

Rustem, The Young Warrior

The Third
of the
Rustem Stories
Retold By
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WHEN Saum heard the joyful news that Rustem had taken the enchanted fortress he said to himself: "Ah! I promised that young, handsome grandson of mine a big warhorse as soon as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Zal and could prove himself equal to the greatest warrior. The boy shall have his reward."

He commanded all the herders to bring to the plains of Zaboulistan their best and finest horses the first day of the Festival of Roses. From these Rustem was to choose his war steed.

What a mammoth, wonderful horse fair that was! In addition to hundreds of the most beautiful and best reared home horses there were also on the hill slopes to the south dozens of white tents with the most famous breeders from Kabul and Alfhan pastures with their animals, a joy to behold.

Near to these was a caravan of low browed men from the shores of the Caspian, who rode their clean limbed, swiftly moving horses, fresh from the steppes, at full speed, standing erect upon their saddles.

At last the morning dawned bright and sunny and the whole city was astir.

Just outside of the gates was placed a golden throne from which Zal and Rustem were to inspect the herds of horses.

Finally all was ready. At a given signal the horses, which had been brought to a convenient distance, were led, one by one, directly before Rustem.

As the keeper of the horses from Zaboulistan led a pretty creature before the golden throne he cried: "Oh, Mighty One! behold this beauty. Truly thou hast not seen one like him. He can outstrip the wind, and yet he is so gentle he will eat sugar out of my hand!"

Smiling at the keeper's earnestness, Rustem stepped out to try this fine steed. He placed his hand upon the horse to see if he could stand the test. But the animal shuddered beneath his grasp and sank upon his haunches from the strength of the heavy pressure, so that, crestfallen, his master was forced to lead him away.

Not one of them could stand the mighty weight of Rustem's hand.

By this time Rustem was very much discouraged and disappointed, for he knew not what he should do for a warhorse. But letting his eyes roam over the whole plain in one last review, he suddenly spied, beyond the tents of the Kabul traders, a mare and her colt feeding quietly on the hillside. The mare was gray, and though her height was

not remarkable, she looked as strong as a lioness.

But it was the colt that held Rustem's attention. It was a wonder, colored like a saffron ground scattered over with rose leaves, and not only its coloring was odd, but it appeared to have the strength of an elephant. It was as tall as a camel, as vigorous as a lion, and its eyes fairly beamed with intelligence. Its tail was long and arched, and its hoofs shone like steel.

Seeing all these points of value and beauty in the colt, hope blazed up in Rustem's heart, and turning quickly to the traders standing near, he asked: "Oh, sons of Kabul, unto whom does that gray mare belong over yonder feeding behind the tents? And whose is the colt following her? Verily, I see no mark upon their flanks."

The herdsmen shook their heads gravely and replied: "What mystery is hidden under all this we do not know, but of a truth it is the safest to leave them alone, for so savage is the gray mare she will tear the heart out of a lion and the skin from a leopard's back in defense of her foal."

No sooner had Rustem heard this startling account of the wonderful rose hued colt than he snatched a lasso from the nearest herdsman's hands, rushed quickly forward and without a sound of warning threw the noose over the head of the startled colt. A furious battle took place at once. The gray mare, seeing the foal attacked, rushed at Rustem like a wild elephant and tried to seize his head in her mouth.

Then, deftly, Rustem, with his bare fist, dealt the mare a blow on the head which rolled her over and over in the dust. When she got up she dragged herself off and hid among the herd. Rustem then tightened the lasso around the colt, laid his strong hand upon its neck and pressed him to his side. But Rakush (as Rustem then called him) did not bend nor pretend to feel the weight; one would have said he was unconscious of it.

With a great bound Rustem leaped upon his back and the rose colored steed bore him swiftly across the plains like the wind.

"At a word the colt turned and quickly trotted back to the city gates, where the vast crowd cheered mightily for Rustem and Rakush.

"Good herdsmen," said Zal, "what do you wish in exchange for this young dragon?" But the herdsmen turned quickly to Rustem and said gravely: "If thou art Rustem, mount him and retrieve the sorrows of Iran, for his price is the land of Persia, and, seated upon his back, no enemy can stand before thee."

Thus it was that Rustem won his great war horse,

Rakush, and none too soon, for in a short time the whole land of Iran was plunged into war and bloodshed. The great shah of the land of Iran had been informed by the Mubids that his end was near. He called his son Nuder, the young prince, to him, and gave him wise counsel. Then, when he had spoken, he closed his eyes and sighed, and lo! the whole world mourned that the shah was dead. And well they might all mourn, for Nuder, the prince, was tyrannical, cruel, hard hearted. Little did he care what effect his commands had upon his people!

So it came to pass that the nobles of the land came to Saum, Rustem's grandfather, and prayed that he would take the crown from Nuder and place it upon his own head. But old, honorable Saum was deeply grieved at such a request, and replied:

"Not so, oh men of might. I can not be untrue to my sovereign in my old age, after I have solemnly sworn loyalty, I and my house."

So Saum girded on his sword and taking with him a great retinue of warriors, journeyed across Persia and came to Nuder. Earnestly old Saum pleaded and Nuder listened to him and lessened his cruel tyranny. Then joy filled the land.

But the news of the tyranny and weakness of the new shah traveled to his enemies before he had reformed and soon reached to far Turan. The ruler of Turan, Poshang, had a son named Afrasaib, who was as strong as a lion and his shadow was said to extend for miles! When Afrasaib and his father heard of the great unrest in Persia under the new ruler they were delighted and at once made ready for war. Therefore, the Tartar hordes under their leaders, Poshang and Afrasaib, thousands of warriors, rushed with mighty ferocity across into Persia.

When Zal heard of Iran's sad plight and the number killed and wounded he called Rustem before him and said: "The times are perilous and Persia is looking to thee to save her from the hordes of the Tartars. The time has come, oh Rustem, when I must send thee and Rakush out to cope with the heroes."

Rustem joyfully replied: "Oh, my father, I know I am young, but it would be a disgrace to be afraid of Afrasaib. Give me thy blessing and send me forth. Then shall Persia be delivered."

When Afrasaib heard that Rustem was to meet him on the field the news did not disturb him. "Ho!" said he, "why should I fear? That son of Zal is only a child and the father is old and the grandfather dead. So let us feast and be merry!"

It was the time of roses and the air was filled with fragrance. Rustem marched in advance, but Zal in the midst of his men, with two noble warriors leading the wings.

Then they halted near the camp of the Tartars, who were not aware of the powerful host so near. And Zal, addressing his men, said: "Behold, we have a great and mighty army, but we suffer a disadvantage because we have no king."

"My son, I pray thee, depart at once for Mount Alborz, for my Mubids have told me that there dwells the Prince Kalkobad, who now should hold the crown and be our king. Do homage to him and tell him the Persian army is waiting for its king. We shall expect your return in 14 days."

Rustem hurried on with his bodyguard. He entered the splendid palace of Kalkobad, saluted the Prince and, bowing in highest respect, said: "Behold, I seek a youth named Kalkobad, whom Zal calleth to the Persians as their king."

The prince replied: "Oh, son of the white haired Zal, rejoice, for thy quest is ended, since I am Kalkobad."

Kalkobad swung himself into his saddle and in less than a week joined his brave countrymen around the outskirts of the Tartar camp. The next day the Tartar champion saw for the first time the mighty host of Persian warriors waiting their chance. At once this barbarous host was called to arms.

Into the fray dashed Rustem, with heart aglow and eyes afire.

Catching a trooper up from his horse, he struck his body against that of another trooper, dashing out his brains.

When Afrasaib heard of the awful slaughter that Rustem had accomplished, he in his tent at night determined to meet him in the morning.

After he had fought with Rustem he talked thus with old Poshang: "Father, there in the midst of the battle, Rustem beheld my standard and sprang to fight me. Long we fought. But suddenly Rustem seized me by my girdle, caught me from my horse with such force that hadst thou seen me thou wouldst have declared he held but a fly in his grasp. Then my girdle broke and down I fell ingloriously upon the bloody field. My bodyguard quickly rescued me. Now I say unto thee, father, quickly make peace with this lion of a Rustem and his shah."

Poshang, with sad eyes and an aching heart, bowed to the superiority of Rustem, the warrior, and signed the treaty of peace.

Thus was Persia saved by Rustem on his glorious war steed Rakush.