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By

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DRAWINGS BY HAROLD SICHEL

She stepped resolutely into the icy water

AN exciting contest was going on in the Marburg High School. Not only the students but the townspeople as well were watching with interest, taking sides and freely prophesying the outcome. The Jane Dillon medal, awarded to the girl student who got the highest marks during her senior year, was not an empty honor; it meant a scholarship at the state college.

Everyone in school had taken for granted that when Anne Temple reached her senior year she would have everything her own way, just as she had had ever since her kindergarten days. Anne's fairy godmother, who had endowed her with good looks, family prestige and charm, had not failed to add brains. Anne learned rapidly, remembered accurately and led her class apparently without exerting herself or sacrificing any of her pleasures.

Then at the beginning of Anne's senior year Cornelia Rudd had entered the class. Cornelia was a big, raw-boned, silent girl, the daughter of a farmer who had just rented a farm lying to the west of Marburg. It had taken a week for the school to realize that at last Anne had a rival. Anne herself had recognized it the first day.

"That Rudd girl isn't much to look at," Kitty Merrill remarked to Anne. "But she's as smart as lightning, just the same."

Anne admitted it without argument.

"Of course I never pretended to have any brains," continued Kitty, whose right to the title of class dunce was unquestioned, "but if I wanted the Jane Dillon medal, I'd keep an eye on Cornelia Rudd."

Cornelia had one tremendous advantage over Anne. Her school work was everything to her. She did not care for any of the outside interests that meant so much to Anne. She had never been to a party in her life and had not the slightest desire to go to one. She took no part in the social life of the school, in which Anne was the leader as she was the leader in its intellectual life. Cornelia might have claimed as her motto the saying, "This is the thing that I was born to do." Study was her recreation as well as her work. Anne was not the first to discover that the rival with the single aim is the rival to be dreaded.

The year went on. Anne studied harder than ever and stopped going out so many evenings in the week; Cornelia held steadily to her course. Cornelia had a double incentive; she wanted to win partly because she suspected her schoolmates all of being on Anne's side, but more because, unless she won the scholarship, her education was likely to stop with high school. When Cornelia thought of that her face wore an expression of determination that would have made Anne apprehensive had she seen it.

By midwinter most of the high school students thought that Cornelia would come out ahead, though all acknowledged that the race was close. A trifle might throw the victory to either of the rivals. Anne was beginning to look a little fagged, and her young friends remonstrated. What was the use of half-killing herself? It wasn't worth while to win the medal if it meant giving up all the fun of her senior year. To such remonstrances Anne invariably replied: "I may be beaten,—sometimes I think I'm going to be,—but it won't be because I didn't try."

All winter long Cornelia had walked to and from school—three miles every morning and three miles back in the afternoon. She had faced many a storm and several times had waded through unbroken snowdrifts, but she had never come so near losing her courage as when on one of the days that are neither spring nor winter but that have all the bad qualities of both she came upon what looked like a lake across the familiar road. Muddy Creek, ordinarily an insignificant little stream showing now on one side of the road and then on the other, had received such accessions from the melting snow and the spring rains that it was no longer recognizable.

Cornelia stood staring at the sheet of water that barred her way. The wind ruffled its surface exactly as if it had been a real lake, leaving in her mind the impression that the water was laughing at her. Cornelia never wasted words. "Well!" she said and stopped with that, though her tone implied that it was anything but well. Apparently the sensible course was to turn back, especially as she was likely to find the road under water at several places farther along. But being absent from school just now was a serious matter. Cornelia was as well aware as anyone that she and Anne were very close.

"I won't go back!" she exclaimed as vehemently as if somebody had been urging her to do it. "I won't." She stared defiantly at the water and then began to take off her storm rubbers, her stout shoes and her woolen stockings.

The middle of March is not the season for going barefoot. Cornelia gasped as she put her foot down on the muddy road, and with each step she gasped again. It took only four steps to bring her to the water. Although it was no time to stand deliberating, she hesitated. But after all if she did not mean to go back, it was necessary for her to go forward. Then she thought of Anne and hesitated no longer. Gathering her skirts about her, she stepped resolutely into the icy water. The shock of it surprised her into uttering a muffled shriek, yet she went splashing ahead and presently found herself on dry ground; her legs ached agonizingly, and her teeth were chattering. She set herself to start the circulation by vigorous rubbing, and then she put her shoes and stockings on again.

"I suppose this is just a waste of time," she said to herself gloomily. "They'll have to come off again."

As a matter of fact they did come off again, not once but twice. Cornelia did no more screaming. She went ahead with a curious feeling of desperation, as if she were to go on forever floundering through pools as cold as ice. When at last the road to town branched off and left Muddy Creek to its own devices she felt unreasonably certain that, if she had come to one more spot where the road was overflowed, she should have sat down by the water and died.

It was fortunate that Cornelia always started for school early. In spite of the delay she arrived ten minutes before the hour of opening. Yet she did not present herself as a conquering heroine. She felt damp and chilled and exhausted, and she looked sadly bedraggled. Moreover, she had dropped one of her books into the water, and, though she had saved it, its appearance caused her keen anguish. Her regard for books made her almost as uncomfortable over mistreating them as she would have felt at seeing an animal abused.

Kitty was in the cloak room when Cornelia entered, and her blue eyes bulged at sight of her. "Why, Cornelia Rudd!" she cried shrilly. "How did you get here?"

"Walked," answered Cornelia.

"Yes, I know, but—why, our milkman didn't get through this morning! He telephoned and said that the water was all over the road."

The girls crowded round. Cornelia found herself a little impatient of their interest and yet a little flattered by it too. "Of course the water's over the road," she replied shortly. "But it's not deep as a well."

"Isn't it over your rubbers?"

"Rubbers!" Cornelia did not often laugh, but the question moved her to merriment. "Well, rather," she said at last. "I suppose it's a little over two feet deep in the deepest parts I struck. Your milkman must be more afraid of water than most of 'em are," she added witheringly.

The girls laughed admiringly at the sally, but Kitty, who when a question puzzled her had a way of sticking to it till she understood it, stared incredulously at Cornelia's feet. "I should think you'd be sopping wet!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I took off my shoes and stockings and waded."

There was a shriek of blended horror and amazement.

Looking about, Cornelia saw that the faces gazing at her were full of friendly admiration. She tried to persuade herself that it made no difference to her, but human nature is human nature, and the girl was never yet born who could be entirely indifferent either to friendliness or to admiration. Then at the back of the room Cornelia caught sight of Anne, gazing at her with an expression that she did not altogether understand. Cornelia picked up her books and moved away.

At ten o'clock the Vergil class filed into the room of the Latin teacher, Miss Train. Cornelia was the second one who was called on to recite. They were reading the sixth book of Vergil; she loved the flowing syllables of the old-time poet. Gallantly struggling to make her translation not unworthy of the original, she began in an unusually husky voice:

"Night rushes on, Æneas. We are protracting the hours with weeping. Here is a spot where the road divides in two directions, the right which leads—"

Cornelia stopped short, realizing that she was going to sneeze. As the class sat waiting for her to do it smiles appeared on the faces turned in her direction. There is indeed something ridiculous about a sneeze. A cough has

a tragic import. No one ever thinks of laughing at a cough. But a sneeze with its bluster of preparation and the following explosion appeals to everyone's sense of humor.

Cornelia sneezed three times while her classmates waited smilingly, and then she took breath—and went on sneezing. At the sixth explosion irrepressible giggles broke out all over the room. But Cornelia did not stop with six sneezes. She went on to nine, and when at last she finished, the room was in an uproar. Even Miss Train laughed.

Cornelia, hot and shaken, and her eyes swimming with tears, waited for the tumult to subside.

Miss Train hastened quiet by rapping for order. "I think we must excuse you from anything more today, Cornelia," she said kindly. "And after school, my dear, do take something for that cold!"

In the back of the room one girl had not laughed, but had sat looking at Cornelia's convulsive struggles with grave sympathy. Kitty had explained to her how Cornelia had reached school that day. "Water all over the road, you know. Our milkman couldn't get across, and that girl took off her shoes and stockings and waded through. What do you think of that?"

"H'm!" Anne had said noncommittally.

The Vergil recitation was half done when a dash of rain struck the windowpane. Cornelia looked up with a start. The sky was overcast again. The rain was beginning anew. And as she stared at the wet path she felt the bitterness of defeat. She was beaten, and she knew it. She could probably wade back as she had waded over that morning, though every drop of rain made matters worse, but she could not continue to do it. As it was, she had taken a serious risk. She should have to stay at home till the swollen creek had subsided, and, though she studied as hard as she could, she should miss innumerable little aids by which Anne would profit. It needed only a trifle to tip the scales. Those raindrops tapping maliciously against the glass of the window were enough.

Cornelia had never given much thought to Anne as a girl. Anne had been only a rival, an impersonal thing, an obstacle in the way of realizing her ambition. Now for the first time she felt hostile toward her. It wasn't fair! Some girls had everything without trying. Now even the weather had taken sides with Anne!

The rain increased as the hours went on. Cornelia dragged from class to class, the victim of unconquerable depression. The road home was likely to be under water for half a mile or more. She should be lucky if she did not have a fit of sickness after two such wettings in a day. And once home, sick or well, she was imprisoned there till the water went down. Even in the time of the year when there was the least to be done on the Rudd farm to spare one of the horses to take the only daughter to school was out of the question. Cornelia had discovered the fact so long before that now she simply accepted it. She was beaten.

In the half hour's intermission allowed for luncheon Cornelia sat at her desk and did not eat. Several girls came up to inquire about her cold, and one brought her some small chocolate-coated pills, which she assured her would break a cold if taken in time. Cornelia immediately swallowed two as directed. She had reached the point where nothing seemed to matter.

When school was dismissed she remained at her desk. She made her school books into

two piles, one for each arm. It would be necessary to take them all home so as not to get behind in her classes. Some one came up and stood beside her. Turning her head, she saw Anne. For all the day was so dark, there was a curious light on Anne's face.

"Cornelia," she said, "I don't see how you can get home, with the creek rising all the time."

"I'm like the woodchuck that climbed the tree," said Cornelia. "He did it because he had to, and it's the same with me."

"And if you get home, I don't see how you're going to get back."

Cornelia made a little impatient movement. To herself she said that it wasn't necessary for Anne to "rub it in." But her answer, spoken dryly, was: "No. I don't see either."

"I was thinking," Anne went on, talking rather fast, "that, if you could telephone your mother, so she wouldn't be frightened, you could come home with me and stay till the roads are better."

Cornelia stared at her. For a bright girl she had considerable difficulty in understanding a simple English sentence. "Do you mean—" she began and found herself unable to go further.

"It would be a shame for you to miss any of school just now," said Anne. "I'd be ever so glad to have you stay with me. You can telephone your mother, so she won't worry, and I can let you have the things you'll need."

Cornelia understood! The victory had been in Anne's hands, but she wanted it only if she could win it fairly. All at once Cornelia's heart was singing in her bosom.

"We haven't a telephone," she answered, "but some neighbors of ours have, and they'll send word by somebody passing."

"Then we'll go home right away. You can use our telephone."

For more than a week Cornelia was a guest in the Temple home. Evening after evening she shut herself into a room the luxury of which was almost distracting and studied till midnight; and in a similar room across the hall Anne was equally industrious.

One of Anne's cousins on learning the reason for Cornelia's presence in the house had exclaimed sympathetically: "Why, if

the poor thing wants it so much, why don't you just let her have it?"

Anne laughed. "You don't know Cornelia. If she wins, she wants to win in a fair race just as I do."

At the end of ten days Muddy Creek was again on its good behavior, and Cornelia resumed her six-mile walk a day. Her stay at Anne's had been a tremendous advantage. The time it took to get to and from school and the other hours she gave to helping with the household tasks had all been devoted to study. "If I win," she said to herself, "it'll be Anne's doings."

The examinations came as usual in the hottest days of June, but two girls of the Marburg High School went through them oblivious of the temperature. Then one breathless June night the town's so-called "Opera House"—though no opera had ever been given in it—was crammed to suffocation with the friends and relatives of the graduating class. A distinguished visiting speaker paid compliments and offered good advice, and then the mayor, looking unhappy, gave a little more good advice and distributed the diplomas. Last of all came the thing for which a good many people in the audience were waiting, the announcement of the prizes.

"The Jane Dillon Medal, carrying a scholarship at the state college, awarded to Miss Cornelia Rudd."

Cornelia's face was a chalky white. "Anne's lost it," she said to herself.

But Anne, joining in the applause that swept through the hall, was pleasantly surprised to discover that she felt no disappointment. "Dear old Cornelia," she found herself thinking. "It would have been cruel if she hadn't won when it meant so much to her."

When the two girls got a chance for a word, it was Anne who was radiant. "Cornelia, I'm glad, I honestly am!"

"It was all your doings," Cornelia said with tremulous lips.

And then as they kissed each other Cornelia realized that the best thing that she had won in that year in the Marburg High School was not the diploma, clutched in her warm hand, or the coveted medal and all that it implied, but Anne herself. Out of that generous rivalry had grown a friendship that would permanently enrich the lives of both. As Cornelia went out into the night it seemed to her that like the June sky the future was spangled thick with stars.