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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SONNETS FROM THE CRIMEA \*\*\*

## Sonnets from the Crimea

[I]

By Adam Mickiewicz

Translated by

Edna Worthley Underwood

MCMXVII

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## ADAM MICKIEWICZ

(1798-1855)

The last of the eighteenth century was an important period for Russia and Poland, not only politically, but in letters and art. It marked the birth of statesmen, patriots, poets and writers. It was into a Poland of great names and greater activities that Adam Mickiewicz was born in 1798, as son of an impoverished family of the old nobility. Three years before, the third and last partition of his native land had taken place, and the signed documents had been hastened to Petersburg to make more triumphant the birthday of the Great Catherine.

Just a few years before this (1792), Kosciusko had courageously led his forty-five thousand valiant Poles in their brave defiance of an overwhelming number of Cossacks and Russians. History had recorded the bloody Turkish wars, the Pugatshev rebellion, the uprising of the Zaporogian Cossacks and the Polish confederations. And with the nineteenth century came the Napoleonic wars with the dramatic entry of Napoleon into Russia, and a new and different mental life began to dawn over Europe.

Mickiewicz was born in Novogrodek in Lithuania. This was the birthplace of Count Henry Rzewuski, who wrote the delightful memories of the Polish eighteenth century, under the title of "The Memories of Pan Severin Soplica,"<sup>[\*]</sup> and who declared he considered it an honor to be born a "schlazier" (noble) of Lithuania, and of Novogrodek. He went to a government school in Minsk, and later attended the University of Vilna, which city in his day was a place of Jesuit faith, gloomy convents and echoing bells. All about him epoch-making events for Slav lands were taking place. It was a resounding, inspired age for his race, and he grew up to take a fitting place in that age and to be called "the immortal hero of Polish poetry." Poland just then was the battle-ground not only for the armies of Europe, but for the diplomats. It was a place for statesmen to win their spurs. If accredited to Petersburg or Warsaw, and successful, they were believed to be equal to any diplomatic emergency. Eloquence, inspiration, and patriotic fervor must have cradled his childhood.

[VIII]

[\*] The full title of the book is: Memories of Pan Severin Soplica, Cupbearer of Parnau, by Count Henry Rzewuski.

At the time of the birth of Mickiewicz, Russia was bringing to a close a prodigious period of development in almost every field of human activity. It was really the birth-throe of a nation that was to move powerfully, and to dominate—partially—the new age. And the splendid and never again to be equalled pageant of the life of Catherine the Great, with its wild dreams of world dominance and of the glorious revival of perished Greece, had just been unrolled for the amazement of Europe. What dramatic and enchanting memories the names of her followers call up: the Orlovs, Potemkin, Panin, Poniatowski, Bestushew-Rjumin, Princess Daschkov, Razumowski.

[IX]

In France, too, the same preceding period had been brilliant. It had been the France of Voltaire, the Encyclopedists, and a most resplendent and luxurious monarch. England had known her greatest orators and prime ministers. It had been the Prussia of Frederick the Great; the Dresden of August the Strong; the Austria of Joseph the Second.

A little later—during Mickiewicz's own youth—Goethe was at the height of his power and the intellectual dictator of Europe. Under his direction and encouragement the treasures of oriental literature were being translated and made known to the West. This is merely a hasty glimpse of the "mise-en-scene" that preceded the debut in life of the most renowned of Polish poets. The old traditions of absolute and God-created monarchs and princely times were coming to an end, and that democratic modern world, where everything was to change, was close at hand, just over the crest, indeed, of this new century into which Fate was ushering him. He was to see the last of blind power and royal prerogative, and the first dawn of a modern spirit which in time would sweep away forever, the old. It was an uncertain, difficult transition period, without standards and without measurements.

[X]

As we take a fleeting, bird's-eye view of the stirring times in which his days were spent, his travels, his army life, his periods of professorship, we can not help but wonder at the amount of writing Mickiewicz did. And his life was not a long one; it did not reach to sixty years. But during the working years allotted him, before a mystical melancholy—which was threatening to degenerate into madness—had impaired his faculties, his mind was unusually brilliant, creative and marvelously disciplined. It obeyed at will. At one time he was professor of Latin in Lausanne; at another time he held the chair of Slavic languages in Paris. He taught Polish and Latin in Kovno. He traveled extensively in Italy in the interest of the Polish revolution. His mind was many-sided and capable of various activities. He devoted considerable time to advanced mathematics and philosophy. He made scientific investigations in Vilna under Lalewel. At one time and another he lived in various large cities of Europe. In Germany he met and became friendly with Goethe. In Switzerland he met Krasinski. In 1833 he married Celina Szymanovska. Her mother was the famous Slav beauty and musician who had so delighted Goethe in her youth.

[XI]

Among writers of Russia and Poland whose life period somewhat coincided with that of Mickiewicz's are: Korzenowski (born in 1797), the novelist (a brother of Adam Mickiewicz was fellow-teacher with Korzenowski at Charkov); Danilewski (1829), likewise a novelist—it was he who translated *The Crimean Sonnets* into Russian; Malzweski, Polish patriot and poet, whose "Maria"—perhaps the most popular poetic story in Poland—appeared at almost the same time as *The Crimean Sonnets*; Zaleski (1802), Slowacki (1809), Krasinski (1812), the three greatest poets of Poland excepting only Mickiewicz himself, the Polish critic, Brodzinski.

In Russia, the golden age of literature almost covered the same period as Mickiewicz's own life—Puschkin, Lermontov, Schukowski, Gogol, to mention only some of the most important names.

In the eighteen-thirties we find Mickiewicz in Paris, which happened to be filled just then with a crowd of brilliant Slavic exiles. Here he became the friend of Chopin, and one of Chopin's most talented pupils—a young Polish girl—made the first translation of the *Sonnets* into French. It was a wonderful and brilliant Paris which Mickiewicz entered. This was the time when the city was first called "the stepmother of Genius." Heine was here in exile, and Börne. It knew the personal fascination and the denunciative writings of Ferdinand la Salle. It was the day, too, of Eugene Sue, Berlioz, George Sand, de Musset, Dumas, Gautier, the Goncourt Brothers, Gavarni, Sainte Beuve, Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn, Ary Scheffer, Delacroix, Horace Vernet—to mention only a few great names at random. Julius Slowacki, Count Krasinski and Adam Mickiewicz were all here editing their poetry in the midst of this brilliant life in the inspiring city by the Seine. This period in Paris signs perhaps the high-water mark of the creative genius of Mickiewicz. He had already written the *Ballads and Romances*, the third part of *Dziady*, *Pan Tadeuz*. [XII]

The Crimean Sequence belongs to the period of Mickiewicz's youth, the Vilna period. He joined a society at this time which was looked upon with disfavor by the Government. At length, because of his continued participation in it, he was exiled to southern Russia. On that trip, while he was going toward Odessa, he began the *Crimean Sonnets*. Their success was quick and astonishing. They were translated into every language of Europe. Although the form is the traditional and classic sonnet form, he makes use of it in a slightly different manner, not altogether as an exposition of the sentiments of the soul, and the convictions and emotions of the mind, but as an instrument with which to sketch what he saw upon this eventful journey. He used the sonnet form at that period just as Verhaeren used it in "*Les Flamandes*," to show us Flanders, and as Albert Samain in "*Le Chariot d'Or*," to picture the gardens of Versailles. This is worthy of note. And this we must remember was before 1826. In the poetical works of Mickiewicz there was always traceable an inclination to break tradition and to search for new and untried possibilities. [XIII]

On this exile in Russia he learned to know Puschkin, then a young man like himself. Puschkin has written a verse letter to him which we transcribe in free prose. "He lived among us for a while—a people strange to him. And yet his mind cherished no hatred and no longing for revenge. Generous, kind of heart, noble-minded, he joined our evening circles, and we loved him. We exchanged our dreams, our plans—our poems. God gave him genius and inspiration. He stood always on the heights and looked down on life. We talked of history and of nations. He declared a time would come when races would forget all evil things—like war, rebellion—and dwell together peaceably in one great family. We listened to him eagerly for he had the gift of speech. After a while he went away and we gave our blessing to him. Then we learned our guest—spurred on by his revengeful race—had become our enemy. To please that bitter race of his he filled his songs with hatred. Of our beloved friend there came to us only revenge and angry thoughts. God grant that peace may come again to his embittered heart!" [XIV]

Puschkin himself wrote eloquently of these same Crimean scenes that Mickiewicz shows us. He, too, was inspired by the old capital city of the Tartar rulers. We recall his "*Fountain of Baktschi Serai*." And he, too, brings before our eyes again that gigantic mountain world of southern Russia in "*The Prisoner of the Caucasus*."

The fame of *The Crimean Sonnets* was so great that Mickiewicz was offered a government position which attached him to the person of the powerful Prince Galitzin, in Moscow. It was in Rome, and singularly enough it was when he wrote the "*Ode to Youth*" that he began to devote himself to mystical studies which had such an injurious effect upon his mind. For some time after he had lost his fluent power as a poet, he retained his conversational gifts which were remarkable and brought him almost as much fame as his poetry. His life ended in a period as dramatic as that in which it began. He entered the Turkish wars in 1855 and died in Stamboul in that same year. It is somewhat peculiar and at the same time no little to his credit that he should have chosen the sonnet as the instrument of his quick sketching of Crimea on the trip of exile, because the sonnet has never been a frequently chosen means of expression of the Slav races, despite the numerous sonnets written later by Vrchlicky, Preseren and others. The sonnet has belonged more to the Latin races, and to the English race. *The Crimean Sonnets*, however, rank among the famous sequences. [XV]

Edna Worthley Underwood.

[1]

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## SONNETS FROM THE CRIMEA

---

Across sea-meadows measureless I go,  
My wagon sinking under grass so tall  
The flowery petals in foam on me fall,  
And blossom-isles float by I do not know.  
No pathway can the deepening twilight show;  
I seek the beckoning stars which sailors call,  
And watch the clouds. What lies there brightening all?  
The Dneister's, the steppe-ocean's evening glow!

The silence! I can hear far flight of cranes—  
So far the eyes of eagle could not reach—  
And bees and blossoms speaking each to each;  
The serpent slipping adown grassy lanes;  
From my far home if word could come to me!—  
Yet none will come. On, o'er the meadow-sea!

---

**BECALMED**

[5]

The flag is listless, limp. It dances not.  
As deep the sea breathes from a gentle breast  
As any bride who dreams at love's behest,  
And wakes and sighs, then casts with dreams her lot.  
Sails hang upon the masts—useless—forgot—  
Like folded standards which the warriors wrest  
And bring home broken from the battle's crest.  
The sailors rest them in some sheltered spot.

O Sea! within your unknown deeps concealed,  
When storms are wild, your monsters dream and sleep,  
And all their cruelty for the sunlight keep.  
Thus, Soul of Mine, in your sad deeps concealed  
The monsters sleep—when wild are storms. They start  
From out some blue sky's peace to seize my heart.

---

**MOUNTAINS FROM THE KESLOV STEPPE**

[7]

(Pilgrim)

What would Great Allah with the frozen sea?  
Would he of icy clouds a throne carve bright,  
Or would the demons of the deepest night  
A bar build where the shining stars sweep free?  
It gleams like pagan cities fired, kings flee.  
When Day was anciently destroyed by Night  
Did Allah amid chaos fix this light  
To guide the star-worlds of eternity?

(Mirza)

Up there I've journeyed where the winter reigns,  
And seen the rivers bitten black like lines  
On Tschatir Dag, where the white cloud reclines,  
Which not the wildest eagle's shadow stains,  
Where cradled under me the thunders sleep  
And Allah and the stars their watches keep.

---

**BAKTSCHI SERAI**

[9]

In ruin are the spacious, splendid halls  
With frozen forest of white columns where  
The Tartar Khan his palace builded fair,  
Where loneliest the shrilling cricket calls.  
The ivy blackens over shining walls  
Enscribing in gigantic letters there  
Some curse Belshazzar-like: BEWARE! BEWARE!—

Then black as crèpe from crested columns falls.  
Within the burnished banquet room there sings  
The fountain of the harem pure and clear,  
Just as of old it sang in twilights drear.  
But whither love and fame speed—on what wings?  
When all things else must perish these endure!  
Yet both are gone! The fountain ripples pure.

---

## BAKTSCHI SERAI BY NIGHT

[11]

From out the mosques the pious wend their way;  
Muezzin voices tremble through the night;  
Within the sky the pallid King of Light  
Wraps silvered ermine round him while he may,  
And Heaven's harem greets its star array.  
One lone white cloud rests in the azure height—  
A veiled court lady in some sorrow's plight—  
Whom cruel love and day have cast away.

The mosques stand there; and here tall cypress trees;  
There—mountains, towering, black as demons frown,  
Which Lucifer in rage from God cast down.  
Like sword blades lightning flickers over these,  
And on an Arab steed the wild Khan rides  
Who goes to Baktschi Serai which night hides.

---

## THE GRAVE OF COUNTESS POTOCKA

[13]

In Spring of love and life, My Polish Rose,  
You faded and forgot the joy of youth;  
Bright butterfly, it brushed you, then left ruth  
Of bitter memory that stings and glows.  
O Stars! that seek a path my northland knows,  
How dare you now on Poland shine forsooth,  
When she who loved you and lent you her youth  
Sleeps where beneath the wind the long grass blows?

Alone, My Polish Rose, I die, like you.  
Beside your grave a while pray let me rest  
With other wanderers at some grief's behest.  
The tongue of Poland by your grave rings true.  
High-hearted, now a young boy past it goes,  
Of you it is he sings, My Polish Rose.

---

## THE GRAVES OF THE HAREM

[15]

They sleep well here whom Allah loved and kept  
And treasured in his vineyard fair and fine,  
Most lustrous of the Orient pearls that shine,  
Which youth found where the waves of passion swept.  
Here, where in peace perpetual they have slept,  
A turban beckons where the roses twine,  
A banner flutters out in silken line,  
And sometimes here a Giaour's name is kept.

Oh! roses of this paradise of old,  
The eyes that loved not Allah saw you not,  
Nor arms that prayed not eastward could enfold!  
But now a Christian treads this hallowed spot;  
Wise Allah, curse not him who bows his head  
Amid the marble shrines of Allah's dead!

---

Give wings unto the storm, and spurs to steed,  
I'd move unchained as wind across the world,  
Sweep onward like a torrent mountain-hurled,  
Nor sea, nor height, nor valley pause to heed.  
The twilight spreads a dimness o'er our speed,  
And shows the diamond-stars from hoofs up-whirled,  
Since daylight now her curtained blue has juried,  
And mystery and magic shadows breed.

The earth sleeps, but not I—not I—not I—  
Who hasten to the shore where waves are loud  
And toward me in the darkness whitely crowd.  
Beneath them I would still my soul's deep cry—  
Like ships the whirlpools seize to drag to death—  
I'd plunge within the silence, sans thought, breath.

---

## ALUSHTA BY DAY

[19]

The mighty mountain flings its mist-veil down;  
With little flowers the gracious fields are bright,  
And from the forest colors flash to sight  
Like gems that drop from off a Calif's crown.  
Upon the meadows settles shimmering down  
A band of butterflies in rainbow flight;  
Cicadas call and call in day's delight,  
And bees are dreaming in a blossom's crown.

The waves beneath the cliff are thunder-pale,  
Now upward, upward in their rage they rise  
And tawny are their crests as tigers' eyes.  
The sun is focused on one white, far sail  
And on blue, shining deeps as smooth as glass  
Wherein slim cranes are shadowed as they pass.

---

## ALUSHTA BY NIGHT

[21]

The drooping, weary day night pushed aside;  
On Tschatir Dagh the sullen sun and low  
Paints phantom purple upon ancient snow;  
While forest ways within, the wanderers hide.  
Night veils the mountains and the valleys wide;  
The thunderous brooks are dream-held, dulled, and slow;  
Beneath the blackness fragrant flowers blow  
And rich leaf-music clothes each valley side.

Almost my waking eyes are dream-held too;  
With gold a meteor marks the deep-domed sky  
And fountain-like the fiery sparks float by.  
Oh! Beauty of the Eastern Night, you woo  
My spirit like the odalisque, who held  
Men captive till her kiss the dream dispelled!

---

## TSCHATIR DAGH

[23]

(Mirza)

The reverent Mussulman bends low to greet  
You, Tschatir Dagh, Crimea's bright-masted ship!  
World-altar,—minaret—the place where dip  
Down stairs from golden Heaven for the feet!  
You guard the door of God in splendor meet,  
Like Gabriel with holy sword on hip;  
In bright mist mantled from the toe to lip,  
Tour turban set with alien stars and sweet.

If winter rule the world, or summer's sun,  
If Giaour rage about, or winds are wild,

Above them, Tschatir Dagh, you, changeless one,  
Are like to Allah, pure and undefiled;  
Aloft you tower from out the lowly sod  
To give to men again the will of God.

---

## TSCHATIR DAGH

[25]

(The Pilgrim)

Below me half a world I see outspread;  
Above, blue heaven; around, peaks of snow;  
And yet the happy pulse of life is slow,  
I dream of distant places, pleasures dead.  
The woods of Lithuania I would tread  
Where happy-throated birds sing songs I know;  
Above the trembling marshland I would go  
Where chill-winged curlews dip and call o'er head.

A tragic, lonely terror grips my heart,  
A longing for some peaceful, gentle place,  
And memories of youthful love I trace.  
Unto my childhood home I long to start,  
And yet if all the leaves my name could cry  
She would not pause nor heed as she passed by.

---

## THE PASS ACROSS THE ABYSS IN THE TSCHUFUT-KALE

[27]

(Mirza)

Pray! Pray! Let loose the bridle. Look not down!  
The humble horse alone has wisdom here.  
He knows where blackest the abysses leer  
And where the path in safety leads us down.  
Pray, and look upward to the mountain's crown!  
The deep below is endless where you peer;  
Stretch not the hand out as you pass, for fear  
The added weight of that might plunge you down.

And check your thoughts' free flight, too, while you go;  
Let all of Fancy's fluttering sails be furled  
Here where Death watches o'er the riven world.

(Pilgrim)

I lived to cross the bridge of ancient snow!  
But what I saw my tongue no more can tell,  
The angels only could rehearse that well.

---

## (MIRZA)

[29]

Behold blue Heaven in that deep abyss!  
The sea is that! Behold the long waves shine!  
Watch how they rock that giant bird divine,  
Whose swinging white wings wide horizons kiss.  
Is that an iceberg in the blue abyss?  
No, no—a cloud! Watch how 'tis veiling fine  
The sea, the land, out-blotting every line  
To drown it all in darkness soon I wis.

The lightning comes now! Frightful is its sweep.  
But softly—softly! Watch my spur—my whip!  
I'll leap across unto that chasm's lip.  
What still and chilling sternness great cliffs keep!  
Down there light calls to me. Soon there I'll be.  
Uncanny is such loneliness to me.

---

Oh, thankless Crimean land! in ruin laid  
Are now the castles that were once your pride!  
Here serpents and the owls from daylight hide,  
And robbers arm them for the nightly raid.  
Upon the lettered marble boasts are made,  
Brave words on battered arms in gold descried,  
And broken splendor years have scattered wide,  
Beside the dead who made them are arrayed.

The Greek set shining, columned marble here.  
The Latin put the Mongol horde to flight,  
And Mussulmans prayed eastward morn and night.  
The owl and vulture of dark wing and drear  
Are fluttering like black banners overhead  
In cities where the pest piles high the dead.

---

## ON JUDA'S CLIFF

[33]

On Juda's Cliff I love to lean and look  
On waves that battling beat and break with might,  
While farther seaward in a bland delight,  
I see them shining where a rainbow shook.  
On Juda's Cliff I love to lean and look  
On waves that like sea-armies swing to sight,  
To send upon the shore their billows white,  
And, ebbing, to leave pearls in every nook.

Thus, Poet, in your youth when storms are wild  
And passions break upon the heart and brain,  
To leave their ruin there—shipwreck and waste—  
Pick up your lute! Upon it undefiled  
You'll find song-pearls that your heart-deeps retain,  
The crown the years have brought you, white and chaste.

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Here, then, end the Crimean Sonnets of the immortal hero of Polish poetry, Adam Mickiewicz as translated by Edna Worthley Underwood and published by Paul Elder and Company at their Tomoye Press, in the city of San Francisco, under the direction of Ricardo J. Orozco, their printer during the month of August, nineteen seventeen

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