

THE NUTCRACKER



The story about the nutcracker is a Christmas favorite in many countries and has even been turned into a famous ballet. Nutcracker dolls were first crafted in the forested slopes of the Ore Mountains in Germany. During the long, cold winters, people spent their time carving all kinds of creations from the plentiful wood of the forest. Many of these traditional crafting methods were handed down through the generations for hundreds of years. Nutcracker dolls were given as gifts, especially at Christmas time, when nuts were a seasonal treat. They were hand-painted like toy soldiers—to guard the family and protect the home.

It was Christmas Eve at last! In the drawing room, the grown-ups were putting up the tree. In the parlor, the sideboard was laden with festive food on the best china; there was hot punch and a whole fish, stuffed and baked. There was bread, studded with citrus, golden with marzipan. There were plump pieces of gingerbread, made with honey and spice, shaped like bells and hearts and stars.

Clara and her brother Fritz were not allowed into the drawing room, or to touch any of the food, until everything was ready. Fritz hopped from leg to leg, bristling with excitement. Clara gazed at the sugar plums, glittering like frosted jewels in the cut glass dish.

At last, a bell rang, and the children were allowed in. Clara gazed in wonder. The Christmas tree twinkled with a hundred candles; their light sparkled on the gold and silver apples and the pale straw stars that dangled from the dark branches. Then there was hugging and kissing and cries of “Merry Christmas!” and Fritz only screwed up his nose a little when the perfume-scented aunts planted their lips on his

cheeks. Then all the family, mama and papa and aunties and uncles and grown-up cousins and baby cousins bouncing on knees, joined together in song. There was dancing, hand in hand, up and down, around and around; skipping and spinning and breathless laughter. Then games; running around blindfolded until they all flopped down amid the children's cheering to get their breath back.

After supper, the grown-ups stirred their coffee cups and passed around chocolates in rustling twists of golden paper until, "At last!" said Fritz, with feeling. It was time for presents.

"Now, Fritz," boomed their Godpapa Drosselmayer. "See what I have made for you." Herr Drosselmayer was a skilled toy maker. He could make a ticking cuckoo clock or a tinkling music box. He made clockwork gentlemen that bowed to one another and clockwork ladies that danced around and around. Godpapa Drosselmayer was the kind of uncle who knew how to find a coin in your ear or tie up your handkerchief to make it into a floppy bunny. "For you..." He presented Fritz with a troop of bright tin soldiers, with shining gold buttons.

On the double, Fritz arranged them into battle formation, clip-clopping the cavalry horses around the table.

"And for you..." Godpapa Drosselmayer presented Clara with a wooden doll with a dashing red frock coat and smart black boots. "Look," said Drosselmayer. "Pass me a nut." He put the nut between the figure's wooden teeth and lifted the wooden cloak. Crack! The shell broke clean in two, and a whole round nut rolled into his open palm. He handed it to Clara. It was creamy and crunchy. Clara cradled the Nutcracker doll in her arms. She liked his friendly face and his charming smile.

"Hello, Nutcracker. Look, Mama, his eyes twinkle when I talk to him."

Mama smiled. "What a lively imagination that child has."

Clara chose the smallest, roundest nuts from the bowl for the Nutcracker to crack, so that he wouldn't hurt his teeth.

Fritz was marching past. "Let me see!" He snatched the Nutcracker from Clara's hands and jammed the biggest, hardest nut he could find between his teeth. Crunk! The Nutcracker's jaw fell slack.

"Oh, Fritz! You've broken him!" cried Clara.

"Huh! A nutcracker that can't crack nuts!" Fritz flung the figure down and went back to his toy soldiers.

"Oh, Nutcracker, don't worry. Fritz doesn't mean any harm; his manners are a little rough, that's all. I'll look after you." Clara took the ribbon from her hair and bandaged the Nutcracker's jaw. She made him a bed from an empty box, with tissue paper blankets tucked up to his chin.

That night, Clara couldn't sleep. She crept down the creaking staircase to check on her wounded doll. In the drawing room, the only light was the lamp turned low, the only sound, the quiet ticking of the clock. Clara sat beneath the tree, cradling the Nutcracker in her arms. Ding, ding, ding... the clock chimed midnight. But what was that? A scritch, scuttling sound, low down

behind the wall. A mouse! Clara watched in horror as a flood of mice poured, squeaking, into the room, and arranged themselves in battle formation. Then, from under the floorboard, there came a mouse as big as a rat, with a long, scaled tail and a crown upon his head—the Mouse King! The mouse army advanced. Clara fell back in fear. But behind her came another sound—the Nutcracker! He bowed to Clara, then advanced upon the mice with sword aloft. Clink, clink, clink. Down from the table leapt the tin soldiers, marching to his defense.

But though the soldiers were many, they were outnumbered. The Nutcracker fought gallantly, but he was wounded and the Mouse King was soon upon him. Without a thought, Clara took off her slipper and flung it at the king. Her aim was good.

Boof! The mouse was down. And in an instant, all the mice disappeared. “Oh, Nutcracker!” Clara ran toward him, and what was this? She blinked in wonder—the Nutcracker was growing taller and taller, as tall as Clara’s uncle, as tall as a prince! Or perhaps it was she that was shrinking? The Christmas tree towered above them like a forest giant.

“You saved my life,” said the Nutcracker. “I’d like to thank you.” He held out his hand and Clara took it. Then he led Clara to a sleigh, which just a moment ago had been a cardboard-box bed. Beyond the towering tree they flew, through white pines, over sparkling snow. The winter forest was a whirl of dancing snowflakes.

At the edge of the forest, the Nutcracker led Clara along a path of smooth white cobbles. There was a cool, clear scent in the air. “Mint!” Clara exclaimed. “Why, they’re not stones at all, they’re sweets!”

“This is the Land of Sweets,” said the Nutcracker, and Clara feasted her eyes as they walked past rivers of honey and lakes of hot punch, and a village made all of gingerbread. The walls were thick ginger slabs, the roofs were white sugar-snow, and the glass in the windows was made of fruit-flavored sweets; lemon, cherry, and blackcurrant. “It’s very pretty,” said the Nutcracker, “but they suffer with terrible toothache.”

Now a palace of marzipan rose before them and there was a dainty tinkling sound, like the chiming of tiny glass bells. A fairy appeared. Her dress was plum-pink and sprinkled with sparkles of pixie dust. Clara curtsied and the Sugar Plum Fairy smiled.

The fairy led the way to a grand ballroom. “Be seated, and we will dance for your delight.” She smiled. Music rose from an invisible orchestra and one dance followed another. There were Spanish dancers in rustling golden dresses. There were dancers in Arabian silks, swinging themselves around and around. A gingerbread mama lifted the hem of her skirt and little gingerbread children skipped out and danced around her.

Even the flowers of the earth woke up and danced, circling together like a garland.

For the last dance, the Sugar Plum Fairy held out her hands for Clara and

the Nutcracker to join her. Clara felt as light as a fairy herself, as the Nutcracker waltzed her around and around. As the dance came to an end, the Nutcracker bowed to Clara. She sank back into her marzipan throne and closed her eyes, in a golden daze of happiness.

Ding, ding, ding... The clock chimed eight. When Clara opened her eyes, she was back in the drawing room. And there was Fritz. “Wake up, Clara, it’s Christmas morning! And look! I woke up early and I helped Godpapa Drosselmayer mend your Nutcracker.” In the flickering firelight, the Nutcracker’s eyes twinkled.

Had it all been a dream? Or was it the magic of Christmas? I’ll tell you a secret: *Magic is all around us, when we look at the world with wonder.*