

§ 28

How Rustam fought with Ashkabús

A warrior named Ashkabús, whose voice
 Was like a kettledrum's, came forth to challenge
 The Íránians, bent to lay some foeman's head
 In dust. He cried: "Which of you famous men
 Will come to fight with me, that I may make
 His blood to flow in streams?"

Ruhhám on hearing V. 948

Sent up his battle-cry, stormed like the sea,
 Took up his bow—the horseman's ambushade—
 And showered arrows on that famous chief,
 But he was clad in panoply of steel,
 And arrows were like wind upon his tunic.
 Ruhhám then raised his massive mace. The hands
 Of both grew weary, but Ruhhám's mace failed
 Upon the other's helm, much as he sought
 To deal a fatal blow, till Ashkabús,
 His heavy mace in hand, while earth seemed iron
 And heaven ebony, smote brave Ruhhám
 Upon the helm and smashed it, who thus worsted
 Wheeled round and sought the heights. Tús at the
 centre

Raged and spurred forth to go at Ashkabús,
 But matchless Rustam said to him in wrath:—
 "Ruhhám's fit comrade is a bowl of wine.
 He holdeth swords as playthings in his cups,
 And vaunteth of himself among the brave;
 Now whither hath he gone, who was a match
 For Ashkabús, with cheeks like sandarach?
 Keep in the army's centre—thy fit place—
 And I will fight afoot."

He slung his bow
 Upon his arm, stuck arrows in his belt,

And shouted, saying : " O thou man of war !
Thine adversary cometh : go not back."

He of Kashán laughed in astonishment,
Then checked his steed and, calling to his foe,
Said, laughing still, to him : " What is thy name,
And who will mourn thee when thy head is off ?"

V. 949

The peerless Rustam answered : " Hapless one !
Why askest thou my name among the folk ?
My mother called me by this name—' Thy death !'
Fate made me for the hammer of thy helm."

He of Kashán replied : " Without a horse
Thou givest up thyself to slaughtering !"

Then peerless Rustam : " Senseless challenger !
Hast thou ne'er seen foot-soldiers lay proud heads
Beneath the stones ? Do lions, crocodiles,
And leopards fight on horseback in thy country ?
Now I, foot-soldier as I am, will teach
Thee how to fight, O mounted warrior !
Tús for this purpose sent me forth afoot
That I might get a horse from Ashkabús.
He of Kashán like me will foot it then,
And all will laugh at him. Afoot one man
Is worth three hundred cavaliers like thee
Upon this plain, this day, and in this fight."

He of Kashán inquired : " Where are thine arms ?
I see not aught but mockery and jests."

Quoth Rustam : " Thou shalt see the bow and arrows
Whereby thy life shall end."

He marked the pride
Of Ashkabús in his fine steed, and shot
An arrow at its breast ; the charger fell
Headforemost. Rustam laughed and cried aloud :—
" Sit by thy noble comrade ! Prithee nurse
Its head and rest thee from the fight awhile."

V. 950

Then Ashkabús, his body quivering,
His face like sandarach, strung up his bow,

And showered shafts on Rustam, who exclaimed :—
 “In vain thou weariest thy wicked soul,
 Thine arms, and body.”

Choosing from his girdle
 A shaft of poplar wood he drew it forth
 Bright-pointed, feathered with four eagle-plumes ;
 Then took his bow of Chách in hand and set
 His thumbstall to the deer-hide string ; he straightened
 His left arm, curved his right ; the bent bow sang ;
 The shaft's point reached his ear ; the deer-hide
 hummed ;
 The shaft's point bussed his finger and its notch
 Was at his back ; he loosed and struck the breast
 Of Ashkabús ; the sky kissed Rustam's hand ;
 Then destiny cried : “Take !” and fate cried : “Give !”
 The heavens cried : “Excellent !” the angels : “Good !”
 He of Kashán expired, thou wouldst have said :—
 “His mother never bare him !”

Both the hosts
 Beheld that fight. Kámús marked with the Khán
 The lofty stature, strength, and fire of Rustam,
 And, when he had withdrawn, the Khán dispatched
 A cavalier, who drew the arrow forth
 All bloody to the plumes ! They passed it round
 And thought it was a spear ! The Khán's heart aged
 When he beheld the feathers and the point.
 He spake thus to Pírán : “Who is this man ?
 What is his name among the Íránian chiefs ?
 ‘They are a paltry remnant,’ were thy words,
 ‘Not on a par with men of high degree,’
 Whereas their arrows are like spears ! A mountain
 Hath little heart to fight them ; thou didst make
 The matter small indeed, but thine account
 Was false throughout !”

V. 951

“None know I of this class,”
 Pírán replied, “within the Íránian host,