

## THE FABULOUS SASSOONS

BY ERNEST O. HAUSER

**T**HIS is the bewildering thing about the name Sassoon: whenever it crops up in the news it carries different connotations. Sassoon may be mentioned in connection with airplanes today, art tomorrow, horses the day after. It makes headlines in relation to British Empire politics, sport, literature, or, most frequently, finance.

To be sure, it is not always the same Sassoon who covers this range of activities. In our day three Sassoon cousins have made headline news: Sir Philip, Britain's Undersecretary for Air, equally distinguished for his wealth, brains, cultured taste, and eccentricities; Siegfried, the fox-hunting poet, whose anti-war lyrics have made him famous as the "British Barbusse"; and Sir Victor, the white boss of Shanghai, one of the world's great financial wizards, whose limping figure is familiar in Bombay, the China ports, the swank clubs of London, and the exclusive hotels of Paris and New York. Sir Philip died some months ago, but the two others carry on — Siegfried in

England, Sir Victor in Shanghai or Hong Kong. The careers of all three deserve individual study as outstanding members of an outstanding family; but even more fascinating than the lives of individual Sassoons is the colorful tapestry of the whole great Sassoon clan — Rothschilds of the East.

The Sassoon pedigree goes back to King David, but not until the twelfth century did the family, under the name of Ibn Shoshan, step across the rim of a mythological past. They entered history first at Toledo, Spain, at the time of the Moorish rule. Toledo was one of Europe's great metropolitan centers, great in commerce and art, and the Ibn Shoshans are mentioned as leaders of the town's highly respected and progressive Jewish community. They kept this position until, in the fifteenth century, the Moors were driven from Spain and the Jews had to follow them into exile. The Ibn Shoshans landed in Bagdad, on their feet. Soon they were known as wealthy

Oriental traders, their name became Sassoon, and the head of the family was given the title "Nasi," making him chief of Mesopotamia's Jewish communities. The family was renowned over the Near East for its wealth, honesty, and financial skill. The last Nasi became the Ottoman Empire's state treasurer at Bagdad.

But disaster followed prosperity; the black plague struck the countries of the Levant. Hatred for the eternal scapegoat, the Jew, swept a desperate population, and the state treasurer's son, David Sassoon, left Bagdad for the safety of Bassora. This was in 1822; David was 30. He had been born in Bagdad, and learned the trade as an employee in a Bagdad bank. David was well equipped to begin a new chapter in the history of the Sassoon clan. With his inherited money he started a firm in Bushire, Persia. He was successful (like every Sassoon in the last seven centuries) and his reputation spread throughout India. In 1832, an important deal took him to Bombay. He liked the big ocean port, brought his family over from backward Bushire, and founded the firm of David Sassoon & Co.

These were the days of the great opium trade. The poppy fields of India and the Near East yielded a

golden harvest, and British ships carried the sweet-smelling product to China's distant ports. David Sassoon began with a rug factory and banking establishment, but he soon recognized the opportunities in opium. Personal honesty and deft maneuvering netted him the most valuable prize an Indian merchant could strive for — a monopoly of the opium trade. He grew rich and powerful. With his colorful turban, his long white beard, he was the picture of the patriarch. And, like the Biblical patriarch, he had twelve children — eight sons and four daughters. He sent the sons to English schools, then into the far corners of Asia to take charge of the branches of his firm, which policy laid the foundation for the Sassoon organization, just as it accounted for the rise of the Rothschilds in Europe.

## II

David's sons were bright. There was Elias, the first Sassoon to go out to the China Seas. He went over as early as 1844, in the wake of the Opium War which had given British traders the right to dump into China all the opium India and the Near East could grow. Selling the drug to 400,000,000 customers, Elias was spectacularly successful.

He returned to India, assisted his father for a time, and avoided a crisis in the firm by holding out against turning it into a joint-stock company. Then he bailed out and founded his own business, E. D. Sassoon. The new firm had offices in Shanghai and Hong Kong and complemented the parent firm with a startlingly clever device: an opium monopoly on the other end. Just as David had persuaded British officials and turban-crowned Hindus to entrust him with the monopoly in India, so his son Elias persuaded the mandarins to give him the rights in China. He shared his prize with six other firms who comprised the Opium Combine. For decades, China intoxicated herself on Sassoons' "certified" opium.

David Jr. was sent to Bagdad to study the Talmud and the Bible. Thus prepared, he went to Shanghai to take charge of his father's branch office there, in friendly co-operation with Elias' new firm. Shanghai had become the most important port along two thousand miles of China coast, outdistancing Canton and Hong Kong. But for all its glamour, Shanghai was a dirty place to live. David Jr. left the office to his lieutenants and went to England. There he spent the rest of his life, a prominent but sedate merchant-gentleman.

Father David remained head of his firm as long as he lived. The first Sassoon to be a British citizen, he never bothered to learn English, though he was master of most Oriental tongues. His wealth was immense; his Bombay mansion a palace. He balanced the dubious ethics of the opium trade by a reputation as a liberal giver to asylums, schools, and hospitals. When he died, in 1864, the house of Sassoon was a power in India.

Albert Abdullah Sassoon, his eldest son, took over. He enlarged the parental business, went heavily into the textile industry; he constructed the Sassoon Dock, the first floating dock east of Suez. Albert Abdullah founded scholarships, endowed foundations, worked his way into Bombay's Legislative Council. He was bearded, too; in his solemn Western-style coat he embodied the transition from the Biblical patriarch to the smooth gentleman of the expiring century. When Albert Abdullah went to England he received the freedom of the City of London. Later, in 1890, after he had made his home in the British Isles, he was knighted by Queen Victoria — the last Sassoon to be born in Bagdad; the first to be a baronet. He was a lavish host. Once he rented the whole Empire Theater in Lon-

don for the sole purpose of entertaining the Shah of Persia.

His younger brother Solomon carried on in Bombay, and produced millions in profits almost automatically. Solomon was head of David Sassoon & Co., conducted the family's banking business, was chairman of the Sassoon Spinning and Weaving Company, the Sassoon Silk Company, the Oriental Life Insurance Company. He was equally respected by the British and the native communities. When he was appointed trustee of the port, and even director of the Bank of Bombay, no one was surprised.

In England, the metamorphosis of the clan was completed; the Sassoons became an integral part of the smart set. They were aristocrats, and their Oriental background seemed to make them living symbols of the Empire. They no longer wore turbans, but top-hats of grey silk; no longer spoke Arabic jargons, but cultured Oxford English; no longer wore beards, but monocles; no longer were Abdullahs, but Edwards, Philips, Victors.

Sir Edward Sassoon, the second baronet (Albert Abdullah's son, born in Bombay in 1856) married Baron Gustave de Rothschild's daughter. He resided in London and became a major in the Duke of

Cambridge's Hussars Yeomanry; his daughter Sybil married the fifth Marquis of Cholmondeley; King Edward VII considered him a friend; and the burghers of Hythe sent him into the House of Commons. In the midst of social and public obligations, Sir Edward found time to publish a booklet which blended his descent with his career: its title was *Finance and the Feudatory States of India*.

### III

So we come to the last generation of Sassoons. Sir Edward's son inherited the Parliament seat and the title, thus becoming the first Jew ever to hold a baronetcy in the third generation. With his combined Sassoon and Rothschild fortune — his personal account, apart from the vast Sassoon holdings in Asia, was estimated at \$20,000,000 in 1920 — Sir Philip Albert Gustave David Sassoon was well equipped to indulge his cultured, extravagant pleasures. His country estates were acres of fragrant flowers; his city home on Park Lane, Mayfair, was stocked with art treasures. He was a close friend of the present Duke of Windsor, played polo with Alfonso of Spain, was one of the finest skaters ever to go to St. Moritz, and be-

longed to London's most expensive and exclusive clubs.

But Sir Philip was more than a polo-playing millionaire. He started his political career at 23, as Britain's youngest M.P. During the first World War, he became secretary to Sir Douglas Haig, commander-in-chief of the British forces in France. Later he was attached to Lloyd George, who liked to hold important conferences at Sir Philip's stately home in Kent. As Undersecretary for Air, he paid a flying visit to the Empire's outposts in the Far East, examining air bases in some of the cities that had been chosen by his ancestors a century ago as banking and trade posts.

Sir Philip, however, was not altogether satisfied with the aviation job which he held, with one interruption, from 1924 till 1937. He was, in the long run, more interested in etchings and architecture, and thoroughly enjoyed his activities as trustee of the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, and the Wallace Collection. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain recognized his secret longing and relieved him of the aviation burden, making him First Commissioner of Works. Among other things he was required to look after the Royal palaces and gardens, and

much was expected from him in this capacity. But Sir Philip died, aged 50, in June 1939, leaving two distant cousins to carry on the Sassoon tradition.

Siegfried Sassoon likes to refer to himself as the "poor Sassoon." His trenchmates in the first World War had another name for him — "Mad Jack." There seemed to be no limit to his foolhardy exploits and, apparently, to his good luck. But when he tried, in 1917, to storm a German position in the Hindenburg Line, he was shot through the throat. This shot ended his patriotic enthusiasm. Thereafter he blasted away, in his trenchant poems, at those who made the war, at those who, in his opinion, wilfully prolonged it. The High Command was much embarrassed. Siegfried had been too valiant to be courtmartialed. When he threw his military cross into the ocean, he was declared temporarily insane and sent to Palestine, to an easy job. He finally agreed to go back into the trenches, where he was shot again, this time through the head. He survived.

Much of Siegfried Sassoon's art is devoted to a sarcastic condemnation of the folly of war —

You sunny-faced crowds with kindling  
eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by

Sneak home and pray you'll never  
know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

In 1933 Siegfried married the daughter of Sir Simon Herbert Gatty; he has one son. Altogether he has published nine books, the last being the first volume of his autobiography. Siegfried, incidentally, is the Sassoon who exclaimed, on New York's Fifth Avenue, "Gee, what a peach of a climate," but added, with the dignity of an English country squire, "pardon slang."

Sir Ellice Victor Sassoon inherited the Bombay firm with its complex network of affiliated enterprises, banks, mills, insurance concerns, and reputation. He was known throughout the Empire as one of the financial wizards of the age. His quick, aggressive mind was apt to produce surprises at any time. One day in the summer of 1931 he gave the world the biggest surprise that could possibly come from a member of the Sassoon clan. He called the editor of the *Times of India* into his office to tell him that he was going to transfer the Sassoon holdings to China.

This bit of news was displayed on the front pages of both the commercial and the sports sections of English, American, French, and Italian newspapers. What was going

to happen to the Sassoon millions; what to the Sassoon horses — Sir Victor's thoroughbreds had made as much history as his financial transactions. As for his millions, Sir Victor was known to be open-handed. Once, when the Viceroy's wife mentioned her plans for a sanitarium in Sanavar, he sent her a check for 100,000 rupees. During the war he served in the Royal Air Force. He had a bad crackup which gave him his limp.

Now, at the height of his career, Sir Victor told the world he was leaving India. It was as if the Taj Mahal itself were walking off. What was the reason for this drastic step? Sir Victor's enemies said it was to dodge British taxation. Sir Victor himself was tight-lipped: "Unsettled conditions resulting from the Indian nationalist campaign" caused his decision. "The political situation does not encourage one to launch out in a big way," he added. In China, he hoped to do business "on a large scale."

No one knows just how much money Sir Victor carried in his pocket when he landed in Shanghai. Some said 85,000,000 Mex; others said 300,000,000. Whatever the amount, he made use of it in the most ingenious fashion. He bought everything that could be had for money. He bought real estate,

conceiving the idea of a new skyline, of a Shanghai reaching up into the clouds. He organized the Cathay Land Company, the Cathay Hotel Company. He took over the vast holdings of Silas Aaron Hardoon, the richest man before him. He bought Arnhold & Co., with its extensive contracting interests. He controlled the Yangtze Finance Company and the International Investment Trust. Sir Victor's companies were incorporated in British Hong Kong but his tremendous store of ready cash was in Shanghai. He sowed his dollars all over the muddy soil of the metropolis, and all he had to do was haul in the harvest. He couldn't go wrong. Even the Shanghai war of 1932 could not harm him; he had too much money.

What the old Shanghai hands — the *taipans* — thought of Sir Victor and his activities is a delicate question. Socially speaking, he was not altogether pukka, not only because of his Jewish blood, but because of the possibility of his having dodged British taxation by clearing out of India. Apart from that, however, there was a gap between Sir Victor and the *taipans* which was hard to overcome: he had not grown up with all the traditions, prejudices, and fears that made up the Shanghai mind. Of course, you could not

ignore him. You saw him, so to speak, from afar, before your ship dropped anchor at Shanghai. The pointed black tower of the Sassoon House, which he had built and where he lived, was the main accent on Shanghai's famous Bund. But not only in steel and concrete did Sir Victor cut a figure; his parties were the talk of the town. He gave them at his villa Eve, one great formal affair every winter and an occasional fancy dress ball. Those who were not invited said that some of the costumes were shockingly indiscreet. Sir Victor is not married. He was 50 the year he came to Shanghai. His predilection for young, attractive women has caused much gossip.

One thing that reconciled some of the die-hards was the fact that Sir Victor had style. His regal whims were something no Englishman could derogate. He had indulged them in India, but in Shanghai his eccentricity assumed gigantic proportions. Once he flew 30,000 miles to see the annual speed races at Indianapolis. During the depression of the early thirties he was the only man in Shanghai who had money and the *taipans* came to his office trying to interest him in their ideas. Sir Victor always listened, but in most cases the ideas were not big enough. Some-

one brought him a scheme for importing American machinery to manufacture leather shoes (five thousand pairs of men's leather shoes were made by hand in Shanghai every day). Sir Victor thought it over. The idea was sound, he said, but it would interest him only if he could have his own cowherds for the leather, his own tanneries, his own factories for the manufacture of the shoes, and his own stores to sell them!

Style was not Sir Victor's only virtue; he was tactful as well. That he, a newcomer, practically owned Shanghai, did not induce him to mingle in city politics, at least not openly. That he managed to dominate the city government indirectly could not cause rebellion on the part of the conservatives. The International Settlement, the unique republic in which was concentrated most of China's wealth, where 50,000 foreigners lived among 1,000,000 Chinese, was ruled by an international body, the Municipal Council. Sir Victor's lieutenant, H. E. Arnhold, whose firm had been taken over by the Sassoon interests, officiated as

Chairman of the Council for a number of years. Sir Victor was the white boss of Shanghai.

Here ends the story of the fabulous Sassoons. Toledo patricians, state treasurers of the Ottoman Empire, royal merchants in India, friends of British kings, white rulers of Shanghai — the might of the Sassoons has spanned two continents, reached from the pillars of Hercules across Arabian deserts and the Indian Sea to the teeming ports of China. Through the better part of the last millennium, good brains and good luck have helped members of the dynasty to gain their ends, and temporary setbacks have only kicked them upstairs.

What does the future hold for the Sassoons? Siegfried has another opportunity to decry the horrors of war. Sir Victor may see fit to shift his fortunes for a second time — they might not be safe in Shanghai's precarious International Settlement. Perhaps his flight from British India was a mistake — but during the last thousand years a Sassoon has never been known to be wrong.





# ARCHIE TH' ODDLIN'

## *A Story*

BY JESSE STUART

PA stopped th' mule in his row o' corn. He looked hard at me. I put th' poplar leaf and th' charcoal in my pocket. I was drawin' th' picture o' an old dead snag in th' corn field with a rain crow settin' on top it.

"You're an oddlin'," says Pa, "if ever I seed one in my life. All my boys are good to work but you. All my people and your Ma's people are good to work. Bring you out to work and all you do is set around and draw pictures. You're runnin' me crazy, Archie. I wonder if you've got good mind. You just don't take attar your old Pappie Sam Ash and his blood."

I started diggin' th' crabgrass from around th' ground roots o' th' corn. I started levelin' down th' furrows th' bull-tongue had made. Lord but it was hot among th' corn. Just seemed like I couldn't get my breath. I just wanted to lay in th' shade and draw. When I saw something I wanted to draw on a poplar leaf I didn't mind th' sun. I'd

draw pictures when Pa sent me out to get th' cows. I'd draw pictures when he sent me out to cut stove-wood. Pa just never bothered to send me to town. He wouldn't let me leave th' place. I just wanted to put all th' pictures I saw on paper. I tell you I saw pictures every place. I saw them in th' terbacker barns, th' houses and th' well sweeps, th' mule teams and th' wagons and th' trees, hawks, buzzards, crows, rain-crows, and all sorts o' birds and th' turtles, terrapins, and snakes. I saw 'em in th' faces of people. W'y I could a-used a hundred tablets in two weeks.

Pa took me out'n school because I just looked at th' purty pictures in th' books and th' purty faces in th' school. Th' teacher tried to make me look at 'im. He jerked me up front and used a honey-locust on me and told me to go home. Said he couldn't do anything with me. I got a ugly picture o' 'im because he was so ugly. He chewed