

Our Spoons Came from Woolworths - 4 (by Barbara Comyns)

Sophia Fairclough, 21 and very naïve, discovered she was pregnant. Charles, her artist husband, was appalled and hoped she might have a miscarriage.

Episode 4

Before I married Charles I used to hope I would have masses of children, but Charles had told me he never wanted to have any, and I saw they would not fit in with the kind of life we would lead, so I just hoped none would come to such unsuitable parents. I had a kind of idea if you controlled your mind and said 'I won't have any babies' very hard, they most likely wouldn't come. I thought that was what was meant by birth-control, but by this time I knew that idea was quite wrong.

Sometimes I would find myself quite looking forward to the baby, and long to see and hold it in my arms, but when I told Charles I felt like this, he was annoyed and made me feel I had betrayed him in some way.

So far even Charles's mother had not noticed anything wrong with me, and I knew if it escaped her black, sharp eyes I was safe from the rest of his family for some time.

Then the Autumn came and the wedding cheques in the dresser-drawer were all gone. There was only a little box with some Spade guineas in it (**antiques – coined 1786-99, with spade shaped shield on them**); that's all that was left. They had been a wedding present too and we had hoped we would never have to spend them. Charles was very bright and kept saying something would turn up. He did get a job in a commercial studio, but it only lasted a week. He had to draw scrubbing brushes all day, and he wasn't very suitable for drawing brushes. Then he got two hanging signs for tearooms to paint and earned ten pounds, so we became full of hope again and had supper at Bertorelli's to celebrate. It was at about this time that the baby started moving about inside me and it felt strange and rather delightful. I began to wonder what kind it would be. I knew Charles never liked me to mention it, but I did ask what kind he wanted. He said he wouldn't mind so much if it was a girl and had long hair. I decided to call her Willow, which I thought a graceful, romantic kind of name.

I felt the time had almost come when Charles's family would notice I was getting full of babies, and they wouldn't be quite so upset about it if we had made a few arrangements about a hospital and pram and things like that, so thought it would be a good idea to ask some of our friends' advice about these things. Most of them were bachelor artists, with the exception of the spiritualist, Mrs Amber, and I knew she would suggest me having the baby on top of a mountain or else in a magic stream with silver leaves in my hair. The most sensible person to ask was Francis. He was a young portrait painter who had had more experience than we had and liked to give us advice on all kinds of subjects.

Francis said he would let us know in a few days the best and cheapest way to have babies, and he thought he knew someone who would give us a pram their child had outgrown. Two days later he came to see us and brought his

sister with him. They had discovered an old woman of eighty who was very rich and ugly and kind and abrupt all at the same time. She spent her days fixing up young Jewish mothers in hospitals and doing other good deeds. Francis's sister had spoken to her about me and she had agreed to help, even if I wasn't a Jewess. Quite soon I went to see her. Her house was large, dark and breathless and the furniture massive and sad, but the old woman was full of vitality. She was like a dark gleaming jewel in a dusty old velvet case. Within a few minutes she had given me a letter to Doctor Wombat of King Edward's Hospital, and had promised me a cot and some baby clothes and said it was a pity I was not a Jewess and hustled me out. I arranged to have a morning off from the studio. Also I told my boss I was expecting a baby, and he said I had better leave at Christmas. I did not like to tell him how much we depended on the money I was earning or he might have thought Charles wasn't a good artist, but it was rather a blow. I had hoped they would let me stay till the baby came and perhaps let me come back after and leave it in a pram by the railings while I was working. I was very frightened when the morning came that I was to visit the hospital, and I walked past several times before I dared go in. I went down some depressing steps and through a door with OUT PATIENTS on it. I showed an official-looking woman my note and she told me to sit on a bench with a lot of other women who were new patients.

It was very depressing and dreary sitting in that passage. One of the women fainted. I noticed some of them were carrying glasses of what I thought was lemonade, so I asked where I could go to get some, but they all shrieked with laughter at me, so I didn't dare to speak again.

After a very long time the official woman came and said we were to go into cubicles and undress. We were allowed to keep our vests on. I went into one of the cubicles which was like a wooden bathing hut. There were three other women there. They all wore big grey corsets, so it took them ages to undress. Some of them rubbed their legs to get the red mark of their garters off. They said the doctors were cross with you if you wore garters. I can't think why they did wear them, because they had forests of suspenders hanging from the grey corsets. I had no stockings and hardly any underclothes, so it did not take me long to undress and put on one of the pink cotton dressing gowns.

When I returned to the passage I was given a glass and told to put a specimen in it. I realized what a fool I had made of myself about the lemonade – if I had been dressed I would have left. After about another hour I did get examined by Dr. Wombat. He was young and charming and cheered me up quite a lot.

When I left the hospital they gave me a card which was pink and had my name on it. This card had to be produced when I returned to the hospital in labour. I felt sure I would lose it in all the hurry and pain and I would be turned away at the door. They gave me a pamphlet, too. It said I must always clean my teeth, with salt if I couldn't afford tooth-paste. There was some other advice about if you started to bleed, I think.

A few weeks before Christmas there was a great stir in Charles's family. Stiff-black-hat died. She caught 'flu, and it made her dead in three days, although she was only forty-four and not due to die for years. As soon as Eva,

Charles's mother, heard the news she came to London to stay with her brother Edmund. She 'phoned and asked us to come and console him, too. I didn't much like going to a house with dead people in it, but Charles said we had better go, all the same.

When we arrived at the gloomy Kensington house, they were all having tea – Edmund, Eva and Stiff-black-hat's mother, who lived with them. Edmund looked very tired, but Eva was full of vitality, and was telling him just what to do about the funeral, and advising him to sell the house and sack the servants, sell the furniture, get a housekeeper and give away the dog. He seemed rather dazed, and beyond saying Yes occasionally, took very little notice. I wondered what Eva's ideas about the old mother were. You could hardly sell or give her away. She didn't seem at all put out by her daughter's death and kept on stuffing away at little pink cakes. She started chuckling to herself, and said, 'Who would have thought it? I shall go and live at the Regent Palace Hotel and have a gay time.'

I felt now that Eva was so interested in the funeral and Edmund's affairs, it would be a good moment to tell her about the coming baby. I waited until she should cease talking for a moment. I had to wait rather a long time, but eventually she did and I found myself almost shouting, 'I am going to have a baby in fourteen weeks.' My news caused a great commotion and for the time being Eva quite forgot about death and funerals, and she left Edmund in peace and he fell asleep with his head hanging over the teacups.

Eva was rather impressed that we had made all the necessary arrangements. I did not tell her that I would shortly be leaving my job, because already she had said that penniless people had no right to have children. She didn't seem to think it was Charles's baby – only mine, because when I was upstairs putting on my coat, she said 'I shall never forgive you, Sophia, for making my son a father at twenty-one.' I almost added, 'And you a grandmother at forty-six.'

Charles went to the funeral. He told me all about it when I returned home from work. He said Eva had told all her relations about the baby, and they had asked him masses of questions about how he was going to support a wife and family. They had given him some money, though, four pounds in all. I was glad to hear this as we had only one golden guinea left, but my gladness did not last long, because it turned out he had already spent the money on some paints, brushes, books and an enormous walnut cake from Fullers.

We had the walnut cake and coffee for supper, and Charles said that now the time had come to tell the rest of his family about the baby, so we started writing letters all among the cake and coffee cups. I didn't like it to seem as if I hadn't any relations to write to, so I wrote to my brother. I was surprised when I received a letter from his wife a few days later, suggesting I paid them a visit after the baby's arrival. I was rather pleased about this. They had a nice country house. I had never been there, but had heard about it from my sister Ann who stayed there quite often. I think the reason they had not asked me before was that they thought I was a bit 'arty' and odd, but expect they hoped now I was becoming a mother I would improve.

The person we were most fritt of telling was Charles's Aunt Emma; she so disliked babies. We had been to her flat quite a lot since we were married,

and she had sometimes taken us to the Arts Theatre on Sunday evenings. Just lately I felt I was enjoying this hospitality under false pretences. Charles undertook to call round and tell her the dreadful truth. I thought this immensely brave of him. She received the news very coldly, and made it quite plain she was most disappointed in us. We saw her very seldom after this.

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