for no other single book has succeeded in conveying a sense of the real social and moral atmosphere of Tokugawa Japan so thoroughly and effectually as Mr. Mitford's perennially interesting volume has done.

[2] This incident has been previously referred to more than once in this present volume. I have no recollection of ever having heard of it before, and have not only failed to find any reference to it in such authorities as are at my disposal but inquiry among the most qualified Japanese literates in London has only shown that their knowledge of it is on a par with my own.---J. H. L.

[3] The Tokugawa jurists asserted that the duty of assuming the vendetta was partly answerable for the severity of the penal code. When a man was sentenced to death for any, and especially for a political, offence it was only prudent to see to it that there should be no subsequent risk from the Avenger of Blood. Hence, it was common to exterminate the whole household of the condemned man.


[1] According to certain authorities the man-slayer even then could not be assailed with impunity within the precincts
of the Imperial palace, or of Yedo Ōsaka and Suruga Castles, in Nikkō, or in Uyeno but that is a doubtful point, as would appear from the Ishii-Akahori case. In 1698, the following document was handed to Ishii Genzō and a copy of it entered in the official register: "Know all men that I, Kawaguchi, Settsu-no-Kami, the City Magistrate of Yedo... hereby give full permission to Ishii Genzō and Ishii Hanzō to slay their father's murderer, Akahori Gengoemon, wherever they may find him in Yedo, even though it should be within the sacred precincts of the Castle.

Besides those mentioned in the text, there are scores of other cases of vendetta (Kataki-uchi) which were sufficiently marked by the circumstances that attended them, both in their inception and execution, to earn records in history, and no doubt many more scores in remote districts of the Empire or among samurai of lowlier grade which have been passed over in silence. Sometimes, the revenge was accomplished in a fairly fought duel, sword to sword; sometimes by an ambush, and not infrequently by what seems to us assassination pure and simple. In the latter cases, it is to be remembered that the murder, which provoked the revenge, was probably effected in the same fashion. The last recorded incident was in the years 1867-8, when a samurai of high degree of the Mito clan was murdered in the most wanton manner by another samurai of the Tosa clan, who silently crept up behind his victim and cut him down from the back. The clans, among whom the
practice was most prevalent were, it may be mentioned, the very powerful ones of Satshuma Tosa, Aidzu, and Mito. In this case it will be seen that the parties were of two of these rival clans. The murderer fled but he was seen and described by a beggar, and the two sons of his victim devoted themselves to their sacred duty of revenge with patience and self-sacrificing determination that were worthy of Ōishi Kuranosuke himself. They even abandoned their homes and disguised themselves as common coolies. Their story is long to tell here with all its striking incidents, and it must be sufficient to say that they were at last successful, and within a year from the date of the murder, the murderer fell beneath the swords of the two devoted brothers. As they had complied with all the legal formalities, they suffered no penalty. Their deed was lauded in the official gazette, and "all men praised their conduct". This was in the last days of the Shōgunate. In 1873 the practice was forbidden by a notification of the Imperial Government which declared that "henceforth no one shall have the right to seek revenge or pass judgment for himself, no matter what the cause and those who follow the ancient custom will be punished according to law". Since then, there has been no case of it. Unlike "hara-kiri" and "junshi", it is dead.

[1] On the anniversary of the attack on Kira's house, the Chūshingura is still acted in most of the theatres throughout the Empire. In the great warlike fief of Satsuma, the Sha --- something originally like the old Spartan mess organization --- are still maintained in a modified form; and
in every one of these the reading of the *Chūshingura* begins with the lighting of the lamps and continues through the night of the fourteenth of the twelfth month (old style) as regularly as the year comes round.

A very scholarly and complete translation of the *Chūshingura* was made and published by the late Mr. F. V. Dickins under the title of *The Chūshingura, or the Loyal League, a Japanese Romance*, The play occupies a greater position on the Japanese stage than even Macbeth or Hamlet on the English and deservedly so, as it is full of thrilling incidents, vividly illustrative of the life of the period. It is always well put on the stage, and well acted.—J. H. L.

[2] Sir Rutherford Alcock almost invariably, both in his admirable description of life in Japan in his day in what is still one of the most interesting books that has been written on Japan (*The Capital of the Tycoon.*., 2 vole., 1863) and in his official dispatches, took the very worst view of the character and disposition of the samurai. The samurai was, in his eyes, "of that extinct species in Europe, still remembered as 'swash-bucklers', swaggering, blustering bullies, many cowardly enough to strike an enemy in the back or cut down an unarmed or inoffensive man, but also supplying numbers ever ready to fling their own lives away in accomplishing a revenge or in carrying out the behests of their chief... no mean adepts in the use of their swords from which they were never parted; one a heavy, two-
handed weapon, pointed and sharp as a razor, the other, short like a Roman sword and religiously kept in the same serviceable state — both as dangerous and deadly weapons as man can well possess. Often drunk and always insolent, the samurai is the terror of all the unarmed population and street dogs, and as a general rule, offensive in gesture and speech to foreigners." Sir Rutherford may well be excused for not having taken a more roseate view of the knighthood of Japan. Twice his Legation was attacked at night by bands of samurai with the object of murdering all its inmates, though he was himself not in Japan on the second occasion, and he never stirred outside the Legation boundaries without justifiably feeling that he was incurring a very present risk of assassination, a risk shared by all his fellow Europeans, which culminated in the death of many by the terrible swords he has described.-

--J. H. L.