THE DIARY OF CHARLES HOLME’S
1889 VISIT TO JAPAN
AND NORTH AMERICA
KYOTO, THURSDAY 28 MARCH

While we were going the round of these beautiful rooms, a party of Japanese country people was being shown round also by one of the supernumeraries of the place. This guide was expounding the glories of the place in the singsong manner which showmen in all parts of the world fall into. The gentleman spoke his speeches as monotone with the most pronounced nasal twang I ever heard. The way the good country people stared at us with open-mouthed astonishment, however, showed us that we, to them, were one of the sights of the place. We are a little astonished to find in a place like Kyoto, so frequented by Europeans and Americans, that the people are not yet so accustomed to the sight of foreigners but the appearance of one is at once a signal for him to stop, open his eyes to their fullest extent – and his mouth on occasions – and STARE (I put the word in capitals, because it really requires them to give the word its due intensity of meaning). Round by Yaami’s Hotel are many of the attractions of Kyoto – temples, teahouses, etc. – and thither the country people all go.¹ This is why we see many of them and perhaps also the reason we get stared at so. I don’t think I am in the least weary of looking at the outside of this great temple of Chionin— this ‘glorified barn’ as it has been called.² The whole exterior is in plain uncoloured and unvarnished wood which has become a greyish brown by exposure to the air. In this respect it is like the majority of temples in Japan. Only the ends of the beams and those places in the woodwork in which the grain is end across and exposed to the air are coloured white. This is so coloured however simply to protect the wood from rotting. I have come over and over again to see the place (being quite near to the hotel) and each time I have liked it better and feel more satisfied that, although perhaps a little barn-like in general outline, it is a great work of constructive art, in which the first principles of architecture have been carried out in a direct and thoroughly artistic manner.

I hope when I have seen more of these great temples in other parts of Japan I shall be able to form a clear and unprejudiced opinion as to their merits and demerits.