

Our Spoons Came from Woolworths – by Barbara Comyns

(The story is set in the 1930s, and was first published in 1950.)

Episode 1

I told Helen my story and she went home and cried. In the evening her husband came to see me and brought some strawberries; he mended my bicycle, too, and was kind, but he needn't have been, because it all happened eight years ago, and I'm not unhappy now. I hardly dare admit it, even touching wood, but I'm so happy that when I wake in the morning I can't believe it's true. I seldom think of the time when I was called Sophia Fairclough; I try and keep it pushed right at the back of my mind. I wish I hadn't told Helen so much; it's brought everything back in a vivid flash. I can see Charles's white pointed face, and hear his husky nervous voice. I keep remembering things all the time.

We met for the first time on a railway journey. We were both carrying portfolios; that is what started us talking to each other. The next day Charles 'phoned me at the studio where I worked, and we met every day after that. The sun seemed to shine perpetually that summer. It never rained, yet everything remained fresh and green, even in London. The summers used to be like that when I was a child, and in the winters there was always deep snow or hard frost. The weather has grown all half-hearted now; soon we won't be able to tell the change in the seasons except by the fall of the leaf, like it says in the Holy Bible, and that will be the end of the world; at least I think it says that.

Charles and I were both twenty when we met, and as soon as we were twenty-one we decided to get married secretly. There was a church next door to the house where I had a bed-sitting-room, so we went there to ask the priest to put the banns up. We dared not ring the bell at first, we felt too shy. Charles said they would ask us in and give us a glass of sherry and some funeral biscuits. We stood on the doorstep rehearsing what to say and the priest must have heard us, because he suddenly opened the door. He took one look at us with his deepset eyes and said 'Banns' in a shouting kind of voice. He asked us some questions and wrote down the answers in a black notebook, and said if we had an organ it would cost extra, and confetti cost extra too, because of the mess it made, so we said we could do without both those things, and he shut the door again. We went back to my bed-sitting-room and planned how we would spend the ten pounds Charles had just received for painting a screen with Victorian women creeping about. We were glad of the ten pounds because that was all we had to spend on our entire home.

A few days after we had arranged about the banns we had dinner with a spiritualist friend of ours, and after we had drunk a little wine confided our marriage plans to her. When we told her we only had ten pounds to furnish our home she gave us a cheque for another ten pounds to go with it; she also said she knew someone who had a flat to let on Haverstock Hill. The next free afternoon we had, we went to the address she had given us. A woman with very fuzzy black hair came to the door. She showed us the flat,

which consisted of a large basement room with an old-fashioned dresser, and a small kitchen and use of bath and lav. When we had seen it she said we had better meet her sister, so we went upstairs and met the sister, who had even more fuzzy hair, but it was fair, and her eyes were round and blue and her face like a melting strawberry icecream. She spoke to us a little and said we were little love-birds looking for a nest. She made us feel all awful inside. Then she suddenly went into a trance. We thought she was dying, but her sister explained she was a medium and governed by a Chinese spirit called Mr Hi Wu. Then Mr Hi Wu spoke to us in very broken English and told us we were so lucky to be offered such a beautiful flat for only twenty-five shillings a week; it was worth at least thirty-five. So when she had recovered we said we would have the flat, and left the first week's rent as a deposit.

After this we had a frantic time shopping; we did most of it in Chalk Farm Road, N.W. We bought a massive oval table for seven-and-six, and chairs for one-and-six. We painted all our furniture duck-egg green with a dash of sea-green. We found the rugs rather expensive; we had to have two and they were a pound each. The sheets and blankets were a great worry too. We had to get the divan on hire purchase and for months after were having trouble over it; we nearly lost it several times, but after two years it really belonged to us, and they sent us a large and legal paper to say it did.

We redecorated the flat ourselves. Because the room was rather dark we painted the walls a kind of stippled yellow, lots of black hairs from the brush got mixed with the paint, but they looked as if they were meant to be there almost.

We had white walls in the kitchen, and Charles painted a chef by the gas cooker. The thing we were most pleased about was the dresser; there were drawers for our clothes and shelves for the china. We had a proper tea-set from Waring and Gillow, and a lot of blue plates from Woolworths; our cooking things came from there too. I had hoped they would give us a set of real silver teaspoons when we bought the wedding-ring, but the jeweller we went to wouldn't, so our spoons came from Woolworths, too.

Every evening there was Charles waiting outside the studio where I worked. The evening before we were married he was there as usual, and as soon as I came out he drew some telegrams out of his pocket and handed them to me. I thought someone must have discovered about our marriage and they were congratulations, but when I read them I felt as frit as Charles looked. One was from my brother saying, 'Do nothing until you hear from me.' I did not worry about this much. As a matter of fact, it was over a month until I did hear from him again, but the other two telegrams were for Charles, one from his father and the other from his mother. They were very angry ones.

Charles had an aunt living quite near, so we decided the best thing would be to go to her flat and ask her advice. His aunt Emma was the only relation of Charles that liked me. We both admired her immensely. She was a very tall woman with red hair, and she wore a cloak and three-cornered hat. She wrote, and was altogether very intellectual and interested in women's rights, but she disliked children, babies in particular, but perhaps that was because she had never had any and couldn't very well now Simeon, her husband, had run away. People always talked about her tragic marriage in hushed voices when she left the room; you were never allowed to mention the name Simeon

in front of her. I thought it a wonderful thing that she approved of me and tried not to talk too much in case she discovered how stupid and ignorant I was. She even liked my newts, and sometimes when we went to dinner there I took Great Warty in my pocket; he didn't mind being carried about, and while I had dinner I gave him a swim in the water jug. On this visit I had no newts in my pocket and had the feeling I was going to be most unpopular, but when we arrived at the flat and Charles told her all about the plans for our secret marriage that had somehow gone astray, she was most sympathetic and helpful. She had the bright idea of putting a trunk call through to Charles's father. Charles did this, and said his father didn't sound too dreadful, but had arranged to come to London by train, an early one, and we were to meet him at the station, but we were to do nothing until he came. I had a feeling the father would agree to our marriage eventually, partly because Charles's mother disliked me so much. They did not live together, Charles's parents, they simply hated each other; there seemed to be a lot of unhappy marriages in that family, perhaps it was kind of catching. Charles's father was called Paul. He rather resembled Guy Fawkes and was handsome; women were always falling in love with him and it made Charles's mother even more mad. Her name was Eva. She was like a hard, shiny, rather pretty but horrid beetle, a spoilt, nagging kind of beetle. We were feeling awfully tired when we left Aunt Emma's flat and hardly spoke on the bus home. Charles came with me to the house where I lived. My landlady came running up the basement stairs in a great flurry, and said she had unintentionally given us away. That morning Charles's mother had called at his bedchamber, but as he was not there his landlady had sent her on to my house. When my landlady answered the door and Eva explained who she was, she was welcomed in and asked if she had come up for the wedding, so after that Eva spent the rest of the day 'phoning and sending telegrams to everyone she could think of. While we were discussing this, there was a great thumping at the door, and in tumbled all Charles's maternal relations. I tried to run up the stairs, but they just fell on me like a swarm of angry hornets. One woman in a stiff black hat gripped me by the arm. She said I was an uncontrolled little beast and when was I expecting the baby. Eva said it was all a trap to catch Charles. I told them I wasn't expecting any babies, but it took a long time to convince them, and they seemed almost disappointed when I did. All the time they tried to make out that I was wicked and sordid to want to marry Charles, and eventually I began to feel I was and my teeth started to chatter. Charles just looked very white and scared; he wasn't very much help. When it was about one o'clock my landlady told them they must go away because everyone in the house was complaining about the noise. Eva tried to make me promise I would not see Charles for a year, but all I would say was that I would do whatever Paul said we were to do when he came in the morning. This made her even more angry. She said if he allowed us to marry she would go to the church and stop the marriage. Then they all went, taking Charles with them. I never expected to see him again. I couldn't help wondering what would happen to all our beautiful furniture.

End of ep 1.

1950 words