CHAPTER SIX

The Dormitories

When Father Corcoran had startled awake to find Fathers Sullivan and Carroll shouting at him about a fire in the house, he had gotten out of bed promptly enough but mussily, his mind fighting for realization. Father Sullivan had left the room first, but Father Carroll still stood there almost hysterically repeating his message. The rector’s mind under the constant repetitions was rapidly focusing while he automatically drew on his pants and shoes and tied the laces. By the time he had straightened up, Father Carroll had gone to rouse the fathers’ corridor, and his mind was clear and thinking. The first thing to do was to call the fire department, then run to the juniors’ dorm and get them out of the house. There was no smoke in his room, nothing but the clear memory of those two shouting fathers standing by his bed to tell him that there was serious danger. He hurried to the phone on his desk. As he picked it up he heard Father Tribble’s voice and someone answer. So that was taken care of.

He stepped over to his door and opened it. He experienced the same shock so many experienced this night; the staircase hall was impenetrable with smoke and hot gusts, packed into the huge area until they were like solids. He could not advance further than a few feet before he was driven back into his room. He shut his door and ran over to his back entrance. This was at the end of
a narrow corridor-like room which, in the time before the Jesuits took over the house, used to be a porch. It had been walled and windowed and served the rector’s room as a closet, storage room and back entry. It opened onto the second-floor landing of the brothers’ stairs and was now, of course, impassable. Through the windows of the door to the landing, Father Corcoran could see flames licking and crackling against the glass.

He turned back to his room, determined now to go out the window. He grabbed his overcoat from a hook inside the door to his back entrance hallway, his glasses and the car keys off his desk, but when he got to the window he saw the novices and juniors come streaming out around the side of the house from the sacristy porch and start running across the driveway. The tight fist which had knotted in his stomach unclenched. He relaxed and sat on his window sill for a moment breathing quietly.

The shouting of Fathers Carroll and Sullivan in the second corridor was what had awakened Father Tom Kelly on the third. He lived diagonally opposite the elevator shaft and when he opened his door he was struck by a murderous blast of heat. As he stood helpless in his thin pajamas, Father Sullivan came running up the stairs towards the attic room. He yelled at him, he supposes; he does not remember. Father Sullivan went clattering up past him, and now, after his moments of bewilderment, he went into action.

He whirled and banged on Brother Bourrie’s door, which was only one step away and directly across from the elevator shaft. Brother Bourrie answered immediately. Father Kelly ran on a short distance to his left through the threshold of a former door which once had divided the servants’ quarters from the master bedrooms that now were the novices’ ascetories. Father Jim Hanlon lived in a small room just off the novitiate since he was the socius, or assistant to the master of novices, in charge of discipline among the novices. Father Kelly did not knock on Father Hanlon’s door but crashed in.

Father Hanlon is a small man, almost entirely bald. Sitting bolt up right in bed he gave Father Kelly a fleeting, incongruous impression of the exophthalmic figure of farce—the
situation was one of midnight alarms and excursions, like a chapter from Fielding; and Jim, without his spectacles, startled and tousled in his night clothes, looked like an illustration, classically Hogarthian. But Father Hanlon was awake, thank God: “Jim, there’s a fire in the house.” The warning was deliberately underplayed—Father Tom Kelly is a gentleman whose mildness seems to be distilled from hidden intensity. He was driving himself to calmness. His quiet words did not shock Father Hanlon into any sense of urgency, for he sat some minutes after Father Kelly had left his room on the edge of his bed, and then in a foggy sort of leisure began to dress.

Meanwhile, Father Kelly made a quick dart into Brother Bourrie’s room—he lived in what must have been formerly a linen closet next to Father Hanlon—and made sure he was awake too. Father Kelly thought of the rest of the third corridor, but he must get the novices out first—one of the others, Brother Bourrie, perhaps, would wake the corridor. He dashed back to his own room for his overcoat.
It had only been moments since he had run the few steps needed to wake Father Hanlon and Brothers Bourrie and Bousquet, but the difference in the atmosphere was incredible. Now he could scarcely move along the hallway. There seemed no air left at all, just smoke, man-shaped billows of it, armed with a thousand fists that reached out, caught at his legs and arms and crammed their crooked fingers down his throat.

He snatched his coat from the closet and started running as hard as he could along the lines of sinks in the novice hallway. There were no lights and he fell once. He coughed and the cough became a violent retching as the merciless smoke probed deeper. At the far end of the hallway, where it widened to the open area which the novices used as a barber shop, the air was somewhat clearer. He had run about a hundred and fifty feet and the smoke was only just beginning to penetrate this far into the eastern wing. He paused a minute to even his breath for he did not wish to panic a dormitory full of fifty sleeping men. When he was slightly calmer he pushed open the door of the big dorm and bent down over the manuductor’s bed which was just inside the door by the light switch.

A manuductor in the novitiate has, as we mentioned before, extraordinary powers. It has been said with some justification that the novice manuductor is the most absolute monarch since Ozymandias. St. Ignatius, in order to hold together the huge and sprawling enterprises of the Society he had founded, relied greatly on the willingness of the talented and so naturally cocksure men he wished to recruit to obey. Ignatian obedience, as is well known, should be a fairly absolute thing. His ideal of obedience has been maligned, of course, partly occasioned by Ignatius’ own use of the traditional monastic metaphors of “a dead body,” “an old man’s staff which serves him who holds it in his hand where and for whatsoever he pleases.” Ignatius is said to have wished the superior to dominate his subject, as the hypnotist his, to have desired to crush normal initiative and transform men into pious zombies. Since this is no place to offer a refutation and since it has been done often enough before, for brevity’s sake we shall employ the dignified retort that Ignatius was a Christian and Christianity does not crush. If, however,
such canards ever have been sincerely proposed, I suspect it was by some former Jesuit novice who found it difficult to forgive his manuductor.

Authority and obedience in the Christian context are difficult correlatives. Subtle and nuanced, mysterious with the deep mystery of the divine in the human, which is the core of Christianity, they demand for their understanding and proper practice prayer, psychological skill and above all mature experience. These qualities are not ordinarily found in the novice. A manuductor has, of course, no authority except by delegation from the master of novices, but in the small details of novitiate living (and they are really the whole surface of the novitiate) his power is extensive. The master cannot concern himself with daily assignments to the kitchen, wardrobe, and so forth; these he leaves to his manuductor. It has not been unknown that the spirit of Prussianism hovered over the circle of novices gathered outside the broom closet on the third corridor for the *manualia* assignments.

I have no personal knowledge of the novice who was manuductor at the time of the fire, Brother Charlie Hancock, and I certainly would not attempt to judge him from the short letter I received from him. If he was a Prussian as a manuductor, well, many have been so before him and he will grow out of it. If he was not, he has a rare ability to adapt to a situation, for if one thing was essential that night to avoid panic, it was the calm voice of the autocrat, and he used it effectively:

“That night Father T. J. C. Kelly woke me up and said, ‘Get the novices up and down the tower stairs. There is a fire in the house.’ I remember that there was no odor of smoke in the dorm so I thought it was only a small fire. I turned on the lights and said, ‘Get up and go down the tower stairs.’ I didn’t even think of giving a reason for the order.”

Those are the authentic tones of the novitiate’s understanding of the great mystery of Christian authority. Thank God for it that night. The entire novitiate rose immediately and in complete order filed down toward the narrow doorway to the tower.

Wisps of smoke were coming in the doorway to the attic.
high up on the west wall of the dormitory where the junior choir used to sing on Christmas Eve. Only a few noticed them. Brother Doyle suddenly spoke. He saw the smoke and knew there was a fire in the house. Since he had no idea how long they would be forced to stand outside, he said, “Brothers, you better take a blanket with you. It’s cold outside. There is a fire in the house, but don’t forget your particular examen and your additions. It’s only a small fire.” Except for this piece of quietly spoken advice, there was absolute silence.

Father Kelly, when he saw that the dormitory was being satisfactorily cleared, thought to ask the manuductor whether there were any more novices other than those in the big dorm. The manuductor told him there were six or seven asleep in the polar dorm over the main entrance. Father Kelly turned back out into the corridor and retraced his steps to the polar dorm. Conditions in the corridor had grown rapidly worse and he had to crawl.

Brother Michael Connolly in the polar dorm had awakened just before this. He smelled smoke, but having stumbled over to the large gothic window he could see nothing unusual outside and was on the point of falling back to bed again when Father Kelly burst open the door.

It had been some minutes now since Father Kelly had sleepily watched Father Sullivan rush up the brothers’ stairs past him, on the way to the attic. Father Sullivan had only rarely had occasion to visit the attic during the ten years he had taught at Shadowbrook and had very hazy ideas of its layout. It was a vast area and under the peak of the sharply pitched roof it looked like a huge gothic barn. Somewhere two small rooms had been walled off in which lived Brothers Murphy and Frost. Father Sullivan stumbled around in the ghost-colored light of the moon which two or three areas of glass tile, that seemed to fascinate everyone who wrote up the Stokes mansion before 1912, let fall on the rough, broad-planked floor. Fortunately he turned left toward the east, though he was not at all sure that the brothers lived in that direction, for it was not more than half a minute later that the hot gases which poured from the top of the elevator shaft ignited, and the uninhabited west wing of the attic was sealed off
by flame.

Brother Murphy’s room was directly in Father Sullivan’s path once he had luckily turned to his left. It was a wall-boarded box, about opposite the doorway to the tower battlements in the middle of the house where the novices and juniors kept watch for planes, and Father Sullivan came upon it quite easily. And so, actually it did not take too long for him to find Brother Murphy’s room, although the black, uncertain seconds he spent looking for it had unnerved him.

Brother Murphy thought this was an awful lot of pother for the middle of the night, but as a refectorian who had for some years listened to fathers describe their individual formulas for the boiled egg, he had developed an impenetrable acquiescence to their reverences’ demands. It appeared that there was a fire and that Father Sullivan wanted to see Brother Frost about it. Well, then, why didn’t he get Brother Frost? Oh, of course, he doesn’t know where he lives. Go straight ahead past the tower door and turn in. The door is on your left. Yes, of course, Father, he would get up himself, Father, sure thing!

Brother Murphy started in on the grim business of shoes and socks, doggedly and with great yawns.

The heat was becoming intense. Since the attic was the terminal of the elevator shaft, most of the rising gas and smoke from the kitchen corridor was being driven up here. Father Sullivan found that now he could barely see. He tried to follow the directions which Brother Murphy had given even though he had to feel his way. He found a door handle, threw it open and stepped inside. The door closed behind him and he was left in utter darkness. It was a closet and no child of ten was ever more terrified. He banged and beat the walls of his confinement until again he found the doorknob and stepped out—shouting.

Brother Murphy, when he heard Father Sullivan’s shouts, came rushing out of his room. Off to the right he could see flames jetting out of the top of the elevator shaft and smoke rolling toward and around him. Now sudden terror was in him, too. He ran to the sound of Father Sullivan’s voice, found him and led him quickly to Brother Frost’s room.

Brother Frost, as can be judged simply from the number
of times it has been necessary to mention him in this narration before he has even come on stage, was one of those few men a community cannot exist without. Specifically his assignment was the boiler-room, but he was also the house electrician, buyer, part-time cook, fill-in infirmarian, sacristan, mechanic, gardener, and, by the law of nature, the heaviest sleeper in the house. They shook and they shouted. Father Sullivan, his terror of the closet still alive within him, kept shouting, “Get a flashlight.” Brother Frost, as he stroked up to consciousness, made much the same judgment as Brother Murphy had, that it was some fire scare he was being called upon to investigate—if, indeed, his sleep-mulled brain was capable of what can be called a judgment. When Brother Frost had finally heaved his big bones up to the edge of the bed, Father Sullivan and Brother Murphy went rushing out. They had put on the light in his room when they came in and now Brother Frost wincing against it groped stolidly around his desk, chair, table, looking for his flashlight. That was what he remembered, that was the important thing—get a flashlight.

Neither Father Sullivan nor Brother Murphy knew how to get out of the attic except by the brothers’ stairs. They ran a short way down in that direction, until they saw that they were entirely impassable. They burst back into Brother Frost’s room, shouting that they were trapped in the attic.

At last, with a snap, Brother Frost woke up. He grabbed his bathrobe and a pair of slippers and ran out ahead of them.
The iron stairs really ended just below the attic level, but a small oddly cut door about two and a half feet high, through, which a man could pass crouching, gave on to them from the attic. Once the community wardrobe had been in this section of the attic at the head of the iron stairs, and the novices of my own time knew the door well. But in recent years, since the wardrobe was moved to the cellar, few novices, it seems, ever went higher up the spiral than to their own quarters on the third floor. To have climbed further merely to indulge curiosity would have been in the words which asceticism has adapted from Qoheleth and Kempis “a vanity.” Consequently, few knew that door. Which, in its way, was a pity; for it was a door rich in imaginative possibilities. Its little height, its strange rhomboid shape, the fact that from one side it gave onto a stairway which spun down into blackness, and on the other to a vast echoing vault of a room hung with cobwebs and the disgusting odor of disuse—these made it a door of mystery and excitement. I remember that as a junior I was a devotee of Lewis Carroll (under the impression, as I recall, that all the good “lit’ry people” liked Alice in Wonderland.) I always pictured that door as the one the mushroom-grown Alice could not get through.

Brother Frost knew it, of course. But as he started to lead the others to it, the little bug-lights he had just thrown on burned out and they were left in complete blackness. Brother Frost had not found his flashlight. The undersides of the beams and struts soaring up to the high ridge tree hidden in the darkness above them were mottled with the moving light from the flames back by the brothers’ stairs. Father Sullivan and Brother Murphy began to shout again.

Father Kelly, coming just then out of the polar dorm on the third floor below them, heard their shouts. He ran to the iron stairwell and put on the light at the third floor level. The little Alice-in-Wonderland door was open to the attic, and the three of them suddenly saw deliverance, as a small bright rhomboid flared up in the darkness off in front of them and slightly to the left.

Brother Frost got the other two onto the stairs and told them to go all the way down to the first floor to St. Joseph’s Aula.
He was going to check the novice dorms. One of them should hold open the door to the aula because he would probably send some of the novices down that way.

As he ran out of the stairwell on the third floor he saw Father Kelly running back to the big dorm. The draft created behind his head by his movement apparently ignited the hot gases in the hallway because a delicate fireball, like St. Elmo’s fire, floated behind his neck.

Brother Frost went into the polar dorm. The novices, already alerted by Father Kelly, were dressing. He told them to hurry and led them to the iron stairs. He sent four of them down before Father Sullivan called up from the first floor that it was becoming too dangerous down in the aula. The rest he told to go out through the big dorm and down the tower stairs. Just to make sure that they got there and that there were no men wandering around the corridor, he followed them into the big dorm.

He found the dormitory clearing rapidly. He turned and went back out into the corridor. He had the suspicion that there should be other novices asleep in a small room off the large St. Mary’s Aula. As a matter of fact, it had been several years since that room which used to be used as the trial dorm had been employed as a novice typing room. There was no one in it, of course; Brother Frost then decided to go down the iron stairs himself, although Father Sullivan had told him it was too dangerous on the first floor. It was a fortunate thing for Brother Bousquet that he did so.

Brother Bousquet, after he had been awakened by Father Kelly, had dressed with urgency but no sense of immediate danger. When he went out of his room he first tried to go down by the brothers’ stairs as he was accustomed. The area out in front of them was filled with flame. He then tried to make it down along the same corridor through the novitiate which Father Kelly had found difficult some minutes before. He fell twice. And on the second fall he experienced much the same sensations which Father Campbell had felt on the second corridor by the recreation room—he was dying, there was nothing to be done except go out peacefully. Then he heard Brother Frost call out: “Is everybody out now?”
Brother Frost had stopped by the top of the iron stairs and given this shout just before he started down. The reply Brother Bousquet was able to manage was weak enough: “I’m lost!”—barely a whisper. Brother Frost by this time had breathed quite a bit of the smoke himself: He got down on his hands and knees and in the slightly better air and greater visibility (for he hadn’t been able to tell where the voice came from) he was able to see Brother Bousquet on the floor some six or seven feet away, crawl to him and lead him back to the iron stairs.

From this point it becomes increasingly difficult to follow the movements of Brother Frost. Ten or a dozen different stories have him at least bi-located during the next twenty minutes or so, and his own recollections—perhaps he did whiff too much smoke—are not very clear; so for the first time in this narrative I must attempt to construct what must have happened though it may well be that only my intention is historical.

With Brother Bousquet before him gripping the railing and half sliding down the narrow spiral of the stairs, Brother Frost went all the way down to the first floor and out to St. Joseph’s Aula. There was no light burning but they could see clearly, for the fire had spewed out of the kitchen corridor and now swarmed over the napkin boxes outside the refectory door. Father Sullivan, Brother Michael Connolly and the other novices from the polar dorm were still in the aula. Brother Frost called to them to help him and ran towards the chapel. Just before the chapel entrance off to the left there was a small ladies’ powder room. In it, on a rack beside the mirror, there was one of the new fire hoses. Brother Frost grabbed its nozzle, pointed to the valve and ran out leaving the others to play out the hose and turn on the nozzle. He ran with the hose up to the stairs outside the chapter room which mounted to the first-floor staircase hall when he was brought up short. Someone back at the valve had turned on the water full blast while the hose was still running out under the door of the ladies’ room. It swelled and caught in the jamb while the most miserable of little trickles was all that came out of the nozzle in Brother Frost’s hands. The flames against the refectory wall were a solid, copper-colored mass that shook defiance. There seemed little chance of pushing them back
even with a full stream of water. Brother Frost dropped the hose and ordered everyone out of the house.

He did not go outside himself, but ran again up the iron stairs to the second floor. Suddenly remembering his blessed ability to sleep through sleet and storm and dark of night, he had thought of the juniorate. Had anyone got the juniors out of bed?

The rooms on the second floor were not lofty, cavernous halls, remembering the world, like those on the first. Their ceilings were no more than two or three feet taller than those of a modern house, and so Bellarmine Hall, the corridor leading into the dormitory and the dorm itself were all choked with smoke.

When he got to the dormitory the lights were burned out, but it had the feel of being empty. The juniors were, in fact, already out. Walter Young, the sub-beadle, slept beside the doorway to the tower stairs and he had heard the commotion when the novices began filing down them. One of them stepped into the juniors’ dormitory and leaning over told Mister Young in the hushed voice used for “necessary speech” during sacred silence that there was a fire upstairs, a small one, of course, but that it might be a good idea to get the juniors out of the house. Young had gone over to Ed O’Flaherty’s bed by the main door, woken him up and told him to put on the lights.

With the weak night lights burning in one half of the dormitory—the lights in the other half were still not working—smoke could be seen hanging like an overcast about three feet underneath the ceiling. Young announced that there was a small fire in the novitiate and all should quickly but quietly leave the house by the tower stairs. There was no panic and, as in the novitiate above them, no talk. Jerry Starratt went out into the corridor to go to the washroom. He was driven back by the denser smoke and came hurrying again into the dormitory. Everybody seemed to be getting out quickly and, since he did not wish to alarm them, he told no one that this must be more than “a small fire in the novitiate.” Joe Devlin’s bed was near Ed O’Flaherty’s by the door and apparently he had inhaled smoke before he woke up, for he sat up when the lights went on and was sick beside his cot. The novices still coming down the tower stairs stood back with a nice regard for religious seniority on the steep stone rises
which would only permit descent in single file in order to allow the juniors, their elders in religion, to pass.

At the foot of the tower stairs a door led out to a short flight of stairs to the ground. It could not be opened. Two days before, Brother Perry had taken the handle off it in order to repair the lock and had not yet put it back. Since it opened in and blocked the stairs it was just as well that it did not work, because it would have only served to bottleneck the stairwell. Each man would have had to close it after him to let the next man down to where he could get out. But someone tried to open it and his voice calling up the hollow-sounding tower: “The door is stuck!” chilled everyone in the dark stone shaft. Someone else calmly said: “Go out through the sacristy,” and the ripple of panic smoothed out.

Most of the juniors brought down blankets because Father Kelly, who had come down with the novices, stood at the tower doorway to the juniors’ dormitory and shouted that no one was to dress, but simply take a blanket and come quickly. He also called out that each man should check the bed beside him.

The juniors, then, had all gone, teary-eyed and coughing, by the time that Brother Frost came running in from the corridor. Father Kelly was still at the tower door shouting and banging the cot nearest to him to make sure that no one had overslept. The lights were no longer working and the smoke was now very heavy. Brother Frost knew he could not stay long in here, so quickly he went around lifting up beds and dropping them, shouting: “Clear out! Clear out!”

In every dormitory there is one phenomenal sleeper. Here it was Richard Cleary. Over in the lakeside corner of the dorm he still buzzed away, curled, innocent and unperturbed. This was the side where the lights were not working, and in the darkness, despite all the precautions, he had been overlooked. When he first became conscious he heard Brother Frost and thought he must have slept over late in the morning. Fuzzily he rolled up to a sitting position. There was a heavy fog in the room and he felt a good deal more miserable than he had ever felt previously in the first bleak moments of a new day. His face was tacky with sweat; his arms and legs ponderous and adhesive—Lord, he was tired.
Slowly he dressed. It seemed that everyone had left and that never had happened before, but then, he never remembered Brother Frost coming into the dormitory before. It was not until he stood up that he began to realize that these clouds were not fog merely, but in some way or other, danger. He as yet did not recognize them for smoke but was vaguely apprehensive. He did not go out through the main door, but picked the shortest way: through the tower. When he arrived in the sacristy, Father Kelly was just going out into the chapel to remove the Blessed Sacrament. It was between seven and ten minutes after the others had cleared out of the dorms and another minute of questions and explanations before Dick Cleary realized what had happened.

Brother Frost was not aware that he had awakened Cleary. He had gone swiftly through the dormitory, thinking it already empty and only banging beds as he went simply for a final perfunctory reassurance. He kept moving, and since then, naturally, he had stayed on the move. When he went down the tower stairs he did not stop off at the sacristy but continued on into the cellar. Four juniors, Joe Appleyard, Arthur Kane, Ed O’Flaherty and Bill Mulligan, had gone down also into the cellar just before. They intended to fetch up a heap of coats and hats from the juniors’ lockers, but they had not gone farther than the novice lockers when they decided to turn back. The novice lockers were in the main cellar corridor outside the bottom of the iron stairs and about twenty feet closer than the juniors’. There was no heavy smoke down here; but thin clouds had begun to seep along under the ceiling. There was some sort of machine clattering like a windmill around the bend in the corridor. They had never heard it before, although everything in the cellars was familiar to them, and in the dimly-lit cavernous corridor with its ancient arches and threatening areas of shadow, they began to be afraid. Someone suggested that the lights might go out as they had in the dormitory upstairs, then one of them cautioned that they should go back, and gratefully they did. They did not, of course, take the novices’ jackets, for they had no permission to do so. Perhaps they returned to the sacristy before Brother Frost came down, perhaps they passed him in a dark section of the corridor without seeing him; anyway, neither party remembers
Brother Frost had come down to check the boilers. For some time now while he was rushing around upstairs, the fear that the fire might have started in the large boiler room which was off the cellar corridor, diagonally opposite the foot of the iron stairs, had kept recurring as a very disturbing thought. The boilers were his responsibility. Over and over again he checked his memory of last evening. Had he shut them off? Was there anything he had forgotten? But he found the boiler room just as he had left it the night before, with the lights burning on the cheerful red-tile floor and all his tools prim and shining on their hooks and shelves. It seemed impossible that the floors above were choked with killing clouds of smoke, that only a short time previously he himself had stumbled around a pitch-black attic and heard it echo to shouting, harsh voices.

He shut off the feed lines to the oil tanks that were buried out in back of the house behind the kitchen. If the fire did finally penetrate to the boiler room, a spark in the lines could cause a tremendous explosion outside, particularly in this month when the tanks, after the winter, were almost empty and full of fumes. He thought of pulling the main light switches, but then remembered that on the floors above someone might still be trapped and needing light to find his way. That thought brought him back to the realization that the cheerful normality of this familiar room was sham, that danger, maybe death, had entered the building, walked the customary corridors.

He rushed out and made a dash farther down the cellar corridor around the bend into the west wing. He wanted to reach the secondary shut-off to the oil tanks which was under the kitchen area. But as he got down near the bottom of the elevator shaft, he found that the smoke was becoming too thick. There was no flame, but enough smoke had been created now to back down against the draft into the cellars and the whole length of the building was rapidly filling. He turned around and started running back to the tower stairs.

When the juniors first came down into the sacristy, Bill Russell, who was the master of ceremonies, had thought of the Blessed Sacrament. No one else yet realized how serious the fire
was, and Bill Russell was not too sure himself. He remembered from a conference given by Father Post when he was a novice that anyone could, in danger of profanation or destruction, remove the Blessed Sacrament from the tabernacle. It would be quite a distinction to be the only junior who had ever opened the tabernacle door, almost as though he were already a priest. Mr. Russell is a man naturally attracted by distinctions, but he had not scrutinized his weaknesses during two years of novitiate for nothing. Sternly he put that thought aside as frivolous. A great crowd of novices and juniors were at the windows which looked over toward the west wing. Some had gone outside and were running across the driveway, but most had remained in the sacristy since they had no desire to go out into the March night in only pajamas and a blanket. From the sacristy windows there didn’t seem to be much danger. Flames could be seen through the grimy storm doors of the small back porch which gave on to the kitchen corridor near the brothers’ stairs and was known as the “express porch,” but no one could seriously consider that a fire way off over there would ever threaten the chapel and sacristy. At this distance it seemed a small, even comforting, fire which would quickly be extinguished. Still, it was getting smoky even here. Russell got out a surplice and the great gold humeral veil used for solemn feasts—if he was going to be forced to remove the Blessed Sacrament, he would do it in proper style.

He had just decided to go into the chapel, in fact he had already vested himself, when Father Kelly, having delayed in the juniors’ dormitory to make sure it was emptied, came down the tower stairs. Bill Russell felt just a touch of disappointment when he saw him, but his general feeling was one of relief.

Father Kelly, after the excitement and driving urgency which had ridden him since that first stunned moment outside his room, was inclined to relax in the atmosphere of calm he found in the sacristy. It was like the nursery scene in Peter Pan, with all the boys in their nighties, sitting on the window seats, looking out through the curtains. If there was apprehension, it seemed (after the pressing dread he had felt up to this) like the apprehension of children before a summer storm. But then Brother Frost came bulking out of the tower, red-eyed and
panting like the giant from his castle, and everything became grim again.

Brother Frost curtly ordered everyone out of the sacristy. He forbade anyone even to stop to take the vestments or the vessels. “Of course, Father,” he told Father Kelly, “remove the Blessed Sacrament. I’m afraid this fire won’t be out for hours. It could even burn down the whole house.”

So Father Kelly, with Bill Russell attending him, went into the chapel, removed the Blessed Sacrament and, hunched in the great cope, stumbled up the dark and slippery path to Campion Cottage where he locked it away in the second-floor chapel.

As the novices and juniors spilled out from the sacristy the La France hose-truck from Lenox turned in the driveway from the Richmond Road and came wailing down the hill past Campion. Brother Frost ran, arms waving, to point out the hydrant halfway up the hill towards the cottage. But the truck parked down in the driveway before the house, and the men quickly began to run hose back up the hill. Brother Frost and Brother Vincent Connolly, a novice, with some others grabbed the hose at intervals to help drag it along.

The men in the lead went right by the hydrant. Brother Frost tried to call them back. But Chief Hutchinson had inspected the water outlet months before this and decided that he could get a stronger flow from the town hydrant on the Richmond Road, should he ever have a fire to fight at Shadowbrook. Brother Frost, however, was sure they would come back and sent some novices running to the garage to get shovels in order to clear the snow away from the hydrant. Then he ran back towards the house.

Soon the Richmond Road was crisscrossed with hose lines. The water jetting from hose couplings coated the road with a thin frosting of ice, and Johnny Loubard of the Lenox department was stationed by the hydrant to warn cars away. A skidding car could break the vital flow to the nozzle.

And the cars were coming in. They already stretched down past the fork at the end of Rosary Lane and would soon be parked along both sides of the road to well below the Tanglewood entrance. Policemen, volunteers, Red Cross, civil defense,
reporters, excitement-seekers and mourners, attracted by the sky glow, called by the whistle or informed by a midnight phone call—the people of the Berkshires were gathering to witness the death of one of the giants of the county, going up like Agamemnon on his pyre.