

# ¡Che inglés!

by Tony Beckwith © 2001

FOR REASONS OF HIS OWN, Emilio never let me forget that I spoke Spanish poorly, like a foreigner. I felt ashamed because I'd been there my entire life, all sixteen years of it. I was born in Argentina and had lived in Uruguay ever since. But my family originally came from Britain so we were *ingleses*, and even though I'd never been to the old country, my mother tongue was unquestionably English.

My alma mater was a local, cosmopolitan institution that catered to children of the foreign community and a smattering of the local elite. It was modeled after English schools, and many of the teachers were "imported" from "home." We were forbidden to speak Spanish, a rule I was never in any danger of breaking.

As a child I played a game with friends during recess. A handful of little boys stood in a circle, and one said, "I'm a Canadian, what are you?" The next boy said, "I'm an Italian, what are you?" And so on around the circle, but when it came to my turn I never knew what to say. To me, it wasn't that clear cut. What was I? I wasn't exactly sure.

After graduating I gratefully declined my father's offer to send me to his old school in England to further my education, and instead got a job at an advertising agency in Montevideo. I was the office boy and Emilio was my boss. "*Che inglés*," he said loudly so that everyone could hear. "Hey Englishman, when did you arrive from England?" I blushed and hung my head.

My sheltered life in the cocoon of my Anglo community was insular

enough that I'd never needed more than a rudimentary command of Spanish — until now. I was shocked and humiliated to discover this inadequacy, and I yearned to speak with the same fluency I enjoyed in English. Emilio taunted me, saying things like "*che inglés, cerrá el puerto que entra el mosco*," a scathing reference to my precarious grip on gender. He was right, I spoke like a foreigner. How embarrassing to be a stranger in my own land! *¡Qué vergüenza!*

Emilio finally took pity on me. He said I desperately needed a transfusion of *criollo* culture and invited me to a *malambo* club that he frequented in the old part of town. It was a funky dive in a ramshackle building that looked like a dimly lit stable, with a low roof and whitewashed walls and wooden planks for a floor. We sat at rough wooden tables on an eclectic selection of chairs and drank the house red in stubby little glasses. The musicians hardly ever took a break, and most of the men in the audience danced with each other in the *mano-a-mano* Uruguayan folklore style, with much flashy footwork and heel-stamping staccato rhythms. Emilio was an excellent *malambo* dancer and

he was constantly out on the floor, lithe and graceful as a bullfighter, whirling and strutting with the best of them. Grinning all over his dark, sweaty face.

Lourdes was Emilio's girlfriend, and she and I kept each other company at a table in a corner. "He always abandons me when we come here," she pouted prettily. It was noisy and crowded and we had to sit very close together to hear what we were saying. Lourdes loved to talk and she was endlessly entertaining. Maybe it was her huge brown eyes, or maybe it was the wine and the pounding heels, but as the night wore on my Spanish miraculously improved and I was speaking more fluently than ever before. My words flowed like a mountain stream, with an easy rhythm that was new and exhilarating. Lourdes fluttered her eyelids and squeezed my hand encouragingly. When Emilio finally returned she said, "Look, I've hypnotized *el inglés!* Now he believes he can speak Spanish." She was quite right, and I have ever since. ★

