CHAPTER SEVEN

*The Third Floor*

All of the novices and juniors were safely out of the building now—all, that is, who slept in the eastern wing. But there were still some on the third floor of the western wing, and like everyone else on the third floor, except Father Kelly and Brother Bousquet, they were trapped.

The three novices on trial that month, Brother John Redgate, Brother Frank Bergen and Brother Richard Wolf, were sleeping in the little dormitory on the driveway side of the house approximately above Father Sullivan’s room. Brothers Redgate and Wolf woke up at precisely the same instant. There was a loud sound of thumping and crackling in the hall. Brother Pete Gabriel, after he had broken out of his window, ran around and around the house, shouting up to the windows of the third floor. Redgate and Wolf remember that, in addition to the ruckus in the corridor, there was a good deal of shouting outside. For perhaps fifteen or twenty seconds they sat up in their beds bewilderedly staring at each other. Then, again together, they hopped out and ran to the door.

Brother Wolf, as the senior novice, was in charge of the dormitory, and his bed was nearest the door. He switched on the lights and looked at the dormitory alarm clock, which was on a chair beside the door. It was thirteen minutes to one. He opened the door while Brother Redgate poked his head over his shoulder.
They stood there peering out. The room was just beyond a bend in the corridor, and so they could not see down to the elevator shaft, where the flames were. But grey rolls of smoke, like a school of tumbling porpoises with red underbellies, turned and rolled in the corridor, lit with an eerie light; and the heat draughting into the opened door behind them stirred their hair like a gale.

Someone seemed to be down around the bend, fighting the flames, for there were huge manlike shadows on the wall opposite them and the sounds of grunts and oaths. Brother Redgate called twice: “Hey, Brother, which way out?” No one answered, and Brother Wolf by this time realized that these were sounds and shadows made by the fire itself, that there was no way out along the corridor.

They closed the door and turned around to see Brother Bergen just getting out of bed with fear beginning to contort his face. All three began rather wildly to exhort one another to stay calm, not to worry about a thing, to keep their heads; and as they jumped into shoes and pants, they assured each other furiously, and repeatedly that everything would be fine, all right, dandy, if “we just stay calm now.” They ran to the windows and saw Mister Bill Griffin break out of his room with the fire behind and around him. They looked down below the three high stories to the driveway and saw the upturned faces of novices and juniors, who were running across from the sacristy, shocked, frightened, despairing.

They had told each other to stay calm, but that did not mean they had to hope blindly, and hope at this moment was a dead, cold lump. Of course, they could tie sheets. It was about forty feet to the ground, and the sheeting from the three beds would never reach all the way. There was a chest, though, with extra blankets: they might be enough. Brother Wolf lashed one end of a sheet around the center post of the casements while the other two knotted blankets and sheets on to the other end. He pulled it tight and yanked against it to see if it held, but all the while he felt like an actor—they only did this sort of thing in movies, it would never work, and look at the “potting” things, ripped, frayed. But then, he was senior and must not express his doubts.
He finished tying his end of the sheet to the window frame and went over to the door to try and close the transom. Smoke was pouring in through it, and they could hardly breathe. The old thing probably had not been closed in ten years; for all he could do, despite straining, was burn his hands on the now hot metal rod. The transom did not budge.
Their rope of assorted blankets and sheets was finished, and they dropped it out the window. It reached to about six feet from the ground. Now that it was done, it seemed they must use it. No other rescue was in sight.

Brother Redgate turned to Brother Wolf and asked, “Who goes first?” The poor senior was not anxious that any of them go, but it seemed as though the counsels of desperation must be heeded. He told Brother Redgate to go, and he gave him careful instructions. He was not to trust those rags too far: he should slide down them as quickly as possible and not attempt to go hand over hand. Brother Redgate clambered out on the roof and disappeared down behind the overhang. Seconds later he called up that he had landed safely, but the rope had broken down near the bottom.

Brothers Bergen and Wolf hauled it up and ran to the chest for more blankets. They tied another two on to the end. While they were working on the knots, the lights burned out; and only the hot faces of the flames jumping up above the transom permitted them to see. It was now almost impossible to breathe. Smoke and now waves of fear drove them both out on the roof.

Crouching on the tilting roof, they held on to the window frame and carefully lowered their rag rope down again. Brother Wolf told Brother Bergen to go next; and down he went, while Wolf himself leaned out over the edge to watch the descent. The rope held, and Bergen landed in a blanket which some of the other novices were holding below the swaying line of sheets. Brother Wolf was part of the tradition that the captain is the last to leave his ship and up to this time had felt through his fear a sort of glow of competence. But now he began to regret that he had watched the operation. The ground and the tiny figures below seemed things seen through the small end of a telescope. Between him and safety plunged a sickening slope of nothingness. Their rope was a bad joke of bunches and knots. He began calling down: “O.K. All clear? All right?” Three or four shouts were all he could use to excuse delay before his fear became shamefully manifest. He sucked in a reluctant deep breath, put his fist around the sheets, and called almost sulkily, “O.K. I’m coming.”

But the sheets had had enough. Fifteen or twenty feet
from the ground they pulled apart. He fell free, hit the blanket off its center, jerked it out of the hands of the man on that corner, and slid off into snow, unhurt and nearly sobbing with terror.

Cap Conklin saw him fall. He had just turned the Buffalo into the driveway a few seconds before. He saw flames shooting up behind the windows in the corner of the house where the two wings met and knew they were in for a night of it. He radioed back to Chief Hutchinson, who was driving into the fire barn, and told him that they would need all the help he could get, that there were people jumping, and that he could see some trapped on the ledges of the roof. Then he scrambled out of the truck and started to unhook his ladder.

Bill Griffin had jumped a short time before Cap Conklin arrived, while Brothers Wolf, Redgate and Bergen were knotting sheets in the trial dormitory. He lived in a small room directly behind the brothers’ stairs on the third floor. He had been in bad health for some months and had not attended classes. Since he could not seem to sleep soundly, he had been given a private room.

He awoke to the noise of eating. Someone, some monstrous nightmare creature was eating, for there was a sound of moving jaws, slurping, slavering, entirely disgusting. He looked out the half-glass door of his room into the passage where the stairs turned up to the attic. The whole passage from wall to wall was a riot of flame. Bill Griffin is an imaginative, sensitive young man with a touch of fey in his makeup. He remembers being immediately frightened, of course, but his predominant sensation was simple bewilderment touched with amusement: what was happening here? and wasn’t it ridiculous, anyway?

He opened the door, was immediately seared, and the flames came in after him, hooting and waving their arms. He fled to the window and utterly without thought burst out through it. His foot caught in the gutter of the roof which dipped down around the windows of the third floor. He stood there in the gutter holding on to the inside of the window frame while the room filled with flames.

He saw the novices in the trial dormitory put their heads out the window and he started to shout: “Hey, what’s going on
here. Hey, I’m burning to death.”

The rector’s window was diagonally below his and he saw Father Corcoran looking up at him and shouting. His hand inside the window was burning, but the unreality of the whole sequence struck him again. “Hello, Father Rector,” he said, and tried to smile. Some novices had stretched out a blanket below him and the rector asked him to jump. The blanket was far out from the building, he thought, and seemed the size of a dust cloth. “No, I can’t. I’m burning, Father.”

The rector had tied sheets together himself, and they hung out the window below him. Scooping them up, he threw the end up to Mister Griffin, who caught it but then dropped it when he felt the skin of his burned hand rub off against the cloth. “I can’t hold it, Father. My hands are burned.”

“Then you have to jump, Mister. There’s no other way.” Griffin bent down, picked up some snow from the roof, and tossed it out towards the blanket. It flaked and drifted apart in all directions. He drew a breath as though he were going under water and leaped out. He hit the blanket squarely and rolled out into the snow. Then he found he could not move—all his body was hot and throbbing. Father Pat Sullivan had just been ordered out of the house by Brother Frost, and as he ran out from under the porte cochere at the front door, he saw Griffin jump. He came over and picked him up in his arms.

The small Buffalo truck which Cap Conklin drove into the yard was equipped with several short length of ladder and one two-section extension ladder framed in steel with aluminum rungs. While he, with Brother Murphy and some others helping him, unhooked the metal extension, some of the juniors took off one of the small ladders and ran it over to the rector’s window. Father Corcoran came down the ladder and went immediately to the garage. He had seen Father Carroll lying motionless on the ground; and he was concerned about Mr. Griffin, who, leaning on Father Sullivan, had disappeared in the direction of Campion. He backed out the black Pontiac and had Father Carroll stretched out in the back seat. Tom Martone, a junior, drove off with him.

Father Peter Dolin, who lived in the first-floor room of the stucco tower directly below the rector, had awakened to
a thunder storm, with lightning flashes and frighteningly close thumps of thunder. He lay there hoping to drop back to sleep. Just as he first became conscious of the enormous heat in his room, the window near his bed smashed in. Misters Young and Bob Braunreuther put their heads inside and yelled for him to come out. He was now on the ground, wandering around, a dazed old man of over seventy, lamenting the lost things.

Cap Conklin had work for his aluminum ladder. There were still seven people trapped on the third floor. Immediately above him as he climbed down from the cab of the Buffalo, on the northeast corner of the west wing he could see two figures clinging to the steep snow-covered roof. They were over to the right of where Wolf had just plunged from the breaking rope of sheets, almost at the corner of the building above the garage. In the near-freezing night one of them was dressed only in his shorts. He hung there naked, helpless and ugly like a just born bat, and as pitiful.

Brother McDavitt was the man in clothes on the roof. He had awakened in the room next to the novice trial dorm about five to ten minutes before this. His room was full of smoke, but like so many others that night, his immediate thought was of routine. The slow first motions of the fuzzy brain had no place for smoke. They persisted in recognizing only the familiar. There was noise in the hall, heat in the room; therefore, it was late. A tingle of apprehension, not fear of fire but of missing morning visit, swept him into full consciousness. And, as his smoke-filled room took on its true significance, he found himself through a momentary panic at a lesser evil prepared to act calmly in face of a greater. He opened his door to the horror of flames, shut it quickly, and began to dress.

The Jesuit brother is not, as in some other orders, ordinarily asked to undertake academic work of any kind. Though, of course, the brother is subject to the same “no conditions” vow of obedience as the priests and scholastics, ordinarily his assignments are to the unglamorous, essential and sanctifying tasks of kitchen, scullery, sacristy, refectory and the like. As the Constitutions in a rare essay at metaphor put it, the brother is “to be content with the role of Martha”—a floury-armed lady, it seems,
given to bustle and impatient efficiency. The brothers are not any more a typical group than the priests, as a matter of fact, and I think there must be fully as many brothers employed in clerical work as there are farmers and boilermakers; but, because the human mind is fashioned to form abstractions, to smear differences, inevitably there has arisen an archtypical image of the Jesuit brother. According to this image, he is a large, expansive man, cheery, perhaps boisterous, a mean hand with machines, and possessor of a bone-crushing handshake. To the small extent this image is justified, Brother McDavitt must be judged an atypical brother. He is just about medium height, but slender and finely drawn. His voice is thin and his pronunciation almost excessively nice.

Brother McDavitt, however, is another example of what almost became a law of inverse nature that night: that the natural heroes were allowed little scope while the meek inherited the perils. For this clerkish man became a one-night steeplejack and saved the life of Father Banks.

Father Banks was the man in his shorts. He had been one of the few who had awakened calmly this night. The smoke seeping into his room beneath his ill-fitting door told him when he first became conscious that there was a fire in the house, and he sat up quickly and began to dress. Father Banks lived two rooms down from the novice trial dorm (where Brothers Bergen and Wolf were, about this time, shouting futilely into the empty corridor) and three rooms down from Brother McDavitt. His room was the last but one from the northwest corner of the house. Brother Perry’s was the last.

Father Banks had only just stripped off his pajamas and wiggled into his shorts when the door of his room burst open. Father Yumont, his across-the-hall neighbor, stood there shouting what he already knew: that there was a fire in the house. Father Yumont, who had crossed the corridor which no one else had found navigable since Father Tom Kelly had run off to the novitiate some ten minutes before, had panicked. He stood there only a few seconds, a shrill voice and a dark form, hooded in smoke, and he was gone again. But the clangor of his fear still rang in Father Banks’ head. Yumont had left the door open, and
now the heat and fumes poured into the room in a great gelatinous mass. Father Banks’ calmness shattered, and he scrambled through the window, out onto the slippery tiles, and hung there, terrified, clinging to the sill.

Brother McDavitt had gained the roof some seconds before this and squatted outside his window. He watched Mr. Griffin burst out and shouted encouragement to him. He had seen the novices from the trial dorm lower their sheets and decided he would edge over carefully and go down with them when they had finished. But when he saw Father Banks appear, naked and terrified, some thirty feet down the roof, he changed his plans. He called down to Father Banks that the gutter would hold a man’s weight, he thought, that father should slide down to it and hook his heels into it. There was no response. Father Banks simply clung where he was, his feet continually slipping from under him with a frequency that was almost like a slow motion dance. Brother McDavitt had up to this point acted like the careful man he is, but now he turned daredevil. He slid to the gutter and began to walk along it. He passed the rope of sheets. Brother Redgate had just gone down, and Bergen was sliding down to the edge of the roof. McDavitt wished him luck and moved on. Seven or eight confident Bunyanesque strides took him along the thirty or so feet of shaky sheet metal to below Father Banks’ window. He threw himself up towards the sill, and stretching out full length against the slope of the roof, he could just reach to the sill. He pulled himself up beside the shivering priest.

Nothing would persuade Father Banks to move. He would not even release his grip sufficiently to put on a coat. He fastened onto the window sill, and Brother McDavitt could do nothing but help hold him there.

Two of the novices from the trial dorm had gone down the rope of sheets successfully; Brother Wolf now leaned over the roof edge and prepared to go down himself. Father Banks suddenly wanted to jump. There was no point in waiting, and the heat blasting from the window was becoming overpowering. Desperately Brother McDavitt reasoned with him: at least try to get over to the sheets. It became a grim struggle and a losing one. The drowning man was about to overcome his rescuer. They had
turned out toward the driveway, and now saw the flashing red light from Conklin’s truck coming down Rosary Lane. Father Banks slid down to the gutter, with McDavitt, still at the window sill, lowering him.

Perhaps a minute went by while the ladder was moved over to the wall. The gutter at this place was choked with ice, and Father Banks’ bare feet could seem to find no firm grip. McDavitt stayed where he was, holding on, with one hand, to Father Banks’ arm and, with the other, gripping the hot sill.

The ladder did not reach to the roof. Carefully Brother McDavitt let go of the sill and slid down beside Father Banks in the gutter. Father Banks lay back against the roof and seemed temporarily secure. He had become very calm. This last disappointment, it seemed, had even aroused his sense of humor, and he began to make the whole situation a joke.

Brother McDavitt crouched over the roof. The two-piece extension ladder had fallen back to a single length. It wavered back and forth some twenty feet below him. Conklin, on the ground, heaved up the extension for the second time. The tips came shooting up toward the roof, and fell back again. This time seven or eight feet short. The catch had not held. Conklin pushed the ladder upright, stepped up on the second rung, reached up and pushed mightily at the extension once again. The whole ladder veered crazily and smashed up against the wall, but this time it was only four or five feet short. One more heave and it sprung out at last to full length, the top barely resting on the edge of the gutter.

Brother McDavitt helped Father Banks down. Around the back there was still great commotion. People had been rushing from one side of the house to the other calling up encouragement and advice to Father Grogan whose room was in the center of the north side facing the lodge. Father Yumont was faced out towards the west on the northwest corner; Father Hanlon clung beside Brother Bourrie to the window of his room far down the west side near the large tower. But most concern was beneath the window of the novice infirmary where, between the rifts in the clouds of smoke pouring out of the window and up from the windows on the second floor, they could see the anxious
face of young Brother Robert White.

Brother White had awakened to shouts in the corridor, perhaps those of Brothers Wolf and Redgate calling to the shadows they mistook for human. He dressed quickly, but when he got to his door, he could not hear anything except the bubbling and spitting of fire. He stood shouting to the voices he had heard, but received no answer. He was afraid to open the door because he was sure there must be flames right outside it, but finally, curiously, he did. A blast of heat scythed off his hair in a moment and drove him back, swinging on the knob. The momentary glance into the corridor convinced him there was no hope of escape that way, and even though he had slammed the door shut, the smoke, coming in the transom and around the lintels, sent him running to the windows.

He flung open the casements and kicked out the screen which someone had forgotten to take down in the fall. Sitting on the sill, he gasped for fresh air, but the smoke funneling up from the smashed windows of the second floor made breathing as difficult as though he were sitting behind an exhaust pipe.

At first there seemed to be no one below him on the ground, though with the smoke it was difficult to see. Further down the roof he could see Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie lying back along the pitch of the roof with their heels caught in the gutter. He shouted down to them, not with any purpose but merely as an expression of the desperate camaraderie of danger. Father Hanlon, concerned, shouted back instructions: if he could get his feet in the gutter as they had, perhaps he could move along it further down the roof and away from the smoke which was all around him. He lowered himself out the window, hanging by his hands; but there was no gutter. This room had been carved out of one originally much larger, one that had proved too prodigal with space after the Jesuits exchanged gracious living for utility; and this window, which had been thrown up between two of the gables, dropped directly off to the ground.

Brother White hung from the sill until he was sure his nervous kicking was not going to meet any gutter; then hastily he hoisted himself back in.

Now there were people below him. He could mistily see
them running down towards Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie with a ladder. It was the short ladder which some novice had found in the subcloister and it was the same ladder that they had used to take Father Ryan off the wall as he came out on sheets from the window of Father Carroll’s bathroom. Brother White could not see the ladder very well; but Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie from their less smoky perch could, and they knew it was far too short to be of any use to the third floor. Father Hanlon called down that they would jump. But the man on the ground refused to allow them and told them to wait at least a short while longer.

By this time Brother White’s own shouts had told the people on the ground that he was there and trapped. He called out that it was becoming impossible to breathe. Someone made the suggestion that he lash sheets and blankets together and attempt to come down to where they could at least see him and perhaps catch him in a blanket. He turned back into the infirmary, which by this time had filled completely with heavy clouds of smoke. He fumbled over to his bed, holding his breath, but he could only tear off one blanket before the need to breathe became desperate. He whirled around clutching the blanket, but now could not see the light from the window through the churning, thick-broth smoke. Dizzy, he fell to the floor and, crawling squint-eyed in the direction of the faint draft of fresh air which slid along the boards, he managed to find the windows again.

Now the men on the ground were calling to him to jump since they could see that there was scant hope he could survive very much longer in the black clouds which poured out around him. Six men held a blanket down in the floor of the subcloister, and five more stood around another blanket at the edge of the subcloister wall on the ground level about six feet above. With these two nets they felt sure they could catch him. But Brother White could not see them any more than they could see him. He shouted that he did not know where to jump.

The youngest man in the first year novice class, Brother White seems to have been a likeable and biddable youngster—in fact, his jump, when he finally made it, was an act of faith in which he threw himself, loose-limbed and relaxed, down four
stories to thin blankets he could not see. Had he fallen stiff with doubt and fear, he would have, according to the doctors, driven his legs up through his chest. But at the present he had no stomach for jumping. There must be some other way than such an insane leap. Again he yelled that he didn’t know where they were.

Father Martin Ryan, who was one of those holding the higher blanket above the subcloister, had refused to encourage Brother White’s jump. He knew in simple realism that it was the only chance, but so desperate a chance that he could not bring himself to encourage Brother White to take it. He absolved him (Bob Braunreuther heard him praying for him), he held the blanket, yet he could not tell him to jump. But now as the smoke from the second floor streamed up to the infirmary window, black and thick as though from the stack of a locomotive, Father Ryan finally shouted: “You have to jump, Brother. We’ll catch you, but you must jump.”

Still Brother White did not. Coughing, terrified, he remained peering through the momentary rifts for some other rescue. And it came. The aluminum extension ladder had taken down Father Banks and Brother McDavitt from the roof out in front of the house and, circling around back, it had already been used to rescue Father Yumont. And now it came jogging around the bend behind the kitchen porch with six or seven attendants carrying it, jiggling and jocund, like the central float in a harvest festival. Gleaming through the smoke, it came and went right past Brother White. The men on the ground, concentrating on the smoke-obscured infirmary window, did not see it, and the men carrying the ladder saw only Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie further down the roof.

Brother White almost despaired for a brief moment, but he, as a good religious, was trained to think of the needs of others; and the need to get Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie down—they had been out on the roof now nearly a half hour—was too evident to need argument. Just then the picture window in the refectory alcove which faced out to the west blew out, and Brother White could see a red glare, slick on the snow. For some reason, despite the terrible moments on the floor of the infirmary when he thought he would not get back to the window
again, despite the choked agony of the fifteen or twenty minutes he had fought for air hanging out in clouds of smoke, it was not until he saw the fire glow on the snow outside the tower that he actually realized that there was no alternative to escape except death. And for some reason buried in the psychology of Brother White, perhaps in the Councils of God, this realization calmed him. He watched the ladder being set against the house beneath Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie. It did not reach. So he was decided.

He called down to the blankets that he was coming. He threw down the blanket he had managed to rip from his bed as a marker and asked where it landed. It had hit the blanket on the floor of the subcloister, dead in the middle. “All set?” And he jumped.

Mr. Braunreuther, standing on the inside corner of the upper blanket, his back to the house, leaned back, craning his neck. He saw a shape coming hurling out of the smoke; it was the blanket. There was only a few seconds pause and Brother White came down. A bundle of shapeless cloth—for an instant he was sure it was another blanket—it suddenly grew arms and legs that pinwheeled and flapped uncontrollably. And, dear God! he was not going to hit the blanket at all. From the first moment the body broke out of the smoke, everyone knew it. Involuntarily, Braunreuther turned away.

Father Ryan, with a horror that was like nausea, saw Brother White’s body tear through the edge of the blanket he was holding as though it were a Kleenex, slap against the wall, lightly but with an audible, meaty sort of impact, bounce off one of the men holding the blanket on the subcloister floor, and fall to the concrete. Father Ryan jumped down beside the crumpled Brother White, who lay with his legs crooked as a carpenter’s rule, and tearfully gave him absolution once more and the apostolic blessing for the dying. It was then with utter astonishment that he heard him speak: “My leg is broken, I think.”

Both legs were broken, as a matter of fact, and the right kneecap was smashed where it had cracked against the wall. All of his teeth had split when his chin bounced off the wall, but he was alive by the favor of God and courage of Brother Michael
Connolly. For it was Mike Connolly, another first year novice, who had broken his fall before he hit the concrete of the subcloister floor. When he had first seen Brother White’s body come plummeting out of the smoke, he knew instantly that he was not going to hit either of the blankets but fall between them. While the others automatically turned away, Connolly stepped directly underneath the hurtling body, trying to jerk the corner of the blanket he was holding around to catch him. White landed on his shoulder, smashing him to the ground and nearly tearing off his ear. Stopping square under a falling man is not an instinctive reaction; that moment of determined courage saved Brother White’s life.

The ladder, as we said, had already taken down Father Yumont, who had spent some time forcing himself by syllogisms (no less!) to wait for it.

He had been in a tunnel, long, inky black, with an intermittent gleam of a fiery-red opening far, far off at the end of it, and a tunnel almost unendurably hot and oppressive. Three or four times the same dream repeated itself—a senseless, overheated tunnel, with himself buried deep in it unable to get out. And so, when he finally awakened to full consciousness, he was greatly annoyed. For a minute he was sure that the radiator was to blame, that the heat had not been turned off that night; but then, swiftly, realization came. There was the unmistakable sound of fire in the corridor, and small curls of smoke were rising along the mopboards.

He jumped out of bed, pulled on bathrobe and slippers while shouting and running over two or three times to pound on the wall behind his bed. Finally he heard Father Grogan in the next room answer that he was awake. He had been all action for a few moments, but suddenly he became indecisive. What was he supposed to do now? He was afraid, from the sounds outside his door, that the entire corridor was aflame and that, if he opened his door, the flames would rush in. Yet, he was not sure whether anyone else was yet awake. At last, with a curiosity like Brother White’s and the realized need to do what he could to warn the others, he opened the door. The heat and smoke were, if anything, more intense than the others, who had done the same thing, expe-
rienced; for it was now after ten minutes to one. He ran across
the corridor to Father Banks’ room and gave warning, with the
results that we know; then he returned to his own room.

He had suddenly been gripped by an incongruous
anxiety. The new glasses he had bought a few days ago had cost
forty-five dollars. He must get them before he went any further. At
the same time he picked up his watch. Then back to the corridor
again with the vaguely realized purpose of warning others and
getting out himself some decent sensible way, like the stairs. He
had not gone more than three or four steps before he once more
was driven back to his room.

This time he headed for his windows, tripping over his
typewriter case on the way, and knocking the slipper from his left
foot. A push, made superhumanly strong by the force of the panic
that was now rising in him, sent the storm window flying from
its hasps out into the back driveway, and he hung out the window
gasping.

Mr. Michael DeAngelis was out there, on the fire escape,
not ten feet away. The fire escape came up to the junior infirmary
where DeAngelis was living, finishing a year’s convalescence from
tuberculosis. He urged Father Yumont to crawl along the rain
gutter to the escape and come down with him.

Now Father Yumont began his syllogisms: If he went
along the gutter, he would be putting too much trust in a few
inches of sheet metal. If he only trusted the gutter to support him
for a few feet, he could then catch hold of the TV antenna from
the fathers’ recreation room that stood up out of the roof not far
beyond the reach of his hand. But then, of course, just how much
support could he expect from the frail antenna pole? On the other
hand, he could not last long here, for the smoke was becoming
suffocating. It was obvious that he would be forced to jump; and
since it was better to jump now, while he was relatively clear-
headed and thinking, than later, when perhaps he had panicked
and would be unable to select a landing place three stories down
with proper care and intelligence, he had better climb up on the
sill and jump.

Father Yumont is a man with one of those strange, utterly
rational senses of humor which is amused by the incongruous,
simply because it is incongruous. He is a living proof Schopenhauer’s theory of laughter. He now takes great delight in telling about his “syllogisms.” In reality, of course, they were mere enthymemes of panic—pure, wild, irrational suggestions, prompted by terror. But at the time he did not think so. He remembers congratulating himself on the lucidity with which arrived at the conclusion that he should promptly go out the window in a forty-foot leap to the rock-hard frozen ground. And his amusement with himself becomes intense when he describes how cleverly and rationally he rebutted his own argument.

He had just reached the point where jumping seemed the only possible conclusion from a careful consideration of all the alternative when someone below him—perhaps Father Campbell, perhaps Father Ryan—smashed out a window. He heard the glass shattering on the ground and he reasoned: “Lord, I can’t jump down into broken glass. I’ve lost my slipper.”

And with that brilliant conclusion of the scholastically trained practical reason, his mind reached a *quies mentis*: he simply must wait until someone could get there with a ladder; it was his only chance, as, indeed, it was.

Once more, after Father Campbell, down on the ground now, had shouted up a suggestion that he try to get to the fire escape, he attempted to fight his way through the corridor again down to the juniors’ infirmary. It was hopeless after two steps down the hall. He ran back to his window and just held on to the conviction that someone would eventually come with a ladder.

When Cap Conklin did get to Father Yumont’s window, the priest could not be seen from the ground, but someone managed to cross the wires in one of the old farm trucks parked out in the kitchen yard; and in the bounce-light from its headlights, his arms, desperately waving, could be glimpsed through the smoke. In stretching his foot down to the ladder (for it did not quite reach the third floor, and Cap Conklin had to hold it upright with no support from the building wall while Father Yumont climbed down), his other slipper fell off. When he got to the ground, he stood on a blanket, still rather silli[l, perhaps, terrified of broken glass, shivering, his eyes and nose running; and while hordes of competent people went rushing past him,
he stood alone, with a hateful need to weep and weep, surging shamefully up his throat. But then, some novice or junior ran up excitedly to tell him that Brother White had jumped from the third floor and lay dying, that he must come and administer the last rites. For one fraction of time more he hesitated—that glass he had heard and his bare feet! And then, at last, the chrysalis of horror which had bound him cracked apart; he functioned again as a man and a priest without the tremble of those strange dream-like “syllogisms” that had directed his actions and saved his life. He ran off towards the subcloister.

Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie lived in adjoining rooms on the third corridor. Brother Bourrie is a Canadian brother who had come to Shadowbrook about ten years before to build up the Holstein herd. He had administered a prize herd in one of the Canadian houses; and when it was decided to sell it off, the then minister of Shadowbrook requested his services for the Shadowbrook farm. He is a dedicated and intelligent farmer and in the ten years he had been at Shadowbrook had built up a herd of registered cows and become well known among farmers and breeders of Holsteins all over New England. A positive man, he was affectionately called “the pope” by the novices and juniors who sweated under him pitching hay, cleaning up cow droppings, and trying to match his wit—a hopeless task, that last, for Brother Bourrie has a voice with a sword’s penetration and indomitable
will. Like all farmers I have ever met, he can give the impression of cryptic taciturnity on first encounter; but, work with him for a day, and you will find him an indefatigable gaffer, his raillery constant and persistent. A novice learning the brand-new lesson of Christian humility, which to the tyro assumes the lineaments of diffidence, was no match for his high-spirited clobbering.

A pose Brother Bourrie loved was that of the wise old man, knowledgeable and experienced in all things. Among his fund of vivid stories one was preeminent: The Time I Escaped from a Fire Which Razed a Canadian Scholasticate. I, myself, never knew the name of that scholasticate and, though I knew it would not be difficult for me to investigate its history in order to use it here, I decided to leave the facts, wrapped in their epic drapery and crowned with their nimbus of distant, mythic heroics, the way they first came to me from Brother Bourrie’s tongue one day some ten years ago on the back of a hayrick. It is not that I fear history would contradict my remembrance of art; it is simply that I felt it would be an indignity even to attempt to test his narrative art by history—a lack of trust and a shocking aesthetic gaffe. Well, the point is that while many woke up in their beds that night shocked, unbelieving, and at least temporarily incapacitated, one man hopped out alert, brisk, an old hand at fires—Brother (the Pope) Bourrie.

That is, at least, the way he tells the story now, and no one who has witnessed his competence at barn and sawmill will feel inclined to question him. Yet, such is the irony of reality that, as clear-headed and experienced as he was, he could do practically nothing during the fire itself.

His room, as I mentioned before, was between Father Kelly’s and Father Hanlon’s on the west side of the third floor and directly opposite the elevator shaft. Only seconds after Father Kelly had banged on his door and run down towards the novice dormitories, the gas and smoke pouring out of the shaft ignited; and the hallway outside Brother Bourrie’s room writhed with flame. Brother had been sitting on the edge of his bed, pulling on his boots and quickly scanning the various courses of action open to him. As he straightened up from knotting a lace, he saw the little eyespace of the keyhole red and glowing, then watched
a thin line of red stitch itself in the spaces where the door did not quite fit the jamb. He knew immediately that it would be fatal to open the door and that he must go out the window. All the plans for best rousing the house, for most effectively fighting the fire, which had gone charging through his mind in the past few moments, were routed. The one thing his experience told him clearly was that he could not go out that door. With the sad realization that a good man with fires was lost to the rest of the house, he snatched his bathrobe off the hook on the door, picked up a chair, and began to beat out the window glass. The collar of the robe was warm against his neck, and later he found it charred where it had rested against the heated door panels.

Only a few minutes after he had climbed out on the roof, the window of Father Hanlon’s room was thrown open, and Father Hanlon put his head out, calling that the smoke was unbearable in his room. Brother Bourrie, lying back along the pitch of the roof with his feet in the gutter, told him to come out onto the roof. Father Hanlon scrambled through the window, and, squatting, came sliding down the pitched tiles to the gutter. He stood bolt upright in the frail copper trough to peer over the side and almost gave Brother Bourrie heart failure. “Lie back along the roof as I am, and use the gutter only to catch your heels in, Father.”

Then the two of them stayed there. There was nothing to be done: the three-floor drop offered them either the stone stairway to the novice toilets or else the concrete floor of the subcloister as possible landing places. There was no possibility of climbing down, though the thought of scrambling across the roof to the large tower did occur to them and was rejected as fantastic. The rough stone work of the tower might have allowed a human fly to climb down it, but it was obviously out of the question for an elderly breeder of Holsteins and a balding clergyman.

They heard the sound of smashing glass when Father John Post broke through his window; and in the crisp March night his soft grunt, as he broke his back, came clearly up to their perch. There were the wild shouting attempts to get Brother White out of his clouds of smoke and onto the roof, and the short-lived hope that the ladder with which the novices and juniors were
running back and forth could reach up to them. But mostly it was waiting.

In the beginning they had been alone, perhaps for ten or twelve minutes. Then there were people scurrying aimlessly below them; but, after the first comfort of knowing that others were aware of their plight, the sight of them safe on the ground only made their sense of loneliness more intense because it pointed out how frighteningly hopeless their position was. Brother Bourrie’s bastioned confidence began to spring leaks. He had asked for absolution when they first came on the roof. They had both prayed, at first, in simple altruism, for those who might be still caught inside, unable to gain a quiet corner of the roof as they had; but later, as the minutes went by, a thin line of desperation seamed their prayers, which were still the silent prayers of men who, even if religious, find it difficult to manifest piety. Brother Bourrie asked again for absolution. And later, again, until Father Hanlon asked quietly, “And who absolves me, Brother?”

They had planned their jump: it would have to be off to the left and quite far out. If they could get enough drive with their feet from the gutter without the gutter giving way, they should be able to miss the stone stairwell and land on the ground outside the refectory windows. From this height there was probably not much to choose anyway.

Then the ladder came. They had been told it was coming, but after nearly a half-hour of desperation and cold they had thought grimly that it was only a kindly fiction. They had made themselves think of jumping and braced their wills against the thought, and the sight of the ladder jouncing towards them out of the night was simply too like the United States Cavalry to be credible. But it came, was handed upright with wondrous dispatch, and did not reach. Brother Bourrie, now as careless of his weight on the gutter as Father Hanlon had been earlier, leaned over shouting: “Put her on the gas tank. Stand it on that gas tank there.”

About three feet tall, squat, shaped like a circus strongman, the gas tank fed the kitchen stoves. There was a nest of them underneath the overhang of the subcloister, more shapely affairs like a grouping of candles; but this one stood outside on
the ground, and why it had been set there, instead of below with its more graceful brothers, no one seems to know.

The width of the ladder just about measured the width of the tank, and placed on top of the tank the ladder reached to just below the gutter where they were lying. It had to be held onto the sloping sides of the gas tank, but Cap Conklin proved strong enough for that. And down they came.

Everyone was now out of the house but Father Grogan. The ladder crew had passed him by when they ran from the northeast corner of the western wing where they had taken Father Banks and Brother McDavitt down from the roof around to Father Yumont’s window on the northwest corner. They started back for him now.

The ladder crew had gone by Father Grogan’s window because he told them to. Many who were in the fire have reproached themselves since because they did not do something other than what they did in the excitement and press of the emergency, others have claimed they were calm and thinking throughout, but after talking to scores of witnesses, I am convinced that the accolade for coolness must go to Father Grogan before anybody else.

Father Grogan, string-thin and sickly looking with a little clown’s tuft of hair in the center of a naked forehead, looks like a nineteenth-century satirical engraving, a Tenniel illustration for Bob Cratchit or one of Dicken’s other wage slaves. His unhealthy appearance was come by honestly, for during his theology studies he was violently ill and nearly died. Being despaired of by doctors seems at least in his case to have a tonic effect, for he is now a man of preternatural calm.

He woke to noise and smoke and got up. He opened the door only a crack and knew that he was not going out into that hallway. From that point on he did everything, as he always does everything, deliberately. Father Yumont was yelling at him from the next room; so he answered that he was fine, everything was fine. Brother Gabriel was yelling outside the window, and there was a good deal of smoke in the room; so he opened the small sliding pane in the storm window and poked out his head. Brother Gabriel called to him that the fire was very serious and told him to smash out the storm window so he could get air. He
carefully unhooked the window and stood leaning out, holding it awkwardly in both hands. Brother Gabriel told him to drop it. But Father Grogan thought that, when all this noise and excitement was finally over and the fire extinguished, the minister would prefer to have his storm windows intact. He inquired whether the brother thought it really necessary. Told it was; he dropped it, wincing slightly at the crash.

He had dressed, of course, suit, hat, overcoat and rubbers, and debated whether to take the Hamilton or not. It seemed clear that, should he finally be forced to vacate the building before the fire was put out, it would be by ladder, and the Hamilton (a famous watch in the New England province—Father Grogan’s maternal care of his timepiece was one of the better known eccentricities of Ours) could easily be jarred on the descent. He decided to leave it, and it perished alone and unattended.

Now there was nothing to do but wait, head out the window in the smoke that was becoming increasingly difficult to bear as it poured out around him from the room behind and funneled up from the windows below, in which, as those on the ground could see, flames had already begun to blossom. The smoke soon became so thick that Father Grogan, like Brother White on the other side of the house, could only be glimpsed at intervals, while the rest of the time his head and shoulders were completely hidden in the black clouds.

There were so many people running back and forth in the road behind the house that Father Grogan was sure he would not be forgotten; but after a time, coughing and distinctly uncomfortable, he began to wonder how serious this all was, and whether, in fact, he might not be unable to get out at all. It was a disturbing thought and forced him, against his inclinations, to disturb others.

He pulled out his handkerchief and began apologetically waving it to attract attention: “Doctor, say, doctor. Oh look, doctor, if you get a chance would you see about getting a ladder around here sometime? It’s getting very smoky here.” And as the novice or junior rushed off: “Take your time, doctor.”

The small ladder which had been used to pluck Father Ryan from the wall, and unsuccessfully for Father Post, had gone
past on the road several times, now in the hands of an excited crew who were running back and forth looking for people in second-floor windows. But not once had they glanced upward and seen him. Regretfully he began semaphoring again with his handkerchief: “Hello. I’m up here. Hello.”

Someone stopped and craned up. “Can you hold out a while longer, Father? We’ll get there.”

“Sure thing, doctor. It’s a little smoky here now, though.”

So the aluminum ladder, too, went past him, and only when Fathers Yumont and Hanlon and Brother Bourrie were on the ground did it return.

By this time his window was erased entirely in a black smudge of smoke, and no one was sure where to set the ladder. Father Grogan, now able to breathe only in quick little gasps through the arm of his overcoat crooked before his face, had taken to waving his handkerchief with outrageous impatience almost continually. He saw the gleaming top of the ladder come poking up through the smoke and rest about two feet to one side of his window. With nearly an athlete’s grace he stepped over to it and started down.

Those on the ground saw him emerge from the billows, an Ichabod Crane with skinny, angular shanks, walking awkwardly down the rungs the wrong way, but with, in the midst of the bedlam of burning, great dignity, hatted and gloved, collared and rubbered—a moving sight of courage and comedy.

One of the juniors started up the last few rungs and offered him his shoulder. “Save it for manualia, doctor,” he said, patting him down ahead of him. “Is everybody out?”