

## THE CLAPHAM SECT.

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Who and what are the Clapham Sect? Are they shadows, or do they represent a substantial idea; Is that idea fanaticism, or is it earnest life—a thing to be despised or to be admired? There are many now-a-days to whom these questions have interest, and there are many others in whom interest will be awakened when they hear the names of the men whom the "Clapham Sect" is understood to comprise.

Names have been defined as "labelled mysteries—disguises put upon things to conceal from us their mystery." The name of a thing is generally supposed to be suggestive of everything about it. If I speak of a rose, the name is associated in my mind with the picture of the flower, and with its qualities of form, color, fragrance, beauty. But there are names which have been fastened upon the things which they have come to designate by some chance event, or by some caprice of genius; and in such a case, unless the interpreter be at hand, the mystery is the deeper for the "label."

It may be that to the uninitiated the mention of the Clapham Sect conveys no definite idea. They cannot trace the connection between geography and religious profession; and they have, perhaps roamed often in that particular suburb of London without discovering "the odour of sanctity" which, some fifty years ago, was so offensive to certain politely vulgar men. To enlighten them in this matter, and to give brief histories of the lives and characters of the men upon whom this name was fixed, is the object of these papers. Perhaps it will appear—if, indeed, the moral be the highest part of human nature, and goodness the highest style of moral excellency that, like the terms Whig and Tory in politics, and Puritan and Methodist in religion, the names give in reproach or by accident, may be accept-

ed with satisfaction, and even referred to by the descendants of those who have worn them with not unholy pride.

It is nearly sixty years ago since there issued from the press a very clever political tract, written to advocate Catholic emancipation, under the following title, "Letters on the Subject of the Catholics, to my brother Abraham, who lives in the country, by Peter Plymley." In these letters, whose close logic, keen wit, strong prejudices, and not too nice delicacy, at once, fathered their authorship, the writer admits, "that there is a vast luxury in selecting a particular set of Christians, and worrying them as a boy worries a puppy-dog," but thinks the Catholics are too numerous to be thus worried with safety, and suggests that the taste might be gratified with less risk in another direction. "But, then, my good Abraham, this, sport, admirable as it is, is become, with respect to the Catholics, a little dangerous; and if we are not extremely careful in taking the amusement, we shall tumble into the holy water and be drowned. As it seems necessary to your idea of an established church to have somebody to worry and torment, suppose we were to select for this purpose *William Wilberforce, Esq., and the patent Christians of Clapham*. We shall by this expedient enjoy the same opportunity for cruelty and injustice without being exposed to the same risks."

These letters, which had an extensive sale, were published anonymously, but rumour ascribed them to the pen of a clergyman then writing himself into notice in the *Edinburgh Review*, and afterwards promoted by Lord Lyndhurst to a vacant canonry of St. Paul's. For a long time he denied the authorship—a venial offence, some would say, which has many precedents— but an untruth, notwithstanding, and hardly squaring with those ele-