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The Nutcracker (Part 2)

Clara awoke late on Christmas morning. When she went downstairs, she found that Godfather Drosselmeyer had already fixed the nutcracker doll so that it was as good as new.

"Thank you so much, dear Godfather," said Clara. "He's the best present I've ever had." Then she told him all about her strange dream, and her Godfather put his head on one side while he listened to her, and when she had finished telling him, he said: "Interesting. Very interesting, indeed. Your dream reminds me of a story. Let me tell it to you now."

This is the story that he told Clara:

One Christmas, some mice crept into the royal palace and gobbled up all the sausage meat that was meant for the king's special Christmas lunch. The king was furious, and he summoned his special inventor - whose name was Drosselmeyer, and who had made many wonderful things. He ordered Drosselmeyer to make some mousetraps - which he did - and these were left in the palace kitchens.

Before long, they had caught lots of mice. Well, the queen of the mice was furious, for the mice that lay in the traps were her children. She climbed up onto the human queen's dressing room table, and just as the queen was going to bed, the queen mouse said, "So you dared to kill my children, did you? Well I'll have my revenge, I will. I'll make your little princess turn quite ugly."

The queen screamed, and her guards rushed in to the room with drawn swords - but the mouse queen had disappeared behind the skirting board.

It just so happened that the king and queen had a beautiful daughter called Princess Pirlipat. When the king heard about the threats of the mouse queen, he ordered the bed of the princess to be guarded by seven fierce cats so that no mouse could get near her.

But even cats must sleep. When they were curled up and purring softly, the queen mouse crept past them and climbed up on to the end of Princess Pirlipat's cot. There she said an evil magic spell, and in the morning, when the princess looked in

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the mirror, she saw that her face had been turned quite, quite ugly. Her nose was long and had a wart on the end of it, her eyes were small and squinty, her hair was standing up on end and would not settle down, and she had spots on her chin. In fact, she wasn't just ugly; she was ridiculous looking.

As you can imagine, the queen was utterly distraught—and the king, well he was beside himself. He summoned Drosselmeyer again and gave him just four weeks to find a cure for the princess's ugliness—or else.

Drosselmeyer was an inventor, however, and not a magician. He could not make magic potions, and he did not know any magic spells. So, he went to the court astrologer for advice.

The astrologer said that Princess Pirlipat must eat a nut called a Crakatook. But that wasn't all. The nut must first be cracked by a boy who had never shaved, and he must do it without opening his eyes, and then he must take seven steps backwards without stumbling.

Drosselmeyer searched the land for a Crakatook nut, and eventually, after almost four weeks were up, he found one in a small shop. He bought the nut and brought it before the king.

"This nut, sire," he said, "is the cure for your daughter's ugliness. She must eat it. But first the nut must be cracked by a boy who has never shaved, and he must do it with his eyes closed, and then he must take 7 steps backwards without stumbling."

The king was pleased that the cure for his daughter was so straight forward. He made a law that that any boy who fulfilled the conditions and cured his daughter of ugliness would have the hand of the princess in marriage.

Many boys came to the palace and tried to crack the nut, but not one could succeed until finally one day when Drosselmeyer's own nephew was visiting his uncle in the palace. His face was still smooth, he had not quite reached the age when he needed to shave, and his uncle asked if he would like to try his hand at cracking the nut.

The nephew held the nut between his teeth, he closed his eyes, and he cracked it. Then he took seven steps backwards. But, right after the seventh step, he stumbled.

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Princess Pirlipat was cured of her ugliness, and was beautiful once more.

Drosselmeyer's nephew, however, caught the spell.

His face became ugly. In place of his nice kind mouth, he wore a stupid grin, and his smooth cheeks grew a white curly beard. His head grew too large for his shoulders. And he looked not only ugly, but foolish too.

Although the king had promised that his daughter would marry the boy who cured her, the princess refused to marry anyone who looked so ridiculous. And the king had to agree that it would not be proper for his daughter to marry such an ugly, silly looking boy.

So, Drosselmeyer's nephew was turned away. As he left the royal palace, people pointed and laughed at him. His teacher said he could no longer come to school because he looked so stupid - so he stayed at home, all alone.

That was the story that Godfather Drosselmeyer told to Clara. She thanked her Godfather for telling her such an interesting story, but she had to admit that it had made her feel rather sad.

That night Clara was thinking about the strange tale, and she could not fall asleep. After a long while of lying awake, she heard a voice whispering in her ear.

It was the mouse king. "Feed me your sweets," he said, "or I will bite off the head of your precious nutcracker, and I will spit it out where nobody will find it again, not even your ingenious godfather."

Clara was so afraid for the nutcracker that she got up and found some sweets for the Mouse king. He gobbled them up with this seven heads in an instance, and then he demanded more. She went down to the pantry and found some cake. He ate all of that too, and the Christmas pudding, and the newly baked biscuits. Still he wanted more.

"How much more shall I give you?" asked Clara. The Mouse King said, "It is for me to say when to stop. Give me more. More I say!"

Clara began to cry - for what would her mother say in the morning when she found that all the sweets, cake, and biscuits in the house had been eaten? And would the Mouse King be satisfied even then?

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As she was crying, the nutcracker came striding into the room. The Mouse king turned around and said, "Prepare to die, oh ugly one," but the nutcracker bit off each of the Mouse King's seven heads, and soon the Mouse King lay dead.

When he had defeated his enemy, Clara picked up her hero and took him back to her room. Instead of going to sleep, they watched a wonderful show. Toys came out to dance and sing for them all night long. Never before had Clara seen such a lovely performance.

In the morning she could not wait to tell her mother all about what she had seen. When she began to explain about the seven headed mouse king and the brave little nutcracker, her mother said, "Clara, your imagination is running wild. Don't you realize that what you saw is just a dream?"

"But look, mother," said Clara, reaching into her pocket. "Here are the seven crowns of the mouse king that the nutcracker defeated!"

"Just toys!" said her mother. "Stop being silly. Can't you see I'm busy?"

So Clara went into the nursery and sat down and cried.

"It is true, it is true," she said. "And if the nutcracker were really a person, not just a wooden nutcracker, then I would love him and marry him—even if he was ugly. I would not be like that Princess Pirlipat in the story. I would love a boy for his good heart—not for his handsome face."

As she said that, she heard the doorbell, followed by her Godfather's voice in the hall. She hurried to tell him what she was thinking, but there was no need.

Godfather Drosselmeyer had come with his nephew, his nephew was no longer ugly - but handsome, bright-eyed and smiling. When Clara had promised to marry an ugly but good boy, she had broken the terrible spell. He had regained his looks of old, and they both knew that one day they would be married to each other and live happily ever after.

THE END