

DEATH ON TELEGRAPH HILL

CHAPTER ONE

A sudden gust of wind hit me full in the face, nearly causing me to lose my footing on the wooden steps leading up the east slope of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill. Burrowing my head further inside my hood, I hastened to catch up with my brother Samuel, who was several stairs ahead of me. He was obviously as eager as was I to be done with this precipitous climb.

It was a cold, clear evening late in March, 1882. In addition to the gusting wind, the approaching dusk was making our hike up the Filbert Street Stairs more arduous than if undertaken during daylight hours. On the other hand, if I had known what lay in store for us that night, the efforts of this ascent would have seemed very trivial indeed. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Our destination was the home of Mortimer Remy, a friend of my brother's and publisher of the *SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY*, a popular newspaper that often bought Samuel's crime articles. Mr. Remy had invited a group of local authors to meet the young Irish poet, Oscar Wilde, who was touring the United States to publicize a book of poetry he had published the previous year.

At least that was the ostensive reason given for his visit. It was hardly a secret that the actual purpose of the trip was to tout the so-called Aesthetic Movement, which was composed of artists, poets, and writers who argued that art need not be practical or useful, but should exist solely for its own sake. Mr. Wilde, the self-proclaimed champion of this philosophy, announced that it was his mission "to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization." Curious to meet the colorful personality, I had readily accepted Samuel's invitation to accompany him to the reading.

Tonight's clear view demonstrated how Telegraph Hill had received its name some thirty-two years earlier: it possessed an excellent vantage point for sighting ships entering the Bay. In order to alert the town to these much-anticipated arrivals – coming as they did bearing the mail and necessary goods and materials – a windmill-like structure called a semaphore had been erected atop the hill. The contraption had long since disappeared, but its brief existence had permanently established the hill's identity.

Mortimer Remy's home was located on a narrow dirt and gravel street, perhaps more correctly labeled a "byway." It was a modest, gabled-roof cottage, probably dating from the late 1850s or early 1860s. Houses along this lane were all but impossible to reach by one-horse, sometimes even two-horse, carriages. Evidently a real estate man by the name of Frederick O. Layman, had recently applied for a city franchise to run a cable car line up Telegraph Hill. The article hinted that Mr. Layman's ultimate plan was to construct an observatory atop the hill, and required the cable car line to transport visitors to and from what was already being described, and ridiculed, as a "German Castle." If the cable car line was eventually built, the hill's inhabitants would benefit from its convenience. On the other hand, it would almost certainly increase housing prices, which until now had remained affordable because of the hill's unfriendly grade.

Mr. Remy himself opened the door and greeted us with hearty cheer, then led us into a front parlor where seats had been arranged to face the front of the room. Built into one wall was a

large hearth, the crackling fire giving out rather more heat than I found comfortable. Opposite the fireplace was an ever-popular bay window, outside which I glimpsed a small copse of trees.

The parlor was simply arranged with functional, rather than decorative, furniture. About half a dozen people were already seated there, and our host directed us to a settee located toward the back of the room. Stephen Parke, a friend of my brothers as well as an aspiring writer, stood and smiled as we approached. He was a taller than average man in his late twenties, blessed with a head of curly brown hair, a fair complexion, and cheerful hazel eyes that twinkled as he assisted me into a seat beside him on the sofa.

“I’m charmed to meet you again, Miss Woolson,” he said. He shook Samuel’s hand, then sank back into his own seat.

“It is very good to see you, Mr. Parke,” I replied, pleased we had been seated next to such an agreeable companion. “It promises to be an interesting evening.”

“That’s what I’m hoping, since I was unable to attend Wilde’s lecture at Platt’s Hall yesterday,” he said. “Opinions about Wilde differ considerably.”

Samuel lowered his voice. “Judging by the man’s photograph in today’s papers, he certainly is a distinctive-looking fellow.”

“Not many men have the nerve to appear in public wearing turbans and knee britches,” said Parke with amusement.

My brother chuckled. “It makes good fodder for the newspapers. By the way, have you read his book of poems?”

“Not yet,” Parke answered. “But I hope to purchase one tonight. I assume he’ll bring copies.”

This time Samuel laughed aloud. “Have you ever known an author who didn’t drag around a trunk crammed full of his scribblings?” He had the good grace to look sheepish. “Not to say that I wouldn’t behave the same if my own book were to be published.”

“Not if, Samuel, but when it is published,” Parke corrected. “And mine as well. We must remain optimistic.”

Stephen Parke referred to the political treatise he was writing, dealing with San Francisco’s frequently corrupt city administrations. The necessity to eat regular meals and keep a roof over his head, however, obliged him to sell articles to Remy’s *SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY*, as well as to any other publications willing to accept his work. Parke lived farther down Telegraph Hill, as did a small colony of writers struggling to make their names in the literary world.

Even as I was pondering this, another member of that community was making his way over to speak to us. I had met Emmett Gardiner on several previous occasions, when I had accompanied Samuel to various literary functions. He was a tall, blond-haired man of thirty, with a strong,

handsome face, steady brown eyes, and a genial personality. Emmett contributed regular stories and poems to the *CALIFORNIAN*, a literary periodical which had evolved out of the old *OVERLAND MONTHLY*. I seemed to remember my brother telling me that Emmett, too, was writing a novel, although I couldn't for the life of me recall the subject matter.

"Samuel, Stephen," said Gardiner, shaking their hands with his usual good cheer. "And Miss Woolson, it is always a pleasure to see you. Did any of you attend Wilde's lecture at Platt's Hall last night?"

When we indicated that we had not, he went on, "Neither did I. Which was why I was delighted when Uncle Mortimer arranged tonight's reading."

"I keep forgetting that Remy is your uncle," Samuel said. "I think it's because you don't sound anything like him."

"That's because he hails from Louisiana, while my mother, his eldest sister, moved with her family to San Francisco when I was just five. She still lives here in the city."

"That explains it then," Stephen Parke commented. "By the way, how is your book progressing?"

As the three would-be authors discussed their various projects, Tull O'Hara, who also lived on the Hill, entered the parlor. A short man in his fifties, he had a long crooked nose, critical gray eyes, and a perpetually dour expression on his weathered face. O'Hara worked for Mortimer Remy's newspaper, and although he was touted to be one of the best typesetters in the city, he was even better known for his disagreeable personality. He certainly lived up to his reputation tonight, giving his employer the barest nod, and studiously ignoring the rest of us as he took a seat behind our own.

"Who is that sitting next to Tull O'Hara?" I asked Samuel, nodding toward the large, ruddy-cheeked man frowning at the typesetter.

"Claude Dunn," my brother whispered, "yet another hopeful author. He spends his days writing while his wife, Lucy, the pregnant girl sitting next to him, cooks and cleans for anyone on the hill who will pay her."

Discreetly, I examined the young woman seated beside her husband. She could not have been more than nineteen or twenty, but her sallow skin and straggly blond hair gave her the appearance of a much older, world-weary woman. I was shocked to note that despite the huge swell of her belly, the bony line of her shoulders was clearly visible from beneath her worn cotton dress. She should be at home tucked into bed, I thought indignantly, not forced to sit here in an overheated room, clearly fighting a losing battle to keep her eyes open!

Mrs. Dunn suddenly looked up, and loathe to be caught staring, I hastily turned my gaze on a couple who were sitting in front of us. The man looked to be in his fifties, and had a long, gray-streaked beard, dark eyes, and wore a yarmulke atop his balding head.

“That’s Solomon Freiberg and his daughter Isabel,” Stephen informed me, following my gaze. “They live down the hill. Miss Freiberg teaches piano, and her father works as a diamond cutter.”

Isabel Freiberg was remarkably pretty. She had a small oval face, creamy skin, intelligent brown eyes, and silky brown hair fashioned into a neat bun at the nape of her slender neck. Although she made a show of listening attentively as her father spoke to her, I noticed her steal several unobtrusive glances over her shoulder at Stephen. Just as interesting, were the looks he returned when he thought no one was watching. Unless I was mistaken, those two shared more than a casual friendship.

Shortly after eight o’clock, Mortimer Remy strode to the front of the room, clearing his throat to attract his guests’ attention. Our host was not an imposing man, but he possessed a steady brown-eyed gaze that co-workers boasted could burrow with uncanny precision into the heart of a story. Perhaps his most notable feature was a full head of white hair that curled about his face in untidy disarray. By contrast, his shaggy eyebrows remained a dark brown, drawing even more attention to those penetrating eyes.

While Remy waited for the last whispers to quiet, I saw him suddenly grimace and touch the right side of his face. Looking closer, I noticed a slight swelling along his jawline, from a toothache, I wondered? If so, the man had my sincere sympathy. Above all things, I dreaded the thankfully infrequent occasions when one of my own teeth caused me distress. There was so little one could do to alleviate the pain. Even my physician brother Charles, was usually forced to resort to age-old remedies such as holding whiskey in the mouth, or applying concoctions composed of red oak bark, camphor, cinnamon, or clove oil to the tooth and gum. Even then, relief was fleeting. The only permanent solution, of course, was to have the afflicted tooth extracted, a recourse even the heartiest of men dreaded!

Remy gingerly moved his jaw from side to side, then gave a labored smile. “Welcome everyone. I am pleased you could join us this evening.”

Despite his obvious discomfort, our host’s voice was pleasant, carrying a strong flavor of the Deep South. I was aware that he had traveled to San Francisco from New Orleans a decade or so earlier, and had brought with him a number of old world customs, including a penchant for long, and in my opinion disagreeable, green cigars and zydeco music. Although I had met him only once or twice, I had come to appreciate his affability and easy charm.

“Tonight we are in for a rare treat,” he continued, smiling at the tall young man who came to stand behind him. “Mr. Oscar Wilde, author of a recently published collection of poetry, and a forerunner in the Aesthetic Movement, has graciously agreed to meet with us here in my home for a more informal visit than his appearance last night at Platt’s Hall.”

Wilde smiled and executed a small, somewhat affected bow, which precipitated a murmur from the audience.

“Too utterly utter,” came a man’s low, sarcastic voice from behind me. There was a smattering of laughter, and I knew at once that the remark had come from Claude Dunn. Not that the comment was original; the expression had been reported with great humor in newspapers throughout the poet’s American tour, along with other so-called “Wildean” expressions,

Mortimer Remy shot Dunn a censoring look, then turned his attention back to the guest of honor. “Considering Mr. Wilde’s views concerning architectural design and household furnishings, I pray that he will overlook the many deficiencies to be found in my own humble abode. I entreat him to turn his attention instead onto literary matters, commencing, if he will be so kind, with how he came to produce such a fine volume of poetry at the tender age of twenty-seven.”

There was polite applause as the publisher stood aside to allow Mr. Wilde to take his place in front of the audience. I had, of course, read newspaper articles describing the Irish poet, but it was nonetheless startling to meet him in person. Wilde was already known across two continents as an opinionated dandy with a cutting, sometimes treacherous, wit. He had a long, somewhat fleshy face, full lips, and heavy-lidded eyes placed to either side of a prominent nose. Attired in a maroon velvet smoking jacket edged with braid, a lavender silk shirt, flowing green cravat, knee-britches, and black shoes with silver buckles, he looked as if he had just stepped out of an eighteenth-century French drawing room. A few muffled laughs once again rippled through the room, and Dunn made more acerbic remarks. Remy’s piercing expression finally silenced the annoying man.

Whether or not he had come to Remy’s house with the intention of speaking about the Aesthetic Movement, Wilde seemed happy enough to accede to the publisher’s request that he confine his discussion to his literary efforts. Having produced a slim volume of the book titled simply, POEMS, he commenced reading in a dull, rather nasal voice. I must say I found his manner surprisingly languorous, as if he were bored by the necessity to speak to us at all.

Wilde had been reciting for only a few minutes, when his performance was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. A moment later, an elderly woman in a wheelchair was rolled into the room. She was small and very wrinkled, her wispy white hair tucked beneath a black hat with a short black veil. She was wearing a black dress with ivory-colored lace at the neck and wrists, and a simple mourning broach pinned to her bodice. Despite her advanced years, she had bright blue eyes that appeared to miss nothing as they swept over the room. A muscular man in his fifties, dressed in dark livery and a battered gray felt cap, pushed her squeaky conveyance into the room. He had a craggy face, and black eyes that looked out suspiciously from beneath bushy black and white eyebrows. A long scar ran from his right jawline down his throat until it was lost beneath his shirt collar.

“Who is that woman?” I whispered to Samuel.

“That’s Mrs. Montgomery, a wealthy widow who lives in the large house at the top of the hill. I don’t know the name of the man pushing her wheelchair, but—“

“His name is Bruno Studds,” said Emmett Gardiner, leaning over so that he could address us in hushed tones. “And you’re right, Samuel, Mrs. Montgomery is quite well-to-do. Her late

husband owned the largest lumber business in the city. She's been a particularly generous benefactor to the writers living here on the hill. It was she who financed the launch of the *SAN FRANCISCO WEEKLY* when Uncle Mortimer founded it ten years ago."

"Doesn't she sponsor The Butter Ball Literary Competition each year?" I asked, referring to the much sought after literary award.

"She does indeed," Gardiner answered, his eyes dancing in the gleam of the room's gas lights. "Not only does the winner receive a sizeable monetary prize, but Mrs. Montgomery publishes his book at her own expense."

"I've never understood what "Butter Ball" stands for?" I said.

"I've heard rumors that it was the name of her only son's favorite pony," Gardiner explained. "Lawrence was an aspiring writer who died quite young. A year or two after his death, Mrs. Montgomery established the award in his honor."

Our conversation was cut short as Mortimer Remy greeted the latest arrival. "Mrs. Montgomery," he drawled, his manners at their Southern best. "I am so pleased that you could come. I regret any inconvenience it may have caused you."

"Thank you, Mr. Remy," Mrs. Montgomery replied, holding out a slightly trembling hand. Remy took her frail fingers and brought them to his lips.

"Please, do make yourself comfortable, dear lady. You're just in time to hear Mr. Wilde read from his volume of poetry." Smiling, he indicated an area in front of the fire that had evidently been reserved for her wheelchair.

Mrs. Montgomery returned her host's smile, and without being told, Studds wheeled his mistress to the designated place. As soon as she was settled, he rearranged the blanket covering her lap, although I couldn't imagine how she would tolerate it considering the heat emanating from the hearth. The man then went to stand stoically behind his mistress's chair.

Before Wilde could resume reading there was yet another disturbance in the foyer, and an arrogant looking man wearing a topcoat and bowler hat stepped into the room. I recognized him at once as Jonathan Aleric, a celebrity of sorts, and owner and editor of the *BAY AREA EXPRESS*, a recently established local newspaper.

Despite his haughty demeanor, I thought Aleric to be a rather ordinary looking individual: in his early forties, he was of average height and build, with graying hair, a large and rather untidy salt and pepper mustache, a pocked complexion, and washed-out blue eyes. Some twelve years earlier, Aleric had gained international fame by penning AN UNCIVIL WAR, an immensely popular book describing General Grant's 1863 march on Vicksburg. In mere weeks, the book had sold out across the nation – surprisingly, sales were even brisk in the South – casting Aleric as the defining voice of the horrendous war between the states.

In the years following the book's publication, his devoted readers waited expectantly for more stirring words to issue from the great author's pen. When none were forthcoming, Aleric's name gradually faded, but never disappeared from the literary scene. He was still regarded as one of the finest American writers of our time, and gave occasional lectures on the war, and his craft, throughout the country. Two years ago he migrated to San Francisco, determined to reinvent himself in the field of journalism. According to Samuel, the relationship between Aleric and Mortimer Remy had been strained from the beginning, both professionally and personally. Over the past year, Aleric seemed to have made it his life's purpose to put Remy's newspaper out of business

If that goal had been his only sin, Remy probably would have been able to cope with it as one more example of journalistic rivalry in an extremely competitive town. But Aleric had not contented himself with stealing Remy's readership; he had also stolen the affections of his lovely wife, dealing the Southerner a devastating, and humbling, blow. When Remy's wife succumbed to a lung disease just months after she had scandalously deserted her husband, a war hardly less intense than that between the states broke out between the two men.

"Aleric!" Remy's face had flushed red with fury. "Good God, man, have you no sense of decency? This is my home, and you most certainly were not invited!"

Ignoring his host, Aleric stepped casually inside

the parlor. His angular, sharp-featured face was creased in a self-satisfied smile, as if Remy's reaction were everything he had hoped for.

"I said what are you doing here?" Remy again demanded. His brown eyes bulged, and his hands were balled into fists. I honestly feared he might be angry enough to strike the interloper.

"Calm down, Mortimer, you'll do yourself an injury," Aleric said calmly. If anything, his smile grew even more taunting. "I came to meet Mr. Wilde, of course. Isn't that the purpose of tonight's little get-together?"

"You bast..." Remy stopped, fighting to collect himself. He glanced uncomfortably at Wilde, who was watching the episode with quiet amusement, then at his tense guests. He took one or two steadying breaths, before continuing in a more composed voice. "As I said, you were not invited, Aleric. I will thank you to leave my home. At once, if you please."

Aleric laughed, dismissing Remy's words with a careless wave of his hand. "Nonsense. I'm here to make Mr. Wilde's acquaintance, and I shall not leave until I have done so." He gave the Irish poet a little bow. "I was privileged to hear your lecture on "Art Decoration" at Pratt's Hall last night, Mr. Wilde. It was truly inspirational. With you as their representative, the Aesthetic Movement cannot fail to be a grand success."

Wilde studied Aleric for a long moment, and then nodded his coiffed head as if to an admiring subject.

“That is kind of you to say, Mr—? He looked questioningly at his host. “Aleric, was it?” He paused a moment, then his lazy eyes suddenly brightened. “Jonathan Aleric! You are the author of AN UNCIVIL WAR, are you not? I remember reading it as a young lad. A marvelous book. It was quite popular in Ireland after your war between the states.”

Aleric beamed. “How kind of you to say so, Mr. Wilde. I’m honored that you enjoyed my book.”

Remy’s face had grown very red, and I saw his jaw muscles clench as he tried to regain control of the situation. “I apologize for this rude interruption, Mr. Wilde. I am sure Mr. Aleric will do the gentlemanly thing and retire, immediately, from my home.”

“Come now, Mr. Remy,” Wilde protested, “Mr. Aleric is a noted author, indeed, a kindred spirit. And he has traveled all this way—“ He fixed his gaze on the newcomer. “I assume you have come from some distance to see me, Mr. Aleric? The walk alone up all those stairs must, in any sane man’s opinion, constitute a journey of inestimable miles.”

I truly feared our host might explode. He opened his mouth to speak, but Wilde cut him off. “After all, life is too important to be taken seriously, don’t you agree? For myself, I make it a point to avoid arguments; they are always vulgar and all too often convincing.”

Wilde’s languid eyes turned to Remy, as if awaiting his agreement. Our host took another deep breath, but there was little he could do but accede to his guest’s wishes. He gave a curt nod of his head, then wordlessly motioned for his nemesis to take a seat. Several people moved aside so that the author could make his way to a vacant seat next to Tull O’Hara, but Aleric held up a hand as if to signify that he wished to cause no inconvenience. Instead, he settled in the seat Remy had occupied prior to his arrival.

Our host’s face grew even darker, but after catching sight of Wilde’s obvious amusement, he placed a chair to Aleric’s left and sat down. Stone faced, he indicated that Wilde should resume reading.

“That is good of you, Mr. Remy,” Wilde said, once again picking up his book of poems. He gave a rueful smile. “Life is never fair, and perhaps it is a good thing for most of us that it is not.”

The tension triggered by Aleric’s arrival, never truly dissipated as the long evening marched drearily onward. Wilde continued to read, but I sensed a general unrest in the room, as one desultory poem followed another. I enjoy good poetry, but these offerings were rather too morose for my taste.

When at long last the Irishman brought his recitation to a close, there was polite applause and one or two thinly disguised sighs of relief, one of them coming from Claude Dunn’s expectant wife Lucy. But it appeared that the poet was not yet finished, and to my dismay he went on to lecture us for another hour on the “House Beautiful,” and how his opinion of Americans as barbaric was reinforced each time he was introduced to yet another “ill-looking room in an ill-built house.”

Finally, mercifully, he concluded his talk by instructing us on how to build and furnish houses that would “live in song and tradition, and delight the hearts of generations of aesthetes yet unborn.”

This time the applause was less enthusiastic. Even Mortimer Remy seemed visibly dismayed that Wilde had veered from his request to focus on his literary career. I must admit that I was more than ready to take my leave of the gathering and return home. I turned to say as much to Samuel, but found him engaged in a heated conversation with Emmett Gardiner and Claude Dunn. Dunn’s wife, I noticed, remained in her seat looking resigned and clearly exhausted.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Stephen Parke slip away to share a few words with the attractive Isabel Freiberg. It was a brief meeting, but it was clear from the way they looked at each other that I had correctly accessed their feelings. When the girl’s father pulled on his topcoat and made toward the door, the young couple quickly drew apart, Stephen looking flustered, the young woman’s face flushing a becoming pink. Taking her arm, the man nodded curtly at the writer, then led the girl none too gently out the door.

Stephen watched the two make their way down the hill, then reluctantly turned back to the room. He and my brother spoke quietly for several moments, then Stephen paid his respects to our host. After bidding me farewell, he departed the cottage.

As Samuel and I approached Remy to say our own goodbyes, we found that he had joined Emmett Gardiner and Jonathan Aleric, and were chatting to Oscar Wilde. Mrs. Montgomery sat in her wheelchair in front of the fireplace, speaking quietly to Claude Dunn. Looking toward his weary wife, he seemed to question something she had said. The elderly widow smiled at Lucy, then nodded her head at Dunn. I sincerely hoped she was suggesting that the man take his poor wife home and put her to bed!

Unfortunately, that did not appear to be the case. Despite his earlier disparaging remarks, Dunn moved to join the others clustered about Wilde, followed a moment later by Mrs. Montgomery, wheeled there by her man, Bruno Studds. Clearly, the poet was in his element.

Mortimer Remy, on the other hand, looked miserable. He was once again holding his swollen jaw, all the while darting hostile looks at Jonathan Aleric, who was chatting with the poet as if they were long lost friends. Finally, he seemed unable to bear it any longer.

“Come, everyone,” he said, forcing a painful smile. “Our guest has had a long journey, and I am sure that he is weary. We must allow him to return to his hotel.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mortimer, the evening is still young,” Aleric put in with a patronizing smile. “Were you aware that Mr. Wilde plans to write a stage play? We were just discussing—“

To my surprise, Mrs. Montgomery spoke up from her wheelchair. “Mortimer is quite right, Mr. Aleric. Mr. Wilde is obviously fatigued after entertaining us with his splendid poetry.” Before Aleric could object, she turned to the faithful man standing silently behind her chair. “It is a clear

evening and the moon is out, but the path can be treacherous at night. Please light Mr. Remy's guests down the steps, Bruno."

"I won't hear of it, Mrs. Montgomery," Remy protested. "Bruno must take you back up the hill to your house. I will see my guests down the hill."

"Nonsense," she replied, waving a dismissive hand. "You have put up a brave front all evening, Mortimer, but you are obviously suffering a toothache. Soak it in whiskey and get a good night's sleep. That's the ticket."

Remy looked at her in dismay. "But—"

"I'll hear no more argument." She looked at Remy's gruff typesetter, who was silently making his way toward the front door. "Your man O'Hara will take me home, will you not, Tull?"

The crotchety man stared at the woman in sullen surprise. I feared he might be about to refuse when Remy sighed.

"I suppose if Tull is willing—"

"His willingness is neither here nor there," the old woman said with acerbity. "He is your employee and naturally will be happy to accede to your wishes. In truth, it is past time we all made our way home"

Her tone was so resolute that even Oscar Wilde was forced to stop talking, appearing affronted that someone had had the effrontery to interrupt his discourse.

"My dear madam, you speak of time" he said in a droll voice, peering at her down his long nose. "As the brilliant Brendan Francis put it, "When you are deeply absorbed in what you are doing, time gives itself to you like a warm and willing lover."

Mrs. Montgomery did not appear impressed. "I'm confident that even Mr. Francis eventually learned not to overstay his welcome, Mr. Wilde. It is a lesson worth cultivating."

Before the poet could object, the widow motioned for Studds to take up his lantern and lead the way out of the cottage. Mortimer Remy shrugged in resignation. No doubt his toothache was finally getting the better of him.

Without further comment, Wilde donned his oversized, fur-trimmed coat and followed Mrs. Montgomery's man toward the door, Jonathan Aleric close upon his heels. After bidding our host a good evening, Samuel and I trailed the group out of the cottage, pausing a moment to wish Emmett Gardiner goodnight before he turned to walk to his own home.

Studds led the way, lantern held above his head. Wilde and Aleric followed behind him, while Samuel and I brought up the rear. Mrs. Montgomery's man was obviously familiar with the path, for he set a brisk pace.

We had nearly reached the top of the Filbert Street Steps, when Aleric lost his footing and started to fall. Samuel bent over and caught him by the arm. As I, too, stepped forward to lend a hand, the quiet night was shattered by a loud explosion.

Time seemed to hang suspended as I looked around, searching for what had caused the boom. I heard my brother utter a single muffled gasp, and turned to find him standing perfectly still beside me, his expression one of astonishment.

Then, suddenly, his legs seemed to give way from beneath him. I watched in horror as, without another sound, he crumbled to the ground like a rag doll.