

Mrs. Annie Besant— An Appreciation

DEATH recently brought to a close in India the career of a woman whom George Bernard Shaw once called "the most wonderful woman of the Age." Mrs. Annie Besant, when she died, in her eighty-sixth year, had lived a long and varied life. Known throughout the world as the leader of the Theosophical Society, she was also revered for her life-long attachment to the Cause of India and for her championship of a number of social reform Movements in London while still a young woman.

Few sterner tests can be imposed upon any thinker than that their recommendations are at first rejected and then accepted by a later generation. When this attribute prevails, foresight and wisdom are evident, and Mrs. Besant fulfilled the test. Free press, equal suffrage for women, divorce, birth control, and other social reforms which she advocated are accepted today. Unlike so many teachers with her ability to see beyond the mental horizon of her own Age, she lived to see the world agree with many of her teachings.

A dissenting mind and great gifts of magnetism, oratory, initiative, organization, and leadership are attributed to Mrs. Besant. She employed them to improve the working conditions of women, in the Suffrage Movement, for birth control, and finally for the youth of India. Freedom and independence in all their phases were a passion with her. She had the intellectual, physical, and moral courage to fight for them. In 1892 Mrs. Besant moved to India,

where she became active in social and political work, and where her all-consuming passion for justice for India caused her to be called the "Mother of India."

Mrs. Besant founded a University in India as part of her work for her adopted land, and worked hand in hand with Indian leaders for better government. Long before Mahatma Gandhi became the idol of the people of India, she was fighting for a more liberal government. She said that a people can only be permanently improved through their determination to live unselfishly, never by physical force and the compulsion of laws.

Mrs. Besant's chief claim to be remembered will be as the successor of Mme. Blavatsky as the leader of the Theosophist Movement, which has probably done most in our time to make the Western World acquainted with the Buddhist doctrine of Reincarnation. She grew up in an Age when people were quick to take up with new religious beliefs, and, once inspired with fervor for the belief that human beings are continually reborn, she made it her principal interest.

Intellectual rebellion, when it is a genuine intellect that rebels, may lead to astounding results. There can be no denying the fact that Mrs. Besant's was one of the most extraordinary feminine personalities in contemporary life. One of the last of the mid-Victorian giants, she was the product of a time which seethed with new ideas and groaned with the birth pangs of great Movements.

