

Story of sohrab and rustom essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ The young Sohrab was the fruit of one of Rustum’s early amours. He had left his mother, and sought fame under the banners of Afrasiab, whose armies he commanded, and soon obtained a renown beyond that of all contemporary heroes but his father. He had carried death and dismay into the ranks of the Persians, and had terrified the boldest warriors of that country, before Rustum encountered him, which at last that hero resolved to do, under a feigned name. They met three times. The first time they parted by mutual consent, though Sohrab had the advantage; the second, the youth obtained a victory, but granted life to his unknown father; the third was fatal to Sohrab, who, when writhing in the pangs of death, warned his conqueror to shun the vengeance that is inspired by parental woes, and bade him dread the rage of the mighty Rustum, who must soon learn that he had slain his son Sohrab. These words, we are told, were as death to the aged hero; and when he recovered from a trance, he called in despair for proofs of what Sohrab had said.

The afflicted and dying youth tore open his mail, and showed his father a seal which his mother had placed on his arm when she discovered to him the secret of his birth, and bade him seek his father. The sight of his own signet rendered Rustum quite frantic; he cursed himself, attempting to put an end to his existence, and was only prevented by the efforts of his expiring son. After Sohrab’s death, he burnt his tents and all his goods, and carried the corpse to Seistan, where it was interred; the army of Turan was, agreeable to the last request of Sohrab, permitted to cross the Oxus unmolested. To reconcile us to the improbability of this tale, we are informed that Rustum could have no idea his son was in existence. The mother of Sohrab had

written to him her child was a daughter, fearing to lose her darling infant if she revealed the truth; and Rustum, as before stated, fought under a feigned name, an usage not uncommon in the chivalrous combats of those days.” — Arnold.

And the first grey of morning filled the east,
And the fog rose out of the Oxus stream.
But all the Tartar camp along the stream
Was hushed, and still the men were plunged in sleep.
Sohrab alone, he slept not; all night long
He had lain wakeful, tossing on his bed;
But when the grey dawn stole into his tent,
He rose, and clad himself, and girt his sword,
And took his horseman's cloak, and left his tent,
And went abroad into the cold wet fog,
Through the dim camp to Peran-Wisa's tent.

Through the black Tartar tents he passed, which stood
Clustering like bee-hives on the low flat strand
Of Oxus, where the summer-floods o'erflow
When the sun melts the snows in high Pamere;
Through the black tents he passed, o'er that low strand,
And to a hillock came, a little back
From the stream's brink — the spot where first a boat,
Crossing the stream in summer, scrapes the land.
The men of former times had crowned the top

With a clay fort; but that was fallen, and now
The Tartars built there Peran-Wisa's tent,
A dome of laths, and o'er it felts were spread.
And Sohrab came there, and went in, and stood
Upon the thick piled carpets in the tent,
And found the old man sleeping on his bed
Of rugs and felts, and near him lay his arms.
And Peran-Wisa heard him, though the step
Was dulled; for he slept light, an old man's sleep;
And he rose quickly on one arm, and said: —

“ Who art thou? for it is not yet clear dawn.
Speak! is there news, or any night alarm?”
But Sohrab came to the bedside, and said: —

“ Thou knowest me, Peran-Wisa: it is I.
The sun is not yet risen, and the foe
Sleep; but I sleep not; all night long I lie
Tossing and wakeful, and I come to thee.

For so did King Afrasiab bid me seek
Thy counsel and to heed thee as thy son,

In Samarcand, before the army marched;
And I will tell thee what my heart desires.
Thou know'st if, since from Ader-baijan first
I came among the Tartars and bore arms,
I have still served Afrasiab well, and shown,
At my boy's years, the courage of a man.

This too thou know'st, that while I still bear on
The conquering Tartar ensigns through the world,
And beat the Persians back on every field,

I seek one man, one man, and one alone —
Rustum, my father; who, I hoped, should greet,
Should one day greet, upon some well fought field,
His not unworthy, not inglorious son.

So I long hoped, but him I never find.
Come then, hear now, and grant me what I ask.
Let the two armies rest to-day: but I

Will challenge forth the bravest Persian lords
To meet me, man to man: if I prevail,
Rustum will surely hear it; if I fall —
Old man, the dead need no one, claim no kin.
Dim is the rumour of a common fight,
Where host meets host, and many names are sunk:
But of a single combat fame speaks clear.”

He spoke: and Peran-Wisa took the hand
Of the young man in his, and sighed, and said: —
“ O Sohrab, an unquiet heart is thine!
Canst thou not rest among the Tartar chiefs,
And share the battle's common chance with us
Who love thee, but must press for ever first,
In single fight incurring single risk,

To find a father thou hast never seen?

That were far best, my son, to stay with us

Unmurmuring; in our tents, while it is war,

And when 'tis truce, then in Afrasiab's towns.

But, if this one desire indeed rules all,

To seek out Rustum — seek him not through fight:

Seek him in peace, and carry to his arms,

O Sohrab, carry an unwounded son!

But far hence seek him, for he is not here.

For now it is not as when I was young,

When Rustum was in front of every fray:

But now he keeps apart, and sits at home,

In Seistan, with Zal, his father old.

Whether that his own mighty strength at last

Feels the abhorred approaches of old age,

Or in some quarrel with the Persian King.

There go: — Thou wilt not? Yet my heart forebodes

Danger or death awaits thee on this field.

Fain would I know thee safe and well, though lost

To us: fain therefore send thee hence, in peace

To seek thy father, not seek single fights

In vain: — but who can keep the lion's cub

From ravening, and who govern Rustum's son?

Go, I will grant thee what thy heart desires."

So said he, and dropped Sohrab's hand, and left
His bed, and the warm rugs whereon he lay;
And o'er his chilly limbs his woollen coat
He passed, and tied his sandals on his feet,
And threw a white cloak round him, and he took
In his right hand a ruler's staff, no sword;
And on his head he set his sheep-skin cap,
Black, glossy, curled, the fleece of Kara-Kul;
And raised the curtain of his tent, and called
His herald to his side, and went abroad.

The sun by this had risen, and cleared the fog
From the broad Oxus and the glittering sands.
And from their tents the Tartar horsemen filed
Into the open plain; so Haman bade —
Haman, who next to Peran-Wisa ruled
The host, and still was in his lusty prime.
From their black tents, long files of horse, they streamed;
As when some grey November morn the files,
In marching order spread, of long-necked cranes
Stream over Casbin and the southern slopes

Of Elburz, from the Aralian estuaries,
Or some frore Caspian reed-bed, southward bound
For the warm Persian sea-board — so they streamed.
The Tartars of the Oxus, the King's guard,
First, with black sheep-skin caps and with long spears;

Large men, large steeds; who from Bokhara come
And Khiva, and ferment the milk of mares.
Next, the more temperate Toorkmuns of the south,
The Tukas, and the lances of Salore,

And those from Attruck and the Caspian sands;
Light men and on light steeds, who only drink
The acrid milk of camels, and their wells.
And then a swarm of wandering horse, who came
From far, and a more doubtful service owned;
The Tartars of Ferghana, from the banks
Of the Jaxartes, men with scanty beards
And close-set skull-caps; and those wilder hordes
Who roam o'er Kipchak and the northern waste,
Kalmucks and unkempt Kuzzaks, tribes who stray

Nearest the Pole, and wandering Kirghizzes,
Who come on shaggy ponies from Pamere;
These all filed out from camp into the plain.
And on the other side the Persians formed; —
First a light cloud of horse, Tartars they seemed,
The Ilyats of Khorassan, and behind,
The royal troops of Persia, horse and foot,
Marshalled battalions bright in burnished steel.

But Peran-Wisa with his herald came,
Threading the Tartar squadrons to the front,

And with his staff kept back the foremost ranks.

And when Ferood, who led the Persians, saw

That Peran-Wisa kept the Tartars back,

He took his spear, and to the front he came,

And checked his ranks, and fixed them where they stood.

And the old Tartar came upon the sand

Betwixt the silent hosts, and spake, and said: —

“ Ferood, and ye, Persians and Tartars, hear!

Let there be truce between the hosts to-day.

But choose a champion from the Persian lords

To fight our champion Sohrab, man to man.”

As, in the country, on a morn in June,

When the dew glistens on the pearled ears,

A shiver runs through the deep corn for joy —

So, when they heard what Peran-Wisa said,

A thrill through all the Tartar squadrons ran

Of pride and hope for Sohrab, whom they loved.

But as a troop of pedlars, from Cabool,

Cross underneath the Indian Caucasus,

That vast sky-neighbouring mountain of milk snow;

Crossing so high, that, as they mount, they pass

Long flocks of travelling birds dead on the snow,

Choked by the air, and scarce can they themselves

Slake their parched throats with sugared mulberries —

In single file they move, and stop their breath,

For fear they should dislodge the o'er hanging snows —
So the pale Persians held their breath with fear.

And to Ferood his brother chiefs came up
To counsel: Gudurz and Zoarrah came
And Feraburz, who ruled the Persian host
Second, and was the uncle of the King
These came and counseled; and then Gudurz said: —
“ Ferood, shame bids us take their challenge up,

Yet champion have we none to match this youth.
He has the wild stag's foot, the lion's heart.
But Rustum came last night; aloof he sits
And sullen, and has pitched his tents apart.
Him will I seek, and carry to his ear
The Tartar challenge, and this young man's name.
Haply he will forget his wrath, and fight.
Stand forth the while, and take their challenge up.”

So spake he; and Ferood stood forth and cried. —
“ Old man, be it agreed as thou hast said!
Let Sohrab arm, and we will find a man.”
He spoke: and Peran-Wisa turned, and strode
Back through the opening squadrons to his tent.
But through the anxious Persians Gudurz ran,
And crossed the camp which lay behind, and reached,

Out on the sands beyond it, Rustum's tents.
Of scarlet cloth they were, and glittering gay

Just pitched; the high pavilion in the midst
Was Rustum's, and his men lay camped around.
And Gudurz entered Rustum's tent, and found
Rustum; his morning meal was done, but still
The table stood before him, charged with food —
A side of roasted sheep, and cakes of bread,
And dark green melons; and there Rustum sate
Listless, and held a falcon on his wrist,
And played with it; but Gudurz came and stood
Before him; and he looked, and saw him stand,
And with a cry sprang up and dropped the bird,
And greeted Gudurz with both hands, and said: —

“ Welcome! these eyes could see no better sight.
What news? but sit down first, and eat and drink.”

But Gudurz stood in the tent-door, and said: —

“ Not now! a time will come to eat and drink,
But not to-day; to-day has other needs.

The armies are drawn out, and stand at gaze;
For from the Tartars is a challenge brought

To pick a champion from the Persian lords
To fight their champion — and thou know'st his name —
Sohrab men call him, but his birth is kid.

O Rustum, like thy might is this young man's!
He has the wild stag's foot, the lion's heart;
And he is young, and Iran's chiefs are old,
Or else too weak; and all eyes turn to thee.
Come down and help us, Rustum, or we lose!"

He spoke; but Rustum answered with a smile: —
" Go to! if Iran's chiefs are old, then I
Am older; if the young are weak, the King
Errs strangely; for the King, for Kai Khosroo,
Himself is young, and honours younger men,
And lets the aged molder to their graves.
Rustum he loves no more, but loves the young —

The young may rise at Sohrab's vaunts, not I.
For what care I, though all speak Sohrab's fame?
For would that I myself had such a son,
And not that one slight helpless girl I have,
A son so famed, so brave, to send to war,
And I to tarry with the snow-haired Zal,
My father, whom the robber Afghans vex,
And clip his borders short, and drive his herds,
And he has none to guard his weak old age.

There would I go, and hang my armour up,
And with my great name fence that weak old man,
And spend the goodly treasures I have got,

And rest my age, and hear of Sohrab's fame,
And leave to death the hosts of thankless kings,
And with these slaughterous hands draw sword no more."

He spoke, and smiled; and Gudurz made reply: —

" What then, O Rustum, will men say to this,
When Sohrab dares our bravest forth, and seeks
Thee most of all, and thou, whom most he seeks,
Hidest thy face? Take heed lest men should say:
Like some old miser, Rustum hoards his fame,
And shuns to peril it with younger men."

And, greatly moved, then Rustum made reply: —

" O Gudurz, wherefore dost thou say such words?
Thou knowest better words than this to say.
What is one more, one less, obscure or famed,
Valiant or craven, young or old, to me?

Are not they mortal, am not I myself?

But who for men of nought would do great deeds?
Come, thou shalt see how Rustum hoards his fame.
But I will fight unknown, and in plain arms;
Let not men say of Rustum, he was matched
In single fight with any mortal man."

He spoke, and frowned; and Gudurz turned, and ran
Back quickly through the camp in fear and joy,
Fear at his wrath, but joy that Rustum came.

But Rustum strode to his tent-door, and called
His followers in, and bade them bring his arms,
And clad himself in steel: the arms he chose
Were plain, and on his shield was no device,
Only his helm was rich, inlaid with gold,
And, from the fluted spine atop, a plume
Of horsehair waved, a scarlet horsehair plume.
So armed, he issued forth; and Ruksh, his horse,
Followed him, like a faithful hound, at heel,
Ruksh, whose renown was noised through all the earth,
The horse, whom Rustum on a foray once
Did in Bokhara by the river find
A colt beneath its dam, and drove him home,
And reared him; a bright bay, with lofty crest;
Dight with a saddle-cloth of brodered green
Crusted with gold, and on the ground were worked
All beasts of chase, all beasts which hunters know:
So followed, Rustum left his tents, and crossed
The camp, and to the Persian host appeared.
And all the Persians knew him, and with shouts
Hailed; but the Tartars knew not who he was.
And dear as the wet diver to the eyes
Of his pale wife who waits and weeps on shore,
By sandy Bahrein, in the Persian Gulf,

Plunging all day in the blue waves, at night,
Having made up his tale of precious pearls,
Rejoins her in their hut upon the sands —
So dear to the pale Persians Rustum came.

And Rustum to the Persian front advanced,
And Sohrab armed in Haman's tent, and came.
And as afield the reapers cut a swathe
Down through the middle of a rich man's corn,
And on each side are squares of standing corn,
And in the midst a stubble, short and bare;
So on each side were squares of men, with spears
Bristling, and in the midst, the open sand.
And Rustum came upon the sand, and cast
His eyes toward the Tartar tents, and saw
Sohrab come forth, and eyed him as he came.

As some rich woman, on a winter's morn,
Eyes through her silken curtains the poor drudge
Who with numb blackened fingers makes her fire —
At cock-crow, on a starlit winter's morn,
When the frost flowers the whitened window-panes —
And wonders how she lives, and what the thoughts
Of that poor drudge may be; so Rustum eyed
The unknown adventurous Youth, who from afar
Came seeking Rustum, and defying forth

All the most valiant chiefs: long he perused
His spirited air, and wondered who he was.
or very young he seemed, tenderly reared;
Like some young cypress, tall, and dark, and straight,
Which in a queen's secluded garden throws
Its slight dark shadow on the moonlit turf,
By midnight, to a bubbling fountain's sound —
So slender Sohrab seemed, so softly reared.
And a deep pity entered Rustum's soul
As he beheld him coming; and he stood,
And beckoned to him with his hand, and said: —

“ O thou young man, the air of Heaven is soft,
And warm, and pleasant; but the grave is cold.
Heaven's air is better than the cold dead grave.
Behold me: I am vast, and clad in iron,
And tried; and I have stood on many a field
Of blood, and I have fought with many a foe:
Never was that field lost, or that foe saved.
O Sohrab, wherefore wilt thou rush on death?
Be governed: quit the Tartar host, and come
To Iran, and be as my son to me,
And fight beneath my banner till I die.
There are no youths in Iran brave as thou.”

So he spake, mildly: Sohrab heard his voice,
The mighty voice of Rustum; and he saw

His giant figure planted on the sand,
Sole, like some single tower, which a chief
Has builded on the waste in former years
Against the robbers; and he saw that head,
Streaked with its first grey hairs: hope filled his soul,
And he ran forward and embraced his knees,
And clasped his hand within his own, and said: —
“ Oh, by thy father’s head! by thine own soul!
Art thou not Rustum? speak! art thou not he?”

But Rustum eyed askance the kneeling youth,
And turned away, and spake to his own soul: —

“ Ah me, I muse what this young fox may mean!
False, wily, boastful, are these Tartar boys.
For if I now confess this thing he asks,
And hide it not, but say — Rustum is here —
He will not yield indeed, nor quit our foes,
But he will find some pretext not to fight,
And praise my fame, and proffer courteous gifts,
A belt or sword perhaps, and go his way.

And on a feast-tide, in Afrasiab’s hall,
In Samarcand, he will arise and cry —
‘ I challenged once, when the two armies camped
Beside the Oxus, all the Persian lords
To cope with me in single fight; but they

Shrank, only Rustum dared; then he and I
Changed gifts, and went on equal terms away.’
So will he speak, perhaps, while men applaud;
Then were the chiefs of Iran shamed through me.”

And then he turned, and sternly spake aloud: —
‘ Rise! wherefore dost thou vainly question thus
Of Rustum? I am here, whom thou hast called
By challenge forth; make good thy vaunt, or yield!
Is it with Rustum only thou wouldst fight?
Rash boy, men look on Rustum’s face and flee

For well I know, that did great Rustum stand
Before thy face this day, and were revealed,
There would be then no talk of fighting more.
But being what I am, I tell thee this;
Do thou record it in thine inmost soul:
Either thou shalt renounce thy vaunt and yield,
Or else thy bones shall strew this sand, till winds
Bleach them, or Oxus with his summer-floods,
Oxus in summer wash them all away.”

He spoke; and Sohrab answered, on his feet: —
“ Art thou so fierce? Thou wilt not fright me so!
I am no girl, to be made pale by words.
Yet this thou hast said well, did Rustum stand
Here on this field, there were no fighting then.

But Rustum is far hence, and we stand here.

Begin! thou art more vast, more dread than I,

And thou art proved, I know, and I am young —

But yet success sways with the breath of Heaven.

And though thou thinkest that thou knowest sure

Thy victory, yet thou canst not surely know.

For we are all, like swimmers in the sea,

Poised on the top of a huge wave of fate,

Which hangs uncertain to which side to fall.

And whether it will heave us up to land,

Or whether it will roll us out to sea,

Back out to sea, to the deep waves of death,

We know not, and no search will make us know;

Only the event will teach us in its hour.”

He spoke, and Rustum answered not, but hurled

His spear; down from the shoulder, down it came,

As on some partridge in the corn a hawk,

That long has towered in the airy clouds,

Drops like a plummet; Sohrab saw it come,

And sprang aside, quick as a flash; the spear

Hissed, and went quivering down into the sand,

Which it sent flying wide: — then Sohrab threw

In turn, and full struck Rustum’s shield; sharp rang,

The iron plates rang sharp, but turned the spear.
And Rustum seized his club, which none but he
Could wield: an unlopped trunk it was, and huge,
Still rough — like those which men in treeless plains
To build them boats fish from the flooded rivers,
Hyphasis or Hydaspes, when, high up
By their dark springs, the wind in winter-time
Hath made in Himalayan forests wrack,
And strewn the channels with torn boughs; so huge

The club which Rustum lifted now, and struck
One stroke; but again Sohrab sprang aside,
Lithe as the glancing snake, and the club came
Thundering to earth, and leapt from Rustum's hand.
And Rustum followed his own blow, and fell
To his knees, and with his fingers clutched the sand;
And now might Sohrab have unsheathed his sword,
And pierced the mighty Rustum while he lay
Dizzy, and on his knees, and choked with sand;
But he looked on, and smiled, nor bared his sword,
But courteously drew back, and spoke, and said: —

“Thou strik'st too hard: that club of thine will float
Upon the summer-floods, and not my bones.
But rise, and be not wroth! not wroth am I;
No, when I see thee, wrath forsakes my soul.
Thou say'st, thou art not Rustum: be it so!

Who art thou then, that canst so touch my soul?

Boy as I am, I have seen battles too;

Have waded foremost in their bloody waves,

And heard their hollow roar of dying men;

But never was my heart thus touched before.

Are they from Heaven, these softenings of the heart?

O thou old warrior, let us yield to Heaven!

Come, plant we here in earth our angry spears,

And make a truce, and sit upon this sand,

And pledge each other in red wine, like friends,

And thou shalt talk to me of Rustum's deeds.

There are enough foes in the Persian host,

Whom I may meet, and strike, and feel no pang;

Champions enough Afrasiab has, whom thou

Mayst fight; fight them, when they confront thy spear!

But oh, let there be peace 'twixt thee and me!"

He ceased, but while he spake, Rustum had risen,

And stood erect, trembling with rage; his club

He left to lie, but had regained his spear,

Whose fiery point now in his mailed right-hand

Blazed bright and baleful, like that autumn-star,

The baleful sign of fevers; dust had soiled

His stately crest, and dimmed his glittering arms.

His breast heaved, his lips foamed, and twice his voice

Was choked with rage: at last these words broke way: —

“ Girl! nimble with thy feet, not with thy hands!
Curled minion, dancer, coiner of sweet words!
Fight; let me hear thy hateful voice no more!
Thou art not in Afrasiab’s gardens now
With Tartar girls, with whom thou art wont to dance;
But on the Oxus-sands, and in the dance
Of battle, and with me, who make no play
Of war; I fight it out, and hand to hand.
Speak not to me of truce, and pledge, and wine!
Remember all thy valour; try thy feints
And cunning: all the pity I had is gone:
Because thou hast shamed me before both the hosts
With thy light skipping tricks, and thy girl’s wiles.”

He spoke, and Sohrab kindled at his taunts,
And he too drew his sword; at once they rushed
Together, as two eagles on one prey
Come rushing down together from the clouds,
One from the east, one from the west; their shields
Dashed with a clang together, and a din
Rose, such as that the sinewy woodcutters
Make often in the forest’s heart at morn,
Of hewing axes, crashing trees: such blows
Rustum and Sohrab on each other hailed.
And you would say that sun and stars took part
In that unnatural conflict; for a cloud

Grew suddenly in Heaven, and darked the sun
Over the fighters' heads; and a wind rose
Under their feet, and moaning swept the plain,
And in a sandy whirlwind wrapped the pair.
In gloom they twain were wrapped, and they alone;
For both the on-looking hosts on either hand
Stood in broad daylight, and the sky was pure,
And the sun sparkled on the Oxus stream.
But in the gloom they fought, with bloodshot eyes
And labouring breath; first Rustum struck the shield
Which Sohrab held stiff out; the steel-spiked spear
Rent the tough plates, but failed to reach the skin,

And Rustum plucked it back with angry groan.
Then Sohrab with his sword smote Rustum's helm,
Nor clove its steel quite through; but all the crest
He shore away, and that proud horsehair plume,
Never till now defiled, sank to the dust;
And Rustum bowed his head; but then the gloom
Grew blacker, thunder rumbled in the air,
And lightnings rent the cloud; and Ruksh, the horse,
Who stood at hand, uttered a dreadful cry:

No horse's cry was that, most like the roar
Of some pained desert-lion, who all day
Hath trailed the hunter's javelin in his side,
And comes at night to die upon the sand: —

The two hosts heard that cry, and quaked for fear,
And Oxus curdled as it crossed his stream.
But Sohrab heard, and quailed not, but rushed on,
And struck again; and again Rustum bowed
His head; but this time all the blade, like glass,
Sprang in a thousand shivers on the helm,
And in the hand the hilt remained alone.

Then Rustum raised his head; his dreadful eyes
Glared, and he shook on high his menacing spear,
And shouted, Rustum! Sohrab heard that shout,
And shrank amazed: back he recoiled one step,
And scanned with blinking eyes the advancing form:
And then he stood bewildered; and he dropped

His covering shield, and the spear pierced his side.
He reeled, and staggering back, sank to the ground.
And then the gloom dispersed, and the wind fell,
And the bright sun broke forth, and melted all
The cloud; and the two armies saw the pair;
Saw Rustum standing, safe upon his feet,
And Sohrab, wounded, on the bloody sand.

Then, with a bitter smile, Rustum began: —
“ Sohrab, thou thoughtest in thy mind to kill
A Persian lord this day, and strip his corpse,
And bear thy trophies to Afrasiab's tent.

Or else that the great Rustum would come down
Himself to fight, and that thy wiles would move
His heart to take a gift, and let thee go.
And then that all the Tartar host would praise
Thy courage or thy craft, and spread thy fame,
To glad thy father in his weak old age.
Fool, thou art slain, and by an unknown man!
Dearer to the red jackals shalt thou be
Than to thy friends, and to thy father old.”

And, with a fearless mien, Sohrab replied: —
“ Unknown thou art; yet thy fierce vaunt is vain.
Thou dost not slay me, proud and boastful man!
No! Rustum slays me, and this filial heart.
For were I matched with ten such men as thee,
And I were that which till to-day I was,
They should be lying here, I standing there.
But that belovèd name unnerved my arm —
That name, and something, I confess, in thee,
Which troubles all my heart, and made my shield
Fall; and thy spear transfixed an unarmed foe.
And now thou boastest, and insultest my fate.
But hear thou this, fierce Man, tremble to hear!
The mighty Rustum shall avenge my death!
My father, whom I seek through all the world,
He shall avenge my death, and punish thee!”

As when some hunter in the spring hath found
A breeding eagle sitting on her nest,
Upon the craggy isle of a hill-lake,
And pierced her with an arrow as she rose,
And followed her to find her where she fell
Far off; — anon her mate comes winging back
From hunting, and a great way off descries
His huddling young left sole; at that, he checks
His pinion, and with short uneasy sweeps

Circles above his eyry, with loud screams
Chiding his mate back to her nest; but she
Lies dying, with the arrow in her side,
In some far stony gorge out of his ken,
A heap of fluttering feathers: never more
Shall the lake glass her, flying over it;
Never the black and dripping precipices
Echo her stormy scream as she sails by: —
As that poor bird flies home, nor knows his loss —
So Rustum knew not his own loss, but stood
Over his dying son, and knew him not.

But, with a cold, incredulous voice, he said: —
“ What prate is this of fathers and revenge?
The mighty Rustum never had a son.”

And, with a failing voice, Sohrab replied: —

“ Ah yes, he had! and that lost son am I.

Surely the news will one day reach his ear,

Reach Rustum, where he sits, and tarries long,

Somewhere, I know not where, but far from here;

And pierce him like a stab, and make him leap

To arms, and cry for vengeance upon thee.

Fierce man, bethink thee, for an only son!

What will that grief, what will that vengeance be?

Oh, could I live, till I that grief had seen!

Yet him I pity not so much, but her,

My mother, who in Ader-baijan dwells

With that old king, her father, who grows grey

With age, and rules over the valiant Koords.

Her most I pity, who no more will see

Sohrab returning from the Tartar camp,

With spoils and honour, when the war is done.

But a dark rumour will be bruited up,

From tribe to tribe, until it reach her ear;

And then will that defenseless woman learn

That Sohrab will rejoice her sight no more,

But that in battle with a nameless foe,

By the far-distant Oxus, he is slain.”

He spoke; and as he ceased, he wept aloud,

Thinking of her he left, and his own death.

He spoke; but Rustum listened, plunged in thought.

Nor did he yet believe it was his son

Who spoke, although he called back names he knew;

For he had had sure tidings that the babe,

Which was in Ader-baijan born to him,

Had been a puny girl, no boy at all —

So that sad mother sent him word, for fear

Rustum should seek the boy, to train in arms;

And so he deemed that either Sohrab took,

By a false boast, the style of Rustum's son;

Or that men gave it him, to swell his fame.

So deemed he; yet he listened, plunged in thought;

And his soul set to grief, as the vast tide

Of the bright rocking Ocean sets to shore

At the full moon; tears gathered in his eyes;

For he remembered his own early youth,

And all its bounding rapture; as, at dawn,

The Shepherd from his mountain lodge descries

A far, bright City, smitten by the sun,

Through many rolling clouds; — -so Rustum saw

His youth; saw Sohrab's mother, in her bloom;

And that old king, her father, who loved well

His wandering guest, and gave him his fair child

With joy; and all the pleasant life they led,

They three, in that long-distant summer-time —

The castle, and the dewy woods, and hunt
And hound, and morn on those delightful hills
In Ader-baijan. And he saw that Youth,

Of age and looks to be his own dear son,
Piteous and lovely, lying on the sand,
Like some rich hyacinth, which by the scythe
Of an unskillful gardener has been cut,
Mowing the garden grass-plots near its bed,
And lies, a fragrant tower of purple bloom,
On the mown, dying grass; — so Sohrab lay,
Lovely in death, upon the common sand.
And Rustum gazed on him with grief, and said: —

“ O Sohrab, thou indeed art such a son
Whom Rustum, wert thou his, might well have loved!
Yet here thou errest, Sohrab, or else men
Have told thee false; — thou art not Rustum’s son.
For Rustum had no son; one child he had —
But one — a girl: who with her mother now
Plies some light female task, nor dreams of us —
Of us she dreams not, nor of wounds, nor war.”

But Sohrab answered him in wrath; for now
The anguish of the deep-fixed spear grew fierce,
And he desired to draw forth the steel,
And let the blood flow free, and so to die;

But first he would convince his stubborn foe —

And, rising sternly on one arm, he said: —

“ Man, who art thou who dost deny my words?

Truth sits upon the lips of dying men,

And Falsehood, while I lived, was far from mine.

I tell thee, pricked upon this arm I bear

That seal which Rustum to my mother gave,

That she might prick it on the babe she bore.”

He spoke: and all the blood left Rustum’s cheeks;

And his knees tottered, and he smote his hand

Against his breast, his heavy mailed hand,

That the hard iron corslet clanked aloud:

And to his heart he pressed the other hand,

And in a hollow voice he spake, and said: —

“ Sohrab, that were a proof which could not lie.

If thou show this, then art thou Rustum’s son.”

Then, with weak hasty fingers, Sohrab loosed

His belt, and near the shoulder bared his arm,

And shewed a sign in faint vermilion points

Pricked: as a cunning workman, in Pekin,

Pricks with vermilion some clear porcelain vase,

An emperor’s gift — at early morn he paints,

And all day long, and, when night comes, the lamp

Lights up his studious forehead and thin hands: —

So delicately pricked the sign appeared
On Sohrab's arm, the sign of Rustum's seal.
It was that griffin, which of old reared Zal,
Rustum's great father, whom they left to die,
A helpless babe, among the mountain rocks.
Him that kind creature found, and reared, and loved —
Then Rustum took it for his glorious sign.
And Sohrab bared that image on his arm,
And himself scanned it long with mournful eyes,
And then he touched it with his hand and said: —
“ How say'st thou? Is that sign the proper sign
Of Rustum's son, or of some other man's?”

He spoke; but Rustum gazed, and gazed, and stood
Speechless; and then he uttered one sharp cry —
O Boy — thy Father! — and his voice choked there.
And then a dark cloud passed before his eyes,
And his head swam, and he sank down to earth.
But Sohrab crawled to where he lay, and cast
His arms about his neck, and kissed his lips,
And with fond faltering fingers stroked his cheeks,
Trying to call him back to life; and life
Came back to Rustum, and he oped his eyes,
And they stood wide with horror; and he seized
In both his hands the dust which lay around,
And threw it on his head, and smirched his hair, —

His hair, and face, and beard, and glittering arms:
And strong convulsive groanings shook his breast,
And his sobs choked him; and he clutched his sword,
To draw it, and for ever let life out.

But Sohrab saw his thoughts, and held his hands
And with a soothing voice he spake, and said: —

“ Father, forbear: for I but meet to-day
The doom which at my birth was written down
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven’s unconscious hand.
Surely my heart cried out that it was thou,
When first I saw thee; and thy heart spoke too,
I know it: but fate trod those promptings down
Under its iron heel; fate, fate engaged
The strife, and hurled me on my father’s spear.
But let us speak no more of this: I find
My father; let me feel that I have found!
Come, sit beside me on this sand, and take
My head betwixt thy hands, and kiss my cheeks,
And wash them with thy tears, and say: My son!
Quick! quick! for numbered are my sands of life
And swift; for like the lightning to this field
I came, and like the wind I go away —
Sudden, and swift, and like a passing wind.
But it was writ in Heaven that this should be.”

So said he, and his voice released the heart
Of Rustum, and his tears broke forth; he cast
His arms round his son's neck, and wept aloud,
And kissed him. And awe fell on both the hosts,
When they saw Rustum's grief; and Ruksh, the horse,
With his head bowing to the ground and mane
Sweeping the dust, came near, and in mute woe
First to the one then to the other moved
His head, as if enquiring what their grief
Might mean; and from his dark, compassionate eyes,
The big warm tears rolled down, and caked the sand.
But Rustum chid him with stern voice, and said: —

“ Ruksh, now thou grieveest; but, O Ruksh, thy feet
Should first have rotted on their nimble joints,
Or ere they brought thy master to this field!”

But Sohrab looked upon the horse and said; —
“ Is this, then, Ruksh? How often, in past days
My mother told me of thee, thou brave steed,
My terrible father's terrible horse! and said,
That I should one day find thy lord and thee.
Come, let me lay my hand upon thy mane!
O Ruksh, thou art more fortunate than I;
For thou has gone where I shall never go,
And snuffed the breezes of my father's home.
And thou hast trod the sands of Seistan

And seen the River of Helmund, and the Lake
Of Zirrah; and the aged Zal himself
Has often stroked thy neck, and given thee food,
Corn in a golden platter soaked with wine,
And said: O Ruksh! bear Rustum well! — but I
Have never known my grandsire's furrowed face,
Nor seen his lofty house in Seistan,
Nor slaked my thirst at the clear Helmund stream;
But lodged among my father's foes, and seen
Afrasiab's cities only, Samarcand,
Bokhara, and lone Khiva in the waste,
And the black Toorkmun tents; and only drunk
The desert rivers, Moorghab and Tejend,
Kohik, and where the Kalmuks feed their sheep,
The northern Sir; and this great Oxus stream,
The yellow Oxus, by whose brink I die."

Then, with a heavy groan, Rustum bewailed: —

" Oh, that its waves were flowing over me!
Oh, that I saw its grains of yellow silt
Roll, tumbling in the current o'er my head!"

But, with a grave mild voice, Sohrab replied: —

" Desire not that, my father! thou must live.
For some are born to do great deeds, and live,
As some are born to be obscured, and die.
Do thou the deeds I die too young to do,

And reap a second glory in thine age;
Thou art my father, and thy gain is mine.
But come! thou seest this great host of men
Which follow me; I pray thee, slay not these!
Let me entreat for them; what have they done?
They followed me, my hope, my fame, my star.
Let them all cross the Oxus back in peace.
But me thou must bear hence, not send with them,
But carry me with thee to Seistan,
And place me on a bed, and mourn for me,
Thou, and the snow-haired Zal, and all thy friends.
And thou must lay me in that lovely earth,
And heap a stately mound above my bones,
And plant a far-seen pillar over all.
That so the passing horseman on the waste
May see my tomb a great way off, and cry:
Sohrab, the mighty Rustum's son, lies there,
Whom his great father did in ignorance kill —
And I be not forgotten in my grave.”

And, with a mournful voice, Rustum replied: —
“ Fear not! as thou hast said, Sohrab, my son,
So shall it be; for I will burn my tents,
And quit the host, and bear thee hence with me,
And carry thee away to Seistan,
And place thee on a bed, and mourn for thee,

With the snow-headed Zal, and all my friends.
And I will lay thee in the lovely earth,
And heap a stately mound above thy bones,
And plant a far-seen pillar over all,
And men shall not forget thee in thy grave.
And I will spare thy host; yea, let them go!
Let them all cross the Oxus back in peace!
What should I do with slaying any more?
For would that all whom I have ever slain
Might be once more alive; my bitterest foes
And they who were called champions in their time,
And through whose death I won that fame I have —
And I were nothing but a common man,
A poor, mean soldier, and without renown,
So thou mightest live too, my Son, my Son!
Or rather would that I, even I myself,
Might now be lying on this bloody sand,
Near death, and by an ignorant stroke of thine,
Not thou of mine! and I might die, not thou;
And I, not thou, be borne to Seistan;
And Zal might weep above my grave, not thine;
And say — O son, I weep thee not too sore,
For willingly, I know, thou met'st thine end. —
But now in blood and battles was my youth,
And full of blood and battles is my age,
And I shall never end this life of blood.”

Then, at the point of death, Sohrab replied: —

“ A life of blood indeed, thou dreadful man!

But thou shalt yet have peace; only not now,

Not yet! but thou shalt have it on that day,

When thou shalt sail in a high-masted ship,

Thou and the other peers of Kai Khosroo,

Returning home over the salt blue sea,

From laying thy dear master in his grave.”

And Rustum gazed in Sohrab’s face, and said: —

“ Soon be that day, my Son, and deep that sea!

Till then, if fate so wills, let me endure.”

He spoke; and Sohrab smiled on him, and took

The spear, and drew it from his side, and eased

His wound’s imperious anguish; but the blood

Came welling from the open gash, and life

Flowed with the stream: all down his cold white side

The crimson torrent ran, dim now and soiled,

Like the soiled tissue of white violets

Left, freshly gathered, on their native bank,

By children whom their nurses call with haste

Indoors from the sun’s eye; his head drooped low,

His limbs grew slack; motionless, white, he lay —

White, with eyes closed; only when heavy gasps,

Deep, heavy gasps, quivering through all his frame,

Convulsed him back to life, he opened them,

And fixed them feebly on his father's face;
Till now all strength was ebb'd, and from his limbs
Unwillingly the spirit fled away,
Regretting the warm mansion which it left,
And youth, and bloom, and this delightful world.

So, on the bloody sand, Sohrab lay dead;
And the great Rustum drew his horseman's cloak
Down o'er his face, and sate by his dead son.
As those black granite pillars, once high-reared
By Jemshid in Persepolis, to bear
His house, now 'mid their broken flights of steps
Lie prone, enormous, down the mountain side —
So in the sand lay Rustum by his son.

And night came down over the solemn waste,
And the two gazing hosts, and that sole pair,
And darkened all; and a cold fog, with night,
Crept from the Oxus. Soon a hum arose,
As of a great assembly loosed, and fires
Began to twinkle through the fog; for now
Both armies moved to camp, and took their meal:
The Persians took it on the open sands
Southward; the Tartars by the river marge:
And Rustum and his son were left alone.

But the majestic River floated on,
Out of the mist and hum of that low land,
Into the frosty starlight, and there moved,
Rejoicing, through the hushed Chorasmian waste,
Under the solitary moon: — he flowed
Right for the polar star, past Orgunjè,
Brimming, and bright, and large: then sands begin
To hem his watery march, and dam his streams,
And split his currents; that for many a league
The shorn and parcelled Oxus strains along
Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles —
Oxus, forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain-cradle in Pamere,
A foiled circuitous wanderer: — till at last
The longed-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bathed stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.