Some time before half past twelve—between the time that Brother Gabriel went to bed at about eleven-fifty and forty minutes later—something went wrong on the kitchen corridor. What it was we shall never know. Perhaps some adventurous mouse, his appetite jaded on the soapy scraps to be found in the drains and around the scrubbed urns, decided to bite into the insulation wrapping the wires inside the walls of the kitchen corridor. We can picture him crouched in the intramural darkness gravely nibbling death. If that is true—if, that is, the fire did begin inside the walls as is entirely likely—then it may be possible to place the time of its beginning even before the house had retired. Not, I think, much before, because the walls of this work area had not been designed like those of the living rooms to create the impression of ducal, devil-may-care luxuriance. These were the kitchens, and practical. The walls were merely two thin coverings of wood or plaster over a framing of two-by-fours. A fire could not long hide its heat from the many who had gone along this corridor only a short hour ago.

We can be sure of the place where the fire began, even though we must allow some leeway in establishing the time of its beginning. From the reports of those who watched its progress, we know with certainty that during its earlier stages the fire was confined to the kitchen corridor and those areas of the upper
corridors immediately adjacent to the draft from the elevator shaft. The windows of the rooms off the kitchen corridor were dark, and the only flames which could be seen from the outside were confined to this specific area around the elevator shaft until almost one-fifteen when the combustion pattern began to change.

Our mouse, if mouse it was, did not long survive his furtive meal, for once the wires were crossed the flame must have shot into full fury, eaten away the walls of its confinement and once in the open run wild. The first man to see the fire, at most a half hour after its kindling by our reasoning, saw it already a giant, uncontrollable and furious.

A few minutes after half past twelve, Father Carroll sat up in his bed. Again, as so often before, he smelled smoke. It was unmistakable. He did not waste time arguing with himself, and he remembers that his sleep-drugged brain had no sophisms to offer to persuade him to forget it and go back to sleep. He was awake in a second and absolutely convinced that there was genuine danger. He slipped into bathrobe and slippers and opened his door. The corridor was vaguely hazy, more unreal than it ordinarily was, even though it customarily, by the dim glow of the night lights, wore an aspect of the half-alive and the haunted. He was not conscious of smoke other than by its smell.

Across the corridor in a room beside the elevator shaft lived Father Pat Sullivan, the dean of studies at Shadowbrook and professor of Greek. Father Carroll banged on Father Sullivan’s door. He had come into the corridor with foreboding, liquid in his midriff. But something about that silent corridor firmed his fears into a swift ball of panic in his throat. His voice was uncertain, choked with the effort to speak above the sudden hardness in his larynx. He did not wait for Father Sullivan to awake but broke into the room and shook him.

Father Sullivan is temperamentally the opposite of Father Carroll in almost every respect. A pipe smoker, a calm and deliberate teacher, he is not the man to be stampeded into action without thought. When he had got clear why he was being shaken awake in the dead of night, he moved quickly enough, while somewhat skeptically, into his shoes and pants. But before he had
completed his hurried dressing his senses became sufficiently awake and *he* smelled smoke. He told Father Carroll he would see how bad it was, and now with all his actions economized by anxiety he rushed out his door and quickly down the brothers’ stairs. No more than a few steps down to the first landing and...
he saw it. Flames filled the elevator shaft and back out into the kitchen corridor as far as his swift terror would let him see. He ran back to Father Carroll who after his first moments of activity stood immobilized at the head of the stairs on the second floor. “It’s very bad, Bill. Let’s get the minister.”

The two men rushed down the corridor to Father Arthur Tribble’s room, the last on the east side of the corridor before the stairs outside Father Ryan’s room. Father Carroll was now nearly helpless with panic. Someone else had taken over making the decisions; he could let his own thinking cease and just follow along for company’s sake.

Father Sullivan, with no ceremony at all, rushed into the minister’s room. The minister had, as a matter of fact, two rooms: one a sort of sitting room/office where he kept his cabinets of toothpaste, shoelaces, cigarettes and shaving cream, and the other a tiny bedroom. It would have been a waste of time to knock. A quick shake and Father Tribble was awake. “There is a fire in the house. Very serious. It’s serious! Get the firemen.”

Father Tribble, something like Father Sullivan himself, was a man who naturally looked before he leaped. We do not know how long it took him to adjust from sleep to action. Fathers Sullivan and Carroll did not wait to find out. The thought had occurred to Father Sullivan from time to time during discussions of the danger of fire at Shadowbrook that should the house ever really catch fire the men who would be in most danger were Brothers Murphy and Frost up in their attic rooms. As he rushed from Father Tribble’s room with the intention of waking the rector, this was the thought which came into his mind. One of the more remarkable things about the activities in the house during the fire itself was that there was so little duplication—everyone seemed to think something to be done which no one else thought of. Had the same thing occurred to everyone, the few mad minutes given for rescue would have been wasted and the loss of life staggering.

Father Sullivan ran the length of the fathers’ corridor to the rector’s room in the stucco tower of the second-floor landing of the main staircase. Father Carroll again ran with him. They crashed into the rector’s room. Father Corcoran sat bolt upright
fully awake. Fathers Sullivan and Carroll, now a frenzied duet, told him of the fire, its seriousness, and left, back again to the fathers’ corridor. Father Sullivan made immediately for the brothers’ stairs, calling that he was going to rouse the men in the attic. Father Carroll was now again in control of himself. The sprints up and down the corridor had crammed his panic back down his throat. He was urgent with terror, but again thinking. He called that he would wake up the fathers.

All this had taken perhaps a minute, perhaps four or five—no more. The corridor still seemed smokeless but its unreal, other-earthly aspect had intensified. Now the haze about the light bulbs was definitely blue and everything on which the eye focused hovered and shook. A strange heaviness pressed on the eyelids and chest and into the brain. A sound, ominous and half-heard like the fading of a gong, shimmered somewhere along the ceiling.

Father Mulcahy in his bathrobe stood at his door across from the stairway and elevator shaft. In the weird light and insane situation he was just there. Accepted like the incongruities of a dream, he stood asking patiently what was the matter. Father Carroll with even more patience explained that there was a fire, a bad fire, that he must get out, that it was cold outside, that he should take a blanket, that he could use the blanket as a protection against the flames, that he should hurry, that he should, for God’s sake, hurry. Father Mulcahy turned back to his room where, it seems, he died.

Father Carroll went into his own room which was next to Father Mulcahy’s on the same side of the house and picked up a blanket and pillow from his bed—some residue from his own advice to Father Mulcahy—and now his head cleared completely. He must rouse the rest of the corridor. Of course, he must stay calm but not at the expense of speed. The heat was becoming unbearable. Still no flames but they would not be long in coming. He must be swift.

He ran down the length of the corridor to Father Ryan’s room at the head of the back stairs. Perhaps they could get down those stairs to the first floor and out by the brothers’ recreation room to the back delivery porch. When Father Carroll banged on
his door Father Ryan got up quickly enough and came out into the corridor, but he was argumentative. He wanted to know how bad it as, who was up, where was the fire—a seeming hundred foolish questions when now the thing to do was get out, get out! Father Ryan went rushing up the corridor shouting he would wake up the juniors. Only Fathers Campbell and Muollo were left and it was getting hotter every second.

There was no smoke around the light bulbs yet, but there was an eerie flickering along the walls. And, Oh God, the stairs were on fire. And now it came: like the breaking of a huge comber, an immense wave, perfectly invisible, horribly palpable, of intense heat fell on him. Frantically he pounded on Father Campbell’s door. “Fire, Fire, hurry!” Father Campbell’s deep unperturbed voice called: “All right, all right. I’m coming.” Now Father Muollo: his door is locked, he’s hard of hearing—pound, pound. Father Muollo’s door swung open. Father Carroll whirled around and saw Father Campbell in the corridor too. Thank God! The heat was scorching.

As Father Carroll turned he shouted, “Follow me,” and rushed back towards Father Ryan’s room at the head of the back stairs. The door had been left open since Father Ryan had come out and disappeared up along the fathers’ corridor, and now the room was choking with smoke.

There was a peculiar acridness to this smoke to which all who were in the fire attest. It got into the throat and lungs, resinous and scummy; a small whiff was enough to cause a burning irritation which lasted several days. Speculation on the source tends now to blame the battleship linoleum runners which lay in all the hallways and corridors. The one in the kitchen corridor was a venerable, patchy old thing, used to years of hard abuse, scrubbed and waxed within an inch of its ancient life.

By now Father Carroll had breathed this poisonous smoke for seven to ten minutes. He had done his job. Everyone on the second floor was awakened and his one thought was escape. The light which Father Ryan had left burning beside his bed glowed faintly like a moon behind clouds and showed nothing but itself through the heavy shifting mass of smoke.

He groped his way to the window opposite the door. There
were two of them, both hinged casements of leaded glass closed by a brass ill-fitting hasp. Beyond them, snug storm windows, secured by hooks and eyes, kept out the mountain winter.

He struggled with the hasp on the inside window. Like so many of us, Father Carroll is a man who finds difficulty with mechanical things; machines seem endowed with malevolence and arbitrary, contemptuous personalities. The hasp would not move. Someone rushed into the room behind him, coughing, shouting—Father Muollo. They shouted back and forth at each other as Father Carroll wrenched and wrenched at the hasp. Someone else came running, pounding down the corridor and into Father Ryan’s room. The heat was incredible. At last the windows swung open. Shouting, “Here, here!,” Father Carroll began beating the storm windows with his hands. Swiftly he smashed out the center with his open palms. Air, pointed, hard and cold, shafted into his lungs. Thank God! “Here, here.” A few beats with a closed fist cleared out the larger spearheads of glass around the frame. He threw his hands on the sill and a voice, not Father Muollo’s but Father Tribble’s—where did he come from?—called for absolution. Father Carroll threw himself out. He landed about fifteen feet from the side of the house on one heel which shattered against the rock-hard ice.

Though to those who passed him lying on the ground he seemed conscious, while slightly incoherent, Father Carroll remembers nothing from this point on until he was put in a car for the hospital. The words of absolution seemed to repeat and repeat themselves in his pulsing skull. “Ego vos absolve . . . I absolve you from all sins and censures in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Father Martin Ryan had gone to bed soon after Father Carroll had left him at eleven twenty-five. In fact, for some time before he went, Father Ryan had been fervently wishing that he would go. The slightly formal graciousness—a legacy from the Spanish hidalgo who was our founder, I have always believed—which characterizes most of the relationships of Jesuits among themselves, even between the most intimate friends, and which has mistakenly been interpreted by some observers as coldness, prevented him from expressing his impatience. And yet he was
tired. Since early that morning, immediately after his last class at ten o’clock, he had been on the move.

Father Ryan was in charge of organizing the fund for the new Shadowbrook up in North Adams and the surrounding districts. He had been driving from place to place, meeting
people, making plans, giving himself entirely to the exhausting, extremely distasteful task of begging for money. When he finally returned at about half Past ten, every nerve called for sleep; and now an hour later he did wish that Bill would call it a night. But when Father Carroll had finally gone, he found with bitter disappointment that his exhausted body was stubbornly alert. Several times he dozed, only to be jerked upright by one of those sudden spasms of overtired nerves that leave one sitting helplessly awake. He tried reading for short snatches, but about twelve o’clock he determined to turn out his light and simply lie there waiting for sleep.

Long minutes went by—perhaps ten, perhaps twenty—when he heard heat come gurgling and banging into his radiator. This was stupid, of course; the thermostat should be turned down at night. Brother Frost must have forgotten. The room was becoming too hot and he thought of getting up and adjusting the thermostat outside his door. But in the growing warmth, sleep was beginning to overtake him. If he got up now who knows when he would get back to sleep. One night of extra heat would hurt no one. He fell asleep at last.

Father Ryan, after only some twenty minutes of sleep, was dragged awake by the cries of Father Carroll outside his door. He acted quickly but with more than some impatience. This was not the first time he had been awakened by Father Carroll to investigate a fire at night. Bill always knew that he could be counted on to get up and give the house a careful search. But why did he have to pick tonight? And why all that shouting and banging? He’ll wake the whole house. Father Ryan slipped his habit on over his pajamas, put on his slippers and went out into the corridor.

Flames were crackling up the stairs to his right; along the ceiling a blue haze hovered and shifted. Father Carroll, a pillow jammed to his mouth with one hand, was pounding with the other on Father Muollo’s door. Stupidly, Father Ryan called to him. “Is it a fire? Where? How bad? Who is up, Bill?” Father Campbell came to his door and stood there holding one shoe in his hand. Frantically, Father Carroll continued to pound on Father Muollo’s door. No one answered Father Ryan’s questions.

“No one can get out of here with the stairs on fire,” Father
Ryan began to reason. “Bill must have got me up first. He always does. Then the others are not up. Lord, the juniors!”

Father Ryan took off down the corridor, expecting the others would follow him, shouting to rouse whoever might still be asleep in the fathers’ rooms. Ahead of him beside the elevator shaft an underbrush of flame about two or three feet high blocked his passage. He accelerated, pounding down the corridor as fast as he could run. He intended to rush through the flames out to the other side and over the landing of the main staircase to the juniorate. About four feet away from the fire itself he was brought to an abrupt halt. He does not remember that there was any gradual slowing down, a slow reluctance in his legs as he neared the fire. His impression is that from a wild run he came to a peremptory stop against a block of heat solid as a wall. He whirled and ran back in the other direction. As he got to the minister’s door—a distance of about twenty-five feet—the same phenomenon occurred. Heat and smoke, curt and definite, simply stopped his churning legs. And he whirled. Back and forth—he cannot remember how many times—he ran in an alleyway continually foreshortening. Somehow, instinctively, he found the still ajar doorway to Father Carroll’s room, and pushed it open.

The room was heavy with smoke, white and billowing, but compared with the corridor it was cool and comfortable. He made for the windows which faced west and overhung the subcloister area two floors down. He intended to hurl himself out, but in passing around Father Carroll’s desk he bumped open the door to his small bathroom. A breath of clean, smokeless air. He went in. For some inexplicable reason, instead of mounting the washbowl and crashing out through the small high window as he had determined to do, he spent minutes groping about the dark little room for a rope. Though why he should expect to find a rope in Father Carroll’s bathroom no one but his guardian angel can explain. There was no rope, of course, but there were some sheets which Father Carroll had been meaning to put on his bed for some days and simply forgotten. Quickly he tied them into some sort of rope, lashed one end to the pipe under the washbowl, climbed up, smashed the window, flung out the sheets and went over the sill.
His few sheets did not reach very far. Miraculously, someone was out there—who Father Ryan did not then know. A ladder was flung against the building, and it reached just to the end of his rope of sheets. His foot met its top rung, and down he went as smoothly as if this were the well-rehearsed ending of a circus act.

Luck and his guardian angel were also with Father Campbell. He woke out of a sound sleep to hear the voices of Fathers Carroll and Ryan shouting in the hall. Customarily an extremely mild-mannered man and one who rarely expressed irritation when he did feel it, Father Campbell woke up an angry man. He had heard the faint sounds of talk from Father Ryan’s room when he went to bed, and the intervening sleep telescoped time so that he connected these sounds with the earlier ones. He was sure that the two fathers were being needlessly and thoughtlessly unconcerned about the community’s rest. He lay there a few seconds fuming. Then came the hammering at his door and Father Carroll’s shout.

Among other oddities (or so they seemed to some) of Father Campbell’s ruggedly individualistic personality was a mild interest in physical culture. In his closet he had rigged a chinning bar, and for some years now the juniors coming in for spiritual direction were likely to have their spiritual father come swinging into the room at them feet first from the darkness of his closet. When the danger of fire had come up for discussion in the fathers’ recreation room in recent months, Father Campbell always had one reply: “I’m in no danger in my room. All I have to do is swing out my window, hang by my hands and drop.” And indeed for a man of his fitness it would be a small task. Now as he heard the cries of “Fire” in the hallway, he thought of his plan. Unlike almost everyone who woke to the confusion of the March night, Father Campbell had no doubts from the first moment of the existence and the seriousness of the danger. He reasoned that no one would go shouting around the corridors in the middle of the night unless there was genuine and grave peril. And so he thought with accustomed calmness of his escape plan. But now for the first time he began to doubt it. The one thing his plan had not provided for was the safety of others. There might be others
trapped in the building who needed help; should he drop safely to the ground and later find that someone he could have assisted remained behind, he would not be able to live with himself.

Something like that reasoning moved swiftly through his neat mind while he slipped into his robe and reached for his shoes. His voice automatically assumed its heavy cheerfulness as he called out to Father Carroll’s frantic pounding, “All right. All right. I’m coming.” It seems he made the decision to abandon his plan for escaping by the window very suddenly because, having put on only one shoe, he wrenched open his door and stood in the hall.

Here, his mind, a second ago working along well-oiled, familiar grooves, clogged. Father Carroll beat and kicked Father Muollo’s door, his voice now almost a raw scream. Yet, for a second he looked incongruous. Everything seemed normal. A strange unsubstantial sort of haze around the light bulbs that still burned on the almost smokeless corridor, a few almost friendly looking flames licking about the bannisters of the back stairs. That was all. Everything else was the same as it had always been deep in the monastic night—silent, familiar—except for Father Carroll screaming there. The impression lasted only a second’s duration. For Father Campbell was immediately stunned with a monstrous horror built out of the familiar. To the quiet glance, everything was almost as it had always been; but heat, heavy and viscous, bound him like a judgment. He recalls that the effect was instantaneous. One second he was in his room among his reasonable belongings and the ordered normality of his way of life, quietly adjusting to a break in the routine, and the next he was drowning in a dreadful hallway which mocked him by its familiarity.

Father Campbell, as perhaps I have indicated before, is not an imaginative man. His description of his own reactions is for that reason the clearest picture of the frightful force of the fire, for he speaks of it from this point on in the exuberant sick images of nightmare.

For some seconds he simply stood there, stupidly holding one shoe in his hand, doing nothing, watching almost detachedly the antics of Father Carroll banging on Father Muollo’s door.
Then Harry’s voice came cheerfully through the door: “O.K. I’m coming.” His door swung open. Father Campbell stood and watched. Father Muollo was in his pajamas, a short, round little man grinning at all the noise it took to wake him up. Father Campbell stood and watched and saw the same stunned incredulity erase the laughter on Father Muollo’s face, watched his jaw drop slack, his eyes fix and the rational light behind them wink out. It was one of those long detailed moments when the eternity that lies behind our coursing minutes thrusts out and freezes its memory forever.

Father Carroll said, “Thank God,” turned and ran full tilt toward Father Ryan’s room, shouting “Follow me.” And now Father Campbell, galvanized by the movement, began to move and to think again. The flames coming up the back stairs had increased. He was sure that no one could live in Father Ryan’s room and that there, there was no exit. Shouting now himself, he ran down the corridor towards the center of the house.

He had not gone ten steps when again he was stopped by the heat. He stood only a moment, then sank down to his hands and knees in the middle of the narrow passage. His mind was again mesmerized, idling, but this time, he recalls, there was no horror. It was peaceful, lulling, and he became beautifully calm and childlike. The conviction that he was dying was suddenly with him like a hand on his brow, and with the careful and proud enunciation of a drunkard he began an Act of Contrition.

Father Tribble, his blue bathrobe flying, came running full tilt around the corner from his room, past Father Campbell and into Father Ryan’s room behind him. In the still seemingly smokeless corridor, Father Campbell could see him clearly.

The passage was narrow here by the stairs and Father Campbell lazily moved his head out of the way of Father Tribble’s running feet. He turned to the left. The flames at the railing of the stairs were still only quietly, almost diffidently, working away at their job. For a second he stared at them inches away, still saying his Act of Contrition and cherishing the strangely sweet conviction of death. But they burned, and their sudden searing was the first violence he experienced since he had opened his door. He turned away impatiently. His head struck open the swinging door
to the fathers’ reference library. This was a small room adjoining the recreation room. He breathed cool air, and with it the will to live revived.

He crawled in on his hands and knees and lay breathing breath after breath of the remarkable air. He remembers standing and walking slowly into the recreation room itself. He walked over, put on the lights and sank into an easy chair. All the time he kept repeating like a propitiation, “Beautiful, beautiful.”

For some time he sat there taking breath after breath, and then the lights went out. From where he sat he could see through the keyhole of the door to the corridor, and the little space was brilliant with fire. And now he panicked completely, rushed to the window. In his hand he still held his one silly shoe, and with it he began madly to beat the glass. Outside the recreation room was a small porch, also glassed during the winter against the winds which dip down over Stockbridge Mountain. He stood and pounded out one of the windows, swinging his shoe like a sledge. Then he stepped out.

This porch faced in three directions. Father Campbell, in terror of the malevolence promised by the blood-colored keyhole, had thought of nothing but escape and beat out the first window he came to. But he had chosen well or it had been chosen well for him, for he selected the one side which gave onto a fire-escape. He fell six inches to the grilled landing and walked to the ground.

It was now perhaps ten or twelve minutes since Father Carroll had awakened to the smell of smoke, and the fire itself had probably not been burning much more than about forty minutes. The sound which Father Ryan heard around twelve-fifteen was doubtless caused by the flames in the walls of the kitchen corridor playing on the steam pipes. And yet in that short time the old house was finally doomed. The kitchen corridor was already aflame along its entire length. By the time that Father Campbell fell out onto the fire escape, some of the novices and juniors under the direction of Brother Frost were attempting to fight the fire in the first floor stair-case hall outside the refectory; but the flames were already roaring into the refectory itself and their attempt was hopeless. The second, third, and attic floors were burning brightly in the area around the elevator shaft, and
smoke, great killing clouds of it, rolled down every corridor. The men who remained in their rooms with their doors closed would be able to survive some minutes more, but the hallways were death traps.

Brother Peter Gabriel, whose room, as you will remember, was off the kitchen corridor itself and beside the back stairs, had been violently awakened from his long-desired sleep by a thumping noise outside his door. It sounded as though someone was heaving barrels around in the refrigerator room across the hall. He was afraid he had overslept and looked at his watch. It was only twelve-forty and he had been asleep for less than an hour. For a few seconds he was tempted not to investigate the noise. Doubtless it was nothing — some one of the brothers had forgotten to do some job which needed to be done before morning. Or perhaps it was a thief — and the swift sorties of reassurance familiar to anyone who has been awakened by strange noises at night crossed his mind. Then the need to prove himself the man forced him to get up and open his door.

The entire corridor was a storm of flame, whipping by like a wind off the sea. He turned and bolted for the little bathroom which lay off the right side of his bedroom where he had left his clothes. He closed the door to the bathroom and dressed quickly. There was no window in the bathroom itself and he had not closed the door to the corridor in his bedroom. When he stepped back into the bedroom to make for the windows, flames like quick, bright-colored animals were running around the door frame and the entire chamber was murky with smoke. It was only one step from the bathroom to the window, but he came close to suffocating before he had smashed its pane and jumped out into the hard-packed pile of snow that the plow had left beside the garage entryway. He saw Father Carroll who had just before this leaped from the window of Father Ryan’s room, which was over the garage doorway, lying on his back about fifteen feet from the house.

Father John Post was the master of novices. During the two years of novitiate, the applicant to the Society is given over to the direction of the master of novices for the formation of his ideals, his spiritual orientation. The master of novices knows
him better than anyone else ever has. His parents, his teachers, his friends, his confessor—none of them have the opportunity to know him as intimately as does his master of novices, for the master, if he is a good one, combines all of these functions. The Society is very careful to provide good masters of novices; her existence depends on them. For the Jesuits in the almost formless complexity of their diverse tasks must be men capable of mature self-direction under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Many are asked to assume chores in the middle of pelting distractions and frequently far from the support of men dedicated as they are.

The cenobite ideal of community living was a wise and necessary development in the Church. When Ignatius rejected it he did an audacious thing. He showed his own realization of its importance because wherever it was at all possible he sent his men in bodies and directed that they set up communities. (Indeed, most Jesuits live in communities to this day.) But he never allowed the ideal of community living to interfere with the performance of some work for the Church that could be better done by one man alone. And so today any Jesuit can be called to months, years or a lifetime away from a community on a lonely mission station, in some secular university, on a scientific expedition or (but rarely, despite the legends!) disguised among hostile men. The Society Ignatius founded was to be a society of frontiersmen, a missionary society to which the support of communal living could be nothing more than a dispensable luxury. The Jesuit must learn to make a monastery in his heart. It is during his novitiate, by prayer and under the guidance of the graces given him, that he learns how to be a monk despite the noise of distraction. The human catalyst in all this is his master of novices.

The purpose of this aside in the midst of a fire has been to give some idea of the character of Father John Post. If, in order properly to form the Jesuit, the master of novices must know his novice intimately, it is inevitable that that novice knows, with what I should imagine is embarrassing intimacy, his master. Consequently, any deviation observed in him from the high ideals he must propose is noted by his subjects—sometimes with the heartless exactitude of very young men. I have never known a class of novices who were unanimously pleased with their novice
master—nothing but a saint would do for them, and, to read some hagiographies, some of the saints would have had small chance for a unanimous vote. This is as it should be, of course; sanctity has been the gift given to many strange personalities throughout the Church’s history, some of whom even found it difficult to bear with one another.

Father Post has been called saint by some who had him as their master of novices, but then, so has every other man who has ever been a master. He has been roundly criticized by others and this, too, is the fate of all masters of novices. No, the men of the Society, at least the older ones, quite rightly consider the measurement and comparison of individual holiness a very frivolous task, and when a master of novices is to be selected careful consideration is given more ponderable qualities. Is he a man with a profound knowledge of Christian spirituality, of the Society, her history and aims? Is he capable of directing men? Is his personal conduct a manifestation of a holiness easily perceived by young men who perhaps are not capable of subtle perceptions? Father Post is all of this and more. If we were to put it in language more familiar to those unacquainted with monastic terms, he is physically and temperamentally an heroic type.

It is one of the ironies of the March 10th fire at Shadowbrook that most of the heroic activity (in the usual sense of that word) was performed by people who were not fitted for it naturally. Father Carroll, sensitive, excitable, was the man who stayed longest in the area of greatest danger and was responsible for giving the first alarm. Father Post, a man with a large athletic body, iron will and utmost calm, was permitted to save only himself. He was called on only for the type of heroism he would have chosen for himself, the hidden, grinding heroics of bearing months of pain.

For some strange reason Father Post was the only man on the fathers’ corridor who was not aroused. When Fathers Carroll and Sullivan ran to the rector’s room, they passed his door. It was the first one on the west side of that wing just off the second-floor staircase hall. When they returned from the rector’s room, Father Mulcahy was standing in the hallway outside his own doorway, which was the second one down from the staircase hall and
beside Father Post’s. Doubtless, as Father Carroll came around the corner he saw Father Mulcahy and in his urgency to tell him of fire and the danger forgot that he was going past Father Post’s room. In any case, it was not until some time later that Father Post was awakened by the sound of the fire crackling outside his door. He knew what it was immediately because smoke had already entered the room and he could see it curling under the ceiling. He believed that he was the first man up and naturally his first thought was for his novices. Waking out of a sleep sound enough to let him ignore all the hubbub that had gone on outside his door, his mind was not capable of doing more than clenching around that single thought: must get the novices out. It was his undoing.

He slipped into shoes and opened his door. The flames were a solid thicket about four feet high, bushing out all over the corridor three feet away from him to the left of his doorway in front of the elevator shaft. Over them he could see the length of the fathers’ corridor all the way down to the stairs near Father Ryan’s room. It was empty: Anyone who was going to leave had already got out. But Father Post did not know that. He thought still that he was the first up. The swift thought of the fathers who he was sure were trapped down that corridor sickened him. He gave one shout and turned towards the stairway hall. Perhaps, he thought, he could get them later, but the first thing to do was to wake the novices.

He had crossed his arms over his face to ward off the intense heat and now he was sucking in his breath through the cloth of his pajamas at the crook of his elbow. It was what saved him. For, running as hard as he could, he experienced the same reaction as Father Ryan had some minutes earlier in the corridor. The thick, poisonous atmosphere refused to let him move. He churned his way about half way across the length of the upper staircase hall; then he could go no further. It seemed an impossible thing to get back to his room. But he must. He fought, pumped and finally stumbled back the ten or twelve feet he had gone, shut the door and breathed.

He did not waste time. Still convinced that no one else was awake, he had to get out some way and save those he could.
He ripped the blankets and sheets off his bed and fashioned a rope. Then he went to the window. He tied the rope of sheets to the center post of the casement. He watched with some interest some of the novices below him. They were attempting to put the ladder, which they had used to take Father Ryan off his rope of sheets, up against the wall beneath Father Post. They shouted to him to wait.

Father Post knew them, of course, and watched their efforts; but he did not draw any conclusions from their presence there. His mind had gripped hard around one purpose: to get the novices out; and in the clarity of that single idea which was all he could think of in the hurl of these past few urgent moments, he was unable to draw the illation that, if novices were putting up a ladder to his window, then the novices were already out of the house. The ladder slipped and fell. It did not look long enough. Father Post was determined. He pitched a chair through the glass of the storm window, threw out his sheets and went over the sill.

When he had opened his door and put his hands before his face against the fire, he had been badly burned. He had not been conscious of these burns, but when his hands gripped the rope of sheets, the flesh tore away. He fell hard on the ice on the cement floor of the subcloister two floors below in a sitting position. Mr. Braunreuther, who was one of those who had been attempting to get the ladder up to his window, heard him give a soft moan. It was the last expression of pain anyone heard from the master throughout the long months of pain ahead. He had smashed two vertebrae and severed the motor nerves of his legs and hips.

There was no one left now on the second floor of the west wing except Fathers Mulcahy, Muollo and Tribble. They died there.

Almost everyone on the third floor of the west wing was trapped, and there was only one ladder, much too short even to reach to the second floor. Father Hanlon, Brother Bourrie, Brother White (a novice), and Father Yumont were all either sitting on the roof outside their rooms or hanging gasping out their windows on the west. Over on the east Mr. Griffin had jumped from the third floor and lay moaning in the snow. Father
Rector hung out his window, and below and above him the fire roared and flickered. Brothers Wolf, Redgate and Bergen were dropping a rope of very flimsy sheets down over the side of the building from the third floor, and Brother McDavitt was inching along the shaking gutter of the roof to Father Banks who clung in desperation to his window sill, clad only in his shorts. No one had seen Brother Perry.

If anyone had been capable of grimly reckoning the probable loss of life at this moment, his total would have been staggering.