

October 1992



Fragments of AA History

Sister Ignatia of Rosary Hall

It was in the spring of 1958, about a year after Madeline and I had joined AA together, that I received a late-night call from Clyde T., asking if I would help him take a sick alcoholic to Cleveland's Rosary Hall the next morning. The place was 140 miles from our town of Deshler, Ohio. Clyde said he had called a nonalcoholic woman named Sister Ignatia to make the arrangements. He had met her on some earlier visit. "You'll like her," he said. "Before she went to Rosary Hall, she worked with Dr. Bob at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, back in the early days of AA. She was the first person who ever got one of Dr. Bob's sick alcoholics into a hospital."

Early the next morning, we picked up our new fellow AA, Ted W., in a tearful scene with his wife and five children. Ted had taken a time-out from AA for a binge, and a week's wages had disappeared. His wife was

in deep despair, and Ted was a picture of remorse. He was almost eager to go with us to Rosary Hall.

Sister Ignatia, in an immaculate white habit, was there at the reception desk. As she rose to greet us I must have had a sudden look of shocked surprise. Clyde's comments about her heroic deeds had led me to expect some sort of powerhouse person; instead, I found myself towering over a delicately beautiful woman who stood a scant five feet tall and weighed less than 100 pounds. The welcoming hand she stretched out to us was a tiny one, but the handshake was remarkably firm. She looked me straight in the eyes with a strong, steady gaze that commanded my total attention.

She spoke softly but very precisely. After a gracious welcome to Ted, she told him: "This is a one-time, fourteen-day program. You may return here as a visitor, but you may never

return as a patient. You should also know that this is not an official AA program, but we have regularly scheduled AA meetings, which you will be required to attend. You also will be invited to lots of informal, impromptu meetings our patients hold at all hours. Please go to as many meetings as you can, because AA is the best way to stay sober."

After Ted was checked in, Sister Ignatia continued an unhurried conversation with Clyde and me. She took a keen interest in what he said about my AA progress and made me feel highly complimented with her questions. In just a matter of minutes, she gave me a kind of encouragement that stayed with me for many months.

When we picked Ted up, fourteen days later, Sister Ignatia reminded him: "Keep in touch with your AA sponsor." She also gave him a little disk, about the size of a poker chip, and said, "Keep this in your pocket with your change. Before you ever buy another drink, try to break this chip in two. It will make you give extra thought to what you're doing."

My second meeting with Sister Ignatia came about eighteen months later. It began, again, with a call from Clyde T. Our group had asked the local police department to let us know anytime they picked up someone for drunkenness, and the police had welcomed our offer. Now they had a drunk for us.

This was a very inconvenient time for me. I was a farmer, working in one of my fields and trying to beat a

forecast of bad weather. After talking with Clyde, I had to ask my young son Johnny to take over on the tractor. Johnny was barely old enough to handle a tractor, but he knew how.

Clyde and I drove to the city jail and picked up a man in his sixties who called himself Bus. He had been locked up for about twelve hours after being involved in a drunken brawl, and he was a mess. I remember especially that he was wearing a dirty old beaver hat, with the lining torn out and hanging down one side of his face. He was surly and refused to shake hands with us, but we were stuck with him.

After his twelve hours in a cell, Bus was soon complaining about thirst and demanding a drink. We stopped and bought him two bottles of Coca-Cola, which he promptly drained, so we stopped and bought him a six-pack of Coke. He was soon complaining again about thirst, but we told him enough was enough.

This time, Sister Ignatia took one look at the patient then looked very suspiciously at me. I gave her my most pleading look, hoping she wouldn't send us away on a return trip with this disagreeable drunk. I guess she read my mind. "We will accept him," she said. Then she turned to Bus and asked, "Before we take you in here, let me ask you: Do you think you could get sober on your own, without help?"

Bus's response to that was a burst of profanity. He was a big man, over six feet tall and weighing more than



250 pounds, and he was *loud*.

Almost instantly, I saw a totally different Sister Ignatia. She was out of her chair and on her feet, waving a finger in that man's face - and he was wilting. In a steely tone, she told him: "Sir, we do not tolerate vulgar language of any kind in this place. If you say one more word like that, you will *leave!*"

Then in a suddenly gentle tone, she asked me, "Has this man had a drink of liquor recently?"

"No," I said. "Not for about fifteen hours or so."

She nodded, called an orderly, and told him: "Take this man out, give him two double-belts, and bring him back in twenty minutes."

As soon as Bus had left the room, Sister Ignatia asked me, "Karl, have you ever seen a real bad case of DTs?"

I shook my head. "No, Sister, I haven't."

"Well," she said, "you very nearly

did. I should warn you that when you bring somebody on a trip of that length, do not bring him without some alcohol to drink - especially if he has been in jail and has been completely off it."

It was another year later that I had my third and last meeting with Sister Ignatia. On that occasion, Clyde and I brought her an AA friend named Ruff W., a dignified, well-dressed business executive in his fifties.

Ruff's wife, who was in Al-Anon, had called me at about ten the night before, asking if Madeline and I could come over to their house, right away, to see Ruff. We were puzzled by what sounded like an emergency, because Ruff had never shown any signs of a problem. To us, he was always a model AA.

When we arrived, we learned that Ruff was drinking. Ruff's wife Martha had hidden his bottle and Ruff was getting belligerent. I asked Martha to put the bottle out on the table and let him drink as much as he wanted.

Ruff looked at the bottle for a long time. Then he turned to me and asked, "Won't this bother you?"

"No," I said, "because I don't want any of it. You're the one who's sick, and I guess you want to get sicker. So go ahead."

"I will," he said. "I'll drink it all."

"Fine," I told him. "If that's not enough, I'll get more."

Ruff kept muttering, "I'll drink it all," but he never touched it. After a long while, he slammed his fist on

the table and told me, in a pitiful, pleading way, "Y'know, I've got to do something about this. I've been on this now for about two or three weeks and I can't get off it."

I said, "Would you be willing to go to Cleveland, to Sister Ignatia's hospital?"

"I'd be willing to go anywhere," he said, "if you can just get me off of this."

It was going on midnight by that time, but I called Clyde, who never complained, and Clyde, I, and Ruff set out for Cleveland. I told Clyde I would bring a bottle along so that we

wouldn't repeat the mistake we had made with Bus.

Ruff was a gentleman, and very polite. But he decided when we were about halfway to Cleveland that he was going to go back home. He began to make such a fuss that Clyde handed him the bottle and said, "Have a little drink, Ruff." That calmed him down so quickly that we continued to offer him a drink whenever he talked about going home.

When we arrived at Rosary Hall, Ruff got out of the car and asked, "Where are we?" I told him, "You're at Rosary Hall and you're going to



be a patient here for two weeks."

"Oh, no I'm not," he said in a very feisty way, and he started to get back into the car, but I grabbed him. He fought back and suddenly we were having a disgraceful scuffle right there in front of Rosary Hall.

Fortunately, Clyde quickly intervened, bottle in hand. "Come on, Ruff," he said, "have a little drink." Ruff took one big swallow, and then a few more, and then we all walked quietly into Rosary Hall and up to the reception desk where little Sister Ignatia was waiting in her immaculate white habit.

She immediately called my name, and I was flattered that she remembered me so well. But her voice, this time, was surprisingly stern.

"Karl," she began, "I told you to give the person a little something to drink." Her voice rose again and she gave me her most wilting look. "I did *not* tell you, Karl, to bring him here *drunk!*"

Ruff was mumbling incoherently, and he asked Sister Ignatia, in a loud, slurred voice: "Who are you?"

Sister Ignatia began to speak softly to Ruff and within five minutes he was answering questions like a sober person. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing. When Clyde and I began to leave, Ruff was suddenly terrified. But Sister Ignatia calmed him down with a few more words. She had a way of working miracles with unruly people.

Later when I was talking with Sister Ignatia about Ruff and his refusal

to admit he was an alcoholic, she said that some people seemed to need one more, final drunk. "It's just possible," she said, "that this was what he needed."

That was the last time I saw Sister Ignatia of Rosary Hall. Madeline and I were about to leave the farm, with our four young ones, and move to New Orleans; and we were never good with letters, even to old friends. But I kept inquiring about Sister Ignatia when I met Ohio people at meetings, so I was promptly informed about her death in 1966.

I didn't see a picture of Sister Ignatia until *Dr. Bob and the Good Old-timers* came out in 1980. And never, in any of the books I have read, have I seen anything about the unforgettable personality of Sister Ignatia, who worked so tirelessly with Dr. Bob. She certainly had a lot to do with my own sobriety, for which I'll always be deeply grateful.

Madeline and I came into AA together in 1957. We did everything that was suggested and now we have medallions for thirty-four years of living sober. We also have observed our fiftieth wedding anniversary, and Madeline has always been my most faithful helper on Twelfth Step calls. Now I'm eighty-two years old and I haven't been to a meeting since yesterday. Without this great Fellowship and its program, I would not have been given the opportunity to live so full and happy a life after so many years of destructive drinking.

Karl H., Eustis, Fla.