

Our Spoons came from Woolworths 8 (by Barbara Comyns)

London in the 1930s. Sophia and the new baby, Sandro, visited her brother John and his wife in the country, and overstayed their welcome because Sophia didn't have the money to get home. Charles, the reluctant father, didn't make any effort to get them back – just sold and pawned things to keep himself going, painting and living in squalor. Edmund, Charles's uncle, eventually brought them back to Fortune Green.

Episode 8

The summer came and passed. Sometimes we were happy and spent days in the sun on the Heath. Sandro ate and slept and played with his toes until I bought him a rattle, then he played with that. I fed him myself, so he hardly cost anything to keep. He was still rather small, but very healthy. His hair was a golden red and very curly and his skin was brown, and his eyes a very dark brown.

We had very little money, but Charles did sell a few designs for book jackets and I went on sitting for artists. Usually they didn't want me to pose with the baby, so I had to leave him with Charles and rush back at lunch-time to feed him. Charles did not seem to resent him quite so much. Sometimes he even seemed to be amused by him. But just when I began to feel more hopeful that in time Charles would grow really fond of Sandro something happened which upset and hurt me dreadfully. He got in touch with one of his father's unmarried sisters and asked her to find particulars of how to have Sandro put in a home for children whose parents could not afford to keep them. The aunt wrote me a long letter saying she would gladly see to all the arrangements and I must give up my baby for Charles's sake. I could earn much more if I was not tied to a baby and I must not get lazy. It was not fair to expect Charles at his age to support a wife and child. The letter was such a shock. I couldn't help thinking of Charles and his family as monsters and I felt I could never trust Charles again.

I had an appointment to sit that morning to an elderly artist, but I dared not leave Sandro in Charles's care in case he was gone when I returned, so I ran out to the telephone box and said I would be unable to come. Charles was in bed when I showed him the letter. He was rather scared with me standing over him storming away. He said: 'Babies have no feelings and would be just as happy in an orphanage as anywhere else.' On the other hand, he would be much happier if the baby was out of the way, so to send him to a 'home' was much the most reasonable thing to do. I just hated Charles then. I told him I wasn't going to work any more, but stay at home and guard Sandro, but he said that was quite unnecessary, because if I felt about the matter so strongly he would write and tell his aunt. There was nothing to make such a fuss about.....

For three days I stayed at home and we had no money, and after the first day, no food and no shillings to put in the gas meter. We hardly spoke to each other, and by the third day he had grown quite humble and sad. Maybe it was hunger made him get that way, but whatever it was, I felt I could trust Sandro with him, so I walked down to the elderly painter and told him I'd be able to sit for him the next day, and would he lend me fourpence-halfpenny. I

bought a loaf with this on the way home and I pulled bits of the crust off and ate them on the way. When I got home we cut the remains of the loaf in half and we ate it and felt all heavy afterwards.

Then the autumn came and I got quite a lot of employment in Art Schools and Sandro had grown so pretty some advertising studios photographed him for advertisements. They paid a guinea for each photograph. I only got seven-and-six a morning for being an artist's model.

With all these sittings (that sounds rather like a hen) we did fairly well the first half of the winter; at least we had enough for our food and rent, and sometimes we had some over for coal, too. Then Christmas came. People suddenly became very kind. Even Charles's family sent some packing-cases full of exciting provisions, and an American artist I had sat for sent a huge turkey and five separate shillings to pay for the cooking. A registered letter came addressed to me, and there was five pounds inside. It didn't say who it was from, but it quite made our Christmas. We had no visitors. My sister Ann was staying with my brother, and our friends Francis and James had gone to their families. I cooked the dinner very nicely, and we had crackers and all the proper Christmas things. Sandro sat at the table in his new high chair, which Francis and his sister had given him, and we even had wine – Charles's father had sent a bottle. There was a tree for Sandro simply covered in glass balls, and toys too. He already had a stocking full that morning. He couldn't quite make out what they were, but thought they were very funny and kept laughing. That was the best Christmas we ever had.

After Christmas things became grim again. No more book jackets came Charles's way and my model work was irregular and poorly paid, and the expenses were heavier now Sandro was weaned. We seldom had a fire and the light got cut off because we had not paid the bill, so we bought a little lamp for two shillings and elevenpence and it gave quite a pretty light. The electric light people gave us back our deposit money less what we owed them and it paid for our food for a week.

Eva came to stay once during this bad patch, fortunately before we had the light cut off. Charles pawned an old-fashioned necklace of my mother's – it was the only piece of jewellery I had. It was worth losing it to hide the fact of the bad state we were in, but what I hated about pawning things was we never got them out again.

This was the first visit Eva had paid us since Sandro was born, and she was full of advice on how to bring him up. Apparently her children had completely given up nappies at six months, and had cut most of their teeth and were walking about at that age, so Sandro at nearly a year seemed very backward in comparison.

He was rather backward walking, but he used to shoot about the floor on his bottom, propelling himself with his feet. He found this such a successful way of following me around, it was difficult to get him interested in walking. I used to worry in case he always went about like that. Otherwise, he was not backward at all and was very forward with talking and took a lively interest in everything we did, and almost never cried.

As the year went on our poverty got worse and worse. Charles just painted away and didn't notice unless there was no money for cigarettes. Then he would borrow a few shillings from Francis to buy some and he would be

happy again. I was out working so much and he had to look after Sandro, but he was more reconciled to him now. If it was fine he would load the pram with painting materials and go to the Heath for the day; if he worked at home he would give Sandro a brush and some paint, and he would paint very carefully until an old canvas was quite covered and give no trouble at all. I became more and more discontented with our way of living. I disliked the flat and the depressing road we lived in. It was over a year since we had been out at all, even to tea. Charles had got in such a rut he hardly knew he was alive. He never sold any paintings, because nobody ever saw them. A few weeks after they were painted he reversed the canvas and painted on the other side.

While I was posing I would try and make new plans to improve our lives. I came to the conclusion that the first thing we must do was move, to a more accessible flat where Charles could have a proper studio and where we could entertain a little.

I did not tell Charles my plans. I thought he would be frightened. Ann, my sister, did not go to her office on Saturday morning, so she used to come to the house agents with me. On the fourth Saturday morning of our hunt we discovered quite a suitable flat in a large, rather battered house in Abbey Road. There were two simply enormous rooms and a tiny kitchen and hall. The bathroom and lavatory were down the passage and had to be shared with two other flats; but to make up for this there was a house telephone. This decided me, and I borrowed a pound from Ann to leave as a deposit. The rent was six pounds a month in advance.

When I broke the news to Charles he was most dismayed, but I kept enticing him with the beautiful large room he would have to paint in. So we wrote to his father and said for practical business reasons we must move and could he let us have twelve pounds for the first month's rent and expense of moving. The letter must have been a good one, because the money came by return, so we gave a week's notice and away we went. I was full of hope, as usual.

Having a telephone was a great help in my work. Previously the artists that needed me had to write. Now they would 'phone and I could be there in half an hour. There was a bus stop just outside the house.

Francis had a studio quite near and whenever he wanted to try out a new technique he would get me to sit for him. He said I was the only person who didn't get offended if the painting turned out badly.

Seeing so much of Francis did Charles good. They would talk about painting for hours. When we had no money for food he would give us lunch. He said he had an account with a grocer's shop and even if he had no money for several weeks he could still buy food, and by the time the bill had grown rather large some money always turned up.

We thought that was the best idea we had heard for a long time, so he took us to his grocer and said we wanted an account, and the grocer said we could have one, and it was lovely having an account like that. The grocer even had beer and when we had no money we would 'phone for some food and a bottle of beer and it was delivered to the door.

1919 words incl. intro.