

The Widow Of Ooty

"Why would she want to get married now? It's a bit sudden isn't it, after all those years on her own?"

"Perhaps that's why," Pramila said.

"Couldn't they just live together? I mean, who's to care - their kids?"

"Verity has only one daughter and I don't think she'd mind," Pramila answered. "It's the way she is. English women of a certain age and class have to do what is respectable."

"Oh, I get it," Annie said. "She'd rather do what's wrong as long as it looks right, than do what's right if it looks wrong. It's all about appearance."

"You see George," Pramila spoke to her son from the back seat of their rented Contessa. "Annie does understand the British."

"She understands when it is a choice between right and wrong she would rather do what is wrong," Sansi responded.

Annie made a face at him in the rear view mirror.

"I don't think Verity would marry just for appearance sake," Pramila added. "She's been a widow too long. There has to be more to it than that, I'm sure."

"I wonder if it might have something to do with money," Sansi mused aloud. "Or position."

Pramila leaned toward Annie and said: "George doesn't like Verity Prynne."

"She's a snob," he said. "The only reason she has anything to do with us is because my mother is famous."

The author of several books on women's issues and a lecturer in Feminist Studies at the University Of Mumbai Pramila was something of a celebrity.

"She adored you," Pramila added. "She thinks enough of you to invite you to her wedding."

"Yes," Sansi said blandly. "I wonder what she wants."

He changed down as their rented Maruti Baleno began the long climb up through the Nilgiri Hills to Ootacamund. It had been a tiring day. A dawn flight from Mumbai to Mysore, the usual three hour delay before take off, the drive from Mysore. All to see somebody he didn't like marry somebody he didn't know.

But his law practice was in a slump and his mother insisted Verity would be hurt if he didn't come. And his girlfriend, Annie, wanted to see Ooty, queen of the hill stations. She thought her old newspaper back in California might be interested in a color piece about the wedding in Ooty of two living relics of the Raj.

The road steepened, they passed a sign that warned: 'Sleeping While Driving Strictly Prohibited.' It wasn't meant to be funny. The jungly ravines on both sides of the road glinted with the remains of wrecked cars.

"Snooty Ooty," Annie said.

"That's what they called it," Pramila responded. "It really was rather splendid, in its day."

She had first seen Ooty in the company of Sansi's father, General George Spooner, when it was one of the few places they could visit safely in the turbulent last days of the Raj. She had come back often after their son, George was born, in 1947.

"It's sad isn't it?" Annie said. "Survivors of a lost empire marooned on these dwindling little islands of Britishness. Why don't they go home?"

"Some of them did," Pramila answered. "But the Britain they remembered had long gone, so they came back to India. Places like Ooty are all that remain of the world they knew."

"Maybe that's why they're getting married," Annie said. "The illusion of permanence. It's romantic and poignant at the same time."

"Like a wedding in a graveyard," Sansi said.

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By the time they reached Ooty it was getting dark and the hills were draped in an autumnal mist more typical of England than India. As they drove to The Ootacamund Club they passed Tudor fronted shops, stone churches and ivy clad cottages that might have been transported intact from the Sussex Downs.

When they reached the club the front door was unattended and Sansi and Annie unloaded the bags while Pramila went inside. As she approached the door it opened briefly then closed again. She gave it a hard pull and yanked out a frail Indian porter holding onto the other side.

"Hello Norman," she said. "This door is getting a bit stiff isn't it."

"Oh no, memsahib." He shook his dark grizzled head.

Annie came up the steps with a bag in each hand and Norman went to take one but Annie sidestepped him, unwilling to take the blame for inducing a heart attack.

"He must be a hundred years old," she whispered to Pramila when they were inside.

"At least," Pramila said. "I think he helped put down the Mutiny. They're all old soldiers with no families. These are the only places they can get work."

Pramila had warned that The Ootacamund Club was a monument to faded grandeur. Its lounges were spacious and opulent and coal fires burned cheerfully in every fireplace. The soft glow of Victorian electric lamps masked the threadbare carpets and cracked leather of the armchairs. The walls were adorned with the moulting heads of jackals, buffalo and tigers growling their silent grudges down through the ages at the murderers whose portraits surrounded them. Like the yellowed copies of The Illustrated London News, left behind for indifferent eyes, they spoke of long forgotten glories.

The grand rooms that once echoed to the stamp and shout of empire were empty and forlorn, but for the few aging castaways who remained. One of whom was Verity Pryn.

"Darling George," she greeted him in her nasal English drawl. "You've grown so handsome, and you still have your father's gorgeous blue eyes."

"I'm lost without them," Sansi said.

She smiled conspiratorially at Annie.

"He teased us like that when he was a little boy too. But we loved him, all the ladies did. He could wrap us around his little finger."

Apart from the double strand of pearls at her throat and the vague flesh tint to her skin Verity was all gray. Her skirt, sweater and cardigan were the same metallic gray as her hair which reminded Sansi of a soap pad. She lunged at him without warning, manacled his wrists in her withered hands and thrust a cold powdered cheek at him. He bought his freedom with an insincere kiss.

"You remember Verity's daughter, Helen, don't you, George?" his mother came to his rescue.

Sansi shook hands with a nice looking blonde woman in her forties. He remembered Helen as a pleasant but quiet girl, utterly dominated by her mother. When she spoke he was surprised to hear an American accent but remembered something about her having an American father and choosing an American university over a British university, much to her mother's displeasure.

She told Sansi she had met her husband at university and they lived in Washington, D.C. He was glad she had found the courage to stand up to her mother and thought it had probably saved her life. When she told him she had three children he thought it telling that neither they nor her husband had come to Ooty for the wedding.

His thoughts were interrupted by Verity's insistence that they all come into the lounge for a drink. Her fiance - she called him Brigadier Bob - had been playing golf but would join them for dinner, she said.

Sansi went quietly with the others. It was twenty years since he had last been to Ooty and nothing had changed. Verity Prynne still told everybody what to do.

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Dinner was every bit as ghastly as Sansi remembered. There was nothing about it to suggest they were in India. A gangrenous cream of asparagus soup was followed by stringy roast chicken with gravelly peas and grayish mashed potatoes. Dessert was a log of steamed suet embedded with raisins and basted with thin custard. To Annie's amusement it was described on the menu as spotted dick.

The much anticipated debut of the groom proved to be something of an anti-climax. Brigadier Bob was a lumpy man in a lumpy tweed suit. He combed his wispy hair to conceal his baldness and deferred to Verity on just about everything, which apparently made him her ideal man.

He had moved to Ooty from the Himalayan retreat of Simla two years earlier, he said. Most of his army service was spent at GHQ Calcutta, though he was embarrassed to admit he could not remember Sansi's father who would have been there around the same time.

"Sorry old chap," he smiled apologetically. "I only moved the fireworks around, never actually got to set any off."

The food and conversation was so unbearably stodgy Sansi had to plead tiredness and excuse himself. Before he could get up Verity struck like a cobra and pinned his hand to the table.

"George, dear, I need to ask you a favor," she said. "A favor for Bob and myself, actually."

Sansi gave his mother an 'I-told-you-so' glance.

"We've run into a bit of bother with the bureaucracy," Verity said.

Sansi turned the phrase over in his head. A bit of bother. It was one of those particularly British expressions that covered everything from dismissing the gardener to quelling a native uprising.

"And if we don't do something about it I'm rather afraid we won't be able to go ahead with the wedding," Verity added.

An appalled silence settled around the table. Only Verity and her husband-to-be seemed unembarrassed by the fact that that they had dragged friends and relatives halfway around the world for a ceremony that might not take place.

"Bit of bother with the paperwork," Brigadier Bob waffled. "You know what sticklers these government wallahs are about that sort of thing. Can't blame them for that of course, considering it was us who trained the beggars, what?"

The wedding guests turned their attention back to Verity.

"We need a death certificate," she said.

"A death certificate?" Pramila repeated.

"For Walter," she added. "My first husband. I mean it's ridiculous. Everybody knows what happened and I filled in all sorts of papers at the time. Naturally I assumed I had a death certificate somewhere but it's the one thing that seems to be missing and I can't go ahead with the wedding until I prove I'm not committing bigamy. It would be funny if it weren't so bothersome wouldn't it?"

Few others at the table seemed to find it funny.

"Can't you get a copy?" Pramila asked brittly.

"That's the favor I wanted to ask George," Verity went on unperturbed. "Because they can't find the original they're telling us we'll have to go through Delhi or some such nonsense. George knows how to cut through all this red tape, don't you dear? It's only a matter of finding the right person - and we do hate to keep everybody hanging around because of a silly piece of paper."

Sansi knew exactly what was involved. A trip to the government office at Coimbatore and a modest bribe would get him a copy of Mahatma Gandhi's death certificate if he wanted it. But condescending to that kind of grubbiness was something Verity and Brigadier Bob wanted to avoid. So the lawyer son of a friend would do perfectly.

Sansi didn't mind at all. It would get him out of Ooty and back onto the sunny plains below for a day or two.

"It will be my wedding present to you both," he said.

"A death certificate?" Annie said.

"That would be perfectly lovely," Verity said.

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"How did her husband die?" Annie asked.

The two of them stood braced against the chill air in their suite, waiting for a servant to come and light the fire.

"Drunk driving, I believe," Sansi said. "Drove his car off the road into a ravine."

"I don't get the impression she was overwhelmed by grief," Annie said.

Sansi smiled.

"From what I've heard it is a mystery how the two of them got together. My understanding is he wasn't her type at all. He was with the military here during the war. Very good looking apparently but with a roving eye and a bit too fond of the drink. And, well, you've met Verity."

"Yes, I can understa..."

The door opened with a bang and Norman, the porter, stumbled into the room with a shovelful of blazing coals. Sansi and Annie stood back as Norman staggered across the sitting room spewing smoke and ash like a runaway train. He tripped, recovered, gathered speed and lunged toward the fireplace. The burning coals cascaded into the hearth with an explosion of spark and flame.

"Please do not be concerning yourselves," Norman assured them. "I will be returning momentarily and setting fire to the bedroom."

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Sansi spent the next morning on the verandah with Verity getting an account of her husband's death. She also showed him some newspaper clippings from 1946 reporting the accident, search and eventual recovery of the car and body. Or what was left of it.

"The animals got at him, you see," Verity said. "Chewed him up rather badly, I believe. Scattered the bones. I never saw the body. Dickie Duggan spared me that much."

District Police Superintendent Richard Duggan's name appeared in the newspaper clippings and in a couple of official letters, one advising Verity of the discovery of her husband's remains and including a list of personal items found with the body, the other expressing condolences.

"They found his wedding ring, his watch and his wallet," Verity added. "Oh and they found his skull. That was what made it definite, they matched it with his dental records."

"Was there an inquest?" Sansi asked.

"Oh yes, absolutely," Verity said. "The ruling was death by misadventure. That's why I'm certain there must be a death certificate somewhere. The funeral was here too, he's buried in the town cemetery. There were mountains of paperwork, absolute mountains. But that's the Indians for you." She looked apologetic, as if just remembering Sansi was half Indian. "Well, you know, the bureaucracy anyway."

Sansi left Verity, Pramila and Annie on the verandah. As he drove the Baleno down the drive he had the three of them in his rear view mirror, like a fading portrait of the Raj. He slowed down at the entrance to turn onto the main road when Verity's daughter, Helen, stepped out of the bushes and waved at him to stop. He pulled over to the curb and lowered the window.

"Is everything alright?" he asked.

The look on her face told him everything was far from alright and the pouches under her eyes suggested she'd been up all night.

"George, I have to talk to you," she said anxiously. "Can I get in?"

"Of course." Sansi said and opened the car door for her.

"Drive on, would you please," she told him. "I don't want anybody to see us together."

Sansi continued down the hill towards town. Helen turned to him and said earnestly: "You have to promise me you won't tell anybody what I'm going to tell you now."

"That depends very much on what it is, Helen," he said.

She looked hurt.

"You can't tell my mother." Her voice wavered and he realized she was close to tears. "Promise me that at least - you won't tell my mother?"

"Helen..." Sansi felt awkward. He liked Helen but he had no desire to be dragged any deeper into her mother's family dramas.

"I can trust you, can't I?" she pleaded. Then, with desperate resignation: "I have to trust you."

Sansi's discomfort was reflected on his face.

"Dad isn't dead," she said.

Sansi almost ran into the car in front. He stepped hard on the brake and the truck behind them blared its horn. He pulled over to the side and stopped.

"He lives in Virginia, a couple of hours outside Washington," she added. "That's the real reason I went to school in the States. Dad never died in that crash, and mom doesn't know."

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"And you're willing to let your mother marry someone else, knowing she'd be committing bigamy?"

"Is it really that much of a crime?" Helen responded. "She's happy, Brigadier Bob is happy, my father is happy. You know better than anybody, the law is an ass."

Sansi shook his head.

"I wish you hadn't told me."

"If it wasn't for that damn death certificate you wouldn't need to know."

He looked confused.

"Then who is buried in the cemetery?"

"Somebody, nobody. I have no idea."

"The remains were positively identified."

She shrugged, as baffled as him.

He tried another approach: "Why is your father pretending to be dead?"

"You know why," she said. "He and mum were never suited for each other. I'm the reason they got married. Dad knocked her up. He had to marry her - she made him."

"And then he abandoned you, both of you?"

"It was the accident," she said. "It wasn't a fake or anything, it was a real accident, he nearly killed himself. But it gave him the chance he wanted and he took it."

Sansi thought of his childhood years at Ooty. Of Helen and Verity and Pramila and the secrets that surrounded them all. Except for Helen. At some point Helen had known.

She saw the look in Sansi's eyes.

"When I was six teen I was at boarding school in New Delhi, remember ? Dad came to see me there. He said he had to wait till I was old enough to understand." She

paused. "But as far as mum is concerned he's been dead fifty years - and that's the way everybody likes it."

"Does he know she wants to remarry?"

"Yes."

"And he has no objection?" Sansi already knew the answer.

"He wishes them every happiness," she said without irony.

"And when I get to the government office in Coimbatore I'm not going to find a copy of a death certificate because there was no original, because it suited your mother to believe your father was dead. There are no records. It was just another little colonial mess that was hushed up."

"Can't you get them to issue one anyway?" she pleaded.

"Are Bapre," he sighed. "I can't be a party to your mother committing bigamy. The wedding will have to be put off. Your father has to come forward and give your mother a divorce. You will all have to be honest with each other for once."

Helen looked panic stricken.

"We can't do that. Do you have any idea how much trouble there will be if we tell the truth now?"

Sansi would have found it comical had Helen not looked so anguished.

"She'll know I've been hiding it from her all these years," Helen went on. "Do you know what that will do to her? To me?"

"Somebody has to tell her," Sansi said finally. "Under the circumstances I assume you'd prefer it was me."

Helen stared numbly into the splintered glare of the sun on the windshield.

"Why don't you ask dad?" she said.

"That's hardly pract..."

"He's staying at the Palace Hotel in Coimbatore."

Sansi stared at her.

"He came back with me," she added dully. "He wanted to have one last look around the place. He thought nobody would recognise him now, nobody would know he was here."

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It was mid-afternoon when Sansi arrived in Coimbatore. He went directly to the state and federal government offices to see what records there were of Walter Pryn's disappearance and presumed death.

The records, including documents left behind by the British, went as far back as the 1880s. They offered a fascinating glimpse of the everyday life of colonial India, but there was nothing in them about Walter Pryn. Not even a record of an inquest. Nor did Sansi find anything through the newly installed computer hook up to Central Records in New Delhi, which Verity and Brigadier Bob apparently did not know about.

Curious, Sansi entered the name of the Brigadier. The result was enlightening. Another surprise in a day of surprises. A day that was far from over.

Around six in the evening Sansi went to the Palace Hotel to confront Walter Pryn. There was no answer from Pryn's room so Sansi made himself comfortable in the lobby.

While he waited he thought of the cataclysm that was about to unleash itself upon the strange, cocooned world of Verity Prynn. Helen was right to fear her mother's wrath. Between them Helen and her father had ruined Verity's last chance at happiness. Then there was the grave in Ooty cemetery. There would be an exhumation and an inquiry. The Indian authorities liked nothing better than turning over white men's bones. It would all have to come out in the open now. The scandal would be tremendous. A scandal the likes of which Ooty hadn't seen in a hundred years - with Verity Prynn at the epicenter. What an ignominious end for Ooty and Verity. He almost felt sorry for her.

Helen said enough time had passed that her father would be unrecognizable. Sansi had never met him but recognised him the moment he walked into the lobby. He was unmistakably Helen's father; the same oval face shape, the same neat features, the same wariness in the eyes.

Sansi waited till he'd collected his room key.

"Mr. Prynn?"

Prynn turned and looked uncertainly at Sansi.

"Yes."

"My name is George Sansi, I am an attorney from Mumbai. I have been speaking with your wife and daughter. There are matters you and I need to discuss."

Prynn swayed under the impact of Sansi's words but recovered quickly.

"Oh boy," he exhaled deeply. "I think I'm going to need a drink for this."

There was a lobby bar with a view of a courtyard and a pool. The only other customers were a couple of Indian businessmen. Prynn took a corner table and ordered a large scotch on the rocks. Sansi ordered a lime and soda.

"Does Verity know?" Prynn asked.

"Not yet," Sansi said. "But she will soon, and your daughter is worried about what will happen when she does. I think it would be better coming from you."

Prynn leaned back in his red vinyl armchair.

"Not in a million years."

"You are prepared to let your wife commit bigamy?"

Prynn grimaced.

"I have a great deal of difficulty thinking of her as my wife," he said. "You're a lawyer, Mr. Sansi. You know the law is just a matter of definitions. By any definition Verity and I are not married."

"So you are happy to let her break the law?"

A waiter brought their drinks. Prynn downed half his in a single swallow.

"Who's complaining? You? Is that what this is about, some kind of shakedown?"

"I don't want any money," Sansi answered. He was beginning to dislike Walter Prynn. "I have been made privy to information I would rather not know. If I make it public several lives will be changed, perhaps for the worse. If I keep it a secret and Verity gets married, I am party to a fraud."

"Be sure and let me know what you decide, won't you?" Prynn said and made a move to go.

Sansi gestured him to sit back down.

"You leave me with few options, Mr. Prynn, he said warningly. "None of them good for you. I can go back to Ooty and tell them I was unsuccessful and that is where it ends for me. But from what I know about Verity she won't let it rest. She will find

someone else to get what she wants. Eventually she will find out you are alive, she will find out where you are living and she will come after you for a divorce - and if all I hear about American lawyers is true she will get a lot more besides."

"Godammit," Prynn muttered. "You don't want money, what do you want?"

Sansi thought everything he'd heard about Prynn must be true; that he was a weakling who used women, a liar and a seducer who hid behind his own daughter for decades to escape the fury of his wife, a woman whose temper he still feared.

"Mr. Prynn, I have no particular affection for your wife, but I think I know now what made her the way she is. I feel sorry for what this will do to her and Helen but I see no reason why I should compromise myself to protect you in your cowardice."

Prynn blanched but said nothing.

This time it was Sansi who got up to go.

"Helen doesn't know," Prynn said abruptly. "Nobody knows."

"Knows what, Mr. Prynn?"

"The reason I left, the real reason."

Sansi hesitated.

"You're right about Helen," Prynn added. "She protected me all those years. But I protected her too - from the truth about her mother."

Sansi sat down again.

"What truth?"

"Verity wanted me dead - I just gave her what she wanted."

Sansi had heard every kind of excuse from every kind of crook, but there was always something new, always another twist.

"Verity wanted you dead?"

"Sure she did," Prynn said. He finished his drink and ordered another. "You know why we were married?"

"Because of Helen."

"You don't think I could have skipped then if I'd wanted?" Prynn said. "I never expected to stay on in India after the war, I never planned on it. Verity changed that. She was something special back then and I guess she still is. Kind of hard for a man to turn down, if you get my meaning. When she told me she was pregnant I could have taken off right then, and who was to stop me?"

He seemed to dare Sansi to contradict him.

"But I didn't," Prynn continued. "I stayed because I wanted to. After Helen was born I wanted to take them back to the States with me and we'd live on the family farm out at Red Springs, Virginia. Then it dawned on me, Verity had a whole different idea of what kind of farm we had, what she was going out to. I guess I talked it up too much, and two hundred acres sounds pretty impressive to somebody who grew up in England. She had me pegged as some kind of gentleman farmer and she was going to be a belle among the Virginia aristocracy. She had no idea what a sharecropper's farm was. After I spelled it out to her, you never saw such a change in a human being. I thought I knew her - I realized I knew nothing about her."

"She thought you had money, property and position in America?"

"It's what she wanted, what she's always wanted, I guess."

"And when you told her it wasn't like that she lost interest in you?"

"She wanted me dead." An amused look came into his eyes. "You think I'm exaggerating, don't you?"

Sansi was no longer so sure. Everything Prynn had said fitted Sansi's opinion of Verity.

"So why did you run?"

"To save my life," Prynn said. "I saved my life by pretending to be dead. I'd hate for her to find out I'm still alive or she might want a second shot."

"You're saying she tried to kill you?"

"I know she tried to kill me."

"How do you know?"

It was the first time Prynn had told anyone the full story and he seemed to take pleasure in the reaction it inspired.

"The night of the accident I wasn't driving," he said. "Verity was."

Nothing in the account Verity had given included the information she had been driving. And all the newspaper reports said Prynn was alone in the car when it plunged into the ravine.

"That isn't the official version," Sansi said.

"The official version has me dead and buried in Ooty cemetery," Prynn said.

"Who do you think is buried in Ooty cemetery?"

"Why don't you ask Dickie Duggan - if you can find him?"

Sansi recalled the name of the District Police Superintendent.

"Why would he know?"

"Because he and Verity were in it together," Prynn said.

"Your wife was having an affair with Superintendent Duggan?" Sansi said.

"Helen told me they were the night of the accident," Prynn answered. "That's why she was driving. I was too drunk. I was sleeping it off in the back seat and next thing I knew we were stopped at the side of the road, the door was open and Verity was gone."

"That doesn't prove she tried to kill you," Sansi said.

Prynn smiled thinly.

"She must have just got out," he continued. "I started calling for her but then she reached in and took off the hand brake. She saw I was awake and she looked me right in the eyes when she did it. She wanted me to know."

Sansi slumped back in his chair.

"Prim and proper Verity," Prynn said. "Didn't want the scandal of a divorce, but murder was okay. Murder made her respectable."

"Why didn't you come back and confront her?" Sansi asked.

"For what?" Prynn said. "She and Dickie Duggan had what they wanted and I had the opportunity I wanted. I left my wedding ring, my watch, my wallet. I got to disappear, no strings attached, till now..."

"What about the positive identification of the remains from dental records?"

"The only reason I survived that crash was because I was drunk," Prynn said. "But I left behind a few teeth. I must have left blood on the car too. It looked the way they wanted it to look."

Sansi remained silent, thinking.

"You know the guy I feel sorry for," Prynn added. "The guy she's marrying. I hope he lives up to her expectations - because his life depends on it."

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Everybody agreed it was the loveliest wedding Ooty had seen in years.

The newlyweds couldn't have been more grateful to Sansi for his role in making it possible. Sansi was relieved to see their car disappear down the driveway of the Ootacamund taking them to their honeymoon on the coast.

"That poor man," Annie said as she watched from the club steps. "He has no idea what he's getting himself into."

"It isn't as if she murdered anybody," Sansi said. "She only thinks she did."

"I don't think I'd take too much comfort from that if I was her husband."

"Oh, I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on Brigadier Bob," Sansi said.

Annie moved closer to him, brushed a few rice grains from his shoulders.

"What do you know that you're not telling me?"

He glanced around to make sure no-one could overhear.

"While I was at the government offices chasing down a non-existent death certificate I decided to see what they had on Brigadier Bob. I was curious to know how he could work at GHQ Calcutta for so long without knowing my father."

"And?"

"There never was a Brigadier Bob," Sansi said. "There was a Master Sergeant Bob. A quartermaster in Calcutta who did three years for stealing army property. One of the reasons he never went back to England, I suspect. He must have run out of money in Simla and come down to Ooty to see if the pickings here were any better."

"My God," Annie said. "Verity hasn't got any money, has she? She thinks he's got money."

"It very much looks that way," Sansi agreed.

"What will happen when they find out they're both broke?"

"Oh, I suspect they'll work it out between them," Sansi said. "I find it rather quaint that there will always be a corner of some foreign field that is forever England, don't you?"

