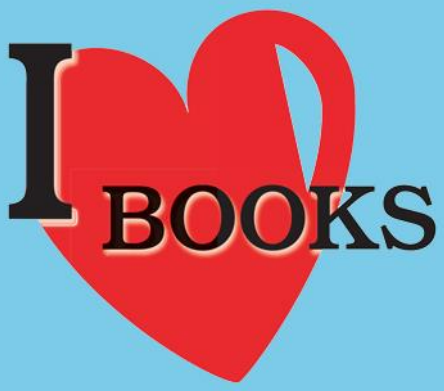


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Clover Moon

Written by

Jacqueline Wilson

Illustrated by

Nick Sharratt

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CLOVER MOON

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'**WHO'S COMING TO PLAY** then?' I yelled, running out of our house.

'Me!' said Megs, jumping up from the front step, where she'd been waiting for me patiently.

'Me!' shouted Jenny, Richie, Pete and Mary. Bert can't talk properly yet but he crowed.

'Me!' shouted Daft Mo from two doors down. He's a great gawky lad now, but he isn't right in the head

and can't start work at the factory, so I let him play with us.

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'Me!' shouted Jimmy Wheels, bowling up on his wooden trolley, the cobbles making it rattle violently.

Jimmy's my special friend. Some of the alley folk think he's as daft as Mo because he talks funny, but he's sharp as a tack.

'Now don't you encourage them kids, Clover Moon,' said Old Ma Robinson, leaning against the crumbling brick wall of her house and lighting her pipe. She puffs herself silly, Old Ma. Her face is turning as yellow as a smoked haddock. 'They're wild enough left to their own devices, but with you stirring them up they get up to all sorts.'

'Quit nagging her,' said Peg-leg Jack, stumping his way down the alley for his lunch-time pint of ale, his scrappy terrier trotting beside him. 'Clover's like a little mother to all the kids.'

'Better than a mother,' Megs muttered indistinctly, sucking her thumb.

Our own mother died when Megs was born. She can't remember her, naturally. I'm sure *I* can. Her name was Margaret. Megs is called after her. I wish I was, but my name is special too because Mother chose it.

She must have been thinking of a lucky four-leaved clover. I'm sure Mother wanted me to be lucky. And though I started off with blue eyes like all babies, they're

now clover-green. Mother was sweet and soft and beautiful, with manners like a true lady, and she sat me on her lap every day and played with me. She still does so, in my dreams. Fat chance of Mildred ever doing that. She's Pa's second wife. She doesn't even cuddle her own children, never mind Megs and me. She shouts and she slaps and we try our best to keep out of her way.

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Jenny and Richie and Pete and Mary and Bert are Mildred's children, our half-brothers and -sisters. Bert is the baby. I carry him even when I'm doing my chores. He howls whenever I set him down. He's fourteen months old so he should be toddling around, but his legs buckle whenever I put his funny fat feet on the floor. Pa's worried that there's something wrong with his legs and he'll end up like Jimmy Wheels, but I think Bert's just lazy.

Jimmy Wheels gets around all right on his trolley, even though he can't walk. Megs used to be frightened of him, especially when he came up close. She squealed like he was a mad dog about to bite her ankles. I had to give her a talking to – Jimmy Wheels is sensitive and I didn't want his feelings hurt. His dad makes it plain he's ashamed of having a crippled son, but Jimmy's got a lovely ma. He's lucky he doesn't have a stepmother like Mildred. Sometimes I think I'd sooner have spider's legs like Jimmy's so long as I didn't have Mildred.

She'd been nagging at me since six in the morning, when we'd lit the copper for the big wash. I hate

Mondays – all that soaking and scrubbing and boiling and rinsing and wringing until my hands are crimson and my arms ache and my dress is soaked right through and even little Bert tied on my back looks as if I've dropped him in a puddle.

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But now the sheets and underwear and aprons were flapping on the line across the cobbles, and there were a dozen other lines all down the alley. Only half the folk bother to do a weekly wash. I don't think Old Ma Robinson ever washes her bedding, her clothes or herself. You can smell her coming before you see her.

'What do you want to play then?' I asked.

'Families!' cried little Mary, rolling up her pinafore to make a cloth baby.

'Murderers!' shouted Richie and Pete, pulling manic faces and curving their hands as if about to strangle someone.

'Grand ladies! And I'll be the grandest lady of them all,' said Jenny.

'Races!' said Daft Mo, who had the longest legs.

'Yes, races!' Jimmy Wheels pleaded, because he was the fastest of all, thumping his hands down on the cobbles and rattling along like a cannon ball. He could speed freely under the sheets, and didn't mind being dripped on either, but the rest of us would be slapped in the face by wet cotton as soon as we took a few strides. But the white sheets had given me an idea.

'We'll play sailing ships,' I said, seizing the bottom of a sheet and making it billow in the wind.

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We'd never seen the sea and hadn't seen any sailing ships when we walked all the way to see the filthy Thames – just barges and tugs and rowing boats – but every child had peered at the tattered pages of the nursery-rhyme book I'd stolen off the second-hand stall in the market.

I was the only one who could read. Mr Dolly had taught me when I was six or so. I was already in charge of Megs and Jenny and Richie, who bawled non-stop when he was a baby. Mr Dolly was shocked that Mildred wouldn't let me go to school, but I was much more use at home being her skivvy and minding the little ones. Mr Dolly said it was a shame because I was a bright little thing, so he showed me all my letters and made me figure out a story about P-a-t the d-o-g and J-e-t the c-a-t, and before I knew it I could read any column in his newspaper, though I didn't have a clue what all the politics were about.

I loved my stolen nursery-rhyme book though. I learned the rhymes by heart and could see every detail of the coloured illustrations even when I closed my eyes. *I Saw Three Ships* was one of my favourites, especially the comic duck in Navy uniform peering through his telescope. Mr Dolly let me peer through his old telescope to see how it worked. He didn't need to explain the Navy

to me though, because you can see Peg-leg Jack any day of the week down the Admiral's Arms public house.

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So we played sailing ships. We each seized a sheet and shook it hard and jumped up and down, pretending we were sailing on a choppy sea. I let Jimmy Wheels have Mrs Watson's longest double sheet that nearly trailed on the ground when she hung it on the line. He seized hold of it, rearing his head up and singing his version of a sea shanty. His hard, calloused hands were filthy from propelling himself along the ground, so the bottom of the sheet suddenly had a new black palm-print pattern. I hoped Mrs Watson wouldn't notice when she came to take in her washing.

We shook our sheets, pretending to race each other, and then I seized hold of the big black apron Daft Mo's ma uses when she's out with the coal cart.

'Watch out, sailors, here's an enemy ship approaching!' I yelled, waving the apron.

'That's just a piddly little ship! *My* ship's much, much bigger,' said Richie scornfully.

'Yes, we're not scared of teeny tiny enemies,' said Pete. 'We'll push them overboard!'

'They're small all right, but they're deadly,' I said, waving the black sail. 'Can't you see the flag they're flying? It's a skull and crossbones. Oh Lordy, pirates!'

'Pirates!' the girls shrieked.

'Yes, pirates, and I can see their captain at the helm. He's small but he's burly, with a big black beard and bloodstains all down his pirate cloak and a peg leg,' I said.

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'I'll bet it's just Peg-leg Jack that you can see and I ain't afraid of him,' said Pete.

'No, this is a real pirate captain, I'm telling you, and he's got a hook for a hand that'll rip the innards out of you, and a cutlass in his teeth that will take your head off at one blow,' I said, to make him squeal. He picks on my Megs sometimes, so he needs to be put in his place.

'He's not really there, is he?' little Mary quavered, hiding behind her own sheet.

I shook my head quickly to reassure her, but then shouted for everyone else's benefit, 'He's coming, he's coming, his ship is getting nearer! Any minute now he'll swing over on his special rope with all his pirate army and he'll have your guts for garters. Watch out, Pete – he always goes after boys like you first, to stop them telling tales.'

Pete waved his sheet violently. 'He's not going to get me. I'm sailing away, faster, faster. I'm leaving that silly, smelly old pirate far behind, see!' he yelled. He tugged his sheet so hard there was a sudden snap as the frayed washing line broke. All the sheets sailed to the ground and lay in a sodden heap.

'Oh Lord, better run for it!' I shouted – but we weren't quick enough.

Mrs Watson came charging out of her house, her blouse wide open because she'd been in the middle of feeding her baby when she heard our shouts.

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'You wicked, pesky little varmints!' she bellowed. 'I spent all blimming morning washing them sheets. Who did it? Was it you, Clover Moon? You're always the ringleader in any mischief. You wait till I tell your mother!'

Pete stared at me, red in the face with fear and guilt, terrified that I'd say it was him. But I wasn't a pathetic little tell-tale.

'See if I care,' I said. 'And that woman's not my real mother anyway.'

I hitched Bert higher up my back and marched off. Megs ran after me, thumb in her mouth like a stopper.

'Oh, Clover,' she said indistinctly. 'Oh, Clover, now you're for it! She'll wallop you.'

'Then I'll turn round and wallop *her*,' I said, though we both knew that Mildred was much bigger than me, and far stronger too. Her arms were like great hams from heaving huge trays of bottles at the sauce factory before she married our pa. She walloped seriously, with all her strength, until her face was as pink and moist as ham too. 'Yes, I'll wallop Mildred – *whack-whack-whack* – and then I'll tip her in the coal hole and lock the door on her, and then you and me will run away together,' I declared. 'Perhaps Bert can come too. If he's good.'

'Will we really?' Megs asked, her eyes round.

'Of course we will!'

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'But where will we go? And where will we live?'

'We'll run away to the seaside and we'll go sailing, just like we played. And we'll make a house in an old boat on the sands. We'll make it so cosy. We'll have one bed with lots of blankets and soft pillows, and we can squash up into one chair. It'll be such fun playing there.'

'What will we eat?' asked Megs.

'We'll eat fish of course. I'll go fishing every day and catch lots of fishes, and then we'll make a fire on the beach and cook them in a frying pan for our dinner, and we'll buy day-old bread and a pot of jam for our tea,' I said.

Behind me, Bert heard the word *jam* and started crowing and clapping, thinking he was about to get a spoonful. His cries became urgent.

'In a minute, Bert. Megs is going to take you home,' I told him.

'No! We're running away, the three of us,' said Megs.

'I wish we could. We will soon. But we need to save some pennies first,' I said. 'Now go back home, Megs. Don't worry about Mildred. You know she hardly ever wallops you. You can say you were looking for me but couldn't find me. And then say Bert started crying so you took him home. Go on now.'

'But what will you do?'

'I'll sneak off by myself for a few hours until I know Pa's home. She won't be so fierce with me then,' I said.

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'Oh, Clover, I don't like to think of you by yourself. And I'm not good with Bert the way you are,' said Megs. 'I don't think he likes me much.'

'He absolutely loves you, Megs.' I loosened the ragged blanket tying Bert to me and eased him round to my front. 'There, Bertie – give your sister a big toothy grin. You love your Megs, don't you, darling? Pull a funny face at him, Megs, and tickle his tummy. That's it – make a big fuss of him.'

Megs tickled Bert and he hunched up, chuckling.

'There now! He's laughing at you. Look, he's holding out his hands. You want a cuddle with Megs, don't you, Bert?' I unravelled him and thrust him into Megs's arms.

'I can't suck my thumb now,' said Megs, struggling.

'Well, you can't in front of Mildred anyway, because she'll rub bitter aloes on it and then you won't be able to suck it for ages. Here, I'd better tie Bert to you, just in case he wriggles too much and you drop him. We don't want him ending up like poor Daft Mo, do we?' I said, busily binding him tightly to Megs's narrow chest. 'Don't wriggle so, Bert! Tuck your little arms in, there's a good boy.'

I got them sorted and then gave Megs a little pat on the shoulder. 'Off you go, lovey. I'll see you later.'

'You'll miss your tea.'

'Never mind. Maybe I'll go down the market and scrounge something. I'll be all right. Bye now.' I ran off quickly, knowing Megs couldn't run fast enough to catch me up, especially lugging Bert. I ran to the end of Cripps Alley, down Winding Lane, and then ducked into Jerrard's Buildings and hid halfway up their stairwell. It was pitch dark there, and you could hear if anyone was coming.

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I hunched up, my head on my knees, and had a little private weep.

'Hard as nails,' Mildred always said, because no matter how hard she walloped I'd never cry in front of her. I'd clench my teeth and ball my fists and glare right back at her. One time she hit me so hard I fell over and whacked my head against the fender, but even then I didn't cry. Afterwards my shoulder bled so much I couldn't peel my frock off, and my forehead came up in a lump as big as a hen's egg, and I was so groggy I nearly fell down again when I was pulled up – but I *still* didn't cry because that would mean Mildred had won and I was never, ever going to let her.

I didn't cry doing the chores, not even when I burned my hand on the iron. I didn't cry when the big lads from the Buildings seized hold of me one Saturday night when Pa sent me out for a jug of ale. I didn't cry in front of anyone. Of course I cried in bed when the pinky-purple burn throbbed, of course I cried as I tried to scratch the

feel of the lads' hands away when I was alone in the privy, of course I cried privately for my own mother when I saw Jimmy Wheels' ma watching out for him tenderly.

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I wished Mother was with me now as I huddled on the stairs and wept. I imagined her putting her arm around me, rocking me gently, murmuring words of comfort. I tried smoothing my own hair, hugging my own shoulders, whispering softly to myself.

'*There now, Clover. Don't cry so. I know you were only trying to look after all the kids. You weren't making deliberate mischief. You just wanted to get them all playing so they could have a bit of fun. Don't fret – if Pa's home Mildred won't whack you too hard. And even if she does, you're strong, you can bear it, you're used to it*,' I mumbled. I slipped my hand down the back of my dress and felt the long raised scars on my shoulders. '*It won't hurt for long*,' I lied. '*Come on, you've had your weep. Dry your eyes and get cracking before someone stumbles over you in the dark.*'

I scrubbed at my face with the hem of my dress and then took a deep breath. It was a mistake because half the lads mistook the stairway for a urinal. I ran down the stairs for a gulp of fresher air and then set off down the road, head up, arms swinging, trying to look as if I didn't have a care in the world.

I got to the market and eyed up the fruit on the stalls, wondering if I dared snatch an apple or an orange and then run for it. Most of the stallholders knew all us kids from

the alley and yelled at us to clear off if we came too near. I'd do better later, when they were packing up for the night. Old Jeff the Veg saw me sighing and offered me a carrot.

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'Thanks, Jeff!' I said gratefully, taking a large bite. The carrot was old and woody, but it was better than a raw potato, which I'd sometimes eaten in desperation.

I wandered off and stood outside the bread shop, breathing in the warm smell of newly baked loaves, pretending the carrot in my mouth was delicious crust. Inside, Mrs Hugget saw me staring but turned away to serve a lady. She was good to Jimmy Wheels and Daft Mo and gave them free currant buns, but she'd never weaken when it came to the rest of us.

I so loved Mrs Hugget's buns. Once a gentleman gave me a shilling for handing him the wallet that had just fallen out of his pocket. I spent it all on a huge bag of buns, some with currants, some with icing, some with extra lard and spice. I shared them with all the children in our alley and we had a lovely feast, though I suffered for it when Mildred got wind of my sudden good fortune.

'You should have handed that money over to me, you useless spendthrift. I'm your mother!' she'd said, shaking me.

'You are *not* my mother, thank the Lord,' I'd said, so she shook me harder, flapping me like a dusty doormat. For two pins I think she'd have used a carpet beater on me.

Still, I was the winner that day. I'd bought the buns and shared them immediately because I knew that once she saw the money she'd want to get her hands on it. We all had our buns safely in our stomachs. In fact Megs had two because there'd been one left over and I insisted she have it because she's the skinniest.

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I looked hopefully at passing gentlemen now, and any ladies with dangling reticules, but couldn't spot any fallen wallets or purses today. I walked on, chewing the last of my carrot, dodging in and out of the stalls, then skipping quickly down the length of the road to warm myself up. I didn't have a shawl, let alone a coat, and my feet were always cold because the soles of my boots were patched with newspaper.

I saw myself reflected in the shop windows and turned my head abruptly. That ragamuffin girl with tangled black hair and ugly rags wasn't *me*. I wasn't Clover Moon from Cripps Alley. I was little Miss Clover-Flower Moonshine from one of the big villas opposite the park, and I was on my way with my mama to choose a new doll for my birthday present.

I slowed down and walked more decorously because my imaginary mama told me it wasn't ladylike to skip in the street.

'*Watch your conduct, Clover-Flower*,' she said. '*You need to set an example to all the poor ragged children who play in the gutters*.'

Oh, I was good at mimicking her swanky voice and stiff manners!

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'We're nearly there, child! Can you see the sign over the road? There, under the candy-stripe awnings. Dolls Aplenty! G. A. Fisher Esq., doll-maker to the gentry.'

That was Mr Dolly's real name, Godfrey Arthur Fisher. I never used his proper name, though he was well-christened, because he was a true godfather to me, and though his hands were old and gnarled with rheumatism, each doll he created was a work of art.

I peered in his shop window eagerly. He had a new display for the coming autumn season. There were small brown and gold and green leaves scattered all over the bottom of the window, and a couple of cardboard trees spread almost bare branches at the top. Two jointed dolls were having a leaf fight in the middle of the window, caps on their heads, little mufflers and knitted mittens keeping their wooden necks and clenched fists warm. Little girl dolls with fur-trimmed bonnets and velvet coats were sharing secrets in a corner, pink painted smiles on their pale wooden faces. A larger nurse doll wheeled twin wooden babies in a miniature perambulator while a small black wooden dog with a red tongue ran behind. I sniggered when I saw another dog lifting its leg against one of the trees.

'You're a naughty rude man, Mr Dolly!' I said, bursting into his shop.

Mr Dolly came out of his workshop and beamed at me. His chin barely cleared his counter top. He was bent over sideways because he had a crooked back, but he kept himself as upright as possible by leaning on his carved cane.

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'Hello there, Clover! And just why am I a naughty man?' he asked, peering at me over his spectacles. His brown work apron was streaked with red and pink and white paint. It looked as if someone had been randomly embroidering berlin woolwork roses all over him. He even had pink streaks in his wild white hair.

'You've got a little wooden dog weeing in your window!' I giggled.

'Nonsense! He's just stretching one leg, that's all,' said Mr Dolly. 'It's a treat to see you, my dear. You haven't paid me a visit for a little while. You've not been ill?'

'No, just busy. You know what Mildred's like. She lolls on our sofa while I have to do all the work,' I sighed.

'She's in a delicate way at the moment, isn't she?' said Mr Dolly.

'Delicate? Mildred? She's as delicate as a warthog!'

'I meant there's going to be a stork visiting soon with a new little baby.'

'A stork!' I scoffed. 'I'm too old to be fobbed off with stork stories. I had to help Mildred when Bert was born and I was only just ten then.'

‘So you’re an old lady of eleven now,’ he said, pulling a lock of my hair. ‘And you know all about babies being born.’

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‘I bet I know more than you, Mr Dolly,’ I said, ‘seeing as you’ve never been married.’

‘I’ve certainly never experienced wedded bliss, but I give birth to babies every week of my life,’ said Mr Dolly, glancing through the door at his workbench. ‘My dolls are my babies.’

There were bits of dolls not yet born – bald heads, and pieces of arms and legs, and woolly wigs, and a velvet case of beady glass eyes set neatly along the bench. Then there were assembled dolls, big and medium sized and very little, all with jointed arms so they could wave and kick their legs, but their heads were eerily blank, needing to be painted. The dolls who had happy smiles and rosy cheeks and shiny varnish were hanging from the ceiling to dry, but they were still naked. Yet more dolls were clustered together in their underwear – tiny bodices and petticoats and white muslin drawers – all patiently waiting for their frocks to be cut and fitted.

‘So many babies!’ I agreed. ‘Imagine if they all started crying at once, Mr Dolly! And how happy you must be that their napkins never need to be changed! Do you know something? I am never, ever getting married and having babies.’

‘But you’re so good with all those children.’

'Yes, but I'd like to do something else with the rest of my life.'

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I ducked under the counter and wandered into the workshop. I picked up a half-finished doll and twirled her in my hands. 'Maybe I could come and be a doll-maker too?' I suggested. I said it playfully enough, but I was suddenly serious. 'Oh please, Mr Dolly, do consider it! I could be your apprentice and learn all your doll-making tricks and then you wouldn't have to work so hard.'

'I'd love that, Clover, but how could I ever pay you? I don't make enough to pay myself more than a few florins a week,' said Mr Dolly.

'You wouldn't have to pay me at all! Just give me a midday meal. I'm not a big eater. If necessary I can go foraging in the market. And I'd stay up late every evening, sewing by candlelight. I don't need much sleep either. I could just curl up on the floor with a blanket,' I said earnestly.

'And what might your pa say, hmm?'

'Pa wouldn't mind too much. Jenny's his favourite now. Jenny and Mary. He favours the girls.' I said it lightly but my heart thumped hard in my chest. I'd been Pa's favourite once. He'd sit me on his lap and run his fingers through my dark hair and kiss the tip of my nose and say I was his little lucky four-leaved Clover, then pop a sweet from his pocket into my mouth.

He tried to make a fuss of Megs too, but she was always a sad little thing, wailing miserably most of the day and half the night, and she also had itchy rashes, so her little mouth had big red sores and her elbows and knees were covered in crusts.

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But then Pa foolishly courted Mildred at the factory, wanting a warm wife to look after him and comfort his two poor motherless daughters. I'm sure she didn't love him and she didn't like the look of Megs and me, but she was already thirty and no other man had shown any interest in her, so she promised to love, honour and obey him when they wed. She didn't do any of those things, but she did provide him with more children – too many: Jenny, Richie, Pete, Mary, Bert, and another due in a couple of months.

Jenny was fair and rosy with curly hair, tall and strong like her mother – much taller than Megs, the same size as me – and she had a winning smile. Pa gave her so many sweets she often needed the toothache rag tied round her head.

There were only eleven months between Richie and Pete so most folk took them for twins. They were very alike in nature as well as looks, rowdy fidgety boys, forever up to mischief. They tried tormenting little Mary when she was a baby, but she was born shrieking and stood up for herself. She had a mop of curls too, and a smile that could melt even Mildred's hard heart.

'What about your stepmother?' Mr Dolly asked. 'Wouldn't she mind if you left home?'

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'You have to be teasing! You know the way folk put out flags to welcome someone home? Well, she'd have banners and bunting announcing my departure. She'd give anything to see the back of me,' I said.

'She'd miss all the skivvying you do for her,' said Mr Dolly.

'Yes, you're right there, but Jenny would take over. I don't think she'd mind too much,' I said.

'What about Megs?' asked Mr Dolly, his eyebrows waggling up and down.

'Megs . . .' I said softly. Oh dear, perhaps I couldn't leave Megs just yet. She might not be able to cope without me.

'And Bert. You're like a little mother to that baby. Where is he now?'

'Megs took him home for me.'

'And I take it you're wandering about because you're in trouble again, you pickle,' said Mr Dolly. 'What have you done this time?'

'Nothing! Well, I suggested a game of sailing ships and all the children loved it, but then someone got too excited and pulled Mrs Watson's washing line down, and she'll tell Mildred, so I daren't go home yet or I'll get what for.'

'Say no more. I understand. Well, you're more than