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After Marie—called Clara in some versions of *The Nutcracker*—opens her presents, she notices something really curious.

In all the Christmas-Eve excitement, she had failed to see what appears to be a nutcracker. (At the time Hoffman wrote his story, nutcrackers were popular in Germany and were known as "Nussknackers".)

This particular nutcracker has an interesting form. It looks like a man made of wood, resembling Herr Drosselmeier (the children's godfather).

Who had placed it under the Christmas tree?

Marie fell head over heels in love with this wonderful little man. Maybe his body was too long, his legs too thin and his head too large. Maybe his short cloak, which looked like wood, did seem rather silly and his hat was like a miner's. Maybe he did look like Godpapa Drosselmeier. But that pretty purple jacket covered in braid, and those splendid little boots, made up for everything.

Besides, as Marie stared at him, she realized what a sweet nature he had. His green eyes, which seemed to stick out a little too far, shone with kindness. His chin, with its white-cotton beard, showed off a smile on his bright, red lips.

"Papa," asked Marie, "who's this darling man?"

"He belongs to all of you," said her father. "You, Fritz and your sister Louise. He's going to crack nuts for you."

Dr. Stahlbaum picked up the little man and lifted his wooden cloak. At once he opened his mouth wider and wider, showing off his sharp, white teeth. Marie put a nut inside his mouth and with a loud CRACK! He bit the nut clean in two.

Dr. Stahlbaum explained that he came from the Nutcracker family and was practicing the trade of his ancestors.

"And since Marie likes him so much," he added, "I'm putting him in her special care."

Marie scooped the nutcracker up in her arms and made him crack some more nuts. She was careful to choose the smallest, so he didn't have to open his mouth too wide. Fritz, who'd grown tired of playing with his soldiers, demanded a turn. Laughing out loud at the funny little man, Fritz made sure Nutcracker cracked the biggest and hardest nuts.

He was doing just that when there was a terrible SNACK-SNACK! Three of the Nutcracker's teeth fell out and his jaw flopped open.

"Poor, darling Nutcracker!" cried Marie, pulling him away.

"What good is he now?" asked Fritz. "I'll soon lick him into shape!"

"No," answered Marie, rather angrily. "You're cruel! You beat your horses and shoot your men!"

"He's as much mine as yours!" shouted Fritz. "Hand him over!"

Marie burst into tears and wrapped Nutcracker carefully in her handkerchief. Papa heard the quarrel and spoke sternly. "Fritz, you should be ashamed of forcing an injured soldier into service like that!"

Marie took her wounded little man, tied a white ribbon round his broken jaw and rocked him in her arms while she read her new books.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Marie-s-Pet>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Marie-s-Pet>