

A Special Christmas Baby

(A Christmas Story - true in every detail)

Ruth Francis was often called Fan or Fanny. She was the seventh of eight sisters, one of whom had tragically died aged five; they were followed later by a brother, Eddie. Fan was a bright, biddable, young girl, bright, slim and pretty. Her parents, William and Margaret, farmed the sparse, undulating, rolling, hills and valleys around Penybont Common, near their farmhouse at Llandewi, in Radnorshire, tending their cattle and sheep. Fan was a willing helper on the farm and in the homestead, learning the arts and crafts and secrets of the countryside, and of the kitchen, which stood her in good stead for later in her life. Life was happy but hard, dependent as it was on the vagaries of the weather, and the needs of the animals. Winters could be hard, the land covered in thick snow blown into drift by fierce winds from the west coast; it often coincided with the sleepless dark nights during lambing, when Fan would act with her parents, as a midwife's assistant.

Leaving the local elementary school at 14 in 1932, Fan found employment at the Home and Colonial Stores in Knighton, the little market town whose river Teme, flows through its centre, forming part of the border between England and Wales. The bustling weekly market was not just an opportunity for the farmers to buy and sell their livestock, but also for their wives to sell their produce of fresh seasonale vegetables, butter, cheese and home baked breads and cakes, and for everyone in the scattered, often lonely landscape, to catch up on personal news of friends and their families. The children loved it too; Fan loved the noise of the animals, and the laughter and friendly bustle and banter of the farmers and their families. Aged around 16, she met a lad there, with whom she developed a serious understanding. So much so, that they were to have been married; indeed, they *would* have been, had it not been for his contracting and dying of TB.

When she was 19, by mutual agreement, it was decided that Fan should leave home and find her own way in the world. She obtained a position as a live-in lady's companion and cook, at The White House in Hagley, Worcestershire, for the wife of a retired colonel. She loved the busy life; despite the long hours, the work was varied, and she was well looked after and appreciated. It also afforded her the opportunity to visit the local towns, to experience a more urban way of life, removed from the harsh life in the countryside with its dependence on time and seasons and life-cycles, the season of the year, the animals and the weather.

On her day off, she would venture into the towns, and soak up the exciting life of the streets. One sunny day, she joined a friend to go into Stourbridge. Walking

along carefree, in calf-length flower-patterned summer frocks, wide shouldered, and belted at the waist, chatting and laughing, they looked in the windows of the drapers, the grocers, the butchers, the bakers and the hardware stores. They savoured the smoky, beery smells emanating from the doorways of the many pubs, inns and taverns, and watched the horses pulling their carts and trailers, dodging the cars. They tried to ignore the acrid smell of horses' droppings, mingled with exhaust fumes, and that from the chimneys of the foundry. They met a couple of lads of the same age, coming the other way; they too were in seeming high spirits, enjoying their hard earned free time. They were dressed in baggy trousers, checked shirts, pullovers, and sporting flat caps which they doffed with a mock bow to the girls. They exchanged names, and walked together to the local park, chatting and laughing as they went. Fan was particularly taken by John, a strapping, well-built young man, who was known, to all his friends, as Jack, although later she found his name was actually John.

The early 1930s had been dominated by the effects of the economic depression, which had created mass unemployment and consequent domestic misery. But as the decade wore on things improved. In the Midlands, aircraft and car manufacturing, raised the prospect of employment and hence the standard of living. But the shadow of Germany hung over the Country.

Jack and his parents, always, called Fan by her first name, Ruth. Fred and Martha were well respected butchers in Lye, with two shops, so Jack was apprenticed to Marsh and Baxter's in Brierley Hill, training to become a Master Butcher. It wasn't long before Ruth and Jack were officially "walking out" together. They would explore the Clent Hills at weekends, or queue in an evening, to sit in the popular, crowded, smoky cinemas, watching their favourite Hollywood stars. Life was sweet.

But it wasn't to last. War with Germany was looking more and more inevitable. Ruth and Jack had been 'going steady' now for two years, and Jack, being a true patriot, and seeing what was a possible, even likely, outcome, asked Ruth to marry him, before it was too late. On 14th August 1939, they promised themselves to each other at a ceremony in Stourbridge register office. They were both 21 years old. They didn't have a honeymoon, but moved into a room in Jack's parents' house. Jack had been right; three weeks later, on 3rd of September, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain announced on the radio at 11.15a.m., that Britain and France were now at war with Germany. Jack immediately enlisted, not waiting for his call-up papers, so keen was he to defend his Country and his new wife. He was initially attached to the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (MNBDO), to be trained as a Royal Marine. The emotional and devastating parting was finally

witnessed on the Stourbridge station platform; Jack saying “Good bye” to his wife, Ruth wishing her husband “Good luck”, before he boarded the train destined for his base in Plymouth.

Following their marriage, Ruth, being now a married woman, had by law, to give up work, and so had left The White House, but was still living with Jack’s parents. When she had saved enough for the fare, she would travel down to Plymouth by train to be with Jack for a weekend. Very soon Ruth found she was expecting a baby, much to everyone’s delight, but sadly, she miscarried. Women were more and more being encouraged to join in the War Effort, and Ruth was only too willing to do *her* ‘bit’ to support the Country and her man. She travelled to Bourneville each morning, helping to assemble Spitfire wings at Cadbury’s, much of the factory, like so many, having been given over to munitions.

Frank saw service in many parts of the world, including Burma, Ceylon, Crete, and Egypt. Like so many gratefully returning servicemen, he only hinted at some of the frightening experiences he had endured, but recounted many stories of comradeship. Ruth and Jack corresponded by frequent letter, but they had to recognise and accept, that all correspondence was heavily censored. In March 1944, Jack was granted leave, and was reunited with his beloved Ruth. Much had happened at home during those long war years of hardship and austerity. Her father William had suffered from poor health, and the weight of the work of the farm was too much to be borne by her mother Margaret. So she and William and Eddie moved into a rented house in New Radnor. To offer much needed support, Ruth left Stourbridge and her work at Cadbury’s, and returned to live them, but she continued her war work, travelling each day to Hereford, where she was engaged in filling bombs, ready for shipment to the front lines. Sadly, it wasn’t long before William died, and the house became too large and too costly to maintain. So Margaret and Ruth and Eddie moved across the border from Wales back into England, to the beautiful little unspoiled village of Clun in Shropshire, immortalised by A. E. Houseman in “A Shropshire Lad”. They took a small terraced cottage in a courtyard, named 4 Little Hospital, Newport Street.

This was a whole new experience for Jack, being with his wife in these completely alien, yet beautiful rural surroundings. The Feast of the Annunciation, when Mary had been told by an angel, that she was to be a mother, and that her baby was to be called Jesus, was celebrated on 25th March, during Ruth and Jack’s time together. All too soon Jack returned to his duties, and Ruth found she was, after five long years, pregnant again. There was much rejoicing throughout the summer, both at home and abroad. Ruth and Jack chose names for both a boy and a girl; a boy was to be called John William; William after his Grandfather, and a girl would be

named Susan Margaret; Margaret after her Grandmother. Nurse Langslow, the local midwife, who lived opposite St. George's church in the village, and was one of its greatest supporters, was duly informed. The expected date for the birth was put at 6th January 1945.

4 Little Hospital was a tiny terraced cottage in the middle of a three-sided courtyard. The front door opening directly from the courtyard, led into a living room, with an open fire at one end, and a black leaded range. There was a tiny kitchen with a bottled gas-fired cooker. There being no electricity, light was achieved using oil lamps; water was carried and stored in a white enamel bucket with a lid, filled from a solitary tap in the courtyard. The W.C. was situated in the small back garden. Upstairs, was one big room divided into two, so that reaching the second room, was only achieved by going through the first. Ruth's bump grew bigger as the end of the year approached.

On 16th December, German forces attempted to break through the Allied lines in the Ardennes region of Belgium, France and Luxemburg. This was the beginning of what became known as the Battle of the Bulge. It lasted five weeks of intense fighting, but ended on 25 January 1945 with success going to the Allies. Jack was only too well aware of the offensive, being as he was now stationed in the Orkneys, receiving special training for service in Europe.

There was a particularly cold spell around Christmas, and snow had fallen further north; Clun however, was spared the snow, but not the hard frost. Ruth, now battling with a bulge of her own, stayed in the cosy cottage, counting the days until her baby would be born in the room upstairs, sometime in the first week of January; everything was ready. Early on Christmas Monday morning, Ruth felt sensations she hadn't experienced before, but she was sure she knew what they presaged. She about to give birth. Nurse Langslow was called, and confirmed that indeed,

"... things are happening". She went home and turned off her Christmas dinner, and returned to the cottage, to be with Ruth in her labour.

That afternoon, Margaret busied herself cleaning the windows both inside and out; anything to take her mind off what was happening upstairs, but the noise emanating from the labour room, prompted her to go up and join in. At half past five in the afternoon of that Christmas Day, Ruth was delivered of a baby girl, Susan Margaret, weighed by Nurse Langslow, by hanging her in her first new nappy from a hand held brass scale,

"Eight pounds, and everything's just fine. I'm off to Evensong at St. George's now, but I'll call in later," and she was gone, leaving Ruth and her mother

Margaret to offer their own private heart-felt prayers of thanks for the special Christmas gift which they had received. Later, they heard strains of “Silent Night, Holy Night”, wafting up from the courtyard below. Nurse Langslow had been true to her word; not only had she been to Evensong, and told everyone the good news of the safe arrival of Susan Margaret, but it seemed to her, that the recent Ministry of Home Security’s relaxing of the rules about lighting in churches, added to the brilliance of the celebration of thanksgiving. She had left the service and returned to the new mother and baby, but now with members of the church choir, who at that very moment, were standing in the little courtyard singing the carol, illuminated by a sole lantern.

A telegram was sent to Jack, who immediately went to his Commanding Officer, seeking compassionate leave to visit his wife and new-born baby daughter. The response was not quite what he had expected,

“Whilst it was necessary for you to be present at the beginning, it doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be there at the end,” he said. However, leave *was* granted, and Jack having travelled by boat and train, had a brief couple of days with his new family, before returning to the Orkneys. It was the beginning of the end of the war, and having been one of the first men to enlist, and one of the nearest, he was one of the first to be demobilised after a few months after May 1945. Subsequently, whilst they were waiting for a council house to be made available back in Stourbridge, Susan was given a sister, Jean Ann, (also remembering her grandmother Margaret Ann), who was also born at 4 Little Hospital, on September 15th 1946. Having eventually moved to Lye, there was to be another sister, who was born prematurely in Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham, in 1947. She was named Carol, as she, like Susan, was also born on Christmas Day. Sadly, she died after just three days of fragile life, on 28th December.

Postscript.

Jack (John) died on 20th February 1995 aged 78

Fan (Ruth Francis) died on 10th February 2013 aged 96, with Susan Margaret at her bedside.

Susan Margaret, now has five children of her own, and eight grandchildren.

On Susan Margaret's 70th birthday - Christmas Day 2014 - all 21 members of her family celebrated together as a house-party in Church Stretton, Shropshire, some 10 miles from Clun. One of her presents from the family, was an original watercolour painting of 4 Little Hospital, showing the illuminated window of the bedroom where she was born, and a group of carollers in the courtyard below the window.

The artist is Maggie Humphry, a local artist, internationally celebrated for her ceramics, as well as her paintings. A display of several figures in a street scene commissioned by the Welsh Arts Council, can be seen at Theatre Clwyd in Mold.

Howard Brayton March 2016



