

BENEATH THE SURFACE

—Elizabeth Clodfelter

(The following short story was the O. Henry Study Club winner, which award was presented in Senior Assembly this afternoon by Miss Florence Reid, president of the club.)

"No, no! It isn't true! You're lying!"
"It is the truth, Margot. There is no escaping from it. Alan and I just can't seem to get along anymore. Besides, I'm still young and see no reason why I should let a family that doesn't belong to me tie me down."

Margot looked at the beautiful woman before her in wonder. Surely her ears were deceiving her; Elaine couldn't really be saying such things.

Elaine seemed to be enjoying herself immensely. She sat perched on the side of the desk in Margot's room. Her long, shapely leg swinging rhythmically back and forth seemed to beat out, "I'll soon be going, I'll soon be going."

Margot looked at Elaine, and in her look was all the hatred and disgust that was possible to get into one look. Elaine recoiled. She stopped swinging her leg for a moment. Then she caught herself.

Margot rose from her desk and said, "Get out. Get out, and don't ever come here again. You've done nothing but cause trouble for us since you married Dad. You disliked us and thought you were being smart when you lorded your superiority over us, but you'll never know how much we've despised you every second you've been married to Dad. So, you see, you haven't been so smart after all, have you?"

Margot was flushed with anger when she finished. Never had she spoken to an elder like this, so she was a little amazed at herself. She half expected Elaine to slap her.

Elaine tried to keep her look of "You don't worry me one bit," as she left the room, but failed completely. She realized that Margot meant every word that she had said. She walked down the hall, paused at the door of Cathy's room as if to go in, remembered that Cathy hadn't come home from the nursery yet, and went on to her own room. She glanced at the clock, saw it was 2:30, and lay down on her bed to rest and think. She wondered if Alan would be calm enough to talk to tonight. Turning over on her back, she went back over his reactions when she had asked for the divorce. At first he was stunned, then amazed, and last—furious. She had never dreamed he could ever be so angry with anyone. "I hope it won't be so bad tonight. If he even looks as though he hates me I can't go through with it. Oh, why did I have to fall in love with him?" She turned restlessly, and finally dozed in a light sleep.

Margot, left alone in her room, suddenly turned and flung herself on her bed, sobbing bitterly. "Oh, mommie, mommie, if only you were here. How different things would be!" Her sobbing continued. It seemed that all the bitterness of the past six months was finally finding its outlet. She felt small and alone. She needed someone to talk to. Suddenly she sat up. "I'll go after Cathy and tell her what happened."

She slipped on a sweater, grabbed a kerchief, and left the house. The sunshine and clear sky startled her. She shook herself, thinking, "It's funny how the darkness of hurt and anger could have made me forget what a beautiful day it was." She gave a sigh of relief and walked hurriedly down the sidewalk because she had only ten minutes to get to the nursery.

Cathy saw Margot as soon as she left the nursery. She laughed and shouted, "Margot!" She ran down the steps to meet her sister. Although

there were eleven years difference in their ages, the girls were good friends and adored each other.

Margot smiled and squeezed Cathy's hand.

"Why aren't you in school?" asked Cathy.

"They are having a teacher's meeting in Carthage this afternoon, and so Mr. Harpe dismissed school at two o'clock. I've been working on my chemistry. I just can't seem to get the ole stuff."

Cathy kicked a small stone lying on the sidewalk. Then she looked up at Margot again and asked, "Why aren't you working on it now? Did you get mad at it?"

"No, Imp," said Margot. "I didn't get mad at the chemistry. I was interrupted in my work and couldn't concentrate after that."

"Who was it?"

"Elaine."

"What's she want this time? I wish she'd go a thousand miles away and never come back!" Cathy gave the stone a vicious kick to emphasize her words.

Margot guided Cathy to a bench in the park close to their home. When they were seated, Margot said, "She is going away, Cathy. I don't know where or how soon, but she is going."

"Honestly, Margot? Do you really mean it?" At times Cathy shared her sister's contempt for their step-mother.

"Yes. She told me when she came into my room about thirty minutes ago. She said she'd asked Dad for a divorce last night after they got back from the Henderson's."

Cathy grabbed Margot's hand and said, "Oh, Margot, I forgot about Daddy. He's going to be so hurt, isn't he?"

Margot nodded. "I guess so. He doesn't seem to care quite as much for her, but it's probably just me. Maybe I'm trying to fool myself into thinking it will be just as good for him as for us." She looked out over the park, her face troubled.

Cathy looked up and saw how worried Margot was. She said, "Let's go see him, Margot. Maybe then we can help him. At least we can tell him WE still love him."

Margot glanced at her young sister and relaxed. She wondered at the child's ability to understand things when she, herself, was so mixed up. Silently she rose. They walked to the corner and waited five minutes for the bus.

After leaving the bus Margot and Cathy paused outside their father's office. They looked at each other, threw back their shoulders, and went in. Both said "Hello" to Miss Jackson, the receptionist, and went right on into the office, forgetting for the moment that they were supposed to first ask if Mr. Downs was busy.

Their father was standing at the window looking out on 5th Avenue. He turned slowly when they entered and looked surprised when he saw who was there.

"Why, hello, girls. To what do I owe such a great honor?" He smiled as he came around the desk to greet them. Margot and Cathy swallowed. Then simultaneously Cathy and Margot said, "Are you going to give Elaine a divorce?"

The room was very quiet. Only the horns and rumble of the cars on 5th Avenue relieved the monotony of the seconds that ticked by. Mr. Downs sat in his swivel chair, his chin resting on the tips of his fingers. He looked at his daughters. He saw Margot, her

curly brown hair pulled back and clasped behind her ears with small berets. She was a pretty girl, looking older and more mature than she should have at seventeen. Cathy's small, heart-shaped face, was surrounded by thick black hair. Freckles were sprinkled lightly across her cheeks and nose. She glanced up at him, and catching him watching her, she smiled warmly, her large eyes glowing brightly. He returned her smile, and made up his mind about the divorce.

He cleared his throat. "I realize what a bad thing it would be to take Elaine away from you, so I'm going to try to persuade her not to get a divorce. It would be cruel to deny you a woman's love when now is the time you really . . ."

"A woman's love?" stormed Margot. Cathy remained quiet.

Mr. Downs looked surprised. "You mean you don't want her to stay? I thought that was why you came—to persuade me to ask Elaine to stay."

"No," said Margot. "We didn't know how you felt, but we wanted you to know how we felt. We're glad Elaine is going. We've never liked her."

Alan had misunderstood their reason in coming. He opened his arms as if to say, "What do I do now?"

"Oh, Daddy, are you really going to divorce Elaine? I thought you loved her so," said Cathy.

Margot didn't give her father a chance to answer. "We'll be happy together, Dad. Maybe you'll find someone else you'll like more."

"Perhaps I will," said her father, "but I don't think so. However, I will always know that I couldn't possibly find two sweeter or prettier daughters than the two right here before me." He ruffled the hair of each, and said, "Let's go home and see what we can do about devouring Maggie's dinner. Okay?"

When they reached the house, Maggie met them at the door. "Miz Downs's been crying all afternoon. Wouldn't stop for nothing. Dinner'll be ready in fifteen minutes. She coming down?"

Mr. Downs put his hat on the table and hung his coat in the hall closet. "We'll go upstairs and see, Maggie."

After Maggie had returned to the kitchen, Mr. Downs motioned to Cathy and Margot to go upstairs with him. He knocked on Elaine's door, then opened it. They found Elaine lying on the bed asleep, the tears still staining her cheeks.

"Elaine," said Mr. Downs, "are you going down to dinner?" He touched her on the arm. She started and woke.

"Alan."

"Will you have dinner with us?" Alan asked quietly.

"I don't guess I should eat with people who don't really want me," was the almost inaudible reply.

"We haven't said we didn't like you." "Margot made my place among you very plain this afternoon."

"What do you mean?"

"Why not ask Margot?" asked Elaine tiredly.

Margot told her father of the scene between her and Elaine earlier in the afternoon. Her father said, "What am I to do? Am I to fuss at you for speaking out of turn to Margot, or at Margot for speaking as she did to you? It looks as though you're both to blame. We had agreed to wait a few weeks until we were sure of ourselves. We both agreed to that plan. Remember?"

"Of course I remember, but how much can a woman stand? I married you because I loved you. Your friends said it was because of your money, but that isn't true. I had high hopes at first. I was to be a wonderful wife to you, a second mother to Margot and Cathy, a good housekeeper, and a good hostess to your friends. Every-

thing I planned was hopeless from the start. I realize that now.

"Every time I moved you mentioned Anne, your first wife. I couldn't be friends with the girls because they decided they hated me the moment you first introduced me as your wife. Maggie hates me because I'm no cook. Your friends despise me because I'm not like Anne. Everyone despises me!" Elaine flung herself back on the bed, sobbing bitterly.

Alan tried to comfort her. "I'm sorry, Elaine. If you wanted to be all these things, why didn't you tell me and let me help you? Believe me, I had no intention of comparing you with Anne. I loved her. My friends knew how deeply. I also love you, and my love for you is just as deep, just as true as my love was for Anne when she was living. I didn't know until today that the girls didn't like you. I still don't know nor understand how that can be true." Alan sat on the bed beside his wife and looked searchingly toward his daughters. His eyes seemed to plead with them for help.

"If you wanted to be a mother to us," said Margot, "why didn't you ever show us you did? We didn't do a thing without your having to comment on it."

"Margot, said if we loved you we would be untrue to Mommie," said Cathy.

"Margot!" said her father, astonished.

Margot was silent for a moment. Then she threw herself on the floor before Elaine, her head bowed on Elaine's knees. "I'm sorry, Elaine, truly I am. I honestly believed what I told Cathy. I didn't mean to hurt you and Dad intentionally. All the things that have been inside me were all bound together in one big hurt, and I couldn't love you even though I tried. I was jealous of your beauty and the way Dad loved you. I wanted Cathy to think of me as a sister and a mother, too, I guess. I wanted to be the woman in the family. Oh, Elaine, can you ever forgive me?"

"Do you doubt my forgiveness, Margot? No one could possibly live without making a mistake once in a while, I suppose I overdid my part of trying to be a second Mother to you and Cathy. Perhaps that is why you resented me. I realized how much you disliked me from the beginning. Finally I saw that if I couldn't win your love that my marriage to your father would never be as it should. I pretended that I didn't care what happened, that I didn't care for you, either. But I did. Oh, you'll never know how much I've loved you and wanted to call you my girls. I wanted to be so proud of you, but I seem to have failed completely."

Margot raised her head. "You haven't failed, Elaine. I've failed."

Elaine pretended not to hear. Mr. Downs saw that she was going to overlook it and realized that she was an even greater woman than he had thought. No wonder he loved her so! Elaine looked up at him and said, "We'll forget the past six months and begin anew. Alan, introduce me to your lovely daughters."

"Of course, Elaine. Margot and Cathy, I want you to meet Elaine, your new mother."

"Hello, Mother," said Cathy. Margot wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled her welcome.

They laughed together for the first time. What a wonderful feeling it was. Together they went down to dinner, and as they were eating, the unfriendliness of the past months of strain vanished forever.

As she was returning to the kitchen after serving the dessert, Maggie was heard to say, "Pears like they might be a family after all."

And indeed they really were—and a very happy one, at that.