

The Ties of Freedom

by Tony Beckwith © 2000

MY FATHER AND I ARRIVED at the *Jauja Bar* at the same time. It was nearly noon on a warm Saturday morning in downtown Montevideo. I'd walked a few blocks from the office and he'd done the same. "I think you'll like this place," he said. "It's one of the most interesting watering holes in town."

The sunlight filtered in through the upper panes of the front windows, above the white curtain hanging from the rail at about shoulder level. It was darker towards the back, where we sat at a small marble-topped table halfway between the bar and the side wall. The place was steadily filling up and a gentle hum of conversation drifted overhead. The fans moved the air and the smoke from our cigarettes, circulating it all up towards the high, old-fashioned ceiling.

On the polished wooden surface at the front end of the bar, dozens of short, slim glasses were set out in rows on a white cloth. They were all about two thirds full. The light from the windows glinted on the glasses, and sparkled on the luminous lime-colored cocktails. Every now and then a bartender would reach over and stir each one with a long-handled spoon. I could hear the spoon tinkling against the sides of the glasses as he worked his way up and down the rows. These were the house specialty, a legend in the city: the best gin fizz in town.

A waiter came by and smiled at my father and they shook hands. "Your son? A pleasure! What will you have today?" We pointed at the gin fizz display and the waiter walked

over to the bar, stirred up a couple and brought them to our table. He set them down on paper napkins and placed a bowl of peanuts between us. "¡Salud!"

By the time we ordered the second gin fizz it was standing room only at the bar and the buzz of



conversation had grown to a steady roar. My father tapped my arm and pointed towards the door. I saw a middle-aged man with dozens of ties hanging off his left arm, which he carried bent at the elbow. He had a pleasant, round face, clean-shaven, and bald at the crown. He was dressed in a hounds tooth sports jacket and gray slacks, with comfortable-looking dark brown shoes. I looked back at Dad and raised my eyebrows. He leaned forward and

said, "He sells ties." I nodded and turned around again. The man was working his way from table to table, pausing here and there to hold up his arm and show his selection, angling the ties so that the sunlight caught them and set the colors blazing for the customer to see. He had a graceful, easy manner. People smiled and exchanged a few words with him, and one or two shook him by the hand. The waiters patted him on the back as they slid past carrying their trays of gin fizzes back and forth across the busy room.

Soon he was standing by our table. I was filled with inexplicable pride when he and my father shook hands. "How have you been? Good to see you too!

Your son? My pleasure, *joven*." His eyes were dark and lustrous, and his face was deeply tanned. He was wearing a crisp white shirt and a stylish regimental tie. He chatted for a few minutes and then

moved on. I was aware of his absence immediately.

Dad leaned forward again. "They say he's an eccentric millionaire who wants to keep in touch with ordinary people. The ties are just an excuse to be able to come and go as he pleases all over town. They say he doesn't want his wealth to isolate him from the world."

"What do you think?" I asked. He wrinkled his eyes and smiled. "I think he's the freest man I know." I nodded sagely, as I'd seen older men do, but it was years before I understood what he meant. ★