

SHORT STORY AMERICA

SENILITY

SHERWOOD ANDERSON

He was an old man and he sat on the steps of the railroad station in a small Kentucky town.

A well dressed man, some traveler from the city, approached and stood before him.

The old man became self-conscious.

His smile was like the smile of a very young child. His face was all sunken and wrinkled and he had a huge nose.

"Have you any coughs, colds, consumption or bleeding sickness?" he asked. In his voice there was a pleading quality.

The stranger shook his head. The old man arose.

"The sickness that bleeds is a terrible nuisance," he said. His tongue protruded from between his teeth and he rattled it about. He put his hand on the stranger's arm and laughed.

"Bully, pretty," he exclaimed. "I cure them all--coughs, colds, consumption and the sickness that bleeds. I take warts from the hand--I cannot explain how I do it--it is a mystery--I charge nothing--my name is Tom--do you like me?"

The stranger was cordial. He nodded his head. The old man became reminiscent. "My father was a hard man," he declared. "He was like me, a blacksmith by trade, but he wore a plug hat. When the corn was high

he said to the poor, 'go into the fields and pick' but when the war came he made a rich man pay five dollars for a bushel of corn."

"I married against his will. He came to me and he said, 'Tom I do not like that girl.'"

"'But I love her,' I said.

"'I don't,' he said.

"My father and I sat on a log. He was a pretty man and wore a plug hat. 'I will get the license,' I said.

"'I will give you no money,' he said.

"My marriage cost me twenty-one dollars--I worked in the corn--it rained and the horses were blind--the clerk said, 'Are you over twenty-one?' I said 'yes' and she said 'yes.' We had chalked it on our shoes. My father said, 'I give you your freedom.' We had no money. My marriage cost twenty-one dollars. She is dead."

The old man looked at the sky. It was evening and the sun had set. The sky was all mottled with grey clouds. "I paint beautiful pictures and give them away," he declared. "My brother is in the penitentiary. He killed a man who called him an ugly name."

The decrepit old man held his hands before the face of the stranger. He opened and shut them. They were black with grime. "I pick out warts," he explained plaintively. "They are as soft as your hands."

"I play on an accordion. You are thirty-seven years old. I sat beside my brother in the penitentiary. He is a pretty man with pompadour hair. 'Albert' I said, 'are you sorry you killed a man?' 'No,' he said, 'I am not sorry. I would kill ten, a hundred, a thousand!'"

The old man began to weep and to wipe his hands with a soiled handkerchief. He attempted to take a chew of tobacco and his false teeth became displaced. He covered his mouth with his hands and was ashamed.

"I am old. You are thirty-seven years old but I am older than that," he whispered.

"My brother is a bad man--he is full of hate--he is pretty and has pompadour hair, but he would kill and kill. I hate old age--I am ashamed that I am old.

"I have a pretty new wife. I wrote her four letters and she replied. She came here and we married--I love to see her walk--O, I buy her pretty clothes.

"Her foot is not straight--it is twisted--my first wife is dead--I pick warts off the hand with my fingers and no blood comes--I cure coughs, colds, consumption and the sickness that bleeds--people can write to me and I answer the letters--if they send me no money it is no matter--all is free."

Again the old man wept and the stranger tried to comfort him. "You are a happy man?" the stranger asked.

"Yes," said the old man, "and a good man too. Ask everywhere about me--my name is Tom, a blacksmith--my wife walks prettily although she has a twisted foot--I have bought her a long dress--she is thirty and I am seventy-five--she has many pairs of shoes--I have bought them for her, but her foot is twisted--I buy straight shoes--

"She thinks I do not know--everybody thinks Tom does not know--I have bought her a long dress that comes down to the ground--my name is Tom, a blacksmith--I am seventy-five and I hate old age--I take warts off the hands and no blood comes--people may write to me and I answer the letters--all is free."