

SPANISH TRADITIONAL TALES IN THE SOUTHWEST

Arthur L. Campa

The ART of storytelling was widespread at one time in the Spanish Southwest. *Contar cuentos* was an attribute which young people expected in their elders, and few indeed were the old uncles, aunts, and grandparents who could not sit in the patio on summer evenings, or by the fireplace in winter, and begin with the delightful “*Este era un rey* (Once there was a king)...”

When families went calling, there was no baby sitter to stay with the children and *sit*; the children went along too. When they arrived, and before the older folks could alight from the buckboard, buggy, or wagon, the children were already scampering down to join their young hosts at a hayloft, under some cottonwood tree, or in any hideout where their privacy would not be invaded by oversolicitous parents steeped in child psychology. There was the usual *Ron chipi ron* (run sheep run), *Escondidas* (hide-and-see), and *La patada del bote* (kick the can), but when everyone grew tired of playing they would collect in some comfortable spot, where darkness would lend enchantment, and tell stories in rotation. There was hardly a boy who did not know the stories of *Juan el Oso* (John the Bear), *El caballito de Troya*, *Los llanos de Berlín y las cuevas de Quiquiriquí*, as well as whole series of stories of kings, princesses in distress, and giants.

The one whose turn it was would ask: “Have you heard the one about the little dove that turned into a princess when the prince stroked her?” A short synopsis finally brought a decision from the crowd: “*Ése, ése, cuéntanos ése* (That’s it, tell us that one!).” And so he would begin: “*Este era un rey...*” Little fellows too sat around in a tight circle and imagined that all they heard was true. Later these youngsters would pass on these same *cuentos* to another generation. Finally, when the hero married the princess, the storyteller would run through this epilogue: “*Y entro por un callejón colorado, y salgo por un amarillo, y cuéntame uno mejor que el mío* (I enter through a red alley, and come out of a yellow one,

and now you tell me one better than mine).” Everyone drew a deep breath, while the next child started another tale, until it was time for the visitors to go home.

In the villages or in larger cities, there was always an old man who sat in the neighborhood grocery, surrounded by children eager to listen to his unending repertoire of *cuentos*. How much he actually knew from tradition and how much he invented as he went along, no one knew, but with his slow and nostalgic monotone he carried young people into the land of make-believe night after night. Sometimes he exacted a cigarette for every story told. “I can’t recall these stories unless I am smoking,” he would say, and his listeners kept him supplied far into the night, until a parent’s call to bed broke the charm.

From storytellers such as these, on a Texas ranch or in the mountains of New Mexico, I have collected or recalled folk tales, including the one below. No attempt has been made to compare them to any great extent with the well-known indexes of Aarne and Thompson, or to classify them according to theme. They are part of the Spanish traditions of the Southwest.

LOS TRES HERMANOS **(The Three Brothers)**

Many, many years ago, when there were giants on the earth, there lived a widower who had three sons. They were very poor, and managed to make a living by selling apples from a tree in their yard. One year, just as they were getting ready to pick the apples and take them to market, they noticed that the apples began to disappear every night. They didn’t know who could be taking them, so the father told his oldest son to watch the tree that night and see who was stealing the apples. The oldest boy watched late into the night, but he became so tired that he went to sleep. The next morning there were some apples missing, but the son had not seen the robber. The next oldest was placed in the patio to guard the apple tree, but he too grew sleepy and never saw the one who stole their apples by night. Finally, the youngest son begged his father to let him watch, but the father told him: “Son, your older brothers haven’t been able to find the robber; what can you do who are so young?” The young son insisted so much that, finally, the father gave in and let him watch that very night.

The young boy went up into the apple tree and fastened his little hammock among the branches, and as soon as it got dark, he placed a pillow covered with pins like a pincushion, took his violin and his pet cat with him and began to play to himself while his father and brothers slept. He played and played, and when he began to nod, the pins would prick him, and he would wake up again and play some more. He played all night, but early in the morning, while it was still very dark, he noticed that his little cat began to spit and arch his back. He laid down his violin, picked up his machete and waited. Suddenly, he felt the earth tremble and realized that someone was approaching nearer and nearer. The leaves on the tree began to rustle as the apples were being plucked, and, finally, he saw a great big hand, with fingers like the branches of the tree reach close to him to pluck an apple. He swung at it with his machete, and hit it. The giant howled, and ran off thinking that he had been bitten by some poisonous snake.

The young boy climbed down from the apple tree, and went into the house to call his father and brothers who had been awakened by the terrible cries of the giant. They started out following the bloody track left by the giant, and followed it for three days. On the third day, they arrived at the foot of a high mountain, and when they climbed it they came upon a large cave where the giant had entered. Then the sons and the father brought a heavy rope and a large bell. On this rope the oldest son was let down into the cave, but after he had gone down some distance, he became frightened and rang the bell so the others would pull him up. The second son tried to go down, but although he went a little further, he too, rang the bell, and they pulled him back up. The youngest insisted so much that the father gave in and let him go down into the cave. Before leaving, he told them to lower him faster whenever he rang the bell. First, he passed through a very hot fire that singed his hair. He kept on ringing until he came to a very strong wind that almost blew him off, but he kept going down until he hit the bottom of the cave. There he saw a beautiful palace. He went in unnoticed and entered the first room he came to. There he saw a beautiful princess seated on a rich throne. "Leave this place immediately, my good boy, or he who watches me will kill you!" said the princess. The young boy asked her who watched over her and where he kept his life. She told him that a wild tiger was her guardian and that his life was in his left eye. Then the boy hid behind the door and waited for the tiger. As the tiger came growling, he shot an arrow through the door crack and hit him squarely in the eye. The tiger fell

dead, and the boy took the princess to the bell, tied her to it and pulled the rope, so his brothers and his father would pull her up. Before going up, she gave him her ring as a token.

He went back into a second room, and there he found another princess even more beautiful than the one he had sent up. She, too, warned him about the fierce lion who watched over her, but also told him that he carried his life in his left paw. The young boy took his machete and hid behind the door. Just as the lion stepped into the doorway, he cut off his left paw, and the lion fell dead. He took her too, and put her on the bell, but before sending her up he received her ring as a token. The third room he entered was occupied by the prettiest princess he had ever seen, and she fell in love with him. She told him that the giant himself watched her and was very jealous. In the cave there was also an old woman; the minute he saw her he was to take off his shirt and turn it inside out, for she was a witch. He went out to look for her and did as he was told when he saw her. The old witch turned into a mouse, but the boy's little cat caught it and brought it back to him. The mouse begged the boy not to kill her. If he did, she could not tell the boy how to kill the giant. The giant had a coin in his pocket with which it was possible to do anything. During the night, the mouse stole the coin and brought it to the boy. The next day he challenged the giant, but when he saw the young boy he began to laugh. He took his big club and swung at the boy, and every time he swung at him the boy would disappear. The giant got angry and began to swing wildly until he fell exhausted to the ground. The boy took his machete and chopped off the giant's head, and then went back to the bell to send up the young princess. She, too, gave him a token and promised to see him again.

When the bell came back he tied a big rock to it that weighed the same as he did, because he was suspicious of his older brothers. Hardly had the bell gone up a mile, when it came tumbling down. The little boy was very sad to know that his family had played this trick on him, so he sat down and unconsciously began to rub the coin he had taken from the giant. Suddenly, he heard a voice calling to him: "What does my master wish?" "I want to get out of here," he answered. At the same time, he saw an enormous eagle perched near by. She told him to kill a cow and to place the carcass and himself on her back, because the journey was very long. The young boy, with the aid of his magic coin, loaded the carcass on the eagle's back. The eagle took to the air with the boy and the carcass and began to circle up and up in the cave. After

a while she got hungry and called: "*Carne!*" The young man took his machete, cut a piece of beef, and fed it to her. The more they flew, the more the eagle would call for meat, and by sundown she had eaten all the beef. The young boy began to get worried, thinking that the eagle might want to eat him, but just then he saw the king's castle below. As soon as they came down, the young boy went to a little hut on the edge of the woods where an old couple lived alone. He knocked at the door and asked them for lodging. The old couple liked him, and let him stay that night and many more.

One day, the boy noticed that the old man was very worried at the supper table and did not feel like eating. "What's the trouble?" he asked. "There is no use telling you, son," he answered. "The king has ordered me to make a throne exactly like the one the oldest princess had in the giant's cave where she was a prisoner. If I don't have it ready by tomorrow, I'll be hanged."

"Don't worry, just ask the king to send you a wagonload of bronze and another of walnuts. You go on to bed, and I'll make the throne for you," said the boy. The old man did as he was told and then went to bed. The young boy went into the old man's shop, for he was a silversmith, and began to crack nuts. The old man heard the pounding and thought the boy was working. Meanwhile, the boy rubbed his magic coin and brought the eagle to him.

He sent him back to the cave to bring the oldest princess' throne. Before midnight, the eagle was back with the throne, and when the old man got up, he was surprised to see the throne already finished. He was very happy, because now he would not be hanged, and he had all the bronze left over.

As soon as the next youngest princess saw her sister's throne, she became jealous and wanted one like the one she had in the cave. The king sent word to the old silversmith to make another throne or be hanged at sunrise. This time he was sure he could not carry out the king's wishes, but again the boy told him what to do. Early in the morning the eagle brought back the silver throne of the second princess, and the old man's life was spared. By now the old couple had a wagonload of bronze and another one of silver, so they were very rich. That same day, one of the king's messengers arrived with another request from the youngest princess. She wanted a golden throne like the one she had left in the giant's cave.

Again, the boy told the old man to ask the king for a wagonload of gold and one of walnuts. He called the eagle when it was dark and told him to bring the last throne. By daybreak the following day, the eagle had not yet arrived with the throne, so the boy began to worry. Finally, he looked out the window and saw the sun coming up, but still the eagle was not in sight. He kept looking at the sun and noticed that it was moving toward him. It was the eagle carrying the golden throne.

The princesses were very happy with their new thrones. The king announced that he was giving three special bullfights in honor of the princesses and the three men they were to marry soon. The old man and the old lady were invited to the bullfights, and they asked their adopted son to go, but he told them he was too tired.

The last bull was so fierce that the matadors could not kill him. They were about to give up when a matador on horseback jumped into the bull ring, saluted the king, and, after a few passes, dropped the bull in his tracks with one thrust. The king ordered the matador to be brought before him, but he jumped over the wall and disappeared. When the old couple came home they told the boy about the wonderful young bullfighter who had arrived so mysteriously and had disappeared before anyone could see who he was. On each of three successive nights a bullfight was given by the king for each of his daughters, and each time the young matador after making a beautiful kill would jump over the wall and disappear. On the third night, however, he rode his horse to where the princesses were sitting and threw his cap on the youngest princess' lap. Again he made his kill, and when the king asked him to come before him he obeyed. As he passed by his brothers and his father they acted as though they did not know him. He told the king that he had rescued the three princesses, but the king asked him to prove it, so he took out the three rings which the princesses had given to him in the cave. They told the king that it was true, and the youngest one insisted that she wanted to marry the young boy. His brothers were about to protest, when he took his magic coin and broke it in three pieces. All three of the traitors dropped dead, and the boy married the youngest princess.

There are similar Puerto Rican tales known as "El caballo de siete colores," "El caballo misterioso," and many others. Although none of these versions is so long as the New Mexican story given here, they are very closely related.¹ In "El caballo de siete colores" the father has the three sons, but it is an enchanted horse which comes to the fields to

eat the crops. The two older brothers are likewise unsuccessful in their attempts to capture the intruding horse, but the youngest boy, with the aid of his violin, hammock and pincushion, is able to stay awake all night and capture the horse. After the capture of the enchanted horse, the story is entirely different from the New Mexican version.

The search for the giant and the rescue of the three princesses are two incidents unknown to the Puerto Rican tales. The bull fight at the end of the story may be an indication of the story's recent origin. This same story is found in the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, Mexico.

NOTES

- ¹J. Alden Mason, "El caballo de siete colores," in Puerto-Rican Folk-Tales, JAFL, Vol. 38 (1925), 583.

