

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

Here Owen was seized with a violent fit of coughing, and resumed his seat. When the cough had ceased he sat wiping his mouth with his handkerchief and listening to the talk that ensued.

'Drink is the cause of most of the poverty,' said Slyme.

This young man had been through some strange process which he called 'conversion'. He had had a 'change of 'art' and looked down with pious pity upon those he called 'worldly' people. He was not 'worldly', he did not smoke or drink and never went to the theatre. He had an extraordinary notion that total abstinence was one of the fundamental principles of the Christian religion. It never occurred to what he called his mind, that this doctrine is an insult to the Founder of Christianity.

'Yes,' said Crass, agreeing with Slyme, 'an' there's plenty of 'em wot's too lazy to work when they can get it. Some of the swine who go about pleading poverty 'ave never done a fair day's work in all their bloody lives. Then there's all this new fangled machinery,' continued Crass, 'that's wot's ruinin' everything. Even in our trade there's them machines for trimmin' wall paper, ar' now they've brought out a paintin' machine. There's a pump an' a 'ose pipe, an' they reckon two men can do as much with this 'ere machine as twenty could without it.'

'Another thing is women,' said Harlow, 'there's thousands of 'em nowadays doin' work wot oughter be done by men.'

'In my opinion there's too much of this 'ere eddication, nowadays,' remarked old Linden, 'wot the 'ell's the good of eddication to the likes of us?'

'None whatever,' said Crass, 'it just puts foolish ideas into people's 'eds and makes 'em too lazy to work.'

Owen was listening to this pitiable farrago with feelings of contempt and wonder. Were they all hopelessly stupid? Had their intelligence never developed beyond the stage of childhood? Or was he mad himself?

'Early marriages is another thing,' said Slyme, 'no man oughtn't to be allowed to get married unless he's in a position to keep a family.'

'How can marriage be a cause of poverty?' said Owen, contemptuously. 'A man who is not married is living an unnatural life. Why don't you continue your argument a little further and say that the practice of eating and drinking is the