

Assembly Line

B. Traven

1928

Mr E.L. Winthrop of New York was on vacation in the Republic of Mexico. It wasn't long before he realised that this strange and really wild country had not yet been fully explored by Rotarians and Lions, who are forever conscious of their glorious mission on earth. Therefore he considered it his duty as a good American citizen to play his part in correcting this oversight.

In search of opportunities to indulge in his new avocation, he left the beaten track and ventured into regions not especially mentioned, and hence not recommended, by travel agents to foreign tourists. So it happened that one day he found himself in a little, quaint Indian village somewhere in the State of Oaxaca.

Walking along the dusty main street of this pueblcito, which knew nothing of pavements, drainage, plumbing, or of any means of artificial light save candles or pine splinters, he met with an Indian squatting on the earthen-floor front porch of a palm hut, a so-called jacalito.

The Indian was busy making little baskets from bast and from all kinds of fibres gathered by him in the immense tropical bush which surrounded the village on all sides. The material used had not only been well prepared for its purpose but was also richly coloured with dyes that the basket-maker himself extracted from various native plants, barks, roots and from certain insects by a process known only to him and the members of his family.

His principal business, however, was not producing baskets. He was a peasant who lived on what the small property he possessed – less than fifteen acres of not too fertile soil – would yield, after much sweat and labour and after constantly worrying over the most wanted and best suited distribution of rain sunshine and wind and the changing balance of birds and insects beneficial or harmful to his crops. Baskets he made when there was nothing else for him to do in the fields, because he was unable to dawdle. After all the sale of his baskets, though to a rather limited degree only, added to the small income he received from his little farm.

In spite of being by profession just a plain peasant, it was clearly seen from the small baskets he made that at heart he was an artist, a true and accomplished artist. Each basket looked as if covered all over with the most beautiful sometimes fantastic ornaments, flowers, butterflies, birds, squirrels, antelopes, tigers and a score of other animals of the wilds. Yet, the most amazing thing was that these decorations, all of them symphonies of colour, were not painted on the baskets but were instead actually part of the baskets themselves. Bast and fibres dyed in dozens of different colours were so cleverly – one must actually say intrinsically – interwoven that those attractive designs appeared on the inner part of the basket as well as on the outside. Not by painting but by

weaving were those highly artistic designs achieved. This performance he accomplished without ever looking at any sketch or pattern. While working on a basket these designs came to light as if by magic, and as long as a basket was not entirely finished one could not perceive what in this case or that the decoration would be like.

People in the market town who bought these baskets would use them for sewing baskets, or to decorate tables with or window sills or to hold little things to keep them from lying around. Women put their jewellery in them or flowers or little dolls. There were in fact a hundred and two ways they might serve certain purposes in a household or in a lady's own room.

Whenever the Indian had finished about twenty of the baskets he took them to town on market day. Sometimes he would already be on his way shortly after midnight because he owned only a burro to ride on, and if the burro had gone astray the day before, as happened frequently, he would have to walk the whole way into town and back again.

At the market he had to pay twenty centavos in taxes to sell his wares. Each basket cost him between twenty and thirty hours of constant work, not counting the time spent gathering bast and fibres, preparing them, making dyes and colouring the bast. All this meant extra time and work. The price he asked for each basket was fifty centavos, the equivalent of about four cents. It seldom happened however that the buyer paid outright the full fifty centavos asked – or four reales as the Indians called that money. The prospective buyer started bargaining, telling the Indian that he ought to be ashamed to ask such a sinful price. “Why the whole dirty thing is nothing but dirty petate straw which you find in heaps wherever you may look for it; the jungle is packed full of it,” the buyer would argue. “such a little basket, what's it good for anyhow? If I paid you, you thief, ten centavitos for it you should be grateful for it and kiss my hand. Well it's your lucky day, I'll be generous this time, I'll pay you twenty, yet not one green centavo more. Take it or run along.”

So he sold finally for twenty-five centavos, but then the buyer would say, “Now, what do you think of that? I've got only twenty centavos change on me. What can we do about that? If you can change me a twenty peso bill, all right, you shall have your twenty-five fierros.” Of course, the Indian could not change a twenty peso bill and so the basket went for twenty centavos.

He had little if any knowledge of the outside world or he would have known that what happened to him was happening every hour of every day to every artist all over the world. That knowledge would have made him very proud, because he would have realised that he belonged to the little army which is the salt of the earth and which keeps culture, urbanity and beauty for their own sakes from passing away.

Often it was not possible for him to sell all the baskets he had brought to market, for people here as elsewhere in the world preferred things made by the millions and each so much like the other that you were unable, even with the help of a magnifying glass, to tell which was which and where was the difference between two of the same kind.

Yet he, this craftsman, had in his life made several hundreds of those exquisite baskets, but so far no two of them had he ever turned out alike in design. Each was an individual piece of art and as different from the other as a Murillo from a Velasquez.

Naturally he did not want to take those baskets which he could not sell at the market place home with him again if he could help it. In such a case he went peddling his products from door to door where he was treated partly as a beggar and partly as a vagrant apparently looking for an opportunity to steal, and he frequently had to swallow all sorts of insults and nasty remarks.

Then, after a long run, perhaps a woman would finally stop him, take one of the baskets and offer ten centavos, which price through talks and talks would perhaps go up to fifteen or even to twenty. Nevertheless, in many instances he would actually get no more than just ten centavos, and the buyer, usually a woman, would grasp that little marvel and right before his eyes throw it carelessly on the nearest table as if to say, "Well, I take that piece of nonsense only for charity's sake. I know my money is wasted. But then, after all, I'm a Christian and I can't see a poor indian die of hunger since he has come such a long way from his village." This would remind her of something better and she would hold him and say, "Where are you at home anyway, Indito? What's your pueblo? So, from Huehuetonoc? Now, listen here, Indito, can't you bring me next Saturday two or three turkeys from Huehuetonoc? But they must be heavy and fat and very, very cheap or I won't even touch them. If I wish to pay the regular price I don't need you to bring them. Understand? Hop along, now, Indito."

The Indian squatted on the earthen floor in the portico of his hut, attended to his work and showed no special interest in the curiosity of Mr Winthrop watching him. He acted almost as if he ignored the presence of the American altogether.

"How much that little basket, friend?" Mr Winthrop asked when he felt that he at least had to say something so as not to appear idiotic.

"Fifty centavos, patroncito, my good little lordy, four reales," the Indian answered politely.

"All right, sold," Mr Winthrop blurted out in a tone and with a gesture as if he had bought a whole railroad. And examining his buy he added, "I know already who I'll give that pretty little thing to. She'll kiss me for it, sure. Wonder what she'll use it for?"

He had expected to hear a price of three or even four pesos. The moment he realised that he had judged the value six times too high, he saw right away what great business possibilities this miserable Indian village might offer to a dynamic promoter like himself. Without further delay he started exploring those possibilities. "Suppose, my good friend, I buy ten of these little baskets of yours, which I might as well tell admit right here and now, have practically no real use whatsoever. Well, as I was saying, if I buy ten, how much would you then charge apiece?"

The Indian hesitated for a few seconds as if making calculations. Finally he said, "If you buy ten I can let you have them for forty-five centavos each, se-orito gentleman."

"All right, amigo. And now let's suppose I buy from you straightaway one hundred of these absolutely useless baskets, how much will cost me each?"

The Indian, never looking up to the American standing before him and hardly taking his eyes off his work, said politely and without the slightest trace of enthusiasm in his voice, "In such a case I might not be quite unwilling to sell each for forty centavitos."

Mr Winthrop bought sixteen baskets which was all the Indian had in stock.

After three weeks' stay in the Republic, Mr Winthrop was convinced that he knew this country perfectly, that he had seen everything and knew all about the inhabitants, their character and their way of life, and that there was nothing left for him to explore. So he returned to good old Nooyorg and felt happy to be once more in a civilised country, as he expressed it to himself.

One day going out for lunch he passed a confectioner's and, looking at the little display in the window, he suddenly remembered the little baskets he had bought in that faraway Indian village.

He hurried home and took all the baskets he still had left to one of the best known candy-makers in the city.

"I can offer you here," Mr Winthrop said to the confectioner, "one of the most artistic and at the same time the most original of boxes, if you wish to call them that. These little baskets would

be just right for the most expensive chocolates meant for elegant and high priced gifts. Just have a good look at the sir, and let me listen.”

The confectioner examined the baskets and found them extraordinarily well suited for a certain line in his business. Never before had there been anything like them for originality, prettiness and good taste. He, however, avoided most carefully showing any sign of enthusiasm, for which there would be time enough once he knew the price and whether he could get a whole load exclusively.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well, I don’t know. If you asked me I’d say it isn’t quite what I’m after. It depends of course on the price. In our business the package mustn’t cost more than what’s in it.”

“Do I hear an offer?” Mr Winthrop asked.

“Why don’t you tell me in round figures how much you want for them? I’m no good at guessing.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Mr Kemple: since I’m the smart guy who discovered these baskets and since I’m the only Jack who knows where to lay his hands on more, I’m selling to the highest bidder, on an exclusive basis of course. I’m positive you can see it my way, Mr Kemple.”

“Quite so, and may the best man win,” the confectioner said. “I’ll talk the matter over with my partners. See me tomorrow morning same time, please, and I’ll let you know how far we might be willing to go.”

Next day when both gentlemen met again Mr Kemple said: “Now, to be frank with you, I know art on seeing it, no getting around that. And these baskets are little works of art, they surely are. However, we are not art dealers, you realise that of course. We’ve no other use for these pretty little things except as fancy packing for our French pralines made by us. We can’t pay for them what we might pay considering them as pieces of art. After all to us they’re only wrappings. Fine wrappings perhaps, but nevertheless wrappings. You’ll see it our way, I hope, Mr — oh yes, Mr Winthrop. So, here is our offer, take it or leave it: a dollar and a quarter apiece and not a one cent more.”

Mr Winthrop made a gesture as if he had been struck over the head.

The confectioner, misunderstanding this involuntary gesture of Mr Winthrop, added quickly “All right, all right, no reason to get excited, no reason at all. Perhaps we can do a trifle better. Let’s say one-fifty.”

“Make it one-seventy-five,” Mr Winthrop snapped, swallowing his breath while wiping his forehead.

“Sold. One-seventy-five apiece free at port of New York. We pay the customs and you pay the shipping. Right?”

“Sold,” Mr Winthrop also said and the deal was closed.

“There is of course, one condition,” the confectioner explained when Mr Winthrop was to leave. “One or two hundred won’t do for us. It wouldn’t pay the trouble and the advertising. I wouldn’t consider less than ten thousand, or one thousand dozens, if that sounds better in your ears. And they must come in twelve different patterns well assorted. How about that?”

“I can make it sixty different patterns or designs.”

“So much the better. And you’re sure you can deliver ten thousand let’s say, early October?”

“Absolutely,” Mr Winthrop avowed and signed the contract.

Practically all the way back to Mexico, Mr Winthrop had a notebook in his left hand and a pencil in his right and he was writing figures, long rows of them, to find out exactly how much richer he would be when this business had been put through.

“Now, let’s sum up the whole goddam thing,” he muttered to himself. “Damn it, where is that cursed pencil again? I had it right between my fingers. Ah, there it is. Ten thousand he ordered. Well, well, there we get a clean cut profit of fifteen thousand four hundred and forty genuine dollars. Sweet smackers. Fifteen grand right into papa’s pocket. Come to think of it, that Republic isn’t so backward after all.”

“Buenas tardes, mi amigo, how are you?” he greeted the Indian whom he found squatting in the porch of his jacalito as if he had never moved from his place since Mr Winthrop had left for New York.

The Indian rose, took off his hat, bowed politely and said in his soft voice, “Be welcome, patroncito. Thank you I feel fine, thank you. Muy buenas tardes. The house and all I have is at your kind disposal.” He bowed once more, moved his right hand in a gesture of greeting and sat down again. But he excused himself for doing so by saying, “Perdonme, patroncito, I have to take advantage of the daylight, soon it will be night.”

“I’ve got big business for you, my friend,” Mr Winthrop began.

“Good to hear that, se-or.”

Mr Winthrop said to himself, “Now, he’ll jump up and go wild when he learns what I’ve got for him.” And aloud he said: “Do you think you can make one thousand of these little baskets?”

“Why not, patroncito? If I can make sixteen, I can make one thousand also.”

“That’s right, my good man. Can you also make five thousand?”

“Of course, se-or. I can make five thousand if I can make one thousand.”

“Good. Now, if I should ask you to make me ten thousand, what would you say? and what would be the price of each? You can make ten thousand, can’t you?”

“Of course I can, se-or. I can make as many as you wish. You see I am an expert in this sort of work. No one else in the whole state can make them the way I do.”

“That’s what I thought and that’s exactly why I came to you.”

“Thank you for the honour, patroncito.”

“Suppose I order you to make ten thousand of these baskets, how much time do you think you would need to deliver them?”

The Indian, without interrupting his work, cocked his head to one side and then to the other as if he were counting the days or weeks it would cost him to make all these baskets.

After a few minutes he said in a slow voice, “It will take a good long time to make so many baskets, patroncito. You see, the bast and the fibres must be very dry before they can be used properly. Then all during the time they are slowly drying they must be worked and handled in a very special way so that while drying they won’t lose their softness and their flexibility and their natural brilliance. Even when dry they must look fresh. They must never lose their natural properties or they will look just as lifeless and dull as straw. Then while they are drying I got to get the plants and roots and barks and insects from which I brew the dyes. That takes much time also, believe me. The plants must be gathered when the moon is just right or they won’t give the right colour. The insects I pick from the plants must also be gathered at the right time and under the right conditions or else they produce no rich colours and are just like dust. But of course, jefecito, I can make as many of these canastitas as you wish, even as many as three dozens if you want them. Only give me time.”

“Three dozens? Three dozens?” Mr Winthrop yelled, and threw up both arms in desperation. “Three dozens!” he repeated as if he had to say it many times in his own voice so as to understand the real meaning of it, because for a while he thought he was dreaming. He had expected the Indian to go crazy on hearing that he was to sell ten thousand of his baskets without having to peddle them from door to door and be treated like a dog with a skin disease.

So the American took up the question of price again, by which he hoped to activate the Indian’s ambition. “You told me that if I take one hundred baskets you will let me have them for forty centavos apiece. Is that right, my friend?”

“Quite right, jefecito.”

“Now,” Mr Winthrop took a deep breath, “now, then, if I ask you to make one thousand, that is ten times one hundred baskets, how much will they cost me, each basket?”

That figure was too high for the Indian to grasp. He became slightly confused and for the first time since Mr Winthrop had arrived he interrupted his work and tried to think it out. Several times he shook his head and looked vaguely around as if for help. Finally he said, “Excuse me, jefecito, little chief, that is by far too much for me to count. Tomorrow, if you will do me the honour, come and see me again and I think I shall have my answer ready for you, patroncito.”

When on the next morning Mr Winthrop came to the hut he found the Indian as usual squatting on the floor under the overhanging palm roof working at his baskets.

“Have you got the price for ten thousand?” he asked the Indian at the very moment he saw him, without taking the trouble to say “Good Morning!”

“Si, patroncito, I have the price ready. You may believe me it has cost much labour and wroy to find out the exact price, because, you see, I do not wish to cheat you out of your honest money.”

“Skip that, amigo. Come out with the salad. What’s the price?” Mr Winthrop asked nervously.

“The price is well calculated now without any mistake on my side. If I got to make one thousand canastitas, each will be three pesos. If I must make five thousand, each will cost nine pesos. And if I have to make ten thousand, in such a case I can’t make them for less than fifteen pesos each”. Immediately he returned to his work as if he were afraid of losing too much time with such idle talk.

Mr Winthrop thought it was perhaps his faulty knowledge of this foreign language that had played a trick on him.

“Did I hear you say fifteen pesos each if I eventually would buy ten thousand?”

“That’s exactly and without any mistake what I’ve said, patroncito,” the Indian answered in his soft and courteous voice.

“But now, see here, my good man, you can’t do this to me. I’m your friend and I want help you get on your feet.”

“Yes, patroncito, I know this and I don’t doubt any of your words.”

“Now, let’s be patient and talk this over as man to man. Didn’t you tell me that if I would but one hundred you would sell each for forty centavos?”

“Si, jefecito, that’s what I said. If you buy one hundred you can have them for forty centavos apiece, provided that I have one hundred, which I don’t.”

“Yes, yes, I see that.” Mr Winthrop felt as if he would go insane any minute now. “Yes, so you said. Only what I can’t comprehend is why you cannot sell at the same price if you make me ten thousand. I certainly don’t want to chisel on the price. I am not that kind. Only, well, let’s see now if you can sell for forty centavos at all, be it for twenty or fifty or a hundred, I can’t quite get the idea why the price has to jump that high if I buy more than a hundred.”

“Bueno, patroncito, what is there so difficult to understand? It’s all very simple. One thousand canastitas cost me a hundred times more work than a dozen. Ten thousand cost me so much time and labour that I could never finish them, not even in a hundred years. For a thousand canastitas I need more bast than for a hundred, and I need more little red beetles and more plants and roots for the dyes. It isn’t that you can just walk into the bush and pick all the things you need at your heart’s desire. One root with the true violet blue may cost me four or five days until I can find one in the jungle. And have you thought how much time it takes and how much hard work to prepare the bast and fibres? What is more if I must make so many baskets, who will then look after my corn and my beans and my goats and chase for me occasionally a rabbit for meat on Sunday? If I have no corn then I have no tortillas to eat, and if I grow no beans, where do I get my frijoles from?”

“But since you’ll get so much money from me for your baskets you can buy all the corn and beans in the world and more than you need.”

“That’s what you think, se-orito, little lordy. But you see it is only the corn I grow for myself that I am sure of. Of the corn which others may or may not grow, I cannot be sure to feast upon.”

“Haven’t you got some relatives here in this village who might help you to make baskets for me?” Mr Winthrop asked hopefully.

“Practically the whole village is related to me somehow or other. Fact is I got lots of close relatives in this here place.”

“Why then can’t they cultivate your fields and look after your goats while you make baskets for me? Not only this, they might gather for you the fibres and the colours in the bush and lend you a hand here and there in preparing the material you need for the baskets.”

“They might, patroncito, yes, they might. Possible. But then you see who would take care of their fields and cattle if they work for me? And if they help me with the baskets it turns out the same. No one would any longer work in his fields properly. In such a case corn and beans would get up so high in price that none of us could buy any and we would all starve to death. Besides, as the price of everything would rise and rise higher still how could I make baskets for forty centavos apiece? A pinch of salt or one green chilli would set me back more than I’d collect for one single basket. Now you’ll understand, highly esteemed caballero and jefecito, why I can’t make the baskets any cheaper than fifteen pesos each if I got to make that many.”

Mr Winthrop was hard-boiled, no wonder considering the city he came from. He refused to give up more than fifteen thousand dollars which at that moment seemed to slip away through his fingers like nothing. Being really desperate now, he talked and bargained with the Indian for almost two full hours, trying to make him understand how rich he, the Indian, would become if he would take this greatest opportunity of his life.

The Indian never ceased working on his baskets while he explained his points of view.

“You know my good man,” Mr Winthrop said, “such a wonderful chance might never again knock on your door, do you realise that? Let me explain to you in ice-cold figures what fortune you might miss if you leave me flat on this deal.”

He tore leaf after leaf from his notebook, covered each with figures and still more figures, and while doing so told the peasant he would be the richest man in the whole district.

The Indian without answering watched with a genuine expression of awe as Mr Winthrop wrote down these long figures, executing complicated multiplications and divisions and subtractions so rapidly that it seemed to him the greatest miracle he had ever seen.

The American, noting this growing interest in the Indian, misjudged the real significance of it. "There you are, my friend," he said. "That's exactly how rich you are going to be. You'll have a bankroll of exactly four thousand pesos. And to show you that I'm a real friend of yours, I'll throw in a bonus. I'll make it a round five thousand pesos, and all in silver."

The Indian however, had not for one moment thought of four thousand pesos. Such an amount of money had no meaning to him. He had been interested solely in Mr Winthrop's ability to write figures so rapidly.

"So, what do you say now? Is it a deal or is it? Say yes and you'll get your advance this very minute."

"As I have explained, patroncito, the price is fifteen pesos each."

"But my good man," Mr Winthrop shouted at the poor Indian in utter despair, "where have you been all this time? On the moon or where? You are still at the same price as before."

"Yes I know that, jefecito, my little chief," the Indian answered entirely unconcerned. "It must be the same price because I cannot make any other one. Besides, se-or, there's still another thing which perhaps you don't know. You see my good lordy and cabalero, I've to make these canastitas my own way and with my song i them and with bits of my soul woven into them. If I were to make them in great numbers there would be no longer my soul in each, or my songs. Each would like the other with no difference and such a thing would slowly eat up my heart. Each has to be another song which I hear in the morning when the sun rises and when the birds begin to chirp and the butterflies come and sit down on my baskets so that I may see a new beauty, because, you see, the butterflies like my baskets and the pretty colours on them, that' why they come and sit down, and I can make my canastitas after them. And now, se-or jefecito, if you will kindly excuse me, I have wasted much time already, although it was a pleasure and a great honour to hear the talk of such a distinguished caballero like you. But I'm afraid I've to attend to my work now, for day after tomorrow is market day in town and I got to take my baskets there. Thank you, se-or, for your visit. Adios."

And in this way it happened that American garbage cans escaped the fate of being turned into receptacles for empty, torn and crumpled little multicoloured canastitas into which an Indian of Mexico had woven dreams of his soul, throbs of his heart: his unsung poems.

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This is an early Traven story, taken, in an uncredited translation, (probably by Traven himself — I have Anglicised the spelling) from *The Night Visitor and other stories*, Allison & Busby, 1983 — a volume long out of print. The original German version — *Der Grossindustrielle* — was first published by the Buchergilde Gutenberg in 1928, as part of the collection *Der Busch*.

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