

## *Lady Sophia's Sapphires.*

An Over True Story of English Life

by Sir Gilbert E. Campbell, Bar

The news had spread all over town, and had been discussed in many a select coterie. It was discussed with much shrugging of shoulders and gesticulation in Parisian salons, and had even penetrated to Nice and Monaco, where for nearly the whole day it formed the staple of conversation. Lady Sophia Girdleton's sapphires were missing. These matchless stones which had been the envy and admiration of society during many London seasons, and which were the most valued of the Girdleton heirlooms, had suddenly vanished and left no trace behind them. It was at Hillside hall, in Loamshire, the country seat of the Girdleton's, that the appalling discovery was first made. Sir Peregrine and Lady Sophia Girdleton had been preparing for a return to town and civilization, when the sapphires were missed, and, as may be imagined, a terrible amount of consternation at once ensued. A thorough search was at once set on foot. Hillside Hall was literally turned upside down, possible and impossible places were ransacked, servants' boxes were searched, and the domestics themselves subjected to a rigorous course of cross-examination, and every effort made to recover the missing jewels, but all efforts proved fruitless. Sir Peregrine Girdleton and wife superintended the search in person, and when that distinguished county magnate, wearied out with his wife's lamentations, pleaded fatigue and retired to his library, nominally to think over the best course to be pursued, but in reality to indulge in a clandestine cigar, Lady Sophia, under the escort of her faithful dog Lance, continued the investigation with unabated vigor. Lance was a large nondescript dog, of no particular breed, which Lady Sophia had purchased during a visit to Biarritz from a young man whose parents had for a long time carried on a contraband trade in tobacco between the French and Spanish frontiers. The lady had become devoutly attached to her four-footed favorite, and insisted on his accompanying her wherever she went. The result of the inquiry elicited the following facts: Lady Sophia had packed up the jewels in a brown paper parcel. When she left the room for a few moments the valuable packet was reposing in all security upon the table, but on her return what was her consternation when she found that it had vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed it up. Society, however, has its claims, and the Girdletons were due in town and had to yield to the inevitable law, sapphires or no sapphires; they had, in spite of their tribulation to return to the metropolis without daring to prolong their stay in Loamshire.

Immediately upon Sir Peregrine's arrival he hurried off to his club to consult an old friend, one Maj. Harbottle, to whom he was in the habit of applying for advice and assistance whenever he found himself placed in any position of difficulty. He was fortunate enough to find the ex-warrior in the smoking room and at once informed him of the terrible loss which he had sustained.

"And now, Harbottle," said he, when he had concluded his recital, "what am I to do? Apart from the value of the sapphires, and their being heirlooms and all that sort of thing, Lady Sophia is half distracted, and declares that people will never believe they have disappeared, but they will, with the usual censoriousness of the world, declare that we are getting hard up and had either sold them or received a temporary loan upon them."

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The major sucked at his cigar in silence for a few minutes, and then said, solemnly: "The police."

"What, you mean that I ought to apply to Scotland Yard?" asked Sir Peregrine.

Maj. Harbottle, who was a man of few words, nodded his head, putting on at the same time an air of preternatural sagacity.

Thanking his friend for his valuable advice, Sir Peregrine took a cab and drove to the headquarters of the police, and in due time was placed in communication with Inspector McCann, to whom he detailed all the circumstances of the case as far as he could recollect them.

Inspector McCann was not a Long or a Goudar, such as the novels of Gaboriau have made us familiar with, but a detective of the good old British school, with a stolid smile upon his face and an expression which might either be taken for intense stupidity or extreme intelligence. He wore rather a seedy black coat, buttoned up to the throat, a white hat with a black band and a pair of serviceable policeman's boots. The first result of this interview was not wholly satisfactory, for Inspector McCann at once went down to Hillside hall, and so tormented and harassed the servants, examining each of them separately and then collectively, and with the usual diplomacy of the detective, leading each one to imagine that he or she was suspected of having committed the robbery, that the whole of the domestic establishment sent in their resignations in a body. After having created this disturbance Inspector McCann quitted the peasant woodlands and pastures of Loamshire, returned to town and busied himself in making all kinds of preparations and inquiries regarding the guests who had been recently staying at Hillside hall. He had several interviews with the body servant of that well-known kleptomaniac, the Duke of St. Pancras and his grace's curious hiding places were carefully searched, but beyond a few coroneted forks and spoons, two or three cigar cases and some half dozen serviettes, nothing was discovered. The gorgeous chambers on the embankment occupied by the distinguished Italian who had lately contrived to push his way into society, claiming for himself titles of count and troubadour, were twice vainly ransacked by Inspector McCann and his subordinates, but the disappearance of Lady Sophia's sapphires remained as great a mystery as ever. The ladies' maids of two or three dames of the upper circle, addicted to cards and little bargains on the stock exchange, were likewise interviewed, but this, too, was without the slightest success, and both Sir Peregrine and Lady Sophia began to give way to despair. All at once, however, Inspector McCann's activity took a new direction. Neglecting all those upon whom his suspicions had previously rested, he attached himself exclusively to Lady Sophia. If that lady left her house for the purpose of doing a little shopping or visiting the theater or any other place of public amusement the detective's form could be noticed following her like her shadow. If she remained at home he made some pretext or other, took up his position in the hall and peered with the closest scrutiny into the faces of all her visitors, especially of those who belonged to the opposite sex. At length this new line of operations became so painfully apparent that Lady Sophia began to feel seriously annoyed, and in the privacy of the nuptial chamber she spoke out her mind pretty freely.

“I really do wish, Sir Peregrine,” said she, “that you would give that ridiculous detective of yours his conge. The man follows me about and dogs my footsteps as if he was under the impression that I had stolen my own sapphires.”

“Upon my word, my dear,” returned her husband, who, good easy man that he was, and not noticed the detective’s strange pertinacity. “I really have not seen anything of the kind, but the matter shall be cleared up at once. You have had worry, enough owing to your loss without being subject to any fresh annoyances.”

The next morning, in accordance with his resolution, Sir Peregrine ensconced himself in the most comfortable chair in the: library, and ringing the bell, ordered the footman to summon the detective into his presence.

“Mr. McCann,” said he, assuming an air of as much sincerity as was compatible with the usual good-natured expression of his countenance, “what is the meaning of all this? Lady Sophia complains that you follow her about every where and this persecution is making her quite ill. Now, I cannot allow her to be annoyed in this manner, so please do not let me hear of your doing so, any more.”

For a moment or two the astute inspector made no reply, thought he winked more than once with an air of the most portentous solemnity; then, creeping softly across the room, he threw open the door as if he expected to discover some one on the rug outside, with, his ear to the keyhole. Apparently disappointed at finding no one, he closed the door with the same stealthy caution, and on coming close up to Sir Peregrine’s chair, and laying a great forefinger personally upon the baronet’s coat sleeve whispered hoarsely:

“Lady Sophia is a good many years younger than you. Sir Peregrine?”

“And who on earth said she wasn’t man,” muttered Sir Peregrine hastily, for his age was rather a sore subject with him. “Everybody knows that; but what has my age or hers to do with the sapphires?” At the same time he withdrew his arm from the inspector’s touch, glancing at the sleeve as he did so, as if he, half-expected to find that the intruding forefinger had left a mark.

“Ahem,” coughed the detective, and there was a sort of solemn invitation in the cough for the baronet to ask further questions, but, as Sir Peregrine remained obstinately silent, Inspector McCann was compelled to go on.

“Lady Sophia takes a good deal of notice of young gentlemen, Sir Peregrine,” remarked he.

The shaft struck home, and Sir Peregrine could not restrain from making a slight movement expressive of annoyance, for he could not deny that Lady Sophia frequently manifested a strong penchant for a class which he was in the habit of contemptuously designating as “bits of boys,” taking a kind of maternal solicitude in them, which the scandal-mongers of society were at times prone to animadvert on in rather an unkindly manner.

“Well, well, and suppose she does,” returned he a little impatiently, “what has that to do with you or any one else, except myself?”

“Lord Athelstane Fulham has been going it a bit lately, and I think I am not wrong in stating that his lordship is in Queer street,” continued the inspector, placidly.

Sir Peregrine nodded an assent that Lord Athelstane’s difficulties were not unknown to him in common with the rest of society, as, indeed, at that time, they formed a most interesting portion of the chronicle scandaleuse of the day.

“He is going to Rotterdam,” continued, McCann, raising his finger impressively; “to Rotterdam by tonight’s boat from Harwick.”

“Well,” returned Sir Peregrine, “I suppose getting out of the country for a time is the best thing that he can do.”

“Rotterdam is not far from Amsterdam,” answered the detective, sententiously: “and that is about the best place I know for getting rid of jewelry, which has been come by in rather a queer sort of way. The Amsterdam tillers don’t give too much money, but then they don’t ask any impertinent questions, either.”

“Hullo!” exclaimed Sir Peregrine, placing both his hands upon the arms of his chair, and half raising himself up, “and what the deuce do you mean with your Lord Athelstane and Amsterdam, and jewels that have been come by in a queer way, eh?”

Once more the detective gazed cautiously round, the room, and as if to make assurance doubly sure, stooped, peeped tunder the table, and then crossing the room thrust the poker a short distance up the chimney. Apparently satisfied with these precautions, he again took up his place in front of Sir Peregrine and continued.

“He have got,” said the inspector, whose grammar was at times slightly erratic, “he have got a got a green velvet jewel casket, which he won’t trust to no portmanteau, but carries it in his hand wrapped up in a piece of brown paper and tied with red tape.”

“Why, confound it, man,” exclaimed Sir Peregrine, angrily, “Lady Sophia’s sapphires were in a green velvet case.”

“Yes, my inquiries told me that, Sir Peregrine,” returned the detective with an air of triumph; “things arn’t long hid from Sandy McCann. Now if you will say the word, I’ll have a warrant out against him, and nab him before he sets his foot on board the steamer Boomplies, which starts to-night.”

Sir Peregrine paused for a moment and turned over the matter in his mind. “No,” said heat length, “I won’t have my wife’s name connected with any scandal. Bless my soul, we should be having an article in the Universe or else a paragraph in Verity, with perhaps a portrait of her and

a view of Hillside hall in some of the other papers. On my word, I believe society journals are worse than financial ones for blackmailing. I tell you what I will do, however, we will cross to Rotterdam in the same boat as he does and make him give them up without any exposure.”

“Just as you like, of course, Sir Peregrine,” returned the detective, “but it strikes me that we shall have a nasty passage; not that I care, for I have been too often across the herring pond in pursuit of runaway cashiers or absconding bankrupts to care for wind or weather, but if you are a bad sailor—” and he glanced inquiringly at the baronet as he ventured on this surmise.

Sir Peregrine winced a little, and moved uneasily towards the library window, against which the blast was driving the rain in one continuous sheet. For an instant he hesitated, and then putting on an expression of almost Roman fortitude, observed:

“Never mind whether I am a good sailor or not, McCann, the course I have marked out for myself is evidently the proper one, and I intend to follow it. The passage is not a very long one, so I’ll risk it. You had better go and get what you want and meet me at the station.”

“An old sailor like myself,” returned McCann, “don’t want to make a neap of preparations like a mere land lubber. I daresay you have a spare waterproof to lend me, and I will take a snack in the servants’ hall before starting, as we have an hour and a half yet to spare.”

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Sir Peregrine nodded his assent, and as soon as he was left alone sat down to think matters over. He had a sort of vague idea that he was going to make a fool of himself, and yet he could not see why he was not taking the proper action. All he had to do was to tell Lady Sophia that the detective had hit upon a fresh clue, and that to follow it up his (Sir Peregrine’s) presence was required, and she must not be surprised if he was absent for fully twenty-four hours. He embodied all this in a letter, which he determined to post himself, and then after seeing that he had sufficient money for the trip wrapped himself up and rang the bell for the detective, who very shortly made his appearance in one of Sir Peregrine’s waterproofs, which fitted him like a sentry box and was in addition so long that he was in momentary peril of being tripped up.

Cautiously the two conspirators crept out of the house, and after Sir Peregrine had posted the letter to his wife they took a cab, and in about half an hour’s time found themselves in the train rolling rapidly along in the direction of Harwich.

Ensconcing themselves behind a crane which stood upon the quay, Sir Peregrine and the detective carefully surveyed all the passengers as they passed down to the Rotterdam boat. In a very brief space of time their perseverance was rewarded by the sight of Lord Athelstane Fulham, muffled up in a great coat with a silk muffler almost concealing the lower portion of his face, and carrying a leather bag, concerning the safety of which he appeared to be extremely solicitous. The young lord, after a glance or two about him, crossed the gangway, and as if desirous of avoiding observation, dived down in the depths of the saloon.

In another moment Sir Peregrine and his sleuth hound stepped on the good ship Boomplies, and

in a few minutes were steaming, away towards the land of the dykes and windmills. By some extraordinary underhand means, for which he took great credit to himself, Inspector McCann had secured for his client and himself the use of the captain's cabin, and to this snug retreat they betook themselves to await the termination of their voyage; and now it was that the unhappy Sir Peregrine's tribulations really commenced.

At length the morning broke, cold, foggy and with a drizzling rain, which seemed to pierce the very marrow. Slowly the steamer, came alongside of the quay, and the unhappy visitors began to believe that the hand of death was not yet upon them and that there was some possibility of their existing for a few years longer. By a powerful exercise of will power the detective crawled out of his berth and with staggering steps made his way across the deck to see how Lord Athelstane had progressed and to watch where he proceeded to on landing. The task was not a very long one, and in a comparatively brief space of time he returned to the cabin with a sickly smile of triumph upon his features.

"Have you seen him?" said Sir Peregrine.

"What do you take me for?" returned the detective. "Seen him? Of course I have. He has gone off to the New Bath hotel, as bold as brass, hugging that leather bag as if he didn't mean to part with it in a hurry. I think we had better make tracks after him without any further delay."

"Come along, then," retorted the baronet, with a faint groan, and the two "toilers of the sea" gained the shore in the best manner that their faltering limbs would permit of. As soon as they reached the New Bath hotel the baronet told the detective to keep a sharp eye upon the movements of Lord Athelstane Fulham.

During the progress of his toilet Sir Peregrine reflected, and for a moment almost came to the conclusion that he had much better have left things as they were. "Suppose," thought he, "that young Fulham positively refuses to give up the sapphires— a nice mess I shall be in then. I couldn't give him into custody, the scandal would be too awful; besides my wife's name would be mixed up in the business. 'No fool like an old fool,' they say, and I am sure I am a perfect exemplification of the proverb. Well, I always was a creature of impulse, and suppose I shall remain so," With these thoughts passing through his brain Sir Peregrine descended the stairs, and was about to enter the public room when Mr. McCann darted out upon him from some coign of vantage in which he had ensconced himself.

"He is walking up and down in front of the hotel," he hissed in the baronet's ear. "For heaven's sake, do not let him see you!"

"Pshaw," returned Sir Peregrine, pushing the detective angrily on one side. "How on earth am I to ask him for the sapphires if I do not see him? Am I to hide behind a corner and shout at him through a speaking trumpet? What nonsense you talk, man."

Deeply chagrined at the manner in which his suggestions had been received, Inspector McCann drew back, assuming at the same time as majestic a pose as his figure was capable of while Sir

Peregrine proceeded towards the principal door. Just; as he reached it another figure came hurriedly in, and collided with Sir Peregrine with some little degree of violence.

Both men recoiled, when the one who was entering the hotel exclaimed in a voice of the utmost surprise. "Sir Peregrine Griddleton, you here!" but though his astonishment was extreme, there was no look of guilt upon his boyish features. "Sir Peregrine," he repeated, "by all that is lucky, why there is no one in the world I could have more strongly desired to meet."

It was now Sir Peregrine's turn to start, as he for his own: part thought that Lord Fulham would sooner have seen any one else than himself at such a juncture.

"I should like a word or two with you," remarked Lord Athelstane Fulham, drawing Sir Peregrine on one side; "but, I say, who the deuce is that shady-looking party with you?"

"Oh," stammered Sir Peregrine, a little taken aback, "that— what that is—is— why yes, of course, he is a dealer in Dutch cattle; you know Holland is famous for cows; I have come, over with him on a matter of business about restocking the dairy farm at Hillside, you know."

"A cattle dealer, eh," returned Lord Athelstane, a little dubiously. "He looks a precious deal more like a police man; but never mind, you'll do me a turn, won't you?"

Sir Peregrine stared at the young nobleman in greater surprise than ever, wondering what was coming next.

"The fact is," continued Lord Athelstane, "I have a lot of precious stones to get rid of—"

"Precious stones to dispose of," returned Sir Peregrine, with a slightly sarcastic accent. "May I ask if there are any sapphires among them?"

A flush rose to the young man's cheek. "How on earth did you hear about them?" asked he. "I thought that she and I were the only ones in the secret, and when I met you I said to myself. 'Well, I am in luck, for Sir Peregrine will be the best reference I could possibly have in case, of any untoward inquiries.'"

This was almost more than the baronet could bear, and for a moment or so he remained silent, perfectly aghast at the cool effrontery of the young nobleman.

"You and she," said he, at length; "you and she."

"Yes," continued Lord Athelstane, who had by this time somewhat recovered from the surprise which Sir Peregrine's knowledge of his precious charge had caused him. "You see I came a most awful mucker and Geraldine my sister—"

"What! Admiral Stanepart's widow?" gasped Sir Peregrine.

“Exactly,” answered Lord Athelstane, “the best and dearest girl in the world, I may say, gave me some of her beautiful sapphires to dispose of to start me fresh in the States.”

The revelation afforded Sir Peregrine a strange mixture of pain and pleasure—pain that he had permitted Inspector McCann to make such an utter fool of him, and pleasure in finding that, after all, Lady Sophia’s sapphires were not in the possession of Lord Athelstane Fulham.”

“Very sorry,” stammered he, “but I can’t help you; I have to be off to important business in town. Good-bye— I haven’t a moment— wish you well, and all that sort of thing, I am sure:” and casting a glance of the utmost contempt upon the crestfallen detective,” he gave the “young man’s hand a hearty shake and walked upstairs to his own room, not deigning to take any further notice of his fellow traveler.

That night the discomfited baronet recrossed the sea, but this time he and Mr. McCann did not occupy the same cabin, for, immediately upon his arrival on board, the shame-faced detective sought some maritime hiding-place which his former passages had made familiar to him.

There was now no clue to the missing jewels, and as Sir Peregrine was disgusted with the impotency of the assistance he had obtained from Scotland Yard, he had made up his mind to bear his loss with patience, and, after much trouble and the present of a magnificent set of diamonds, he persuaded Lady Sophia to adopt the same course.

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Six months had passed away since the baronet’s futile journey to Rotterdam, and nothing more had been heard of the sapphires so strangely absent without leave. Time had assuaged the pangs of Lady Sophia’s grief, and society had ceased to whisper and shrug its shoulders over the strange disappearance of the gems.

Sir Peregrine and his lady had returned to Hillside Hall, in order to entertain a select party of visitors who would arrive in a few days. Lady Sophia was of course: accompanied by her favorite, Lance, to whom she had become more than ever attached. Just before leaving town. Sir Peregrine purchased a book of flies from those eminent fish tackle manufacturers, Bant & Nibble, and having no time to pack, he brought it down with him made into a neat brown paper parcel. This, on arrival, he placed upon the hall table, and was turning to give some orders to a servant, when to his extreme surprise, he saw Lance rise upon his hind legs, seized the packet in his mouth, and dashed through the open door like a flash of lightning. A hot pursuit was at once commenced. Sir Peregrine, in spite of his obesity, leading the way, and in a small plantation of Scotch firs, a few hundred yards from the house, the faithful animal was discovered in the act of depositing his booty in a disused rabbit burrow. A search at once brought the missing sapphires to light, together with several other small parcels which had been missed at different periods, the disappearance of which caused no little unpleasantness, and for which certain invisible tramps had been blamed. The mystery, however, was now cleared up, for it was remembered that in his earlier and unregenerate days Lance had been in the possession of a family addicted to the contraband trade, and had been trained to carry small parcels of lace and tobacco across the



frontier and to conceal them in certain spots, so as to escape the sharp eyes of the custom house officials. These early habits had no doubt impelled him to carry off and conceal small parcels whenever he came across them, and had thus produced the unpleasant complication which has been narrated. Lady Sophia wore the sapphires at the next drawing room after her return to town, but there were not wanting a few malicious tongues to connect their reappearance with the marriage of Lord Athelstane to the daughter of a millionaire contractor at Chicago, and the report went round that after all Fulham was not such a bad sort of fellow, though others contended that it was very soft of him to return the jewels which this proud, ill-natured Lady Sophia had given him to make a fresh start with.

[THE END.]

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