

Slough of Despair

The Florida sun rises over the banks of the upper Suwanee river, a land covered in palmettos and moss. On the banks of the river, a thriving town sits, its crops just a shade too green, its fruit just a bit too ripe, its air just a bit too dry for northern Florida. In the center of Columbus, watching, guarding over all is the seven-foot stalk of the Dark Trill.

Violet-black petals come from one horn-bell blossom, a blossom which no bee or hummingbird shall ever visit. In fact, the entire area is free of all insects; its residents are neither bitten by mosquito nor visited by roaches.

The mayor-lieutenant rises with the sun each day, and calls to the people. The action is perfunctory, regular and superfluous. In unison, the doors of their homes open, and the people of the town walk to the Dark Trill.

They till it first. Weeds are uprooted, water is added, and fertilizer added to the soil when needed. Then, the Trill guides each individual to his or her task. The town sustains itself off of food produced in the nearby clearings, blessed by the Trill's own purpose. The people of the town do not speak while they work; it is unnecessary, as the Trill will simply act in its own behalf through its marionettes.

In the evening, the Trill walks the people home. They dine, and then they rest. In the next morning, the scene will repeat, just as it has for two hundred years, a pair of centuries which have passed for Columbus, but which have yet to be seen by the lands surrounding the Dark Trill's influence. There, it is still 1871. Columbus has seen two hundred 1871s.

With each passing season, the roles of the people change. During the harvest, grain is stored and meat is salted for the Winter. The Trill infuses the populace with lust, and the orgies that follow are enthusiastic and loveless. During the Spring, only enough children are preserved to replace those lost over the past year. The rest are slaughtered and prepared for fertilizer. The mothers of Columbus do not shed a tear over their lost children; the Trill does not permit such frivolity.

It began one morning. The sun rose again. It was a morning like any other. The mayor-lieutenant called to the people; the people came from their homes. They walked forward to serve the Dark Trill.

And there, in the thickness of the morning, a voice pierced through. The voice of one of the young boys of the town, who was singing.

*Oh, Glorious Day! Oh, Beautiful Day!
Let us rejoice and give thanks to the Lord,
For his love endures forever!*

And in that moment, there was a pause. And during that brief handful of seconds, it felt to all as if the strings had been cut, a fog had lifted, and all were able to see once again. And the moment passed, leaving all to wonder; whose child had been singing? Who had taught him that song?

The Dark Trill, for its part, had noticed the loss of control, but upon regaining it, thought nothing more of it. The day passed as had every other day for two hundred years, and all slept soundly that night.

The sun rose again. It was a morning like any other. The mayor-lieutenant called to the people; the people came from their homes. They walked forward to serve their gracious flower.

And there, in the thickness of the morning, a voice pierced through. It was the boy, who was singing again.

This is the day that the Lord has made!

As he sang, one of the older men of the village began to sing with him.

*The Lord has done this,
And it is marvelous in our eyes.*

And now the pause lasted a bit longer. People were able to look around in shock for a moment, before yet again the Dark Trill regained its power. It again thought nothing of the matter once the power was restored. But in the minds of certain people, an idea began to take form.

The day passed as had every other day for two hundred years, and all slept well that night. There was evening and there was morning, a morning like any other. The mayor-lieutenant called to the people; the people came from their homes. They walked forward to tend the fronds of the Trill.

Once more, in the thickness of the morning, a voice pierced through, and then another, and then others. First the boy, then the old man, then some young girls joined in. And soon the singing was heard in every ear of the residents of Columbus.

*Give thanks to the Lord
For His love endures forever!*

*I will not die but live,
And proclaim what the Lord has done!*

And as the pause began, a few more voices joined in the song.

*The stone the builders rejected
Has become the capstone;
The Lord has done this;
And it is marvelous in our eyes!*

The voices raised in triumph! The Trill was perplexed, but only heard two of the next lines as they sang together another verse!

*You are my God, and I will give you thanks
You are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord for He is good;
His love endures forever.*

And when the singing stopped, the people gasped in horror at what they saw. The old man who had joined the young boy in singing the day before was standing in the center of the town. In one hand, he had a pair of shears; in the other, the stalk of the Dark Trill.

The people of Columbus were free, and they seethed with rage at their liberators.

Some of them were descendants of the witches who had summoned the Trill in the first place, to salvage the town from history, and give it unending prosperity and eternal life. Some of them were those who loved their homes and understood that the ground would not give up its fruits so easily without the Trill's help. And some of them simply feared change, and were petrified of regaining Free Will. Each was a minority, but together they made a supermajority.

That evening, the man who cut down the Trill, the boy, and his mother (who must have taught him the Hymns) were hanged from a tree until dead. The rest of those who had sung fled the village. They had retained their beliefs through the centuries in the night, when most were too exhausted to realize that the Trill's power was weaker. As to why one young boy had the spirit to sing when all else had been in the Trill's sway, who can tell? Who is to say that they did not all have the power; rather, that they simply chose not to use it.

Few slept well that night. And the sun rose on a morning like any other. The mayor-lieutenant called to the people. Some came from their homes. Many, without the guidance of the Dark Trill, simply stayed in their beds, and remained there until they starved to death. Those who remained approached the Dark Trill's former grounds, and stared at it blankly. Having given it what honors they could, they went to the barnyards and fields. There, they pantomimed the acts of taking care of the livestock and fields; but without the Trill to guide their hands, their acts made a mockery of real farming. And when the time for harvest came, those who remained had no food to eat. They all starved before that December.

The wheels of time moved once again, and it was January, 1872. No one lives in Columbus, Florida, any more. But to this day you can visit where it was in the Suwanee River State Park.

All that remains is the cemetery.