

Overture was finished. From the hall that every moment seemed to grow darker came a sound of ghostly applause. Michael looked at his program in a fever. What was this unpronounceable German composition, this Tonic Poem that must be played before Stella's turn would arrive? It seemed to go on forever in a most barbaric and amorphous din; with corybantic crashings, with brazen fanfares and stinging cymbals it flung itself against the audience, while the wood-wind howled and the violins were harsh as cats. Michael brooded unreceptive; he had a sense of monstrous loneliness; he could think of nothing. The noise overpowered his beating heart, and he began to count absurdly, while he bit his nails or shivered in alternations of fire and snow. Then his program fluttered down onto the head of a bald violoncellist, and the ensuing shock of self-consciousness, that was mingled with a violent desire to laugh very loudly, restored him to his normal calm. The Tonic Poem shrieked and tore itself to death. The world became very quiet.

There was a gradual flap of rising applause, and it was Stella who, tall and white, was being handed across the platform. It was Stella who was sitting white and rigid at the black piano that suddenly seemed to have shrunk into a puny insignificance. It was Stella whose fingers were causing those rills of melody to flow. She paused, while the orchestra took up their part, and then again the rills began to flow, gently, fiercely, madly, sadly, wildly. Now she seemed to contend against the mighty odds of innumerable rival instruments; now her own frail instrument seemed to flag; now she was gaining strength; her cool clear harmonies were subduing this welter of violins, this tempest of horns and clarionets, this menace of bass-voils and drums. The audience was extinguished like a candle. The orchestra seemed inspired by the angry forces of nature herself. The bows of the violins whitened and flickered like