

# LITERATURE OF NORTHERN EUROPE.

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## SONGS OF THE POLISH PEASANTRY.

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AFTER the melancholy disasters, which we have recorded in the previous article, those Icelanders who had escaped the general ruin, carried into other lands the vigorous and powerful productions of their island home. To their Teutonic kinsmen the boon was most welcome. The German mind was strengthened and enlarged. There was an awakening to new life. The effect was similar to that produced by the transfusion of healthy blood, into the veins of a weak and fatuous patient. The "Nibelungen-lied," the earliest heroic poem in Germany, and the first of a long line of brilliant productions, has not merely the spirit, but the very form and structure of an Icelandic legend. The tragic conclusion of the poem, is manifestly borrowed from a half historical incident in the early traditions of the north. Nor is it to be forgotten that these islanders were, for the most part, men of far greater taste and learning than those with whom they came in contact. Europe also received from their hands the gift of no inconsiderable portion of the classic authors; works that had been carefully treasured up in Iceland, while, on the continent, they had not unfrequently been destroyed to make way for some monkish legend. Even at the present day, we are told, the traveller in Iceland finds the guide whom he has hired, able to hold a conversation with him in Latin; and, on his arrival at his miserable place of rest for the night, is addressed with fluency and elegance in the same language. It is gratifying to find that the example of their illustrious ancestors has not been thrown away. "While the little hut," says a modern voyager, "which the Icelanders inhabit, is almost buried in the snow, and while darkness and desolation are spread universally around, the light of an oil lamp illumines the page, from which he reads to his family the lessons of knowledge, religion and virtue." Amid the storms of the surrounding ocean, these poor fishermen possess an intimate acquaintance with the classical writings of antiquity and a keen sense of their beauty.

Not unlike these simple-hearted people in their earnestness of character, and intense love of country, almost in their political fate, are the peasantry of Poland, whose National Songs now remain to be considered. In this country, the most intellectual of the Slavonic nations, there are but two sorts of classes, the highest and the lowest. To the former belong the nobles of the land, that brave and romantic chivalry of whom so much has been said and written. The latter is composed of the serfs or peasantry, a race of men little conspicuous in their history, yet numbering in their ranks many who, under other auspices, might have become noted as chief poets, or leaders of armies. It is the showy part of Polish history which especially captivates our attention. We admire the beauty of the blossoming flower, without reflecting on the life-giving root which lies buried in the earth. Yet the very sap and vigor of the nation is derived from the earnest sincerity of these humble men. Nor are the annals of Poland wanting in proofs of their intellectuality. Dantiscus rose by his services to the episcopal dignity of Varmin, was employed principally in diplomatic missions, and became so great a favorite of the emperor Charles V., that he was the only foreign ambassador who accompanied him to Spain after the battle of Pavia. He died in 1548, at an advanced age: his poems have been warmly eulogised by Erasmus. Janicki, the elegiac poet, gained a great reputation before he was ten years old: his poetic effusions have been compared to those of Tibullus: when he was only twenty years old, Pope Clement VII. crowned him with a laurel wreath. How the heart of the young peasant must have throbbed, to receive, amid the acclamations of the imperial city, the same distinction which had been conferred on Petrarch! The crown of laurel was also conferred, by another Pontiff, on Szymoniewicz, or Simonides, who not only distinguished himself, towards the close of the sixteenth century, by his beautiful Polish Elegiacs,