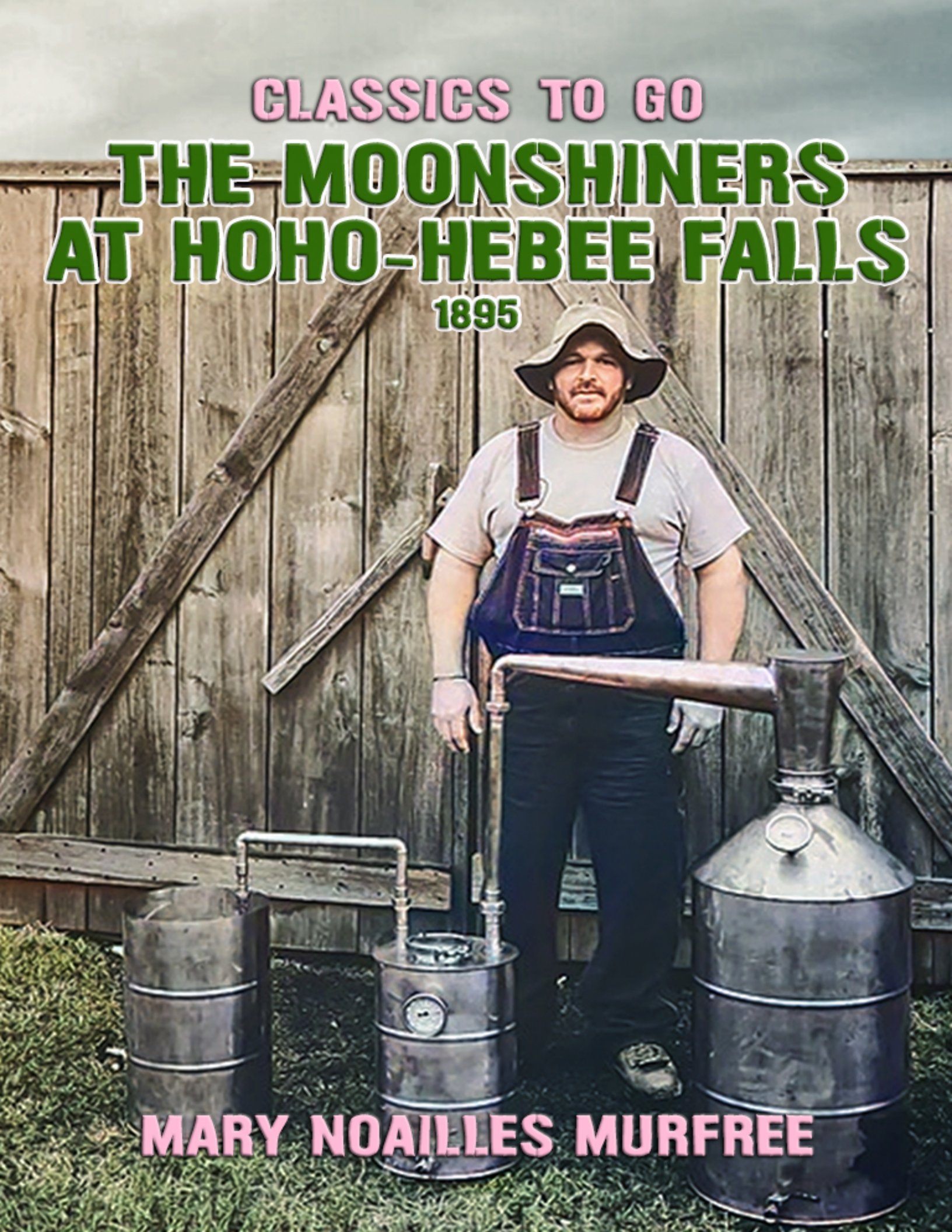
CLASSICS TO GO

# THE MOONSHINERS AT HOHO-HEBEE FALLS

1895



MARY NOAILLES MURFREE

# The Moonshiners

## At Hoho-Hebee Falls 1895

Mary Noailles Murfree

# List of Illustrations

# I

If the mission of the little school-house in Holly Cove was to impress upon the youthful mind a comprehension and appreciation of the eternal verities of nature, its site could hardly have been better chosen. All along the eastern horizon deployed the endless files of the Great Smoky Mountains—blue and sunlit, with now and again the apparition of an unfamiliar peak, hovering like a straggler in the far-distant rear, and made visible for the nonce by some exceptional clarification of the atmosphere; or lowering, gray, stern; or with ranks of clouds hanging on their flanks, while all the artillery of heaven whirled about them, and the whole world quaked beneath the flash and roar of its volleys. The seasons successively painted the great landscape—spring, with its timorous touch, its illumined haze, its tender, tentative green and gray and yellow; summer, with its flush of completion, its deep, luscious, definite verdure, and the golden richness of fruition; autumn, with a full brush and all chromatic splendors; winter, in melancholy sepia tones, black and brown and many sad variations of the pallors of white. So high was the little structure on the side of a transverse ridge that it commanded a vast field of sky above the wooded ranges; and in the immediate foreground, down between the slopes which were cleft to the heart, was the river, resplendent with the reflected moods of the heavens. In this deep gorge the winds and the pines chanted like a Greek chorus; the waves continuously murmured an intricate rune, as if conning it by frequent repetition; a bird would call out from the upper air some joyous apothegm in a language which no creature of the earth has learned enough of happiness to translate.

But the precepts which prevailed in the little school-house were to the effect that rivers, except as they flowed as they listed to confusing points of the compass, rising among names difficult to remember, and emptying into the least anticipated body of water, were chiefly to be avoided for their proclivity to drown small boys intent on swimming or angling. Mountains, aside from the desirability of their recognition as forming one of the divisions of land somewhat easily distinguishable by the more erudite youth from plains, valleys, and capes, were full of crags and chasms, rattlesnakes and vegetable poisons, and a further familiarity with them was liable to result in the total loss of the adventurous—to see friends, family, and home no more.

These dicta, promulgated from the professorial chair, served to keep the small body of callow humanity, with whose instruction Abner Sage was intrusted by the State, well within call and out of harm's way during the short recesses, while under his guidance they toddled along the rough road that leads up the steeps to knowledge. But one there was who either bore a charmed life or possessed an unequalled craft in successfully defying danger; who fished and swam with impunity; who was ragged and torn from much climbing of crags; whose freckled face bore frequent red tokens of an indiscriminate sampling of berries. It is too much to say that Abner Sage would have been glad to have his warnings made terrible by some bodily disaster to the juvenile dare-devil of the school, but Leander Yerby's disobedient incredulity as to the terrors that menaced him, and his triumphant immunity, fostered a certain grudge against him. Covert though it was, unrecognized even by Sage himself, it was very definitely apparent to Tyler Sudley when sometimes, often, indeed, on his way home from hunting, he would pause at the school-house window, pulling open the shutter from the outside, and gravely

watch his protégé, who stood spelling at the head of the class.

For Leander Yerby's exploits were not altogether those of a physical prowess. He was a mighty wrestler with the multiplication table. He had met and overthrown the nine line in single-handed combat. He had attained unto some interesting knowledge of the earth on which he lived, and could fluently bound countries with neatness and precision, and was on terms of intimacy with sundry seas, volcanoes, islands, and other sizable objects. The glib certainty of his contemptuous familiarity with the alphabet and its untoward combinations, as he flung off words in four syllables in his impudent chirping treble, seemed something uncanny, almost appalling, to Tyler Sudley, who could not have done the like to save his stalwart life. He would stare dumfounded at the erudite personage at the head of the class; Leander's bare feet were always carefully adjusted to a crack between the puncheons of the floor, literally “toeing the mark “; his broad trousers, frayed out liberally at the hem, revealed his skinny and scarred little ankles, for his out-door adventures were not without a record upon the more impressionable portions of his anatomy; his waistband was drawn high up under his shoulder-blades and his ribs, and girt over the shoulders of his unbleached cotton shirt by braces, which all his learning did not prevent him from calling “galluses”; his cut, scratched, calloused hands were held stiffly down at the side seams in his nether garments in strict accordance with the regulations. But rules could not control the twinkle in his big blue eyes, the mingled effrontery and affection on his freckled face as he perceived the on-looking visitor, nor hinder the wink, the swiftly thrust-out tongue, as swiftly withdrawn, the egregious display of two rows of dishevelled jagged squirrel teeth, when once more, with an offhand toss of his tangled brown hair, he nimbly spelled a long twisted-tailed word, and leered capably at the grave intent face

framed in the window. “Why, Abner!” Tyler Sudley would break out, addressing the teacher, all unmindful of scholastic etiquette, a flush of pleasure rising to his swarthy cheek as he thrust back his wide black hat on his long dark hair and turned his candid gray eyes, all aglow, upon the cadaverous, ascetic preceptor, “ain't Lee-yander a-gittin' on powerful, *powerful* fas' with his book?”

“Not in enny ways so special,” Sage would reply in cavalier discouragement, his disaffected gaze resting upon the champion scholar, who stood elated, confident, needing no commendation to assure him of his pre-eminence; “but he air disobejient, an' turr'ble, turr'ble bad.”

The nonchalance with which Leander Yerby hearkened to this criticism intimated a persuasion that there were many obedient people in this world, but few who could so disport themselves in the intricacies of the English language; and Sudley, as he plodded homeward with his rifle on his shoulder, his dog running on in advance, and Leander pattering along behind, was often moved to add the weight of his admonition to the teacher's reproof.

“Lee-yander,” he would gently drawl, “ye mustn't be so bad, honey; ye *mustn't* be so turr'ble bad.”

“Naw, ma'am, I won't,” Leander would cheerily pipe out, and so the procession would wend its way along.

For he still confused the gender in titles of respect, and from force of habit he continued to do so in addressing Tyler Sudley for many a year after he had learned better.

These lapses were pathetic rather than ridiculous in the hunter's ears. It was he who had taught Leander every observance of verbal humility toward his wife, in the forlorn hope of propitiating her in the interest of the child, who, however, with his quick understanding that the words sought to do honor and express respect, had of his own accord transferred them to his one true friend in the

household. The only friend he had in the world, Sudley often felt, with a sigh over the happy child's forlorn estate. And, with the morbid sensitiveness peculiar to a tender conscience, he winced under the knowledge that it was he who, through wrong-headedness or wrongheartedness, had contrived to make all the world besides the boy's enemy. Both wrongheaded and wronghearted he was, he sometimes told himself. For even now it still seemed to him that he had not judged amiss, that only the perversity of fate had thwarted him. Was it so fantastically improbable, so hopeless a solace that he had planned, that he should have thought his wife might take comfort for the death of their own child in making for its sake a home for another, orphaned, forlorn, a burden, and a glad riddance to those into whose grudging charge it had been thrown? This bounty of hope and affection and comfort had seemed to him a free gift from the dead baby's hands, who had no need of it since coming into its infinite heritage of immortality, to the living waif, to whom it was like life itself, since it held all the essential values of existence. The idea smote him like an inspiration. He had ridden' twenty miles in a snowy night to beg the unwelcome mite from the custody of its father's half-brothers, who were on the eve of moving to a neighboring county with all their kin and belongings.

Tyler Sudley was a slow man, and tenacious of impressions. He could remember every detail of the events as they had happened—the palpable surprise, the moment of hesitation, the feint of denial which successively ensued on his arrival. It mattered not what the season or the hour—he could behold at will the wintry dawn, the deserted cabin, the glow of embers dying on the hearth within; the white-covered wagon slowly a-creak along the frozen road beneath the gaunt, bare, overhanging trees, the pots and pans as they swung at the rear, the bucket for water swaying beneath, the mounted men beside it, the few head

of swine and cattle driven before them. Years had passed, but he could feel anew the vague stir of the living bundle which he held on the pommel of his saddle, the sudden twist it gave to bring its inquiring, apprehensive eyes, so large in its thin, lank-jawed, piteous little countenance, to bear on his face, as if it understood its transfer of custody, and trembled lest a worse thing befall it. One of the women stopped the wagon and ran back to pin about its neck an additional wrapping, an old red-flannel petticoat, lest it should suffer in its long, cold ride. His heart glowed with vicarious gratitude for her forethought, and he shook her hand warmly and wished her well, and hoped that she might prosper in her new home, and stood still to watch the white wagon out of sight in the avenue of the snow-laden trees, above which the moon was visible, a-journeying too, swinging down the western sky.

Laurelia Sudley sat in stunned amazement when, half-frozen, but triumphant and flushed and full of his story, he burst into the warm home atmosphere, and put the animated bundle down upon the hearth-stone in front of the glowing fire. For one moment she met its forlorn gaze out of its peaked and pinched little face with a vague hesitation in her own worn, tremulous, sorrow-stricken eyes. Then she burst into a tumult of tears, upbraiding her husband that he could think that another child could take the place of her dead child—all the dearer because it was dead; that she could play the traitor to its memory and forget her sacred grief; that she could do aught as long as she should live but sit her down to bewail her loss, every tear a tribute, every pang its inalienable right, her whole smitten existence a testimony to her love. It was in vain that he expostulated. The idea of substitution had never entered his mind. But he was ignorant, and clumsy of speech, and unaccustomed to analyze his motives. He could not put into words his feeling that to do for the welfare of this orphaned and unwelcome