

Our Spoons came from Woolworths 16 (by Barbara Comyns)

Through her son Sophia met a new man, another artist, Rollo. She was torn between embarrassment and attraction, as he came to tea at her employer's house and saw her at her worst, sweating in the kitchen. But he wrote to ask her out to dinner, and she spent all her savings on a lovely new outfit.

Episode 16

Rollo 'phoned on Friday morning to say he would fetch me at seven o'clock. I was glad I'd answered the 'phone, because I was shy for the Redheads to know I was having dinner with Rollo. I knew May would be surprised if she knew.

It was a heavenly day and I kept running outside to make sure there weren't any clouds. If it was raining or cold my new clothes would look so unsuitable. I knew it was dangerous to be too happy, because something always goes wrong, but I just couldn't help it that day.

At last it was time to put Sandro to bed. I had a bath and dressed very slowly. At last I was ready, and I felt so pleased with my reflection. It was the first time I'd worn a really lovely dress.

I heard May calling. I ran downstairs and there was May looking rather red and put out. She said, 'There is a friend of yours in the drawing room.' She gave a bewildered glance at my clothes. I felt scared to go into the room. I could hear Rollo and Mr Redhead talking. When I put my nose round the door, Mr Redhead said, 'Yes, Mrs Fairclough, what do you want?' So Rollo explained I was having dinner with him, but it took some time for Mr Redhead to understand. I felt pretty awful. It would have been so lovely if I'd been given a glass of sherry and Mr Redhead had forgotten I was a cook for a few minutes. But eventually Rollo got me out of the house and into the car, which he said he had borrowed from the girl friend who had a horse. I would rather have walked than used her car and I began to feel 'All this is the result of being too happy all day.'

When we reached Bentley Hall we sat in a large lounge. A waiter brought some cocktails. I became happy again, but was too shy to say much. I just listened to Rollo talking, and sometimes asked him questions.

I was happy to hear he expected to be in the village for at least another month. I couldn't bear to think of him going away for ever. He told me his father was dead, and his mother was dead too. He told me about his father's house in St John's Wood. He didn't live in it himself, but was thinking of letting it until he had made up his mind what to do with it. He thought there were toy railways in one of the attics that he had had when he was a boy and he promised he would hunt them out and give them to Sandro. Then we went into the dining room and had the most heavenly dinner, the first time I had eaten a meal that I hadn't cooked myself for over three years. We drank wine and I began to talk. I told him about my married life with Charles and a little about Peregrine – but I didn't mention Fanny; and I told him about Ann and my brother. I told him a lot of things and he seemed to be interested. It was such a relief to talk to a real person, not just the people I worked for. I was always afraid of making them think I wasn't a suitable person to have in the house.

While we were having coffee, Rollo said he had met Charles about a year ago and had actually visited his studio. He said he thought his paintings very good, but they varied a lot. He was always trying new methods and destroying his previous work. He believed he had gone to live in Paris now; but what really interested me was that he said Charles had a prehistoric-looking object in a bowl of water and it sounded as if he had kept Great Warty, my newt, all these years and my heart quite warmed to Charles. After our coffee we walked in the gardens, and Rollo held my arm and I was glad my dress had short sleeves so that I could feel his hand against my arm. It was time to go home, because the Redheads always went to bed early. We were back so soon, but the house was all locked up. Rollo tried all the doors but none of them would open. He wanted to ring the bell, but I was terrified of the idea of Mr Redhead snarling in his nightshirt. Then I remembered there were some ladders in the yard and we fetched one and it just reached my window. Rollo said he wanted to paint a portrait of me and could I start sitting for it tomorrow, and I said I would come to the cottage tomorrow afternoon. Then he kissed me goodnight and I don't know how I got up the ladder after that.

The next morning May asked me how I had enjoyed myself. I could see she was longing to ask me more, so I started talking about the day's meals and ginger puddings and things like that.

I hardly knew how I did my work that day. As soon as my duties were over I hurried down the fields. When I arrived at the cottage the door was open, so I went straight in. It gave me a lovely feeling to be so intimate with Rollo. He painted me in the garden lying on the grass in the sun, and after a time there was quite a row of heads bobbing over the hedge. So we thought it was time to go in and have an early tea.

Rollo came and sat beside me on the old-fashioned sofa, and I hoped he would make love to me; but when he did I felt all shaky and kind of worried. When he asked me to marry him, I didn't like to answer in case it was a mistake and he hadn't really said it; but he asked me again, so I knew it was real. Then I told him about Fanny and all about Peregrine and his disgusting wife, and any odds and ends of awful things I could remember doing. It only seemed to make him love me even more. We became engaged to be married.

The Redheads stopped shaking their heads over me, and I had letters of congratulation from Ann and my brother. Ann asked me to London for the weekend. Rollo thought it would be a good idea. He could come to London and show me his father's house. May was most helpful and offered to look after Sandro.

It was wonderful to be coming back to London after three years. I refused to use a taxi. I was so longing to go in a red bus again. I could see Rollo made a great impression on Ann. She gave us some sherry and there was a great deal of talking. Then Rollo 'phoned Prunier's and reserved a table for dinner. I still have the book matches I took home that evening.

On Sunday we went to see Rollo's house. It was delightful – early Victorian with a high-walled garden. There were masses of roses just coming out. Against the house there was a grape-vine. I couldn't believe I could be queen of all this. The house seemed filled with sun and air. One room was simply stiff with lovely, old-fashioned toys. Most of the rooms were furnished with

very beautiful antique furniture.

The weekend passed so quickly, but it was only a foretaste of the happiness that was coming. I felt kind of sorry when I said goodbye to the Redheads. The years there hadn't been too unhappy, just dull and lonely. I took Sandro to stay with my brother, because we couldn't very well take him on our honeymoon. Rollo had arranged for us to go to Portugal. He loved to surprise me with thrilling things we were going to do. We were married in a registry office, and after the wedding we had an enormous lunch at Boulestin's. Then we took a taxi to St John's Wood. We sat in the garden under the apple trees and I said it would be nice to have a goldfish pond. Rollo went into the house quite suddenly, and I felt worried in case I'd distressed him. Perhaps his mother had been drowned in a goldfish pond at some time. When he returned he told me he had been telephoning a landscape gardener, and when we came home there would be a goldfish pond, and if there was anything else I wanted that would be done as well.

The day after we were married we flew to Lisbon. Before we left the house I went into the garden and marked the place where I wanted the pond made. I didn't want anything else, because it was all so perfect.

That's the end of my book, but not the end of my story, which will go on until I die; but now we have come to such a happy part of my life there is very little to say about it. At first, because I wasn't used to happiness and freedom from worry, I would be terrified that disaster was coming round the corner at any minute. But nothing happened, so gradually I ceased to imagine all the dreadful things.

Once rather a nasty shadow from the past crept near me like a dark spider, but it vanished again. It was at the private view of an exhibition of Rollo's paintings. Across the gallery I saw a girl called Helen. I was very fond of her, and hurried over. Just as I reached her I noticed someone looking very intently at a painting of me. It was Peregrine. He looked all gruesome, very yellow, thin and bitter. I turned away quickly before he could see me, and there was Helen looking so surprised, and I said 'Come away.' I sent Helen back after a little time to see if the man with the disagreeable yellow face was still there; but he had gone.

Rollo had to go to the country to paint a general's portrait. It was the first time we had been parted and I missed him so much. I 'phoned Helen and asked her to keep me company. I took her into the garden to show her the pond. We sat in the sun and drank coffee. Helen talked about her husband, who was called Harold, and suddenly she stopped and said, 'Was that sinister man your ex-husband?' For a moment I didn't answer. Then I told her about Peregrine. It was a waste to talk about such distressing subjects on such a lovely afternoon, but she listened and I talked on and on and the ants carrying their eggs walked over our bare legs and we hardly noticed, and that is really how I came to write this story.