**The Tale of the Forty-seven Ronin**

The story known as "Chushingura" is based on a real historical incident that took place in 1701, in which forty-seven loyal samurai revenged the death of their lord. The story has become famous in Japan through countless plays, movies, and novels.

The title "Chushingura" means Treasury of Loyal Retainers, and comes from the title of the kabuki play based on the incident. The leader of the forty-seven samurai was Oishi Kuranosuke.

**The Story**

In the spring of 1701, Lord Asano, the young daimyo (lord) of Ako Castle, was appointed to serve on the reception committee at the Shogun's castle in Edo (Tokyo) for the annual visit of messengers from the Emperor. This was a ceremonious occasion requiring elaborate etiquette. It was essential that Lord Asano be trained in every detail of the ceremony so as not to make any mistake that would insult the Emperor or reflect badly on the Shogun.

Lord Kira, the Shogun's master of ceremonies, was assigned to instruct Lord Asano in court etiquette. For his assistance, Lord Kira was accustomed to receive expensive bribes, but Lord Asano's gift to him was the simple token gift of dried bonito fish. Kira was insulted. Throughout the training period he was un-cooperative and scornful of Asano's manners.

On the day of the ceremony Lord Asano realized that he did not know whether he should kneel at the top or at the bottom of the steps to receive the delegation from the Emperor. When he asked for guidance from Kira, the haughty master of ceremonies refused to tell him, and mocked his awkwardness. "You should have found out long ago, Lord Asano. I am too busy to help you now."

With his pride and his patience goaded beyond endurance, Asano drew his sword and lashed out at Kira. He managed to wound him on his face before he was restrained. For the crime of drawing his sword within the palace of the shogun, Asano was condemned to die by seppuku, or ritual suicide. The penalty was quickly carried out. That very day he forfeited his life.

Messengers swiftly carried the news to Ako, and reported the death of their lord to the chief steward, Oishi Kuranosuke. The situation was serious. Not only was their master dead, but his lands and holdings would be confiscated by the government. Lord Asano's men were now ronin, or masterless samurai. The Shogun's forces were moving to take over the castle.

The samurai considered resistance, and some argued for defending the castle to the death, but Oishi argued that their first duty was to try to restore the fortunes of the clan, and if that did not succeed, then they would seek vengeance on Lord Kira. In order to have the time to lay out their plans, they would have to cooperate with the government. A petition was sent to the Shogun asking that Lord Asano's younger brother Daisuke be allowed to take his brother's place. Then the castle was turned over quietly, the Asano samurai dispersed, and Oishi moved his family to Kyoto.

Soon the word came that the government would not allow Lord Asano's younger brother to take over the Asano domain. The clan no longer existed. With that hope gone, only the goal of vengeance remained. Out of about 300 samurai, about a quarter signed a secret pact to revenge their master's death.

For over a year, Oishi and his men worked in secret, laying their plans and gathering weapons. It would not be easy to gather a force in Edo to attack Lord Kira's heavily guarded mansion. Fearing a plot against him, Lord Kira sent spies to watch the ronin, particularly their leader, Oishi. It was essential that their plans not be discovered.

To disguise his plans and throw Kira's spies off the scent, Oishi embarked on a life of dissipation and indulgence. In order to protect his family, he divorced his wife and sent her and the three youngest children back to her parents. He knew that this move would protect them from government prosecution after the vendetta was completed. Their oldest son, Chikara, was a member of the plot, and stayed with his father.

In Kyoto, Oishi began a life of entertainment and pleasure. He attended the kabuki theatre, visited teahouses, and enjoyed his time with geisha. Spies followed him everywhere. He was drunk more often than he was sober, and carried on a love affair with a beautiful courtesan. Some of his followers were disillusioned, but others realized that his aim was to convince Lord Kira that Asano's men had abandoned any plans for vengeance. The ruse worked. Kira remained in Edo and relaxed his guard.

The attack was made on December 14th, 1702. Oishi had cautiously moved men and weapons into the capital city of Edo. Men disguised as servants, artisans, and Buddhists priests spied on Kira and gathered information. They waited for a day when they could be sure that Kira would be in residence.

On the chosen night, snow was falling in Edo. The ronin put on clean new clothes and armor. Over the armor they wore the uniforms of a fire brigade so that they could freely move through the streets of Edo. In front of Kira's mansion they placed a placard proclaiming their vengeance and assuring the neighbors that the object of attack was only Lord Kira's mansion. Then Oishi struck the war drum and the attack began.

The forty-seven spread throughout Kira's mansion. They met some resistance from Kira's men, but many more, including Kira's son, ran away from the fight. For some time they hunted for Kira, and finally found him hiding in a storage hut. The sound of a whistle notified the ronin that Kira had been found. Oishi offered Kira the opportunity to commit seppuku, suicide, but Kira refused. Using the dagger with which Lord Asano had killed himself, Oishi struck the blow that cut off his head. No Asano men had been lost in the fight.

The Asano samurai were a disciplined and orderly force. After killing Kira they took the head wrapped in a cloth, and together marched across town to Sengaku-ji Temple, the site of Lord Asano's tomb. There they washed the head in a well and laid it in front of the tomb, bowing and offering prayers and incense for the repose of their Lord's spirit. They then turned themselves in to the authorities. They had known from the start that the price of success would be their own lives.

Their action was widely admired, even by the Shogun. They were praised as exemplary samurai, true followers of the code of bushido, which placed loyalty to one's lord above all other virtues. However, they had broken the law in pursuing an unauthorized vendetta. They had smuggled weapons into Edo and attacked a trusted retainer of the Shogun. They had to be punished.

After much debate in the government, they were permitted to commit seppuku, an honorable form of death, rather than be executed as common criminals. All forty-seven were buried next to their Lord's grave at Sengaku-ji.

Meanwhile the story of the forty-seven loyal ronin spread like wildfire throughout Japan. A few weeks after their deaths the first of many kabuki plays based on the "Ako Incident" was performed. Today it is still one of the most popular of kabuki dramas, performed every December in their memory. Numerous films and television dramas have also been produced. At Sengaku-ji, admirers still come to burn incense at the graves. The forty-seven ronin of Ako have never been forgotten.