

Our Spoons came from Woolworths 5
(by Barbara Comyns)

21 year old orphan Sophia Fairclough has discovered she's pregnant. Her feckless artist husband, Charles, doesn't like the idea at all. She's about to lose her job, and they're very poor. She's told his mother, Eva, who's divorced from his father, Paul. Eva's not pleased.

Episode 5

Charles's father was a bit het up when he heard we were going to have a family, but at the same time, you could tell from reading his letter he was rather amused at the idea of being a grandfather, as long as it didn't cost him anything. My sister Ann had known she was going to be an aunt for some time, and she kept showering me with motherly magazines published by the firm she worked for. They were very sentimental, and called babies 'little treasures', and the walking ones were 'toddlers'. There were stories telling how much more men loved their wives if they were domesticated and had some children. In some of the stories the wives used to prefer going to work instead of doing the housework and having a baby. Their husbands always left these selfish wives, but just at the last minute the wife would become all domesticated and find she was having a 'little treasure' and the husband would come back.

By now it was nearly Christmas and the lease of our flat ended at that date. It was not worth renewing, because it would be too small for three people. Charles hated the idea of moving and suggested we kept the baby in the cupboard, but after reading all those magazines I knew it wasn't a good idea, and made the reluctant Charles go flat-hunting. I couldn't go myself because of work.

Eventually he found an attic flat in Fortune Green. It had three rooms and a kitchen on the landing. I had to work overtime the day we moved. It seemed strange to leave home in the morning and return to a new one in the evening. When I arrived, our best man, James, was cooking sausages on the landing by the light of a candle, and Charles had got a fire going. We had discovered you had to pay a deposit at the electric light place, so we had to do without any till after Christmas, when we hoped we would have some money left over from Christmas presents.

I looked about for the ginger cat, Ambassador, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then Charles told me a sad thing. When he had arrived holding Great Warty, my newt, under one arm and the cat under the other the landlady had said 'I never allow pets. Take the creatures away at once.' He did get Great Warty in by pretending he was a goldfish, but he left James to do the unpacking and took the poor cat to my old landlady and asked her to find a good home for him. We missed him very much, and I hoped she wouldn't expect me to give the baby away when it came.

Living in such an out of the way place lost us quite a number of our friends, but Ann and the faithful James came quite frequently. James was teaching me how to knit baby clothes. I did manage two vests that resembled badly-made porridge.

Our friend Francis and his sister came sometimes. Soon after we had moved they came, accompanied by an Austrian woman. She was a portrait painter and always looking for new models, so she asked me if I would sit for her. I had been so worried about how we would manage when my salary ended. A model's fee was half-a-crown an hour and she said she would need me quite a lot and would introduce me to other portrait painters. I just felt so happy; now I could tell Charles's family I was still able to earn money and not be a drag on Charles.

Two days before Christmas I left the studio where I had been working for three years. The other girls said what fun it must be to be married and going to have a baby. I said it was marvellous, and they must all come and see me. I said Goodbye to the boss and he gave me an extra two pounds on my last week's wages and shook hands with me. Then I threw my paint-stained overall in the dustbin and never saw any of them again.

Both Charles's parents wanted us to stay with them for Christmas, so we went to Wiltshire and spent a difficult week dividing ourselves between them; we even had to eat two Christmas dinners. Paul's wife was a managing, domestic kind of woman. She kept asking how I did my various household tasks and when I told her she would say it was all wrong. She was quite a generous kind of woman really, and kept wanting to give me things for the baby, but Charles said I wasn't to accept them, because Eva would not approve. He had always been brought up to hate his father's second wife, and when we went to see Eva, she would say, 'How is that dreadful woman?' and make fun of her. When we got back to Paul's house, Mrs Paul would say, 'And how was Her Ladyship? Is it true that she has a new fur coat?' Then she would go on for hours with much bitterness about how much alimony Eva had. I couldn't bear all this and said I must return to London for another examination at the hospital, and Charles said it was most important I didn't miss it, so we went home to have some peace.

The Austrian woman kept her promise and wrote and asked me to sit for my portrait. She painted several pictures of me and I enjoyed spending the day at her studio. There was a large gas-fire burning away, not one like ours that kept on going out because it wanted more shillings. I enjoyed the warmth so much and there was lunch, too.

When she had finished the third portrait she gave me an introduction to an R.A. she knew. He was most kind, and so was his wife. He said he would paint me straight away, and that he would like to paint me with the baby when it arrived. These people gave me lunch too, and these free meals were a great help, because I had grown dreadfully hungry lately and we were rather short of food at home. We only had the little I earned as a model. With this we had to pay for food, light and heat, and of course rent. Sometimes we were several weeks behind and the landlady would ask us for money each time we went in or out of the house. I felt dreadfully ashamed. Charles did not mind. As soon as he started to paint he forgot about the cold and money worries. That is how artists should be, but I was only a commercial artist, so I went on worrying.

When things were looking pretty grim, Francis put some hack lettering work in Charles's way, so we were able to pay the rent that was owing. Then another friend wanted their flat redecorating and asked Charles to do it. They paid

him ten pounds for this and it seemed like a fortune to us, and I was able to keep back a little of the money I earned to get a few things for the baby. I packed a suitcase all ready to take to the hospital in case the baby came too soon. I put two half-crowns in the case to make sure we had enough money for a taxi.

By this time I was growing rather large. Charles used to call me 'Dumpling', and his mother said I was a dumpy little person, and if the baby took after me she couldn't possibly be called Willow, which was a ridiculous name in any case. They seemed to forget how slim I used to be. My waist used to be only nineteen inches before I became all stiff with babies. Eva said, 'Why on earth don't you wear a maternity gown? You can't go about like that.' Needless to say, I couldn't afford one. There was one nice thing about being such a funny shape – it made strangers very kind. Busmen were so careful helping me in and out of buses, and policemen held up the traffic when I wanted to cross the road; it was just before they had traffic lights. The people who served in shops were most kind too.

Eva wanted to come and stay for a week before the baby was due – to help. This worried me a lot. I knew she was trying to be kind, but already she had stayed in the flat once and it was most difficult. She would spend hours in the bathroom and when at last she did come out, it would be left in the most dreadful mess, talcum powder all over the floor and the bath all scummy. Before I could get down there to clear it up, some of the people we shared the bathroom with would go and complain to the landlady, and there would be a lot of trouble. Another thing – we only had six towels, and as they were all small, she would use the whole lot for her bath. We only had two pairs of sheets, and one pair was always in the wash, so when Eva came to stay we gave her the sheets and slept between blankets, and as she expected at least two pillows, we gave her ours.

She had always had so much herself, she just couldn't understand how difficult it is to be poor and how the merest necessity becomes a luxury. She thought the lack of essentials in the flat was due to the fact that I was a bad housekeeper and did not know how civilised people lived.

I found it very difficult to tell her that I did not want her to visit us so near the baby's birth, but just had to trust that it would arrive early before she came, and I did all I could to make this come about. I even went to the fair at Hampstead Heath on Easter Saturday. Charles went with me, and I had to hold on to his arm to help me get up Heath Street, and it made him rather impatient with me, and when we did arrive at the fair, the music made me burst into tears. Charles said I was being even more stupid than usual, and if I felt like that I had better go home. Before we left he made a little drawing of the fair, seen from one of the little hills surrounding the Vale of Health. He was quite pleased with it and said he would bring his paints on Monday, but on Monday something happened to prevent this plan.