



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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The Magician

My maternal grandfather, Albert Evans, was born in Sheffield, Yorkshire and moved to London as a young man. There he joined the London & River Plate Bank, a thriving financial institution with branches in Argentina, which some years later became the Bank of London & South America, known far and wide by its acronym, BOLSA. In about 1910 Albert was offered a position in the Bank's Buenos Aires office, which he accepted. A bright future awaited him, but there was just one catch. He had recently fallen in love with a young lady, Dora King, and couldn't bear the thought of leaving her. Undaunted, and inspired by a quote he remembered from his school days— "Faint heart never won fair lady"—he asked Dora's father for her hand in marriage so that she might accompany him and share his new life. In those days, of course, South America was considered to be "the back of beyond," and Dora's father balked at the thought of his daughter taking such a bold step into the unknown. But after thinking it over he made Albert a counter offer: "Go to Argentina and establish yourself in your new job and surroundings, then return in a year and, if Dora still wants to marry you, I'll give you my blessing."

Thus it came to pass that Dora and Albert Evans were married. They sailed from England just a couple of years before the First World War and settled in Argentina, where they lived for the rest of their lives. This was a very common pattern; countless waves of people emigrated from the British Isles to the River Plate region where they formed substantial and influential communities in Montevideo and Buenos Aires. In time Dora gave Albert three Anglo-Argentine children, the second of whom in due course married my father, also a first-generation Anglo-Argentine, and begat my brother and me. The four of us moved to Montevideo shortly thereafter, but we frequently visited Buenos Aires, and on those trips, we almost always stayed with my grandparents at their house in Coghlan, the suburb where my mother grew up. One of the best attributes of that house was its proximity to the Drago railway station, where we'd sometimes catch a train into town. Riding a train into town was the most exciting thing I'd ever done

at that stage of my life. I loved the wind in my face when I leaned out of the window, loved the leathery smell of the carriage, the hypnotic lurching of the train, and the rhythmic clattering of the wheels.

My grandfather had a talent for saying things in a colourful way. He'd point at the utility poles flashing past the open window of the train and say, "Let's catch a ride home on one of those and save the cost of a ticket." When I was being a brat he'd say, "Next time I bring you I'll leave you at home." When I asked him his age he replied, "I'm as old as my tongue, and a little older than my teeth." He was a natural communicator, one who seemed to have an almost magical gift for both understanding and being understood. This story is about him.

He was a tall man and still held himself straight even though he was now well over seventy years old. His two grandsons held his hands as they walked slowly along the open platform at the railway station. It was a cold, cloudy morning and they all wore overcoats and gloves and hats. His was a stylish dark fedora, as usual. The little boys wore the brightly coloured woollen mittens and scarves their mother had knitted for them.



Drago station was on a suburban line in Buenos Aires and there would be no trains coming through until the twelve-forty-eight to the city. The platform was deserted and looked drab in the grey light. It had rained earlier, and the boys looked sideways at the puddles glistening between the tracks. The old man would have liked to step into the waiting room, to sit for a while and smoke his pipe, but he didn't want to let go of his grandsons' hands. And he did want to get to where they were going. They all did.

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At the end of the platform they stopped and turned to look across the tracks at a building a couple of hundred yards away. Square and simple and three stories high, the building itself was unremarkable. But on the roof was a sign that said, in large, metal letters, *Adams Chiclets*. The little boys stood quite still, their eyes shining, not saying a word.

He slipped his hands out of theirs and into his coat pockets for just a second. Then he raised his arms above his head with both fists tightly clenched and slowly, rhythmically moved them back and forth and side to side, chanting the magic words that only they understood in a deep, serious voice. He threw his head back and spoke the words again, and then a third time quite loudly, his eyes closed and his arms stretching up till it looked as though he was touching the clouds. The boys kept staring at the sign on the roof of the building, their mouths half open, blowing little puffs of steam with every breath.

Then the old man stepped back a pace, opened his eyes and lowered his arms. He knelt down and held out his hands, slowly unfolding his fists. In each one, on the shiny black leather of his glove, lay a small yellow box emblazoned with the words *Adams Chiclets*.

The boys shrieked and grabbed the boxes, excited smiles flashing across their little pink cheeks. They tore open the flaps and poured the two shiny white pellets of sugar-coated gum straight into their mouths, chewing and grinning.



He took their hands again and led them back towards the station. The older boy looked over at his brother and said, "See? Grandpa *is* a magician." The old man squeezed their hands and smiled, blinking in the chilly morning air.

SIMON'S CAT

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