

THE NUTCRACKER STORY

German author E.T.A Hoffman first published *The Nutcracker* in 1816. His tale described how Clara's love brings to life an enchanted Nutcracker, a gift from her mysterious godfather, Dr. Drosselmeyer. Alexandre Dumas (father of the well-known French writer of the same name) retold Hoffman's story, removing the darker elements and calling his heroine "Maria." Master Russian choreographer Marius Petipa began work on a ballet version of Dumas' story by sending Peter Tchaikovsky instructions for scenes in the ballet; the composer's job was to write music to fit the scenes. Petipa followed staging trends of his day, aiming to showcase outstanding dancers in his company rather than build a narrative sequence. An assistant, Lev Ivanov, finished the choreography. The ballet, with the heroine named "Clara" again, premiered at St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater in 1892. Never a huge success in Europe, the ballet was performed infrequently in the early decades of the twentieth century. Only bits of Ivanov's choreography have survived; hence, no "definitive version" of *The Nutcracker* exists. The San Francisco Ballet gave the first U.S. performance of *The Nutcracker* in 1944. It was George Balanchine's 1954 version for the New York City Ballet that began *The Nutcracker's* association with the holiday season. Since then, the ballet has been through numerous versions. Each choreographer interprets the story differently. Most versions of *The Nutcracker*, however, portray a dream, a journey, and the return home at the end. Although choreography and interpretations change, Tchaikovsky's brilliant music has been essential to the story since the ballet's premier in 1892.

THE NUTCRACKER BALLET

Act I

Guests arrive for a Christmas party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stahlbaum and their children, Clara and Fritz. Adults watch the children play and dance. Dr. Drosselmeyer, godfather to Clara and Fritz, enthralls the children with his magical tricks and mechanical dolls that seem almost human. All of the children receive presents. Just when it looks as if Fritz and Clara have no presents, Godfather Drosselmeyer gives Fritz a hobby horse and Clara a handsome Nutcracker. Clara falls in love with her wonderful present, but jealous Fritz breaks it. Godfather Drosselmeyer repairs the Nutcracker's broken jaw with his handkerchief. The party ends with the traditional "Grandfather Dance," signaling the end of the party.

After everyone has gone, Clara is too excited to sleep. She creeps into the parlor with her Nutcracker. Perhaps she falls asleep, because a group of angels come to bid her goodnight. Then mice emerge from the shadows. Nightmarish things begin to happen: dolls and toy soldiers come to life. Clara's Nutcracker leads the toy soldiers in battle against the fierce Mouse King and his minions. At a critical moment, Clara summons the courage to throw her shoe at the Mouse King's head, and saves the Nutcracker's life. The Nutcracker is transformed into a handsome prince, awakened by the Sugar Plum Fairy. Together, they set off for the Nutcracker's home in the Kingdom of Sweets. They first pass through the Land of Snow, where the Snowflakes dance.

Act II

The Nutcracker Prince and the Sugar Plum Fairy arrive in the magical Kingdom of Sweets. Dolls welcome them with native dances. Beautiful fairies dance the Waltz of the Flowers. The Sugar Plum Fairy and her Nutcracker perform the most beautiful dance of all.

Then Clara awakens in her own parlor. Godfather Drosselmeyer returns her Nutcracker, now completely repaired. She is grateful and overjoyed that her Nutcracker is like new again.