

Our Spoons came from Woolworths 15 (by Barbara Comyns)

Sophia had scarlet fever, and her baby died. Sophia's brother and his wife took her in when she came out of hospital, and arranged a job for her as cook-housekeeper to the Redhead family in Bedfordshire, where she stayed for three years. Mrs Redhead died, one of her daughters got married, and Charles asked for a divorce. Sophia, now 27, felt life was passing her by.

Episode 15

I was sitting on the kitchen window-sill peeling apples. Sandro came running through the garden and sat on the sill too, and ate the apple-peel. In between his munching, he said 'When I was playing by the lake this morning, I met a man painting, and he is putting me in his picture.'

I was so startled that I cut my finger, and thought 'Perhaps it's Charles he has seen. He will come here and make trouble of some sort, borrow money from the Redheads or disgrace me in the village.' I asked Sandro what he looked like, this beastly artist. Sandro said he couldn't remember, but 'He's awfully nice. You would like him, Mummy.'

The next morning he wanted to meet this wretched artist again and I refused to let him go, but he kept saying, 'He was depending on me,' in such a grieving voice, I had to let him go.

I felt depressed and worried all morning. At lunch Sandro was full of his new friend. He said he was called Rollo. So it wasn't Charles after all, but maybe it was a friend of his, which was almost as bad. After I'd washed the luncheon things we went for a walk. The poodle forgot its great age and ran about stirring up the cows, pulling and tugging until I was almost running and became entangled round the long legs of a man coming towards us. Sandro started to laugh and said, 'Here is Rollo. Now you can see how nice he is.' I dared not look up, but had an impression of a young face with thick grey hair. I couldn't remember seeing anyone like that while I was married to Charles, so I felt much better. I saw he was a terribly handsome person in spite of having grey hair. He had a delightful voice, and he thanked me for lending him Sandro and said he hoped I would come and see the painting. He had taken a furnished cottage by the church and the next thing that happened was we were walking to the cottage to see the painting right away.

I was rather scared and didn't say much, but he talked away in his nice voice. The cottage was rather dark and overcrowded, but nice and peaceful. Rollo showed me the painting which was almost finished and it was a strong vigorous kind of painting, full of light and colour. He told me he had felt his work was growing dreary and stale and it would do him good to work in the country for a time. He mostly painted portraits and seemed to be quite successful.

While we were looking at the painting a vase of daffodils on the window-sill upset and the water started to splash on to a lovely old spinet. We looked at the window and there was an awful old brown mat trying to get in. I'd quite forgotten the poodle, and there she was, so I let her in and she ran round welcoming us and caused a great disturbance. Rollo went and got a cloth to dry the spinet. When he had mopped up the water he asked us to stay to tea, but I rather felt we had outstayed our welcome and left quite quickly.

When we came home I went upstairs and sat by the looking-glass and looked at myself to see what had happened to my face since I'd been living with the Redheads. In a way it had improved. My skin was very clear and my eyes large and bright; but there were some lines round my mouth and eyes that didn't used to be there. My hair was still dark and curly. It only grew as far as my shoulders, so I never had it cut. My clothes were dull, a washed out shirt, a jumper with darns on the elbows, and an old tweed skirt I'd made from one of Rose's cast offs. I stood regretting very much I wasn't glamorous. Then I went down and got tea.

For three days it rained and I spent my spare time making a blue-spotted summer frock. It really suited me very well indeed. The first of May came and it was so warm and sunny I thought, 'I'll wear my new frock this afternoon.' May came in to the kitchen and asked me to make a chocolate cake because some people were coming to tea, and I was glad, because since Rose had got married she was too much alone and worked frightfully hard on the farm and had no pleasures at all. This morning she washed her golden hair and let it dry in the sun while she mowed the lawn for the first time that year, and I opened the kitchen window to smell the new-cut grass.

Mr Redhead came into the kitchen with a great bundle of rhubarb in his arms. He said he wanted me to make it into jam. I saw my afternoon in the sun disappearing, so I said I couldn't make it today, but he said 'You must make it today while the rhubarb is fresh; it makes all the difference.'

Although it was such a warm day I had to cook a great stuffy lunch of greasy mutton and roast potatoes. Then after lunch there was all the sordid washing up to face, and when that was finished there was the wretched jam. I stood over it, stirring away and every now and then trying it in a saucer to see if it would set. I knew the afternoon was nearly over. The doorbell rang and May went and welcomed her friends. I heard her say, 'We will have tea in the garden.' I put the tea-things on a tray. The scones and chocolate cake I'd made that morning looked delicious. I left it all ready for May to fetch. I went back to my jam-stirring. The visitors seemed to be coming into the kitchen to help May carry the tea-things. I felt ashamed for them to see me all hot and sticky; there was even jam on my ears and I'd cried a bit and gone all blotchy. The visitors came into the kitchen. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a girl in a fresh linen dress. I knew her slightly, because she came quite often to the house, usually on a horse, and once she had ridden it right into the kitchen and it had eaten the apples I'd put in a dish all ready to bake. She didn't have a horse with her, but a man. I didn't look at him, but when I heard him say, 'Let me carry that tray, Miss Redhead,' I knew it was Rollo. When he saw me bent over the disgusting jam, he said 'Good afternoon. How are you?' and the girls seemed surprised he knew me. I hunched myself up and murmured, 'I'm feeling beastly, thank you.' May said, 'That jam smells as if it's burning.' Then they went out of the kitchen. She was quite right. I had to spend about an hour cleaning the bottom of the brass pan.

When Sandro came home from school he saw the tea-party on the lawn, and when he recognised Rollo he wanted to climb out of the window to speak to him, but I wouldn't let him. We had our tea by the back door. I couldn't bear to see that tea-party and I felt terribly tired of being a cook.

The following morning there was a letter for me – a thing which seldom happened. It had a local postmark and rather square writing. I didn't open it

for several hours, because I liked to think it was something exciting and knew it would turn into a letter from Sandro's school saying he must bring a pair of slippers to school if I opened it. But it didn't turn into something dreary, after all. It was a heavenly note from Rollo asking me which evening I would be free to have dinner with him at Bentley Hall. Rose used to go there quite often and I used to envy her, and when I had to pass that way I always walked slowly to see all the rich, care-free people coming out. They always seemed to be young and good-looking; but once I heard two elegant people sitting in an open cream car talking, and the man was moaning about his overdraft and the woman seemed pretty miserable, too, and I was almost glad. Now I was going to go there, too.

I asked May which evening I could have free, and she seemed quite startled, but said I could have the following Friday, so I wrote to Rollo and said that's when I'd be free. I looked at my clothes, and the only fresh-looking dress was the spotted one, but it didn't look the sort of thing they would wear at Bentley Hall. In my tin cash-box there was eleven pounds seven and six. It had taken me three years to save that in case I got the sack and we had nowhere to go. I became overcome with temptation, and the next day caught the bus to Bedford. I could only get about an hour there, but in that hour I found just the kind of dress I was looking for. It was real silk and had a most elegantly-shaped bodice and a pleated skirt. It cost nine guineas. There was just enough left to buy a pair of delicate sandals and some real silk stockings. Then it was time to catch the bus home. I found Sandro sadly waiting for his tea. I felt very guilty and remembered I'd spent all our money and hadn't even bought him a toy, so I gave him a shilling to buy some sweets with; but I still felt guilty and could see ruin staring us in the face. But when it was time to go to bed and I tried all my new clothes on and the frock fitted perfectly, and the sandals were so light and dainty, and even in the speckled old looking glass I looked almost beautiful, I was glad I'd spent all our money.