A Summer Storm.

By A. M. DAVIES OGDEN.

The afternoon sunshine rippled across the lake, burnishing the waves to gold and bringing out soft glints in Margaret Alliston's hair. The girl's eyes gazed dreamily over the water. Her hands—firm, capable little hands—were clasped loosely behind her head as she leaned back in the rustic chair. The clear, delicately pencilled features, the pliant figure relaxed to a happy abandon—all breathed a rare atmosphere of refinement and charm. Mrs. Rushwell, looking critically at her, wondered for the thousandth time why Margaret had never married.

They were seated in one of the pretty piazza crowned boathouses which decorate the Adirondack shores. Margaret had been reading aloud while the other sewed. Mrs. Rushwell carefully threaded her needle.

"It has been so lovely to have you all to myself this way, Margaret," she said sincerely. "I almost wish Ned was not bringing up all that mob tonight."

A glint of laughter flickered in the girl's eyes.

"And who all are coming?" she queried idly. She knew Mary's social tastes—Mary, who was never so happy as when entertaining a roomful. For herself, the fresh, cool breeze, the fringe of green edging, the sparkling bit of blue, the distant glimpses of purple mountains—these filled her with an unspeakable sense of peace and comfort. She did not think that the people would bother her greatly. Mrs. Rushwell reflected.

"Well, there are Susie Hoyt and Billy Morris and Jim Blackwell and—and—oh, yes, you remember Townsend Lassiter. He is just returned from Chile, where I believe he was the most popular minister ever sent there from Washington. And Belen di Herrera arrives too. She is a sort of ward of his, I believe. He knew her parents intimately, and when they both died he rather took charge of the girl and has just brought her up to her mother's people. She was an American. The girl is awfully young, only seventeen, but they develop early in those countries. So when I asked him I invited her too. He brought her to see me just before I left town, and in spite of his being so much older I believe he is going to marry her. It's quite a romantic story, isn't it?"

"Very," murmured Margaret. She had grown a trifle paler, but that might have been attributable to the heat. The breeze was going down with the sun. Her manner was quite unruffled."

"I remember Mr. Lassiter very well," she said quietly. "It will be pleasant to meet him again."

But as she dressed for dinner that evening Margaret found herself using even more than her usual dainty care. When she had finished the girl lifted the hand glass and surveyed herself carefully. A little sigh fluttered between her parted lips. She was still slim and straight and tall, but the thoughtful mouth had a tired curve, and the soft hair showed a patch of silver.

"And he is engaged to a girl of seventeen," she reflected rather wistfully. "Will he think me very changed, I wonder?" Then with a sudden change of mood she blew out the candle and smiled. "He has probably forgotten the whole episode ages since," she decided. "Don't be a goose, Margaret. Evoking ghosts is a foolish pastime."

But despite her philosophy Margaret was conscious of a quick throb of interest as Townsend Lassiter came forward to greet her. He at least had not changed, or if he had it was but to improve, conceded Margaret. The straight, thick hair on his temples was touched with gray; the pleasant, frank eyes had a serious look in them. But the old flashing smile was there. Margaret experienced a sudden sense of relief. There was no hint of awkwardness in his manner. The note of cordial greeting to an old friend was exactly right. Then he turned.

"I want you to meet Miss di Herrera," he said.

During dinner Margaret looked at the little South American. She seemed a mere child, with her great, dark, velvety eyes and sensitive, quivering mouth. And Townsend Lassiter cared for her. He treated her with a grave, careful tenderness that considered her every want. Yet all at once Margaret was conscious of a sudden, swelling sympathy for the shy, half frightened little thing. She seemed so young, so helpless. As they all rose to leave the dining room Margaret spoke to her in kindly, halting Spanish. The small face lighted up, the soft olive cheeks flushed duskily, as the girl stammered some grateful reply. Margaret was almost startled at the loveliness of the child, and young Morris, close behind, caught his breath.

The house party had been invited for two weeks, but hardly three days had passed before Mrs. Rushwell began dimly to surmise something wrong. To all appearance her guests were well chosen and congenial, but some subtle sixth sense made her aware of a strain, a tension, carefully hidden, but acutely present. She fell to watching, but conclusions baffled her. The little South American girl, her eyes wider and darker than ever, clung to Margaret with an almost passionate devotion. The Morris boy moped. Margaret, in a mood difficult of analysis, enveloped herself in a wayward brilliancy impossible to penetrate. Once or twice his hostess caught Lassiter studying with curious eyes his little fiancee. What was the matter with them all, wondered Mrs. Rushwell. Was Lassiter jealous? There could be nothing serious in the Morris boy's attentions.

It was the last night of their stay. All day heavy clouds had been piling up in the west, threatening masses of violet. The sun had sunk below the horizon in a sullen blaze of dull red. The stillness and the heat were intense. Margaret, restless and wearied, had slipped outside, seeking a refuge, a breath among the stately pines. Above her head they murmured in endless cadence, musical and mysterious. But to her troubled mind the tranquillity of the woods brought no peace. As yet the pain was too fresh for nature's assuagement. And twisted through the tangle of her own persistent thoughts ran a teasing little question of Belen's. Before dinner the girl had come to her room. The camellia-like face was pale; the dusky eyes had an odd look of suffering. She had picked up Margaret's silver hand glass and stood balancing it absently.

"Mr. Townsend, he is a very great man, is he not?" She had put the question wistfully, and Margaret had answered yes.

"It—it is strange that he can care for one—one so young, so ignorant, so untrained," faltered the young voice. "Do you—do you think he really does—really?" The big eyes had searched Margaret's face with an eager, almost a supplicating intensity.

For a moment Margaret's heart had almost stopped its beating. What could the child mean? Then she had forced herself to calmness.

"I know he does," she had answered steadily. "He cares very much."

But the question lingered in Margaret's mind, touched to a poignant significance by the memory of that small white face. Of what was the child thinking? Whence came the hidden feeling which prompted the query?

Margaret, despite the close atmosphere, shivered. Why had Lassiter returned and why, oh, why, had he come here to destroy, this time forever, the peace of mind which Margaret had believed so secure at last? And this poor child who loved her! Involuntarily Margaret wrung her hands. How hard, how complicated, was life! But, thank Heaven, tomorrow they would all separate. After tomorrow she need see him no more.

There was a step behind her on the soft carpet of fallen needles—a quick, firm tread coming hurriedly down the path. Margaret turned. It was dusky under the thick sheltering boughs, but she recognized at once that it was Lassiter. At sight of the white figure before him the man started.

"Margaret!" he ejaculated sharply. "Margaret!" But he caught himself at once. "I beg your pardon," he smiled. "You looked almost like a ghost there among the trees. I am on my way to the boathouse," explaining easily. "Belen and young Morris are on the lake, and it looks so like a storm."

"Come," she said quickly. It had grown very dark. The sultry air was breathless. Not a sigh stirred the branches above. The slippery, overgrown path was difficult to find, but Margaret sped unheedingly on. That little frail canoe out on the tumbling waters! Oh, why was the boathouse so far? And then all at once a gnarled old root thrust boldly out caught her foot. She tripped, stumbled, and the next instant she had fallen into Lassiter's arms.

It was only for one brief fraction of time, one half anguished moment, during which the man, his stern self control shaken, had gathered her close. Then Margaret broke from him.

"Belen!" she gasped. The lines around Lassiter's mouth whitened.

"I know," he said. "I know." But despite his effort at self mastery the emotion roused was not to be so easily leashed. The bitterness of years surged to the surface.

"Margaret!" he cried. "Oh, Margaret, why did you send me away?"

"I—I didn't know," murmured the woman unsteadily. "I—I thought I didn't care, and then it was too late—you had gone. But—but you are happy now," she urged. "Belen"—

"Belen is a child," said Lassiter quietly. "When she was left so alone with only me for guardian there seemed nothing else to do. I shall try to make her a good husband. But you, Margaret"—his voice suddenly dropped to an unconscious entreaty—"Margaret"—

Then out of the gloom a voice echoed clearly across the water.

"No, no," it sobbed, and both man and woman, stopping suddenly, recognized the voice as Belen's. "You mustn't talk so. I can't marry you. Oh, I can't! He loves me. Miss Alston says so. And he has been too good to me. I must not break his heart, but I love Billy."

Across the murky darkness leaped a white flash of fire. A tremendous crashing peal seemed to split the very heavens, and then suddenly the rain, loosed at last, came pouring down, cool, cleansing, revivifying, bringing a grateful freshness to the thirsty ground, restored equilibrium to the surcharged atmosphere. Great drops pattered on the pine boughs, but Margaret, her eyes wet with happy tears, was not conscious of the pelting rain, for in that second when lake and woods had stood distinct and clear, silhouetted against that unearthly brilliance, in that instant of vision had been revealed the picture of a man and a maid, a picture old when time was young—Billy Morris kissing Belen.

"Margaret!" cried Lassiter hoarsely. "Oh, Margaret, you saw, you heard! Belen is going to marry Billy Morris, and you—you are going to marry me, aren't you, Margaret?" as she lifted her face to his.

IN A TUNNEL.

Having visited my estate at Poissy, I started back with a package of bills amounting to $2,000, which I was in too much of a hurry to count. Happily for me, the 3:20 express for Paris was late arriving, and I had time to spring into a compartment that I thought was empty.

A lady, however, was there before me in the corner to the right. This lady was not only young, but very pretty, elegant and dressed in perfect taste. Presently she took up a paper folded on her lap and began to read.

Meanwhile we were rapidly approaching the station of Maisons-Laffitte, when all at once the notion struck me to read again some letters I had about me and that I had only glanced at in the hurry of my morning departure.

I put my hand in my pocket then and drew out in a loose heap the bundle of papers and letters and among them my pocketbook.

I took up the pocketbook, therefore, drew out the notes and in the absolute security of that narrow, shut in carriage counted them slowly, complacently, without the slightest fear of being spied on. With my accustomed carelessness in everything I did I laid the pocketbook down on the seat beside me, along with the handful of letters that I proposed to read.

A sharp rattle of iron made me look up brusquely. Was it really possible we were already passing Asnieres?

The young woman, too, had been drawn by the noise from her immobility. She folded up her paper, then drew off her glove.

But now the shadow of the great wall of the Batignolles was falling into the wagon, already gray with the coming twilight, and I saw that the lantern was not lighted. A moment more and we rushed into the Asnieres tunnel.

Immediately I was conscious of a slight rustling sound, almost imperceptible in that fracas of rattling iron, a sort of light rubbing or scratching among the papers lying on the seat beside me.

Absentminded as I am, there were a hundred chances to one against my noticing so slight a thing. Nevertheless, be it a supernatural warning or latent suspicion, I instantly thought of my pocketbook, and instantly, too, without reflection, I threw myself forward, my two hands spread out wide upon my scattered papers, and leaned heavily upon them.

My heart gave one great plunge and seemed to stop beating, for I felt at once under those sheets of paper that I had seized upon something—something that, like a bear in a trap, sought to be free, writhing, struggling, clawing, twisting.

Just then the train whistled again, a whistle of distress, of inquiry maybe, relaxed its speed and came to a stop in the black night of the tunnel, and there in that pitchy darkness, for some seconds at least, I lived through the crisis of a veritable nightmare.

How long it went on I never knew—never will know—but presently that hand, after doubling itself with the vain but tortured tossings of a captive servant—that hand—crushed remorselessly under my own two palms, grew still and stirred no more, like a thing that is dead.

And all this while I saw nothing, heard nothing, not even a sighing breath from the owner of that hand, though I perfectly comprehended that she to whom the hand belonged was simply crafty; that she was biding her time merely; that in that black obscurity even she eyed me treacherously.

At last the train began to move on once more. The relief experienced as it started was so great that involuntarily my entire being seemed to relax from its strain.

She was watching for exactly that moment, for instantly that hand was stirring again, struggling again to be free, not in fits and starts this time, but in a steady recoil, tenacious, vigorous, into which was thrown all its remaining energy.

I felt it through the papers, slipping, gliding, escaping me, little by little. To get a better purchase on it I moved my palms slightly, and—the hand was gone. I grasped only my pocketbook. I opened it feverishly, learned by feeling that the bills were still there, thrust it into the breast of my coat and folded my arms upon it. Then I breathed freely.

The darkness now was growing less, the street light beginning to enter the compartment.

Naturally my first glance leaped to that young woman's face. She was in the same place in the same attitude of haughty unconcern. Nothing was deranged about her toilet; not a fold of her robe seemed to have stirred. The paper still lay folded upon her lap; the umbrella stood up beside her against the door. Only she was paler, and with eyes fixed on her wrist—the bruised and abraded right wrist, as I knew very well—she was relacing her glove, dexterously as ever, but with considerably more haste.

Meanwhile we had reached the station. The platform was on my side. The young woman rose, dropped her paper negligently, took up her umbrella and with admirable coolness stepped by me, murmuring in a voice clear and calm and in exactly the commonplace tone demanded by courtesy:

"Your pardon, monsieur!"

She was a thief. I knew it. She had done her best to rob me. I knew that too. She sprang to the platform. The crowd had closed around her and swallowed her up. From that day to this I have never seen her more.—Chicago Dispatch.

Meerschaum.

Meerschaum is a silicate of magnesia and is to be found chiefly in Asia Minor, Greece and Madrid.