

## Incidents in the Life of a Tyneside Evangelist

### Transcription of Articles in the Christian Messenger by Rev W. Gelley

#### CHAPTER I

#### HOW I BECAME AN EVANGELIST

In the year 1898, I was induced by my dear friend, the Rev. H.B. Kendall, to send an account of the way "I Found Christ."

I have been frequently urged by our present Editor, Rev. H. Yooll, to set forth some of the incidents which have turned up amongst the miners of the North Country. After a great deal of hesitation I have at last consented, though I have a strong aversion to refer to events connected with my life. I will briefly state to my readers how I became an Evangelist.

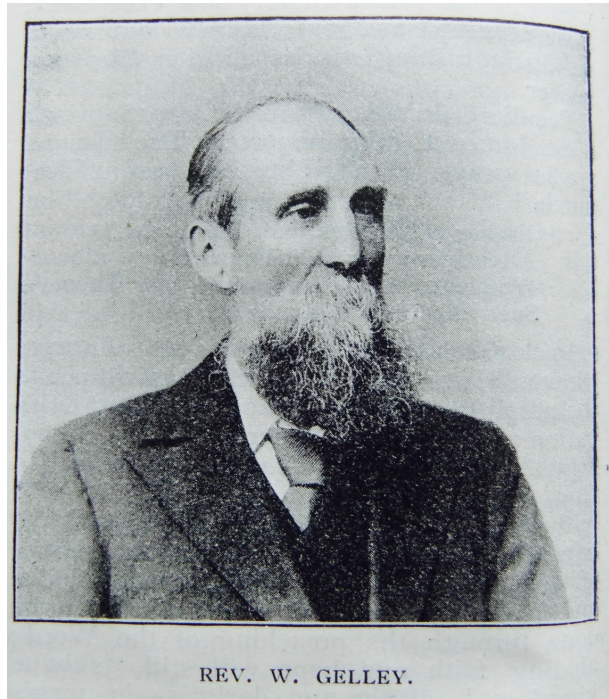
After my conversion in the year 1859, at the great revival held at the Wesleyan Chapel under Dr. and Mrs. Palmer, of America, I received my first-class tickets in May, 1860, in our Primitive Methodist Chapel, Nelson Street, Gateshead.

As soon as I experienced the new life in Christ I became possessed with a mighty impulse to bring others to the Saviour, and soon found full employment in the Sunday school and in open-air missions. These fields of labour did not fully satisfy my passion to do good.

I had a strong desire to preach, but my very defective education seemed to place in my way an insurmountable barrier; yet what I lacked in knowledge acquired from books. I possessed in a large experience of human nature, a little tact, and a measure of mother wit, that no mere books could supply. In my early days ardent zeal was an essential requisite for ministers, and many defects were overlooked if a true passion to save souls was in the preacher.

I was sent out to preach by the Newcastle Circuit, and I was to accompany Bro. George Hall, a man of true saintly character, and well-informed.

My first preaching effort was at "Bird's Nest," and my text was indicative of my spirit - "Therefore be ye also ready." After the usual course of probation I became a full local preacher on the Gateshead plan, 1863. I now found full scope for my energies, and I was prepared to go the longest journeys and preach as many times as I could find opportunities. The first year I saw 16 souls converted, and the next, 21 gave themselves to Christ. I found my services were much appreciated by the churches, and with my friend, the Rev. Hugh Gilmour, we were appointed to nearly every camp meeting in the Circuit.



Well do I remember these days. Gilmour's great text was - "Acquaint now thyself with Him"; and my special favourite was - "Ye must be born again." Gilmour's efforts in those days were full of poetry and simile, metaphor, climax. He was by far the greatest orator in our Circuit, but he was not at home in the penitent form work; his Scotch nature and training made against him. To me it was the highest joy to work at the penitent form, where souls were seeking for mercy.

After spending some months at Jarrow, in the South Shields Circuit, I came back to Gateshead. I was out of employment, and things were dark indeed. The Rev. H. Phillips was then travelling in the Gateshead Circuit, and was anxious to retain my services, and he proposed that the Circuit should employ me as an Evangelist. The quarter day was in debt, and some of the good brethren thought to employ me would add to the burden; others thought it would take the burden of debt away (which it did). Mr. Phillips took the whole responsibility on himself to pay whatever was deficient in my salary; this he was never called upon to do, for several generous friends, G.E. Almond, J. Gowland, J.T. Scott, M. Robson, and many others gave liberally to my support.

I commenced on September 10th, 1866, at Gateshead, and continued until October 17th, when we had the joy of reporting 37 persons who had given themselves to Christ.

I then began a mission at the Felling and Windy Nook. About 40 were converted at the latter place and 29 at the former. These meetings created great excitement in the places where they were held, and night after night our chapels were crowded with people hungry for the bread of life.

When I was preaching one night from the text, "As he was yet a-coming the devil threw down and tare him," I saw a man sitting in front of me; he evidently was under the most powerful emotion, and as soon as I invited penitents to come forward, he leapt to his feet and jumped over the pew tops, into the singers' pew, and exclaimed, "He shan't throw me down to night." It was little Sammy Hand, and he became one of the most devoted members and officials of our Felling church.

A young Irishman was sent to buy food for the cattle, and had drunk the money his mother had given him. For very shame he could not face his widowed mother; so he came over to England, and having a sister at the Felling, who came to our chapel, she invited her prodigal brother to the chapel on the Sunday night. I preached from the "Prodigal Son," and poor "Andy" though this sister had given me full information of his wicked life. He was smitten to the heart by the word and soon came boldly forward to confess Christ, and his devout and saintly life told how true and deep the change was, which God's Spirit had wrought in his heart.

I now felt myself fairly committed to Evangelistic work, and invitations came to me from far and near to engage in Revival Mission services.

## CHAPTER II.

When I began my Evangelistic Mission I laid down three regulating lines of conduct. 1<sup>st</sup>. I would not ask for any stipulated salary, but take what the generosity of the churches would give me. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Never go to any place for a stated time, but be guided by the events of Providence. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Try and persuade all who were converted to become total abstainers. These three rules of conduct I found

to be useful. In the year 1867 I held missions at Kibblesworth, Southwick, and Ouston. At Kibblesworth I held two series of meetings - one in January and the other in April. The services were of a successful character. There were 30 persons decided in the first mission, and 14 in the second. We had two difficulties to meet. We had no chapel, only a room, and we had the wild freaks of a jumping man to suppress. This man would attend our services, and when he became very excited he used to spring right up in the air and come crash down among the people - sometimes falling with his head on the forms or floor. One of my services was broken up by him, so I had to take strong measures with him, and told him to hire an empty room and there he could leap and jump until his heart was content. There has been a very pretty chapel in that village for many years, and a good strong church. I next received an invitation to visit Southwick, in the Sunderland Circuit, where I laboured for a month, and 59 persons professed to find the Lord. We had a fine church at Southwick. It was about the best church in the Circuit next to Old Flag Lane. Many of its leading men were very prominent in the Circuit. Mr. Bell, Mr. Donald, Mr. King, Mr. Archer, Mr. Tiplady, Mr. Milner. I received a kindness from this church, surpassed by none and equalled by few. The work of the mission was of a high order, and its converts consisted largely of members of the congregation, and the young men and women of the Sunday school. It was a great contrast to the next place I missioned, where some of the vilest of men were brought to Christ.

Councillor W. Allison, of Birtley, who was then a young man of Ouston, was largely the means of inducing me to visit this colliery village. We had only a small chapel that would seat about 200 people. In this little Bethel I laboured for a period of six weeks. Night after night it was crowded to the door, and each night when the service was done I was just as if I had come out of a Turkish bath. There were 112 names taken who desired to serve Christ, and amongst the number were many of the leading blackguards of the place, and one of the greatest was Tom Flush. When it became known that Tom had turned "a Ranter" the excitement knew no bounds. Our chapel was soon filled with pigeon-fliers, gamblers, and drunkards. The character of our services was perfectly indescribable. I have witnessed them singing "The lion of Judah" and "There's a better day coming on"—oh! with what vehement earnestness did they repeat again and again, ten or twenty times, and with each repeat the excitement grew; their bodies swaying to and fro; their eyes closed; their faces lit up with heavenly joy. I have often smiled when I have witnessed some of our modern fashionable choirs trying to give a specimen of how our fathers sang the old hymns. I hope no one takes them seriously. One night, when the excitement had reached its full strength, I saw a great, powerful young man, who had been several nights to our meetings, but would not yield. As I stood watching him I saw him fall his full length on the chapel floor as if he had been shot. This caused a profound sensation to go through the whole audience. Some wanted to rush for a doctor, others called for brandy, and others for water. I leapt on to a form and called on the people to wait on God. I cried at the top of my voice: "It is not brandy he needs, but the love of Jesus to save him from sin; let him lie, he will soon come all right." After lying stiff and rigid for some twenty minutes his face was lit up with a smile, and he came out singing and rejoicing in conscious salvation. Then the whole audience joined in a song of triumph, that could be heard over the whole village. An experience of quite a different character took place on another night. At the end of each week it was determined whether I should remain any longer, and it was followed by the members offering to pay so much, so that the expenses of the mission might be secured. The giving was of a cheerful and liberal character, except in the case of a young man who was known for his mercenary spirit. He had upwards of £20 in his bank book, but when it came to giving he could not be drawn. One night he was praying by my side, and exclaimed,

“Rivers of water run down mine eyes because the people keep not Thy law.” Such cant roused my fierce spirit of indignation, and I exclaimed: “Ah, Lord! what a flood there would be before it washed sixpence out of his pocket.”

At the close of the mission I held two temperance meetings, and 93 persons signed the pledge. James Bairley, Esq., several years after this, took the chair at one of my lectures, and said, “ One reason why so many of the converts stood true was that Mr. Gelley always insisted on them becoming total abstainers.” In fact, little hope could have been held out to these men without they left the drink alone.

I soon experienced the difficulties of an Evangelist’s life. I could be employed all the winter, but I must live on angels’ food in the summer, and this was a task to which I had strong aversion, as I had others to support who needed a more substantial diet. I held a mission down in Pipewellgate, one of the worst streets in Gateshead, and some twenty of these poor outcasts found Christ. One man I had urged several times to decide for Christ, at last yielded, and as soon as he found liberty he came forward and gripped my hand, and with tears of joy he exclaimed: “Oh, mon; I am so glad ye pres’t me to come.”

As we had been turned out of our chapel at Dunstan (for it was not connexional), I was sent three months, by Quarter Day, to “hold the fort.” We had no place but Mrs. Scott’s room. She was a good, devoted soul. I missioned the streets, and preached each Sabbath in the open air, and we showed our friend who had turned us out that we could hold our own outside as well-as inside.

### CHAPTER III

In the Autumn of 1867 I opened my mission at Waldrige Fell, about two miles from Ouston, where I had laboured the previous winter. We have no chapel here, and had to hold our services in the day-school, which was very inconvenient, being long and narrow, and filled with school desks. My home was with one of the most hearty and earnest Christian miners that I have met - George Bruce; and I am glad to know the son has caught the spirit of his father, and is one of our most acceptable local preachers in Chester-le-Street Circuit.

It was a wonderful sight to see that old schoolroom filled night after night with the very worst characters in the place - drunkards, dog-fighters, gamblers, and blasphemers, all listening to the Word of Life. I felt certain that a great work was going to be done in this village. In the second week scores of souls broke down, both men and women. One man went to the pit day after days until, on the last day of the week, he dared not work any longer, but came home in agony of soul, and made a full surrender of himself to Christ, We soon had sixty names of new disciples added to our roll, and out of that number there came nine local preachers and two ministers - the Rev. George W. King, who is now Superintendent of Burnley I. Circuit, and the Rev. J.G. Binney, who spent the early part of his ministry in the north, and loined the Congregational Church at Gateshead, where he exercised a great influence in the social and political life of that town; he is now labouring in the town of West Hartlepool with much success. But the most notable incident was the conversion of a notorious woman called “Nan” H\*\*\*\*p and her husband, “Jack.” “Nan,” as she was commonly called, lived in the long Blue Row, and when she appeared in the service we knew not what to think or say; for she

had been the terror of her neighbours for years. But no one in the congregation listened with greater attention than “Nan,” and I was not long in seeing that God’s word had smitten her hard heart. On the third night she made one of the crowd of enquirers at the penitent form, and like Paul, she could joyfully exclaim: “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor and injurious; but I obtained mercy.”

The conversion of “Nan” spread like wildfire. The next day women discussed it on their doorsteps. It was the theme of conversation down the coalpit. And the universal verdict was: “She will not stand long.” The neighbours expected to hear her tongue the next day, as they had so often heard it before, but the gossips met a singular disappointment for once. “Nan” kept herself within doors, and prayed most fervently for God’s grace to help her; and she did not pray in vain.” The change was most remarkable. No one appreciated it more than her husband - “Jack.” One morning as he was about to “go in by” in the coal pit, and was waiting for his lamp to be locked, the men were all sitting discussing the events of the mission, the character of that “chap Gelley, the revivalist.” Some said things complimentary, and others thought he was half crazed. Jack, who had sat in silence for some time, at last spoke, and said: “My lads, ye may say what ye like about Gelley and the ranters, but there’s a bonny change in our Nan.”

Now Jack began to think if religion was so good a thing for his wife it could not be a bad thing for himself, and, to our great joy, drunken Jack H\*\*\*\* was next seen at the penitent form in earnest prayer, seeking the mercy of God.

At the close of my mission I held two temperance meetings, and enrolled the most of the converts as abstainers, and commenced an Order of the “Sons of Temperance,” which was a great success. Twelve months after this mission I paid a visit to the place to preach the school sermons. The first man to give me hearty greetings was Jack, smiling all over his face, and his first words were: “There is nothing like religion and teetotalism.” I at once made inquiry after his wife and he pointed her out to me, and also his two lads, who were standing on the platform saying, “They’re all new together from cap to shoes. Praise the Lord!” I soon made my way to Ann—for she was no longer called by her old name “Nan”—and as I looked into her face I saw the mighty change which grace can make.

In this revival I saw more clearly that I must give greater prominence to two things - “repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The heart must be broken *for sin* and *from sin*. In looking over my diary for 1867 I see I preached about 400 sermons and gave many temperance addresses, and 488 persons took upon themselves the profession of Christian discipleship. My next scene of labour was at Ryhope Colliery - one of the largest colliery villages of the county of Durham, and about three miles from the town of Sunderland. It had a bad reputation for all kinds of wickedness. Some of the very worst characters in the county worked here. Drinking, gambling, fighting, clog-racing, were the amusements of the working miners. We had a good chapel and a good strong church. The Wesleyans had a chapel here, but were not so strong as we were. Some of the leading men of the church were men of saintly character, and had rendered most valuable service for many years. William Bates, the choirmaster, was my right-hand supporter. He was mighty in prayer and in song, and I have never met with any man in our Israel whose labours were more incessant. Joseph Humble was another stalwart, sober and cautious, generous and true. There was also a sprinkling of eccentric characters - “Joe, the caller,” the man who went about calling the

miners for work. Joe was good, but simple. He had a marvellous memory for texts, and could give you every preacher's text for twenty or thirty years back; but he could never outline the sermon. He was a kind of terror to lazy preachers. If they went to Ryhope with old sermons, Joe would meet them in the porch, and with loud voice, so that all might hear, say: "Lad, We have had that one before."

We also had the indescribable "Alec Petticrow" — a modern Johnny Oxtoby. He was a man of mighty faith, and most powerful in prayer. I have heard him tell with marvellous unction how he prayed for entire sanctification near the Colliery pond, and the spirit of power and love filled his soul that he leapt right up from the ground and fell in the midst of the water. "Glory be to God!" he exclaimed. "I was justified, sanctified, and baptised all at once," and nearly glorified too, for he had some difficulty to get out of the water. These were some of my strongest supporters, with many others whose names are in the Book of Life. It was here I saw one of the greatest religious movements I have witnessed in my life. The incidents I must reserve for my next paper.

#### CHAPTER IV.

When I began my work at Ryhope I found a divided feeling, arising out of the conditions of labour; one set of miners were always working at night, this gave rise to an opinion that a mission could not be carried on with much hope of success. We had not been at the work more than two weeks when we rejoiced to find the chapel crowded night after night with all sorts and conditions of men. These crowds continued to come for the next ten weeks, and the excitement and influence spread far and wide.

It was not until he had reached the second week that any signs of a great work appeared, and even in the best periods of the mission we had to struggle with the powers of darkness to gain the victory. I shall never forget one night. We were all in earnest prayer, and waiting on God, yet the meeting was hard. The prayers seemed to reach the roof of the chapel and then fall on our heads again. Some of our women, who were mighty in prayer, led us in our devotions, but all seemed dark, dark. At last the light came, and deliverance with it, and soon the singer's pew was filled with earnest enquirers, and 17 souls testified to obtaining mercy. When the New Year's watch meeting was held, 130 had come out for Jesus Christ. At the watch meeting the chapel was crowded with men who had always spent the New Year's eve in the public-house. I saw it would be necessary to get up some attraction for these men, in order to keep them out of temptation. I arranged to have a supper, with tea and coffee and plenty to eat as soon as our watch meeting closed. They filled the tables, and joy and gladness beamed from every face. The public-house had so few customers that they closed their doors and went to bed. The policeman came to the chapel, for he had no work to do, so we gave him a hearty welcome to our tables, and he sat down amongst a group of men, many of whom he had frequently had to lock up on these festive anniversaries. Such a New Year had never been witnessed in this colliery before. These men who had been depraved by drink and stained by crime, were now in full voice giving praise to God for His saving grace. We had the best public-house fiddler converted, and the most popular singer of the bar room now with us. The leading boxer was fighting the good fight of faith. Women, with tears of joy in their eyes, told me how, for the first time in their life, they had got a full pay. Everyone rejoiced in the mission except the publicans, and they did all they could to hinder and annoy us; but in vain. So far-reaching was this work of grace, and so

marked was the improvement in the coal pit. The men were steady, and attended to their work, and both men and masters were gainers from a secular point of view. The owners—John Taylor, Esq., J.C. Lamb, Esq.—sought an interview with me, and desired me to visit all their collieries and they would pay my salary and all expenses of my mission for two years. That, I think, is the best evidence of the genuine depth of the work; for these coal owners looked at my work largely from a secular standpoint—better men, better work, more wealth; showing clearly that the true religion is the handmaid of social progress, and the true friend of the masses. In one of my visits to a miner's home I found a woman in great distress. She had been a member of the church, but for some time she had not been present at the means of grace; I strongly urged upon her the importance of Christian worship. She listened in silence to all I had to say, and then, with a full heart, she told me the sad story of her life. Her husband had drunk the most part of his wages, and for two weeks' pay he had only given her 12s., not enough to pay the butcher. She had to fly from the house in her night-dress, as he had with a razor threatened to take her life. "How can I come to chapel?" said she. I could say no more than we must pray for him. I knelt down on the red-brick floor of the miners home, and prayed that God might touch the heart of "Bob," her husband. When I was leaving, she said, "I will come to chapel to-night, and I will invite 'Bob' to come also." At night she was in the meeting, and "Bob" was present also. He came several nights, and at last this riotous drunkard was earnestly seeking mercy. He turned out a fine, steady man. Twelve months after this I was visiting the same street, when I came to "Bob's" home. I thought something strange and serious had taken place. I saw marks which showed there had been severe struggle, there were patches of blood and skin on the door-step, and I heard loud voices within. What, I thought, has "Bob" broken out, and played the fool? I at once prepared myself for the worst, and, raising my voice, I said, "What is the matter here?" "Come in! Come in!" cried the voice of 'Bob's' wife, "We are only killing the pig." "What do you think, Mr. Gelley, said the wife, "our "Bob" has saved up his teetotal pocket money in the clock, and as soon as we killed the pig he went out and bought another with his pocket money." I said, "Well done, "Bob," you had better feed a pig for yourself than help to feed one for the publican; for if you feed a pig for the publican you get none of the bacon."

Many people think that giving away tracts is useless labour. I have no such conception, and I distributed close upon six thousand; and not in vain, for one day as I was visiting a woman asked me for one of my little books, which I was giving away. She said, "Sir, you gave two books to my nephews at Ryhope, and they were instrumental in leading them both to Jesus."

## CHAPTER V.

Having been engaged by the Ryhope Coal Company, I had a roving commission to visit their eighteen collieries in Durham and Northumberland. My services, whilst principally given to the church of my choice, were freely offered to all the churches. My duties were to visit the people in their homes; to hold Gospel Temperance Meetings; and to preach, both indoors and outside. In the month of February, 1868, I had a most successful mission at Westmoor. Some two hundred persons came forward and made a confession of Christ; once a great number signed the temperance pledge. Never did I see a chapel more crowded night after night. At last I was compelled to enter the chapel by the windows, and walk on the tops of the pews to the pulpit. In the same Year I preached five nights at Guide Post, when a remarkable conversion took place. "Ned Lewis" came to the service in a suit of white pit flannels. He was supposed to be a Churchman and a good hater of the "ranterers." He was a

desperate character, and known to all the district around. He was much impressed by my address, and when he went home he asked some of the members why they had told the preacher he was there. They told him they had never spoken to me in any way about him. This puzzled him; as I had minutely described his sinful life he felt sure some one had given me information. About the third night he came forward and gave himself to God, and his earnest life in church work showed how deep and true the work of grace had been. Ned paid a visit to one of his class-mates, and found him in a low way; Ned gave him a hearty invitation to go to the class meeting, but the brother refused to go for a long time. At last, overcome by Ned's earnestness, he went along to the means of grace, where his heart got warmed by strong feelings of devotion, and when called on by his leader to give his experience, he exclaimed. "I was glad when they said unto me let us go into the house of the Lord." Ned lifted up his head and said, "O, what a lie. I could hardly get thee to come at all."

I held missions at Newsham, Holywell, Backworth, and Cramlington. I thought I ought to send a report of how my time was spent to the coal company, and offered to do so, when I received the following letter:-

"Earsdon,  
"July 27th 1868.

"DEAR SIR.

"I am much pleased to receive your report of the 24th inst, relating to your journeying to and fro, and it reflects on you the highest credit. It is not necessary to have any monthly report; but continue to go on as you are doing, and you will give satisfaction to all.

"Yours truly,  
"JOHN TAYLOR."

I pushed on further north to a colliery village called North Seaton, and here a most remarkable work of grace was witnessed. Great numbers turned from the ways of wickedness. Many young men of great promise joined the church, and have continued up to this date as the most devoted workers in the Blyth Circuit. I made an arrangement for Mr. Thomas Parker, of Newcastle, to give us a lecture at North Seaton. His subject was, "The use and abuse of Scripture difficulties." The Secularists heard about it, and Mr. Watts, of London, being in the neighbourhood, the Secularists brought him down to the chapel as their great champion. I had to take the chair, and I was in great fear how Mr. Parker would acquit himself. At the close of the lecture Mr. Watts came forward, and with great vehemence, made an attack on the positions laid down. Mr. Parker replied in a most cool and masterly way, and our Secularist friends found out that they had not won a triumph. In 1869 our district meeting was held at Stockton-on-Tees. At that time there was nothing to me so grand as Conference or district meeting, so I paid a visit. I was urgently requested to speak at the Temperance Meeting. It was such a scene as I have never witnessed before or since. Grave and sober men like the Revs. John Atkinson, James Jackson, and many others, were in the greatest stages of excitement. I remember well, on the Sunday morning, the Rev. Thomas Greenfield preached on "Lord, increase our faith." "What is faith" said the preacher. "It is trust, reliance." "Never make a definition longer than your finger," said Mr. Greenfield. During the sermon a man, near to me, cried out for mercy. I leapt from my seat, and was instantly at the poor man's side. The Rev. Joseph Spoor sprang to the front of the platform with outspread hands, and, with his clarion voice, shouted "Glory!" Greenfield stood perfectly amazed, for his faith had not prompted him to expect such a turn of events.



I held missions at Haswell, Haswell Moor, and Shotton Collieries, with much success. At Haswell I formed my first acquaintance with Mr. John Wilson, M.P., and our friendship has deepened as the years have rolled by.

At Shotton Colliery we had a work of grace that sent a thrill of joy into many hearts and homes. It was one of the most pleasing events of my life to meet at this place Mr. Newark Featony, a man whose name was known both far and near. For racy wit and quaint humour I have never met his equal. He was, as he often described himself, "a queer compound of Nature and grace." One cold day an old man came to his door begging, and seeing he was shivering with cold, he said, "Would you like to be warmed a bit?" He replied, "Yes, sir." "Come in, then," he said, and put him a chair by the fire. Newark says, "Aw was just getting a draw or two of the pipe, and thinking he might like a puff or two, aw said, do you smoke, friend?" "Yes, sir, when aw'I get the chance." "Would you like a cup of tea, friend?" "Yes, sir, if you please." My wife, Bessie, soon made him a hot cup of tea. Then having warmed him, fed him, and smoked him, I must have a word about his soul. "Do you ever pray?" says I. "Yes, sir; I says my prayers every night." "Well, what do you say?" The old beggar was 72 years of age. "Oh, dear," said Newark, "just think of it, repeating the old, old prayer his mother taught him at 72 years of age. How sad!"

After two years' service I finished up my engagement with the coal company. I had missioned all their collieries. I have received the names of 746 persons to the Temperance pledge; and 795 had taken upon them the profession of the Christian Faith during my two years' labours. The coal owners gave me beautiful letters of acknowledgment with their best wishes for my future.

I was engaged twelve months with the Sunderland Circuit as tour missionary, and my work was mainly visiting the homes of the people. The Rev. Ralph Shields and Dr. W. Antliff took up my case, and though I was a married man I was put down by Conference as the fourth preacher in the Sunderland Circuit.

## **References**

*Christian Messenger* 1904/20, 1904/49, 1904/87, 1904/143, 1904/165