

CHAPTER 5

Tut, Sport, and a Man Called Briggsie

If you, dear reader, are an animal-lover as I am, you will understand why I am so determined to spare animals unnecessary pain. And you will also understand why I sometimes say my life really began only after I returned from my aunt's home in Frederick, Maryland, and I began to get to know some animals first-hand.

Though I did not like to complain, I reached a turning point just after my thirteenth birthday, in early December 1922. I wrote to Mother asking her to send me the train fare to come home for Christmas. I asked her, too, if there was any way I could return home permanently. I was so unhappy, so lonely, and yet I had never had an opportunity to tell Mother this when she visited me in Frederick. Somehow she scraped together the train fare, and I had my chance at last.

I will never forget stepping off the train at Washington's Union Station and into the arms of my sister, Margaret, and my brother, Jack. How happy I was to see them. At last, I felt free—for the first time in my life. The three of us celebrated with a chocolate sundae, bought at a delicatessen on Wisconsin Avenue. It was my first chocolate sundae ever, a wonderful treat made even more delicious by the joy of being with my brother and sister.

My family was living in a tiny, four-room house in Georgetown, now a very fancy neighborhood, but then just a working-class, down-to-earth place. My coming home meant that Margaret and Mother would have to share their bedroom with me. I was grateful that they seemed to do so willingly. Now I had to adjust to having no electricity and no central heating, luxuries I had known at the orphanage and at my aunt's house. But these were small deprivations in my mind. At last I was home.

Best of all, though, at last I got to know a dog—a five-week-old puppy named Tut, given to my sister, Margaret. Because Margaret worked as an addressograph operator, it was my job to care for Tut before and after school. A world of pure joy opened up to me. The puppy and I spent every available moment together. Caring for Tut was not a chore to me, but an endless delight.

When I looked into Tut's warm brown eyes, when I played with her, when I stroked her smooth, warm, coat, I could only think how very, very wrong my aunt had been about dogs.

But this paradise could not last. Six months after we got Tut, my mother decided she could not let me keep her because she was a female. I had no idea what the implications of being female were, and why that would mean that Tut would have to go—but once again, there was no arguing with one's mother in those days. At the time, neither Mother nor I knew about spaying. To Mother, there was no alternative, but I was crushed at the idea of having to give Tut away.

I asked every friend and acquaintance if they could take Tut, but no one could. I decided to take her to the delicatessen where I had enjoyed my first ice cream sundae. There I stood on the street with Tut in my arms, asking passersby if they could give my dog a home. It took everything in me to offer Tut over to other people—people I didn't even know. But it had to be done.

At last, two young men approached me. Seeing the tears stream down my face, one of them offered to take Tut. He said she could live at his office where he sold coal. I watched Tut to see how she reacted to him. They took to each other, and thus I lost my first real friend.

Heartbroken, I went home. I was devastated at the loss of Tut. Somehow, a few days later, I managed to get a nickel and I called the man who had taken her. He said she was doing fine. After that I thought it best not to call him any more.

More changes were coming. Mother had her eye on a house for sale in northeast Washington, on Capitol Hill, and she had managed to work overtime long enough to scrape together a deposit. In February 1924, we moved. Still grieving for Tut, now I had to adjust to a new school and classmates. Fortunately, Valentine's Day was just around the corner; and when Valentines were distributed, I received some from my new schoolmates. I felt much better. That was a good school year for me, with an interesting teacher and nice new friends, and gradually I recovered from the loss of Tut.

As I got to know my new neighborhood, I met many people who were out walking their dogs. One lady told me about the Animal Rescue League not too far from my new home. I thought to myself, "It *must* be a wonderful place if they have dogs!" I asked her for directions. The next Sunday afternoon I ran most of the way there.

Leona, the lady in charge, took me to the kennels. I had never seen a kennel before. Leona told me that not every dog would find a home. I determined that I would at least give them some extra love and caring, and every Sunday after that I ran down Capitol Hill to the Animal Rescue League, where Leona let me feed, water, and play with the dogs. My life was immeasurably happier now.

I would run back home after my hours at the League, overflowing with stories about the dogs I loved so much. I was overjoyed when Mother said I could have a male terrier puppy if the League had one to give me. She believed a terrier would kill any rats that might threaten our household. I myself did not care what kind of dog we got. Any dog would be wonderful.

When I went to the League on Palm Sunday 1924, Leona told me she had a puppy for me. He was curled up in a cage, sound asleep, a wee little pup of just six weeks, all white except for a bit of tan on his ears. Leona handed him to me with a big smile. I was ecstatically happy. I managed to thank her and took my precious ball of fur to show Mother. I named him "Sport," and with his presence in my life, the pain remaining from Tut's loss truly began to fade from my heart and mind.

I no longer had time to grieve over Tut, since Sport demanded a lot of care. He was very good at night, but as the sun rose, he would whimper—lonely for his mother and his littermates, no doubt. I would race downstairs and hold him until Mother got up at 6 a.m. Then I fed Sport and took him for a walk, taking tiny short steps so as not to hurry him. When I left for school, he settled down for a nap. I raced home during lunch time to feed him and take him out for his constitutional. He slept again in the afternoon, and after school he stayed in the yard until after the evening meal. We fed Sport table scraps. It didn't take much to fill him up since he was so tiny.

As Sport grew, it became clear that he was not going to kill rats as Mother had hoped. One day, I fed Sport outside, then watched him let a rat come right up and eat his food. Wisely, I thought, Sport had decided to give the rat plenty of room. Rats were not his enemies. He might have even thought of them as friends. I decided to feed Sport inside the house only from then on, but the rats kept coming, as if they expected something. I fed them leftover bread. To me, they were animals like any others. But you can imagine how Mother felt when she found out. She promptly put a stop to my rat-feeding.

Soon Mother decided Sport was not fulfilling his duties as expected. Now a medium-sized dog, Sport obviously had no intention of killing anything. The handwriting was on the

wall: Sport was going to have to go. When Mother handed down this decision, I wanted to run away with my dog, but my common sense prevailed. I went to Leona at the Animal Rescue League.

“Sport will have to be put to sleep if you bring him here,” she told me. There was no way I was going to let that happen to my happy, healthy friend. So I went to see the lady who had first told me about the League.

“You know, I’ve heard about a farm for homeless animals,” she said. “It’s run by a Mr. Briggs. Why don’t you telephone him?” She looked up his phone number for me. I called, my hopes high for my little dog. The lady who answered the phone said she would give Mr. Briggs my message, but he never called.

On a very cold January day in 1925, I was talking with a neighbor in front of my house when a large collie came to me. Icicles were clinging to the fur of this beautifully, obviously purebred dog; he bore no identification. The neighbor had never seen him before, nor had I. As we pondered what to do, a middle-aged man stopped and asked us if the dog was lost.

“I don’t know, but I think so,” I told him, “and we don’t know what to do about him.”

The kindness in the man’s blue eyes was readily apparent. “I run a farm for homeless animals,” he said. “I can send a man tomorrow to pick up the dog, if we can find shelter for him tonight.”

I looked at him in astonishment. “You must be Mr. Briggs!” I exclaimed.

Indeed, it *was* Mr. Briggs. Already I thought he seemed like the kindest man I had ever met.

“I called your house weeks ago,” I told him, “and I left you a message, and you never called back.”

It turned out that the lady who took my message was his cousin. She had a habit of not passing on messages about animals in distress, because she didn’t want Mr. Briggs to bring them to the house, even though it was not her home. Now that he knew my story, Mr. Briggs would be able to help me. I was so relieved.

I took the collie home to try to keep him in our garage overnight, so Mr. Briggs could have him picked up the next day. But when the man came for the dog, the collie had managed to find a way out of the enclosure, and was gone. I explained to the driver that, though there was no collie to pick up, I had to give up my own dog, Sport, and asked him to take my pet to Mr. Briggs’ Farm.

When the man picked up my Sport to put him into the truck, I ran into the house to cry my eyes out. But at least I knew he would not have to be put to death.

Months went by. I wondered about Sport, about how he was doing. Once again I spent my days grieving for a dog I loved and had been forced to give up.

Eventually, I met Mr. Briggs on the street when he was out walking his own dog. I asked him about Sport, but he did not know specifically about my dog. He invited me to join a party of other ladies who visited the Farm on Sundays, if my mother would give me permission. My heart leapt with joy when Mother said yes, and a trip was arranged for the next Sunday.

When we arrived at the Farm, located in what was then the Maryland countryside, I jumped out of my car, wildly excited about the prospect of seeing my Sportie again. I “met” every one of the 150 dogs at the Farm, but Sport was not there. The lady in charge told me that a white terrier with tan ears had been adopted by a family with two children a few months before. My heart sank because I would never see Sport again, but I was happy for my little dog. He was in good hands, and I knew it would be selfish to wish to have him back again.

That day, Mr. Briggs showed me around his 80-acre Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm. In addition to the 150 dogs, there were 65 cats, 10 horses, and a good many cattle. I held some of the dogs while Mr. Briggs treated them for mange. Though he worked hard as an attorney during the week, Mr. Briggs loved animals so much that he devoted every spare moment to their rescue and care. I had never met anyone so generous with his love and caring before. I left the Farm with a new sense of joy in my heart. Just knowing about the Farm, and about Mr. Briggs, made me deeply happy.

My visits to the Farm became a regular occurrence. I lived for each Sunday to arrive. In 1925, I got my driver's license—a rather rare thing for a young woman in those days—and I became a regular Sunday driver for the Humane Education Society's new vehicle, a Model A sedan, almost luxurious with its heater and automatic windshield wiper. [The Humane Education Society, which Mr. Briggs started before he met Mrs. Briggs, is the precursor to The National Humane Education Society.]

Every Sunday, I was getting to know James P. Briggs better and better. And every Sunday, I found there was more and more to admire.

Mr. Briggs started his organization in 1920, mortgaging his home to purchase the 80-acre property that became the Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm. He built the Farm's animal pens mostly by himself, learning carpentry as he went along.

In addition to rescuing animals and taking them to the Farm, Mr. Briggs held public meetings to inform people about the suffering of animals in steel-jaw traps, laboratories, cruel sports and practices, roadside zoos, and farms and slaughterhouses. He struggled tirelessly to publicize the plight of animals, writing letter after letter to William Randolph Hearst, Sr., trying to get the great publisher interested in exposing the cruelty in laboratories. I helped him with this correspondence, typing some of the letters. We were so gratified when Mr. Hearst devoted the centerfold of *The American Weekly* to this important subject.

Though I had been forced to drop out of school and take a job at a dry cleaner's to help my family's finances, I was learning a lot about humane work from Mr. Briggs in those teenage years. In fact, I was forming my vocation with his help. He taught me how to get people involved, how to care for animals, how to launch an effective protest against inhumane practices. He inspired me, nurturing my childlike love for animals into an adult commitment, encouraging me to be a vegetarian, as he was.

Until then I had never heard of a vegetarian, but in practice, I had just about become one. When Sport had been with us, I realized he needed meat in addition to the table scraps we gave him. I was only too glad to give him my share, along with a lot of gravy I would make and pour over any leftovers we might have had. Nobody ever heard of canned dog food in those days.

For Mr. Briggs, being a vegetarian followed out of his commitment to animals. He told how cattle and sheep on trains and in slaughterhouses suffered miserably. From that day on, I have never eaten flesh, and I have never missed it. Nor did my children eat meat or fish. Yet, contrary to popular belief, we were all healthy and able to out-work many of our meat-eating counterparts. [And, at 98, I am still a vegetarian.]

With Mr. Briggs' help, I learned how to rescue and care for animals who had been terribly mistreated, and soon I had an opportunity to test my skills on my own. In the spring of 1925, a friend told me about a next-door neighbor who was beating his German Shepherd almost daily. Apparently, the man wanted the dog to act like Rin-Tin-Tin, then a popular canine matinee idol. But no amount of training, shouting, and beating made the poor dog do tricks like

the man had seen on the movie screen. Though the man had named the dog “Cy”—short for “Cyclone”—there was nothing energetic about this oft-beaten, pathetic animal.

My friend told the man about me, and that I would be willing to take Cy off his hands, but the man would not relent. The poor dog was in terrible shape, afraid even to walk. This infuriated the man even more, and he whipped him mercilessly. Finally, the man realized he would never win this battle with Cy, and that no one would buy him in the shape he was in. So he called my friend and said, “You tell that friend of yours she had better come and get this dog before I kill it.”

When my friend called, I ran to the man’s house immediately. Thinking I might hurt him, the dog shook and looked for a hiding place. My heart went out to the poor thin creature, and though he was nearly full-grown, I picked Cy up and carried him home. When I put him on the floor, he ran behind a chair and put his head under it, trying to find shelter.

Of course, I knew Mother would likely be very unhappy about Cy’s presence in our home. But she, too, admired Rin-Tin-Tin; and because Cy was a German shepherd, I thought she might give him a chance. I knew I could fall back on Mr. Briggs if Mother would not relent. To my surprise, however, Mother felt sorry for Cy, even though it was obvious he was in no shape to catch any rats.

It took months to restore Cy to health, months of tender loving care I was only too glad to give. I would speak soothingly to him, kneeling on the floor if he was hiding. For a long time, Cy would not come out of his hiding place unless I coaxed him. Eventually, he would come out for my sister, but my brothers apparently reminded him forcefully of his former owner, and he stayed away from them. It took several months before Cy would accept their overtures.

By summertime, I could take Cy into the front yard, holding him and stroking him. He needed the support of my touch and constant “baby talk” in order to believe that all was well. He held his tail between his legs so much that people thought it had been cut off, so I taught him how to wag his tail again, moving it gently with my hand for five minutes at a time. Eventually he started wagging it himself, and the day came when he no longer kept it hidden between his legs. How happy that made me.

Though he still liked to hide behind his chair, Cy gradually grew bolder, happily running in the park with me. And one day, with the help of some puppies, he learned to trust Mother.

Someone had asked me to keep a couple of puppies for a few hours, which I did gladly. When Mother returned from work, and I explained that the puppies were not permanent additions to the household, she knelt down to play with them. Cy was very interested and watched Mother avidly as she petted the little puppies. Inching forward, Cy came over to investigate. Seeing that she liked the puppies, Cy realized that she might like him, too. Suddenly, the ice was broken. Mother reached down and patted Cy on the head, and Cy actually wagged his tail happily. I was thrilled.

After that day, Cy never had the shakes again. But still he had never barked. One day, though, we were both on the third floor of the house. Someone was at the door, and Cy ran downstairs barking. I followed him, delighted, and threw open the door. I shouted to the unsuspecting bread man, “My dog barked! Isn’t that *great*?” I’m sure the man thought I was a lunatic. After all, what would you expect of a full-grown German Shepherd?

I explained Cy’s story, and the bread man told me that until that day he had never known we even had a dog. Cy now had the confidence to be a watch dog. I was thrilled, and even mother was pleased: At last, a dog who could pull his weight in our household.

Cy was smart, too. Though I never tried to teach him any tricks, Cy learned to run and get his leash whenever I combed my hair in front of the mantelpiece mirror. When we went to the store, he seemed to want to carry something home, so I gave him a small basket. He would carry a lightweight item in it as we walked home together companionably. In fact, Cy became a real expert on grocery-buying. When he knew I was about to go out, he would carry Mother's purse to her by the strap. She would take out a five- or ten-dollar bill, which Cy would carry to me. Then he would pick up his little basket, ready to go to the store.

On our walks, Cy and I often encountered Mr. Briggs, out walking his dog. Sometimes we would sit together, and Mr. Briggs would confide in me about his struggles to keep the Farm going. Getting adequate help was a constant concern; caretakers did not want to stay at a place without central heating, electricity, or running water. I felt so sorry for this dedicated man who worked all day in the city, and then spent every available moment—and every available dollar—to care for the animals he loved.

Though there were many years between us, Mr. Briggs and I seemed to have a special understanding. Certainly we shared a commitment to helping animals, but Mr. Briggs was equally kind to people—especially to me, I thought. Whenever he thought of a special pleasure I might like, he saw to it that I had the opportunity to enjoy it, by giving me tickets to a movie about animals, for example. My admiration for Mr. Briggs was growing into real love, and one day I let my feelings show.

We were out walking our dogs when I thought of something I wanted to tell him. Without thinking, I blurted out, "Oh, Briggsie," the special name I called him in my mind. Embarrassed, I told him I had never intended to call him that, but he laughed and said he was glad of it.

Briggsie began to meet me almost every evening, after my shift at the dry cleaners ended at 8:00. Though I was only 17 when he asked me to marry him, I had no doubts. I knew my family and friends would disapprove of our age difference, but we both knew in our hearts that it could be bridged—and that it had already been.

On my 18th birthday, December 9, 1927, Briggsie and I went to Ellicott City, Maryland, where we were married in a parsonage. When the ceremony was over, the pastor told us he never married anyone unless he felt they were right for one another. He confided that he was absolutely certain that we would make a good married life together.

And that we did. For the next 18 years, I knew the great happiness of being married to the kindest man I have ever met—a man who would do anything to help people or animals in need.

Today, I like to think that, through our love, Briggsie and I were able to help the innocent creatures he loved so much. And it is in his memory that I continue the work we started together—work I will do with love in my heart until I am no longer able to continue it.