

HŌKOKUJI

“Here are cool mosses deep
And thro' the moss the ivies creep.”

Somewhat farther along the Kanazawa road will be seen the approach to this small temple; a wooden bridge is crossed, spanning the rocky upper course of the Nameri river, and shaded by the spreading branches of a fine old fir tree. A lych-gate roofed with mouldering thatch and piercing an open-work stone wall marks the temple precincts. Although all that was best and most valuable has passed away, and become “portions and parcels of the dreadful Past,” yet this lovely spot is well worth inspection for the charm of its romantic setting—the ancient trees; the rocks and caves; the riot of every shade of luxuriant green; the carpet of ferns and wild flowers; the densely wooded valleys—beyond and around the hills rising up to the rocky height of *Kinubari-yama*: above all for the indescribable atmosphere of peace and solitude, and mystic remoteness from the things of earth, that seems to envelop like a dream so many of these old-world shrines and temples in Japan.

A small courtyard lies beyond the gate, shaded by lofty and dignified old trees; a flight of well-worn stone steps, thickly coated with moss, confronts the visitor with the sole remaining fabric that the inroads of successive centuries have left to Hōkokuji.

Founded some 600 years ago by Ashikaga Iyetoki—

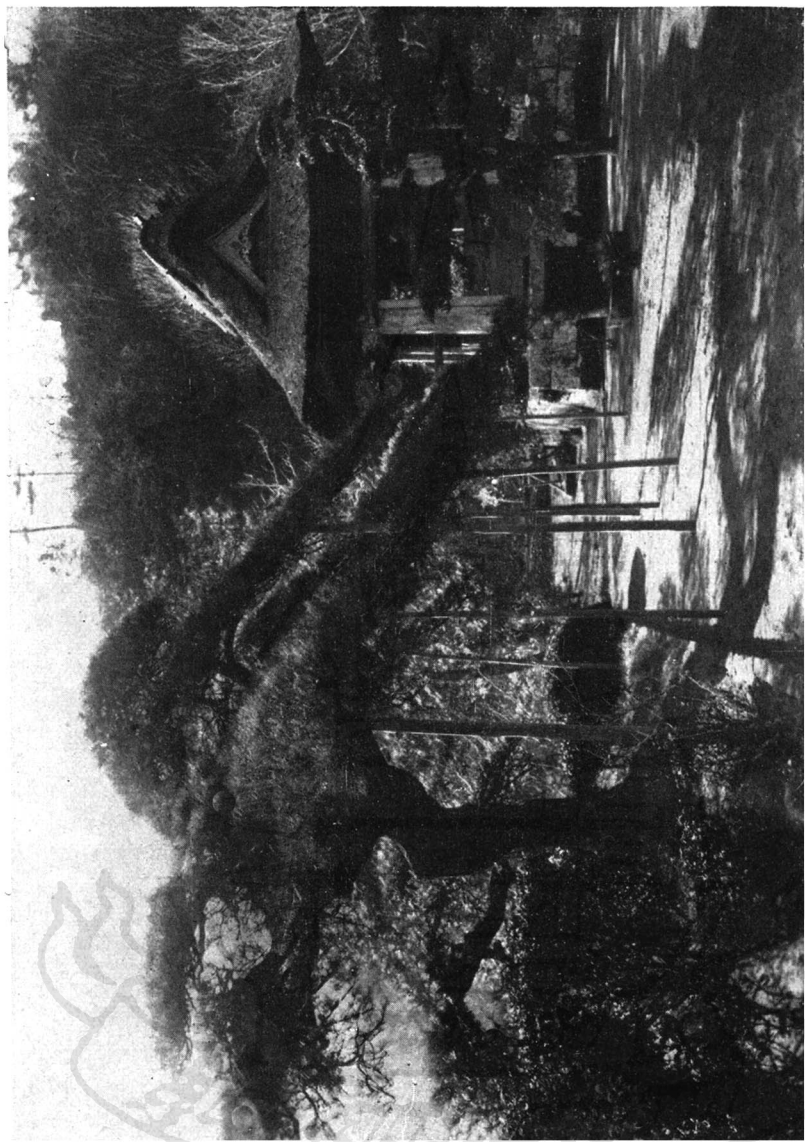
grandfather of Takauji, first of the Ashikaga *Shōguns*—the temple derived its name from Iyetoki's *nom-de-plume*. In its bygone days of prosperity there were five edifices, with a bell-tower, that have by degrees ingloriously dwindled to a solitary small and insignificant building. The last stroke of Fate fell as recently as some thirty-five years ago, when the fine old '*Butsuden*,' (Hall of Images) was completely destroyed by one of the disastrous fires that these wooden structures are so unfortunately liable to, and with it perished all its priceless contents, including many highly-prized statues and other important works of art. Of this calamity, so deplored by art-lovers, not a trace remains. The site of the holocaust is as completely effaced by the finger of Time as though it never existed, and the little valley of the vanished treasures has degenerated into placid ricefields. The centrepiece of the present altar is a very ancient figure of Buddha: another of the few remaining possessions is a curious statue of Kwannon crowned with a jewelled head-ornament and said to be of extreme antiquity. On the right-hand side of the altar is preserved an interesting relic in the realistic and life-sized statue of the first priest who officiated at this temple—a disciple of the first priest of Enkakujī, known as Tengan. This effigy is painted in natural colours and reposes in an ecclesiastical chair, the robes being lacquered a dull red hue.

Owing to the various calamities, extending over many hundred years, the treasures belonging to the temple have become sadly reduced. The existing remnants include an antique metal mirror which is said to date from the beginning of the Kamakura Era (12th

century); a finely carved Chinese *suzuri*, or writing box—made of black stone and ornamented with a design of quaint and nondescript animals according to the zoologic ideas of that period; ancient seals of the temple, and various venerable objects that are supposed to have been the property of the sculptor Takuma. This famous artist is said to have resided in the vicinity of Hōkokuji, hence this district was known as "*Takuma-ga-yatsu*," or Valley of Takuma.

Immediately facing the temple stands a graceful old pine which is said to date back from the early days of the temple. Its shape is superb, and as yet happily unimpaired by its great age: in this sheltered valley, immune from the storms that prove fatal to so many of these ancient landmarks, its boughs remain still fresh and green, manifesting no system of decay. According to the priest of Hōkokuji, the preservation of this beautiful old tree constitutes a serious drain upon his income, the attentions of numerous gardeners being necessary to minister to its needs and to preserve it in a flourishing condition.

A little path thickly overgrown with ferns and wild flowers, and overshadowed by huge boulders of rock, leads the pilgrim to what must surely be one of the most sequestered and solitary abodes of peace in the world—an old old cemetery. So ancient indeed are some of the venerable grey tombs, and so thickly covered with moss and silvery lichens that scarcely a trace of the original stone is visible: however here and there a new monument with its inscription in fresh vermilion—and sprays of scarcely-withered flowers, with little offerings to the soul of the departed—indicate that the spot



The ancient Pine and Belfry of Hōkokuji.

is not wholly dedicated to the ghosts and spirits of remote ages; but now and again new inmates come to join the silent throng beneath the leafy rest and peaceful silence of this "dreaming garden of the dead."

High up in the overhanging cliffs, and shaded by the cloistering boughs of tall cedar and *icho* trees, are two niches hewn out of the solid rock: here, beneath these rounded monuments, repose the ashes of the early priests of this temple. Although so safely sheltered from the fury of wind and rain, some of these venerable tombs are almost reduced to lacework by the flight of centuries, and seem as though the ebbing of the waves of Time have imprinted corresponding little ribbed and stony wavelets upon their rugged surfaces. The solitary monument in the left hand niche marks the resting-place of the first priest of Hōkokuji, Tengan. It can be approached by some worn steps almost concealed in the verdant undergrowth, and a more picturesque spot could hardly be found for the last long sleep than this mossy, fern-shadowed crevice in the rocky wall of the mountain side; one instinctively breathes a prayer that in the land of shades the soul of that ancient divine may find the tranquillity and beauty that surround his ashes in this mortal world of strife below. A grove of solemn cryptomeria forms the background to this sequestered graveyard: a short distance beyond, on the hillside above is a cave containing two ancient tombs, concerning which there is a tragic history.

The fourth Ashikaga Regent, Mochiuji, was keenly ambitious to succeed to the *Shōgunate*, but Fate willed it otherwise: when he was superseded, Mochiuji formed the plan of assembling an army, in order to assert what

he considered to be his rights by force of arms. However the plot was betrayed before it could materialise. On realising the collapse of his hopes and plans the unfortunate aspirant, together with numbers of his retainers, committed suicide in a near-by temple (Eianji), which has since disappeared, in the neighbourhood of Zuisenji : on the same day his wife, with many of her ladies, was accidentally burnt to death (p. 67). Now their eldest son, a boy of ten years of age named Yoshihisa, had been deposited for safety in the temple of Hōkokuji. This child possessed the indomitable spirit of the samurai, and although of such tender years, he resolved to anticipate the fate that was surely impending from his enemies. So here, in this temple, he stabbed himself to death : his kinsman (Mochiuji's brother) who was in charge of the unfortunate boy followed suit, and died upon his sword. Their ashes lie beneath these old grey tombs ; the smaller one which is of the Ashikaga shape, being the memorial of the young Yoshihisa.

Kinubari-yama the lofty height beyond, partly belonged to Hōkokuji in the old days. Its name—'Silk-spread mountain'—is derived from the fact that its peak was plainly visible from Yoritomo's residence, and in the heats of summer the *Shōgun* is recorded to have caused white silk to be spread upon the summit, creating the effect of snow. From the neighbourhood an accessible, although somewhat steep path winds upward to the great cavern above, which commands one of Kamakura's most beautiful panoramas. Near this cavern are three other large caves in the rock. Legend connects one of these with the days of Yoritomo ; it is still well-known in the neighbourhood as '*Karaito-no-Tsuchi-no-Ro*,' or the earth-prison of Karaito.

It is a historical fact that the First *Shōgun* was on notoriously bad terms with his cousin Kiso Yoshinaka, whose territory lay in the north of Japan. Karaito was the daughter of one of his generals, who had entered the household of the *Shōgun* at Kamakura: she managed to hold secret communication with the enemy, and cherished the idea of making away with Yoritomo. To this end she kept a small sword concealed in her dress, and possibly her scheme of vengeance might have been accomplished, for she had been appointed to serve her master as one of his personal waiting-maids, and opportunity would doubtless have occurred. But her design was discovered and she was imprisoned in this cave regarding her ultimate fate—whether Karaito managed to flee from her doom, or whether she shared the fate of Yoritomo's many victims—is left to the imagination and tradition is silent.

