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Opening extract from

# The Nutcracker

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Published by

**Walker Books Ltd**

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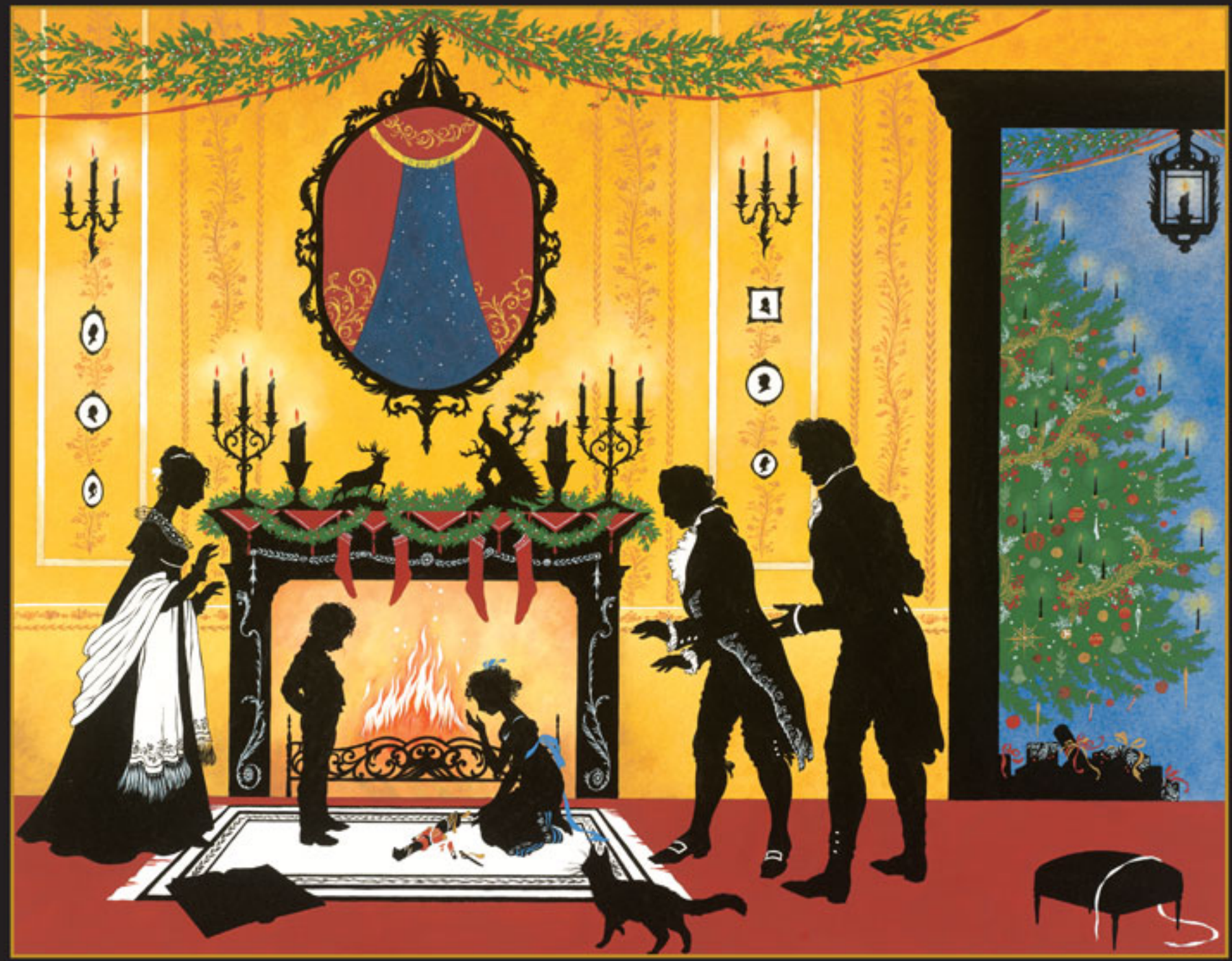
IT WAS Christmas Eve and Clara and her little brother Fritz were bursting with excitement. The house smelled of spiced gingerbread, presents were piled high beneath the tree, and the light of a hundred glowing candles danced in the windows.

As the grandfather clock struck six, there was a knock at the door. Clara's godfather, Dr Drosselmeyer, swept in from the snow, producing gifts as if by magic: toy soldiers for Fritz, and for Clara the most wonderful wooden nutcracker shaped like a prince, with a cherry-red coat and indigo eyes.

Fritz eyed the nutcracker enviously. "That's a boy's toy," he said – and he snatched it and threw it to the ground with a sickening CRACK.

Clara cradled the broken nutcracker, angry tears in her eyes. "Please, Dr Drosselmeyer – can you fix him?"

Her godfather looked at her thoughtfully. "Leave him under the Christmas tree tonight," he said. "He'll be as good as new by morning."





JUST BEFORE midnight, Clara woke with a start. "My nutcracker!" she remembered. "I wonder if he's fixed yet?"

By the light of the moon, she slipped out of bed and slowly, softly tiptoed downstairs to find her wooden prince.

The house was silent apart from the creaking of the stairs and the tick-tick-tick of the grandfather clock. But as Clara stepped into the hallway, there was a deafening DONG. The clock struck the first stroke of midnight and the house began to shake.

Right before her eyes, the Christmas tree began to bristle and creak and grow, taller and taller and taller still. She looked for her nutcracker – but he was nowhere to be seen.

Then she heard a rustling and scuttling coming from upstairs. She looked up, and a thousand pairs of gleaming eyes glared back at her ... mice! But these were not ordinary mice – they were almost as big as Clara, tumbling down the staircase like a whiskery, squeaking waterfall.

LEADING THE charge was a fearsome Mouse King with a golden crown and a flashing silver sword. "Get the sweets!" he ordered, and the mice scuttled to every corner of the room. "I'll take care of the girl..."

"Not so fast," came a voice. Clara turned to see her Nutcracker, now as tall as the Mouse King! He stood with his wooden arms crossed at the head of an army; behind him were toy soldiers, gingerbread men and dolls, assembled in neat rows, ready to fight.

"Attention!" he cried, and his soldiers snapped their heels together. "Ready! Forward march!"

The Nutcracker's army stamped towards the mice, "Hup, two, three, four!" Clara held her breath as the soldiers brandished their swords and the mice gnashed their teeth. But suddenly the Mouse King knocked the Nutcracker's sword from his hand...

"No!" cried Clara. How could she save him? In desperation, she took off her slipper and hurled it at the Mouse King as hard as she could.





AS IF BY MAGIC, all the mice disappeared. Standing before Clara was a handsome prince, with a cherry-red coat and indigo eyes ... her Nutcracker had come to life!

"You saved me," he said. "Not just from the Mouse King – from a terrible curse, too. I would have been wooden for ever if you hadn't risked your life for me! Now, will you do me the honour of accompanying me to my home, the Land of Sweets?"

"Oh, yes please!" breathed Clara.

They travelled by swan over gold-flecked oceans and silver-edged cities. Clara held her breath, her eyes wide. As she gazed at the twinkling lights far below, snowflakes pirouetted past. The Prince caught one and gave it to Clara. "Try it," he said.

Clara let the snowflake dissolve on her tongue. "Mmm. Rosebuds and raspberries!" she said.

"Mine is peppermint and honey," said her Prince. "Every snowflake tastes unique."