

AN UNNECESSARY ACTION

By LAWRENCE P. SPINGARN

IT was late in the summer when Stanwood chose the pond in preference to the white beach at the other end of their road. At first, he and Marian had gone to the beach, but the beach attracted too many others now. The beach, alas, was no longer the quiet refuge it had been last summer, or the summer before that. Therefore, Stanwood walked through the piney woods to the pond, where he and his wife could find shade, and where the water was much warmer.

"Nobody knows about this pond," Marian would say.

"It's hidden from the highway," Stanwood explained.

"Just Carlotta knows," Marian said one day. "She never disappoints us."

Carlotta's house was deeper in the woods than theirs, farther from the beach. When she appeared at the pond carrying her toy pail and shovel, dressed in dirty rompers, Stanwood always got up to meet her. He thought that she needed his hand before she ventured on, a child of five with long brown hair in ringlets and a chubby face whose deep-set blue eyes looked gravely upon all objects. Her tiny mouth was pursed to smile but never did.

"We'll play store," Stanwood usually suggested. "What shall we sell today?"

Imagination notwithstanding, the store was meagre. Marian would empty her purse of small belongings and range them on the sand while Stanwood and the child went in search of shells, pine cones, nails and iron rings from the tumbledown icehouse. A single warped board served for a counter. Marian and Stanwood were the only customers. And Carlotta, collecting their pennies, would push sticks, shells, and pine cones across the board in return.

And thus afternoon, prodded by their voices and the shadows of their movements, retreated deeper into the pines. Sometimes the heron crossed the patch of sky overhead, wheeled lazily, settled on the tangled brush at the far side of the pond, where Stanwood's voice faintly carried. If the heron listened in shadow with the sun touching only the tips of its wings, Carlotta listened in the stillness that the pond cast over them all. Only Marian laughed at Stanwood's drollery, and the heron, alarmed by the echo of that laugh, flapped its wings to warn them that the light was fading among the trees.

"It's quiet here," Marian would say. "Even with Carlotta, it's quiet."

On the day Carlotta did not appear, Marian repeated only the first part of her observation, looked at Stanwood who seemed asleep, sighed for her own relief. Her finger slipped out of the book she was reading. She longed to lie down beside him, to reach out and touch the grey curls beneath the brim of his canvas hat. His arm was flung across his face. His mouth was set almost bitterly. The quiet lay between them in its subtle posture.

But Stanwood was not asleep, nor even drowsy. The smooth surface of the pond engaged his shaded eyes, alerted him to the peace and calm he had sought and found. This was the third summer at the cottage, the third summer that now approached its close. In swimming, reading, walking the paths through the piney woods, he and Marian had tried to break their chains by substituting one set of habits for another. They had said nothing to each other about this. Indeed, the life they shared at the cottage was taken as much for granted as their life during the winter, when Stanwood went dutifully to his office, wrote laborious briefs, attended court, visited the library. The cottage was simply an alternate home when the city failed, when hot pavements and small rooms were too much. And to the cottage they had taken that vague discontent, that sense of something missed which haunted them increasingly.

"Carlotta's gone away," Stanwood said, moving as if he had just heard Marian's remark through the haze of sleep. He turned over on his side, stretched out his arms and long legs, yawned, and looked his wife full in the face.

Her face was framed by her usual restraint, held taut by the muscles of jaw and neck in its deceptive look of youth. Her hair, however, was as grey as his; the little lines at her eyes recalled their years together. He felt good that they were together yet, but recently the unknown strain on him had increased, reacting on her as well. He could see the strain in her face now, but he did not want to probe Marian for the reason. Although he watched her so intently, he was thinking of Carlotta too. Summer was almost over; had Carlotta gone home? When Stanwood rose to his feet, Marian nodded and put out her hands to be pulled up. They collected their belongings and started back through the woods, walking some distance apart.

Next day, urged by an expectation they would not mention, the Stanwoods packed a picnic lunch and started for the pond before noon. Half way there, he stopped and put up his hand for silence.

"I hear voices, Marian."

She listened too, then broke into a smile he had never seen. Her face acquired energy, purpose. The corners of her mouth were firm.

"It's Carlotta," Stanwood said as they reached the pond.

Carlotta's father was tanned and wiry, his face a syllable in the sound of joy as he tossed her the big rubber ball, which she bounced back at him along the sand. Wind whipped at the scarf of Carlotta's mother, who sat in a nest of towels blankets, luncheon things, her stomach big with child. When Stanwood introduced himself to them, he smiled at Carlotta. The ball came his way. He stooped and threw it back to Carlotta. Marian, standing at a distance, only nodded pleasantly, as she sat down beneath a pine.

"We know Carlotta," Stanwood explained, rubbing one foot against the other. "We thought she'd gone home for good. Yesterday, she didn't come here. . . ."

Wind muffled the answer Carlotta's father gave: Stanwood nodded vaguely, glanced at Carlotta's mother. She was a smiling, pleasant-faced woman whose features, unlike Marian's were smooth and fleshy. When she said nothing, Stanwood studied the ball, then the tiny wind-caps on the pond. Carlotta and her father went on playing. The ball did not come Stanwood's way again. His smile vanished and he turned away, feeling autumn upon his neck.

He sat by Marian unable to read, watching Carlotta, hearing her chatter. Marian had already stripped down to her bathing suit. Soon he would do the same, and take a dip before lunch. For the first time that summer Stanwood needed solace, but when he reached out to touch Marian, her bleak eyes stopped him. He dropped his arm and dug his fingers into the sand.

They took their dip fifty feet from Carlotta. Now Carlotta's father bore her on his shoulders and marched her shouting toward the pond. Stanwood turned away from Marian, whose eyes followed the child; he bent down, made cups of his hands, and splashed Marian as if to remind her of their own lives.

"Silly!" Marian said with a wan smile. "What brought that on?"

They reclined in the shade after lunch, their bodies touching faithfully, their skin still water damp. It was not a time for action. It was too early for the heron to appear. And Carlotta was playing with her ball, her cries enfeebled by the wind that brought the ocean smell inland.

"Ball! Ball!" Carlotta screamed suddenly.

Stanwood sat up with a start, shaded his eyes, knew what was wrong. The ball had bounced off the beach into the pond, where the wind was spinning it. Stanwood threw off his robe and ran to the water. Plunging in, he swam toward the ball.

His was an unnecessary action. The ball would have drifted to shore, gotten caught in weeds and stayed caught until safely fetched. Carlotta's father had not gone after it, and Stanwood watched the young man while swimming side-stroke. Carlotta was waving to Stanwood, jumping and laughing. Even Marian, he noted, was strolling languidly to the water's edge, as if he had done nothing uncommon. Stanwood again faced the ball, which was almost within reach.

There! He had it! But no, the wet surface slipped from his grasp, went bobbing a foot, then a yard away. Stanwood gasped, twisted in the water as his legs refused their help. When he reared up and flung himself forward, the ball gave a little jump, and Stanwood sank. Water filled his ears, eyes, mouth. He came up thrashing, blinded for a moment. His eyes cleared, and he realized that he was half-way across the pond that appeared so small from shore. He thought he heard his name called, but he would not turn his head. No, he should not look back, for there was the ball, inches ahead, just inches. . . And Stanwood sank a second time.

Going down, he recalled the green waste of his days, unexplored channels, the petty discipline of habit. He was drugged by too much regret, and now he welcomed that tide which he had held off so long. Marian did not need him, nor could she lift the weight of water from him. She might pity him, but she would not miss him for very long. His feet touched bottom, felt the springs that fed the pond. He opened his eyes, glimpsed sun through layers of darkness. When he broke the surface and painfully exhaled air, Stanwood shot out his arms and gripped the ball with the last of his strength.

The pond and its surroundings were very still. Calm and smooth, the water traced little wrinkles around Stanwood as he floated shoreward on the supporting ball. The people on the beach did not seem alarmed. Marian was talking with the

young couple. Carlotta was filling her pail with sand. Nobody had seen his struggle, least of all Carlotta. . . . Recovering by degrees, Stanwood paddled forward like a lazy swimmer who enjoys the sun, the silence, the wide sky. When he reached shore, he stood up with the ball in his hands.

"There!" he told Carlotta. "I've saved your ball."

When Carlotta pushed the ball away and went on filling her pail, Stanwood stopped smiling and went down the beach to find his towel. When Marian approached him, he was staring at the spot in the pond where he had nearly drowned. How calm and smooth it was now, how peaceful and deceptive! And just then the heron flew by with a fish in its mouth, settling on the far pile of brush to feed in its own solitude.
