**The Theory and the Hound**

O. Henry

NOT many days ago my old friend from the tropics, J. P. Bridger, United States consul on the island of Ratona, was in the city. We had wassail and jubilee and saw the Flatiron building, and missed seeing the Bronxless menagerie by about a couple of nights. And then, at the ebb tide, we were walking up a street that parallels and parodies Broadway.

A woman with a comely and mundane countenance passed us, holding in leash a wheezing, vicious, waddling, brute of a yellow pug. The dog entangled himself with Bridger’s legs and mumbled his ankles in a snarling, peevish, sulky bite. Bridger, with a happy smile, kicked the breath out of the brute; the woman showered us with a quick rain of well-conceived adjectives that left us in no doubt as to our place in her opinion, and we passed on. Ten yards farther an old woman with disordered white hair and her bankbook tucked well hidden beneath her tattered shawl begged. Bridger stopped and disinterred for her a quarter from his holiday waistcoat.

On the next corner a quarter of a ton of well-clothed man with a rice-powdered, fat, white jowl, stood holding the chain of a devil-born bulldog whose forelegs were strangers by the length of a dachshund. A little woman in a last-season’s hat confronted him and wept, which was plainly all she could do, while he cursed her in low sweet, practised tones.

Bridger smiled again — strictly to himself — and this time he took out a little memorandum book and made a note of it. This he had no right to do without due explanation, and I said so.

“It’s a new theory,” said Bridger, “that I picked up down in Ratona. I’ve been gathering support for it as I knock about. The world isn’t ripe for it yet, but — well I’ll tell you; and then you run your mind back along the people you’ve known and see what you make of it.”

And so I cornered Bridger in a place where they have artificial palms and wine; and he told me the story which is here in my words and on his responsibility.

One afternoon at three o’clock, on the island of Ratona, a boy raced alongthe beach screaming, “Pajaro, ahoy!”

Thus he made known the keenness of his hearing and the justice of his discrimination in pitch.

He who first heard and made oral proclamation concerning the toot of an approaching steamer’s whistle, and correctly named the steamer, was a small hero in Ratona —until the’ next steamer came. Wherefore, there was rivalry among the barefoot youth of Ratona, and many fell victims to the softly blown conch shells of sloops which, as they enter harbour, sound surprisingly like a distant steamer’s signal. And some could name you the vessel when its call, in your duller ears, sounded no louder than the sigh of the wind through the branches of the cocoanut palms.

But to-day he who proclaimed the Pajaro gained his honours. Ratona bent its ear to listen; and soon the deep-tongued blast grew louder and nearer, and at length Ratona saw above the line of palms on the low “joint” the two black funnels of the fruiter slowly creeping toward the mouth of the harbour.

You must know that Ratona is an island twenty miles off the south of a South American republic. It is a port of that republic; and it sleeps sweetly in a smiling sea, toiling not nor spinning; fed by the abundant tropics where all things “ripen, cease and fall toward the grave.”

Eight hundred people dream life away in a greenembowered village that follows the horseshoe curve of its bijou harbour. They are mostly Spanish and Indian mestizos, with a shading of San Domingo Negroes, a lightening of pure-blood Spanish officials and a slight leavening of the froth of three or four pioneering white races. No steamers touch at Ratona save the fruit steamers which take on their banana inspectors there on their way to the coast. They leave Sunday newspapers, ice, quinine, bacon, watermelons and vaccine matter at the island and that is about all the touch Ratona gets with the world.

The Pajaro paused at the mouth of the harbour, roll ing heavily in the swell that sent the whitecaps racing beyond the smooth water inside. Already two dories from the village — one conveying fruit inspectors, the other going for what it could get — were halfway out to the steamer.

The inspectors’ dory was taken on board with them, and the Pajaro steamed away for the mainland for its load of fruit.

The other boat returned to Ratona bearing a contribution from the Pajaro’s store of ice, the usual roll of newspapers and one passenger — Taylor Plunkett, sheriff of Chatham County, Kentucky.

Bridger, the United States consul at Ratona, was cleaning his rifle in the official shanty under a bread-fruit tree twenty yards from the water of the harbour. The consul occupied a place somewhat near the tail of his political party’s procession. The music of the band wagon sounded very faintly to him in the distance. The plums of office went to others. Bridger’s share of the spoils — the consulship at Ratona — was little more than a prune — a dried prune from the boarding-house department of the public crib. But $900 yearly was opulence in Ratona. Besides, Bridger had contracted a passion for shooting alligators in the lagoons near his consulate, and was not unhappy.

He looked up from a careful inspection of his rifle lock a broad man filling his doorway. A broad, noiseless, slow-moving man, sunburned almost to the Vandyke. A man of forty-five, neatly clothed in homespun, with scanty light hair, a close-clipped brownand-gray beard and pale-blue eyes expressing mildness implicity.

“You are Mr. Bridger, the consul,” said the broad man. “They directed me here. Can you tell me what those big bunches of things like gourds are in those trees that look like feather dusters along the edge of the water?”

“Take that chair,” said the consul, reoiling his cleaning rag. “No, the other one — that bamboo thing won’t hold you. Why, they’re cocoanuts — green cocoanuts. The shell of ’em is always a light green before they’re ripe.”

“Much obliged,” said the other man, sitting down carefully. “I didn’t quite like to tell the folks at home they were olives unless I was sure about it. My name is Plunkett. I’m sheriff of Chatham County, Kentucky. I’ve got extradition papers in my pocket authorizing the arrest of a man on this island. They’ve been signed by the President of this country, and they’re in correct shape. The man’s name is Wade Williams. He’s in the cocoanut raising business. What he’s wanted for is the murder of his wife two years ago. Where can I find him?”

The consul squinted an eye and looked through his rifle barrel.

“There’s nobody on the island who calls himself ‘Williams,’” he remarked.

“Didn’t suppose there was,” said Plunkett mildly. “He’ll do by any other name.”

“Besides myself,” said Bridger, “there are only two Americans on Ratona — Bob Reeves and Henry Morgan.”

“The man I want sells cocoanuts,” suggested Plunkett.

“You see that cocoanut walk extending up to the point?” said the consul, waving his hand toward the open door. “That belongs to Bob Reeves. Henry Morgan owns half the trees to loo’ard on the island.”

“One, month ago,” said the sheriff, “Wade Williams wrote a confidential letter to a man in Chatham county, telling him where he was and how he was getting along. The letter was lost; and the person that found it gave it away. They sent me after him, and I’ve got the papers. I reckon he’s one of your cocoanut men for certain.”

“You’ve got his picture, of course,” said Bridger. “It might be Reeves or Morgan, but I’d hate to think it. They’re both as fine fellows as you’d meet in an all-day auto ride.”

“No,” doubtfully answered Plunkett; “there wasn’t any picture of Williams to be had. And I never saw him myself. I’ve been sheriff only a year. But I’ve got a pretty accurate description of him. About 5 feet 11; dark-hair and eyes; nose inclined to be Roman; heavy about the shoulders; strong, white teeth, with none missing; laughs a good deal, talkative; drinks considerably but never to intoxication; looks you square in the eye when talking; age thirty-five. Which one of your men does that description fit?”

The consul grinned broadly.

“I’ll tell you what you do,” he said, laying down his rifle and slipping on his dingy black alpaca coat. “You come along, Mr. Plunkett, — and I’ll take you up to see the boys. If you can tell which one of ’em your description fits better than it does the other you have the advantage of me.”

Bridger conducted the sheriff out and along the hard beach close to which the tiny houses of the village were distributed. Immediately back of the town rose sudden, small, thickly wooded hills. Up one of these, by means of steps cut in the hard clay, the consul led Plunkett. the very verge of an eminence was perched, a tworoom wooden cottage with a thatched roof. A Carib woman was washing clothes outside. The consul ushered the sheriff to the door of the room that overlooked the harbour.

Two men were in the room, about to sit down, in their shirt sleeves, to a table spread for dinner. They bore little resemblance one to the other in detail; but the general description given by Plunkett could have been justly applied to either. In height, colour of hair, shape of nose, build and manners each of them tallied with it. They were fair types of jovial, ready-witted, broadgauged Americans who had gravitated together for companionship in an alien land.

“Hello, Bridger” they called in unison at sight Of the consul. “Come and have dinner with us!” And then they noticed Plunkett at his heels, and came forward with hospitable curiosity.

“Gentlemen,” said the consul, his voice taking on unaccustomed formality, “this is Mr. Plunkett. Mr. Plunkett — Mr. Reeves and Mr. Morgan.”

The cocoanut barons greeted the newcomer joyously. Reeves seemed about an inch taller than Morgan, but his laugh was not quite as loud. Morgan’s eyes weredeep brown; Reeves’s were black. Reeves was the host and busied himself with fetching other chairs and calling to the Carib woman for supplemental table ware. It was explained that Morgan lived in a bamboo shack to. loo’ard, but that every day the two friends dined together. Plunkett stood still during the preparations, looking about mildly with his pale-blue eyes. Bridger looked apologetic and uneasy.

At length two other covers were laid and the companywas assigned to places. Reeves and Morgan stood side by side across the table from the visitors. Reeves nodded genially as a signal for all to seat themselves. And then suddenly Plunkett raised his hand with a gesture of authority. He was looking straight between Reeves and Morgan.

“Wade Williams,” he said quietly, “you are under arrest for murder.”

Reeves and Morgan instantly exchanged a quick, bright glance, the quality of which was interrogation, with a seasoning of surprise. Then, simultaneously they turned to the speaker with a puzzled and frank deprecation in their gaze.

“Can’t say that we understand you, Mr. Plunkett,” said Morgan, cheerfully. “Did you say ‘Williams’?”

“What’s the joke, Bridgy?” asked Reeves, turning, to the consul with a smile.

Before Bridger could answer Plunkett spoke again.

“I’ll explain,” he said, quietly. “One of you don’t need any explanation, but this is for the other one. One of you is Wade Williams of Chatham County, Kentucky. You murdered your wife on May 5, two years ago, after ill-treating and abusing her continually for five years. I have the proper papers in my pocket for taking you back with me, and you are going. We will return on the fruit steamer that comes back by this island to-morrow to leave its inspectors. I acknowledge, gentlemen, that I’m not quite sure which one of you is Williams. But Wade Williams goes back to Chatham County to-morrow. I want you to understand that.”

A great sound of merry laughter from Morgan and Reeves went out over the still harbour. Two or three fishermen in the fleet of sloops anchored there looked up at the house of the diablos Americanos on the hill and wondered.

“My dear Mr. Plunkett,” cried Morgan, conquering his mirth, “the dinner is getting, cold. Let us sit down and eat. I am anxious to get my spoon into that sharkfin soup. Business afterward.”

“Sit down, gentlemen, if you please,” added Reeves, pleasantly. “I am sure Mr. Plunkett will not object. Perhaps a little time may be of advantage to him in identifying — the gentlemen he wishes to arrest.”

“No objections, I’m sure,” said Plunkett, dropping into his chair heavily. “I’m hungry myself. I didn’t want to accept the hospitality of you folks without giving you notice; that’s all.”

Reeves set bottles and glasses on the table.

“There’s cognac,” he said, “and anisada, and Scotch ’smoke,’ and rye. Take your choice.”

Bridger chose rye, Reeves poured three fingers of Scotch for himself, Morgan took the same. The sheriff, against much protestation, filled his glass from the water bottle.

“Here’s to the appetite,” said Reeves, raising his glass, “of Mr. Williams!” Morgan’s laugh and his drink encountering sent him into a choking splutter. All began to pay attention to the dinner, which was well cooked and palatable.

“Williams!” called Plunkett, suddenly and sharply.

All looked up wonderingly. Reeves found the sheriff’s mild eye resting upon him. He flushed a little.

“See here,” he said, with some asperity, “my name’s Reeves,and I don’t want you too — ” But the comedy of the thing came to his rescue, and he ended with a laugh.

“I suppose, Mr. Plunkett,” said Morgan, carefully seasoning an alligator pear, “that you are aware of the fact that you will import a good deal of trouble for yourself into Kentucky if you take back the wrong man — that is, of course, if you take anybody back?”

“Thank you for the salt,” said the sheriff. “Oh, I’ll take somebody back. It’ll be one of you two gentlemen. Yes, I know I’d get stuck for damages if I make a mistake. But I’m going to try to get the right man.”

“I’ll tell you what you do,” said Morgan, leaning forward with a jolly twinkle in his eyes. “You take me. I’ll go without any trouble. The cocoanut business hasn’t panned out well this year, and I’d like to make some extra money out of your bondsmen.”

“That’s not fair,” chimed in Reeves. “I got only $16 a thousand for my last shipment. Take me, Mr. Plunkett.”

“I’ll take Wade Williams,” said the sheriff, patiently, “or I’ll come pretty close to it.”

“It’s like dining with a ghost,” remarked Morgan, with a pretended shiver. “The ghost of a murderer, too! Will somebody pass the toothpicks to the shade of the naughty Mr. Williams?”

Plunkett seemed as unconcerned as if he were dining at his own table in Chatham County. He was a gallant trencherman, and the strange tropic viands tickled his palate. Heavy, commonplace, almost slothful in his movements, he appeared to be devoid of all the cunning and watchfulness of the sleuth. He even ceased to observe, with any sharpness or attempted discrimination, the two men, one of whom he had undertaken with surprising self-confidence, to drag away upon the serious charge of wife-murder. Here, indeed, was a problem set before him that if wrongly solved would have amounted to his serious discomfiture, yet there he sat puzzling his soul (to all appearances) over the novel flavour of a broiled iguana cutlet.

The consul felt a decided discomfort. Reeves and Morgan were his friends and pals; yet the sheriff from Kentucky had a certain right to his official aid and moral support. So Bridger sat the silentest around the board and tried to estimate the peculiar situation. His conclusion was that both Reeves and Morgan, quickwitted, as he knew them to be, had conceived at the moment of Plunkett’s disclosure of his mission — and in the brief space of a lightning flash — the idea that the other might be the guilty Williams; and that each of them had decided in that moment loyally to protect his comrade against the doom that threatened him. This was the consul’s theory. and if he had been a bookmaker at a race of wits for life and liberty he would have offered heavy odds against the plodding sheriff from Chatham County, Kentucky.

When the meal was concluded the Carib woman came and removed the dishes and cloth. Reeves strewed them table with excellent cigars, and Plunkett, with the others, lighted one of these with evident gratification.

“I may be dull,” said Morgan, with a grin and a wink at Bridger; “but I want to know if I am. Now, I say this is all a joke of Mr. Plunkett’s, concocted to frighten. two babes-in-the-woods. Is this Williamson to be taken seriously or not?”

“‘Williams,’” corrected Plunkett gravely. “I never got off any jokes in my life. I know I wouldn’t travel 2,000 miles to get off a poor one as this would be if I didn’t take Wade Williams back with me. Gentlemen!” continued the sheriff, now letting his mild eyes travel impartially from one of the company to another, “see if you can find any joke in this case. Wade Williams is listening to the words I utter now; but out of politeness, I will speak of him as a third person. For five years he made his wife lead the life of a dog — No; I’ll take that back. No dog in Kentucky was ever treated as she was. He spent the money that she brought him — spent it at races, at the card table and on horses and hunting. He was a good fellow to his friends, but a cold, sullen demon at home. He wound up the five years of neglect by striking her with his closed hand — a hand as hard as a stone — when she was ill and weak from suffering. She died the next day; and he skipped. That’s all there is to it. It’s enough. I never saw Williams; but I knew his wife. I’m not a man to tell half. She and I were keeping company when she met him. She went to Louisville on a visit and saw him there. I’ll admit that he spoilt my chances in no time. I lived then on the edge of the Cumberland mountains. I was elected sheriff of Chatham County a year after Wade Williams killed his wife. My official duty sends me out here after him; but I’ll admit that there’s personal feeling, too. And he’s going back with me. Mr. — er — Reeves, will you pass me a match?

“Awfully imprudent of Williams,” said Morgan, putting his feet up against the wall, “to strike a Kentucky lady. Seems to me I’ve heard they were scrappers.”

“Bad, bad Williams,” said Reeves, pouring out more Scotch.”

The two men spoke lightly, but the consul saw and felt the tension and the carefulness in their actions and words. “Good old fellows,” he said to himself; “they’re both all right. Each of ’em is standing by the other like a little brick church.”

And then a dog walked into the room where they sat — a black-and-tan hound, long-eared, lazy, confident of welcome.

Plunkett turned his head and looked at the animal, which halted, confidently, within a few feet of his chair.

Suddenly the sheriff, with a deep-mouthed oath, left his seat and, bestowed upon the dog a vicious and heavy kick, with his ponderous shoe.

The hound, heartbroken, astonished, with flapping ears and incurved tail, uttered a piercing yelp of pain and surprise.

Reeves and the consul remained in their chairs, saying nothing, but astonished at the unexpected show of intolerance from the easy-going-man from Chatham county.

But Morgan, with a suddenly purpling face, leaped, to his feet and raised a threatening arm above the guest.

“You — brute!” he shouted, passionately; “why did you do that?”

Quickly the amenities returned, Plunkett muttered some indistinct apology and regained his seat. Morgan with a decided effort controlled his indignation and also returned to his chair.

And then Plunkett with the spring of a tiger, leaped around the corner of the table and snapped handcuffs on the paralyzed Morgan’s wrists.

“Hound-lover and woman-killer!” he cried; “get ready to meet your God.”

When Bridger had finished I asked him:

“Did he get the right man?”

“He did,” said the Consul.

“And how did he know?” I inquired, being in a kind of bewilderment.

“When he put Morgan in the dory,” answered Bridger, “the next day to take him aboard the Pajaro, this man Plunkett stopped to shake hands with me and I asked him the same question.”

“‘Mr. Bridger,’ said he, ‘I’m a Kentuckian, and I’ve seen a great deal of both men and animals. And I never yet saw a man that was overfond of horses and dogs but what was cruel to women.’”