

## Our Spoons came from Woolworths 6

By Barbara Comyns

It's the 1930s. Young Sophia, married to penniless artist Charles, a reluctant expectant father, is near the end of her pregnancy.

### Episode 6

On Easter Sunday we had shepherd's pie for supper, and I felt rather sick afterwards and went to bed early. I usually slept alone in the bedroom now and Charles on the divan in the living-room.

I was wakened later by the noise of a great wind. The windows rattled and the door banged and my tummy ached quite a lot, so I thought it would be a good idea to go to the lavatory, but found the bedroom door was jammed to; then of course I wanted to go to the lavatory twice as much. I had to call Charles and ask him to open the door from the outside. He was rather annoyed at being woken in the middle of the night, so I went sadly downstairs, but as I was leaving I noticed some blood on the floor, and felt quite sure it had come from me, so remembering what it said on the hospital instructions, I went and woke Charles again. He was really angry this time and said I was always imagining things and even if it was the baby I would have to wait until the morning. I went back to bed feeling rather in disgrace. I awoke again with a start, and suddenly I was all flooding with water. I went to the living room and wakened Charles again. I told him I was sorry to be such a bother, but this time it really was serious. I'd grown so fat I'd burst. He could see I wasn't imagining things this time, and he looked quite worried. He said he would get a taxi to take me to the hospital. Then he looked in his pockets and only found ninepence, so I told him about the five shillings I'd hidden in my suitcase. When he opened the case, there was the pink card from the hospital saying I would not be admitted unless I was in labour. We didn't know if all this water was labour or not, but Charles said the hospital would have to admit me now I was all broken, so he went off to find a taxi.

When Charles returned, he found it rather difficult getting me down three flights of stairs, because I had become all doubled up with pain. In the taxi the pains began to come much quicker, but I discovered if I recited poetry very quickly over and over I could bear the pain much better, so I did this for the rest of the journey.

When we arrived at the hospital, I was taken to a dreary room with a lot of dark brown paint all over the place. I was given a bundle of hospital clothes and told to fold my clothes up neatly for my husband to take home. I didn't like parting with my clothes. It made it seem so prison-like. I couldn't escape if I wanted to without any clothes.

The hospital clothes were simply awful – a grey flannel shirt, pink cotton dressing-gown, and some really frightful white cotton stockings. As soon as Charles saw me he started laughing and said, 'Darling, if you only knew how funny you look!' I hoped I wouldn't die, in case he always remembered me like that. When he had finished laughing, the nurse told him to come back in

the morning. Then he had gone, and I felt dreadfully alone.

The next thing was being taken to a nice, tiled bathroom and being told to have a bath. When the nurse left I made several attempts to get in the bath, but I was so doubled up I couldn't manage it, so I just made some wet marks on the cork mat with my hands to make it appear as if I had. The nurse came back and caught me. She said I was a dirty woman to be afraid of water, and stayed in the room while I crawled into the bath. I was getting very discouraged by this time.

I was taken to a room with two nurses in it and some rather high beds without sheets. I had to climb into one, and they asked me some questions and filled in forms. Then one of the nurses shaved me and put some very strong disinfectant on me. This smarted a lot, but it was almost a relief to have a different sort of pain. Then they gave me an enema, the first I had ever had, and it shamed me a lot, but the next thing was worse – a large dose of castor oil which made me dreadfully sick for hours.

After this I escaped from the torture chamber and was taken to a room called the labour ward. There were other women there who were talking quite cheerfully, and it made me feel better, because all the nurses had been so grumpy and impatient with me. I had begun to think it was a disgraceful wicked thing to do, to have a baby.

I lay in bed for about an hour and kept shivering. The pain did not seem quite so bad now I wasn't being disturbed all the time. Unfortunately, a maid came with some tea and bread and butter on a tray. I took one look and was sick all over the bed. The nurse looked at me disgustedly, I was taken out of the labour ward and put in another room all by myself. Two nurses came and examined me. I heard one say it would be about two hours before the baby came. Two more hours seemed an awful long time. The pains got worse and I tried saying a poem, but they told me to be quiet. I longed to cry out, but knew they would be angry, so bit my hands. They gave me a bowl to be sick in, but without any warning the wicked castor oil acted and I was completely disgraced. The nurse was so angry. She said that I had disgusting habits. I just felt a great longing to die and escape, but instead I walked behind the disgusted nurse, all doubled up with shame and pain. The next ward I went to had a toilet behind a curtain. There were other women in this ward and I did so hope I wouldn't disgrace myself again. The pain was terrific now. It seemed like the end of the world.

Suddenly I was on a kind of trolley. The next place I found myself was a brilliantly lighted room with two doctors and a nurse. As soon as I arrived in the room I could tell they were going to be kind. I was lifted on to a very high kind of bed-table arrangement.

I explained to the nurse that I kept being sick all the time, but she didn't seem to mind. Every time I had a great pain she would say 'Bear down, Mother.' I tried to explain I wasn't a mother, but couldn't get it out.

Then I was enveloped in a terrific sea of pain, and I heard myself shouting. I suddenly felt so interested in what was happening. The baby was really coming now and there it was. Then I heard it cry, so I knew it was alive and was able to relax. Perhaps I went to sleep. The next thing I knew was the doctor was pressing my tummy, but although it hurt, it didn't seem to matter. I asked the nurse what kind of baby it was and if it was perfect. She said, of course it was, but I asked her to make sure it had all its fingers and toes. She

laughed and said it was a lovely little boy, rather small, but quite healthy. I couldn't help crying when I heard it was a boy, because I knew there wasn't much chance of Charles liking it – he particularly disliked little boys. I longed to see the baby, but they said I couldn't yet. It had stopped crying and I was worried in case it was dead. So I cried about that too.

I was being pushed along on a trolley again. I found myself in the largest ward I had been in so far. There were ten beds. The third bed was empty and I was put into it.

I lay dozing and feeling quite happy, the women chatting and nurses bustling about. At two o'clock the babies were brought in to be fed. I so longed to see my baby, but they did not bring him to me. It seemed odd to have a son I had never seen. I was sure he was cold all by himself.

When it was tea-time, they asked me if I had brought tea, butter, sugar and jam. I hadn't any of those things, so they said I must tell my husband to bring them next time he came. There were two visiting evenings a week just for husbands, and they could come on Sunday afternoon and bring a relation if they wished.

Then it was six o'clock and all the babies came again – but not mine. This time I could not help crying. I was sure he was dead. I knew if you took a new-born puppy away from its mother it died quite soon. I planned as soon as the ward was empty of nurses I would creep out and find my cold poor baby. Then behind one of the nurses came Charles. As soon as he came near I said, 'Oh, Charles, have you seen the baby? I know it is dead.' He said they would have told him if it was dead, and he didn't want to see it ever now it was a boy. I became so upset he went to the nurse and asked if he could see the baby. He looked awfully embarrassed.

When he returned he said there was an awfully nice baby rather like a Japanese, with lots of black hair. He said he wouldn't have minded that one so much, but ours was rather grim, very thin and red with red hair, and an awful look of himself about it. I asked if it felt cold and he said he hadn't touched it, although the nurse had tried to make him hold it. I was so glad to hear it was alive I did not mind how ugly it was, and if he looked like Charles he would be quite handsome.

Charles said he had borrowed some money to send telegrams to his relations saying we had a boy of six ounces. I told him it was six pounds not ounces, but he said a few pounds either way wouldn't make any difference. But Charles's telegrams caused a huge sensation, and his family was most disappointed when in due course they discovered we had quite a normal baby.

Later on, when they brought the babies in for their last feed that night, mine came with them. I just looked and looked at him, to make up for all the time I had missed. I thought he was the best baby I had ever seen. I looked at his little fingers and toes and they all had perfect nails. He even had eye-lashes; nothing had been forgotten. His tiny feet were frozen and his hands, too; I held him to me to warm him. The nurse came and said I was to try and feed him, but he made grunting noises and would not wake up, so they took him away, and almost before he had left the ward, I had gone to sleep.

(1977 words incl. intro )