

### Our Spoons Came from Woolworths 3 ( by Barbara Comyns)

21 year old Sophia married 21 year old Charles in the 1930s in London, and they started their married life in a flat in Haverstock Hill. Charles was an artist, Sophia worked in a commercial art studio for two pounds a week. Charles's father, Paul, stopped his allowance but attended the wedding. Charles's very angry mother, Eva, separated from Paul, didn't.

#### Episode 3

Sophia Fairclough was my new name and quite soon I became used to it and to being called 'Mrs' and wearing a wedding ring. Already, after a few weeks' married life, my saucepans had burnt marks on them. I had hoped to keep them always shiny, because I had a stupid feeling that as long as I could keep them like new my marriage would stay the same, but in spite of the saucepans we were quite happy. Sometimes I worried about money a little because my weekly two pounds did not go very far, but we had some cheques that were wedding presents in one of the dresser drawers, and whenever we ran out of money we asked my sister Ann to cash one. She earned enough to have a banking account and was a real bachelor girl with a flat. She was two years older than I and rather efficient at her job on a woman's weekly. She collected material for a page 'Ways of wasting not more than five shillings' and all the articles on the page had captions underneath like this: 'This dainty little butter-dish made of leather costs but 2/11' or 'Wouldn't the kiddies just love this jolly little squeaking mouse – a bargain at 4/9'.

Before our marriage Charles used to paint and draw me quite a lot, but now we were living together I had to pose in every imaginable position. He painted me in the bath once and I have never been so clean before or since. Sometimes when I woke in the morning, there would be Charles painting me asleep. That was the most comfortable way to be painted, but it made me late for work. When I was out during the day he liked to paint still lives. He would arrange a group on a cushion – a melon, a banana and some carrots and perhaps a kipper or an egg, but the kitten, Matthew, would eat the fish in the night and play football with the fruit and Charles would be most upset, although he was rather batty about the kitten usually; he was called Matthew after the church we were married in, he was grey and dainty. Most mornings Charles would walk with me to Chalk Farm station and Matthew would follow about halfway and wait for Charles until he returned, and they would be company for each other during the day. Charles stayed at home painting most of the day. Sometimes he went to commercial studios in search of work, but nothing ever came of it; this was the time of the Great Depression or Slump, but there were still a few cheques in the drawer.

On Saturday afternoon I had a holiday and we would give the flat a great clean and shop, and on Sunday we went for long walks on the Heath or read and were lazy by the gas fire.

One Saturday, after we had been married about two months, we thought we would skip the housework, so Charles met me and we had lunch in Charlotte Street and then went to the Tate. We returned home in time for tea. I glanced through the windows of the flat as we passed on our way to the side

door. To my surprise the room was full of people. There was Eva, Charles's mother, surrounded by the same relations she had brought with her the night before the wedding. My first thought was, 'Well, they can't unmarry us now.' Then I remembered the flat was all dusty and uncleaned. My heart sank right down to my rather holey shoes. If only I had known they were coming and had everything grand and tidy.

Charles went in first and I followed feeling pretty scared. Eva kissed Charles and then me, so I knew it was meant to be a friendly visit. I couldn't help feeling glad I'd smudged her lipstick when she kissed me, I knew she would feel pretty mad when she saw her face. I started muttering about the place being untidy, but she said it did not matter as she had imagined it much worse and why didn't we have a charwoman.

Then Edmund, the husband of Stiff-black-hat, said he was sure Eva would be able to give me some useful hints on economical housekeeping. As Eva was quite famous for her extravagance in dress and home, I was rather interested to hear what she would have to say. She cleared her throat once or twice, and said something about poor people should eat a lot of herrings, as they were most nutritious, also she had heard poor people ate heaps of sheeps' heads and she went on to ask if I ever cooked them. I said I would rather be dead than cook or eat a sheep's head. After that helpful hints for the poor were forgotten, because Charles told her about our weekend visit to Paul. She was most interested, because she wanted to know how he was situated for money, because she needed her allowance increasing. Charles and I both assured her he was living in the most abject poverty and his car just falling to bits, so she began to worry in case her allowance was cut.

Then Edmund started asking Charles about his prospects. Had he a job in view? Had he sold any paintings? So Charles had to pretend things were much better than they were, and he talked very brightly and rather unconvincingly about his future. I couldn't help wishing Charles would ask Edmund a few questions about his financial position.

At last Stiff-black-hat said it was time to go and dress for dinner. All this time she had been sitting on the unpaid-for divan, looking around with cold blue eyes, her thin white lips tightly pressed together. I had no relations with the exception of a sister and brother, but I felt Charles had enough for us both. At last they left and it felt as if there had been a great wind which had suddenly ceased.

After this first visit Eva and I had a kind of truce; she continued to criticise and talk at me, but as she did the same to everyone she knew, even Charles, I couldn't object too much. Although most of Charles's relations came from Wiltshire they used to come to London very frequently. They all asked questions about our financial position and took the line of 'I hope you are looking after dear Charles properly', or 'What a lucky girl you are to have married into our family.' In those days I was too timid to say much, but I used to resent it all the more, and sometimes, after they left, I would be nervy and resentful with Charles.

Except when his relations came fussing around Charles was quite happy just painting away, and as long as I earned two pounds a week and there were a few cheques in the drawer he hadn't a care in the world. He was very loving and gentle with me. One day we went to the sea with his friend James and a huge wave knocked me down when we were bathing. He was dreadfully

distressed and kept asking if I was all right. I liked him being concerned for me, because it was a long time since anyone had been. I'd been living alone in bed-sitting-rooms since I was seventeen and it had been rather a hard life and lonely sometimes, too.

After about ten weeks of married life I began to feel rather sick, not of Charles or married life – just sick in myself. At first it was just a whisper of sickness and I thought I was imagining it, then I thought maybe it was strawberries; they were very cheap that year, there must have been what they call a 'glut', we even ate strawberries for breakfast. Then the whisper became very loud and I became really sick. It was so difficult at work, because I had to keep running to the lavatory.

The girls I worked with said I should see a doctor; most likely he would have a nice surprise for me. One morning I fainted when I got out of bed. Charles was very scared and said I was to stay in bed. I didn't like to stay away from the studio in case they found how well they could get on without me and gave me the sack, but it just seemed like heaven to stay in bed, so I did.

Charles said he would fetch a doctor. We had noticed a brass plate further up the road. The doctor told us we were going to have a baby; it was going to come in about seven months. Charles's white pointed face went even more so and I felt frightened, trapped and excited all at once.

The doctor gave a few words of advice, and said I was to visit him in about a month. Then he had gone and we were left alone, but we were not alone any more. Charles said, 'Oh dear, what will the family say? How I dislike the idea of being a Daddy and pushing a pram!' So I said, 'I don't want to be a beastly Mummy either; I shall run away.' Then I remembered that if I ran away the baby would come with me wherever I went. It was a most suffocating feeling and I started to cry.

Charles kissed me then and said it was no use crying about something that was not going to happen for seven months, I might have a miscarriage before then. I was almost more scared of having a miscarriage than having a baby, so I went on crying.

The next day I went back to work and told the girls. They laughed and said they knew that already. They were kind really. If only they hadn't told me such dreadful stories about childbirth. Frightful things seemed to have happened to their mothers and friends. They made it seem almost impossible to have a baby that was not dead or deformed in some way.

There were lots of daddy-long-legs about that year. I got the idea that if one touched me the baby would be marked in that place. I had to sleep with my head under the bedclothes in case one touched me when I was asleep.

Charles got very angry with me and said I was stupid and hysterical. Most fortunately, Matthew – the kitten – took a great interest in daddy-long-legs and used to catch them in his mouth and dash about with all the legs sticking out like a moustache. I was so grateful to him and let him sleep on the bed as a reward for his service.

Poor little Matthew! One morning he came part of the way down the hill as usual, and never returned. The next morning someone came to say he had been run over. Charles was even more sad than I about this misfortune. We bought a catfish and called it Greedy Min and put it on the mantelpiece by Great Warty, my newt, but it wasn't much of a companion to Charles in the

daytime.

One night, a few weeks later, we awoke to find a large ginger cat asleep on the divan, so we let him stay and in the morning he was still there. We called him Ambassador. One disadvantage about him was, he used to bring all his dirty old friends in as soon as our backs were turned, and they smelt rather. Still, we were glad to have a cat again, even one with smelly friends.

2009 words including intro.