

# Seasoned Timber

*Dorothy Canfield*

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1939, BY  
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, INC.

*All rights reserved, including  
the right to reproduce this book  
or portions thereof in any form.*

*first edition*

*Designed by Robert Josephy*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

## SEASONED TIMBER



## CHAPTER ONE

SOMEBODY was knocking at the door of the Principal's house. The thumps passed in waves from the well-seasoned oak to the stones of the walls and to the quiet air inside the hall. The stones took the sound in and gave none of it out, putting it secretly away into the silence where they kept the other sounds which had throbbed against them for the last hundred years. The impressionable air passed the knocks on up the stairs to the second floor. Here their brutishly anarchic lack of rhythm was met by a surging of complex, masterfully ordered, and beautiful sound-waves, transmitted from a closed door to the right of the landing, and like hairy Neanderthalers caught up in a flight of seraphs, they were borne aloft to the third story where, with a shout of "*Gratias agimus tibi!*" they poured through the open door of a large slant-ceilinged room in which Mr. T. C. Hulme sat at his desk.

He was the Principal. The knocks on the door two stories below were for him, and he easily distinguished them through the much louder music throbbing from the room under his study. He managed this feat as a man who works in a boiler-factory hears the small dry slam of a door behind him, inaudible to a visitor deafened by the clatter of machinery. Mr. Hulme was reading. He had sat down to finish the usual autumn struggle with the Academy budget, but although this was a familiar routine task, his spirits had drooped at the thought of those intractable figures, and he had self-indulgently picked up a magazine instead. It was a *Manchester Guardian*, a fortnight old, but newly arrived. What he saw in it was anything but inspiring—an account of recent anti-Semitic brutalities under Hitler—but a familiar feeling of guilt over the passively accepted safety of his own life had made him ashamed not to go on reading. The knocks which had come so far to reach him were now hardly sounds in his ears, were but faint vibrations in the bones of his skull. But this was enough. The bones of his

skull knew very well that Bach could have nothing to do with such vibrations.

He laid the magazine aside and ran all the way down the two flights of stairs to the front door. Yet there was no need for haste. Everybody in Clifford knew that old Lottie Anderson, the only hired help ever in the Principal's house, did her work between breakfast and lunch and was never there in the afternoon, that Mrs. Henry, the Professor's aunt, heard nothing—except music—that the Professor himself was the only one who came when you knocked and that he was usually in his study on the third floor. Nobody thought of going away if the door was not opened at once. You gave the brass knocker two or three good bangs and turned around to look off while you waited. Some people sat down on the stone slab at the top of the steps, in the hollow worn by the feet of other people who had banged that knocker.

There was always something to look at from there. The Academy was in a sightly spot, set above the town on a shelf of rocky ground jutting out from the mountain. The Principal's house, like a cairn of reddish stones, stood at the south end of this shelf. When you sat on its front steps, if you turned your head to the left, you looked down the steep slope of Academy Hill, to where the square gray tower of St. Andrew's, the spire of the Roman Catholic Church, the three factory smokestacks down by the Depot and the many slate roofs—gray, green, and rosy—of Clifford showed through the densly leaved maples. To your right was the long three-story stone Academy building. Sometimes, as now, a set of tennis was being played on one of the Academy courts, and you could watch that without so much as turning your head, the courts being directly in front of the Principal's house. Sometimes you heard, through the opened windows of the Academy building, snatches of what the Glee Club was practicing. If there were nothing else, the two exotic-looking old sycamores on each side of the front entrance were a treat to see. They were the only sycamores in town; people said they were the very most northerly ones in the State. Nobody minded waiting for that door to be opened. Except in zero weather, of course. And this was in mid-September.

The Principal knew as well as anyone that there was no hurry, yet he kept his long slender legs moving in well-timed strides,

taking two steps at a time of the steep bare third-story flight, and three of the broader, carpeted, second-story stairs. It was not because he was eager to see the person who was knocking. He had no idea who it was.

Indeed, when he reached the lower hall and saw young Eli Kemp through the leaded-glass panes at the side of the door, he stopped short. Eli couldn't be coming to ask *again* about that confounded gadget! If only those knocks had not been audible! There was nothing to do now but let him in. Unlike most visitors, Eli had not turned around to look idly at the view or the tennis or the sycamore trees while he waited. Nor had he sat down. He had kept his eyes seriously fixed on the wavering greenish glass of the side panes, and from his expectant forward shuffling it was apparent he saw that Mr. Hulme had now come to the door.

Mr. Hulme lifted the latch, opened the door. "Hello, Eli, what can I do for you?"

Eli transferred his attentive gaze to the Principal's face and asked, "Have you found out yet whether that thing I sold you saves gas?"

Mr. Hulme cleared his throat, leaned forward a little towards the boy in the threadbare suit—he was taller than Eli, who was not short—and explained, softening his rather harsh voice to a propitiating tone, "Well, to tell the truth I haven't got around to putting it on the Ford yet."

The boy stood silent for a moment and then said in the unemphatic tone of one stating a fact, not expressing a grievance, "Professor, if that thing's no good I want to take it away and give you back your money."

"Oh, no, Eli, that's not the trouble at all. I've just been too darn busy ever since I got back, getting things ready for school to open. I've been *sunk* in work! The accounts—the budget! Why, this very afternoon the Domestic Science teacher telegraphed that she's married and won't be coming back to teach, and it takes forever for a Domestic Science teacher to get used to what we want of her at the Academy. You must know there's a lot for me to do at this time of year." With a passing twinge, he remembered the magazine lying open in his study; but he believed a certain percentage of lies should be permitted to anybody trying to be civilized. He

dropped his confused defense here and tried an offensive move. "See here, Eli, when you sent my name in to the Company that makes that gadget, you wrote it without the l. The package came addressed H-U-M-E. After three years in the Academy, you certainly must know how my name is spelled!"

But Eli, like the others with whom the Principal labored about the l in his name, did not take him seriously. Not seriously enough even to answer. He went on earnestly, "Professor Hulme, I don't aim to sell anything that's not worth the money a person pays for it. If you don't think it'll give you better mileage for your gas, I wish you'd . . ."

"Why, Eli, no such thing! I *know* that invention's a good one"—this was going rather beyond the allowable percentage, he thought—"or you wouldn't be selling it. I just haven't got around to putting it on, I tell you. I'll give it a tryout tomorrow, sure thing."

"Do you know what your mileage is now?" inquired the boy searchingly. "Because if you don't, how can you tell whether this'll give you more?"

Mr. Hulme had gone so far beyond the percentage allowed for civilization that he had lost track. "I get fifteen to the gallon," he affirmed roundly, hoping that this was a probable figure.

Apparently it was. The grave young face before him relaxed. "Well, then I *know* it'll save ye something," said Eli, relieved, and without any formalities of leavetaking, went away.

The Principal shut the door, but did not at once go back up the stairs. After any encounter with life which promised an addition to the raw material from which experience may be distilled, he liked to get it sorted out and labeled before going on to a new encounter, especially when, as in this instance, the judge at the inner bar was saying, shocked, "A certain percentage of lies, yes. But not a hundred per cent!" So for a moment he stood still to think, in a position familiar to all his students, his right hand meditatively stroking back his sandy brown hair, his eyes bent thoughtfully on a spot on the floor about eight inches to the left of his left foot. His summons to his mind had been a quite correct order to analyze the little episode and find out what its meaning was. But his mind knew very well what human beings want of their minds, and began at once to rearrange the episode more to his taste, pro-



testing against the harsh mien of the inner judge. "But what could I do but lie?" he asked himself disingenuously. "Could I *tell* the boy I thought his contraption was no good and the only reason I bought it was because he was trying to earn his way through the Academy?"

His memory crammed, as it was always forced to be, with the details of other people's lives, set gloomily before him Eli's worthless, drunken, bee-hunting, and muskrat-trapping father, his dull-witted, feeble mother, the foredoomed futility of Eli's poor efforts to educate the brains he did not have. "The dice of the gods are always loaded," he thought. But like all educators, social-welfare workers, and doctors, T.C., the educator, knew from painful experience the uselessness of sinking into the vast morass of other people's failures. In self-preservation he had taught himself a crude technique of wrenching his thoughts away. But he did not need to use it now. For, at this point, his inner eye perceived the incident to be a shrine in which sincerity triumphant stood crowned with light. He made a nettled inner genuflection of respect before the dignity it conferred on the boy who had no other. "Astonishing how a person who never lies can see right through people who do. He knew I thought his gadget was no good!"

But this reflection did not at all lessen the exasperation he felt at the prospect of the mechanical bothers before him—"And have I got to mess around with screws and air-takes and God knows what, because a boy . . ."

The grave voice of the inner judge admonished him, "A small penalty to pay for an affront to human dignity."

He made an appeal from this verdict to standards accepted by the insensitive, "An affront to human dignity—nothing of the kind! I was trying to do the boy a kindness."

His conscience-judge whipped out of its scabbard a rapier question, "Would *you* be willing to accept a kindness on the same terms?" And, when he hesitated, lunged and ran him through, "Do you call it good breeding to maneuver somebody else into a position that isn't good enough for you?"

But Eli Kemp was not a very important element in Timothy Hulme's life and he was tired of splitting hairs. He turned his mind to a fanciful speculation suggested to him by the trifling epi-

sode. "Wouldn't it be a joke," he thought, "if the nineteenth-century worship of super-salesmanship—already waning—should pass away from the face of the earth before it ever reached Vermont at all? Could anything be more amusing than to have the moss-grown old State ease itself into some new system of distributing goods—like co-operative buying, for instance—with less of a jolt than streamlined modern industrial communities—just because it hadn't moved fast enough to catch up to the methods of competition?" He knew that "streamlined" was not the right word. He knew that his mind had snatched it up at random, but he was already thinking of something else. The tall clock behind him struck six. It was time to begin to get Aunt Lavinia started to make herself presentable enough to go out to supper.

He cocked his ear to the stairs and perceived that she was now in the midst of "*Qui tollis peccata. . .*" She must have taken off the "*Domine Deus*" record while he and Eli were talking. Putting on his hat and taking up his walking stick so that he would be ready to start at a moment's notice, he dropped down on the chair in the little nook between the living-room and the hall to wait for the end so that he could snatch her away before she started the "*Qui sedes. . .*"

To his ear and mind, freed from other sounds and thoughts, the music, louder for a moment, now really penetrated. His blurring familiarity with its every note thinned and blew away, as a cloud hiding the view blows away from a mountain top. He saw the view. He heard the music. His heart leapt up to its proclamation of a beauty which is safe from all that threatens beauty. So Aunt Lavinia always heard it, he thought.

But he was not Aunt Lavinia. And even her ear would have heard little of the pianissimo of the last half which dropped the exquisite self-accusations of the intertwining voices to no more than an agreeable bee-like murmur. So most people hear music, he thought. He glanced at the clock, pushed his hat to the back of his head, yawned, relaxed in his chair, his mind—left to its own devices—loafing here and there as it pleased. It was not safe to start any consecutive train of thought, or he would miss the end of the music.

His eyes wandered vaguely about the room—from the six worn

leather backs of his father's Gibbon to the photograph of his long-dead young wife, faded like the memory of her almost to invisibility; from his grandmother's India shawl on the sofa, to the old maple table he had just refinished with oil and wax and elbow-grease; from the two banal modern vases, the mistaken present of a recent graduating class, to the framed *Noblesse oblige* done in crewels. The fatuous caste-complacency of this motto had always offended him, especially since it had been crammed—of all places!—into the fascist knapsack, but he could not take it down from his wall because his great-grandmother had embroidered it, his mother had brought it from England and Aunt Lavinia valued it. Since he looked at these objects every day of his life he no longer saw them. His eyes, roaming over them, were blank till they chanced to drop to his hands, clasped over the carved ivory head of his walking stick. How like his father's they were, he thought with satisfaction. Not at all like the white tapering elegance of his mother's. He still thought hers the only beautiful fingers he had ever seen. But no man except a movie star would wish to have ornamental hands like that. He looked down at his with an old unavowed pleasure in their distinction and a new uneasy question about an indefinable change in their aspect. Could they be beginning to look middle-aged? They were as they always had been, firm and brown, with a good normal sprinkling of hair on the backs, the long fingers strong and supple. Why did they look older? Well, perhaps they didn't. Perhaps he imagined it. Forty-four was hardly middle-aged—for a man. A middle-aged man could not have run down two flights of stairs as sure-footedly as he. “. . . Aha!” cried the needle-sharp voice of self-mockery. “Was that the reason you were so spry on the stairs?”

He was amused and annoyed by this idea—a little amused and a good deal annoyed. Shifting his hands, he felt the edge of the ivory acanthus leaf in a new place, and sent his mind along another bypath. Why did he carry a walking stick anyhow? Why did anyone with two sound legs? In primitive times and on rough roads they had been useful. But not now. Were they perhaps just another of the tools of the past which humanity lugged along into the present, nobody having noticed that they are now only useless bothers? Like the buttons on the sleeves of men's coats. Like the

dashboards on the first automobiles. Like capitalism. Like cross-stitched, class-conscious mottoes. Like roadside watering-troughs. Like horse-racing. But, no, this was beside the point. What he had bidden his mind to seek was the reason for the survival of walking sticks rather than—well, rather than perforated lanthorns with candles in them formerly carried by pedestrians along with walking sticks. Of course he knew the reason. The passing years had deposited upon canes and not on lanthorns an incrustation of gentility. Never having known his grandfather he did not know (though he could make a pretty good guess) why he had carried this ivory-headed cane and prized it so that he passed it on in his will to his son. But the manner of his father's carrying it left no doubt that he used it with sturdy British faith in the value of class distinction, to mark the fact that he was upper, rather than lower, middle class, just as he insisted on the l in his name because the Hulmes were "county" and the Humes were tradesfolk. But could he, Timothy Coulton Hulme with the u in Coulton and the l in Hulme, claim that he had any better reason? He could not. Was there anything but childish vanity in his carrying a walking stick along these artless streets on his way with his untidy old aunt to eat supper in a village boarding-house? There was not. Compared to the stern Doric dignity of a penniless boy like Eli Kemp, to carry an unneeded walking stick was not even ostentation, it was silliness.

He looked down at the bold spirited curves of the ivory, turning it around to get the best light, admiring it, glad to own it, glad that his grandfather had owned it.

But wasn't that the last *deprecationem nostram* dying away? Grasping his walking stick firmly, he leaped up the stairs—not thinking this time of his lightness of foot—knocked on the door, snatched off his hat, opened the door and went in, saying, "Come along, m'lass. Time to eat."

She was not, as he had expected, on her feet just about to drop the needle upon the next record. She was poring over the music, her room silent for once, quiescent around her in its usual dust and disorder. Her head was bent so low over the tattered copy of the Mass on her knee that a straggling white lock brushed the page. But his

other expectation was accurate, she was not at all ready to go out on the street. Not even on a Clifford street.

It was from a distance, evidently, that his voice came to her. It did not reach her at once. When she heard it she flung up her head, stared at him for an instant, and with a movement as of fear, began to draw herself slowly, tensely back in her chair.

He stopped still where he was. "It's just Tim," he assured her with a carefully offhand intonation. Recognition and relief flashed into her fine, deeply sunken, dark eyes. She relaxed, passed her hand over her eyes. "Oh. Oh, yes. Tim. Of course. Supper time? I'll be ready in a wink." She pronounced it "r-r-raydy" with a Scotch burr.

Struggling stiffly to her feet, she smoothed back her hair with her hands, gave her face a summary wash, slipped off her none-too-clean gray cotton wrapper, put on a crumpled black silk dress, pinned its lace collar with a cameo pin and still hooking it up (crookedly) said, "All r-r-raydy, Timothy."

"Wait a minute," he said. "You're not getting that quite right." He laid down his hat and stick, took away her fumbling, arthritis-crippled hands, undid the hooks and fastened them up straight. Then he looked amidst the dusty clutter on the bureau till he had found some hairpins and twisting together the straggling locks on each side, fastened them, not very skillfully, back of her ears. "There," he said, surveying her with a smile, a propitiatory smile. "You'll do now. It's fine you look." He dared say nothing about her run-over, flat, cloth house-slippers. What was the use of living in a remote country village rather than a city, if an old lady couldn't go out on the street in house-slippers without losing the respect that was due her?

He held the door open, said as she passed him into the hall, "Now don't start down till I'm there to give you a hand," stepped back for his hat and stick, and grasping them in one hand, put the other under her elbow in a firm steadying grasp. They made slow work of the descent, getting both her feet on each step before going down to the next one, because of that right knee that could now scarcely bend at all.

## CHAPTER TWO

BY the time the Principal had eased his aunt's tall stooping form down from the last front steps—they ended in the graveled driveway which encircled the tennis courts—the game at which Eli Kemp had not looked was finished, and one of the players had gone home. The other, a thick-set boy in khaki shirt and trousers, was stooping to pick up a pair of leather work-brogans. His broad back looked dejected.

"Hello there, Andrew," called Mr. Hulme. "How'd it go?"

The boy turned around. He was short-legged and large-barreled, of the opposite type from the slender gangling Eli. "Mr. Lane licked the hell—the stuffing out of me."

"Your backhand go back on you?"

Andrew nodded ruefully.

"Aunt Lavinia, just walk on by yourself for a minute, will you? I'll catch you up before the turn of the road." Mr. Hulme laid down his stick and stooped for a ball. Andrew's face lightened. He trotted heavily back on the court and took his stance. Very accurately, Mr. Hulme tossed a ball to his left side. Andrew put all the power of his broad shoulders into a tremendous swing which sent it feebly into the net. Mr. Hulme said nothing, tossed him another. And another. Leaning on his walking stick beside his aunt, correct in his blue serge and gray felt hat, he had looked like a professor. Not now. His knees were bent a little in a springy crouch, his narrowed eyes, intent to find the young player's mistakes, were burning with the athletic coach's selfless devotion to skill. And when, after the lad's third futile try, he straightened his knees and stood up, the boy looked eagerly at him with the young athlete's confident hope of help from a coach, not with the defensive, hang-dog expression of a student waiting for a teacher's criticism.

"You're not stepping forward enough as you swing," was Mr. Hulme's verdict.

"Mr. Lane he said I turned too much," said the boy.

"You don't need two subjects to that verb," said the Principal.

"Mr. Lane said—" the boy corrected himself.

"Well, he was wrong," said Mr. Hulme. "You don't get yourself nearly sideways enough. You ought to feel as though you had your back to the net, almost. Let me have the racket. Now toss over one. See, don't run up on it, let it hang well in front of you, turn very sideways, and then—*step into it!*" A smooth fast ball curved over the net, missing it by an inch.

The boy reached for the racket, ran back to the receiving line, and took an extreme sideways stance. Mr. Hulme tossed him a ball. It came back over the net, fast and hard, but overshot the backline.

"Your racket-head's slanting back a shade too much," diagnosed the coach. "Tip it forward a hair." He tossed over another ball. When this one, and two more had been returned like bullets to the far corners of the court, but safe within the line, he smiled, nodded, said, "Now you're shouting," dusted off his hands, picked up his walking stick, and set off, his mind full of an all-too-familiar question, "Why can't I teach and why can't they learn English and history and algebra in that atmosphere?"

"I'm surely much obliged to ye, Professor," the boy shouted after him gratefully.

Without turning, Mr. Hulme lifted his hand over his head and shook it in the gesture which means, "Don't mention it," and felt a horrid looseness of the sleeve of his coat. Curses! He had ripped the underarm seam reaching for that backhand. Well, he must just remember to keep his arm down so that Aunt Lavinia would not see it and insist on taking it into the chaos of her room to mend. He would never get it back if she did. But had he any dark-blue thread? Oh, well, his usual black linen would do. He hated mending! What a fool not to have taken his coat off for that stroke. He was always doing fool things! Vanity had probably been at the bottom of it too, the desire to show off. "*Ha!*" he said aloud, in the harsh bark, ironic rather than mirthful, which was often his comment on the satiric comedy of life.

His aunt had by this time turned the corner at the far end of the Academy shelf and was falteringly stepping from one to another of the flagstones. The hill was here so steep that in places the flat

stones of the sidewalks were placed one below another, like stairs. She caught her foot and stumbled on one of them. Damnation! He shouldn't have let her go down there alone. Never for a single instant was it safe not to remember her feebleness. Exasperated, remorseful, impatient, he leaped down a dozen steps in a few of his long-legged strides and came up to put his hand steadily under her elbow as she reached the leveled-off space in front of the Primary School. There, slackening his pace to hers, he had plenty of time for his usual long look at the familiar building. It had two claims on his attention: in it, in spite of all he could do as Superintendent, was taught the English with which he later, as Principal, vainly struggled at the Academy; and there was a fascination for him in its extravagant lack of even the most moderate good looks. "Odd that its size—just its size—doesn't give it a little dignity! Maybe the eye is so stunned by the hideous raw purplish-red of the bricks, or maybe it's that pseudo-Richardsonian tower—and, oh, God, how well built it is! It'll stay there, ruining the looks of the Academy grounds, till Kingdom Come!"

He was disconcerted to perceive that he was repeating the same inward groan, phrased in the same way, which was always wrung from him by the Primary School, and thought with acerbity, "That comes from living in a hole, in a rut, in a treadmill, in a small town, in Clifford, Vermont." But, "Oh, no, that comes of living anywhere," cut in his mind, which had had a good deal of training in objectiveness. "Didn't the fellow who wrote *Trivia*—Oxford man, Londoner, and all that—confess to dragging out the same story about the goat whenever Portsmouth was mentioned?"



"*Qui tol-lis pec-ca-ta . . .*" murmured his companion, beating time with a crooked old hand. She had not emerged from the Bach. Something must be done about coffee.

"Aunt Lavinia," said Mr. Hulme. "Aunt Lavinia!" He waited till he had her attention and said firmly, "I believe I'll have tea for breakfast for a while."



"Just as you like, Tim," she said, indulgent of his fancies.

They were now approaching their destination. To erase the memory of the Primary School, Mr. Hulme gazed earnestly at the Peck house as though he saw it for the first, instead of the thousandth time. It was brick too, and square and large; but as different as though made by another race of beings. The bricks were rosy pink, with a soft weather-eroded texture. Like cut velvet, they took in and held the light, and set off the gleaming white paint on the well-proportioned window-frames, on the shapely carved cornices holding up the green slate roof, and on the two Ionic columns of the doorway. Infinite repetition had taught Mr. Hulme most of the local stories. He knew that nothing but Lawyer Peck's cussedness and that of his father had stood between the comely 1820 plainness of this house and the well-intentioned 1870 bow-windows and 1890 side-porches which disfigured other old Clifford houses. His mind began to play around the ebbs and flows of fashion, disconcerting to the intelligence with their unpredictable unreason, and to the dignity of the human will with their invincible power. Walking slowly up the front walk beside his aunt's ancient shuffle, he had time to think of the possibility that aesthetes of the future might find some reason for admiring the Primary School and the equally dreadful mansard-roofed chocolate-colored Court House downtown, more than the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century buildings so much valued by those who now thought themselves connoisseurs. He found the idea amusing, although he took it for what it was intended, as no more than a fancy. His mind, ranging free, had run across the notion—as a dog, scampering at random around a man's plodding path through the woods, might come across some oddity of queer-smelling fungus or plant to be sniffed at idly and left behind.

Mr. Hulme now whistled his mind back to heel. Miss Peck, he saw, had changed the sentence on her bulletin board. This board was such a one as churches use to announce the name of their minister, and the hours of church service. It had belonged to a Congregational Church in a small old village, over the mountain in a back valley. When that region had been taken over by an Electric Power Company and flooded to make a reservoir, Miss Peck had bought the bulletin board and planted it by her front