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A Speculative Arab Tale by Marian Vayreda

*Translation by Sara Martín and introductory note by Mariano
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Stories set among Arab Bedouins, both ancient pagans and modern Muslims, could hardly qualify as speculative fiction, being recognisably set in our primary world. Some of them, however, are closer to secondary world fantasy insofar as their invented proper names and other textual hints suggest that those Arabs of fiction are not those of history, but rather the denizens of an imaginary, subcreated civilization, such as those featuring in some exotic tale from the *Arabian Nights*. A good example of this kind of narrative is “Conte àrab”, in English *Arab Tale*, written in

Catalan by Marian Vayreda (1853-1903), who published it in 1893 under the pseudonym *Tarik*.¹ This penname was probably intended to enhance the plausibility of the supposed Arabic origin of the text. Its setting in a desert oasis and its description of the way of life and the appearance of the camp of an Arab tribe led by an elderly patriarch correspond to the common image of the Bedouin world, as transmitted by Arab history and literature to Western orientalists. The use of untranslated Arabisms also contributes to that plausibility. However, the consequent realist effect is limited to the

¹ The original bears the title, in slightly modified Spanish, “Quento árabe,” as it appears in the text published in the magazine *L’Olotí*, vi, 305 (1.10.1893), pp. 476-478. The English translation by Sara Martín here presented is based on the modernized version titled “Conte àrab” from the volume *El roure dels penjats* (The Oak of the Hanged), edited by Albert Mestres and published in Barcelona by Lapslàtzuli in 2016, pp. 64-66. All footnotes are by the translator.

narrative framework that precedes the tale itself, which is presented as an oral history transmitted by the old tribal chief as a lesson for his relatives and servants.

This story is an “Arab tale” due to its origin, but what is told takes place in an imaginary Middle Eastern land where an invented nation, the Krumirs, live, subjected to the ruler of yet another imagined place, called Helzurm. These persons seem to be ancient Arabs, since there is in the tale a caliph and Allah is worshipped, although this is not necessarily the God of Islam, but perhaps the pagan god that used to exist in Arabia. This does not alter, however, the fact that their civilization seems to have been invented using a procedure common in speculative fantasy. This consists in combining features from different ancient cultures to subcreate a secondary world of an eclectic nature, which is also historically impossible in the primary world. In this “Arab Tale” we can see that there are scribes and pharisees, who play no role as such in a proper Islamic society as the Krumirs are supposed to be. This is not an authorial error, but rather Vayreda’s way to suggest that his political parable is not to be read as limited to Islam but endowed with the universality of any good (high) fantasy story.

This Arab tale dispenses with any private history in its presentation of a collective process of an almost exclusively political nature. The painting of the defective personality of the protagonist offers a cynical view of the practice of power. The Krumirs are subjects in a distant monarchical regime, headed by a caliph, who exercises his authority through the

governors and sheiks that he sends to them. When any of the sheiks becomes unbearable, the Krumirs ask for him to be promoted and sent elsewhere, while the local patricians (the scribes and Pharisees of the tale) keep their very real grip on power. In this context, even a well-meaning new authority would be unable to improve the common lot of the Krumirs. The scribes and pharisees serving as intermediaries between the common people and the leader sent by the sovereign raise a metaphorical fence isolating governors from their local subjects. After the current sheik fails in overcoming the social barrier built around him by the powerful locals and is replaced in turn, his essential powerlessness is shown by his leaving the city unaccompanied and snubbed, while the patricians welcome a new governor, thus highlighting an everlasting cycle of bad governance. The Krumirs cannot escape their sad fate unless they get rid of their own predatory elites, but these know too well how to behave to preserve their power. This situation surely mirrored that of Catalonia and Spain in Vayreda’s times. However, the exotic and speculative setting of this “Arab Tale” confers it a much broader scope. The imaginary place is a metaphor showing that the portrayed power dynamics were (and are) unfortunately common to any place where civilization has given birth to politics, as well as to corrupt and manipulative intellectual and social elites. The invented Krumirs have never existed as such, but they are found everywhere under the name of any nation from the past, the present and, most likely, the future.

MARIAN VAYREDA

Arab Tale

The little old man Abu-Alifar had just drunk his *nabith*² from a terracotta bowl and his granddaughter Kara, a beautiful twelve-year-old brunette, had just picked up the remains of the frugal repast, consisting of dates and white wheat bread soaked in camel milk. The sun, already setting, still reddened the sky and marked with a dark line the far away horizon, which melted with the limits of the desert. The palms of the oasis stood out smugly against the fiery red sky. Abu-Alifar's tent shone with its light tan fabric against a greyish hedgerow of mastic and wild privet, through which one might glimpse rather than see some carefully tended small fields.

The hour was silent and peaceful. One could only hear the bitter moaning of the wooden pulley that the women used to draw

the water to fill in the drinking troughs previous to the arrival of the cattle, and, weakened by the distance, the melodious sounds of the bells of the sheep that the shepherds guided towards the folds sheltered by the camp.

Eventually, the women and children gathered around the patriarch waiting for the hour to wind down and, making the most of the occasion, prepared to listen to the tale with which old Abu-Alifar daily regaled their ears and strengthened their morals.

"Today," he said, "I'll tell you the story of Aben-Solim, the sheik of the tribe of the Krumirs. These persons occupy a small city set at the bottom of a rich valley on the mountains of Katsala. Their lands are fertile and well-watered, the climate is sweet though their habits, once pure and simple, are now much

² Wikipedia explains that Nabīth (Arabic: نبيث [na'bi:ð]) is a traditional fermented drink from the Arabian Peninsula made from dates (or raisins) steeped in water. Though usually non-intoxicating, "if left for a certain period of time, it can turn mildly intoxicating, or heavily intoxicating depending on the level of fermentation" [Accessed 1 March 2026].

spoiled owing to foreign elements that have been for them elements of perversion.

They finally got tired of their sheik, and, asking the caliph of Helzurm, their king, for help, they told him:

‘We can’t suffer the sheik any more that you gave us to dispense justice. His hands can’t hold the rod. He’s a drunkard. Promote him.’

The caliph, a providence for all his vassals, found the complaints of the Krumirs fair and rid them of their sheik, whom he promoted to the highest rank, moving him to another tribe where *nabith* and *lakim*¹ were more abundant.

The new sheik, Aben-Solim, arrived full of good intentions and started working with much ardour on the administration of justice.

Seeing this, some scribes and pharisees met and agreed:

‘We must make the new sheik ours, or our barns won’t fill up, and our water mills won’t spin.’

And they formed a solid fence around Aben-Solim, so that those who wanted to reach the hall of justice had to leave pieces of fabric and of meat.

Sometimes voices of protest and alarm reached Aben-Solim. Yet the scribes and pharisees reassured him:

‘These are your enemies. They speak out of envy. Don’t listen to them.’

In the meantime, the sheik enjoyed himself like a young prince. He earned two and spent four. Some bemoaned the situation. Others proposed asking for their sheik to be promoted. But many said: ‘There’s nothing to be done!’

One day, the sheik went to his friends and told them:

‘I must leave the tribe of the Krumirs. The caliph has promoted me, and I have orders to

occupy my new position in eight days. I find myself lacking resources for my journey and see to my obligations, and I hope you will provide for me.’

They replied:

‘We have carried you on our shoulders long enough. You’re today a tree with no shade. Your rod is no longer useful for shaking the acorns to feed our pigs. Don’t ask us for anything else.’

Aben-Solim addressed other persons he believed indebted to him, yet one claimed his wife was in labour, others were away travelling and nobody was home.

He also appealed to persons that lived beyond the compound, but they told him:

‘We have nothing!’

Defeated and humiliated, Aben-Solim prepared to travel as well as he could and left through the Western gate.

Before losing from sight the small city of the Krumirs, he exclaimed, tearing up:

‘May Allah watches over you, dear tribe, and brings you better luck. I’m sorry for the bad example I’ve given you and everything I’ve neglected. But please, know that you keep in your core enough elements of perversion to fear your future. To you, friends one day and my enemies today, I wish that my successor places his rod over your heads and his feet over your throats so that you never cloud the very pure water of the Krumir tribe like salamanders born of pestilent wells.’

Thus he spoke addressing the scribes and pharisees. But they couldn’t hear him. They were at the Eastern gate, waiting for the new sheik to arrive.”

¹ *Lakim* possibly alludes to *lahmacun*, “a Middle Eastern flatbread topped with minced meat (most commonly beef or lamb), minced vegetables, and herbs such as onions, garlic, tomatoes, red peppers, and parsley, flavored with spices such as chili pepper and paprika, then baked” (Wikipedia). [Accessed 1 March 2026].