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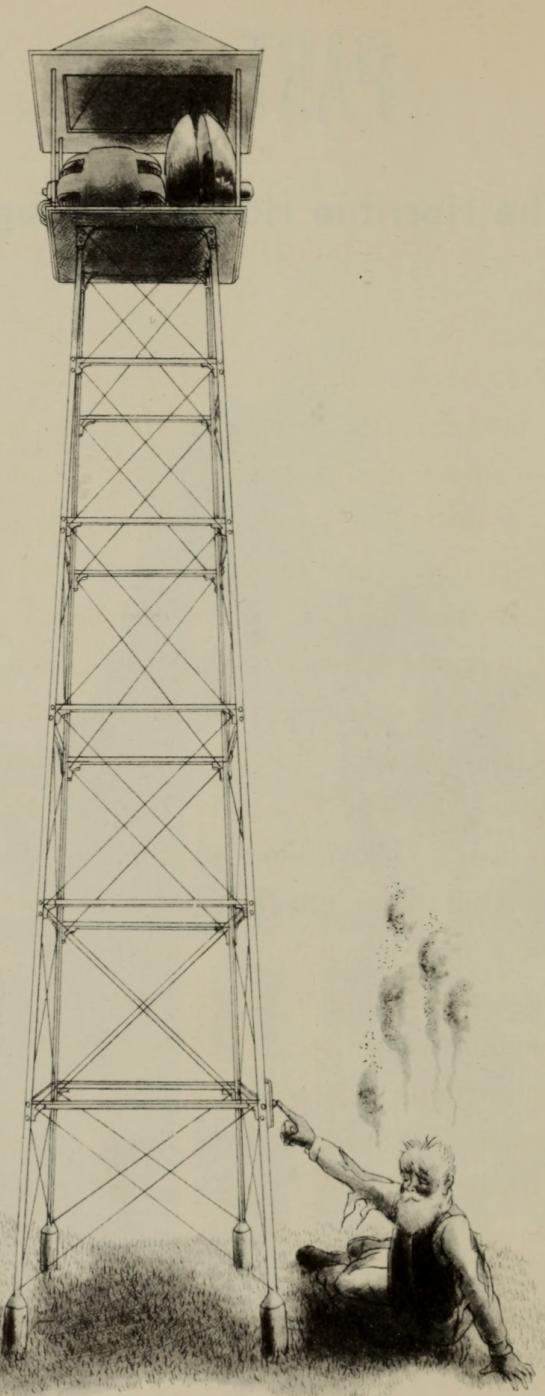
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PART ONE

The Horrible House of Houghton





Catastrophes Unlimited

There are houses which by their very nature stand out as terrifying dots on the landscape. They may have different ways of affecting the senses but each is equally grim. Some are disturbingly ugly; others may be haunted and full of strange unearthly noises, bats, and ghosts. Still others may be a danger to one's life because of high voltages as in power plants, or deadly fumes as in gas or sewage plants. There is a man named Houghton F. Furlong whose house, known either as "The Horrible House of Houghton" or "The House of Horrible Houghton," is famous near and far for just about all these reasons.

I could tell you exactly the name of the town where this monstrous mansion may be found, but the Chamber of Commerce of the region pleaded with me and made me promise not to mention it. "We are blessed with a beautiful countryside," they told me. "Our cattle are of the finest stock. Our ground is exceptionally fertile; our trees bear famous fruit. Our average income is unusually high, our schools are fine, our hospitals gleam with efficiency. *We are sick and tired* of being known for thousands of miles around simply as '*the home of the House of Horrible Houghton!*'"

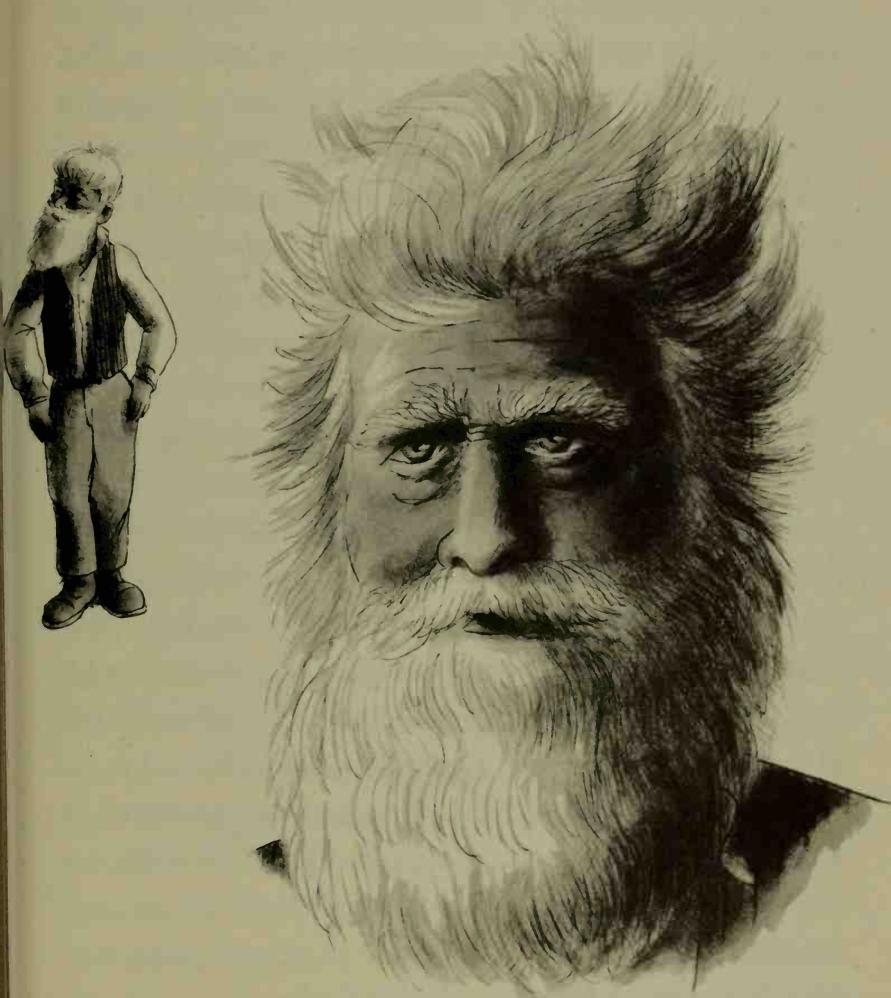
Since a town must have a name I shall call it Hounds-tooth, which of course isn't its real name. I shall also pass on the hint that if ever you find yourself in the eastern half of the United States and are within one thousand miles of the town either east, west, north, or south of it, a mere whispered inquiry about the Horrible House of Houghton is sufficient to produce explicit directions to the exact spot where the place is situated.

Since a house alone cannot cause such varied excitement, the blame must be shared by the one person who lives in it, Houghton Furlong. Of him little is known because he is left quite to himself. He would have been told, in no uncertain terms, to move long ago, except that the Houndstooth Postmaster reported that he receives a high pension from the United States Government. This automatically seems to make him worthy of a certain amount of respect. By profession, he is a retired inventor, retired from whatever government post he held, but still extremely active on his own.

His looks are not too ferocious, his actions are particularly wild. He is in his middle seventies, short but sturdy, nimble of body and bright of eye. His white hair sprouts from his head in all directions, like the leaves of an artichoke. He is always seen dressed in the simplest country clothing. It is quite apparent that he devotes no great time to shaving or grooming. His rough beard, which fetches to the middle of his chest, is squared off abruptly as if trimmed by hedge clippers. What can be seen of his face between the wool of his hair and the

scraggle of his beard seems intelligent and reasonable, but examine these of his actions and you will easily understand how he and his house earned such an eccentric and sinister reputation.

The first thing he did after buying the house in question was to have installed in his front yard a tall tower, on the top of which there was a loud, electrically operated



bell. Just once he drove his old but shiny Buick into town. "If by any chance," he told the townsmen, "I should find myself obliged to ring this bell, would you be kind enough to send a fire engine over right away?" The townsmen looked puzzled but of course agreed to do this, it being the duty of a well-run fire department to answer any form of fire alarm. It wasn't more than a day or so later that people of Houndstooth heard the bell of the Horrible House of Houghton for the first time. The fire department hastened over in full array, and sure enough they found Houghton Furlong on his front lawn, calmly pointing to a wing of his house which was furiously blazing away. "Thank you, gentlemen. Please put it out quickly so that I may get back to work."

While Houghton was having this wing rebuilt—the damage wasn't too great, for his alarm was clear and the engines got there quickly—he continued working in another wing. Two days later, this wing was burning briskly and that fire had to be extinguished. A week later the whole Horrible House of Houghton was enveloped in thick, persistent green gas fumes, and Houghton was found at the foot of his alarm tower, quite overcome by the terrible vapors, having just reached the alarm switch at the foot of the tower in time to save himself.

In successive weeks several fire calls were answered; a violent explosion rocked the neighborhood, blowing out a wall in Houghton's kitchen; Houghton twice needed artificial respiration to revive him from strange gases, and once had to be rushed to the hospital when he was found

at the foot of his alarm tower, the sleeves of his suit disintegrated by a powerful acid and his forearms, wrists, and hands severely burned.

On Sundays alone could the people of Houndstooth feel assured of complete peace, but even on this day they felt uneasy. On Sundays the aged inventor opened wide the doors of his spacious garage and brought out a huge sausage-shaped captive balloon. He would climb into the basket of this airship, unwind the cable until he was lifted about three hundred feet above his house, and up there he would survey the countryside, or bide his time reading the Sunday papers. But because of the unusual life Houghton Furlong led on week days, the people of Houndstooth couldn't allow themselves the simple relaxation of trusting him on Sundays. They were certain that he was studying the countryside from his balloon with but one object in mind—how best to wipe out the whole Houndstooth countryside.

At first, Houghton Furlong's alarm was answered only by the fire department. Later an emergency truck and crew from the gas company also answered the call with complete resuscitating equipment and oxygen tanks. Then the Houndstooth Hospital decided to send an ambulance over when the bell rang, just in case. Later on, when Houghton sounded his alarm, the whole neighborhood was shaken with the sounds of clanging bells and sirens.

It must also be mentioned that the Horrible House of Houghton is on the main road that runs through

Houndstooth, a wide three-lane concrete highway. For some time now no car, except the emergency fire engines and ambulances, has dared go past the house; instead the traffic takes a detour on a dirt road, giving the house a wide berth. The stretch of highway past Houghton's house is now quite overgrown around the edges, and grass is beginning to push its way through the seams.

There was one time when a delegation of extremely curious ladies of the Houndstooth Good-Neighbor League persuaded the mayor, the chief of police, and a few other high Houndstooth authorities to head a delegation to visit the Horrible House of Houghton. Houghton was told well in advance of this proposed visit. He seemed to welcome it with warm friendliness. As the ladies nervously approached the house, pushing the mayor ahead of them as if to shield themselves in case of an unforeseen attack, there came the sound of an old phonograph record playing "The Star-Spangled Banner." Suddenly multicolored sparks shot forth from all of the windows, the open door, the chimneys—sparks which soon so brilliantly filled the air as to make the house quite invisible. From this tinsel inferno Houghton suddenly hopped forth. "Ladies, my house is yours. Make yourselves at home." He found himself to be quite alone—his visitors, howling and screaming, had fled in all directions.

Nobody dares get too close to the Horrible House of Houghton, that is, no ordinary person who prides himself upon the possession of common or horse sense.

2

Alone at Last

“Let’s play follow the leader. I’ll be leader!”

That noise came from Peter Graves.

He wasn’t as boastful or sure of himself as that might make him sound, but almost. He had good reasons to be. He was shouting to twenty-four boys about his age who made up a big gang and who called themselves the Houndstooth Growlers. This was Peter’s own gang because among the Growlers he had grown the fastest and the strongest and still managed to be the quickest and the nimblest. He was a full head taller than any other member of his gang and thus stood out clearly from the mob. This head of his was topped with jet-black hair and was made even more noticeable by a pair of big dark brown eyes, round as bullets. Peter Graves was fourteen and a half years old.

He moved around so much, so quickly, so nervously, being overloaded with energy, that only his mother and father were able to notice that he wasn’t particularly handsome. His teachers had found him to be “intelligent, quick-thinking, most capable . . . terribly lazy!” His Growlers could find little wrong with him.

“*Okay,*” they yelled, “let’s go!”

If these Growlers had been able to study the gleam in Peter's eye, they might have thought twice before starting off after him, but he moved around too much for that. Peter had spent a good part of the night mapping out a route, a nice tricky and rather funny route, he thought, one in which he could shake off at least half of his followers. You mustn't think that besides being a boaster he had a mean streak about a mile wide. No. When he set out to do something seriously, he usually did it well, and Follow the Leader is serious business, particularly if you're the leader of a big gang like the Houndstooth Growlers. It should be hard to follow a good leader, Peter thought to himself. This ought to show them a thing or two.

They started off at a brisk pace, making a lot of noise as usual, all of them growling like lions and sounding louder than a jungle movie. He led them first to the river. There he hopped across from rock to rock on his left foot. Suddenly something unusual happened which was quite difficult for the Growlers to figure accurately. On the fifth rock, Peter Graves seemed to slip—well, some thought he slipped, but others swore that he did it on purpose—from the fifth rock Peter Graves did a loud splashing belly-whopper into the drink. He came up smiling and continued, slightly slowed down, to the other bank. There, he quickly turned to see that the others were doing the same. Most of them did, but a few pointed to wrist watches, new shoes, good clothes, and quit the pack right there. Peter Graves in less than three

minutes had shaken off four of his followers. He did this dubiously perhaps, but four Growlers down in three minutes is fast work in Houndstooth no matter how you look at it.

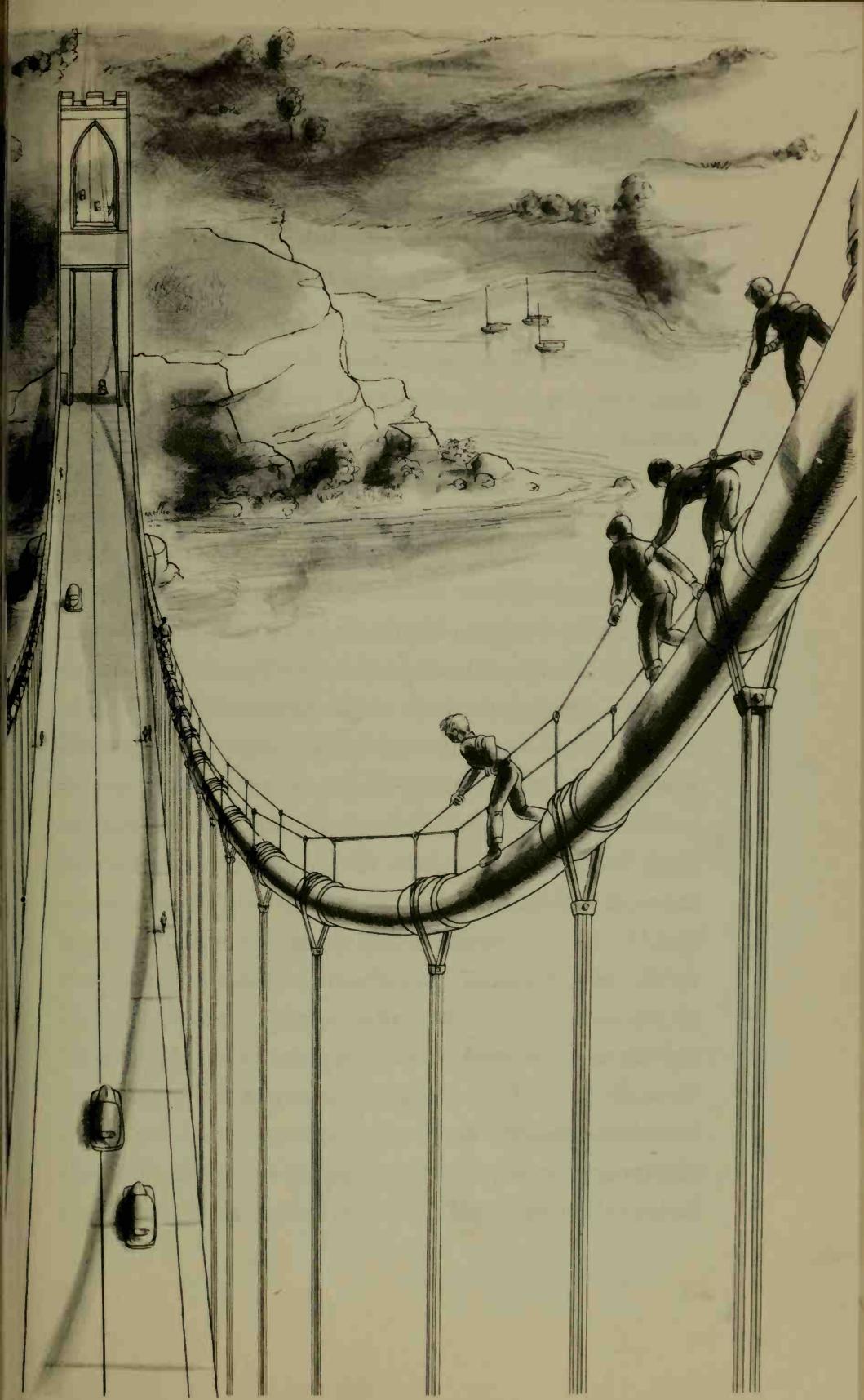
He next led his gang farther up the river, to a place where it was wide and deep and spanned by a most impressive suspension bridge. He led them across the bridge but instead of walking where pedestrians were supposed to walk, he took them up and down the cables on a tiny catwalk with but one slim and wobbly supporting railing, a place for bridge inspectors and repairmen only. Two members of the Houndstooth Growlers decided at this point that it was late and they'd better be running home. Peter himself dashed up and down and up and down and over the bridge as easily as though he always crossed bridges in this way. He then sat in the sun to dry off a bit while watching his gang struggle across.

The Houndstooth Growlers cautiously moved up the bridge cables, looking from the distance like a slow crawling centipede. They then started the steep descent toward the middle of the bridge—that is, half the Growlers started down. The other half seemed stuck at the top of the tower, as if the centipede had been cut in two. Peter Graves was puzzled by this, then was quite alarmed to hear shouts for help. He dashed back up and down the cables, nimbly passing the first group of Growlers as they slowly moved along, then climbed quickly up to the top of the first tower. Here he found one of the younger Growlers, a lad named Jackie Whiton,

clinging desperately to the railing, his eyes shut tight, and shivering with fear. He had had an attack of dizziness when he looked down from the top of the first tower, and was frozen to the spot, not daring to move either backward or forward. Peter Graves talked to him as soothingly as he could, convinced him that he couldn't spend the rest of his life on top of the first tower, and managed to get him to climb on his back where he clung to Peter's neck with a strangling, iron grip. Peter carried him back to safety and again crossed the bridge, up and down and up and down the cables, passing the Growlers, who shuddered nervously and clung tight as he overtook them. He reached the opposite bank, clapped his hands, and suggested annoyingly that his gang put on a burst of speed so that they might all get on to more daring things.

At last the Growlers reached the opposite bank where many of them, happy to be on solid ground again, looked at each other, smiled, and talked about what fun it had been. Others, with very earnest faces, explained that it was getting late and that they really ought to be running home. These took off like gazelles and quickly disappeared, hoping that great speed would somehow hide their failing courage. The leader had managed to shake off five more of his followers.

The Growlers next followed Peter through the woods in single file, pulling branches back, as he did, and letting them snap in the face of the boy behind. This was quite satisfying, unless you happened to be the last in line, and just about right for the leader. Peter Graves suddenly



stopped and took a penknife from his pocket. His followers of course did the same. He carved from a tree a whiplike stick, long and willowy, then checked to see that all of the others had one too, lending his knife to those who didn't have one with them. He led them out of the woods, over a fence and into a field where a famous bull of the neighborhood spent most of his time. This bull, a fine, ferocious, and extremely well-bred fellow, had earned for himself from his admirers among the Hounds-tooth Growlers the nickname of El Toro Goro. This wasn't because he had gored anybody, but because he looked perfectly equipped to do so, with long sharp horns, speed to burn, and considerable reserve strength. No one ever thought of bothering him to test his temper.

Peter Graves sneaked up behind El Toro Goro and with his stick swatted the bull a whistling lash on the back-side. He then took off and leaped over the fence. El Toro Goro, his hide being tough and refined, was not so much hurt by this as he was surprised. He turned and gave Peter a puzzled look. This seemed an opportune moment for the next boy to swat the bull, which he quickly did, followed directly by the third boy, who got in his lash and ran off toward safety. The bull was slowly beginning to feel that his great dignity was being treated lightly, and wheeled around to give chase. He took off after the two boys, huffing and snorting and making the earth tremble with his hoofs. The fourth, fifth, and sixth boys were chasing after him to get in their licks. The two he was after just made the fence, and while El Toro Goro



was glaring and snarling at them to express his disgust at their cowardice, the fourth, fifth, and sixth caught up with him and in quick succession rapped him on his hindquarters. This was quite enough for El Toro Goro, the last straw. These three were near enough to the fence to hit and jump in rapid succession, but the rest of the Houndstooth Growlers, who had yet to make their presence felt to the bull, found themselves grouped pretty close to the middle of the field with neither a nearby fence to jump over nor a friendly tree to climb into. El Toro Goro wheeled and made for these unfortunates. Wearing his most ferocious face, he dug in and charged at them like thunder. There was a furious scramble and a lot of yelling and screaming as the remaining Growlers scattered in all directions. There wasn't one who dared or even thought of daring to raise his stick at him, nor was there a boy in a position to do so. If there was any more hitting from behind to take place it was to be done with the horns of El Toro Goro.

A great cloud of dust followed the terrifying bull, so that Peter Graves and the five who were successful in following the leader were unable to see exactly what was happening. When the dust settled, they saw no trace of the other Growlers. Not that any one of them was hurt—they had kept right on running after most fortunately making the fence unharmed. They had then taken

advantage of the dust screen to scurry off unseen.

Peter Graves and the remaining five were strangely silent for some time, then they all burst out laughing, just a little at El Toro Goro, partly at their fast-running friends, but mostly from release of tension. They laughed and rolled around in the grass and laughed some more until Peter clapped his hands.

"Let's go," he said.

"More?"

"We've just started," said Peter Graves. He jumped to his feet and ran off at a dogtrot. His followers sent forth a few grunts and slowly rose to their feet. Peter ran on through fields until he came to another wooded area, through this wooded area, without bothering to bend back a branch, until he came on the main road. He ran up the main road until he came to a spot where it seemed quite unused and where grass had pushed its way up through the seams which separated the concrete strips. It was quite late in the afternoon now and the sun was down and it was getting dark and foggy. He turned to see if he was still being followed. He was. He made a sharp left turn and ran right off the main road up to the door of an extremely well-known house in the Houndstooth region. A dull green thick smoke was seeping out of two of its windows. Peter pounded loudly on the door and whirled around to catch the expressions on the faces of his followers.

He was quite shocked to discover that he was very much alone.