The hill behind the house had filled with Berkshire people watching the fire destroy this brash, arrogant, and relatively young house, which had become an object of affection for even the dourest and most tradition-minded Yankee there. As the aesthete might at this distance feel affection for Barnum or the most socially conscious undergraduate for Rockefeller’s dimes, the house had become part of his scene, a slice of his personal history.

Down in the driveway, firemen, shapeless in their rubber coats, scurried around directing the pitiful streams of water into what were now massive towers of flame, invincible and exultant. The Stockbridge brigade had arrived as well as trucks from Lenoxdale, a ladder truck from Pittsfield, and trucks from Lee, Dalton, Lanesboro, West Stockbridge, Interlaken and Glendale. There was really nothing they could do. Three hoses were now hooked on the Richmond Road hydrant, and two more were drawing a thin trickle from the house hydrant which Brother Frost had uncovered. But nothing was going to stop the fire.

At one-fifteen there was an explosion from the kitchen corridor behind the express porch. Twenty gallons of paint in five-gallon drums had been delivered only two days before and were stored temporarily in the corridor until someone had opportunity to bring them down to the cellar paint shop. It is
supposed they caused the explosion which blew out the windows of the express porch and sent the fire leaping past the fire wall in the middle of the house into the parlor area on the first floor and juniorate library on the second. From that point on there was nothing to be done, except pour on the little water available and watch.

Father Corcoran, after he had been assured by Father Sullivan that Mr. Griffin had been taken to the hospital by Jim Quinn of Lenox, had run to the back of the house where Brother White and Father Post were lying.

When Father Post had fallen, he lay on the ground in the sure knowledge that his back was broken. One of the novices, Brother Joe Doherty, rushed down to him and asked him whether he could get up. He replied that perhaps it would be better if he remained where he was until he could be moved. But in a short while, embers shooting up out of the flames which had broken through the roof on the other side of the house began to shower down into the subcloister, and pieces of tile began to fall from the roof. It was felt that he must be moved. Mr. J. Gould, who had run
over from his home when he first saw the flames, and some of the novices dragged Father Post along the concrete floor of the subcloister to the edge of the stairs. They left him lying with his head on the third stair and his broken back stretched over the points of the first two. He had been there now for about twenty minutes watching the rescue of Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie and agonizing through the drama of Brother White’s leap. He had asked Brother Doherty to say the rosary with him, “… since,” he apologized, “I can’t seem to concentrate, Brother, and there are people in danger who need prayers.”

After Brother White had jumped and Father Hanlon was safely on the ground, Father Post told the novices around him that Father Hanlon would be in charge from now on and that they were to do whatever he told them. From this point on there were moments when he lost consciousness briefly, but for the most part he remained alert and in pain.

When Brother Frost arrived at the back of the house, he decided that Father Post should be left at the edge of the stairs until an ambulance could come with a stretcher. Four ambulances came to Shadowbrook that night—the Red Cross ambulances from Lee and Lenox, the town ambulance from Lanesboro and the Civil Defense ambulance from Pittsfield—but such was the jam of cars and fire trucks along the road that not one of them got through to the house. Everyone who went to the hospital eventually went in private cars.

About five minutes past one it became evident that because of the falling tiles and embers Brother White and Father Post would have to be moved without waiting for special equipment: Brother Frost was also concerned about the underground oil tanks which were buried only a few feet away. He wished he had been able to close that second shutoff. He and Brother Vincent Connolly, a burly ex-marine novice, threw themselves against the cellar bulkhead door, trying to get in to the second shutoff valve and also to find some lengths of board from which to improvise stretchers. But the stout door, unlike the ones in the “tough guy” detective novels, would not yield. Then Brother Frost remembered that the small pickup truck which was parked just out behind him in the shadows had an old plank thrown over the back which
might do. It, did not quite match Father Post’s length, and his feet hung down on either side. But they managed to get him over to the truck.

The pickup had recently been used to transport some pigs to the slaughterhouse, and the leavings made the back of the truck something less than hygienic, but it would have to do. There were no keys for the truck, but they crossed the ignition wires, and it drove off with Brother Frost at the wheel and Brother Manning in the back with Father Post.

Brother Connolly called on his remembrance of marine training and constructed a makeshift stretcher out of blankets to carry Brother White on. Young White was moaning quite loudly until the men carrying him told him that they were forced to hurt him to get him away from that spot. He quieted immediately. They had been told that the Cranwell station wagon was out in front of the house, so they carried him out around front, slowly, carefully shuffling along to reduce the number of jounces. But Father Banks, hearing that there were injured in the back of the house, had already driven the station wagon back out to the Richmond Road where he was now trying to navigate the entangled hose lines and skidding ice. So they had to put Brother White in the back seat of a car belonging to Mr. William Gregory of Lenox, cautiously easing his crumpled legs into the cramped space.

With the injured gone to the hospital, the drama slowly subsided to tableau. The firefighting went on in a hopeless sort of ritualistic mime, but the crowd, tiered along the ledge, simply stood watching, their faces ruddy in the spilled light from the thunderous spectacle of destruction. There was a proud splendor to the death of his house which, I think, would have pleased old Anson Stokes—nothing but “the largest private residence in America” could have splashed its colored defiance so splendidly across the winter night. Anna Mahony, on one of her many hasty trips in and out, overheard one schoolboy say to another in reverent tones: “Gosh, what a composition this is going to make!”

The adults, too, were not impervious to the magnificence of the fire; but, being adults, they were capable of tragedy.
Edna Millay, one of the latest of the Berkshire poets, tells us: “Childhood is a kingdom where nobody dies . . . “; for children, who only know the world as it exists at their own nerve-endings, never know loss. One must be able to transform sensation into thought before a bridge is built between man and man, for only by reflection can one know another’s pain for his own. Truly to define loss, we must learn to love because love, the precious pain of mature men, is the only thing that compels us to reflection.

The crowd that stood that night in the snow on the slope and ledges behind Shadowbrook or climbed among the rocks of the Lourdes shrine that faced the porte cochere spoke mostly in whispers, breathy with sympathy and loss. The groups of Red Cross workers, going about with cups of coffee and sandwiches for the firemen, seemed to create a kindliness that was as earthy, practical and as welcome as everyman’s cliché memories of home—here brisk and hearty, here the poor, bracing joke, here a mere smile or silence. They used all the ancient, tender tropes in the rhetoric of sympathy and used them with a deeply felt, unobtrusive eloquence. Men and women, one after another, approached the fathers, who stood in slippers or with their
bare feet in flopping rubbers, some dressed in habits, some in
mismatched pants and coat, others hunched under blankets
covering the sunbursts, sailboats or palm trees on their thin and
unmonastic pajamas, to offer jackets, scarfs, coffee, the use of
their cars, their homes. At least a dozen of the fathers and some
of the novices and juniors were told how many extra beds could
be spared in homes in nearly every town for miles around. Mrs.
Gould told Father Corcoran she was ready to turn the Higginsons’
ancestral farmhouse into a dormitory where she, her daughter
and her staff would cook the meals. The number and names of
these generous people have been lost unfortunately in the ruck
of that night’s confused memories; and those offering money,
clothes, food, sympathy to every bewildered, smoke-blackened
Jesuit they met were so many it can be doubted they could ever be
recalled even had the circumstances been tranquil. It was the first
sluice of a cataract of charity whose full tide would not be known
until the rest of the Berkshires woke tomorrow.

There was only one note out of harmony, for, it seems, a
young man with the loud, eternally childish voice of the village
atheist chose this moment gauchely to boast his captaincy of soul.
None of this religion muck for him, and look where it’s brought
these birds with their rosaries and mutterings!

St. Ignatius had an acid test for holiness (and rarely has
a test been more acid). No one, according to his tough-minded
realism, can be said to understand and live Christianity unless
he accepts insult and contumely in silence and with the joy
which Christ, knowing that such was His salvific work, accepted
the mindless jeers of Herod’s court. The fathers passed one half
of Ignatius’ test that night on the firelit hill, but Father Martin
Ryan frankly admits that he at least miserably flunked out when
it came to joy. He was raging. He dug his nails into his palms,
and perhaps was only saved from retorting by the intervention of
state trooper Eugene Burns, who angrily told the young Voltaire
to “shut his trap or beat it.” For it was now about two-thirty and
the fathers knew that four men were dead.

For some reason Father Muollo and Brother Perry had
been missed almost immediately after the first men had gotten
out of the house. Attempts were made to get into both rooms.
One of the short ladders from the truck which Ed Conklin drove was up against Father Muollo’s second-floor window, while the other was still being used for Father Grogan’s descent. Brother Frost first attempted to get in the room but was driven back by the smoke. Then trooper Burns, who had put on a respirator and taken one of the firemen’s large, battery-powered trouble lamps, climbed up the ladder. He reported that the smoke and heat were so intense that he could not enter the room at all, but he did manage to make sure that it was empty. The heavy smoke was shifting sufficiently so that standing at the window he was able to shine his lamp into all corners. He knew it would be impossible to go further into the house than this room for, even standing outside as he was, the blast of heat was beginning to melt the metal parts of his respirator.

When Father Grogan had reached the ground, Ed Conklin tried to get into Brother Perry’s room. The long extension ladder was put up again at the same corner of the house where he had rescued Father Banks and Brother McDavitt because Brother Perry lived in the room adjacent to Father Banks’ toward the north. This time the ladder slid up to position smoothly and Ed Conklin scrambled up it. He went past the second floor and was driven back by the smoke. Chief Hutchinson gave him a respirator and he tried again—all the way to the top and up the slippery roof tiles until he could clutch the window frame with one hand while he smashed in the glass with the other. Chief Hutchinson and the others on the ground watched his work anxiously.

Perhaps this is as good a place as any to recapitulate the feats of Cap Conklin. He had been at the fire now about twenty minutes; and in that brief, action-filled period he had rescued six men who without him were surely lost: Father Banks, Brother McDavitt, Father Yumont, Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie, and Father Grogan. And it was a ladder from his truck which was used to take Father Corcoran down. A burly, powerful man, he had little help at first in yanking the extension ladder from the hooks on the truck and throwing it up against the side of the building to bring down Brother McDavitt and Father Banks. When the ladder catch did not work, it was his controlled, desperate heaves that finally shot it to full length and his strength which mainly
braced it against Father Yumont’s weight when Father Yumont leaped on to it before it had been set against the wall. He held it on top of the curved gas tank to get it up to Father Hanlon and Brother Bourrie and directed it blindly through the dense smoke pouring around Father Grogan’s room. There was an impression around during the days following the fire that he was able to do much that he did because the aluminum ladder was so light and easily handled. May I call attention to the fact that the upright struts of the ladder are structural steel? I know because, with Johnny Loubard a dourly amused witness, I attempted one day in the Lenox fire barn to hoist one end of the ladder off its stanchion on the side of the small Buffalo. One of the minor sorrows of my high school days was my lack of athletic accomplishment; still I am no weakling. With a fairly hefty heave which let my midriff know it had been in a contest, I did manage to get it into the air about a foot.

Eddie Conklin was on vacation during the time I was in Lenox. After tracking him for several days, I found him late one afternoon riding in on the back of a hayrick from the fields (not his own) where he was working. I had, of course, heard most of the details of his rescues from other witnesses, but I hoped he would be able to fill me in on the stories and make them more vivid. His is the one story I can repeat almost verbatim.

“Sometime before one o’clock Mary Shalley called me up and told me they had a fire at Shadowbrook. I didn’t believe her, so I said, ‘Aw, you’re kidding, Mary.’ She had Hutch on the phone at the same time and he said, ‘Go down there in the Buffalo, Cap. I’ll be right along.’ So I took the Buffalo and drove down there. When
I got into the yard I saw that it was going to be a bad one, and there was somebody coming down a sheet off the third floor. He fell maybe twenty feet when the sheet he was on broke. And I saw some others sitting on the roof. I radioed Hutch to bring all the help he could get. Then I got out the metal ladder, and we got the two on the corner of the house down. Then they told me there were some more trapped on the roof in the back. So we got them down. By that time the La France had hooked up to the Richmond Road hydrant. So we poured water on it, but it didn’t do much good.”

Asked to amplify, to give details, any little thing he remembered, Ed Conklin added that one of the men on the roof was sitting out there with nothing on but his shorts. I told him I would have to bill him as a modest hero, and under the hay dust he blushed—unless it was the slant rays of the sun which happened to color his face. Chief Hutchinson, after forty-five years of training and directing Lenox firemen, calls Ed Conklin “a good fireman”—an accolade in the long tradition of Yankee meiosis, but spoken with an un-Yankee-like emphasis.

When Cap Conklin had broken the glass of Brother Perry’s window, the heat came driving up against him with the force of a gale. He fought into it and got one leg over the sill before he realized, as Gene Burns had done in Father Muollo’s room, that it was impossible to go further. The room was almost pitch black and he could see nothing. The heat drilling in through his rubber coat and burning around the edges of his breathing mask convinced him that no one was alive who had been in this room more than a few minutes. So he backed out, slid down the roof to
the ladder and climbed to the ground.

Father Muollo and Brother Perry, then, were known to be dead. The little group of fathers standing around Father Corcoran underneath the Lourdes shrine were sick with helplessness and nagging memories. The flames rampaging now through the entire west wing burned in their eyes and seared deeper. They knew that some were still inside among them and would never leave.

Some time shortly after one-thirty the rector asked where Father Tribble was. He was awake, he had heard him on the phone. And Father Mulcahy? Had anyone seen him?

The next hour was a hell of inquiries, search, contradictions and hopes that rose hectic as fever and guttered out until they died around half past two. And the total was established at four.

Father Sullivan was positive that it was too high. He had awakened Father Tribble before anyone else; the minister was certainly out of the house. He had talked with Father Mulcahy in the corridor before he ran upstairs; there was plenty of time for him to escape. Neither of them could possibly be still there: they had gone to the hospital in someone’s car, they had accepted some kind offer to go home with someone and get warm, or possibly they were stunned and wandering around the woods. Father Sullivan gradually weakened in his certainty of Father Mulcahy’s safety—perhaps, because of his hip injury, he had fallen. But it was two days before he gave up all hope that Father Tribble would be found. “He had so much time!” No one there had heard Father Carroll’s story yet, and no one then realized how long Father Tribble stayed in his room pleading into a dead phone for the help he finally won for others.

But Father Corcoran knew his minister, and he was much more ready to accept the fact that Father Tribble had not escaped than anyone else. His argument was simple and eventually irrefutable: “If Arthur got out he’d be in the middle of things right now.”

A check was made of the novices and juniors. The manuductor, leaning against the fender of one of the fire trucks, wrote out the names on an old piece of cardboard. They were all safe.
One of the juniors was sure he had seen Father Tribble; he recognized his stocking cap. But it proved to be one of the volunteer firemen. Someone saw Father Mulcahy limping around the back of the house. A trick of the flickering light. A wild story that Brother Perry was in the porter’s lodge trying to call up the fire department. But no one could find who began it, and the porter’s lodge was red with flames.

Up and down, giddy as the colored globes which burst behind closed eyelids when the dark remembers light, these fancied hopes came and went, less and less strong until, at around two-thirty, their hour was over; and for the fathers standing in the orange brilliance of the huge blaze, everything went finally dark: four had died, Fathers Mulcahy, Muollo and Tribble, and old Brother Perry.

There is a dullness to tragedy. When catastrophe is happening, the activated glands, I suppose, send blood charging around, stimulate the nerves and reflexes; and a man feels alive—sometimes (this must be the allure for adventurers) brilliantly so. But let the great event wink out, let a pause come for reckoning, and all the thrills turn tawdry like memories of spent youth. So the fathers stood and watched the burning house, dully, sated with spectacle and heavy with sorrow. Perhaps something like these precise biographies were passing through their minds, only much more personal ones and poignant, while the persistent taunt of past possibilities, which is the core of human sorrow, picked at their consciousness. “Could I have done something I did not do?” “Was there any chance, if I had only ...?” And, “Dear God, give them rest.”

The fire, like a knife, sheared off the entire chapel ceiling in a single stroke. And the expanse of quartered oak, carved in whorls, fell like a collapsing canopy in a glitter of flames and embers. But it meant nothing to the men on the hill, except that now the entire house was surely lost and it was time to leave. The west wing was rapidly burning itself out. Nothing but the masonry, massive yet somehow pathetic, remained; and here and there, through chinks where the mortar had been baked and crumbled, flames could be seen still burning behind it as through the frets of a brazier. The large tower stood alone, cracked and
slightly tipsy with fallen debris aflame at its base. And now with the fall of the chapel ceiling, the east wing was doomed.

“It’s getting too cold to stand here any more, Tom.” Father Corcoran, noticing that Father Kelly was shaking, suggested, “Let’s get out of here.”

So a word of thanks to the firemen and they drove off, down along the inside road around the lake to the causeway opposite and facing Baldhead, where they could see the fire brilliant on its ledge platform curveting against the mountain. They watched it a few minutes in silence; then Father Corcoran turned the car around and headed it towards Cranwell. It was just after three-thirty.

They expected to find the novices and juniors bivouacked in the Cranwell gymnasium. During the anxious hour when they had been trying to establish who was missing, Father Larry Ryan had come to Father Corcoran and suggested that he get the novices and juniors away from the scene since most of them were not dressed against the cold. He told the rector that he would take care of all arrangements and see that they had heat, something warm to drink and were put to bed. Father Ryan hadn’t a clue as to how he was going to accomplish all these things, but they needed doing and that is why the Society has ministers. Cranwell had very few extra beds. Chief Hutchinson had told him that he had the authority to open the town hall for emergencies and he would be very glad to do it if shelter was needed. Father Ryan gratefully refused because he already decided on the Cranwell gym. He made one more quick trip to the school, turned on the lights and the heat in the gymnasium, reported to Father Keane, the rector of Cranwell, on the situation; and firmly insisted over Father Keane’s protests that it would be much more useful if the rector stayed at the school answering the phone calls which the Lenox exchange had begun diverting to Cranwell. He could also call the provincial. As Father Ryan drove back to Shadowbrook, he was still concerned with the problem of beds. Where was he ever going to find enough beds for one hundred and fifty men? And how was he going to transport so many to Cranwell? He supposed that he could find enough cars with willing owners, but it proposed to be a messy job. And transporting them in small
lots like that would make it difficult to check on the missing—the way those kids were running around it was going to be hard enough anyway.

This was the problem foremost in his mind as he inched his car in through the clutter of cars to the Shadowbrook gatehouse again. So when he ran into Dave Herrick, the first thing he said was, “Dave, where could I get some buses this time of night?”

“Chick Fuore, Father. Hey, Chick.” And Chick was standing, like a character in a badly written play, about five yards away. He was a volunteer fireman and proprietor of Chick’s Garage in Lenox, where the town’s school buses were kept. He took Dave’s car and drove off for the buses.

Father Larry then told Father Burke to contact the manud conductor and the junior beadle and tell them to round up their people, check them and come down to the gatehouse at the end of Rosary Lane. And he went off, still concerned about beds.

Anna Mahony had not been inactive. She was just braking a snorting car at the gate, having returned from another trip to Lee where she had opened the Congregational Church as an emergency kitchen and possible shelter. It was the shelter problem she intended to face now. Chick brought in the buses while Anna was making a brief survey of the activity over at the Gould farmhouse; and when she returned, the novices and juniors were boarding them with Father Ryan overseeing the operation. She inquired what his plans were. Told that the only thing necessary was beds, she said, “All right, that’ll be my problem, Father,” and set out again for her still warm car.

But a policeman who had been listening in during the first part of the conversation now walked over from a car he just finished questioning and told Father Ryan that the owner of the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge offered his hotel as shelter for the whole community. There would be no need of makeshift and “boy-scoutery” in the barn-like gymnasium; it was a perfect answer. Father Ryan happily agreed and ran out to catch Anna Mahony before she jetted off into the night.

Byrne Bauer was the Red Lion Inn’s proprietor and also the Red Cross disaster chairman in the town of Stockbridge.
Doctor Campbell of Stockbridge had been alerted, as had most of the nearby doctors, and his wife thought to call Byrne Bauer. She told him that apparently the entire community was out in the cold and that they needed blankets before anything else. That call was what had brought Bauer, his station wagon loaded with blankets, over to the Shadowbrook gate and a fortuitous questioning by the policeman who had overheard the discussion between the worried Father Ryan and the competent Miss Mahony.

“What’s your business here, sir?”
“I’m Byrne Bauer, officer. I run the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, and I have some blankets in the back there.”
“The Red Lion, huh? Fine. Go back and open up your hotel. These kids need shelter.”

And that is how the Shadowbrook community was moved to the Red Lion Inn. No one has been able to identify the disposing policeman who managed the whole affair. A god out of the machine, disguised like a cop, he has faded away back to his empyrean. And the badly plotted drama reached its happy ending.