

The Girl with her Head in the Clouds

The Amazing
Life of Dolly
Shepherd

Karen
McCombie

Illustrated by Anneli Bray



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For Leila of Ally Pally

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CHAPTER 1

Ready, Steady, Jump!

I stood on the roof of the brick shed and looked up.

Above me I could see blue sky, dancing birds and puffy white clouds. Smoke drifted from the tall chimneys of nearby houses. How I wished I could swirl high into the sky like the smoke!

“Oi! Hurry up, Dolly!” my brother called out from the ground below.

David stared up at me. I was in my best dress and holding an umbrella upside down.

“I’ll come when I’m ready, thank you!” I replied.

“Not scared, are you?” David asked with a cheeky grin.

“No chance!” I burst out.

I didn’t mind David teasing me about being scared. He knew how brave I was. Don’t get me wrong – my brother was brave too. He’d had awful nosebleeds his whole life and never ever moaned about them. But *I* was braver.

Not so long ago David got an answer wrong in class, and his teacher threw the blackboard cleaning block at his head. That one hard WHACK made David’s nose bleed so badly his clothes got soaked with blood. The teacher shouted at David for making a mess. Well, that made me SO mad. The next day I marched into David’s classroom to tell that teacher off. It didn’t matter to me that I was skinny, small and younger than my brother. But the teacher

ordered me out of the classroom before I got a chance to say a word! I was even madder then. I picked up an ink pot from the nearest desk – and threw it at the teacher. Let’s see how HE liked his clothes all soaked and marked! The whole class cheered as that big bully of a teacher got what he deserved.

Mother and Father pretended to be cross with me, but I think they were proud that I’d tried to stand up for my brother. Even if it didn’t end the way it was supposed to – I got expelled.

“Promise you won’t tell Aunt Mariam when she comes to visit,” Mother asked David and me.

Aunt Mariam was Mother’s sister, and she was rich compared to us. She was a big, tall woman who wore huge hats and spotless gloves. She came to ours for afternoon tea once a month, on a Sunday. Father always told me and David to be on our best behaviour – as if we dared to be anything else! Of course Aunt

Mariam would still find fault with us, saying things like, “Sit up and don’t slouch, Dolly!” and, “Use a hankie and don’t sniff, David!” But even if she was bossy, Aunt Mariam was also kind. She always came with a box of fancy cakes and gave me and my brother warm hugs and pennies for pocket money when she left.

My mouth suddenly watered. Aunt Mariam was due here soon. What kind of cakes would she bring today? Lemon tarts or cherry slices? Or maybe cream horns! They were my favourite ...

“Come on, Dolly – jump!” David urged me now as I stood on the roof.

“I’m not going to jump,” I called out to him. I picked up the black umbrella by the handle. “I’m going to fly!”

I saw the worried frown on my brother’s face just as I was about to leap.

“Dolly Shepherd!” Aunt Mariam shouted at me, appearing round the corner in a wide purple hat. “What ARE you doing? Girls do NOT go clambering on roofs like that!”

“Why not?” I said. “*Boys* do.”

I didn’t mean to be cheeky. It was an honest question.

“I’m going to speak to your mother about this!” Aunt Mariam huffed and puffed. Her head was shaking so much it made the long feathers on her hat bob-bob-bob about.

“Mother won’t mind,” I told her.

Mother liked me being as brave and confident as any boy. She had trained me to ride our pony to and from the field every day since I was young – barefoot and without a saddle. Can you imagine if Aunt Mariam knew that?

“Get down this MINUTE, Dolly!” my aunt ordered.

“I was coming anyway,” I said.

I held the umbrella above me, raised my chin up – and took a step into thin air ...

