



1-21-2022

## Marigold Tuppence

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### Recommended Citation

Ellis, Evan J. (2022) "Marigold Tuppence," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 21 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol21/iss1/3>

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## Marigold Tuppence

### Description

A short story (that is past the maximum wordcount but Katie said I could do it) about a 70-year old man insisting the neighbor's young new babysitter is his girlfriend who he watched die when he was 18.

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### About the Contributor

Evan Ellis is theatre kid with no sense of brevity.

# MARIGOLD TUPPENCE

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EVAN ELLIS

Solomon Trent ran across his porch, past the truck he wasn't allowed to drive anymore, past the flower garden he no longer had the strength to weed, across the street he had walked, biked, and jogged across all his miserably long life, with more vigor than he had felt in years. Unfortunately for him, this vigor couldn't change the weakness in his bones, the soreness in his joints, or the heaviness in his back. He felt like a cheetah, dashing across the asphalt plains, even if his neighbors saw a lopsided penguin, waddling across the street.

"Marigold Tuppence!" Solomon attempted to yell as his vocal folds stretched and groaned.

The woman he was yelling at turned from her original task of shaking the hands of Martin and Jill Anderson, whose house she was about to enter. She seemed to be in her early twenties and wore a sky-blue dress with sunflower patterns that somehow matched the yellow of her hair. It had been so many years, and she hadn't even changed her wardrobe. She looked at Solomon with shocked curiosity, her ears ready to listen and her eyes ready to judge, like she always did. The husband and wife pair in front of her didn't respond so openly. They were all judge and no listen. Solomon was used to that. Solomon expected the Andersons to disapprove of anything he did. He expected the whole neighborhood to disapprove of him; the feeling was mutual. But Marigold was different; she would listen to him.

"Marigold Tuppence!" Solomon rasped again.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "Do I know you?"

"It's me, Solomon," he wheezed out as he stopped about a yard away from her on the Andersons' driveway.

The woman stared at him with a critical gaze. She had to recognize him. Well, he would

have to forgive her if she didn't. He had changed a lot in the last few decades; old age tends to mutilate the face. She seemed to have missed that memo though. She looked just like she had sixty years ago when she dated an eighteen-year-old Solomon.

"I guess I've changed a bit since I last saw you," Solomon muttered almost to himself, reaching up to awkwardly pat his bald head. He'd never gotten used to not having hair to run his hand through. "But you have to remember me? We were quite a fine couple back in the day."

Martin Anderson attempted to put himself between Marigold and Solomon while Jill's hands flew up to her mouth and her eyes widened with shock, but Marigold stopped him and walked a few steps forward. Solomon smiled. He knew Marigold would recognize him.

Marigold stared at him for a few moments, her mouth and eyes fidgeting as words couldn't quite formulate properly. She finally said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Solomon, but I don't believe we've met. How did you learn my name?"

Solomon's eyes narrowed as he studied her. She must have forgotten their time together. It was understandable. He'd wanted to forget the circumstances of her death as well. But that night was burned into his mind. It still woke him up at night. It had always been awkward to explain to Samantha why he woke up crying. How do you explain to your wife that you still dream about your old flame? He hadn't had to worry about that for six years now. Damn cancer.

But cancer wasn't the point of this conversation. This was Marigold Tuppence and he was going to prove to her that they had met. Quickly. Jules would notice he wasn't napping any moment now and he couldn't have that supposed daughter of his interrupting important business. He took a

deep breath and said, "Alright, alright. Your name is Marigold Serene Malinda Janine Tuppence. You're named after your father's four sisters, listed in order from his favorite to least favorite. When you were five, you told your mother you were ready to be a father. You always wear clothes with flowers on them, but never marigolds 'cause that'd be too obvious."

Martin's face contorted into a mixture of confusion and amusement as if he knew that none of those things could possibly be true. But Marigold, Marigold knew. Solomon could tell as she studied him. She hadn't quite put it together yet, but she knew him. She had to.

"Where have we met, Mr. Solomon?" Marigold asked, much to the chagrin of Martin and concern of Jill.

"We met... Well... That was a long time ago, wasn't it." Solomon stuttered a bit and hoped she understood. He was sure he remembered. The computer between his ears might run slow, but Solomon would die before he let anyone say it didn't work. Suddenly, it popped back into his head. He pointed at her with more vigor than he knew he had and said, "I got it! We met right here!"

"Right here?" Marigold looked around a bit, trying to find where exactly here was. Martin's eyebrows flew straight up his forehead and his mouth moved up, scrunching his mustache.

Solomon continued undeterred. "Yes, right here, in this parking lot. You were about to begin your job as a babysitter for--well you were gonna start babysitting at this house--and I saw you through the window and, well, I figured I should introduce myself. I was rather full of myself back then, absolutely no social skills, it's a wonder you didn't slap me."

Martin said something under his breath that involved the words "assaulting a geriatric" and

then interrupted their reunion by stepping between them, putting on the most patient sneer he could muster, and saying, "Solomon, I think you're a little confused. Marigold Tuppence is here to be the babysitter today, her first day. I'm fairly certain she's not your childhood crush, given her age. Now, I would appreciate it greatly if you left her alone before I call the cops."

Solomon's glare could have melted steel bars, or at least it would have if his eyebrows did what he wanted anymore. Now all they could do was twitch uncontrollably. His gaze moved from Martin to Marigold. Her face seemed concerned, but not on his behalf. She wanted to be here. For some reason he couldn't understand, Marigold wanted this to go well, she needed to be doing this babysitting job.

"Fine, I know when I'm not wanted," Solomon said while once again patting his bald head. "But first, I have one question."

Martin opened his mouth to yell but before he could, Marigold said, "I don't know if I'll be able to answer, but you can ask."

Solomon looked her dead in the eyes and said, "How are you alive?"

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Solomon Trent had always been a watcher. Mrs. Cordova called him a peeper once, but that was inaccurate; he only saw her in her underwear once, and that was an accident he had no intention of repeating. Ten-year-olds don't think about that when they're looking through windows; he just had nothing better to do than watch his neighbors. People were more interesting from a distance than up close. By the time he was 12, his mother, tired of his inability to talk to people, forced him to actually talk to kids at school. Her rules were

simple: Solomon needed to learn one specific thing about someone every day that they told him directly. Solomon took to the game with passion. Jeffery wanted to be a soldier. Marianne still slept with her dolls. Jonny's dad was having an affair. So Jonny didn't outright say that one, but it was kind of obvious given how Jonny's eyes screwed up when Solomon asked who "Jessica" was and how his mother glared at her husband that one time Solomon had seen them. Solomon's mother didn't like that one. She wanted him to "only use what you have been told directly, do not base anything on assumption." Solomon always rolled his eyes when she said that.

However, high school occurred and Solomon matured in some ways. He regressed in others, but he finally sort of learned how to hold a conversation. He still watched the neighbors though. He did it less often; his homework load limited his ability to stare out the window. But, when he noticed someone new on the block, he couldn't resist. On the morning of May 26, almost two weeks after he had graduated high school, Solomon Trent saw her walk across the street to start her job as babysitter for the Fairviews. She couldn't be older than twenty and her hair was a deep yellow that matched the sunflowers on her bright blue sundress.

Solomon was a connoisseur of first impressions. He liked to think he could figure someone out as soon as he saw them. That's why he liked watching people; he could see the things people wouldn't show him directly. He could see the way people grimaced or beamed after saying a first greeting so much better if he wasn't the one giving the greeting. And this woman, she radiated...confidence was the wrong word, too close to arrogance, which implies a deeper insecurity. She was too at ease. Purpose. That's what she had. The way she

interacted with Bob Fairview radiated the calm assurance that this conversation would go the way she wanted regardless of what was actually said. Solomon had to meet her, he had to talk to that--that--power. For the first time in his life, he actually wanted to see a first impression from the perspective of the greeter. He rushed into his nicest casual button-up shirt and khakis, smoothed the errant hay bale that was his hair down while checking the mirror, and ran out the door.

Right as the woman was about to walk into the Fairviews' house, she heard Solomon yelling "Hey! Hello!" as he ran down the street with a youthful energy that almost made up for his complete lack of athletic skill.

The woman turned around with one eyebrow raised and a curious smirk on her face. "Hello, I take it you're the neighborhood greeting committee?" she asked.

"Yes I-- Wait, well, er...not quite." Solomon stuttered out as he anxiously ran his hand through his blond hair. "But I did want to welcome you to the neighborhood! My name is Solomon Trent!"

Solomon put his hand out faster than he expected and nearly karate-chopped the woman. She moved back a little, giggled to herself, accepted his outstretched hand, and shook it. "I'm Marigold Tuppence. Nice to meet you, Solomon. Was there anything else you wanted to say before I got back to my actual business here?" she said, the giggle not quite leaving her voice.

Bob Fairview was still standing in the doorway and grinding his teeth so hard Solomon expected them to start popping out of his mouth. But Solomon didn't care. The purpose she radiated was so much more brilliant up close than it was from the window of his house. Even his interruption seemed to be a part of her plan; she would get where she was going regardless of anything he or

Bob did.

"That actually brings me to the question I wanted to ask, Ms. Tuppence," Solomon said while deliberately avoiding making eye contact with Bob. "What brings you to our neighborhood?"

"Well, I moved in with my Aunt Serene down the road, and Mr. Fairview here needs a babysitter for his children and I need money, so it's a mutual agreement." Marigold laughed a little to herself again.

"You mean Ms. Serene Tuppence? I walk past her porch all the time on my way to Jeff's Diner!" Solomon had actually guessed she was staying with Serene the second she said Tuppence, but his mom had taught him to be at least a little subtle.

"Ah, yes. Everyone has told me I just have eat Jeff's 'Legendary Spaghetti'."

"You mean you haven't been yet? You live right there!"

"Is this the part where you offer to take me?"

"I mean, if you haven't been, someone should take you."

"Alright, you free tomorrow at five?"

"I believe so."

"Alright, I'll meet you there. Now you better get going before Mr. Fairview's head explodes."

Solomon turned and noticed that Bob Fairview's face was in fact as red as a stick of dynamite. "Ah, yes. Well, see you tomorrow!" Solomon said as he rushed back to his house.

It wasn't until Solomon told the story to his mother that he realized he had technically asked Marigold out on a date.

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Solomon Trent stared out his window. Old age had ruined his hair, lungs, joints, and even his

heart, but it hadn't taken his eyes. To the shock of most friends, family, doctors, and teenagers, his eyesight was still as sharp as when he accidentally saw Mrs. Cordova in her underwear. The house across the street had a big bay window in the front that exposed the entire front room, and, from the right angle in his own bedroom, he could see into the kitchen. There, he saw Marigold talking with the Andersons. It was her. That same sense of purpose oozed out of every pore of her being.

"You gonna tell me why Martin Anderson told me I need to put you on a leash?"

Solomon frowned. Martin had kicked him off of his property before Marigold could properly answer his question. Apparently, an honest question as to how Marigold was alive was "inappropriate and absurd."

"Shouldn't you be out trying to find yourself a man or something?" he barked back at Jules. His second child, oldest daughter and the only one of his four children unmarried, had waltzed into his bedroom and sat on the chair across from the bed.

Jules scowled at the back of his head as she sipped from the teacup she had stolen from his kitchen, the ungrateful brat. "You should be happy I'm single so you don't have some heartless nurse watching you."

"You call what you have a heart?"

Jules smiled at him, a bit tiredly, like how a mother smiles at a teenager trying sarcasm for the first time. "Depends, what do you call yours?"

"I had a family of my own! I got married."

"Because that's the metric of human quality." If Solomon was paying as much attention to her as he was to Martin Anderson's house, he would have noticed her eyebrows lower over her eyes as she responded to his claim and averted her gaze. For all his looking out the window, he never quite noticed her.

Jules continued speaking, with a slight exhaustion in her voice. Solomon was aware she was looking forward to Drew and Hannah visiting so she could go spend a few days at the house of that witch of a friend she kept, Caroline. "Now, what did you do to the neighbors?"

"You wouldn't understand, you weren't there."

"Dad, please look away from the window and tell me what happened with Mr. Anderson."

Solomon whirled on his daughter. "I owe you nothing! Can't you trust me, the man who raised you!"

Jules sighed. As she did so, Solomon felt something change, break. He felt surprised. She always weathered his outbursts before. He assumed she was unbreakable. She put her teacup down on the bedside table, stood up and walked over to her father, and bent so that they were eye level. Solomon had always hated that his daughter was three inches taller than him, a distance that had grown as old age had hunched his back. "You're right. I should trust my father; however, I'm not talking to my father, I'm talking to an old man who treats his own daughter with the same contempt he treats a hobo on the street. Now tell me what happened."

Solomon's scowl deepened. Jules wouldn't understand. She focused so much on self-discovery, never bothering to look at the world around her. She didn't know anything about the family house. She didn't know how to properly hold the lever so the toilet flushed, which floorboards in the kitchen creaked, or where Solomon hid the rifle under his bed. She didn't have the seventy-eight years of experience Solomon did. "I'm a grown man, I can handle it myself."

Jules stood back up and rubbed her forehead. "And I'll be cleaning up after you."

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It was the talk of the whole neighborhood that Marigold Tuppence, a twenty-year-old woman, was dating the infamous Solomon Trent, who was only eighteen. No one understood how such a likable, self-assured girl could be seen associating with the neighborhood stalker. When looking back in later years, Solomon couldn't help but agree with them. He didn't understand any etiquette for interacting with humans in general, much less how to interact on a date. The waiters at Jeff's diner would always give him odd looks whenever he suggested they split the bill, forgot to hold the door for her, or asked an impertinent question, of which there were many. The game of learning something new every day was on, but for only one person. He asked all kinds of questions about her father, fashion choices, and childhood, but there was one question that bugged him. He knew he shouldn't ask it because it was built on something he saw, rather than something she had said, but he had to know.

It was on the fifth date; it had been two months since their first date exactly. All five dates had been at Jeff's Diner. Solomon wasn't quite original. But he knew what he liked and he was pretty sure Marigold liked it too, judging by her smiles. It was the perfect spot for a date, if you ignored the large families with crying children, and the ant problem, and the fact that the tables were made nearly an inch thicker by the layer of chewing gum on their undersides. So maybe it wasn't ideal, but it was good spaghetti and that's all a woman should really ask for in a man, right? The ability to buy good spaghetti.

The date was going well; she hadn't rolled her eyes at some comment he had made on the neighbors; the waiter of Jeff's Diner had even

nodded to Solomon encouragingly about the progress he had made in his table manners. Now was as good a time as any.

Solomon took a deep breath and asked "Marigold, why are you a babysitter?"

Marigold cocked one eyebrow. "Because I need the money?"

"Yes, but you could have been a waitress here, or at any other restaurant. Why a babysitter?"

Marigold's other eyebrow went up. "You think I would have been better at being a waitress?"

The people at the table behind Marigold glanced over in their direction while trying very hard not to. Solomon's mother was right, he shouldn't have asked, but he needed to know.

"Well, not permanently," he stuttered out awkwardly. "I'm just asking, of all the jobs in town, why babysitting?"

"Why not babysitting?" Marigold's mouth was a firm line, but there was something Solomon saw in the back of her eye, the tilt of her head, and the twitch of her eyebrow; she was curious what he was going to say. He was on to something.

"Because you're not a babysitter."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, sure you're good with the Fairview children, but it's a mask you put on. It's like they're a tool to get to something more. They're a stepping stool."

"And you're not?" Marigold said those words flatly, staring him dead in the eyes.

"I'm not what?" Solomon asked while trying to avoid her eyes by examining his spaghetti.

"A stepping stool," Marigold answered with a sharp sense of apathy. The members of the table behind her were openly staring at their conversation now. Solomon continued staring at his spaghetti until he heard Marigold sigh and say, "Look, Solomon, we both know you haven't actually

seen me interact with the children in person. You've been watching me through the windows, which is a terribly unattractive trait in a man, but that's beside the point."

Solomon opened his mouth to defend himself, but was stopped by Marigold leaning forward and whispering through gritted teeth, "If you want to know why I babysit those children or why I put up with you or what the hell I'm doing in this neighborhood, use your skills tomorrow."

Marigold then sat up straight again, took one last gulp of water, stood up, and turned to leave the restaurant. As she was walking out, she stopped and without turning around said, "Solomon, next girl you date, appreciate her for more than just the fact that she's different; she's gonna be a lot more than just unique."

As the door closed behind her, Solomon felt for the first time what it was like to be the watched rather than the watcher. Every pair of eyes in the nearest thirty feet was trained on him and the empty space at the table across from him. It took him until he was curled up in his bed trying not to cry that he realized he left the restaurant without paying for his food.

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Solomon Trent did his best to keep Jules from noticing that he was constantly staring out through the Fairviews' -- no, Andersons' -- it was the Andersons' house now -- bay window to watch Marigold. It would have been harder if Jules actually cared about him. She mostly read books on her phone while drinking her tea. That girl drank enough tea to drown China.

Marigold hadn't changed at all; her smile still had that stretched affectation when she was interacting with children and she still radiated that

purpose. She was here again for a reason and Solomon thought he knew what it was. He'd had sixty years to think about what had happened the last time he saw her. He just needed confirmation. He needed Martin Anderson to punch, grab, or kick Marigold. He just needed it to happen once, then Solomon wouldn't let it happen again.

Martin and Marigold were talking in the kitchen again and Martin seemed angry. Good. Prove Solomon's theory. Martin was shouting and Marigold just stood there, awaiting the inevitable. Martin's hand was up in the air when it suddenly clenched and started to swing down towards Marigold.

Close enough. Solomon spun and ran into his room and grabbed his hidden rifle from under the mattress. Those four years of back pain caused by sleeping on that stupid hidden rifle were finally worth it. He ran out the back door so as to keep Jules from realizing her demented father was running out into the street with a rifle until it was too late. As he ran through the backyard, he grabbed the rusty old metal watering can in his free hand. He used that same hand to clumsily unlatch the gate and ran out into the street.

As he ran across the pavement and the Andersons' lawn, he saw Martin look directly at him. Martin was so awestruck by the old man hobbling across the street that he actually moved closer to the window to see Solomon better. "Stupid sonuvagun," Solomon muttered under his breath as he threw the watering can through the bay window.

Well, the watering can didn't go through the window per se, it may have bounced off. Darn. Solomon's throwing arm was not what it used to be, but this rifle power wasn't affected by geriatric arm strength. He heard Jules yelling at him from the front porch back at his house across the road. About time that girl noticed what was right in front

of her.

“Martin Anderson!” Solomon shouted at the window as he saw Marigold keep Jill Anderson and the two children from exiting the kitchen. “Say hi to Bob Fairview for me!” Solomon then took aim at Martin’s face with the rifle and pulled the trigger. Then everything went black.

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The day after Solomon Trent got dumped by Marigold Tuppence, he stalked her through the windows of his house like a lioness stalking her prey through the African grass. He saw everything she did in the Fairviews’ house, looking for that reason she had described before she left him.

And then he saw her get in a fight with Bob Fairview. Bob was screaming, flailing his arms, and his face was redder than Solomon had ever seen, which was saying something. Marigold just stood there. From his angle, Solomon could only see her from the back while he could see everything Bob was doing. But even without seeing her face, Solomon could tell Marigold was at peace. Whatever happened here was what she planned for.

Bob Fairview grabbed Marigold by the throat and squeezed as hard as he could.

Solomon panicked. He shouted and banged on the glass of his bedroom window until his voice broke. Marigold was spasming and jerking. She couldn’t have much time. Solomon ran for the phone in the kitchen and called the police. They told him to stay where he was. By the time they arrived, it was too late. Marigold was dead.

He should have known.

Those words would chase him for years. He was a watcher. The Fairviews had lived across from him for years. He had stared through their windows for years. He had seen the way Bob looked at a

knife. The way he didn’t look at his children. Bob looked through everyone; humans were obstacles, even his wife. Solomon had watched Bob slap his wife, for crying out loud. But Solomon couldn’t say anything, it wasn’t his business.

At least twice a month, he would wake up screaming for Marigold not to leave him at the diner, not to enter Fairview’s house. He became a pariah in his dorm. They called him Old Yeller. But Samantha always knew what to say. He met her in comp class. He helped her write her thesis, she helped him make friends. After they were married, she could always calm him down, always point out how he could use things he had seen to cause actual positive change. In return, he gave her character ideas for her novels and cooked a great lasagna. They were a good pair. Marigold was right: Samantha was more than just unique.

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Solomon Trent woke up on a hospital bed. Everything was fuzzy and flat seeming. He’d been here before; his heart had spasmed enough that the hospital should have given him a frequent visitors card. However, there was one thing that he could see with perfect clarity: Marigold. She was sitting at a chair next to his bed, looking calm and purposeful as ever. In a world still fuzzy, she radiated clarity.

“Did I kill him?” Solomon asked her with the beginnings of a grin on his face.

“Thankfully, no,” Marigold said, the sudden thud of her voice sending Solomon all the way back to that night she dumped him. “He’s rattled and wanting to press charges, but the doctors claim you have dementia. So, you’re probably looking at either rather intense house arrest or solitary confinement in a nursing home, maybe jail time, but

probably not."

"Darn it," Solomon spit out. "All that for nothing."

"All what? The murder attempt?" Marigold spit back. Solomon's eyes were adjusting so that everything still seemed clear again, but there was something different about Marigold. Glowing wasn't the word. She seemed almost more real than the rest of the room, purer, brighter.

"Well, that's what I was for? Right?"

"What do you mean?"

"When Bob Fairview killed you, he got arrested and executed for murder, but also the lesser charge of abusing his wife and kids."

Marigold wrinkled her nose at the words "lesser charge."

Solomon continued. "So, you wanted him to get arrested, but you also wanted me to watch, so I was supposed to stop the attack. And...and...we both know how that turned out. All I did was scream and wail, like a baby. So, when you came back, it was all gonna happen again, but I had to do better this time, I had to kill Martin Anderson before he killed you."

Marigold's whole face seemed to slump a little, as if the weight of Solomon's stupidity was exhausting. "Clearly, if I got killed again, I'd probably recover."

Solomon awkwardly drooped in his bed.

"Well, yes. But I couldn't watch you die again."

Marigold leaned forward. "Then look away next time."

"Next time?" Solomon perked up a little.

"I'm almost dead, and about to be arrested, when is next time?"

"You will have plenty of opportunities to stay out of other people's business in your last eight years of life, Solomon Trent. I suggest you take advantage of it. You are not a man of action,

you are a watcher. I befriended you so you would watch." Marigold's expression softened as she saw Solomon stare down at his hands and contemplate the purpose of his existence. He had always felt a void deep within himself. He was incapable of doing anything.

"I... befriended you so I could be more than just a watcher." Solomon said while staring at his hands. "You were going somewhere. I figured, if I clung onto you, I could join you. I could be a mover, not just a watcher."

Marigold didn't smile, but the edges of her mouth moved up a little in a gesture of what Solomon hoped was sympathy but worried was pity. She put a hand on the handle of the hospital bed and said, "You were just what you needed to be, Solomon. The whole plan would have failed if you didn't watch. And I think you do your children and grandchildren a disservice to say you didn't have any purpose outside of me."

"All their good qualities came from Samantha."

"Given that the average human only has 10% good qualities, that means you supplied the other 90% of any qualities. They're contributing to society and haven't gotten arrested yet. Well done." As she was saying this, Marigold sat up and opened the hospital window.

"Contributing? Jules just sits around and tells me everything I'm doing wrong."

Marigold looked out the window and at the ground that was four floors beneath them, then turned around and faced Solomon. "You treat that daughter of yours well. She's sacrificed a lot for you, hidden a lot from you as well. You still got eight long years ahead of you. She won't be as present--given that you're going to be institutionalized--but maybe lend her an ear or shoulder, she could use the company."

As she said that, she sat on the window ledge and began to lean back. "Goodbye, Solomon Trent, it definitely wasn't a pleasure, but I don't think I'll ever forget you." She reached out above her and pulled on what Solomon could only assume was a rope. She flew up out of the window, pulled by her right arm into what Solomon could only assume was the sky. Solomon's heart almost spasmed again. But there was no scream, no thud of a young woman on pavement, no hubbub in the streets that anyone had just flown out of the window. Leaving Solomon alone, again.