

empire of the sons

his sons would go everywhere to baghdada, japapn, London

elias went to china

what life was like for him and others

he was well suited

From a business point of view they were well suited—they could specialize and compartmentalize.

opium

then cotton with civil war

david dies

abdulah takes over

elias sets up own firm

they beat jardines

more acceptance in England

but still anti Semitism

china in turmoil

that nenefitted business—it was good for business—refugees looking for housing and a goivt that make opium legal after second opium war

they hada great commercial triumph

but at what cost. They had sopwed bitterness and china itself outside the settlemenet walls was in chaos, prostrate

nine years between children

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Ch 2 Rothschilds

of the East. They were nothing of the kind.

In the first place, the Rothschilds were essentially financiers, whereas the Sassoons were essentially merchants, with subsidiary interests as manufacturers.

rapidity of assimilation:

Yet the transition was made with extraordinary rapidity, assuredly equalled by no other family in history. David Sassoon, the founder of the House, was an Oriental patriarch, albeit at the same time a good business-man. His sons, most of whom never knew the discomforts of occidental dress until they arrived at manhood, later cut a figure in London society, and were among the most prominent personalities

in p:6y5the Royal Enclosure that rotated about

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Preface 13

King Edward VII. The next generation entered Parliament and intermarried with the nobility. The next flaunts the most English of contemporary English poets, the most civilized of Commissioners of Public Works, and a steeplechase rider whose death was considered an irreparable loss to English sport. It is an amazing record. What family could have-beeij^ess^English in its tastes a century ago?, What-faqjly ha j T p r o ^ w h o are more,

sq, Jt£u d ay ? – 7

David Sassoon was quite different. He belonged to a family that settled in the fabulous East Indian Company territory. Both on his father's side and on his mother's, he was descended from the last successors of the Princes of the Captivity, whose office can be dimly traced for a hundred generations, linking up through the rose-coloured mists of antiquity with the royal house of David. "When a century after his birth his posterity began to identify with the nobility and to entertain crowned heads and princes of the blood they were simply

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re-asserting their station in life—they were not in any sense of the term rising above it.¹

HAND IN HAND WITH PHENOMENON OF PAX BRITANNICA AND BRITISH IMPERIAL EXPANSION CAME THE PHENOMENA OF EMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION THAT WOULD SHAPE THE LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY. NOT JUST BRITS GOING TO THE COLONIES BUT JEWS MOVING AND GERMANS AND THE IRISH AND OTHERS. EMIGRATION WOULD BE A PHENOMENON

David Sassoon's translocation was not therefore an isolated phenomenon, an unprecedented adventure. He was caught up, rather early, in an eddy of this universal stream of migration which was responsible in the first half of the nineteenth

century for such vast displacements of population throughout the world (and the suppression of which, in the first half of the twentieth century, seems to be having the same unfortunate effect as the stoppage of the safety-valve in any other delicate piece of machinery). On the other hand, of the pioneers in the Pacific, none succeeded more brilliantly than the Sassoons, and none, moreover, achieved such extraordinary results in the second stage of their pilgrimage, when they turned back again towards the west

his two elder sons, Abdullah and Elias

But the

name was an exotic one, hardly suited for a man who was to cut a great figure in European circles: and Abdullah Sassoon subsequently adopted, first as an addition and then as an all-but-invariable substitute (though without any legal formality) the English approximation 'Albert'—a name certainly unknown in the Jewish quarter of Baghdad when he was born there in 1817. (The choice was of course pre-eminently loyal: the late Prince Consort was Albert and the Prince of Wales Albert Edward)

DAID SENT HIS ELDEST SON ABDULLAH TO BAGHDAD WHICH WAS THE MOST LUCRATIVE PART OF THE COMPANY

=====

DAVID...

As a result, in 1844, after he had been settled in Bombay for a little more than ten years, he had the idea of dispatching one of his sons to the Far East to supervise the operations of the firm. It was the second and (apparently) most enterprising of the house, Elias, whom he chose for the purpose. First the young man went to Canton, then the great emporium of Chinese trade. Subsequently he removed to Hong Kong, recently transferred to British sovereignty and rapidly growing in importance: then, about 1850, he opened up a branch in the treaty-port of Shanghai, which from now on became the second great centre of Sassoon activities and interests. Later on, other members of the family were sent to second his efforts there or in other parts of China. First came the eldest brother, Abdullah, who had formerly been in Baghdad (this was before the Far Eastern potentialities had been fully realized). Sassoon, the eldest son by David's second wife, was in Shanghai in the early eightenfifties. Reuben, Abraham, Solomon, Farraj, all followed later on. Thus, in the end, all of the eight brothers (with perhaps one exception) served their apprenticeship there and had the experience of the

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world that they afterwards turned to such good account. Thanks to their industry and devotion, the most lucrative part of the trade from British India to China and beyond (and, later on, much of the direct trade from England to the Far East) came into the hands of the firm of David Sassoon, Sons, & Company, as this subordinate house was styled, who had a practical monopoly of the importing of opium, fabrics, and cotton-yarn. Besides the branches in Shanghai, Canton and Hong Kong, there were agencies in Japan, at Yokohama, Nagasaki and other cities, generally managed by some member or connexion of the family. Another branch establishment set up rather earlier at Calcutta tapped the trade of Eastern India and constituted a half-way house to the Celestial Empire. It was the China trade that raised the house to the very first rank in British India. By 1854, David Sassoon was considered a millionaire; he was far more than this by the time of his death.

ABDULLAH TAKES OVER COMPANY AFTER DAVID'S DEATH IN 1864 (HE HAD ALREADY BEEN TO CHINA AND BROUGHT BACK TO BE HIS FATHER'S RIGHT HAND MAN

ABDULLAH KEY IN DEVELOPING India's weaving industry, bringing in looms from Lancashire using Indian yarn and labor to weave garments

Before long,

a vast manufactory of cotton goods sprang up under

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their auspices and that of their associates, and for some time their supremacy was unchallenged. This was indubitably the most important development in the history of Indian industry in the nineteenth century: though it must be added that it was inevitable in the long run, whether the Sassoons had participated in it or no. Moreover, much the same methods were employed in the weaving of silk, in which there was an ancient, primitive local tradition, barely challenged by the modern looms of Lyons and Milan, by which English interests were quite unaffected. Thus, by the side of the original firm, David Sassoon and Company, there grew up subordinate manufacturing and weaving establishments which played their part in revolutionizing the weaving industry in the dependency, and in transforming Bombay, in the second half of the century, into a smoke-blurred manufacturing city.¹ Albert-Abdullah thus earned his niche as one of the creators of Industrial India.

The House of Sassoon

were merchants, with industrial interests. They were not, like the Rothschilds, bankers and financiers, notwithstanding the general misapprehension on this point, nor did they have important financial interests. They imported and exported on an enormous scale and over a vast range of territory: they chartered steamers plying on all the seven seas, though with a natural predilection for one of them: they were of course active in the Indian exchange market in all its branches. But they were intimately associated with no great financial enterprises

The circumstances of their history—persecution, urbanization, solidarity—drove the Parsees, like the Jews, into business life:

while elias struggled in shnaghai against disease etc, Abdullah became like a pasha in Bombay and Sassoon influence gew:

David Sassoon's tastes were simple, his greatest luxury being an occasional orgy of prayer or the privilege of entertaining a distinguished Rabbi. His eldest son, the heir to great wealth and accustomed from his early manhood to the idea of using it, had more ambitious conceptions. In the

new India, where merchants and industrialists were beginning to trespass on the status of at least the lesser Rajahs, he found ample outlet for his luxurious tastes, and he began to play a great role in Society. He had superb villas at Garden Reach, Poona, and at Mahabaleshwar high on the hills above it, where he lavishly entertained fellowfugitives from the summer heat of the plains. But his principal residence was the incongruously named and incongruously designed mansion of Sans Souci, in the outskirts of Bombay, modelled on an Italian palazzo of the Renaissance and called after Frederick the Great's retreat at Potsdam. It was one of the show-places of the city. Here the new The Second (generation 85 head of the house of Sassoon sometimes indulged in almost fabulous hospitality, his guests including the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) and almost all the other persons of note who visited Bombay. One great ball given here in 1876, in honour of the Viceroy (Lord Northbrook) became almost legendary, and was still remembered a quarter of a century later as the most gorgeous and most brilliant social affair that ever took place in Bombay. The illuminations were on a scale which, before the days of electricity, seemed fantastic, and extended even to the fountains. There were fourteen hundred guests, including nearly all the native princes and Rajahs. Seldom had such a galaxy of

Indian brilliance been gathered together in one spot except at a Durbar.

This was only one of a vast series of benefactions from Albert-Abdullah to his native city. To commemorate the visit of the Prince of Wales to India in 1875 (when he had been privileged to entertain the royal party) he presented the City of Bombay with a colossal equestrian statue of rather more than double life-size, showing him in the uniform of a Field-Marshal. This, executed by Joseph Edgar Boehm, the fashionable sculptor, was placed in a commanding site in front of the Town Hall. One of the two bas-reliefs on the granite base of the statue depicts the Prince's welcome by the native chiefs on his landing at the dockyard, with the donor's son and eventual heir, Edward (as well as one of the Gubbay family belonging to the firm) in the group behind the royal party. (This decorative trifle cost the donor €11,000—a sum that could certainly have been expended more usefully.) The great organ inside the Town Hall, then considered as fine as any in a similar public institution in Europe, was a further memento from him on the occasion of the visit in March 1870 of Queen Victoria's second son, the Duke of Edinburgh (who subsequently passed from the ranks of the British

peerage to become Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha

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in succession to the Prince Consort's brother).

He founded scholarships at the University and the Art School. His benefactions were not confined to Bombay. They extended throughout India—to Calcutta

, Madras, Poona and far beyond. In Albert-

Abdullah's native Baghdad, a new school for the

Alliance Israelite Universelle, amply endowed,

stood as a reminder to the youth of the city of what

they might attain by application tempered with

piety (or was it piety tempered with application?).

And, further off still, in Persia and even in Great

Britain, his reputation as philanthropist was widely,

and not inexpensively, spread.

His services were not unappreciated and, if he

was unable to wear his heart on his sleeve, he was

at least able to wear a number of orders on his

breast. In 1867, he was created a Companion of the

Order of the Star of India. Four years later, in consideration

of his work in Persia and his services in

the development of Persian commerce, the Shah

made him a member of the order of the Lion and

Sun. In 1868, he had become a member of the

Bombay Legislative Council, a position that he

continued to hold for four years. In 1872, he was

raised to the Knighthood, as a Knight Companion

of the Order of the Star of India, in recognition of

his own and his father's beneficent activities.

When in the following year he was in England, the City of London conferred the freedom upon him, “ in consideration of his munificent and philanthropic exertions in the cause of charity and the promotion of education, more especially, though not exclusively, in our Indian Empire,” at that

SIR ALBERT SASSOON

(Caricature by “ Spy”)

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time said to have amounted to £280,000. (It is not quite accurate to state, as is so often done, that this was the first time that an Indian had received this honour: Sir Jamsetji Jejeebhoy, the Parsee philanthropist, had been voted the Freedom in 1855, though he did not come to take it up in person.)

The ceremony was expensively and ostentatiously performed; well-turned Victorian periods particularized the “ cosmopolitan and unsectarian scope” of the philanthropist’s liberality, and his endowments of “ schools for Indian and Jewish children, colleges for the higher education of native youth, institutes for mechanics, hospitals for the diseased, retreats for the convalescent, reformatories for the depraved” : and there was the invariable sybarite sequel. It was incidentally (as the official orators did not fail to accentuate) the first time that any person belonging to what they termed the “Hebrew persuasion” had received the Freedom of the City

in the honorary form.¹

Elias

The leader of the secession was the patriarch's second son and fourth child, Elias David Sassoon, born in 1820, when his grandfather had but recently lost his position of pre-eminence at Baghdad, and named after one of the latter's brothers.

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He seems to have displayed particularly high business ability, and when in 1844 his father decided to open up a branch of his business in China, it was Elias, not his elder brother, whom he sent to supervise the new venture. The energetic young Oriental (he was not yet twenty-five years of age) performed his mission with conspicuous success. He spent many months in uncomfortable sailingboats, on his way from port to port, notwithstanding the immense difficulty of maintaining the Jewish ritual observances under such conditions. But he was magnificently successful; branches and agencies were opened up in one commercial centre after the other; and the fabulous days of David Sassoon & Company began with the Odyssey of Elias in the Far East. After his return to India, leaving a selection of other members of the family to supervise

operations in the off-shoots he had established, he became his father's right-hand man. During the latter's last years he was partly responsible for conducting the parent establishment in Bombay. It was largely due, it is said, to his coolness and foresight that the firm did not become involved, like most of the other leading houses in the city, in the share-mania of 1861-5, when the American Civil War had created a boom on Indian cotton, and in the subsequent disastrous crash which involved most of them.¹

On his father's death, Elias found himself relegated to a place which he considered inferior to his abilities. His elder brother, Abdullah (he was not yet Albert), was now at the head of the firm. The

¹ See pages 50-3 and 76-7.

latter was in the prime of life, and did not have to be dependent (like his father) on the younger brother, whose superabundant energy perhaps found the cautious methods of his senior a little irksome. We have to assume fraternal disputes, followed by quarrels: and after little more than two years, in 1867, Elias took the obvious step. He was already a wealthy man, like all of the brothers, with ample capital of his own. Taking his twentyfour-year-old first-born, Jacob, into partnership, he opened at Bombay a rival firm bearing his own name, Messrs. E. D. Sassoon & Co., carrying on identical activities and trading with the same

centres. Contrary to what is generally believed, and sometimes stated even in authoritative works, there is no association whatsoever between the two firms except that of name, their reciprocal relations having long been those of bitter rivals rather than of colleagues.

But why confine himself to Bombay? After all, the Far Eastern branches of the parent house had been established through his energy, and he had, as it were, a prescriptive natural right to establish himself there. He had to hand, moreover (and this could not be said to an equal extent of any of his brothers) the same potential instruments for expansion as his father: for his wife, Leah Gubbay, presented him all told with six sons, besides his three daughters, and they were beginning to arrive at the age when they could take an active and responsible share in the activities of his firm. In the year after he started his business, therefore, he dispatched his son Jacob on a trip to the Far East,

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similar to that which he had himself undertaken a generation before but under circumstances infinitely more comfortable. In almost every city where the parent firm had branches or agencies,

especially Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the Treaty Ports, Messrs. E. D. Sassoon & Co. Company now became established, somewhat to the perplexity of old-established clients of the paternal business. Relations were opened up with Baghdad, the cradle of the family, where the original house might have aspired to be undisturbed. Within a very few years the operations and agencies of the new firm had spread to Europe, and even to some places in Africa and America, where David Sassoon Company were as yet unknown. When Elias died in 1880, in his sixtieth year, while on a visit to Colombo, he had been established in business on his own account for only thirteen years, but it was already a gigantic concern, with connexions in every part of the world. In all these branches, the tradition of the parent establishment was followed. The managers and clerks were almost all Jews, brought out from India and Baghdad, who worshipped in synagogues established by their employers and were sustained in all the vicissitudes of life by charities set up by them. It was not only a commercial house. It conducted considerable banking operations as well—not unlike those of any similar establishment except for the fact that, with typical Sassoon loyalty to tradition and to its Jewish origin, the cheques bore the name of the firm in Hebrew as well as in English.

The Shanghai interests were henceforth managed by one of their Baghdadi connexions, Silas Aaron Haroon, who had the unusual distinction of serving simultaneously on the French and English municipal councils and was said to be the richest man east of Suez. (He died in 1931, a reputed Buddhist, leaving some marital perplexity, an enormous fortune, and an interesting judicial problem which provided a rich and protracted harvest for lawyers from different lands.)

The high commercial reputation that the firm enjoyed can best be gauged from the attacks made upon it. In 1888, a certain I. G. Thirkell published at the Celestial Empire office in Shanghai a work, intended to be scurrilous, entitled Some Queer Stories of Benjamin David Benjamin and Messrs. E. D. Sassoon & Co. If this is the worst arraignment that 1 The head offices of the Eastern Bank are in London, but it gravitates towards India, Iraq, Ceylon, and Singapore. malevolence could compile, the record of the firm must have been extraordinarily good. The worst anecdote related in the work relates to the captain of one of the firm's junks, who raised a contribution from the entire crew to purchase a lottery ticket and, finding that it drew a prize, absconded

with the proceeds. MAISIE MAYER BOOK SEPHARDIS FROM RIVER OF BABYLON HAS INFO ON THIS SUIT THOUGH NOT SO MUCH ON THE SASSOON PART But it is hardly probable (nor is it suggested) that his employers connived at this action. It is remarkable, in point of fact, how insubstantial are most of the accusations made by gossip against Sassoon business methods; particularization always recedes, like a will-o'-the-wisp or the temptations of Tantalus, before the thirsty investigator. (Not long since, when there was a far-reaching business-scandal at Bombay, theirs was the only house that had sufficient confidence and sufficient courage to come forward with evidence.)

THE CENTER OF GRAVITY AND THE FAMILY MOVED TO LONDON, LEAVING HARDOON IN CHARGE AND OPENING FOR OTHERS LIKE THE KADOORIES AND THE RISE OF HARDOON ..UNTIL VICTOR WOULD COME AND REASSERT HIMSELF. THE FORTUNE DIDN'T FLAG CUZ HARDOUN WAS VERY GOON...AND THEN HE LEFT AND THEN VICTOR HAD TO STEP IN

In 1858, David Sassoon, finding that the affairs of his house were prospering, that expansion in the Far East demanded an ever-increasing quantity of imports from England, and imagining that it must be possible to develop a direct export trade in Indian commodities and raw materials, took what was to prove a decisive step in the history of his family. Recalling his third son, Sassoon, from Shanghai, he dispatched him to London to supervise the firm's interests at the very centre of the world's

economy. (A separate chapter of this work will be devoted to him and his progeny.¹) Before long, the mass of business to be transacted in London had grown to such an extent that in 1867, three years after the patriarch's death, the fourth brother, Reuben² (who likewise had served his apprenticeship in China), went to England to assist in the work. Now that David Sassoon was no more, the firm's centre of gravity was no longer necessarily situated in India, and with the passage of time was attracted more and more to the capital of the Empire: the activities in which it was engaged being

1 See Chapter VIII ("The Sassoons of Ashley Park").

2 He was named after an uncle, one of David Sassoon's brothers, who died in the plague of 1802.

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mainly the Indian produce business, the import of raw cotton, and the export of mill supplies for the Bombay looms. After the eldest of the family, Sir Albert Abdullah Sassoon, settled in England in the eighteen-seventies, Leadenhall Street, in London, was the centre of the firm's transactions instead of Forbes Street, Bombay, and the West End of its social life instead of Poona.

In the end, all of the eight brothers drifted to England, with the exception of Elias, who had set up in business with magnificent success on his own account¹, and Solomon, who managed the affairs

of the parent house in India from 1877 onwards.² The remaining six were domiciled in England, lived in England, died in England, and were buried in England. Three of them, at least, played a part in English social life which can be described without exaggeration as spectacular. Moreover, the offspring of the two brothers who remained in India subsequently succumbed to the fascination of the imperious and imperial city. Even David Sassoon's widow, who had accompanied her son Reuben to Europe in 1867, found life there more pleasing than in the East, and remained, basking in her sons' reflected glory, for nearly twenty years, until she died at Brighton in 1886, nearly sixty years after her marriage. Thus the family which removed in the eighteen-thirties to Bombay from Baghdad, where they had been settled for untold generations, took a more revolutionary step in the second half

- of the nineteenth century and, removing from Bombay to London, became English.

They arrived in England, of course, at a particularly happy moment, at the height of the age of laissez-faire and of the unchallenged supremacy of the Manchester School, when the country followed

what is now regarded as the incredibly stupid policy of accepting advantages from all quarters, giving talent an opportunity regardless of its origin, and attempting to profit from the specialist qualifications even of foreigners. When in 1873 Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, became the leader of fashionable life in London, even the aristocracy yielded to the new notions, and the old hidebound "Society" of allied and exclusive families was invaded by, and ultimately merged with, the "Smart Set" that centred about Marlborough House. Elements of non-English origin were prominent in this new Society: and the American twang (perhaps because it was at the time comparatively unfamiliar) attracted fully as much attention, and caused fully as much head-shaking in the drawingrooms of the dowagers, as the gutturalities that betrayed a Continental origin a good deal nearer home. Jews, not long since given their first opportunity after centuries of immurement in their Ghettos, and showing something of the optimistic ebullience of prisoners released from gaol without a stain on their name after an unjust sentence, were also prominent. They had made good, they had prospered, they had shown their ability and their benevolence: and why should they not derive the same pleasures and advantages as other men ?

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Society, encouraged by the example of the tolerant

Prince of Wales (an aspect to which special attention must be devoted later on¹) saw no reason why they should not, providing only that they did not neglect their cellars.²

A mildly anti-Semitic visitor to London, who disguised his identity under the pseudonym, A Foreign Resident, has recorded his impressions on this subject in a book, *Society in the New Reign* (London, 1904), which deserves more attention than it has received from students of social history at the beginning of this century. It puts a different light upon the once-decried royal familiarities and their outcome:

Say what you will, the Jews are the salt of smart Society, and the City the one intellectual stimulus that its faculties know . . . Such humanising influences as leaven fashionable London to-day come largely from the Jewish element.

Apart from the fostering Hebrew, English art and music could hardly live in the English capital . . . No one expected or wished Edward VII to pose as the regenerator of Society . . . The rich men of the East are to-day only where he found them on his accession. With the high tact which keeps Jew and Gentile alike in high good humour, he has contrived to make them pay in philanthropy for what they have received in honours . . . To talk of Jew influence materialising Society in London is silly blague. The Israelite

1 See the next chapter, "The Royal Box."

2 As this work passes through the Press, it occurs to me that it may be necessary to point out that the word "cellar" in the nineteenth century connoted wines, not air-raid precautions.

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might rather claim to be considered a spiritualising force. Not only from Houndsditch to Hyde Park Corner does he supply a whetstone for the wits of his adopted countrymen, but he gives the self-sufficient islanders the few opportunities they enjoy of meeting men distinguished in art and letters, who, but for their Jewish proxeni in Piccadilly, would never entrust their existence to the British climate.

In the ranks of these persons here described there were a number of entirely different elements hardly distinguishable in the eyes of the outside world.

There were old-established Anglo-Jewish families—some of the southern (Sephardi) element, such as the Montefiores, and some of the northern or Ashkenazi, such as the Goldsmids, with the Rothschilds, of course, looming in the foreground. Then there were more recent arrivals from the Continent, almost exclusively identified with the new international banking-houses, such as the Bischoffsheims, the Speyers, the Sterns, the De Worms (who alone of those mentioned here were merchants, not bankers). The Sassoons, who had so recently landed from the distant Orient and still

bore traces of their origin, stood in a category by themselves, their background differing from that of their co-religionists who had preceded them to a far greater extent than that of the latter did from the general background of English society. Nevertheless, when Sassoon David Sassoon arrived in England in 1858 he found the ground fully prepared.

(In that very year, the first Jew had been admitted to Parliament, after a thirty-years' struggle, and the political emancipation of Anglo-Jewry was 116 The Sassoon Dynasty

thereby completed.) In that good-natured, tolerant age, when people had agreed to overlook the religion that their associates professed, no one was inclined to examine over-meticulously their precise degree of pigmentation. In the course of the next two or three decades, accordingly, the Sassoons came to be numbered among the best-known hosts of the new Society that, unlike the old, depended on commerce rather than on land.

It was a curious, and amazingly sudden, revolution.

In India, the Baghdadi Jew was not quite accepted in European circles.¹ (Not that this was an unmixed disadvantage; a guide-book of 1880 describes the Byculla Club at Bombay, the hub of British society, as "inconveniently situated, very exclusive, and subject to disagreeable odours.")

But these same persons who suffered from discrimination in India found themselves in England

not merely accepted, but even courted, by those who on the other side of the world cold-shouldered them.

Their homes were luxurious. The equipages were the most elegant that could be seen in the Park, and were seldom absent from it. Their women-folk were decked in jewellery worth a king's ransom, but more reminiscent of rajahs than of kings (the great ropes of pearls, of hardly credible size and perfection were especially famous). Their cuisines retained a sufficient touch of India to interest jaded appetites; the cellars were well stocked and the

1 It is said that the resplendent Taj Mahal Hotel at Bombay was the revanche of the Sassoon and Tata families for the treatment they had received, not so very long ago, at what was formerly the first hotel in the city.

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cigars superb: and Society was not slow to unbend to these new arrivals sufficiently to enjoy the extremely pleasurable hospitality that they offered so lavishly. Hence their circle of acquaintance expanded with a prodigious rapidity.

1881

Abraham Sassoon, one of David's sons. becomes Arthur Sassoon and marries woman from a prominent Italian Jewish family

There is no need to tell those who have seen her of Mrs Arthur Sassoon's beauty, dignity and charm, even now when she is descending in the vale of the years. They are so striking as to make it easy to understand, even after this great lapse of time (it is now sixty-eight years since her marriage) the impression that she made in the Sassoon circle when she first arrived in London. It was as yet a comparatively small circle, but through her it expanded rapidly; for she was connected with many of the well-known Austrian-Jewish families, the most important among which (it is enough to mention the Rothschilds) had their relations in London too. She soon counted among her close friends Hannah de Rothschild, daughter of Baron Mayer, the idol of the Turf and the first Jew to own a Derby winner, who died in the following year (Hannah subsequently became, in 1878, Countess of Rosebery, and was mother both of the present Earl and of the Marchioness of Crewe). In consequence, when her lovely younger sister, Maria Perugia, came to visit her not long after, she saw a great deal of the Rothschild family, hunted with them, rode with them, drove with them, and danced with them. The result was seen on that January day in 1881, in the middle of one of the bitterest winters on record in England, when she was married to Leopold de Rothschild, the youngest and most popular of the three partners

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who now controlled the famous banking-business at New Court* It was a great occasion; and the Prince of Wales, the bridegroom's close friend, was present not only at the ceremony in the Synagogue, but also at the subsequent wedding-breakfast T at the house of Mr and Mrs Arthur Sassoon (the bride's brother-in-law and sister, and her nearest relations in England), where he gave the toast of the bride and bridegroom. (His own health was proposed afterwards by the Earl of Beaconsfield, old, tired, and dyed, at one of his last public appearances.) Through Arthur and his wife, and as a consequence of this marriage, the Sassoons entered into the orbit, if not yet the circle, of the Heir to the Throne and arbiter of London society—a process which was (as we shall see) to prove of the greatest importance in the family history. Moreover, thus allied to the Rothschilds,¹ who for the last generation had cut a great figure in English public and social life, these new arrivals in England and to Europe enjoyed something of the same prestige and were at once “ accepted” : a piece of good fortune envied even by such men as the superlatively wealthy Baron de Hirsch, who as late' as the eighteen-nineties was reported to consider it the great bitterness of his life that the New Court plutocrats would not recognize him.

mrs Arthur Sassoon: Hardly any account of London Society of the Edwardian or late Victorian era fails to mention her, with a matter-of-fact simplicity which, though the despair of the biographer, itself testifies to the reputation she enjoyed: no other hostess below the rank of Duchess probably figures anything like so often. A list of those persons who went to her luncheon- or dinner-parties in London or attended her balls is a directory of London politics and Society, and her name is seldom absent, with flattering qualifications, in the reminiscences of statesmen and society men of the time. Lord Rosebery, whose wife was a Rothschild, was on the most intimate terms with both Mrs Leopold and her sister, with a lifelong bond, and most of the other political leaders, on either side, followed his example.

--reuben sassoon becomes close friends with prince of wales:

Reuben Sassoon, who had arrived in England to assist in the family business in 1867, completed the family trilogy of celebrities, with his brothers, Albert and Arthur, so far as English Society was concerned. In most ways he was the most incongruous figure of all; for on the one hand he was not demonstratively Anglo-Indian, like the former, nor on the other did he have the English upbringing of

the latter or enjoy the advantages of a wife who was a heaven-sent hostess in the grand manner. But when (as will be seen in the next chapter) he not only entered for some reason or the other into the circle of the Prince of Wales, but actually became one of his closest friends, Society could not avoid throwing open its doors to him or taking advantage of the fact that his were open to them. Henceforth, the Talmudical knowledge that he had acquired in his youth was diverted to other purposes. The dapper, dark-skinned, heavy-faced, bearded Oriental was to be discerned wherever the Heir-Apparent went. He became a devotee of the theatre, where he might regularly be seen (almost invariably in a box), wearing elaborate jewels which that age resented in male clothing less than the present one. He dabbled in the Turf, and had a few horses in the stable of Leopold de Rothschild (the best and most profitable of them was Theodore, a son of his kinsman's freak Derby winner, Sir Bevys). As became one of the Prince's circle, he was of course an impassioned bridge-player, and had a folding cardtable specially made which always accompanied him as part of his luggage wherever he went. But he had the courage to retain, without any compromise, the Biblical name that his father had bestowed upon him, doubtless recalling the Rabbinic adage that he had learned in his youth, that the Children of Israel were redeemed from Egypt as a guerdon for their fidelity in not changing their names and

transmogrifying, e.g., Reuben into a fashionable appellation such as Rufus. Once the original diffidence was passed, Society found him generous, charitable, kindly, and unostentatious and, unlike most of his rivals in the Marlborough House set, it

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could be said of him that he did not have a single

enemy. ((THEY MAY HAVE BEEN WELL INFORMED BUT THEY SHARED THE BLINDNESS TO WHAT WAS GOING ON IN SHNAGHAI OR AT LEAST SHARED THE BRITISH VIEW THAT COLONIALISM WAS RIGHT AND SO WAS OPIUM AND INEUQLAITY ETC . CHINA AND SHANGHAI WERE SEETHING . ((PROBLEM HERE IS THAT SASSOON SEEM PASSIVE AT THIS POINT, SILAS TRIES TO DO SOMETHING GETS INVOLVED IN POLITICS ETC. BUT SASSOONS?) OR MAY HE IN EFFECT NECOMES A "SASSOON AND PUSGES FAMILY FORWRAD BUOYED BY THEIR CONNECTIONS IN ENGLAND)

((KING EDWARD RELATIONS WITH SASSOONS IN CECL ROTH BOOK PP142 FF))

WHY VICTOR LEFT INDIA

The mercantile and manufacturing interests of the original business in India were as yet unaffected. But, before long, political and other conditions made it seem imperative for the firm to reconsider its line of conduct here too. The Swaraj policy, under the auspices of Mahatma Gandhi, had radically altered the Indian economic perspective. Whereas previously the stranger who set up his business or factory in India was considered to be developing the country, henceforth he was alleged to be guilty of

exploiting it: and labour conditions, in consequence, became more and more difficult. In addition, there was an increasing difficulty in competing with native Indian firms with relatively small overhead charges and negligible commitments. In October 1931 there was consternation in the business world of Bombay when it was heard that Sir Victor Sassoon, head of the famous firm, had left for the Far East with the intention of transferring the principal seat of his trading and manufacturing activities to China. He denied the report half-heartedly. China, he said, was returning to a greater equilibrium after the long period of disturbance through which it had passed, and the time was coming when it would be possible to open up business with the country again. On the other hand, political circumstances in India and the constant disturbances which in his opinion were to be envisaged under Swaraj made new enterprise there difficult if not impossible. It was not hence (he inferred) a question of transferring established enterprises but rather of reducing new commitments. In fact, the reports proved accurate enough in the long run, for the interests at Bombay, to which the firm of E. D. Sassoon & Company owed its reputation and prosperity in the first instance, have now been removed to a great extent to China. It was a drastic step—and, in view of present conditions, the observer might wonder whether it was

altogether a happy one. There were, however, compensations,
due probably to good fortune rather

than to foresight. In 1935, Messrs. Elias David
Sassoon Company determined to withdraw from
the produce business in China. Accordingly, they
came to an agreement with their associated firm of
Arnhold & Company whereby the latter formed a
new and entirely independent concern, the capital
of which was subscribed partly by them, partly by
their old staff and associates, and partly by the
important insurance and trading house of Bo wring,
Jones & Tidy, Limited, of London. The new business
adopted the name of the Arnhold Trading
Company, Limited. It took over, as a going concern,
the produce business of Arnhold & Company—
i.e., that on which Elias David Sassoon had established
his fortune. The head office is at Shanghai:

it has branches at London (in Creechurch Lane),
Hankow and Hong Kong, and there are subsidiary
companies at Tientsin (under the style, The Tientsin
The Sassoon Dynasty
Anlee Export Company, Limited) and New York
(there known as Arnhold & Company, Incorporated).

But, though the business that it contracts is
to a large extent that which in the first instance was
established by Elias David Sassoon, the Sassoons
have only a minority holding in it.

In India too what once constituted a source of
apparently inexhaustible wealth is at present passing

through a serious crisis. It is some years since the E. D. Sassoon United Mills, with their capital of 20,000,000 rupees and controlling their thousands of looms and hundreds of thousands of spindles, last paid a dividend, and the ordinary 10-rupee shares are quoted at nil on the Bombay Stock Exchange list. (An almost incredibly large number of the other Bombay mills have shown themselves equally unprofitable during the past few years. It should be a comforting, though perhaps perplexing, consideration to the Lancashire mill-owners, who have long considered their misfortunes to be due mainly to Indian competition.) The principal direct interest of this branch of the Sassoon family to-day is, then, the comparatively new banking house, established as a separate concern as recently as 1930. Its head, Sir Victor Sassoon, is now domiciled in Shanghai, where he subscribed £20,000 to the British War Fund on the outbreak of hostilities in 1939.¹

The story of the extensive ramifications, and radical transformation, of the business established

¹ Sir Victor Sassoon has of course other business interests, being a director of the South British Insurance Company (London Board) and at one time also of the Power Investment Corporation.

The Fourth (generation 229
by Elias David Sassoon is almost bewilderingly complicated.
The parent house of David Sassoon &

Company has had a less involved and less adventurous existence, still following conservatively in the path marked out for it by the founder and his eldest son. The reason for this is possibly that the heads of the family, after the second generation, have had wider interests, political and personal, which, moreover, kept them quasi-permanently in Europe.

FROM STANLEY JACKSON, THE SASSOONS

Elias had also found his mate among pioneers, the Gubbays. His Leah bore him a son, already over nine years old before Abdullah at last had an heir. It partly consoled the younger brother for the discomforts of a lonely exile in China while the first-born remained at his father's right hand, snug in his villa and clubs.

Abdullah was less indolent than he looked. David Sassoon was permanently anchored in Bombay but kept all his sons on the move. He was spirally established in contact with his birthplace, still considered more rewarding than the new branches in Hong Kong and Shanghai. In Baghdad he discovered several promising recruits to the various Sassoon offices in China where suitable personnel were thin on the ground in those early years. But even junior staff would be engaged with the cautious deliberation which had become almost ritual with David Sassoon. It made him hesitate when his sons pointed excitedly to the profits being made in cotton.

He declined to be hurried. He understood opium, but the Cotton Exchange was still alien territory. He therefore sat patiently on his hands

when C. N. Davar opened Bombay's first mill in 1851.

In Bombay the Sassoons were perfectly situated between England, the main exporter, and a China hungry for imports. The latter offered the fatter return on outlay and with fewer problems except distance, but ultimate success hinged on Elias's shrewdness in assessing risks. The man's dedication. Vital decisions had often to be made without waiting for the erratic monthly mail from Hong Kong. It was a solitary stint in the company of his wife and a few other British. A stern moral precept of the Torah. In a thriving foreign colony with few other foreign traders took Chinese concubines and began to speak in their own customers.

Elias was a quieter man who enjoyed study and meditation after the unceasing daily haggles with sea captains and the most corrupt customs

service on earth. Like other prosperous merchants, he had soon built himself a two-storeyed house behind the high Settlement walls which were needed as much for sanitation as defence. It was modest compared with Garden Reach in Poona or Abdullah's picturesque showplace on the steep Ghats, but his charming little garden alongside the yellow Whangpoo was gay with peonies or flowering cherries. ^

This slightly stooping, short-sighted exile would never be at ease in

Settlement drawing-rooms, but he liked to meet Englishmen and Americans and linger near some of the elegant French women who brought a spice of Paris from their Concession. He lent his patronage to the Shanghai Club which had opened soon after he started up in the port. On Sundays, if not occupied, he enjoyed watching the little Mongolian ponies race, but never joined other members in shooting pheasant or snipe. He much preferred to walk alone in the new park before going to evening service.

The tiny Sino-Jewish congregation had somehow survived for generations. They were mainly small traders with a sprinkling of ancient nobility who often held high office in the province. In quilted robes and with pigtailed dangling over their prayer shawls, they had startled him before he acquired enough Mandarin to talk to them. He slowly came to understand their strange liturgical deviations which seemed to owe more to Confucius and Buddha than the Law of Moses. He was only at ease with a group of refugees who, like his own family, had fled from the pashas at the close of the century. They were joined by the office managers, clerks and warehousemen whom Abdullah or his father recruited from Bombay and Baghdad.

After his first long spell of duty, Elias returned to India to make the usual detailed report and, above all, to enjoy a little family life. His exile had meant, a nine-year gap between the births of his two-elderssons. He was temporarily replaced in China by Abdullah, who felt more at home in Bombay or among his convivial sea captains on the Gulf. He loved the leisurely bargaining over coffee and a hookah and took kindly to the thrusting competition in the Treaty Ports where his name was less familiar than in India or Persia. Moreover, he lacked the resignation and quiet philosophy which had helped Elias to survive his lonely years in Shanghai. Abdullah was always impatient to hurry back to his wife and their comfortable bungalow in Poona, but even a short tour of the branches in

Canton, Shanghai and Hong Kong left its mark. He had a flair for soothing people with a few genial words in the manner of visiting royalty. Clerks in some remote office often felt they knew him better than Elias who had moved quietly among them for years. It was an astonishing gift which paid dividends in a firm ruled by a legendary, patriarch whom few would ever see again after they were engaged and sent overseas.

David Sassoon followed an unchanging executive policy for twenty years. Each son would be thoroughly initiated into the routine procedure of leaving for visits to Baghdad, Bushire and the Gulf Ports. These short but intensive tours gave them confidence and experience but there was a subtler purpose. Moral stamina had to be developed for the longer spells of duty in China. Apart from Abdullah, none of the brothers enjoyed any special privileges. The married ones were packed off to Shanghai or Hong Kong like the bachelors. Not for some years would housing conditions in the Settlements attract one to accompany their wives. Besides they appreciated the comforts of a wealthy Bombay household too much to find China appealing.

Closer in age than the others, he and Abraham were naturally drawn together, but they also formed a close attachment with Abdullah. He found them far more congenial than his full brother, Elias, in whom at times he detected a resentment and jealousy. But such rivalries remained

well submerged and did not impair remarkable team-work. Often separated by entire continents, without telephones and cables and with letters delivered by slow and unreliable boats, all the brothers acted together by an educated instinct. They sensed infallibly how the others would respond to the prod of crisis. And by constantly shifting the pack, David Sassoon made them almost intercommunicative:

They were paid generously and each was allowed to invest on his own so long as it did not conflict with the firm's ventures. For this reason they speculated mainly in real estate and bought properties in Hong Kong and elsewhere, either alone or sometimes jointly, from their first savings. As expected, the quiet and secretive Elias was careful with his money and inclined to play a lone hand. Within a few years, he was able to pay over £2,000 for shares in the China Steam Navigation Company. He also snapped up sites on the Shanghai mud flats at agricultural prices, sometimes as low as £90 an acre. (It would soar to £300,000 an acre by the time his grandson, Sir Victor, came to develop the Bund!) He guessed that the port must grow, but was surprised by the influx of fifty thousand

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Chinese labourers who poured into the Settlement by 1855, eager to work and escape vicious taxation by the warlords, Elias would be among the first to invest in the housing estates that engulfed the city.

By allowing his sons to amass small independent fortunes, David Sassoon showed generosity as well as an understanding of human frailty.

Avarice was nipped before it could fester. Married sons with homes and families of their own might have been seduced from the parent firm had they - or their wives - felt too restricted. Individual enterprise could be a splendid safety-valve as well as proof of capacity. In the years to come, none would be admitted to partnership in the firm until he had made

sizeable capital by his own efforts. David Sassoon remained the sole owner until 1852, when Abdullah joined him as a partner and Elias shortly afterwards. Only after their father's death, when the firm needed new blood at the top, would any of the younger brothers be given a place at the Board table.

By the time of the Indian Mutiny, a hare qararfpr-rfMitnry fiinc-p th° ni£X were laid on the first floor over the cramppfl rrmnting-ltmigp and gnrlnxyn^ in TamarfnH' Lane, the firm was already one of the most power-ful in the Orient. Sontemporary observed, without the slightest acrimony, that "silver and gold, silks, gums and spices, opium and cotton, wool and wheat - whatever moves over sea or land feels the hand or bears the mark of Sassoon & Co.'. The times were, of course, propitious. Labour was cheap and abundant, and taxation negligible. Trade had thrust ahead, powered by new industrial methods and lubricated by railways, ships and the telegraph.

The Sassoon firm had unique advantages. Few competitors were as closely integrated or enjoyed a more reliable information service. It preserved them from the fate which overtook so many others as a too eager alchemy went to work in mid-century Bombay. They resisted dazzling new prospectuses and preferred to buy up businesses wrecked by gamblers or badly run by indolent, near bankrupt owners.

They had no taste for pioneering. David Sassoon followed the Gubbays, Ezras and Ezekiels to India. He had only sent his son, Elias, to China after the Jardines and others had secured a foothold in the Treaty Ports. From the beginning and almost by instinct, he conformed to the classic tradition by launching his millions on the second wave.

Elias, the China trade specialist, soon adapted himself to the frantic atmosphere of Bombay. Of all the sons he had the widest mercantile

experience and was best equipped to maintain a delicate balance between orders from East and West. He shrewdly assessed risks and avoided the many ambushes laid by share-pushers and speculators for the Sassoon rupees. With his son, Jacob, who was almost a replica of himself even to the spectacles both wore, he virtually took over the day-to-day running of the business. More than once, however, he was irritated by his father's over-caution. For this he privately blamed his brother.

Albert might be short of inches, but he was already walking on the stilts of the first-born. He was now his father's proxy in supervising the schools, hospitals, synagogues and other Sassoon endowments. He signed a £3,000 cheque to pay for an eight-foot statue in memory of the late Prince Consort, one of the firm's many patriotic acts of piety. No pitched battle developed between the brothers, but Elias resented carrying a heavier responsibility which left little time for home life or the clubs where Albert was such a popular figure. He was perhaps less than just to his brother whose sociability worked as a useful lubricant in the business mechanism.

A similar, if smaller, patch of irritation was forming in the Far East where Reuben was based mainly in Hong Kong, with Arthur as his willing lieutenant. Solomon, one of the twin boys, was more serious and industrious. He made his headquarters in Shanghai but kept an eye on his brothers and also remained closely in touch with the firm's agent in Yokohama. He made many a holiday or business trip to Japan whose landscape and graceful people appealed to a poetic streak in his nature. A reserved and devout bachelor, he modelled himself on his father and found the Talmud a greater comfort than the card-tables and race-meetings which his brothers could not resist.

Reuben was respected in Hong Kong as a man of the world and a good

judge of madeira. He seemed just as much at home when he went north to Shanghai. He did not win his 'pink' like a future Sassoon, but enjoyed the picturesque meets of the newly formed Paper Hunt Club. The foxes wore red cowls over head and shoulders to pick them out in the gloomy swamps. The coolies used to stop their blindfold oxen at the water-wheels, while the foreign devils jumped their Mongol ponies over fences and often landed in the Soochow Creek.

A round of gay Settlement parties in March 1863 toasted the health and happiness of the Prince of Wales and his bride, Princess Alexandra of Schleswig-Holstein. Reuben spent happy hours pasting pictures of the royal couple's new home, Marlborough House, into his album. He also found delight in an occasional day's shooting. The country air was cool and ideal for potting snipe, even if the Jewish dietary laws denied him the fruits of his bag. Such pleasures were not for the austere-minded Solomon, who still appreciated his brother's extraordinary talent for solving financial problems by making only a doodle or two on his starched cuff.

Any differences of temperament were submerged during these boom years when all David Sassoon's sons justified his patient training. At their Barmitzvah, each son attained not only his religious coming-of-age a solemn responsibility as heir to vast riches. They paid the price in lost youth. Their family galleons sailed the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and the China Seas, but none among them had ever launched boats.

No firm could fail to stay afloat during Bombay's four years of high tide, but the Sassoons escaped the disasters which later submerged many

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of their competitors. So much sudden wealth had led to commercial debauchery. A dozen new companies spawned every day, mostly bogus, and with nothing but paper assets to justify a mushroom rise in values.

Gamblers became self-intoxicated and speculated in any share that came on the market. Coffee, furniture, steamers, hotels, jewellery, distilleries, livery stables - there was no shortage of rupees for a nimble turnover. The greatest frenzy of all was in land reclamation. With pier room so restricted, the most flamboyant schemes were launched for draining the swamps. Shares in the Back Bay Reclamation Company, 2,000 Rs. at par, soared to 50,000 in a few weeks. Every mud flat on the island was bought, sold and swiftly re-sold, some of the share-pushers having paid only a nominal deposit before issuing a dazzling prospectus. It became superfluous to reclaim a single foot during this wildcat delirium. The lemmings still raced headlong to the golden strip of foreshore.

Even the normally level-headed Parsees were caught up in this orgy of speculation. J. N. Tata, destined to become India's leading industrialist and social benefactor, was among the earliest victims. The son of a prosperous contractor, he had hastened back from China to join the textile boom. He became fascinated by an eager little broker, one Premchand Roychand, who had established agencies in several cotton-growing districts, and held court in Mazagon where his mansion became a miniature stock exchange, from dawn onwards. Friends, hangers-on, gamblers and share-pushers made their daily pilgrimage up the hill to wait patiently for a hint that could turn to gold. A pencilled note from Roychand would at once unlock the coffers of the Bank of Bombay in which the Government held shares. The directors had feverishly altered their Charter, doubled the capital reserve and were eager to offer almost unlimited advances to the wildest of speculators.

The Sassoons had no faith in Roychand and his hare-brained reclamation plans. They preferred to buy up godowns and wharves ready for the new steamer services. Through their Elphinstone Land and Press Company, they also invested quietly in property sites which would pay an enormous

dividend when Bombay started to build office buildings and scores of tenements for the city's enlarging army of factory workers. The sons in the Far East were quietly urged to buy land for development while prices still remained economic.

Bombay's inflationary share values had become less and less tempting to those who foresaw a sudden end to the cotton boom. China seemed a far safer and more attractive outlet for capital. But a central banking unit was needed to discount bonds and keep commodities and currencies flowing evenly. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation was duly established by an international group of merchants with a capital of The Sassoons 43

15 million. It would merge the requirements and interests of the established agency houses and thereby short-circuit delays in referring bills to houses in Bombay and faraway London.

Hong Kong was the headquarters, with premises in Queen's Road first rented from the Sassoons and purchased outright from them a year or two later. Arthur Sassoon and Thomas Sutherland of P. & O. were original members of the Board. A major branch was at once set up in Shanghai where the two majestic bronze lions outside the Bank became one of the city landmarks. They would often be touched for luck by passers-by on the Bund. A smaller office was soon established in Yokohama to handle the fattening trade with Japan.

Arthur's pleasure in his first directorship was soured by distressing news from India. Up in Poona, one November afternoon in 1864, the patriarch had walked for the last time among his foaming beds of hydrangea. He retired to write his daily letters to the Bombay office and must have fallen into a gentle sleep. A servant heard him cry out faintly, 'Abdullah, Abdullah', having forgotten that his son was in England. He died with the quill pen still in his hand.

He was buried in the grounds of his synagogue in Poona after a ceremony conducted according to the ancient customs of Baghdad Jewry.

The family mourners slashed their garments as a sign of grief, the womenfolk loosening their hair and the sons tying handkerchiefs about their necks. Seven circuits were made round the grave before the coffin was removed and the bier overturned. A cloth was laid over the grave and all present threw coins upon it. For seven days afterwards, prayers were said at Sans Souci where the family sat together on hard low stools. The sons attended services - in Bombay, Shanghai, Hong Kong, London, and wherever else they might find themselves - daily prayer for the mourning. _

There was no falling off in personal initiative after their father's death; quite the reverse. His counsel would be missed, but they could at last speak their minds, liberated from a sense of being pieces on a chessboard. Each son now had the stimulus of a solid personal holding in the business. Apart from estate in England valued at £ 60,000, father had left upwards of two million sterling, according to the vague Press announcement. No precise figure was ever published, but it was generally believed in Bombay that he had been worth over five million pounds.

the inheritance would be divided equally among the eight sons whose holdings in the firm might reasonably be valued at some half a million pounds a head. Such an interest, when added to properties privately acquired over the years, would make them men of enormous wealth at a time when a good servant in Bombay was grateful for fifteen shillings a month and Shanghai's

--semi-skilled workers were being paid half a crown a week.

The new Chairman was showing much more energy than in the past. His brain hummed with plans for building docks and possibly moving into cotton manufacture. He became a leading member of the Chamber of Commerce which had once snubbed his father. He was among the first to buy a site on Elphinstone Circle where he planned to build the head offices of David Sassoon & Sons. He also hastened designs to complete and equip the Mechanics' Institute which his father had promised to endow shortly before his death.

All this activity placed inevitable strains on Elias who missed his independence and the healthier climate of Shanghai. During the sticky

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summer months, he often dined with his trousers tucked into top-boots to keep out the mosquitoes, even on Malabar Hill. As second-in-command, he was permanently anchored in Bombay, while Albert and his family moved grandly between Sans Souci, Garden Reach in Poona and their delightful villa at Mahabaleshwar.

The pattern was becoming all too clear to Elias. His brother would remain the suave Chairman, although increasingly absorbed in civic affairs and his social life. He was playing host to the Governor, local officials, the Parsee magnates and any native princes who happened to be visiting the Presidency. He was being canvassed to accept nomination to the Bombay Legislative Council. His two sons had private tutors and would doubtless follow him into the business after completing their education in England. He was still in his prime, full of vigour and affable, if a touch pompous. He had lost his hair which gave a more patrician look to the longish face, framed by an almost white imperial beard.

Also bald. Reuben had grown very like him physically, but he was too active and spring-heeled to cultivate his brother's bourgeois corpulence. The rtd-China lunds ihottght him thecleverest and most congenial of the Sasso<->ns_ Hp at-i-pnrW^ his synagogue" regularly but also enjoyed the company-a f pretty-Ja^omen. He shorieat the card-table., and fellow^TngTiAefs— of his clubs were fortunate to draw him as partner. Arthur was no less popular in Hong KongwHere he had steadily moved up the social ladder, thjmfrrs frt h ism rn T °nrry irrir> baftking circles. ~AIS a richer and personable tw^nty-^^ hig mantelshelf was thirk_with cards."-

TKeir brother, Solomon, wasjfar more conscientious, and led an almost liff iji the Settlement. He once wiuLe lu~James Barnard in " " iokohama and asked him-to~send a couple of goocTclogs for his solitafy*^ walksTHE poste3"a~cheque fui ^^5-toxove'r their cost-plus freight. It was one of his rare extravagances. Solomon impaired his health through overwork, and Elias had finally persuaded him to leave Shanghai for an extended tour of some of the firm's branches, including Japan. After going south to confer with Arthur and other directors of the Shanghai and Hong Kong Bank, he sailed for Bombay in the winter of 1866. He reluctantly agreed to Albert's suggestion to visit the London office and also investigate Manchester's latest spinning techniques.

As a result, Solomon narrowly missed an event which delighted the family. Wearing a smoothly ironed silk hat and a frock-coat cut by the best Parsee tailor in the city, Albert drove up to Government House in Poona where Sir Bartle Frere pinned the Order of the Star of India to his broad chest. He celebrated with an elaborate supper and ball at Sans Souci, where he attempted to please all tastes by introducing excerpts from Italian opera between the customary Indian dances. The Bombay Gazette reported with approval that no 'natives' were among the three hundred

guests and solemnly congratulated 'Mr Sassoon and his family on their evident wish to ally themselves with English society in Bombay'.

Albert's pleasure was wrecked by news from England. Woolner had made excellent progress on his statue of the patriarch. A site had already been roped off in Bombay's newly-opened Mechanics' Institute, but it would first be exhibited for some months in the North Court of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. S. D. Sassoon travelled up from Surrey to see the scale model, although not feeling at his best during the abnormal heat of July 1867. He dropped dead while standing in the foyer of the Langham Hotel waiting for a cab to take him to South Kensington. The Sassoons gathered at Sans Souci to discuss the vacancy in the London branch and generally to regroup. Their father's policy of rigidly excluding strangers from management had paid dividends in the early years, but there were disadvantages in this mutal pollination. The firm had thinned dangerously at executive level. S.D. had not been a business genius, but it seemed unthinkable to replace him by anyone outside the family.

Reuben at once volunteered to take over in Leadenhall Street. He was bored by Bombay's synagogue society and looked forward excitedly to meeting epicures like the Rothschilds, who hunted in the Vale of Aylesbury and entertained so magnificently in their Mayfair mansions. His wife was pregnant with their first child and he hoped, without much conviction, that a change of scene might make her more tolerable. His widowed mother decided to sail with them. She had languished in Bombay since her husband's death and was anxious to meet her Ashley Park grandchildren. Albert saw them off with little apprehension about the London office or indeed any of the other branches. All was set fair. Solomon, the devout bachelor, had no interest in 'godless' England and seemed relieved to return to his work and prayers in Shanghai, with an occasional trip to Japan for relaxation. The youngest brother, Frederick, was still in his

teens, but surprisingly mature for his years. He would now be given an intensive business training in Elphinstone Circle before joining Solomon in China. Arthur was disappointed to lose Reuben's companionship and would dearly have loved to join him in Leadenhall Street. However, he was promised opportunities to pay more visits to London in the future. He went back to Hong Kong with a directorship in the firm.

Albert was now ready to go on the Bombay Legislative Council. He thought Elias would welcome fuller business responsibility and might perhaps send his son, Jacob, out to Shanghai, Hong Kong and the Gulf Ports as a kind of roving manager. Unhappily, Elias refused to fit into The Sassoons 47

the neat jigsaw. During the three years since David Sassoon's death, the split had widened between his sons. With no crisis to clear the air, personal resentments had seethed and bubbled underground. Elias saw himself as a permanent deputy to his brother who would enjoy the life and prestige of being Chairman until he was ready to hand over to His son.

Elias decided on a show of force which might bruise the others but would be more painful, if delayed. He had adequate working capital of his own, experience and, above all, twenty-three-year-old Jacob's proven ability. Nevertheless, the final step was only taken after many agonizing days of planning and prayer. His deep religious sense and a talmudic training made him question his own motives until he could hardly distinguish between self-interest and clan loyalty. He finally persuaded himself that the firm was too well established and prosperous to founder if he seceded. He guessed that Albert would be brought closer to Reuben and Arthur, both of whom were ambitious and might not altogether mourn his own departure from the hierarchy.

He announced his resignation in the autumn of 1867. It naturally

caused a hubbub in trading circles, but without public sign of family discord. As the curtain fell, the two principals bowed stiffly to each other and went their own ways, rather like rival actors after an exhausting long run. Albert expected Elias to set up in a small way of business. He might compete inconspicuously, but could scarcely disturb the solid parent firm with its international reputation.

Elias behaved with good sense and dignity. He called his new firm, E. D. Sassoon & Co., and quietly formed long-term plans without making any move which might embarrass his brothers. He was absolutely confident of success. He loved Solomon and respected his character and ability; the others he dismissed as too casual, all brilliance and shallow hedonism. From past evidence, they would probably do little more than keep the business running steadily but without much creative imagination.

/ As it happened, he and Albert had almost completely misjudged and \ underrated each other.