Shaw the 'Loafer'

ANNIE BESANT

From Annie Besant, *An Autobiography* (1893; 2nd edn London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908) p. 303. Annie Besant (1847–1933) was a freethinker, closely associated with Charles Bradlaugh and his *National Reformer*, when she first heard Shaw speak in May 1884, with the consequences she describes below. Her feeling of injury 'at having been entrapped into such a blunder' may well have extended to the intimacy that developed between them after she joined the Fabian Society in 1885, for Shaw seems to have been responsible for its termination two years later. Her autobiography is silent on the whole affair. In 1889 she was converted to theosophy and subsequently settled in India.

At this time also I met George Bernard Shaw, one of the most brilliant of Socialist writers and most provoking of men; a man with a perfect genius for 'aggravating' the enthusiastically earnest, and with a passion for representing himself as a scoundrel. On my first experience of him on the platform at South Place Institute he described himself as a 'loafer', and I gave an angry snarl at him in the *Reformer*, for a loafer was my detestation, and behold! I found that he was very poor, because he was a writer with principles and preferred starving his body to starving his conscience; that he gave time and earnest work to the spreading of Socialism, spending night after night in workmen's clubs; and that 'a loafer' was only an amiable way of describing himself because he did not carry a hod. Of course I had to apologise for my sharp criticism as doing him a serious injustice, but privately felt somewhat injured at having been entrapped into such a blunder.

A Fascinating Fabian

EDITH NESBIT

From Doris Langley Moore, *E. Nesbit: A Biography* (1933; rev. edn London: Ernest Benn, 1967) p. 113. Edith Nesbit (1858–1924), poet and novelist best remembered for her children's books, was the wife of Hubert Bland and, like him, an early