

Our Spoons Came from Woolworths 2 (by Barbara Comyns)

Sophia is reminiscing about her penniless earlier life in London in the 1930s. When she was 21 she was planning a secret wedding with artist Charles Fairclough (also 21) when his separated parents, Eva and Paul, found out about it the night before the wedding. Paul said 'Do nothing till I see you', and Eva turned up with a lot of relations, caused a terrible row, and took Charles away.

Episode 2

Then the morning came and it was light. There were half packed suitcases all around my bed. Great Warty, my newt, looked at me from his glass house, so I took him out and let him walk up my arm until he fell in the bed, then I made tunnels out of the bedclothes for him to walk slowly through and he looked extra prehistoric. All this time I tried to close my mind that this should have been my wedding morning, also I had to give up my room at twelve o'clock because it had been let to another girl. Actually, I supposed I could live in the flat, but felt this would be impossible without Charles. I never wanted to see it again, also the rent would be far too much for me on my own. I earned two pounds a week and my present room was only fifteen shillings.

Eventually I had a bath and dressed, then I wondered what I should do next. I heard the front door slam, then there were hurried steps up the stairs and Charles opened the door of my room. At first I thought it was too good to be true and I was imagining things, but it really was Charles. He kissed me and said it was time to meet his father and he thought we should both go to the station. I was so happy to see him again after all my sad thoughts. There he was looking just as if he were going to be married after all. He was wearing his new suit, so I pulled off my old yellow linen frock and put on rather a frightful green suit that had a wrap-over skirt that was always coming unwrapped at the wrong moments, but it was my best. Then we hurried away to Paddington Station.

When we arrived there we saw the tall figure of Charles's Aunt Emma walking up and down the platform, so we went to her and told her all about the dreadful time we had had after we left her the previous evening. Then the train came in and there was Paul. He was wearing rather an old-fashioned bowler hat, a thing I'd never seen him in before, so I said to Charles, 'That must mean there is going to be a wedding, your father wearing a hat like that.' But when he turned round I saw his suit was very shabby; it had been let out at the back with new material and it made a stripe all down his back, so my heart sank, but Charles seemed quite cheerful and said, 'Don't worry. Whatever he says, no one can stop us getting married today.'

Paul had a lot of things in the guard's van, a round table and some hampers and some things he was bringing up for a friend; he disposed of these in the cloak-room, then we all went to Hyde Park. There we sat on benches and discussed how impossible it was for Charles and me to marry. He gave us quite a long lecture which he enjoyed very much. We didn't listen, but managed to say Yes when it was needed. Charles said, 'Oh yes. Yes indeed' and the lecture went off very well. He asked us what Eva thought about it all,

and he laughed when we told him and said it was just like Eva. Both he and Emma were rather shocked about the woman in the stiff black hat thinking I was going to have some babies already. After all this talk he said we had better have some lunch, so we went to an Italian café near the Cobden statue. I always thought that statue was of Crippen to point out what a wicked place Camden Town is, but I was quite wrong; Cobden was an eminent Victorian.

I thought it was a hopeful sign we were having lunch so near the church we had arranged to be married in, and after we had drunk some wine Paul said: 'Now, Charles, if I allow you two children to marry, I shall stop your allowance. If you can't keep yourself now you have come of age and are intending to become a married man, you never will.' Charles said 'Yes, yes,' several times – he always did this when he was embarrassed. The thought of saving Charles's allowance seemed to please Paul a lot, but we were all in a pretty good mood; we had drunk rather a lot of wine that tasted of ink and the lunch had been quite good. When we were halfway through our coffee Paul said we had better hurry. By this time I had made up my mind he was going to consent to our marriage, and after the remark about Charles's allowance I was quite sure about it.

We left the restaurant in a great hurry, because it was already half-past two and in England you can't get married after three – something to do with the licensing laws, I should think. The church was next door to my house, so I ran in and perched a beret on my head, because there is another law about that; I put Great Warty in my pocket as a kind of page and ran out of the house. Paul and Charles were waiting outside the church. Paul said he would give me away. We had arranged for rather a handsome actor we knew to do this, but as Paul seemed to be enjoying himself so much we let him do the giving away and an artist friend of Charles, called James, was the best man.

When we got in the church the priest took Charles right away. I thought it was a trick of his mother's at first, but no one seemed surprised. Then I saw him standing with James very stiff and still. They made me sit in a pew with Paul and I felt a bit scared in case they married me to him by mistake. There were masses of people in the church, most of them uninvited. There was the man who owned the studio where I worked, and some women I sometimes did typing for, also the place was quite stiff with old landladies; some had big hats all covered in feathers. Charles owed rent to quite a lot of them. There was his Aunt Emma and some of her friends, and my sister Ann. I had asked her to come as a witness. She looked very surprised to see Paul and all those people at a secret wedding. I smiled at her to show it was all right. Then I forgot all about the people because lovely little noises came, kind of singing, chirping noises. I saw all up in the roof there were masses of little birds, all singing and chirping in the most delightful manner, I felt so glad we hadn't paid extra for the beastly organ and hoped so much we would make a success of our marriage after the birds being so nice about it.

A little man called a verger came and told us the time had come to go up the aisle. I looked round the church quickly to make sure Eva, Charles's mother, wasn't around somewhere. She had said she would say she knew a just cause and impediment why we should not marry and I was dreading a scene

like there is in *Jane Eyre*, but she did not appear to be anywhere unless she was hiding. I soon found myself going up the aisle very fast on Paul's arm. I hoped my boss couldn't see the seam down Paul's back. People kept smiling at me; the landlady before the last shouted out, 'Would you like a kitten born on your wedding day?' as I passed, so I shouted back 'Yes,' just as I reached the altar. Charles was still there and the priest and James, who produced the wedding ring. Charles and I had to do a lot of talking, but it was not difficult, because we said it after the priest, and we were married in no time, quite safely, because Eva was not there to say about just causes and impediments.

When we got to the vestry Paul kissed me and I felt rather sad because it should have been Charles, but he was looking rather white and dazed, also he hadn't enough money to pay them for marrying us. It was quite a lot of money they wanted – about seventeen-and-six, I believe, but we borrowed it from James. Of course, we need not have paid, because they couldn't unmarry us if we hadn't. I expect people do that sometimes, but it would be rather unpleasant.

As soon as the wedding was over we all went to our spiritualist friend's flat. The reception was quite a success and she did not seem to mind that the party had grown so large. I was so thrilled by my wedding ring I didn't notice the guests much. I found a quiet corner where I could look at my left hand in all sorts of positions. The effect was rather spoilt because there was a lot of sea-green paint under my nails that I had not had time to get out.

After a time Paul said he would like to see the flat, so we took a taxi to the station to collect the things for his friend, but when we arrived at Haverstock Hill it turned out they were meant for us, so he must have made up his mind about us before he left home. There was a dear little oak tip-up table, in the hamper was linen and some glass and china, also there was an enormous bunch of asparagus.

He thought our flat most attractive, and before he left it was arranged that we should spend the next weekend at his house in the Cotswolds, so it was good to think that we were not at all in disgrace with him. After he left we walked round the shops and did our first shopping. I still had my two pounds wages in my bag, so we could buy quite a lot. I didn't know much about meat, so when we got to the butcher's, I said, 'Can I have a small joint of bones stuck together?' and the butcher told me that kind of meat is called best end of neck of lamb.

In the evening Ann came and helped us unpack and arrange things. We ate heaps of asparagus and drank Chianti which came out of a nice bottle dressed in straw; we kept that bottle for years. We were awfully tired and went to bed as soon as she left, but the divan we had bought on hire purchase was not comfortable at all, because we had no mattress on top and the clothes kept slipping off, also the sheets were new and stiff and smelt funny. We were much too tired to make love and it was not at all the kind of wedding night I had read about, but eventually we bought a mattress and were able to tuck the clothes in and the sheets were washed and didn't smell and we became proper married people.

1965 words, including intro.