



Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

The Ties of Freedom

My father and I arrived at the Jauja Bar at the same time. It was nearly noon on a warm Saturday morning in the Ciudad Vieja, the old part of downtown Montevideo. I'd walked a few blocks from my 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 a 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 sidewall. The place was steadily filling up, surrounding us with a gentle hum of conversation. 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, scores 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-coloured cocktails. Every now and then a bartender would reach over and stir each one with a long-handled spoon. I could hear the spoon linking 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 salted 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 an elderly man with dozens of ties hanging over his left arm, which he carried bent at the elbow. He had a pleasant, round face, clean-shaven, and was bald at the crown. He was dressed in a hounds tooth sports jacket and grey 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 colours 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. My father 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.

Man who runs in front of car gets tired, man who runs behind car gets exhausted.

Man who leaps off cliff jumps to conclusion.

War does not determine who is right, it determine who is left.

Lady who goes camping must beware of evil intent.