CHAPTER THREE

The Last Day

The evening of March 9, 1956 was clear, cold and Lenten. The Bowl looked as it had since the first snow back in November. Stockbridge Mountain stood out against the faded blue winter sky, its long flank mottled with snow patches and the black of jutting ledges. The snow from several recent snow storms lay out over the frozen lake, bright in the weak sun, but dull and gray in the distance down by the island and Interlaken.

It had been an ordinary day at Shadowbrook; routine, with the full force of that word which is only realized, perhaps in the novitiates of religious orders, where each day is carefully calculated to resemble the one before and the one to follow as much as possible. Contingency, time, change are inevitable, but this is a school for eternity. The tyrannous excitement of variety is, to the extent warranted by considerations of health and common sense, decisively excluded. Let change be restricted to the slow deep-sea change of growth in grace with as little surface agitation as possible.

And so the novices had followed the centuries old order of the novitiate which can in its essentials be found in the records of Sant’Andrea, established before the death of St. Ignatius. They had risen at 5:30, made their hour of prayer at the tiny desks in the crowded ascetoreies; Mass at ten minutes to seven; breakfast at twenty minutes to eight. Sacred silence was observed until
after breakfast. Then a day of spiritual readings, periods of work in the kitchen, laundry, sacristy, scullery, refectory, farm—all the hundred odd jobs which serve to maintain a hundred and fifty men in the ancient monastic tradition of self-sufficiency. The day is broken with classes in Greek and Latin—grammar, as befits the penitential spirit of the novice’s life. It is a rare mind that finds itself intellectually over-stimulated by novitiate grammar class. This, too, is calculated; the mind for, these two years should be almost exclusively occupied with God and the advance in perfection.

The juniorate order had followed the novitiate’s exactly until after breakfast; but while the novices read Rodriguez’ *Christian Perfection*, the juniors were cracking open their Liddell and Scott *Dictionary of the Greek Language*, or lip-moving their way through Chaucer’s racy Middle English. They are the drones of this hive as far as manual work goes. Some do help on the farm or tinker with motors during recreational periods, but they are free to do what they want at this time. Their purpose is study, literature and the humanities, for they have begun the long course of study which will train them for the priesthood. Rightly to represent the infinite God to diverse men, they must know so many things.

And so the juniors had attended their classes and worked the hours of study in the helter-skelter ascertories, which, with their large desks each one equipped according to its owner’s fancy and mechanical skill with its own custom-built bookracks, dictionary stands, pigeonholes and catchalls, contrasted so sharply with the clinical neatness and severity of the novice ascertories, and manifested more, perhaps, than any other feature the difference between the two ways of life. A small group had gone skiing down the long slope of the front lawn that afternoon and the soft snow, now crisping in the evening chill, was still rutted with their tracks.

Not everyone had leisure for athletics, however. Mr. Joe Appleyard had called a rehearsal for the play *The Strong Are Lonely*, which was to be presented in honor of the Ignatian Year. Dramatics have historically played a large part in the Jesuit curriculum which was formed during the later Renaissance
and consequently was directed to the end of acquiring *perfecta eloquentia*. There is good evidence that the art of ballet was developed out of the gigantic, rococo productions which the Jesuit schools of France used to entertain the court of Louis XIV, and, of course, the dependence of the classical French theater on the Jesuit-trained Racine is too obvious to need elaboration. But with the aim of education generally directed to skills and manipulatory power and away from mere expression, the practice of present-day Jesuit educators has necessarily veered away from the traditional *Ratio*. There is no criticism implied here; what has been done seems to me not merely necessary, but even desirable. Flexibility should rule the selection of contingent means to a transcendent end. But one result which I personally regret has been to confine “dramatics” to being just another and sometimes
slightly disreputable extra-curricular activity. But they flourish still in Jesuit novitiates and juniorates.

Another group also spent the noon recreation period indoors. They were the staff of the relatively recent juniorate magazine, *Studia*. And they were working on the linoleum cuts, cut-outs and pop-up pages of their definitely avant garde publication with as much dedication as if they had a national circulation instead of a list of subscribers which was limited to a few scholastics’ recreation rooms throughout the province.

The days had begun to lengthen perceptibly, but the nights were still sudden, and the juniors in the first ascetory could not see Stockbridge Mountain out of the curved windows of the tower. Not long before, fluorescent overhead lights had been installed and their bright glare had given the ascetory the nickname “Stop & Shop.” But in my day each desk had been equipped with its own goose-necked lamp. The entire house would be still. Upstairs the novices would be making their evening meditation. There were no footsteps or scraping chairs

In 1955, with plans for a fundraising drive underway, a professional photographer took a number of pictures intended to show how crowded and inadequate the building was. Here juniors are shaving in the early morning, somewhat better dressed, for the photographer, than ordinarily.
to disturb the hush. The jagged outline of the tall blue spruce could still be seen against the faint green light that still held the zenith, but night would slowly be piled up against the windows of this room where Anson Stokes had lain, staring for months at the strange hollow in the sheets where his leg used to plump them out, and where Carnegie had tossed weakly railing against a world he could no longer command. Little lamps divided the large room into fifteen separate caverns of light, each inhabited by a black-gowned figure, hunched over a book. The half-hour spiritual reading was a witching hour in the juniors’ first ascetory.

Mr. Walter Young, down in the second ascetory beyond the staircase hall, found it difficult to concentrate on his book. Tonight at supper he was assigned to preach the first of three sermons in honor of the fourth centenary of the death of St. Ignatius. He found the phrases of his sermon coming unbidden into his mind. Any one of these long minutes now the five-minute warning bell would ring for supper and the community would file down to their Friday fish. He would have to stand up before them and deliver the sentiments and phrases he had composed to the heartless accompaniment of rattling dishes, and indifferent, masticating jaws. Well, he had done his best. He would make a short visit—alas, probably as equally distracted as his spiritual reading—before supper. Then it was out of his hands. At least he had chosen a rousing text and theme: the words of St. Ignatius to St. Francis Xavier before he sent him to the Indies, “Go, set the world on fire.” He hoped the rhetorical flames his voice and words would evoke might be strong enough to pierce the miasma of minds concerned, after the Lenten fast, with their “one full meal.”

The sermon was thoroughly discussed and dissected during the after-dinner recreation period by the little bands of hooded and scarfed novices which picked their way around the icy, rutted and lightless roads. The juniors for the most part confined themselves to the glassed area of the front porch and strove to square their comments with the best principles of Longinus.

In the fathers’ recreation room over in the west wing, comment on Mr. Young’s sermon was, I fear, brief and perfuncto-
Years of refectory sermons have dulled somewhat their enthusiasm for the practice. “Go, set the world on fire” is a theme rich in rhetorical possibilities, of course; but most of them have been actualized before this—many times in fact. The “tropes” were genuinely effective, but expectable; words evoke small response in these minds sophisticate in rhetoric. Father Bob Campbell, an incurable and incessant punster, was entertaining his small group of devotees: Father Harry Muollo, Father Rector (Father Francis Corcoran), and Father John Post, the novice master. The recreation took one of those unexpectedly bright turns that sometimes occur, when Father Steve Mulcahy announced that he intended to attend the Jesuit alumni dinner to be held that coming Sunday at Cranwell. As part of the Ignatian Year a series of these dinners were to be held all over the country, and Cranwell was the site for the alumni in the Berkshires. Father Alphonse Yumont got special delight out of twitting Father Mulcahy, one of whose most vulnerable spots was his extreme devotion to Boston College where he had served as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Father Yumont poised for the attack:

“Do you realize you’ll have to sit with Holy Cross men, Steve? Do you think you can act civilly?”

It was an old tactic, the source of many jokes which might seem feeble enough outside the walls, but which were sufficiently serviceable for intramural recreation. Father Mulcahy rose dutifully to the bait, and his rich eloquence flowed with the amusing fruitiness the subject deserved, for he had a fine hibernian power of overstatement and a keen sense of the ridiculous. It was, Father Yumont attests, a “brilliant recreation.”

Father William Carroll was not in the rec room that night. He was rehearsing the house choir in the Te Deum to be sung that Sunday in honor of the Ignatian Year.

Following recreation the novices had study until the nine o’clock litanies which mark the close of the day in our scholastics. After litanies the novices, who had made their points and examen during the half hour before, went immediately to their dormitories for the common discipline, held three times a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday—unless one of these days is a feast day. They then hurried to bed, clattering up and down the
iron stairs to the toilets in the basement. Some few stopped by the big garish Sacred Heart statue which stood in a dark corner by the big dorm for a last prayer and review of the matter for the morning’s meditation. Brothers Dick Wolf, John Redgate and Frank Bergen were the novices on trial that month—they worked in the kitchen getting the breakfast and had to rise for an early Mass and so they slept apart from the others in the “trial dorm,” a small room on the third-floor corridor of the west wing, facing onto the front drive. Brother Bob White was also on the third corridor of the west wing in the novice infirmary. He had suffered now for some months with a series of minor ailments, anemia, stomach upsets, lassitude. No one could discover what exactly was the matter.

The rest of the house retired after the novices. Immediately after litanies there followed a fifteen-minute period to prepare the points for the morning prayer, then fifteen minutes of examination of conscience. It is common practice to use the examen period for confessions.

Brother Jim McDavitt went to confession that night. As he passed down the gloomy third corridor he saw the bent form of old Brother Henry Perry coming from confession. Friday, though, was never the most popular night for confessions and so

A Latin class of second-year juniors with Fr. Robert Banks, one of the Shadovbrook faculty.
the number of those early to chapel for the last visit was light. Almost the entire body of the juniorate filed down together then for the short visit in the darkened chapel. Then upstairs for the discipline. After that there are just ten minutes allowed for washing up and getting to bed.

Mr. Ed O’Flaherty, the beadle, turned out the light a few minutes after ten. The number of late stragglers increased each month. The novice’s individuality is somewhat inhibited, a novice tends to move automatically with the crowd and quite strictly according to the order posted each day on the bulletin board. But your junior is a man burgeoning as a personality under the influence of his humanistic studies and his consciousness of himself as one of the elders of the community. All kinds of little businesses keep him from getting to the dormitory at the exact minute before the lights are doused. Which is all very well, of course, but hard on the poor beadle who must not only turn out the light promptly but also sleep in the bed right by the door where every time someone comes in he pushes aside the squealing sliding-door, sends a shaft of light from the corridor into the beadle’s eyes, and stumbles noisily by in the pitch black, bed-crowded room. Those who slept on the right side of the dormitory, however, had become quite used to groping their way

The dining room in 1955, with novices on the left, juniors on the right, and faculty in the turret alcove. A reader is sitting at the small desk in the center.
to bed. The light on that side had been burned out for some weeks. Mr. O’Flaherty supposed he should have told Brother Frost about it before this. He reminded himself to do it tomorrow, but no doubt tomorrow like all the other days would be so crowded with distractions, he would forget it again. Sunday the juniors had permission to watch Maurice Evans on TV and he must make sure that the set would be available and working. Now that was something he mustn’t forget!

The faculty retired later. Frs. Muollo, and Campbell were in the recreation room. They had decided to wait for the 11:00 o’clock TV news. For some reason—perhaps a satiety with the inane flow of images and words from the set—they went to bed earlier than the eleven o’clock news. They put off the lights in the fathers’ recreation room and turned down the second-floor corridor towards their own rooms. Both lived at the very end of the fathers’ corridor where the building abutted on the original ledge which Anson Stokes had had blasted away in 1892 to make room for his home. Father Muollo’s room faced out towards the west on the corner, a small room traditionally occupied by the house treasurer. Father Campbell lived in the adjacent room, an even smaller one, whose window faced north directly onto the rock face of the ledge and was separated from it by the width of the driveway.

Bobby Campbell (inevitably “Soupie” to the juniors) is a little priest whose keen eyes and puffy cheeks give him a chipmunk-like expression of friendly wariness. He favors the swinging stride of a much larger man, but this is all anyone could point out as a pretense in him. For his qualities are those of a tough-minded realist, practical, ordered and neat in all his thoughts and conclusions. For years he had been the spiritual adviser of the juniors. He was often asked whether he would not prefer a larger and more lightsome room, but his reply was inevitably the same: “I’m the man the men with problems are supposed to come to. The man with a problem is not always anxious to let other people know he has one. Tucked around two corners in the back of the house is the best place I could possibly live.”

The night light was burning over the back stairs which went down one flight to the kitchen corridor as the two priests
turned towards their rooms. The room at the head of the stairs
turning out towards the east and overlooking the front drive, was
still showing a light, and they could faintly hear Father Carroll’s
laugh through the closed door.

Father Campbell turned to Father Muollo just as he was
opening his own door and reminded him that he had promised
to take a parish call down in Goshen, Connecticut, that weekend.
Harry said he would be off in the morning.

Father Martin Ryan lived in the room at the head of
the back stairs, and Father Bill Carroll was visiting him. Father
Carroll was the professor of Latin in “Poetry” year which is the
first year of the juniorate. In former years, when he had first come
to Shadowbrook, he had taught the English courses which Father
Ryan now handled. Temperamentally, Frs. Ryan and Carroll have
much in common. Both are talented teachers, imaginative, easily
moved themselves and with the gift of moving others. Father
Carroll perhaps is the more flamboyant of the pair, his conver-
sation a roman candle display of knowledge and interests of
startling range and collocation. He will follow a rapid paragraph
on the musical structure of old English madrigals by one, equally
exhaustive, on the construction and decoration of American
outhouses. And his mood shifts bewilderingly from earnestness
to raillery so swiftly that it is a constant trap for the unwary.

Father Ryan, I have said, was of similar temperament,
though to see the two of them together one might well judge
that Father Ryan, a sparsely-haired rather grim-mouthed man,
was the dour pole to Father Carroll’s obvious gaiety. There are
four Ryans in the province; all thin, tallish, bald and each one an
exotic blend of earnestness and humor. Father Martin is on the
humorous end of the Ryan Spectrum. He can, like his brothers,
be disconcertingly serious, but he is customarily lighthearted,
witty and the best company in the world. It was not unusual to
hear, as Frs. Campbell and Muollo did that night, the sound of
laughter from Father Ryan’s room.

They had been discussing the plans for the new Shad-
owbrook which Father Rector had left in the recreation room for
comment by the faculty during the past week. I don’t know, of
course, how familiar people outside the Society can be expected
to be with the nature of “comment” within it. But it seems to me that it should not be too hard for anyone to reason to a picture of our intramural criticism. The elements are these: a group of highly diverse men, most of them naturally sensitive and intelligent, all of them with minds honed to the limits of their gifts by a minimum of fifteen years of academic training, engaged from the motives of love and dedication in a communal enterprise of which the only limits are defined in the vague cosmic phrase “for the greater Glory of God” and the means of which are anything at all—within the bounds of possibility and morality. Given such a situation, is it any wonder that a group of Jesuits’ comments on the lives and transactions of Ours and the decisions of superiors tend to be tart? It seems inevitable from the nature of things. Since I got into this, let me only state that the comments, while usually somewhat negative, are almost invariably given with the benediction of wit; they are the children of loyalty and a readiness to obey delivered with ruefulness and familial freedom. In my own years in the Society, I have only on very few occasions, and then
always with the shock of the unexpected, detected resonances of bitterness.

All this is preparatory, of course, to saying that the new plans were being roundly clobbered by Father Carroll and Father Ryan. The point seemed to be that the room placement was inept, and the overall effect artistically dismal. Father Carroll contended, “If we need a new Shadowbrook—and anyone who has lived in this firetrap knows we do—couldn’t we get something better than this?” And he added with the phrase-maker’s proper pride, “It’s a monumental mediocrity.”

A few years previously, Father Carroll and Father Mulcahy had been driving to Cranwell Preparatory School about 7:30 P.M. when an intoxicated youngster came full speed down the wrong lane and smashed into their car. There were other fathers in the car, but only Frs. Carroll and Mulcahy were injured and both of them quite seriously. Father Mulcahy had smashed his hip and ever since walked with great difficulty. For more than a year he had had to use a crutch. Since the accident both men had been rather nervous, not only about driving but also about the possibility of violent death in any form. Why it was true I don’t think anyone can say, but the fact remains that in adding up the disadvantages of Anson Stokes’ wonder house as a novitiate (and the fathers who lived in it did add them up quite often) the danger of fire was rarely mentioned until shortly before the fire itself. Then, it seems, the two moving spirits in that type of grim speculation were Father Carroll and Father Mulcahy.

Spurred by their nervousness, concern about the possibility of fire had become a common topic of discussion among the fathers. The minister had had new fire hoses installed only a few months before throughout the house. In searching for a leak in the water main, a section of the front lawn out in front of the porte cochere had been dug up and left open for nearly a year while the possibility of putting in another hydrant was studied in the usual desultory fashion in which such things are studied in press of more immediate needs. It was finally decided that the main would not supply enough water to matter and what it would offer would only subtract from the flow that could be taken from the other hydrant about a hundred and fifty feet away on the road
by Campion cottage. And so that fall the hole had finally been filled in. But the complacency about Shadowbrook’s durability, which the sight of its turrets and brawny fieldstone walls had, I suppose, fostered in the minds of previous faculties and administrators of Shadowbrook, was now definitely impaired. Shadowbrook was worried about fire.

This concern was the best safety measure which had been taken in years. Physically there was little which could be done. The house, built in an age when architectural caprice was highly prized, showed its age not merely externally in the whimsical mixture of styles—its Spanish roof, Norman turrets, Chateau stucco, and (crowning joke!) chessman chimneys—but within, in its honeycombing of hidden spaces that provided a network of updrafts and cross-drafts capable of moving fire swiftly anywhere throughout the house. The chapel ceiling hung suspended by chains from the roof three flights above. Between it and the second floor there was a space over four feet deep and sixteen hundred feet square, a chamber completely hidden and perfect for fire. In three different sections of the fathers’ wing, air shafts went up two flights to the roof opening into little gable windows. In many places, abutting rooms were separated by hollow walls of two or three feet of empty space, where the building bent, or the dictates of Victorian aesthetics demanded a room smaller than the space reserved for it within the baronial shell. Fire in this building would be extremely difficult to detect and practically impossible to control.

A year before this, Father Carroll had smelled smoke at night. No one else could smell it, an investigation could discover nothing. Next day the Lenox and Stockbridge fire chiefs were called. They could find nothing. For two days and two nights Father Carroll continued to insist that the there was a fire burning somewhere in the house. The fire chiefs made another trip. Brothers Perry and Frost together with the chiefs, eventually after some hours of search, stripped off the plaster from a corner of the juniors’ basement toilets and in the space between this ceiling and the kitchen floor found a wooden beam glowing red along a distance of seven or eight feet, and eaten away by the smoldering fire to over half of its foot and a half bulk. The fire had glowered
for four days, nursing itself on the air it had within the wall space and slowly creeping toward a supply of oxygen which would let it spurt out in full anger. Some mystery of complex and no doubt marvelously indirect venting had brought its little smoke and faint smell into Father Carroll's room. Nowhere else in the house could it be detected.

No, fire precautions in the usual sense were little use in this house. Its odd construction, years of aging its oak beams, floors and paneled walls, oiling and waxing and varnishing them had all served to make any fire’s job a lark. And the water supply, while adequate enough to wash and lubricate one hundred and fifty men, and clean their utensils and their clothes, was pitifully incapable of producing the sudden tons needed to check a blaze once it had started.

And so the concern that had begun with Father Carroll’s and Father Mulcahy’s fears and gradually spread to the rest of the faculty was well justified and the only real protection the house enjoyed. Father Carroll’s remark to Father Ryan about the house being a firetrap was casual enough, but it showed how his mind
was focused that night and every night for some time past. Shadowbrook would be grateful to his nervousness before the night was over.

About five minutes of eleven, Father Carroll left Father Ryan’s room to go to the recreation room for the eleven o’clock news. Finding it empty, he decided to forget it. Half the fun of watching world events in the Society is the comment and opinion one gets right off the top of one’s brothers’ heads. So he went to his room and in about twenty minutes was in bed. The fathers’ second-floor corridor was empty and asleep, dimly lit by three ten-watt bulbs that glowed as night lights at all times.

On the third floor, everyone had retired about eleven o’clock. The brothers and novices and the two juniors—one in the infirmary which overlooked the west view of Stockbridge Mountain, the other in a small wall-boarded room that had been made from a glassed-in conservatory behind the stairs and elevator shaft—had all been asleep by ten. The last father to retire was Father Thomas Grogan and he had gone down the stairs by the elevator shaft to the chapel and back up them again about twenty minutes to eleven, almost a quarter of an hour before Father Carroll left Father Ryan’s room. He was the last up on the third corridor and he was in bed by quarter to eleven.

Two brothers, Brother Connie Murphy and Brother Bill Frost, had climbed to their attic rooms about quarter past ten, gone promptly to bed, and already slept the profound sleep of the first few exhausted hours.

The novices and juniors, of course, had long since made their way to their beds in the big dorms over in the far eastern wing; and the dorms already stirred with the eerie animal sounds of many sleepers, the thrashers, the snorers, the grinders, the moaners.

By quarter past eleven only one man was still awake. Brother Peter Gabriel, a short, cheerful-eyed dark-complexioned Lebanese, was the house infirmarian. But for the past few months the doctor was sick. Peter was convalescing from treatment of a spinal disk. He had been hospitalized for some weeks and the omni-competent Brother Frost had assumed his job as infirmarian, while Peter on his return from the hospital had been given
one of the two bedrooms on the first floor that he might avoid climbing stairs.

This room was at the end of the kitchen corridor immediately beside the narrow flight of stairs which ran to the fathers’ corridor and the section where Frs. Muollo, Campbell and Ryan lived. His room faced onto the drive, and the corridor widened at this point the width of the building to the back delivery porch. The door to the brothers’ recreation room, which ran along the width of the building beneath Frs. Campbell and Muollo, opened onto the corridor over near the porch.

As it happened for some months past, Brother Gabriel could not sleep. He had tossed and turned since about twenty past ten and shortly before eleven o’clock he got up and went outside. The corridor was dark except for some faint light which spilled down the stairs from the night light in the fathers’ corridor above him. He could very faintly hear voices from Father Ryan’s room at the head of the stairs. He groped his way to the brothers’ recreation room, got the papers, brought them back to his own room
and settled down to see whether he could induce sleep by reading. He read until about quarter to twelve when his head began to feel blissfully heavy. He got up and returned the papers to the recreation room. The tiny lights in the fathers’ corridor still marked the rises of the stairs, but there were no voices now. The only sound was the weird heave and sigh one hears in a large house where many men are asleep and which often seems to be the breathing of the house itself. He returned to his room, got into bed, turned out the light and, with immense gratitude, slept.