

THE DOLLS' FIRST CHRISTMAS

By Sophie Masson

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IT WAS EARLY ON CHRISTMAS EVE. In Miss Jeffries' toy-shop, the last delivery had just arrived. Teddy-bears and tin toys. Puppets and pull-alongs. Rocking-horses and doll's houses. And Esmeralda.

She arrived in an ordinary box, like the other dolls:

Sarah and

Donna and

Laura and

Clara and

Gloria.

Gloria, haughty queen of the dolls in Miss Jeffries' toy shop, sat on her glittering throne in the window. Everyone gasped when they saw Gloria and said how beautiful she was. But no-one had bought her yet. She was too special. She cost too much.

Esmeralda was beautiful too, but in a different way. Her hair wasn't golden, like Gloria's, but black, in great long curls. Her skin wasn't peaches and cream, like Gloria's, but honey and tea. Her eyes weren't sky blue, but nut-brown. Her stripy dress was splendid—but she did not have elegant satin slippers, like Gloria. Her feet were bare.

Miss Jeffries smiled as she set Esmeralda up on green velvet. 'There, now, ' she said. 'We'll have two Queens. A snow queen. And a sun queen. You'll be friends.'

But can two queens really be friends? Gloria didn't think so. Esmeralda didn't think so. Each thought she was better. Each sat in her splendour and looked haughtily away and thought she would be the first to go.

It was a long busy day. Sarah and Clara and Laura and Donna left and two boy dolls and six tin toys and eight teddy-bears and three puppets and two fairy dolls and a mermaid doll and two clowns and four baby dolls, plus a brace of Barbies. But not Gloria. And not Esmeralda, either.

At last, and very late, Miss Jeffries was about to close up. A man rushed in, shouting, 'I work for Mr Darling, the millionaire. He sent me to buy a Christmas gift for his daughter Cherie. Her mother's dead and her father has no time. I need your best doll. Your very best doll.'

‘There are two,’ said Miss Jeffries, calmly. ‘Esmeralda, and Gloria. Which one would Cherie like best? Sun queen or snow queen?’

The man stared. ‘Oh! I have no idea. But I know she’ll have a tantrum if she doesn’t like what I choose. She’s always having tantrums. Blow it. I’ll take the two.’

‘Good choice,’ beamed Miss Jeffries, ‘they belong together, no question.’ She put them in their boxes and tied a pretty ribbon around them and waved a cheerful goodbye as the man hurried out, muttering to himself, ‘After all, if that brat doesn’t like one of them, she can always give it to someone else. Or throw it away. They’re only dolls, after all.’

Poor Gloria and Esmeralda! They had been made with such care. Their dresses were hand-stitched, their hair hand-knotted, their faces hand-painted. They’d been made to be loved. And now here was someone saying they might just be thrown away, like some cheap, broken factory toy.

Dolls may not talk in words and their red satin hearts may not beat but they have other ways of communicating. Gloria and Esmeralda sensed each other’s fear. At first, each thought it didn’t matter. Whichever doll Cherie liked best would be safe. But then-- what if Cherie got sick of *her*? She might be worse off, then. While the other one might have gone to a good home. To a little girl who loved her.

Most dolls are airheads, the space under their pretty china or plastic skulls quite hollow. But Gloria and Esmeralda had cloth faces, pulled tightly over wads of stuffing. In the middle of the stuffing, each had a long, bright pin, left in by mistake. So their thoughts were sharp and they each thought the same thing at the same moment. They were queens. Snow queen, sun queen. They might not be friends, but sometimes queens put rivalry aside for the good of all. They would do something together, not apart. But how?

At the Darling mansion, the man gave the boxes to the housekeeper. She took them to a room where a tall, twinkling Christmas tree stood, with piles of presents under it. The housekeeper shook her head, sadly. ‘More things going to waste on that spoilt child,’ she said.

The dolls lay under the tree for hours. No clever ideas came to them. Soon, they knew, it would be too late.

And then, just after midnight, there was a clatter of hooves on the roof above. Moments later a deep voice grumbled, ‘Why do I come? She has so much already!’

Now all toys, no matter how new, know what happens Christmas night. So Esmeralda and Gloria knew the grumbler wasn’t Mr Darling, or any of his staff. It was that jolly visitor, come from a magical world, whose job is to give every child in the world a present. The humans call him Santa Claus.

The dolls' red satin hearts swelled and the sharp pin in their heads glittered as they tried to struggle out and beg for his help. They only made a tiny rustle, but Santa Claus' sharp ears pricked up. And his kind eyes, that see into the heart of every child everywhere, saw right into those two red satin hearts. With a little chuckle, he opened the boxes. He gazed in at Esmeralda and Gloria. 'A Christmas gift for you, little ones?' he said. He touched each of them, very gently. A warm, golden stream of light seemed to flow from his fingers, into the dolls' painted eyes. 'Very well, then. I give you the power of love. And a very merry Christmas to you both.'

And with that, he was gone. The dolls heard the clatter of his reindeer's hooves on the roof, then nothing. They waited in the warm piney darkness, filled with hope now.

Soon, it was morning. The dolls heard a man's voice, trying to be jolly. 'Well, Cherie, aren't you going to open your lovely presents? Start with those two boxes.'

'Yes, Daddy.' A thin, flat, voice. Gloria and Esmeralda were afraid again. This child would *not* love them, no matter what Santa Claus said. All was lost.

Next thing, the wrapping-paper was roughly ripped, the lids of the boxes pulled off, so quickly that the dolls flipped helplessly out, onto their faces.

Mr Darling cried, 'Really, Cherie, be careful! Look how beautiful they are!'

'I don't like dolls,' shouted Cherie. 'They stare and stare and they're stupid! Stupid!'

'Oh, nothing's good enough for you, I'm tired of it, tired, do you hear!' yelled her father. And he went out, slamming the door.

Cherie glared at the dolls. She picked them up, roughly. Gloria and Esmeralda thought their last hour had come. They would be torn limb from limb, their bodies shredded, their heads wrenched off. But as they helplessly looked up they suddenly saw in the child's eyes, under the anger, a sadness that made their red satin hearts clench and their sharp minds ache. In that instant, something warm and golden and loving flowed from the dolls to the child, seeping into Cherie's unhappy, lonely eyes.

She stared at them. Her lip trembled. She said, faintly, 'I don't like dolls..' Shyly, she touched Esmeralda's hair, then Gloria's. She stroked their clothes. She held a doll in the crook of each arm. She whispered, 'Most dolls are stupid,' but then added, 'not you,' softly.

That is how Mr Darling found them when he came back, ashamed of shouting at his daughter on Christmas Day, wishing that he'd chosen her present himself, telling himself that he must try and understand, even if she made it hard.

But she smiled at him and said, 'Daddy, do you know what their names are? Gloria and Esmeralda. I think they must be good friends, don't you? Oh, Daddy, I love them already.'

And as Mr Darling sat happily with his daughter, Gloria and Esmeralda lay happily in her arms. Can two queens really be good friends? Why not? Anything was possible, on

this beautiful Christmas morning.