

# The Nutcracker

It was Christmas Eve and Clara was staring through the downstairs window. It was getting dark but she could still see the snow outside. It had been falling all day and now the forests and hills were covered in a thick white blanket.

She turned, smiling, and watched as all the party guests danced and mingled around her. Christmas cheer filled the great house and she found herself moving to the sound of the music. The smell of pine and cinnamon drifted past her nose and she peered towards the huge Christmas tree. At the bottom lay dozens of presents wrapped in glittery paper and ribbons. Clara felt a shiver of excitement. "He'll be here soon," she whispered to herself, turning back to the window.



Just then, there was a loud knock at the door and Clara rushed to open it. Standing in the doorway was a mysterious looking man hidden behind a black cape.

"Clara!" the strange man yelled.

"Uncle!" Clara shrieked, throwing her arms around him. "You came!"

"Of course I did," the man said. "It's Christmas Eve! I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Before he could say any more, Clara's brother, Fritz, appeared from nowhere. "Uncle Drosselmeyer!" he shouted. "Have you got me a present?"

"Fritz! Don't be so rude!" Clara said, frowning at her brother.

"It's OK," Clara's uncle laughed, taking off his coat. "I've got them right here."

Clara and Fritz watched keenly as their uncle handed them two beautifully decorated presents from behind his back. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Fritz rushed off without so much as a thank you, but Clara stood gazing at the exciting silver-wrapped gift. "Oh, Uncle," she smiled, "what can it be?"

"Something rather special," he whispered, "for a rather special niece. Why don't you open it?"

It was tradition for presents to be opened on Christmas Eve in Clara's house, so she carefully peeled away the silver paper. It was a nutcracker doll! "Uncle!" she gasped. "He's beautiful!" The doll was dressed in a soldier's uniform, with red trousers and a green jacket. His boots were polished black, and he wore a smart hat on his head. She gazed up at her uncle. "Thank you!" she said, and gave him a huge hug.



A little later on, Clara was playing with her new nutcracker by the Christmas tree.

"What's that?" said Fritz, peering over his sister's shoulder.

"It's a nutcracker," Clara replied. "Isn't he wonderful?"

Fritz bent forward and snatched Clara's present away. "What's so wonderful about this silly toy?" he sneered.

"Hey!" Clara shouted. "Give him back!" She jumped up and grabbed the nutcracker.

"Why should I?" Fritz sniggered. He pulled hard and the nutcracker fell to the ground with a smash!

"No!" Clara cried, sinking to her knees. She cradled the broken soldier in her arms and wept.

"Whatever is the matter?" said a deep, calming voice.

Clara peered up. Fritz had run away and in his place stood her uncle. "He's hurt," Clara sobbed, handing him the nutcracker.

"Goodness me, so he is," her uncle nodded, rolling the toy around in his hands. "Now, let me see..." He turned away from Clara and did something to the nutcracker that she couldn't see. Then, he turned around again and handed the toy back.

"He... he's better!" squealed Clara.

"Not quite," her uncle said. "Place him under the Christmas tree, and let him rest until morning."



That night, Clara couldn't get to sleep. She kept thinking about her nutcracker. After a lot of tossing and turning, she decided to go downstairs and check to see if he was alright.

There he was, just as Clara had left him, lying under the tree. She hugged him, put him back and curled up on the sofa. Soon she was fast asleep.

Dong!

Clara woke to the sound of the grandfather clock. It was midnight! She peered around as candlelight flickered amber shadows across the grand room. Outside, she could see the snow falling gently. Everything was quiet and still.

Suddenly, she felt rather strange. The room began to spin and a loud noise began scratching from the walls!

The Christmas tree began to grow! The sofa began to grow! Clara held her head. She felt really dizzy. When she looked up everything was much bigger than it used to be. Then she realised what had happened. Things weren't bigger – she had got smaller! Clara turned to the presents by the Christmas tree. There, standing as tall as her, was the nutcracker.

“Good evening, Clara,” the nutcracker said.

“Whaaaa!” Clara squealed, jumping back.

“Please, don't be frightened,” the proud-looking soldier said.

“I'm here to save you.”

“S... save me?” Clara gasped. “From who?”

“From them!” the nutcracker shouted, drawing his sword.

All of a sudden, an army of kitchen mice sprang out from the holes in the walls.

“Ahhhh!” shrieked Clara, as the mice sprinted towards them with evil-looking eyes.

“Stand back,” the nutcracker ordered and blew on his whistle. From behind them, a troop of soldiers rushed forwards with guns and cannons at the ready. They fired bits of old cheese and rotten fruit at the mice and charged at them with their swords.

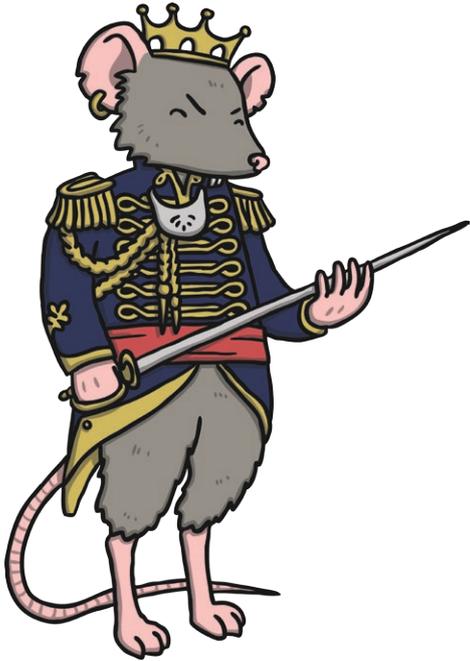


An incredible battle commenced. Clara hid under the Christmas tree and watched as the soldiers drove the mice back.

Then she heard a growl from behind her. She spun round to see two red eyes shining in the dark. "Who are you?" Clara whimpered.

An enormous rodent shuffled from the shadows. "I am the Mouse King," the creature snarled, and he lunged at Clara with his sword.

Clang!



Out of nowhere, the nutcracker's sword clashed against the Mouse King's, saving Clara just in time. "Get behind me!" he shouted.

Clara did as he said and watched as the Mouse King charged forwards again.

Clang! Clash! Swish!

The nutcracker was an excellent swordsman but so was the Mouse King! The evil rodent got a lucky hit and sent the nutcracker's weapon flying through the air.

"No!" screamed Clara, seeing that her hero was now defenceless. The Mouse King scampered forwards with his sword held high. Clara had to act fast. Without thinking, she took off her shoe and threw it at the evil mouse.

Thwack!

It hit him right on the head!

The Mouse King fell crashing to the floor. Suddenly, the other mice stopped fighting. Seeing that their leader was now defeated, they scampered away.

"Hooray!" cheered the soldiers. "You saved us!"

"I did?" Clara said.

"Y...yes..." the nutcracker mumbled. It looked like he was in pain. He squeezed his side and fell to the floor.

“Nutcracker!” cried Clara.

Just then, a strange noise filled the air and Clara’s uncle appeared from nowhere.

“Uncle?” she gasped.

“Hello, Clara,” he said in a deep, calm voice. “It seems that your nutcracker hasn’t quite mended. Now, let me see...” He turned and bent over the nutcracker like last time. When he stood up, the toy soldier was better again. Only this time, there was something different about him. “Clara,” her uncle smiled, “let me introduce... the Nutcracker Prince!”

“Nutcracker Prince?” Clara said.

“At your service,” bowed the Prince. “Allow me to thank you for saving me.” He held out his hand and led Clara to a sleigh behind the Christmas tree. “Sit tight,” the Prince said, with a wink. Magical reindeer pulled them through the house and out of an open window. Before she knew it, Clara was flying through the night’s sky amongst all the falling snow and twinkling stars.

“Yippeeee!” she giggled. “Where are we going?”

“The Land of Sweets!” The Prince laughed.

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On their way, they stopped off in a snow-covered pine forest to visit the Ice Queen. The Queen was so excited to see Clara and the Nutcracker Prince, she put on a grand ball, full of snowflake ballerinas and wonderful music. The ballerinas were dressed in beautiful silver dresses and Clara loved watching them twirl and swirl around the Ice Palace ballroom.

Soon it was time to go and once again Clara found herself shooting through the sky on the magical sleigh.

After a while, they entered the Land of Sweets and Clara peered down. What she saw was amazing. There were candyfloss trees, milkshake rivers, and whole mountains made from cakes!

They landed in front of a magnificent looking castle. Clara could see cookie-filled walls and candy-stick turrets. Surrounding the castle was a thick stream

of melted chocolate! “Wow!” Clara cried.

A ginger-bread drawbridge lowered and out danced a beautiful fairy, dressed in purple and pink.

“This is the Sugar Plum Fairy,” the Prince announced. “She’s been expecting you, Clara.”

“What an honour it is to meet you,” beamed the Sugar Plum Fairy. She led Clara and the Prince into the castle. Inside, it was incredible. Yellows and oranges and greens shone down from fruit-sweet windows, while the walls were coated in warm-coloured caramel. “You must be hungry,” the Fairy said. “Please, take a seat.”



The Prince pulled out a chocolate button chair for Clara and she sat down, gazing at all the wonderful sweets!



All sorts of treats lay on the table and Clara ate until she couldn’t eat any more.

“Do you like dancing?” the Sugar Plum Fairy asked Clara as they all sat there rubbing their tummies.

“Like it?” replied Clara. “I love it!”

“Wonderful,” the Fairy smiled, clapping her hands.

Suddenly the castle hall was filled with exotic-looking dancers. First up were the Spanish chocolate castanets. Then came the coffee dance from Arabia, and Clara became hypnotised with their twirling movements.

“Now for something really special!” announced the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Life-sized candy canes skipped onto the dancefloor and began tapping and jigging to music from Russia. Clara clapped to the rhythm and laughed with the Nutcracker Prince. It was the best show she had ever seen. But it didn’t stop there. There were gingerbread dancers, waltzing flower ballerinas, and candy flute players from Denmark!

To end with, the Sugar Plum Fairy took to the floor herself and performed a dazzling solo dance, full of twists and turns and graceful spins.

“Time to go,” the Nutcracker Prince said, as the Fairy finished her dance. It had been an incredible evening and Clara thanked the Sugar Plum Fairy for inviting her to stay. Clara waved goodbye and climbed aboard the magical sleigh. Soon, she was soaring over the land of Sweets again and into the snow-filled night. Clara felt sleepy and she curled up close to the Prince and closed her eyes. “Thank you for a magical Christmas Eve,” she said.

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When Clara woke, she was lying on the sofa in her house. She looked at her hands. She was normal size again! She jumped down and peered beneath the Christmas tree. There were dozens of presents, and there, right where she had left him the night before, was her nutcracker. She picked him up and cradled him in her arms. He was fixed! “It must have been a dream...” she whispered to herself.

Snow glistened outside and Clara walked over to the window to get a better look. She trod on something strange and peered down. Scattered all over the floor were bits of old cheese and rotten fruit. “That’s odd,” she said, puzzled. Then she noticed a small note, hanging from the nutcracker. It read:

*Dear Clara,*

*I do hope the Nutcracker Prince saved you. Those mice can be awfully nasty.*

*Merry Christmas.*

*Love Uncle.*

Clara’s eyes widened and she took a sharp breath. “Perhaps it wasn’t a dream after all,” she gasped, staring at her Nutcracker Prince. And do you know what? She could have sworn he winked back at her!

