

Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends  
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[1919]

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## Abi Fressah's Feast

There was not in the whole city of Bagdad a greedier man than Abi Fressah, and you may be sure he was not popular. It was not that he was rich and refused to give heed to the needs of the poor. He was, in truth, a merchant in moderately affluent circumstances, and he did not withhold charity from the deserving; but he was a man of enormous appetite and did not scruple to descend to trickery to secure an invitation to a meal.

So skilful, indeed, did he become in wheedling these favors from his friends and from those with whom he traded, that he devoted the major portion of each day to feeding and left himself little time to attend to his business affairs. Moreover, he grew unpleasantly fat. His face was red and bloated with much wine drinking. He was not a nice person to look upon at all, and those who had aforesaid been his friends came to the conclusion that the day had arrived when he should be taught a severe lesson.

And so it came to pass that when Abi Fressah was standing in the bazaar at the hour of the mid-day meal and eagerly scanning the crowd to discover some acquaintance whom he could induce to ask him to dinner, he saw Ben Maslia, one of the wealthiest and most generous of men in Bagdad.

"Ah, my excellent friend," Abi cried, warmly greeting Ben Maslia, "'tis almost an eternity since nay unworthy eyes were cast upon thy pleasant countenance. Peace be on thee and thine unto the end of days."

"Also to thee," returned Ben Maslia.

"And whence comest thou? And whither goest thou, oh most hospitable friend?" Abi Fressah asked these questions hastily, his beady eyes searching the other's face hungrily for a sign upon which he could seize to invite himself to a meal. "It is the hour of the mid-day meal. Goest thou, perchance, to thy pious home?"

"Thither go I," said Ben Maslia.

"My path lies in the same direction," said Abi Fressah. "It will be pleasant to walk together. Come," and he grasped Ben Maslia by the arm.

"It is kind of thee, friend Abi Fressah," rejoined the other, "but I have built me a new abode on the other side of the city."

Abi Fressah's face fell for a moment, but he was clever enough to take advantage of the news.

"A new dwelling erected by the wealthy Ben Maslia," he said, winningly, "must be a building of magnificence, worth seeing."

"Indeed it is as thou sayest," cried the other enthusiastically, and forthwith he launched into a lavish description of his residence.

Abi Fressah grew impatient when Ben Maslia began to describe each room in detail, his hunger increased when, in glowing words, his friend painted the gorgeous dining-room, and his mouth watered at the information that the cellars were stocked with a thousand bottles of wine.

"Blessings on thee and thy wine-cellar and thy house," murmured Abi Fressah, when he could get in a word. "I have no business of consequence to transact this afternoon. I could not pay thee a better compliment than to spend it examining thy treasures."

"Of a certainty thou couldst not," assented the other, to his great glee.

"Then let us proceed," said Abi Fressah.

So they set out, Ben Maslia still continuing his glowing account of his wonderful house.

"It must be as spacious as a palace," put in Abi Fressah.

"Thou speakest truth," agreed Ben Maslia. "I will illustrate to thee the vast expanse of my new residence."

He stopped in his walk, measured one hundred paces in the street, and intimated that this represented the width of the central courtyard.

Abi Fressah was overwhelmed with surprise, but he was growing momentarily hungrier, and it was with difficulty he could restrain his impatience.

"Yes, yes," he said, "I would fain gaze upon the outer door of thy dwelling."

"Such an outer door," said Ben Maslia, "hast thou never seen. Its width. . ." and again he began to measure the street to indicate its dimensions.

"And further," he added, calmly, either failing to notice, or deliberately overlooking Abi Fressah's growing distress, "its shape and design are . . .!" and he dragged the other through several streets until he found a door to which he could point as being not altogether unlike his own.

"But I weary thee," he said, suddenly, as if regretful of the time he had wasted.

"Nay, nay, not at all," Abi Fressah assured him, although he was inwardly fuming at the delay.

"Thy descriptions delight me immeasurably. Thou hast not yet unfolded to me the wonders of thy dining-room."

Thereupon Ben Maslia took up the tale of the dining-room and its furniture, and he dragged his companion half a mile out of their path to show him the furniture emporium where he had purchased the tables and the couches. Then he retraced his steps to point out a building from which he had borrowed certain ideas of decoration.

Abi Fressah's fat body was unused to such exertion. He perspired freely, his legs tottered beneath him, and his tongue was parched. He was really very uncomfortable, and the pangs of hunger from which he suffered were not lessened when Ben Maslia stopped outside a restaurant to speak to a friend who was just going in.

The conversation was prolonged, and all the time Abi Fressah's nose was tickled by the smell of the cooking. He endured agonies, especially when the friend invited Ben Maslia to dine with him, and Ben Maslia, after a few moment's hesitation, firmly declined.

"I must apologize to thee for this delay," said Ben Maslia, when at length he left his friend, "but the matter was urgent. I will make up to thee by the magnificence of the feast."

Abi Fressah thanked him cordially for his consideration, but his pain was intense when Ben Maslia insisted on giving him fullest particulars of all the dishes he would enjoy.

"Yes, yes," Abi kept saying, but Ben Maslia stayed his interruptions.

"Thy dwelling is far from the center of the city," Abi Fressah managed to say at last.

"That is a virtue," commented Ben Maslia, and he followed it up with the advice given to him by a renowned physician that a house was healthiest when it stood alone, away from the busy haunts of men. To all this and more, Abi Fressah was compelled to listen. His whole fat body ached with weariness, he was tortured by a raging thirst, and he fancied he felt himself growing thinner--so fearfully hungry was he.

The sun was sinking when at last they reached the house, and Abi Fressah was afraid for a moment that his host would enlarge upon its architecture. To his relief, however, they entered straightway, and Ben Maslia said to him, "Thou must be fatigued after thy walk. Rest awhile."

Abi Fressah was truly grateful, and taking off his shoes he stretched himself on a comfortable couch. He dozed for a while, but was awakened by the noise of clattering dishes and the smell of savory cooking. He almost forgot his unpleasant afternoon in the prospect of the coming feast, but Ben Maslia came not. Abi Fressah soon felt angry. He could not restrain himself from banging a big brass gong to summon a servant. But although he banged several times, no servant answered the call. Abi Fressah nearly shed tears in his despair.

Suddenly Ben Maslia appeared before him.

"I thought I would give thee ample rest," he said suavely. "Come, we must perform our ablutions."

Abi Fressah would have preferred to have dispensed with this ceremony, but he could not offend his host by declining to conform to the custom of the period. Ben Maslia led the way to the bath-chamber, and there they spent quite an hour. Then, thoroughly refreshed, the host said, "Now I will show thee the wonders and beauties of my domain."

Abi Fressah was almost stupefied with hunger, but he had to permit himself to be led through each room and to hear again the praises that had already been poured into his ears all the afternoon. Only the smell of the cooking fortified his spirit and enabled him to undergo the ordeal. He seemed to wake up from a stupor when his host opened a door and exclaimed, "This is the feasting-chamber."

A scene of splendor burst upon the eyes of Abi Fressah. He rubbed his hands in glee and was ready to forget and forgive the discomforts of the past few hours. The dining-room presented a magnificent appearance, with its gorgeous hangings, its many lamps, and its marble floor. But these things Abi Fressah scarcely noted. His gaze was promptly directed on the table.

It was spread with the most sumptuous repast that ever he had seen. There were dishes upon dishes of tasty sweetmeats, huge platters of luscious fruits, many bottles of wine, and covered bowls from which arose the most appetizing aroma. Abi Fressah's mouth began to twitch and his eyes glowed. He moved forward to a seat.

"Good friend," said his host, "let me first introduce to your notice my staff of servants."

He clapped his hands, and immediately, in quite startling fashion, a dozen servants stepped from behind the hangings which had hidden them and bowed before their master. With a dozen attendants to wait upon him, Abi Fressah saw that he was going to enjoy a meal worthy of the occasion. He looked upon the slaves with satisfaction.

"Note, my worthy Abi Fressah," said Ben Maslia, "that this is no ordinary retinue of servants. Each one comes from a different part of the known world. Rosh, the big man there, head of them all, is the only native of Bagdad. He has an interesting history. He has been in my service since his birth. His father was likewise in the service of my sainted father, and his grandfather . . . But let that suffice. I would not imprison thy appetite longer. Sheni--that is the second servant, the big black Nubian there--bring hither the first dish."

Sheni took up one of the dishes from the table and placed himself by the side of his master.

"Stands he not well?" asked Ben Maslia, in admiring tones. "He is a descendant of kings. In ancient days his ancestors sat on a throne and ruled over a huge territory beyond the deserts of Africa. I obtained him during my journey in that country. And on that occasion I discovered this beautiful rug in a shop in Cairo."

Saying which, Ben Maslia rose from his seat and fingered lovingly one of the hangings of the room. Abi Fressah did not rise. He was trying to keep his temper. The dish which Sheni held so tantalizingly under his very nose made him mad with hunger and desire.

But Ben Maslia took no heed. He began to dilate upon the virtues of another piece of tapestry.

"This," he said, "I bought in the famous bazaar of Damascus. It is hundreds of years old. And in that city, too, I became possessed of my third servant, Shelishi there, a true-born son of the Holy Land and the keeper of my camels. Our meeting was an adventure . . .

Abi Fressah was not listening. This was beyond endurance. He felt that soon he would collapse in a faint on the floor. And still Ben Maslia droned on. There was a servant from China and also a cunningly wrought vase from that land; a brown page boy in a red turban from India from which land his host had also brought the lamp standing in the center of the table and some of the flowers which adorned the room.

"You would not guess," he was saying, "that many of these blooms are not natural. They are artificial but mixed so skillfully with the real that even experts would be deluded."

By this time Abi Fressah was beyond the power of speech. Two or three times, he tried to speak but could not. He was really too weak. Never in his life before had he been so hungry, so tortured. It was some time, however, before Ben Maslia noticed his plight.

"Art thou ill?" he exclaimed. "That grieves me. But, fortunately, I have in the house an experienced apothecary who can apply leeches and relieve thee of foul blood."

"No, no," pleaded the unhappy Abi Fressah, finding his tongue at this dismal prospect.

"Perchance a glass of rare cordial will revive thee," said Ben Maslia, taking one of the bottles from the table.

Abi Fressah managed to gasp the word "Yes," and Rosh held a goblet into which Ben Maslia poured a rich, red fluid.

"Drink this," he said kindly, holding the cup to his guest's lip.

"At last," thought Abi Fressah, as he opened his mouth.

The next moment he sprang from his stool with astonishing agility, spluttering and cursing. The liquid was bitter in the extreme, the taste it left in his mouth most horrid.

"Now I know I have been hoodwinked," he screamed in rage, and he dashed toward the outer door.

"Stay, stay--what ails thee?" cried Ben Maslia.

"Stop, stop," echoed the servants, as Abi Fressah commenced to run.

The cry was taken up in the street by those who saw a fat man panting along in the darkness, pursued by a number of servants.

"Stop thief!" was the cry of one man in his excitement. The town guards heard, and without any ado they seized Abi Fressah and hauled him off to the jail. In vain he begged for mercy and struggled for freedom.

"If thou wilt not behave, we shall use force," the guards said, and they beat him with staves.

At the jail, Abi Fressah was flung into a cell, and there, on a bed of straw on the ground, he spent a horrible, sleepless night. He ached in every bone in his body, he was bruised all over, and his hunger was such that he felt he had never eaten in his life. His reflections were sad, as you may well imagine, and they led him to a vow that never again would he seek the hospitality of his friends. He realized at last that he had made himself obnoxious and had been cleverly and deservedly well punished.

Even yet his sufferings were not at an end, for next morning, when he was released and sent for his physician, the latter prescribed a diet of gruel and barley water for a whole week!