

The Light Sellers

by [Neil Latimer](#) (September 2022)



Market Square in Brunswick, Ivo Ambroise Vermeersch, 1851

In the clear autumn morning, Mayor Harris could see that only a few dealers were still unloading their wares. Most already had their wagons empty and their teams in the feed lot for alfalfa and water.

“Fine weather and a good turnout for October Trade Days, Mr. Mayor. Every booth’s full, mostly locals with a few of the usual crafters from out of town ... and those four.” Sheriff Ben

Taylor motioned to two men and two women, all in their mid-thirties, busy working on something in one of the booths. "I gave 'em a small booth, but made it clear that you'd have the final say."

"Something wrong with 'em? You don't need my OK to run off anybody you suspect of grifting. If they're honest, they're welcome to stay, but grifters are a different matter." The mayor watched the four for a few moments but couldn't make out what they had on the table. "What're they selling?"

"That's the odd thing, Mr. Mayor. Light. I first thought I hadn't heard them right and asked them to repeat it. Sure enough, they said they're selling light."

Harris thought that over for a moment and snickered. "Ben, if these folks sell any light, let's set up our own booth for selling air. I'm turning seventy-two this month and could use a few more coppers for retirement." He regretted the words as soon as he said them.

Ben turned red. "I should have run them off, but it's just that you have forty years on me and remember things from before The Collapse, so I thought you could best decide if--"

Harris put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "You did the right thing, Ben. I'm sorry to make fun of the situation. Tell you what--let 'em finish setting up. We'll pay a visit straight after lunch, ask a few questions. But this morning, I'm going to shake some hands; election's coming in November." He pasted on a smile and ambled over to a group of voting-age shoppers.

Noontime came without incident. As was his habit on monthly trade days, the mayor splurged a couple of coppers for a sandwich from Elizabeth Mobly's lunch cart--there was no chicken this time, so he settled for cheese--and had his canteen of well water to wash it down. He sat on the grass, his back resting against one of the venerable old pecan trees

set in rows next to the square. Ben came along soon with his home-packed lunch of buttered bread and acorn coffee.

“The nice weather has folks in a buying mood, Mayor,” said Ben, as he sat cross-legged and began to eat. “Plus,” he said between mouthfuls, “they want to get some good trading in before the coming winter slows things down.”

“Uh-huh.” Harris nodded and gazed at his half-eaten sandwich. “I’ve been thinking about what you said this morning about remembering things before The Collapse. I do remember things. I was just a little boy but it’s still sharp like yesterday how there were so many machines and everybody had whatever they wanted.” He chewed a bite of sandwich and swallowed. “They didn’t have to settle for cheese sandwiches if they wanted chicken—or beef or ham—on any one of a dozen types of bread. In truth, there was some good about those days before The Collapse.” The mayor’s face hardened. “I also remember crying in terror as my parents and I stumbled through the rain to safety after the cities got blasted and everything quit working.” He finished the sandwich, stood, brushed the dirt off his trousers. “Let’s go check on our light sellers, shall we?”

They walked over to the booth area and found things much different from the morning’s easy flow of business. People talking in low voices bunched together in front of the light sellers’ display. Some gripped fist-sized river rocks, one man tapped a club against the side of his leg. “That’s a crowd about a half-minute from being a mob,” said Ben. “Something’s going on.”

The mayor and sheriff worked their way to the front of the group and watched as a thin woman with short, brown hair and round spectacles tried to make her pitch. “It’s technology,” she said, “that can make light. Look.” She had a glass globe attached by wires to a metal device on the counter. As she turned a crank on the device, light brighter than a hundred

candles rose up in the globe. "We have a much bigger generator in the wagon, from a burned out hospital, and can hook it up to a waterwheel in your river. We found a good spot just downstream of where the miller has his." The crowd noise took on a more threatening edge.

One of the light sellers, a clean-shaven young man with a lanky frame, recognized Ben from the morning and spoke up. "I'm glad you're here, sheriff." He looked at Harris. "You the mayor? The sheriff said you have the last word on letting us have a say or not. We're just trying to explain how we can generate electricity to provide some light for the town."

"Yes, I'm Mayor Harris. These people already know about electricity, son, and don't want any. For your own sake, just be quiet about it."

"I don't think you understand, sir. We're—"

The mayor's eyes flashed as his voice rose. "All of us here understand. Techies like you made promises and did things decades ago. People rode faster than any horse and flew higher than any bird. Pictures moved, boxes talked, and scientists and engineers promised even better things to come. Those techies built other things alright—horrible things. Nations quarreled and set those horrors loose on one another. I remember seeing a boiling fireball, then another, light up the night from miles away where San Antonio had been. Later, people with clumps of hair falling out and thick, dark blood coming up with every cough staggered to my parents' ranch for help. Nobody could help 'em. Not even the damned techies."

The crowd set their jaws and listened. A few were old enough to have the same memories, the younger ones knew from family lore.

The mayor took a long breath and softened his tone. "I think you are decent people trying to improve things, but techie promises only lead to ruin. For your own sake, stop what

you're doing or you'll get hurt—maybe worse. I can find decent, honest work for all of you in this town.”

Without further word, the four light sellers packed up their things and moved on.

After a mild winter, spring came early. As re-elected Mayor Harris started up the steps to town hall, the sheriff joined him with some news. “Remember those four techie light sellers we ran off last October? Well, they're back, without their light-making gear, and have an interesting tale.”

Harris climbed two more steps, stopped and turned toward the sheriff. “They're back?”

“They made their sales pitch from town to town east of here, got as far as Sealy, just this side of the Houston Craters. Seems Sealy townsfolk don't have as much patience with techies as we have and decided to lynch 'em on the spot. Even got the ropes ready.”

“OK, this is getting interesting. So how and why are they back here?”

The sheriff's grin grew into a laugh. “They promised in Sealy they'd never mention electricity again and said you'd find decent work for the four of 'em here—which you did offer to do, as I recall.”

Mayor Harris smiled and nodded. “So I did. Let's go talk to our new citizens. Looks like they've seen the light,” he said with a chuckle.

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Neil Latimer retired from writing engineering manuals and decided to write fiction for a change of pace. How difficult can it be, right? No equations! He soon learned that good, attention-getting fiction does not come easily and developed a deep admiration of those who can do it.

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