**Supply and Demand**

O. Henry

Finch keeps a hats-cleaned-by-electricity-while-you-wait establishment, nine feet by twelve, in Third Avenue. Once a customer, you are always his. I do not know his secret process, but every four days your hat needs to be cleaned again.

Finch is a leathern, sallow, slow-footed man, between twenty and forty. You would say he had been brought up a bushelman in Essex Street. When business is slack he likes to talk, so I had my hat cleaned even oftener than it deserved, hoping Finch might let me into some of the secrets of the sweatshops.

One afternoon I dropped in and found Finch alone. He began to anoint my headpiece de Panama with his mysterious fluid that attracted dust and dirt like a magnet.

“They say the Indians weave ’em under water,” said I, for a leader.

“Don’t you believe it,” said Finch. “No Indian or white man could stay under water that long. Say, do you pay much attention to politics? I see in the paper something about a law they’ve passed called ‘the law of supply and demand.’”

I explained to him as well as I could that the reference was to a politico-economical law, and not to a legal statute.

“I didn’t know,” said Finch. “I heard a good deal about it a year or so ago, but in a one-sided way.”

“Yes,” said I, “political orators use it a great deal. In fact, they never give it a rest. I suppose you heard some of those cart-tail fellows spouting on the subject over here on the east side.”

“I heard it from a king,” said Finch—“the white king of a tribe of Indians in South America.”

I was interested but not surprised. The big city is like a mother’s knee to many who have strayed far and found the roads rough beneath their uncertain feet. At dusk they come home and sit upon the door-step. I know a piano player in a cheap café who has shot lions in Africa, a bell-boy who fought in the British army against the Zulus, an express-driver whose left arm had been cracked like a lobster’s claw for a stew-pot of Patagonian cannibals when the boat of his rescuers hove in sight. So a hat-cleaner who had been a friend of a king did not oppress me.

“A new band?” asked Finch, with his dry, barren smile.

“Yes,” said I, “and half an inch wider.” I had had a new band five days before.

“I meets a man one night,” said Finch, beginning his story—“a man brown as snuff, with money in every pocket, eating schweinerknuckel in Schlagel’s. That was two years ago, when I was a hose-cart driver for No. 98. His discourse runs to the subject of gold. He says that certain mountains in a country down South that he calls Gaudymala is full of it. He says the Indians wash it out of the streams in plural quantities.

“‘Oh, Geronimo?’ says I. ‘Indians! There’s no Indians in the South,’ I tell him, ‘except Elks, Maccabees, and the buyers for the fall dry-goods trade. The Indians are all on the reservations,’ says I.

“‘I’m telling you this with reservations,’ says he. ‘They ain’t Buffalo Bill Indians; they’re squattier and more pedigreed. They call ’em Inkers and Aspics, and they was old inhabitants when Mazuma was King of Mexico. They wash the gold out of the mountain streams,’ says the brown man, ‘and fill quills with it; and then they empty ’em into red jars till they are full; and then they pack it in buckskin sacks of one arroba each—an arroba is twenty-five pounds—and store it in a stone house, with an engraving of a idol with marcelled hair, playing a flute, over the door.’

“‘How do they work off this unearth increment?’ I asks.

“‘They don’t,’ says the man. ‘It’s a case of “Ill fares the land with the great deal of velocity where wealth accumulates and there ain’t any reciprocity."’

“After this man and me got through our conversation, which left him dry of information, I shook hands with him and told him I was sorry I couldn’t believe him. And a month afterward I landed on the coast of this Gaudymala with $1,300 that I had been saving up for five years. I thought I knew what Indians liked, and I fixed myself accordingly. I loaded down four pack-mules with red woollen blankets, wrought-iron pails, jewelled side-combs for the ladies, glass necklaces, and safety-razors. I hired a black mozo, who was supposed to be a mule-driver and an interpreter too. It turned out that he could interpret mules all right, but he drove the English language much too hard. His name sounded like a Yale key when you push it in wrong side up, but I called him McClintock, which was close to the noise.

“Well, this gold village was forty miles up in the mountains, and it took us nine days to find it. But one afternoon McClintock led the other mules and myself over a rawhide bridge stretched across a precipice five thousand feet deep, it seemed to me. The hoofs of the beasts drummed on it just like before George M. Cohan makes his first entrance on the stage.

“This village was built of mud and stone, and had no streets. Some few yellow-and-brown persons popped their heads out-of-doors, looking about like Welsh rabbits with Worcester sauce on em. Out of the biggest house, that had a kind of a porch around it, steps a big white man, red as a beet in color, dressed in fine tanned deerskin clothes, with a gold chain around his neck, smoking a cigar. I’ve seen United States Senators of his style of features and build, also head-waiters and cops.

“He walks up and takes a look at us, while McClintock disembarks and begins to interpret to the lead mule while he smokes a cigarette.

“‘Hello, Buttinsky,’ says the fine man to me. ‘How did you get in the game? I didn’t see you buy any chips. Who gave you the keys of the city?’

“‘I’m a poor traveller,’ says I. ‘Especially mule-back. You’ll excuse me. Do you run a hack line or only a bluff?’

“‘Segregate yourself from your pseudo-equine quadruped,’ says he, ‘and come inside.’

“He raises a finger, and a villager runs up.

“‘This man will take care of your outfit,’ says he, ‘and I’ll take care of you.’

“He leads me into the biggest house, and sets out the chairs and a kind of a drink the color of milk. It was the finest room I ever saw. The stone walls was hung all over with silk shawls, and there was red and yellow rugs on the floor, and jars of red pottery and Angora goat skins, and enough bamboo furniture to misfurnish half a dozen seaside cottages.

“‘In the first place,’ says the man, ‘you want to know who I am. I’m sole lessee and proprietor of this tribe of Indians. They call me the Grand Yacuma, which is to say King or Main Finger of the bunch. I’ve got more power here than a chargé d’affaires, a charge of dynamite, and a charge account at Tiffany’s combined. In fact, I’m the Big Stick, with as many extra knots on it as there is on the record run of the Lusitania. Oh, I read the papers now and then,’ says he. ‘Now, let’s hear your entitlements,’ he goes on, ‘and the meeting will be open.’

“‘Well,’ says I, ‘I am known as one W. D. Finch. Occupation, capitalist. Address, 541 East Thirty-second—‘

“‘New York,’ chips in the Noble Grand. ‘I know,’ says he, grinning. ‘It ain’t the first time you’ve seen it go down on the blotter. I can tell by the way you hand it out. Well, explain “capitalist."’

“I tells this boss plain what I come for and how I come to came.

“‘Gold-dust?’ says he, looking as puzzled as a baby that’s got a feather stuck on its molasses finger. ‘That’s funny. This ain’t a gold-mining country. And you invested all your capital on a stranger’s story? Well, well! These Indians of mine—they are the last of the tribe of Peches—are simple as children. They know nothing of the purchasing power of gold. I’m afraid you’ve been imposed on,’ says he.

“‘Maybe so,’ says I, ‘but it sounded pretty straight to me.’

“‘W. D.,’ says the King, all of a sudden, ‘I’ll give you a square deal. It ain’t often I get to talk to a white man, and I’ll give you a show for your money. It may be these constituents of mine have a few grains of gold-dust hid away in their clothes. To-morrow you may get out these goods you’ve brought up and see if you can make any sales. Now, I’m going to introduce myself unofficially. My name is Shane—Patrick Shane. I own this tribe of Peche Indians by right of conquest—single handed and unafraid. I drifted up here four years ago, and won ’em by my size and complexion and nerve. I learned their language in six weeks—it’s easy: you simply emit a string of consonants as long as your breath holds out and then point at what you’re asking for.

“‘I conquered ’em, spectacularly,’ goes on King Shane, ‘and then I went at ’em with economical politics, law, sleight-of-hand, and a kind of New England ethics and parsimony. Every Sunday, or as near as I can guess at it, I preach to ’em in the council-house (I’m the council) on the law of supply and demand. I praise supply and knock demand. I use the same text every time. You wouldn’t think, W. D.,’ says Shane, ‘that I had poetry in me, would you?’

“‘Well,’ says I, ‘I wouldn’t know whether to call it poetry or not.’

“‘Tennyson,’ says Shane, ‘furnishes the poetic gospel I preach. I always considered him the boss poet. Here’s the way the text goes:

“‘"For, not to admire, if a man could learn it, were more

Than to walk all day like a Sultan of old in a garden of spice.”

“‘You see, I teach ’em to cut out demand—that supply is the main thing. I teach ’em not to desire anything beyond their simplest needs. A little mutton, a little cocoa, and a little fruit brought up from the coast—that’s all they want to make ’em happy. I’ve got ’em well trained. They make their own clothes and hats out of a vegetable fibre and straw, and they’re a contented lot. It’s a great thing,’ winds up Shane, ‘to have made a people happy by the incultivation of such simple institutions.’

“Well, the next day, with the King’s permission, I has the McClintock open up a couple of sacks of my goods in the little plaza of the village. The Indians swarmed around by the hundred and looked the bargain-counter over. I shook red blankets at ’em, flashed finger-rings and ear-bobs, tried pearl necklaces and side-combs on the women, and a line of red hosiery on the men. ‘Twas no use. They looked on like hungry graven images, but I never made a sale. I asked McClintock what was the trouble. Mac yawned three or four times, rolled a cigarette, made one or two confidential side remarks to a mule, and then condescended to inform me that the people had no money.

“Just then up strolls King Patrick, big and red and royal as usual, with the gold chain over his chest and his cigar in front of him.

“‘How’s business, W. D.?’ he asks.

“‘Fine,’ says I. ‘It’s a bargain-day rush. I’ve got one more line of goods to offer before I shut up shop. I’ll try ’em with safety-razors. I’ve got two gross that I bought at a fire sale.’

“Shane laughs till some kind of mameluke or private secretary he carries with him has to hold him up.

“‘O my sainted Aunt Jerusha?’ says he, ‘ain’t you one of the Babes in the Goods, W. D.? Don’t you know that no Indians ever shave? They pull out their whiskers instead.’

“‘Well,’ says I, ‘that’s just what these razors would do for ’em—they wouldn’t have any kick coming if they used ’em once.’

“Shane went away, and I could hear him laughing a block, if there had been any block.

“‘Tell ’em,’ says I to McClintock, ‘it ain’t money I want—tell ’em I’ll take gold-dust. Tell ’em I’ll allow ’em sixteen dollars an ounce for it in trade. That’s what I’m out for—the dust.’

“Mac interprets, and you’d have thought a squadron of cops had charged the crowd to disperse it. Every uncle’s nephew and aunt’s niece of ’em faded away inside of two minutes.

“At the royal palace that night me and the King talked it over.

“‘They’ve got the dust hid out somewhere,’ says I, ‘or they wouldn’t have been so sensitive about it.’

“‘They haven’t,’ says Shane. ‘What’s this gag you’ve got about gold? You been reading Edward Allen Poe? They ain’t got any gold.’

“‘They put it in quills,’ says I, ‘and then they empty it in jars, and then into sacks of twenty-five pounds each. I got it straight.’

“‘W. D.,’ says Shane, laughing and chewing his cigar, ‘I don’t often see a white man, and I feel like putting you on. I don’t think you’ll get away from here alive, anyhow, so I’m going to tell you. Come over here.’

“He draws aside a silk fibre curtain in a corner of the room and shows me a pile of buckskin sacks.

“‘Forty of ’em,’ says Shane. ‘One arroba in each one. In round numbers, $220,000 worth of gold-dust you see there. It’s all mine. It belongs to the Grand Yacuma. They bring it all to me. Two hundred and twenty thousand dollars—think of that, you glass-bead peddler,’ says Shane—‘and all mine.’

“‘Little good it does you,’ says I, contemptuously and hatefully. ‘And so you are the government depository of this gang of moneyless money-makers? Don’t you pay enough interest on it to enable one of your depositors to buy an Augusta (Maine) Pullman carbon diamond worth $200 for $4.85?’

“‘Listen,’ says Patrick Shane, with the sweat coming out on his brow. ‘I’m confidant with you, as you have, somehow, enlisted my regards. Did you ever,’ he says, ‘feel the avoirdupois power of gold—not the troy weight of it, but the sixteen-ounces-to-the-pound force of it?’

“‘Never,’ says I. ‘I never take in any bad money.’

“Shane drops down on the floor and throws his arms over the sacks of gold-dust.

“‘I love it,’ says he. ‘I want to feel the touch of it day and night. It’s my pleasure in life. I come in this room, and I’m a king and a rich man. I’ll be a millionaire in another year. The pile’s getting bigger every month. I’ve got the whole tribe washing out the sands in the creeks. I’m the happiest man in the world, W. D. I just want to be near this gold, and know it’s mine and it’s increasing every day. Now, you know,’ says he, ‘why my Indians wouldn’t buy your goods. They can’t. They bring all the dust to me. I’m their king. I’ve taught ’em not to desire or admire. You might as well shut up shop.’

“‘I’ll tell you what you are,’ says I. ‘You’re a plain, contemptible miser. You preach supply and you forget demand. Now, supply,’ I goes on, ‘is never anything but supply. On the contrary,’ says I, ’demand is a much broader syllogism and assertion. Demand includes the rights of our women and children, and charity and friendship, and even a little begging on the street corners. They’ve both got to harmonize equally. And I’ve got a few things up my commercial sleeve yet,’ says I, ‘that may jostle your preconceived ideas of politics and economy.

“The next morning I had McClintock bring up another mule-load of goods to the plaza and open it up. The people gathered around the same as before.

“I got out the finest line of necklaces, bracelets, hair-combs, and earrings that I carried, and had the women put ’em on. And then I played trumps.

“Out of my last pack I opened up a half gross of hand-mirrors, with solid tinfoil backs, and passed ’em around among the ladies. That was the first introduction of looking-glasses among the Peche Indians.

“Shane walks by with his big laugh.

“‘Business looking up any?’ he asks.

“‘It’s looking at itself right now,’ says I.

“By-and-by a kind of a murmur goes through the crowd. The women had looked into the magic crystal and seen that they were beautiful, and was confiding the secret to the men. The men seemed to be urging the lack of money and the hard times just before the election, but their excuses didn’t go.

“Then was my time.

“I called McClintock away from an animated conversation with his mules and told him to do some interpreting.

“‘Tell ’em,’ says I, ‘that gold-dust will buy for them these befitting ornaments for kings and queens of the earth. Tell ’em the yellow sand they wash out of the waters for the High Sanctified Yacomay and Chop Suey of the tribe will buy the precious jewels and charms that will make them beautiful and preserve and pickle them from evil spirits. Tell ’em the Pittsburgh banks are paying four per cent. interest on deposits by mail, while this get-rich-frequently custodian of the public funds ain’t even paying attention. Keep telling ’em, Mac,’ says I, ‘to let the gold-dust family do their work. Talk to ’em like a born anti-Bryanite,’ says I. ’remind ’em that Tom Watson’s gone back to Georgia,’ says I.

“McClintock waves his hand affectionately at one of his mules, and then hurls a few stickfuls of minion type at the mob of shoppers.

“A gutta-percha Indian man, with a lady hanging on his arm, with three strings of my fish-scale jewelry and imitation marble beads around her neck, stands up on a block of stone and makes a talk that sounds like a man shaking dice in a box to fill aces and sixes.

“‘He says,’ says McClintock, ‘that the people not know that gold-dust will buy their things. The women very mad. The Grand Yacuma tell them it no good but for keep to make bad spirits keep away.’

“‘You can’t keep bad spirits away from money,’ says I.

“‘They say,’ goes on McClintock, ‘the Yacuma fool them. They raise plenty row.’

“‘Going! Going?’ says I. ‘Gold-dust or cash takes the entire stock. The dust weighed before you, and taken at sixteen dollars the ounce—the highest price on the Gaudymala coast.’

“Then the crowd disperses all of a sudden, and I don’t know what’s up. Mac and me packs away the hand-mirrors and jewelry they had handed back to us, and we had the mules back to the corral they had set apart for our garage.

“While we was there we hear great noises of shouting, and down across the plaza runs Patrick Shane, hotfoot, with his clothes ripped half off, and scratches on his face like a cat had fought him hard for every one of its lives.

“‘They’re looting the treasury, W. D.,’ he sings out. ‘They’re going to kill me and you, too. Unlimber a couple of mules at once. We’ll have to make a get-away in a couple of minutes.’

“‘They’ve found out,’ says I,’ the truth about the law of supply and demand.’

“‘It’s the women, mostly,’ says the King. ‘And they used to admire me so!’

“‘They hadn’t seen looking-glasses then,’ says I.

“‘They’ve got knives and hatchets,’ says Shane; ‘hurry!’

“‘Take that roan mule,’ says I. ‘You and your law of supply! I’ll ride the dun, for he’s two knots per hour the faster. The roan has a stiff knee, but he may make it,’ says I. ‘If you’d included reciprocity in your political platform I might have given you the dun,’ says I.

“Shane and McClintock and me mounted our mules and rode across the rawhide bridge just as the Peches reached the other side and began firing stones and long knives at us. We cut the thongs that held up our end of the bridge and headed for the coast.”

A tall, bulky policeman came into Finch’s shop at that moment and leaned an elbow on the showcase. Finch nodded at him friendly.

“I heard down at Casey’s,” said the cop, in rumbling, husky tones, “that there was going to be a picnic of the Hat-Cleaners’ Union over at Bergen Beach, Sunday. Is that right?”

“Sure,” said Finch. “There’ll be a dandy time.”

“Gimme five tickets,” said the cop, throwing a five-dollar bill on the showcase.

“Why,” said Finch, “ain’t you going it a little too—”

“Go to h—!” said the cop. “You got ’em to sell, ain’t you? Somebody’s got to buy ’em. Wish I could go along.”

I was glad to See Finch so well thought of in his neighborhood.

And then in came a wee girl of seven, with dirty face and pure blue eyes and a smutched and insufficient dress.

“Mamma says,” she recited shrilly, “that you must give me eighty cents for the grocer and nineteen for the milkman and five cents for me to buy hokey-pokey with—but she didn’t say that,” the elf concluded, with a hopeful but honest grin.

Finch shelled out the money, counting it twice, but I noticed that the total sum that the small girl received was one dollar and four cents.

“That’s the right kind of a law,” remarked Finch, as he carefully broke some of the stitches of my hatband so that it would assuredly come off within a few days—“the law of supply and demand. But they’ve both got to work together. I’ll bet,” he went on, with his dry smile, “she’ll get jelly beans with that nickel—she likes ’em. What’s supply if there’s no demand for it?”

“What ever became of the King?” I asked, curiously.

“Oh, I might have told you,” said Finch. “That was Shane came in and bought the tickets. He came back with me, and he’s on the force now.”