

PACO AND THE BULL AND THE SEVEN ROBBERS

In Jalisco, in Mexico, the men called *charros* spend all day on their horses, throwing their lassos and practicing their tricks. They like to ride all over the many ranches, herding the hundreds of cattle that look like ants on the hillsides. It was here that Paco, who was seven or eight or maybe even nine, used to live with his father in a little one-room house. It was small, with a hole in the roof, but it was just right for them.

Paco's father worked for a rancher, caring for more cows than Paco could count. Paco got to help too, and he loved learning about horses and lassos and riding and herding. He loved to go to his classes in the day and listen to the *mariachi* music at night.

Paco's father also took care of a bull. This bull had no name, but it was the biggest, strongest, meanest bull that Paco had ever seen. It lived in a pen across from Paco's house, and Paco's father always kept the gate locked tight. Everyone in the village was afraid of the bull.

Paco liked to watch the bull from the fence. But there was a rule to never ever go inside the pen—it was too dangerous. Even Paco's father, when he fed the bull, threw the food over the fence without going in. The bull ate grass, hay, and straw, but it especially liked carrots.

One night, just like every other night, Paco's father made tortillas and beans for dinner. "Do we have any cheese tonight, Papa?" asked Paco.

"Not tonight, Paco, remember?" said his father. "We ate it all two days ago, and there is no money to buy any more."

After dinner Paco did some math problems then stayed up late practicing with his whip—he wanted to make a *CRACK* sound with it like his father could do, but he never could. "Time for bed, Paco," said his father. "I am sure you will crack the whip tomorrow." So Paco put on his nightshirt, brushed his teeth, and climbed into bed, the whip tucked snugly by his side.

For a little while his father sat by the stove counting the coins in the coin bag. Then he gently pushed the bag beneath the pillow under Paco's head. He put on his nightshirt, turned off the lantern, and climbed in next to his son.

Outside, a cool breeze blew the hair on the sleeping bull's enormous back.

In the bushes on the other side of the bull's pen, something moved. A voice said, "They turned the light off. That means they are in bed." A man stepped out of the leaves into the moonlight, then another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another. They were seven outlaws, and for months and months they had been robbing people in their houses, taking everything they owned and carrying it back to their secret hideout. The police could not catch them, and many poor villagers had been left with nothing. And now the robbers were looking at the house of Paco and his father.

They tiptoed up to the window and peaked inside. Paco and his father were both fast asleep.

One of the men opened the window and climbed inside. He crept over to the door and let the other robbers in. One by one they crept inside, careful not to make a sound. They each had a big empty sack that they started filling with Paco's things.

They found the extra tortillas. Into the sack. They found Paco's math book. Into the sack. They found Paco's father's work boots. Into the sack. They found everything in the house, and everything went into the sack.

All they left was the bed, the sheet, and the pillow where Paco and his father were sleeping. Besides that the room was empty. The seven robbers picked up seven very full sacks and started to sneak back out the door. One, two, three, four, five, six went outside. The last robber turned and slid his hand underneath the pillow. He smiled a crooked smile as he pulled the coin bag out and put it in his sack.

When he got outside, the other men were jumping up and down. "Ha, ha! We did it again!" cried one. "They will never catch us—we are too sneaky and too smart. We are the greatest robbers ever. We could steal anything in the whole wide world!"

The others cheered, then they swung their heavy sacks onto their backs and started for home. But as they passed the gate of the bull's pen one of them looked inside and saw the bull sleeping in the moonlight. Then he had an idea.

"Look, everybody," he said. "Look at the size of that bull. If we stole him too, *he* could carry our sacks. We'd be able to steal twice as much and not even get tired."

The others stopped and looked at the bull. The smallest robber said, "I don't know. He looks pretty big, and those horns look pretty sharp."

The others nodded, so the first robber said, "We can sneak in there while he is sleeping and tie him up with this lasso we just stole. After all, we are the sneakiest, quietest robbers in all of Mexico."

Well, that was certainly true, so they all agreed. They set down their big heavy sacks and started to climb over the fence.

Inside, Paco was cold. The robbers had forgotten to close the door and now a cool breeze was blowing on Paco's bare feet. He opened his eyes and saw that everything was gone.

"Papa, wake up!" he yelled. His father sat up and reached for the lantern, but it was missing too. So were his shoes, his lasso, and even his pants.

"Oh, Paco, we are ruined!" said his father.

"We must go after the robbers and stop them!" said Paco.

"No, no. How can we? There are many of them and only two of us. They are surely far away by now, and they did not even leave our shoes. We cannot find them and how would we catch them even if we did?"

"I do not know, Papa," said Paco, "But I am going to try!" Paco grabbed his whip and dashed out the door before his father could stop him.

He ran across the field, trying to guess which way the robbers had gone. Then he saw the seven sacks sitting in front of the bull's gate. He ran up and looked inside one. "These are our things," he said. He dumped the first sack out then opened the second.

All this time the robbers had been standing around the bull, each trying to decide how to tie it without waking it. "Wrap up its horns good and tight," whispered one. "Then it will not matter if it wakes up, at least we can keep those from moving."

"That will not work," said another. "You must tie its feet first and then its horns."

Paco looked up. He thought he heard the robbers talking, but it was coming from the bull's pen, and nobody would go in there, not even a robber. Still, he climbed up on the fence and peered into the pen. He could not believe it. There were the seven robbers, standing around the bull, arguing. One was tying the horns and one was tying the feet and the other five were each pulling in different directions. It was too bad the bull was asleep, Paco thought. If it woke up, those robbers would learn a lesson they would not soon forget.

Paco's eyes lit up. That was it! Wake up the bull! All he needed was to make a loud sound. He needed something noisy to do it with. He jumped down and started looking through the piles on the ground. A hat, a spoon, a tortilla, towel, fork, dirty socks. Nothing to make a noise with.

Then Paco remembered his whip. He picked it up and thought, "I have to crack it this time. I have to." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He raised his hand high in the air, brought it down, and—**CRACK!**

The sound rang out through the night air. The robbers, who thought it was the police, spun around to look. Behind them, the bull's eyes shot open. It jumped to its feet and looked around.

And saw that there were seven robbers in its pen.

Paco jumped to the fence to watch. The bull lowered its head and started forward like a train engine. It plowed its horns into the first robber, hitting him so hard he flew through the air and landed in the mud. The other robbers screamed and started to run in different directions, but they were all tangled up in the rope—and they were all tied to the bull.

BANG! BAM! BOOM! The bull hit each robber with its long horns, knocking them high and low. *POW! POOF! PAM!* The robbers bounced around like jumping beans, and the bull was turning to charge them again.

“RUN!” said the robbers all together, and that was when Paco had another idea.

He jumped off the fence and swung open the gate. “This way, this way!” he shouted. All together, the robbers turned and ran toward the gate, the bull close behind them. Paco grabbed an empty sack and waited. And when the first robber ran through the gate—*POOF!* Paco closed him up inside the sack.

POOF! He caught a second, then a third, then a fourth and a fifth. When the seventh robber ran into the seventh sack Paco closed it up, swung the gate closed, and locked it as quickly as he could. *CRASH* went the bull, but the gate stayed shut.

Paco's father ran up with the chief policeman. Paco's father had chased him outside, but he had gone the wrong way found the policeman instead. Now they were back in time to see what happened.

“Papa, Papa, I have captured the robbers and got all our things back!” said Paco.

“You did this? You did this?” asked the chief policeman, who was out of breath.

“Yes,” said Paco. “The bull helped.”

“Paco, you are a hero,” said the policeman. “Did you know there was a big reward for capturing these men?”

“No,” said Paco.

The policeman took out a paper and read: “One hundred pesos, to be rewarded to anyone who can catch the seven robbers.” That was more money than Paco and his father had ever had in their entire lives.

Paco's father knelt down and wrapped his arms around his boy. "Paco, I am very proud of you. Not for the reward, but for your courage. I love you very much."

When they got the money Paco and his father still lived in their little house, they still worked together on the big ranch, and they still ate tortillas and beans. But Paco's father fixed the hole in their roof. They bought Paco some new books for school. And they even got to eat cheese with their supper every single week.

But do you know the very first thing Paco did with his part of the money? He bought the biggest, crunchiest carrot in all the village.