



# Rustem Accepts Sohrab's Challenge

THE  
ELEVENTH  
OF  
RUSTEM  
STORIES

RETOLD BY  
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THE morning after Kalkous had made peace with Rustem, the shah commanded the war clarions to be sounded throughout the city, calling the loyal sons of Iran to go forth to meet the Tartar host.

When the Persians arrived in the plains near the white fortress silently they set up their tents, planning a surprise for the Tartars.

Early in the morning the Tartar watchman upon the towers of the white fortress saw spread out upon the plains an immense white city, set up as if by magic.

Surprised and dismayed he gave a loud shout, which at once brought Sohrab and two great Tartar chiefs out upon the ramparts.

When Human saw upon every side the mighty Persian host, looking so brave and formidable, he suddenly grew pale and trembled like a leaf.

But Sohrab took a glass of wine, drank to their destruction and said:

"Look, brave Human! There are many men in this hostile army, but within its ranks I see no hero with mighty mace who can stand against the fearless son of Rustem! When that mighty champion himself appears then it will be time for us to rally our courage. But as for these others—why, they are but dogs!"

So saying Sohrab went down from the ramparts and invited his great warriors and chiefs to a banquet.

Gayly he issued his invitations, saying to his guests: "Today let us feast; let us banquet today, for tomorrow to battle we'll hasten away."

But—at Sohrab's banquet there was to be an uninvited guest! For when the night came Rustem the Mighty went boldly unto the shah, demanding permission to go unarmed to spy out the forces of the enemy and to learn the character of the chieftains opposed to him, particularly Sohrab, whose renown had aroused such dread in the heart of Kalkous. He was granted permission and, clad in the dress of a Tartar, under the cover of darkness he stole forth like a lion penetrating into the very presence of the great Sohrab and his warriors as they feasted.

Rustem stood by the door and saw that Sohrab was like a tall cypress of good sap, while round about him were seated more than 100 brave warriors, scarcely equaled in the Persian army.

It was indeed a festive scene! Torches gave back the flash of arms and the gleam of eyes eager for the morrow's battle. Beside the glorious fare to delight the appetites there was also sweet music to charm the ear.

All were filled with gaiety and merriment, never dreaming of the coming sorrow.

Now among Sohrab's guests was an old man, Zende, the brother of Sohrab's mother. Tamineh, the fond mother, had sent him forth to sacredly guard her boy during all dangers, and should the youth meet Rustem, old Zende was to warn him of their relationship before a tragedy occurred.

Rising from the banquet table Zende, unobserved and quietly, went out into the curtained vestibule.

He saw the shadow of one in ambush, and advancing to where Rustem was hiding, said quietly: "Vile Persian! Come forth into the light that I may see thy face. For well I know by thy stature that thou belongest to Iran."

Rustem did not reply, but, before Zende had ceased speaking, he struck the old man such a blow

on the nape of his neck that he laid him dead at his feet.

The merry makers did not know that the dark angel of death hovered about the door.

Presently Sohrab noticed that his uncle's place at table was vacant and asked why he delayed. One of the chiefs hastened out to seek him. In doing so he found the body of the unfortunate warrior cold upon the floor. Quickly returning to Sohrab in an awed voice he told of the fatal happening.

Sohrab would scarcely believe that right in their midst, without a cry or struggle, death could have come so suddenly to his uncle.

Commanding torches to be brought Sohrab, followed by all his warriors rushed out to find his devoted uncle in a pitiful state.

He turned to his nobles with tears in his eyes and cried: "Woe! Woe unto Turan. For behold the wolf hath stolen into the fold and in spite of shepherds and dogs, has taken the best of the flock. But, verily, God helping me, I will be fully avenged for the death of Zende!"

Sohrab then returned to his place at the banquet table and continued the feast. Although his own heart was heavy with sorrow, he did not wish the spirit of his warriors to be dampened by pity or fear of this terrible, silent, unknown foe. Raising his glass to his lips he cried lustily: "A toast, my brave comrades, 'Death to the slayer of Zende and destruction, utter and sure, unto the Persian host!'"

So the warriors and chiefs all drank, standing upon their feet and as the hours passed by Sohrab continued to fan into a more glowing flame the lust of battle which slumbered in every warrior's soul.

Now Sohrab and his mighty army occupied the white fortress as their starting point in the battle to be waged against the Persians. Although Sohrab was deeply grieved over his uncle's death, he thought it but folly to waste tears and time.

Before him, as far as eye could discern, stretched the Persian tents. Greatly disappointed was Sohrab the next morning after his uncle was murdered, that he could not learn from Hujir, the defeated champion of the white fort, which of the mighty warriors encamped upon the plains before them was Rustem, the great hero of Persia. Sohrab strongly suspected a certain great warrior in a green tent, who was indeed Rustem.

Defeated in this endeavor Sohrab entered the fort, donned his chain mail and arming himself, he and his band of sturdy warriors sallied out upon the plain. So sudden and swift was the rush of these warriors that the Persians were taken unawares and Sohrab was able to penetrate almost at once into their very center.

However, the Persians soon rallied. Then, so fearful was the contest that the very earth seemed to shake beneath the shock and the carnage was fearful.

All through the long hours of the battle, although Sohrab seemed to be everywhere upon the field, never once did he catch a glimpse of the owner of the green tent and much he wondered.

In spite of the day's successes, that night Sohrab lay wakeful in his tent, restlessly tossing upon his bed of skins, while busy thoughts surged through his mind.

As soon as the daylight appeared, he sought his old adviser, Piran-Wisa, and implored him thus for advice:

"O, glorious chief, whose wisdom hath ever been

my counsel! I would make known unto thee a plan which hath kept me wakeful upon my bed:

"I would have thee challenge the bravest of the Persian Pehliva to meet me, man to man, in single combat. If I prevail Rustem will surely learn of it; while if I fall, no man need hear of me again."

Piran-Wisa replied:

"My son, much I love thy valorous spirit, which hath striven and longed for the noblest and best. Nevertheless I counsel thee to think of thy mother and be content to share the common risks of battle. Or, if thou wouldst seek that loved father whom thou hast never seen, seek him where men say he dwelleth, in far off Seistar with his aged father, Zal."

But Sohrab passionately answered the old warrior: "Alas, good old Piran! canst thou not understand that I wish not to go to my father empty handed? I am so proud of him and with reason I must make him proud of his son also."

Piran-Wisa finally consented to Sohrab's plan and the old general summoned his herald and taking his ruler's staff, he went forth, marshaling the whole Tartar army upon the plain.

The Persians noticing this move of the enemy, also formed into battle array opposite, bright in burnished steel and splendid in rank upon rank of brave warriors.

When all was in readiness, Piran-Wisa advanced to the front, while the herald blew a blast upon his trumpet to make known that he had something to say.

Silence, deep and thrilling, reigned in both great armies as Piran, in ringing tones, offered Sohrab's challenge.

The Tartars rent the air with shouts and called their hero's name, for sincerely they felt no Persian hero could match their gallant leader.

Unexpected was this call to the Persians and as a consequence a deep silence reigned within the lines of Iran. So greatly was Sohrab feared that no man dared take up the challenge!

After their first shock of surprise, from mouth to mouth there was breathed the one word: "Rustem! Rustem!" So, quickly Kalkous sent a messenger to the great Pehliva, saying: "O mighty one. Come quickly, for behold, the faces of my warriors grow pale before this young Tartar and only thy sword can cause the sun to weep."

When Gudarz, Rustem's old friend, entered his tent to deliver the message, he frowned at its meaning, for well he remembered the cowardice of Kalkous, which made him sick with shame. Rustem made no reply but frowned and Gudarz continued:

"Truly this young hero is marvelous and this time Kalkous is not to be condemned for his terror. For as I live, the champion existeth not who can match Sohrab with the exception of Rustem, the mighty, unto whom all eyes turn."

Rustem, who was again angered at Kalkous, replied bitterly to Gudarz. But this excited and anxious messenger would not listen to Rustem when that hero spoke of delaying such a contest and cried:

"Take heed, Oh mighty one, lest men say that thou fearest to peril thy fame with a younger man!"

With a fierce frown of displeasure Rustem consented to meet the champion upon condition that he be allowed to fight unknown and in plain arms.

Quickly the nobles buckled upon him his armor, threw his leopard skin around him, saddled Rakush and made him ready for the strife.