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About 2,800 words

The Better Salesman

By Richard Prosch

After putting off the job until late May, Anderson Teague went hunting one morning for his long handled grubbing hoe in the iron pile behind his two-room shack. There was no more arguing with the patch of thistles growing up around his front door.

Something had to give.

Teague just hoped it wasn't his back when he dug out the noxious weeds.

Then again, after three years on the claim, he was getting used to hard work.

It hadn't always been his way. For more years than he cared to count, the worst his back went through was a day's ride on his old buckboard wagon under the hand-painted wood sign: The Better Salesman.

That's what they called him in those days.

Kicking at a tangle of lightning rods and cable, turning over a kettle of rusted square nails, he found the hoe half-buried in the Wyoming sod, overgrown with new grass. Almost everything in the pile was overgrown, from horseshoes and band saw blades to rolls of barbed wire and broken lengths of angled scrap. Inventory from a past life.

If it was made of metal, Teague sold it, swapped it or sat on it.

He swung the hoe high into the air and the cast iron head flew off its rotted wood handle to land with a thud and poof of red dust.

The last few years had seen a lot more sitting than selling.

Teague dropped the handle and swiped at the sweat on his stubbled cheeks, rubbed the dusty dry smell of sagebrush from his nose, and turned back to the pile of debris.

A worthless collection if ever there was one.

The leftovers from one storm-wracked venture after another.

The peddler's peddler, just a little too clever, a little too quick with a sweet little deal, Teague had dealt well, but not well enough. Now he stood penniless on his granddad's old claim digging around the remains of his many past lives.

Nails, saw blades and lightning rods. Sun-browned and worthless.

Just like Anderson Teague.

Summer wind whistled through the empty stalls of the sagging two-story pole barn west of the shack, and the hay mow door banged open, then closed. His grandad built the barn in '79, adding the shack as an afterthought, a nod to a man's need for a bed when tending horses in the high-country.

The old man had been gone a long time, and there never were many horses.

Around front, Shep started barking, and Teague turned to peer down the prairie road.

Who could be passing by so early in the day?

Following two swayback roans, a high wheeled conestoga style wagon rolled off the plains into Teague's front yard, its contents hidden by its eggshell-white canvas. Two men crouched on the wagon's rigid front bench. One held the swaybacks' reins and wore vested city clothes with a black bowler derby. The other one, younger and heavier, was dressed in a sloppy long shirt and denim pants with holes at the knees.

Teague's throat tightened at the heavy smell of kerosene surrounding the rig.

He adjusted his floppy sweat-stained hat, then picked up the handle of the grubbing hoe just for something to carry around the side of the shack. Something to show the men he meant business if they got too pushy.

Teague grinned to himself. He sorta hoped they would.

The wagon came to a stop twenty feet from the front door. The sign painted on the high canvas side said "Max Plank and Son, Painters."

Shep circled the rig, yapping like he had a rabbit in its hole.

"How do?" said the man closest to Teague, doffing his little round hat.

Max Plank.

"Good afternoon to you, sir," said the shabby other.

The son.

"That's a mighty fine dog you got there. Border collie ain't she?"

Shep continued trotting around, a wide smile on her face.

Teague held on to the hoe. "Turn your wagon around and head out the way you came in."

"A moment of your time, sir."

"I don't think so."

"A drink of fresh water."

"You wouldn't deny us a drink on a hot morning?" said the son.

"I guess I would." Teague took a step forward, shooing the horses with the wood handle.

"Git. Git." Sniffing, he rubbed his nose again. He'd known barn painters before, even helped a few out.

None of 'em ever had such a stink as these Plank boys.

Shep sneezed, then added a few barks of disgust.

"Now that's a magnificent structure," said Max Plank, standing up from the wagon bench to face the barn.

"Hell of a barn," said the son.

"You ever see such workmanship?"

"I ain't never seen it, Daddy."

Max gave a series of drawn out humble nods. He turned to Teague.

"If I might just ask before we leave? Who raised that splendid edifice?"

"Who built the barn ain't none of your business," said Teague with a heavy sigh. "Who's talking to you is. I said move along."

The painters continued to ignore him.

"Cherry Tree Red?" said Max. "Bright and shining, a blossom on the horizon, a scarlet beacon of cheer."

"With snow white trim," said the son. "Cold and delicious."

"Like iced cream," said Max.

"I don't care to have my barn painted," said Teague.

"It would be a challenge," Max told his son.

"But what a showpiece. Folks would talk. Word would spread. Our reputation..."

"Would be assured in these parts." Max stroked his chin. "Could we do it for half price."

"Don't see why we couldn't."

Max Plank looked down at Teague. "You heard my boy. We'll give you half-off our normal rates."

"Half-off my ass."

Teague knew how it worked. These boys pulled in, promising to do a job in a few days, then hung around for weeks to freeload grub and any other handout they could get.

He'd done it himself a time or two. A lot of 'em stayed drunk half the time, drinking their own watered down paint thinner.

It had never got that bad for Teague. At least not yet.

Shep sneezed again.

Max Plank's eyes were red rimmed and sliding back and forth, from Teague to the barn and back again. He licked his chapped lips and picked at his trousers. "We can have it done in three hours," he said.

Teague blinked into the sun, the wagon shimmering out of focus.

"Three hours?"

"Less time than that if we get started now, before the worst of the heat."

Teague balled up his fists and planted them on his hips.

Here was something new.

"Just how do you propose to finish a job that size in three hours?" He laughed out loud. "There's no way in hell. Unless you got twelve men huddled up in the back of that wagon. That's a three or four-day job. Minimum."

"A four-day job for you and me in our youth," said Max, eager to explain.

"This here's the 20th century," said the son.

"How about you show him, boy?"

The fat kid jumped to the ground.

Teague wasn't about to let these devils trip him up. There was no way they were laying one damn brushstroke to so much as a single stick of grass.

But they'd accomplished one thing. They'd stoked his curiosity.

He supposed it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the back of the wagon.

With Shep at his heels, and still swinging the hoe handle, Teague followed Max Plank's son to the rear of the conestoga.

Once there, Max appeared around the other side and together the two salesmen pulled open the canvas to reveal the contents of the wagon.

"The 20th Century, sir," said Max.

Without trying to hide it, Teague smiled.

There, mounted on a heavy plate of iron, bolted to the wagon's reinforced oak floor before three rusted iron barrels was a small gasoline engine and pump-jack with a seemingly endless roll of rubber hose attached.

"Let me tell you how it works," said Max.

"Oh, I get it," said Teague.

"We don't use brushwork," said the son. "The paint is sprayed on. With the pump."

"Don't you see?" said Max. "This little marvel provides better coverage in a fraction of the time."

"I told you, I understand."

"Twenty-five dollars," said Max. "That's for two colors. Red and white."

Teague knew painters who would charge twice that much.

"You spray the white trim too?"

"You'd be surprised at the precision of the nozzle on that hose."

"Three hours?"

"Three hours or less," said the son.

"Or you don't pay us," said Max.

"I may not pay you anyway," said Teague.

"Your satisfaction is our guarantee."

While the three men stood looking at the engine, inhaling smells of gas, paint, and kerosene, Teague surprised himself by actually considering the offer.

Maybe the fumes were getting to him.

But, he was already thinking about the future. Some long dormant part of him was alive and cooking up a sweet little deal for himself.

Paint the barn today, maybe do the house someday by himself.

Then fix up a few things. Put some new hinges on that hay mow door.

He might actually unload the place and have bankroll enough to go somewhere else.

Try something new.

The whole thing could start now, today. If only he really were the better salesman.

“There's just one problem,” said Teague, “I don't think you can do it in the time you said. Not to my satisfaction.”

Max did an adequate job of looking hurt. “Are you calling us liars, sir?”

“I'm calling it like I see it,” said Teague. “You may as well know, I'm no stranger to your trade. There's a lot of preparation work here. Hose to unroll. Motor to get working.”

He exaggerated a slow head shake.

The son tossed out a new offer. “Say two and a half hours.”

“Two and a half hours.” Teague chewed his lip. “Now that might be worth the money.” He spread out upturned hands. “But plain and simple, I don't believe you can do it.”

Max Plank's eyes flared wide at the challenge. He reached into his coat and Teague stepped back.

The painter brought out a tarnished pocket watch.

“Say the word, and we'll get to work.” He handed Teague the timepiece.

Now it was Teague's turn to raise his eyebrows. “I'm gonna go pull a jug of water from my well and sit down there by my iron pile. You boys got two hours and thirty minutes.” He looked at the watch. “Starting now.”

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The gas popper made a hell of a racket, and if the kerosene stink was bad before they started, it was three times worse now.

Twice in a half hour Teague had turned his back on the entire enterprise to walk out across the open range and suck in lungfuls of fresh air. He stood nearly a quarter mile away

from the claim and looked back. Shep circled around, poking her nose into prairie dog holes.

The painters were working steady along the side of the barn in a swirling cloud of red mist. Max was stripped down to shirt and trousers, leaving his vest, coat, and derby on the seat of the wagon. The boy had tossed his shirt aside and his puffy soft skin was a blazing pink, equal parts sunburn and paint.

“What a damned mess,” Teague said out loud and Shep sneezed in agreement.

“Hell of a way to make a living,” he said.

The thing of it was, they were making good progress. They'd started on the north-east side and were working their way around the barn clockwise.

Teague looked at the pocket watch. After forty-five minutes, the Planks were almost half done, the bleached dry barn wood sucking up the paint like a thirsty blood tick.

Satisfaction guaranteed, the old man had said.

Well, no matter how good a job they did, the rifle inside Teague's back door wasn't about to be satisfied with the job. Paying the Planks wasn't a part of Teague's home improvement plan.

The breeze kicked up a thick whiff of kerosene: the secret of the Plank's speed and their ability to cut costs. Every barn painter Teague ever knew cut his paint with thinner, but the Planks' setup was the worst ever. The stuff chugging through the pump and landing on the barn wall contained less paint than a bargirl's lipstick. Even from a distance, Teague could see the gunk running in long, sloppy curves down the boards.

It was the kind of sloppy work that would make his refusal to pay more honest than he'd figured.

He slapped the pocket watch shut and, walking toward the iron pile, breathed in and out through his mouth.

Next time Teague opened the lid, Max Plank was walking toward him, wiping his scarlet

hands on a dirty gray rag. Teague leaned back in a wood rocker beside the iron pile, the watch in one hand, a rifle flat across his lap. He returned the painter's smug grin.

"Glory be, that sun is a booger," said Max. "But I believe we got her licked."

"That so?"

"It'll take an hour or two to dry. Not long in this weather."

Teague chuckled. "That stuff you call paint was dry the minute it hit the barn."

"Barn wood does soak up the pigment."

"Soaks up the kerosene. Don't know how much paint you actually used."

Unfazed by the comment, Max dabbed at coat of pink covering his neck, cheeks and forehead. The barn's hay mow door banged open, then closed and both men turned to watch the son work at rolling up the wet, stained paint hose.

Once a sun-bleached cool gray, the two story building was now a brownish rust color with fuzzy pink outlines, swirling mirage-like in a field of shimmering hot fumes. Teague peered through squinty lids and watched the kid toss down the hose and dig into his pants pocket.

"If I may, I'd like to ask you for the time," said Max, extending his hand.

Teague tossed him the watch. "Oh, you made the deadline, alright," he said. "With ten minutes to spare."

At the barn, the son was rolling a cigarette with papers and a sack of tobacco.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Max. "We'll just get everything cleaned up and then I'll be back over to settle up."

"Ain't gonna be no settlin' up." Teague put both hands on the rifle. "Like I told you before, you can turn your wagon around and come back the way you came."

"Beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

"We had a deal, sir."

"Yes, we did. Satisfaction guaranteed, you said. Well, I ain't satisfied."

"I don't understand." Max Plank flung an outstretched arm toward the barn. "That's a damned fine job for what you're paying."

"You didn't hear me. I ain't paying."

Max opened his mouth, then closed it before anything came out.

Oddly enough, the kid was still standing by the barn, unlit cigarette in hand. Like he was waiting for something.

"This ain't my first rodeo, Mr. Plank. Matter of fact, I used to be something of a wheeler dealer just like yourself. They called me the Better Salesman."

Max narrowed his eyes, turned to look at the boy.

"Then they called you wrong, sir."

Max nodded.

The kid tossed the cigarette to the ground. Brought up his other hand. Lifted his left foot.

Too late, Teague realized what he was going to do.

A match blazed to life on the son's boot heel.

"Like you observed," said Max, the better salesman. "Lot of kerosene there."

Teague closed his eyes and gripped the rifle with white knuckled frustration.

He should've seen it coming. Should've known there'd be an angle. There was always an angle.

Shep barked, and Teague's mind went to the iron pile.

The sawblades, the cables, the lightning rods.

"I'll pay, I'll pay," said Teague, tossing his rifle aside and rising to his feet.

Max smiled and waved at his son who promptly ground the sputtering match into the dirt.

"I knew you'd see reason."

"But before I do, I've got a proposition for you."

"A proposition?"

"Picture this," said Anderson Teague, spreading his hands wide, spinning a yarn long and colorful.

The match Max's son had was nothing more than a spark. A spark could come from anywhere. Out here on the open range, sparks were frequent in the form of lightning.

And who would want their fresh painted barn to get struck by lightning? Especially a barn coated in Max Plank's unique mixture of pigment.

A unique, highly flammable mixture.

Nobody would want that, would they?

So wouldn't the sensible man part with a few additional dollars for a lightning rod? Maybe two?

"Indeed he might," said Max, seeing the potential. "But where would I find enough lightning rods to make a go of it?"

Teague put his arm around the older man. "Step right this way, my friend."

And just like that, he was back on top. The legend on the sign still belonged to Anderson Teague.