HUMOR

Mary Wilkins Freeman

(1852-1930)

ANALYSIS

"A Village Singer" (1891)

Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote local color stories of New England at a time of cultural decline. After the Civil War, many people, especially young men, had gone out West in the covered wagon trains, leaving behind many unmarried women and few eligible men.

"A Village Singer" is a humorous example of pure Realism that transcends the limitations of most local color fiction. The style is plain with authentic dialect, vivid figurative language and apt motifs, evoking the commonplace in a modest tone that contrasts with the personality of the old village singer, Candace Whitcomb. It is Spring, the season of new life, and the story is about how Candace reacts when she gets dismissed after 40 years as lead soloist in the village church choir. Her voice 'had grown too cracked and uncertain on the upper notes.' The upper notes connote spiritual as well as vocal elevation.

The congregation sits waiting to hear the new young soprano debut, as a murmur of trees outside fills the church with "soft sylvan music" and "tender harmony." As soon as the new singer, Alma Way, begins to sing her first solo, so nervous her bonnet is trembling, her sweet voice is countered by Candace, who lives just next door to the church—"singing another hymn to another tune." The old lady is playing her parlor organ and singing loudly to drown out the voice of her young rival. The reaction of the women in the congregation sets the tone of the story: "half aghast, half smiling." Alma finishes her solo feeling shaken and faint. Later, when she begins to sing another solo, "Again the parlor organ droned above the carefully delicate accompaniment of the church organ, and again Candace Whitcomb's voice clamored forth in another tune."

Candace is an independent, strong-willed New England woman who had lived a quiet life but "all the time held within herself the elements of revolution." The rebellion of this "revolutionary parishioner" recalls the American Revolution, which began nearby, inspired by exactly the character traits she is now

displaying. "To this obscure woman, kept relentlessly by circumstances in a narrow track, singing in the village choir had been as much as Italy was to Napoleon--and now on her island of exile she was still showing fight." After the service the choir leader William Emmons consoles Alma, calling the disruptions "outrageous." This is a price Candace is willing to pay: She and Emmons had sung duets together, he had walked her home after rehearsals and people "had watched sharply her old face, on which the blushes of youth sat pitifully" whenever he entered the choir seats. They had "wondered if he would ever ask her to marry him." But now he says to Alma that Candace's voice had "failed utterly of late, that she sang shockingly, and ought to have had sense enough to know it."

Relations between the sexes in the village are evident in the fact that Alma and Wilson Ford, who waits for her in the doorway, had been seeing each other "for the last ten years." As they walk past Candace's little house, Wilson declares that if Candace, who is his aunt, disrupts Alma again he will go into her house and break her old organ "into kindling wood." Wilson's mother is a "pugnacious" and self-pitying woman and is the reason he has not married Alma. "He would not take his wife home to live with her, and was unable to support separate establishments." Alma is willing to marry him and put up with his mother, for she is losing her prettiness and is beginning to look like an old maid herself.

The timid minister visits Candace in an attempt to put down her rebellion, but her "eyes had two tiny cold sparks of fury in them, like an enraged bird's." When he stammers out an explanation of how her singing and playing her organ so loudly had disturbed the church service, politely supposing that she was unaware, she replies with defiance:

> "'I did it on purpose; I meant to.'
> The minister looked at her.
> 'You needn't look at me. I know jest what I'm about. I sung the way I did on purpose, an' I'm goin' to do it again, an' I'd like to see you stop me. I guess I've got a right to set down to my own organ, an' sing a psalm tune on a Sabbath day, 'f I want to; an' there ain't no amount of talkin' an' palaverin' a-goin' to stop me. See there!' Candace swung aside her skirts a little. 'Look at that!'
> The minister looked. Candace's feet were resting on a large red-plush photograph album.
> 'Makes a nice footstool, don't it?' said she."

The album is the gift she was given upon her dismissal as the church soloist. Her laugh is "almost a snarl," and "her tone full of vicious irony." The story too is full of irony. Candace denounces the members of the church for only pretending to be Christians and claims, "my voice is jest as good as ever t'was; there can't anybody say it ain't. It wa'n't ever quite so high-pitched as that Way girl's, mebbe; but she flats the whole durn time.... S'pose they should turn you off, Mr. Pollard, come an' give you a photograph album, an' tell you to clear out, how'd you like it?... There's William Emmons, too; he's three years older'n I am... If my voice has given out, it stan's to reason his has.... Why don't they turn him out the way they have me, an' give him a photograph album?'"

She faults them all for not being direct with her instead of just leaving the album on her table with a letter of dismissal inside, though it is apparent they were afraid of her: "If they'd gone about it any decent way, told me right out that they'd got tired of me, an' wanted Alma Way to sing instead of me, I wouldn't minded so much." She continues in a long diatribe that echoes the American revolutionaries, saying "I'm goin' to take matters into my own hands. I'm goin' to let folks see that I ain't trod down quite flat." The minister "could not account for such violence, such extremes, except in a loss of reason.... He himself was not a typical New-Englander; the national elements of character were not pronounced in him.... For a New England nature has a floodgate, and the power which it releases is an accumulation." The befuddled pastor can only ask Candace to kneel down and pray with him. "Candace refused flatly. 'I don't see any use prayin' about it,' said she. 'I don't think the Lord's got much to do with it, anyhow'."

During the next church service, once again Candace pounds her organ and loudly sings out "with jealous fury." She "sang with wonderful fire," and fire becomes a motif of her passion thereafter. Afterward, her

nephew Wilson Ford comes barging in and threatens to throw her organ out the window. She declares that "after the way you've spoke today, you sha'n't never have one cent of my money, an' you can't never marry that Way girl if you don't have it. You can't never take her home to live with your mother, an' this house would have been mighty nice an' convenient for you some day. Now you won't get it. I'm goin' to make another will'."

"Her threat of disinheriting him did not cow him at all; he had too much rough independence, and indeed his aunt Candace's house had always been too much of an air-castle for him to contemplate seriously." Mary *Wil*-kins Freeman transcends her gender by making *Wil*-son the model of integrity and Realism in her story: With his "common-sense," he "could have little to do with air-castles" and relies upon "his own long and steady labor" to get ahead in life. In *Walden* (1854) Thoreau advises us: "If you have built castles in the air...that is where they should be." Freeman's contrasting outlook expressed through Wilson exemplifies the difference between Romanticism and Realism.

After he storms out of her house, Candace builds a fire in her kitchen stove, which soon burns out, as she does. After experiencing a chill, she develops a deadly fever--a *synedoche*, a part of the story that encapsulates the whole. She notices a fire in the woods (Wilderness/soul) across the fields (Garden/heart), an archetypal symbol of her inner fire, "withering and destroying": "She was in the roar of an intenser fire; the growths of all her springs and the delicate wontedness of her whole life were going down in it." Dying of fever in her bed, she tries to put out her inner fire by asking that the photograph album be brushed "up a little," then by asking the minister to forgive her. She asks for Alma Way. The name Alma means soul and she represents the way of the soul: "I'd like to--hear her sing." When Alma and Wilson come in, Candace tells them she is leaving her house to Wilson after all: "Alma can have--all--my things."

Wilson weeps and Alma sings "Jesus, lover of my soul." Now Candace's face "had a holy and radiant expression" and "it did not disappear" as she utters her last words "through the smoke and flame of the transfiguring fire the instant before it falls." The popular sentimental fiction of that day set up a presumption that Candace has now put out her inner fire, purged herself completely and attained spiritual perfection. However, Candace is human, therefore by nature imperfect. Freeman the Realist contradicts the sentimental expectation of the reader with a delightful ironic punch line that applies to Candace rather than Alma, making the old village singer more endearing than if she had proved in the end to be a conventional Victorian lady, as she cannot resist criticizing her rival: "You flatted a little on soul."

Michael Hollister (2015)