

**EDWIN ARNOLD AS POETIZER AND
AS PAGANIZER: CONTAINING AN
EXAMINATION OF THE "LIGHT OF
ASIA", FOR ITS LITERATURE AND
FOR ITS BUDDHISM**

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Edwin Arnold as Poetizer and as Paganizer: Containing an Examination of The "Light of Asia",
for Its Literature and for Its Buddhism by William Cleaver Wilkinson

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BY

WILLIAM CLEAVER WILKINSON E

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE.

It is proper to say that the present volume, while essentially in original design, and formally still in execution, a critique, literary and doctrinal, on Mr. Arnold's very popular poem, offers, as now presented to the public, a criticism of Buddhism itself, in the ethical part of that great religion so-called. It contains material nowhere else to be found in a form accessible to the general reader, for a just independent judgment of the real ethical merits of a pagan creed that has been much vaunted of late among us. It is thus a substantial contribution, which will be appreciated especially by Christian teachers, to the current discussion of Comparative Religion.

PREFACE.

It certainly would seem hardly worth while to write a book, even a little book like the present, solely for the purpose of criticising such a production as Mr. Edwin Arnold's "Light of Asia." But that production has accomplished, is still perhaps in course of accomplishing, a mission in America of influence upon the public mind important quite out of proportion to any significance attaching to the poem by virtue of its own intrinsic character.

The publication of Mr. Arnold's work happened to coincide in time with a singular development, both in America and in Europe, of popular curiosity and interest concerning ethnic religions, especially concerning Buddhism. The "Light of Asia" was well adapted to hit this transient-whim of Occidental taste. So I account, in part, for the instantaneous American popularity of the poem. At any rate, Mr. Arnold has, no doubt, whether by merit or by fortune, been, beyond any other writer, the means of widening the American audience prepared to entertain with favor the pretensions of Buddha and his teachings.

The effect is very observable. There has entered the general mind an unconfessed, a half unconscious, but a most shrewdly penetrative, misgiving that perhaps, after all, Christianity has not of right quite the exclusive claim that it was previously supposed to possess, upon the

attention and reverence of mankind. A letting up in the sense of obligation, on the part of Christians, to christianize the world, has followed. Nay, the individual Christian conscience itself has, if I mistake not, been disposed to wear more lightly its own yoke of exclusive loyalty to Jesus.

In view of this state of the case, I have thought that it might not be amiss, if I should take occasion, by Mr. Arnold's book, to let in, from original sources, a little real light upon his subject, for the satisfaction of those readers of his who would like to know what is the actual truth underlying his representations of Buddha and of Buddhism. In achieving my purpose, I was naturally led to consider as well the literary, as the didactic, value of the "Light of Asia." Hence the anomaly of what, upon the face of it, is a literary critique, appearing in the form of a book. My critique, while superficially of Mr. Arnold, becomes fundamentally of Mr. Arnold's subject not less. I will not disguise it, my true paramount motive throughout has been still more religious and Christian than literary.

As already intimated, one marked feature of the following discussion of Buddhism will be found to lie in the fact that it presents the system itself, in specimen, and not merely a single unfriendly critic's view of the system. Buddhism is given its chance to stand or to fall, with the reader, by its own inherent merits or demerits, and not by the praise or the blame of a perhaps prejudiced interpreter. The writer comments indeed, but the text on which he comments is Buddhist literature itself placed visibly under the eye of the reader. The reader can thus condemn either the thing criticised, or the person criticising, in accordance with what seems to be the demand of justice in the case.

The present writer judges Buddhism by the words which it speaks. It is but right that he too should himself in turn be judged, as inevitably he will, out of his own mouth.

