

CHAPTER 7

A Haven and a Refuge: Peace Plantation

For the 18 years of my marriage to Briggsie, I knew what it meant to be truly in love. To me, the man was an angel—a loving husband, a gentle father, a tireless worker for the innocent animals who could not help themselves.

Once married, we moved to the Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm, living in part of the caretaker's house. I got used to kerosene heaters, oil lamps, and an oil cookstove once again. Now, too, I learned to carry water long distances, in buckets, uphill when our rusty old pump broke down, as it often did. People think of these things as hardships, and perhaps I would, too, if I had to do them again today; but at that time they did not seem so difficult, because we shared all the work.

My life was happy and busy. I drove Briggsie to work in Washington six days a week. Three times a week, I went to a bakery to buy two-day-old bread for our animals, and then on to an abattoir (slaughterhouse) to get the cheapest available meats, beef lungs and livers. I hated going there, hearing the animals being driven to their slaughter, but I had no choice: Our animals had to eat.

Then I'd go back to the Farm and help prepare the food for 200 dogs and 70 cats. Fortunately, we could feed the larger animals, horses and cattle, on the hay and grain the Farm produced. Then, when the animals had all been fed for the day, I'd drive back to Washington and pick up my husband. Often, on the return trip, we'd stop to pick up an animal to take back to the Farm with us.

After his workday was done, Briggsie spent long hours taking care of the animals and repairing kennels. In fact, this was the pattern for the rest of his life: Work all day at a demanding office job, then work at night and on the weekends in his efforts to help animals. In spite of this exhausting routine, I never heard my husband say "I'm tired." Though in later years he became a bit stooped from leaning over his desk for many hours, he never lost his abundant love for life.

The Briggs Family Grows

When people ask me today how I keep going in spite of discouragements, I tell them I learned my optimism from Briggsie. I don't believe he knew how to be really discouraged—though he had some hard blows, especially when we lost the Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm.

With the arrival of our first child in March 1929, we had been forced to move to more congenial living quarters in the city with running water and electricity, but we managed to keep the Farm, working there in our spare hours. Back in Washington, D.C., I managed to continue taking stale bread and cheap meat to the Farm, hiring a babysitter to watch our son Jimmy while I took these trips. Times were hard. Often we found ourselves having to beg or borrow money in order to feed the animals at the Farm. How I hated pleading for money. I had no choice, with so many mouths to feed; but I detested it nonetheless.

We tried many avenues to make some extra income, including opening a candy store. I learned to make candy and worked hard, long hours turning out all sorts of delectable items, but still we found it hard to come out ahead.

Though we continued the candy business, hoping that it might turn a real, though modest, profit someday, things only got worse for us financially. Of course, there was still much joy in

our lives: Our son Bobby was born in April 1931, and we continued our work with the animals, though under increasingly difficult conditions. But in 1932, the economic disaster known as the Depression finally robbed us of our Farm. For want of \$6,500, we lost it. And though I was not too proud to beg on behalf of my animals, there was no way to raise this enormous sum of money in those bleak days.

We were heartbroken, but there was nothing we could do other than try our best to find homes for the animals at the Farm. With the help of Mrs. Kibbie of Bide-A-Wee, a humane organization in New York which took in 150 of our least-likely-to-be-adopted dogs, we placed every animal in a good home.

And so it was that the doors closed on the Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm. Briggsie turned his attention to the needs of animals in laboratories and steel traps. As for me, I closed the candy store in 1933, choosing to find a job with a regular income. But first, with Briggsie's encouragement, I decided to return to high school and get my diploma, which I received in 1936. Fortunately, a kind, loving, and dependable woman name Ruby Brown had come into our lives; Ruby helped with our children while I attended classes. She was a great blessing to our growing family, especially when son Jack was born in 1934 and daughter Virginia in 1937.

I named my daughter Virginia after my friend Virginia Sargent, President of the Animal Protective Association, who ran an animal shelter. I helped Miss Sargent whenever I could in the kennels; she in turn allowed me to board animals in need at her facility until good homes could be found for them. Thanks to Miss Sargent, I was able to continue the animal work Briggsie and I had been so devoted to at the Farm. During these years, I also worked with a lady named Alice Morgan Wright. We who loved animals formed a network all around the area, doing whatever we could to help animals. Both Miss Sargent and Miss Wright were instrumental in my work and to The National Humane Education Society as it exists today.

These were busy years, with my young family, my animal rescue work, and, as of April 1941, a secretarial job with the U.S. Army. Since Briggsie was so much older than I, I realized that I needed to prepare myself to support my children. The last thing I wanted was to be unable to keep my family together if my husband died—the same thing that had happened to my mother, splitting our family apart. Since Briggsie's health was not good, I urged him to retire. But this hard-working family man would not hear of it.

On December 7, 1941, as the Pearl Harbor attack was announced over the radio, Briggsie and I were signing papers to buy a house in Riverdale, Maryland. We moved our family there, and from then on both of us worked six days a week, and, because of the war, often on Sundays, too.

Despite our long, hard hours and our concerns for our nation and its allies, our family was thriving during those war years. Jimmy, our oldest son, had excelled in school. He graduated from high school in 1945, at the age of 15, and was accepted early by the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. That summer was a good one for our children, who loved living in Riverdale and had many friends.

Briggsie was working harder than ever to spare dogs from vivisection, pushing for the passage of the Dog Exemption Bill in Congress. On September 8, 1945, he traveled to Philadelphia to talk with colleagues there about the proposed legislation. I picked him up on his return to Union Station, noticing how very tired he looked and how slowly he walked toward the car. He did not say much and I did not press him for details of his visit.

We had gone only a few blocks when he asked me to stop for a bit. I wanted to take him to the doctor, but he said no. I soon realized that he was going into a coma. I rushed him to a hospital, but the shot of adrenalin he was given did not revive him.

Jimmy and Jack were with me. I hugged my sons as I broke the news of their father's death. Then we went home to tell Bob and Virginia, or Ginger, as she is called. My children had never known death before. They had never even been to a funeral. The boys tried not to burden me with their sorrow, spending a lot of time together in their big bedroom. Ginger, though, was bewildered, and clung to me.

We decided it would be easier to leave our Riverdale house, with its many reminders of Briggsie, and to start anew. We sold it and moved to a house in Washington with more affordable payments. I realized that I must find an additional source of income. Fortunately, Virginia Sargent offered me work doing bookkeeping for her shelter. My two older sons graduated from school and went to work, Jimmy at the State Department and Bobby at a bank. As a family, we pulled together, and I am so grateful for that.

Peace Plantation Is Born

All through these sad times, of course, we still carried on in our work for animals. In 1948, Alice Morgan Wright, who was—among other things—an heiress, an animal rights activist, an organizer of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a sculptress—approached me with an idea.

“Anna, we need to start a national organization,” she said, “so we can do the most effective work possible for the animals.”

Together, Miss Wright and I started The National Humane Education Society (NHES) that year. Its guiding principles, reproduced at the end of this chapter, were authored by Miss Wright, a great lady whose contributions to the well-being of animals are legion.

At about this time, Miss Sargent, who had been running the shelter I worked with, told me she was going to have to close it down. Now I knew I would no longer have a place to house strays and rescued animals. This worried me greatly. I told Miss Wright about the situation, and she promised financial backing to start a shelter under the auspices of NHES.

My son Jimmy and I went out looking for a suitable place. After quite a search, we found a 145-acre place in Sterling, Virginia, with a large house and garage, two sheds and a chicken house. Its price was \$50,000. Miss Wright came from Albany to look at it, and offered to donate half the purchase price. Jimmy and I decided to take her up on it, and we would meet the monthly payments of this first shelter of NHES.

We sold our house in Washington, receiving about \$6,000 in equity, which we used to put up a frame building large enough to house about 50 dogs. My sons used their heads and their hands to do the enormous amount of work that built our first Peace Plantation, including piping water from a lake uphill to the kennels, erecting pens, and painting and concreting.

A Lady Named Ruby: The Heart and Soul of Peace Plantation

As we prepared for the move to Sterling, I realized how badly we would need help in caring for the animals. I turned to my old friend, Ruby Brown, a Black woman who helped me for years by babysitting for my children when they were little, when I was working or helping at the Be Kind to Animals Rest Farm. Ruby was a widow with six children, living at home in an

inner-city area of Washington. Rats were frequent visitors in that neighborhood, and it was not the best environment in which to raise children.

I didn't know if Ruby would want to come to Sterling, Virginia, to be the chief animal caretaker of Peace Plantation. And in those days, in Virginia, hiring a Black person for such a responsible post was nearly unheard of. But Ruby's color never concerned me. I wanted the kindest, most loving, most competent person for the most important job at Peace Plantation. So I asked Ruby, "Would you like to come live in the country?"

"I sure would," she said. Her curiosity was piqued.

I told her what her duties would be if she accepted my offer to work and live at Peace Plantation: fixing enormous quantities of food for cats and dogs, cleaning their pens and litter boxes, going on emergency rescue missions—whatever it would take to give hundreds of needy animals the best possible care.

It wasn't a job for just anybody, I explained.

"How will I know how to take care of cats and dogs?" Ruby asked me.

"You'll learn," I told her, chuckling. "They'll teach you!"

God was good to me that day. Ruby said "yes," and moved with us to Peace Plantation on July 1, 1950, its first day of operation. Without Ruby, there is no way we could have handled the quickly growing reputation of Peace Plantation as a great place to take animals in trouble—a place where no healthy animals would ever be euthanized.

My boys converted an open shed into a small house for her, a place she referred to proudly as "my little white house." At first, I could offer her only a very paltry salary, in addition to her room and board. Later, I'm glad to report, NHES was able to pay Ruby more appropriately—but of course no amount of money could ever pay for the kind of love and caring she gave to thousands of animals in her years at Peace Plantation.

Ruby stayed with us in Sterling, then moved again when we relocated Peace Plantation to Leesburg, Virginia, in 1965. For 34 years, Ruby was the heart and soul of Peace Plantation, my right arm and half of my left. Knowing that Ruby was in charge, I could leave our place to go rescue animals or to raise money we so desperately needed to keep our operation going. Ruby took to her duties as if she had been doing them all her life, greeting all guests and giving tours to school and civic groups. No animal rescue effort was too strenuous for her. And she loved the animals so much that she would go out of her way to prepare treats for them—stopping on the roadside to pick watercress to add to their meals, making corn on the cob with margarine for the cats, fixing up any little delicacy that might add pleasure to their lives. (Yes, cats like watercress, corn on the cob—and potatoes!)

"I try not to favor any cat or dog in our charge," she would say, "and I strive to pass my love to all of them in my care. No task is too menial when it comes to tending to the cats and dogs."

Removing leftover food and cleaning litter boxes never seemed to bother Ruby. Nor did washing the carpets and rugs from the animals' pens—by hand, on a washboard, because Peace Plantation didn't have a washer or a dryer in those days. We all shared in this heavy work. Ruby never complained of it. She felt it was a privilege to take care of the animals.

Ruby's love and dedication showed—in the animals' sparkling-clean cages, in their odor-free quarters, in their healthy coats and eyes, and in their happy demeanor. People from all over the region and even across the country got to know Ruby well when they brought animals to us or adopted them from us.

"Ruby *was* Peace Plantation," people told me when she died.

That was a terrible day, the day Ruby died.

It was September 8, 1984. I was away from home, in New York City, in the tunnels beneath Grand Central Station. My work there had started in 1972. Two railroad employees had been feeding the wild cats who lived in the station's underground area, but now they were about to retire. They worried about what would happen to the animals. I went back several times in that first year or so, bringing back many cats to Peace Plantation. Others who helped with the rescue promised to keep an eye out to make sure no more cats remained. They promised to call me if they saw others who needed our help.

I didn't hear from them until 1984, when they asked me to come and rescue many more cats now living there. I put my humane traps out as always, but got only one cat and a kitten. It turned out that some well-meaning ladies, fearing I would nab the cats and have them put to sleep, had fed them already that morning.

Greatly discouraged, I called home to check on matters at Peace Plantation, as I always did when I was traveling. To my horror, I learned that Ruby had been taken ill and sent by ambulance to the hospital.

I got back to Leesburg as fast as I could; but by the time I arrived, Ruby had died of a heart attack. She was 76 years old, one year older than I, and she had been my friend since we met on my 18th birthday. I felt my whole world had come to an end. Of course, the world did not end. No matter how heartbroken we might be, life has a way of going on in spite of our feelings. And we had new challenges to meet.

The area around Peace Plantation was starting to become very fashionable in the early 1980s, as the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area continued to expand into the countryside. My daughter Virginia and I had a discussion in 1982 about what we would do if the farms surrounding Peace Plantation were sold off, subdivided, and developed. Surely people buying fancy new homes would not want to be near a thriving animal shelter like ours. Anticipating changes in the area zoning, we started looking for a new place.

At first, we asked one of our neighbors if they would sell us 100 acres. This, we figured, would be adequate "insulation" between us and any encroaching suburban community. Certainly, said the neighbor, for \$400,000. We laughed. Such a price tag was out of the question. We had been operating on a shoestring for years. For years, I had worked full-time at my government job, running NHES and Peace Plantation in the evenings and on weekends. Of course, I would have preferred to devote all my time to Peace Plantation, but financial reality would not allow it—just as financial reality made \$400,000 an impossibility.

Because property was so expensive in our area, we looked in neighboring states—West Virginia and Pennsylvania. But nothing turned up there, so we kept looking, going into rural New York. At last, we found a 138-acre farm near Walton, a small town in upstate New York. The farm had a small kennel and a very nice stable we could use as temporary quarters for animals.

In 1983, The NHES Board of Directors approved the purchase of the Walton farm, and endorsed our decision to create a new Peace Plantation there. In May, my daughter's husband, Earl Dungan, went to Walton to get the operation started. So by the time of Ruby's death in September 1984, things were well under way at Walton. It seemed to me that Earl had worked miracles with our new facility, which we moved into late in 1984, taking many trips in our station wagon or pickup truck to transport our animals from Leesburg to Walton.

I only wished that Ruby had been able to share our joy as we dedicated our new facility to the ongoing work of The National Humane Education Society. At first, it didn't feel like

Peace Plantation, because Ruby was not there to make it so. But today, in my mind's eye, I can imagine this great lady playing Pied Piper to the hundreds of cats in our much-improved facility in Walton, sharing with them her unbounded love and devotion. And somehow, I think Ruby's spirit is still with us, blessing our work as only she could do.

Heaven knows we need her still, as the requests to help needy, hurt, frightened animals continue to pour into our offices, and as we strive to meet their needs, doing our best to be one candle in the darkness of a cold, cruel world.

The National Humane Education Society's Thirteen Guiding Principles

1. To oppose cruelty in all its forms.
2. To strive for an end to bullfighting, rodeo, and all cruel sports wherever performed and wherever represented as art or as entertainment.
3. To strive to abolish cruelty trapping. (In my estimation there could be no such thing as a "humane trap." The words are a contradiction in terms. Only a box-trap should be tolerated.)
4. To discourage hunting, especially as a sport.
5. To oppose all poisoning of wildlife.
6. To protect and conserve wildlife for its own sake and not as a resource for Man's exploitation.
7. To aid or initiate programs for slaughter reform.
8. To teach humane handling and care of work animals and food animals.
9. To cooperate in efforts to find more humane methods of catching and killing the fauna of the sea, especially whales and seals.
10. To advance programs for the humane sterilization of cats and dogs in order to reduce their over-population.
11. To provide for the rescue, housing, and feeding of lost, stray or abandoned animals, until suitable homes are found.
12. To urge that when it is necessary to put any tame animal to death, unless some better method of euthanasia is available, it is so arranged that the animal be held in the arms of some human friend while he or she is being given a painless preliminary anaesthetic, to be stroked and comforted with reassuring words until he or she loses consciousness, after which the lethal agent should be quickly administered.
13. To recognize in animals their capacity for friendship and their need of friends. To befriend all Earth's creatures, of the land, the sea and the air; to defend them against ravages by mankind, and to inspire in human beings compassion for all.