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EDITORIAL PREFACE

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

No section of the population of India can afford to neglect her ancient heritage. In her literature, philosophy, art, and regulated life there is much that is worthless, much also that is distinctly unhealthy; yet the treasures of knowledge, wisdom, and beauty which they contain are too precious to be lost. Every citizen of India needs to use them, if he is to be a cultured modern Indian. This is as true of the Christian, the Muslim, the Zoroastrian as of the Hindu. But, while the heritage of India has been largely explored by scholars, and the results of their toil are laid out for us in their books, they cannot be said to be really available for the ordinary man. The volumes are in most cases expensive, and are often technical and difficult. Hence this series of cheap books has been planned by a group of Christian men, in order that every educated Indian, whether rich or poor, may be able to find his way into the treasures of India's past. Many Europeans, both in India and elsewhere, will doubtless be glad to use the series.

The utmost care is being taken by the General Editors in selecting writers, and in passing manuscripts for the press. To every book two tests are rigidly applied: everything must be scholarly, and everything must be sympathetic. The purpose is to bring the best out of the ancient treasuries, so that it may be known, enjoyed, and used.

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ASOKA

BY

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INTRODUCTION

IN the history of ancient India, the figure of Asoka stands out like some great Himalayan peak, clear against the sky, resplendent in the sun, while the lower and nearer ranges are hidden by the clouds.

As an historical figure, his character has to-day a two-fold interest for us: political and religious. He was the most illustrious member of a great and powerful dynasty, which has left indelible traces of its achievements on Indian history, and he was the leader in his own day of a spiritual movement which, spreading far with profound effect, marked an epoch in the history of the Eastern world, and has exercised a religious influence upon a third of the human race.

It was inevitable that there should be a large admixture of legend and myth in the mass of tradition that has gathered round the name of Asoka: the same is true of all the heroes of antiquity who have impressed themselves on the popular imagination; of the English King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, of the good King Alfred, and of St. Louis, the saintly King of France; but a remarkable fact about Asoka is that we have at our disposal, clearly distinguishable from the almost unlimited amount of myth, a limited but still very considerable amount of authentic and indisputable evidence of a most interesting kind, by which he is brought nearer to us and made more real than any other monarch of ancient days in India. Recently this evidence has been accumulating. The researches of scholars and the excavations of the Archæological Survey have combined to place at our disposal fresh sources of information, in some cases confirming what had previously been conjecture, and in others adding to the sum of ascertained knowledge new facts of very great value.

To understand the place that Asoka held in Indian history and the work he did, it is necessary to consider

briefly what may be termed his natural and also his spiritual pedigree, to trace, that is to say, the story of the Maurya dynasty and also the origin of Buddhism.

While no historian of India can ignore Asoka and while every student of religion must take Buddha into account, there are two writers to whom all who are interested in these subjects owe a very special debt of obligation. Mr. Vincent A. Smith, of the Indian Civil Service (retired), and Professor T. W. Rhys Davids have reaped the field so well that there is very little left for the gleaner to pick up in the way of new information. They, however, have been generous in placing the fruit of their labours at the service of the public. Mr. Smith's volume on Asoka, in the Rulers of India series, is the only monograph on the subject in the English language. So much new matter became available after the book was written, that the second edition, which appeared in 1909, although preserving the general plan of the first and without material emendation in the part that presented the legends regarding Asoka, was substantially a new work.

The modest volume on Buddhism, written as far back as 1878, by Professor Rhys Davids, for a series on the Non-Christian Religious Systems, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, still holds the field as the best handbook on the subject. Two other works by the same authors come next to those that have been mentioned, for the light they throw upon the India of the Maurya period. One of these is Mr. Smith's *Early History of India*, and the other is the volume on *Buddhist India*, by Professor Rhys Davids. Articles by the same writers on various cognate subjects in Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* give us their most recent opinions and embody the results of some of the latest discoveries; the same work, as far as it has gone, contains many articles by other authorities that are of much interest to the student of the history of religion in India and the East. The historical volume (vol. ii) of the latest edition of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1908) also contains a useful summary, Mr. Vincent A. Smith being one of the principal contributors. For the information, however, regarding the interesting work of exploration on the site of the ancient Pataliputra, which is still in progress,

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we are indebted to the Reports that have been published by the Archæological Survey of India. Other works that have been consulted will be referred to in the following pages.