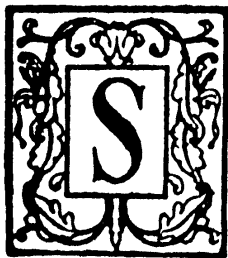




Author of "Grizzly Gallagher and the Otter," etc.



EATED in his cabin on Brady's Flat, old Cal Inglis puffed at his pipe and gazed at the snow-covered summit of Tamarack Mountain, which was fully twenty miles away.

"Soon be Christmas again," muttered the old man into his gray beard; "down in the city folks will be runnin' around buyin' presents; kids will be laughin' and shoutin' in glee. Me, I'll be settin' here alone in my cabin same as I've done for fifty years. Christmas never comes to Brady's Flat. No, by Sam! Christmas never comes to Brady's Flat."

Somebody knocked at the door, and old Cal Inglis laid his pipe on the table and arose to his feet.

"Come in," he invited quaveringly. "Ain't no need to rap." For he thought it was one of his old acquaintances dropping in for a chat.

The door opened, and a gaunt, sun-bonneted woman stood looking at him.

"Huh!" she exclaimed without any preliminary greeting. "So there you be; Cal Inglis, ain't you?"

"That's my name, ma'am," acknowledged the old prospector. "Was you lookin' for me?"

"What do you suppose I came here for?" snapped out his visitor. "Fat feller down at the

hotel said I'd be likely to find you up here. I'm 'Ma' Shawney."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," said old Cal. "Was there something you wished to see me about?"

Ma Shawney seated herself in the only chair and pushed her sunbonnet far back on her gray hair.

"Brady's Flat ain't what it used to be," she remarked irrelevantly. "No, it ain't what it used to be fifty years ago."

Old Cal peered at her with sudden interest. Nowhere in those gaunt features could he trace any resemblance to any one he had ever known.

"You was here, ma'am, in early days?" he asked. "Somehow I don't seem to be able to place you."

Ignoring his question, Ma Shawney arose and strode to the open door and pointed a long-wristed, bony hand across the creek.

"Ain't that where Brady's saloon used to stand?" she queried.

"Yes, ma'am," replied old Cal, "but it ain't there no more. Mike Brady's saloon was burned down more'n forty year ago."

"So the fat feller down at the hotel told me," responded Ma Shawney ungraciously. "Well, I'm going to locate there, if nobody don't object."

"Nobody won't object, ma'am," said old Cal, "but you couldn't make a living on Brady's

bar, for there ain't no gold there; never was any there; I know, for I've been here fifty years."

"Just the same," retorted Ma Shawney, "I'm going to camp there. I'm going to start a laundry in this camp."

"Ma'am!" exclaimed old Cal. "There's only a dozen of us old-timers here on Brady's Flat. There wouldn't be no use in you starting a laundry here."

"Just the same, I'm going to start one," persisted Ma Shawney. "Got any objection?"

"No, ma'am," replied old Cal feebly. He didn't exactly like the idea of neighboring with such a strong-minded woman as Ma Shawney appeared to be.

"That's settled then," said Ma Shawney briskly. "I'm going to charge two bits a garment, and I'll start on you."

"Me, ma'am!" exclaimed old Cal. "Why, ma'am, I do my own washing."

"You can help me to build a cabin on Brady's bar," said Ma Shawney, ignoring the old man's statement, "and I'll do your washing and clean up your cabin to pay for your labor. Are you goin' to help me, or ain't you?"

"I—I guess so, ma'am." Completely bewildered, old Cal hardly realized what he was saying.

"All right, we'll start work in the morning," snapped out Ma Shawney, and she stalked out as abruptly as she had appeared. Old Cal gazed after her, scratching his gray head.

"If I knewed where to go," muttered the old prospector wrathfully, "I'd pull out. But I ain't got no other home. By Sam, by Sam! What have I ever done to have to neighbor with an old catamount like her?"

True to her word, Ma Shawney arrived early the next morning with two pack horses which she had hired. On their backs was a miscellaneous assortment of bedding, groceries, and camp equipment, securely lashed with diamond hitches.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" snapped out Ma Shawney. "Anything wrong with the way them plugs are packed?"

"No, ma'am," acknowledged old Cal, "but unless somebody else packed 'em for you, you must have been in the hills before."

"Who, me!" exclaimed Ma Shawney, snapping loose the free end of a lash rope. "Never

been anywheres else, Cripple Creek, Bisbee, Nome, I've been to all of 'em." She turned on one of the pack animals which suddenly had become restless. "Stand still, you pie-eyed camel, or I'll kick a rib out of you."

"Just where do you aim to build your cabin, ma'am?" inquired old Cal. "Down next to the creek?"

"Down next to nothing," was the ungracious retort. "Just like the rest of the men, you be. Ain't you got brains enough to see that the best place is right where that old saloon used to stand? Get your ax and go to cleaning off the ground."

"I wonder what Mike Brady would say if he knew that there is going to be a laundry on the site of his old saloon," pondered old Cal as he paused in his labors to wipe the perspiration from his brow. "Many's the wild night I had in Mike's when I was young."

"That's the reason you ain't got nothing now," commented Ma Shawney. "Wild oats is powerful easy to sow, but almighty hard to harvest."

"Yeah." Perhaps it was the fact that he was working on the scene of many past debauches that roused old Cal to unusual garrulity. "There was gold on Brady's Flat in them days. It was easy to get and easier to spend, and lots of it was spent in Mike Brady's saloon. Had a little daughter, a little golden-haired girl of four, Mike had, but he never would let her inside the saloon. Wanted her to grow up to be a real good woman, he did. Often, when little Nora Brady was playing around, the miners would give her nuggets. And what do you suppose she did with 'em, ma'am?"

"Traded 'em at the store for candy and such stuff, I reckon," surmised Ma Shawney.

"No, ma'am," corrected old Cal. "Little Norah used to bury 'em in the ground to see if they would grow big. Faith of a little child, some of the boy's called it. In time we got to callin' her the fairy of Brady's Flat."

"What became of the little girl?" asked Ma Shawney.

"Married a traveling photographer when she was seventeen," replied old Cal, wiping his eyes. "And she never came back to Brady's Flat."

In two weeks Ma Shawney's cabin was finished. For a little while the few old prospectors still living in the old camp grumbled and growled

about the new arrival, but Ma Shawney paid no attention to their grumbling. At last, the old-timers became reconciled to her presence and, each with a bundle of laundry beneath his arm, came to visit the cabin on Brady's bar.

Never did Ma Shawney invite any of them to enter. "Huh!" she would sniff. "You can leave your dirty clothes by the door; maybe I'll get 'em laundered next week, maybe not until the week after. Looks like I'll have to drain the creek before I get them clothes clean."

"How would it be, if I was to carry water for you, ma'am," asked old Cal Inglis one day. "It's a powerful long way to the creek, and I ain't busy."

"Then you'd better get busy," snapped out Ma Shawney. "The freeze-up will soon be here, and you won't have any money for Christmas."

"Christmas!" exclaimed old Cal. "Why, ma'am, Christmas is only for them as has money. We don't have no Christmas on Brady's Flat."

One day Ma Shawney appeared at the cabin of old Cal. "Guess I'll clean your place up," she began without preliminary, and paying no attention to the old prospector's protests, she began literally to throw things out.

Dish towels, shirts, overalls, one after another the gaunt woman threw them out of the door. Then she turned her attention to the bedding.

"You pack them dirty clothes up to my door," ordered Ma Shawney. "Just pile 'em outside. If you as much as set foot inside the door, I'll never wash another thing for you."

"But, ma'am," expostulated old Cal, raising his cracked voice in feeble protest. "I don't never wash my blankets. They ain't been washed in ten years."

"Get out and do as I tell you," snapped out the gaunt woman. "I'd be ashamed to tell it."

"Huh," she muttered as she snatched the woolen blankets off old Cal's bunk and revealed the dusty fir boughs which served for a mattress. Then she turned to old Cal, who was poking his gray head in at the door. "You can go and cut some fresh boughs; I'm going to burn these."

"Just a minute, ma'am," begged old Cal. "I've got something hidden in those boughs that I want to save."

"Miser, huh?" said Ma Shawney, poking a strand of gray hair away from her eyes "Let me

see how much you've saved." She took from old Cal a package he had removed from among the boughs of his bunk.

"Please, ma'am," begged old Cal, but the cold, blue eyes of the gaunt woman were fixed on the face of a photograph she had found where she had expected to find gold.

"Huh!" she exclaimed. "So that is why you are an old bachelor living alone in the hills."

"It is a picture taken of Norah Brady," whispered old Cal, "nearly fifty years ago."

"I didn't suppose it was taken yesterday," replied Ma Shawney as she handed back the photograph. "They don't wear them high-necked dresses no more, worse luck."

"She was married when she was seventeen," said old Cal lamely, "to the feller that took that picture. He was a traveling photografter."

"Pack that pile of blankets up to my place," was all Ma Shawney said. "I'll loan you a couple of mine until I get yours washed."

Three days later old Cal stared in amazement at the transformation Ma Shawney had made in his cabin. There were white curtains at the window, white oilcloth on the table, and clean blankets on the bed. On the wall at the back of the stove, the pots and pans were as clean as sand and soap could make them.

"I'll try and keep them clean," stammered the old prospector, shaking his gray old head, "but I don't know, ma'am; I don't know."

"Huh, I ain't done with you yet," said Ma Shawney. "Bring your chair outside and set yourself down in it; I'm going to cut your hair."

"But, ma'am!"

"Shut up and do as I say," ordered Ma Shawney brusquely.

Later, when old Cal looked in the broken mirror, he hardly recognized himself. Gone was his ragged beard, and with it most of his iron-gray hair."

"You see that you keep that way, too," ordered Ma Shawney. "Just because a man chooses to live alone in the hills is no reason why he should resemble a grizzly b'ar."

"No, ma'am," agreed old Cal meekly.

"I guess we're square now," concluded Ma Shawney, "but don't get the idea that because I cleaned you up, I want you snooping around my place."

Old Cal Inglis watched her, as stiff and uncompromising she strode down the hill; then once more he took down his broken looking-glass and surveyed himself.

"I never thought I looked like this," he muttered. "No, by Sam. I never did!"

Neither did the other prospectors in Brady's Flat. For a while they jeered at the change for the better in old Cal's appearance, and predicted that the change would not last. However, they failed to take into consideration the fact that the self-respect of a man increases in accordance with his habits.

Old Cal Inglis became a different man from the day Ma Shawney "cleaned him up." And so great is the power of example that, one after another, the bearded old-timers of Brady's Flat followed that of Cal's.

Once or twice after the "clean-up" some old-timer would make a friendly call on Ma Shawney. After a while they ceased to bother her, for never did she invite them in. Tall, gaunt, and self-centered, she seemed to wish only to be left alone—some said, with her memories.

Soon, news that there was a laundress at Brady's Flat reached other camps, and packages began to arrive for Ma Shawney through the mail. Often during the day she could be seen carrying water, or emptying wash tubs of soapy suds, yellow with the mud from the creeks. Apparently her work increased so fast that she had to wash far into the night, for often a light could be seen gleaming through the little window, and up in his cabin old Cal Inglis would hear what appeared to be the rub, rubbing of clothes on a washboard.

"Seems like we'd ought to get up a little Christmas for her," suggested old Cal Inglis one day after the snow had grown deep. "Ma Shawney ain't got no kin, and she's the only woman on Brady's Flat."

He was playing rummy down at the hotel when the idea occurred to him. It caused such a sensation among the other card players that by mutual consent they stopped their game.

"Christmas!" exclaimed "Limpy" Tyson, a little, old man with weak eyes and a goatee. "Christmas at Brady's Flat?"

"Kristmas?" said "Dutch" Hertzler. "Ven I vas a poy, always at Kristmas ve roasted chestnuts. They vas goot."

Leaning over the counter of the office, George Hallowell, the proprietor, caught the word.

"Why not?" he inquired. "We could rig up a tree in one end of the dining room, and we could let the surrounding camps know that we are going to celebrate. Folks would come from all around the hills to spend a Christmas at Brady's Flat."

"Suppose she wouldn't come?" suggested old Cal. "Seems like she don't like company very well. There never has been one of us to enter her cabin."

"To live too much alone iss not goot," said Dutch Hertzler. "Not a vord vill we say to Ma Shawney, but when the tree is all glittering with candles all retty, we vill go and get her, and she vill haf to come to our Kristmas, here on Brady's Flat."

Old Cal Inglis laid his hat on the table; then he dropped into it a soiled five-dollar bill.

"Chip in," he ordered, "and then we'll give it all to George, here, and let him buy pretties for the tree, and something nice for Ma Shawney. We'll have a regular, honest-to-goodness Christmas here on Brady's Flat."

"We might buy Ma Shawney a new wash tub," suggested Dutch Hertzler, but his suggestion was immediately frowned upon.

For a few moments there was silence, as each old-timer strove to think of an appropriate present for the only woman in the old camp.

Then George Hallowell was struck with a brilliant idea.

"Tell you what we'll do, boys," he suggested. "I've got a photograph of the camp as it used to be. We'll have it copied and enlarged and framed, and we'll give Ma Shawney a picture of Brady's Flat as it was fifty years ago."

For days afterward old men could be seen whispering together in mysterious fashion. George Hallowell wrote a number of letters notifying the scattered inhabitants of the surrounding hills that there was to be a Christmas celebration at Brady's Flat.

Late one night, so that Ma Shawney would not suspect what was going on, a beautiful balsam fir tree was dragged in from the hills by old Cal Inglis and Dutch Hertzler. It was set up at one end of the big dining room at the hotel that had so few guests.

Then a mysterious package arrived on the stage. From it the old-timers took coil upon coil of silver tinsel, twining it in and out of the dark-green boughs. From their ends were hung pink and yellow and blue glass globes and tiny silver stars. When at last the tree was decorated, the old men gathered around it and looked at each other with tears rolling down their cheeks, talking somewhat incoherently of the days when they were young.

It seemed to them all that Christmas Eve would never come. At last it did, and with it men and women and girls on snowshoes began to arrive at Brady's Flat. The great table in the big dining room was set for forty people, and over it hung garlands of bright-red kinnikin-nick berries and wreaths of dark-green boughs. In its center was a great Christmas cake all frosted in white, and covered with tiny candles.

All that day it had snowed and snowed and snowed, and when that evening old Cal Inglis and a "deputation" of old-timers started for Ma Shawney's cabin on Brady's bar there were no tracks to show that she had been outside that day.

"Maybe she's sick," said Cal Inglis with a sinking heart.

"Better go back and get a woman to come along with us," said George Hallowell. "She'll be needed if Ma Shawney is sick."

In the falling snow, the old men waited until Limpy Tyson returned with a young woman who had come to Brady's Flat from a distant camp. Then under the lead of old Cal Inglis, the little deputation straggled up the hill to the cabin on Brady's bar.

"You knock, Rose," said George Hallowell to the young woman who was with them. "Maybe Ma Shawney will talk to you."

"Wait," she whispered. "I've an idea. How would it be if all of us were to stand out here and sing a Christmas carol?"

The old men shuffled their feet uneasily, for they had not thought of that.

"I guess we've forgotten all the songs of that kind we ever knew," said old Cal Inglis. "Maybe you'll sing, Rose."

She did not refuse as some would have done, but sweet as the trill of a mountain nightingale she raised her voice in song out there in the snow.

"As shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground;
The angels of the Lord appeared,
And Glory shone around."

For a moment there was no sound from the cabin, then the door was opened, and Ma Shawney stood on the threshold.

"Merry Christmas," she said in a choked voice, "and come in, all of you old-timers of Brady's Flat."

One by one they passed her as she stood in the doorway; then they gazed in amazement, for at one end of Ma Shawney's cabin stood a Christmas tree more beautiful than their wildest dreams.

And beneath it was a great heap of packages bright in holly-paper wrappings and tied with tinsel ribbon.

Silently the old-timers looked at one another; then they looked at Ma Shawney.

"Boys," said Ma Shawney, and they failed to recognize her voice, "years and years ago there once lived here on this little bar a little girl whom you named 'the fairy of Brady's Flat.' Long, long ago she went away; but she never forgot the old camp. Her husband died, and she struck it rich in Alaska. Then she wanted to come back and spend a Christmas with you all; she wanted to do something for all of you that have prospected so long without any success. In order to find out how you were all situated, and what you needed most, she took in your washing." Then Ma Shawney waved a hand toward the pile of packages beneath the tree.

"Merry, merry Christmas to you all," she cried. "From the fairy of Brady's Flat."

Old, gray, and poverty-stricken, Cal Inglis looked at her. In his faded old eyes was a look she had not seen for fifty years; he did not speak at once, for she was so rich, and he so old and poor. Still silent, he made as though to turn away, then suddenly he stopped as she called him back.

"Cal, oh, Cal!" Ma Shawney came toward him and laid her hands on his shoulders. "Aren't you going to wish me merry Christmas, Cal?"

Fifty years rolled away as he lifted his poor old eyes to hers.

"Nora," he whispered. "Nora."

"Guess we ain't needed here, boys," said Limpy Tyson, as they filed out.

Little by little Ma Shawney told old Cal Inglis of how, after the death of her husband, she had prospected in every great gold camp of the West, hoping that some day she would strike it rich and come back to him on Brady's Flat.

"You do still care, don't you, Cal?" she whispered, with her gray hair against his.

"Care?" he repeated. "Why, by Sam, I'll spend the rest of my life remembering how Christmas came to me at Brady's Flat."