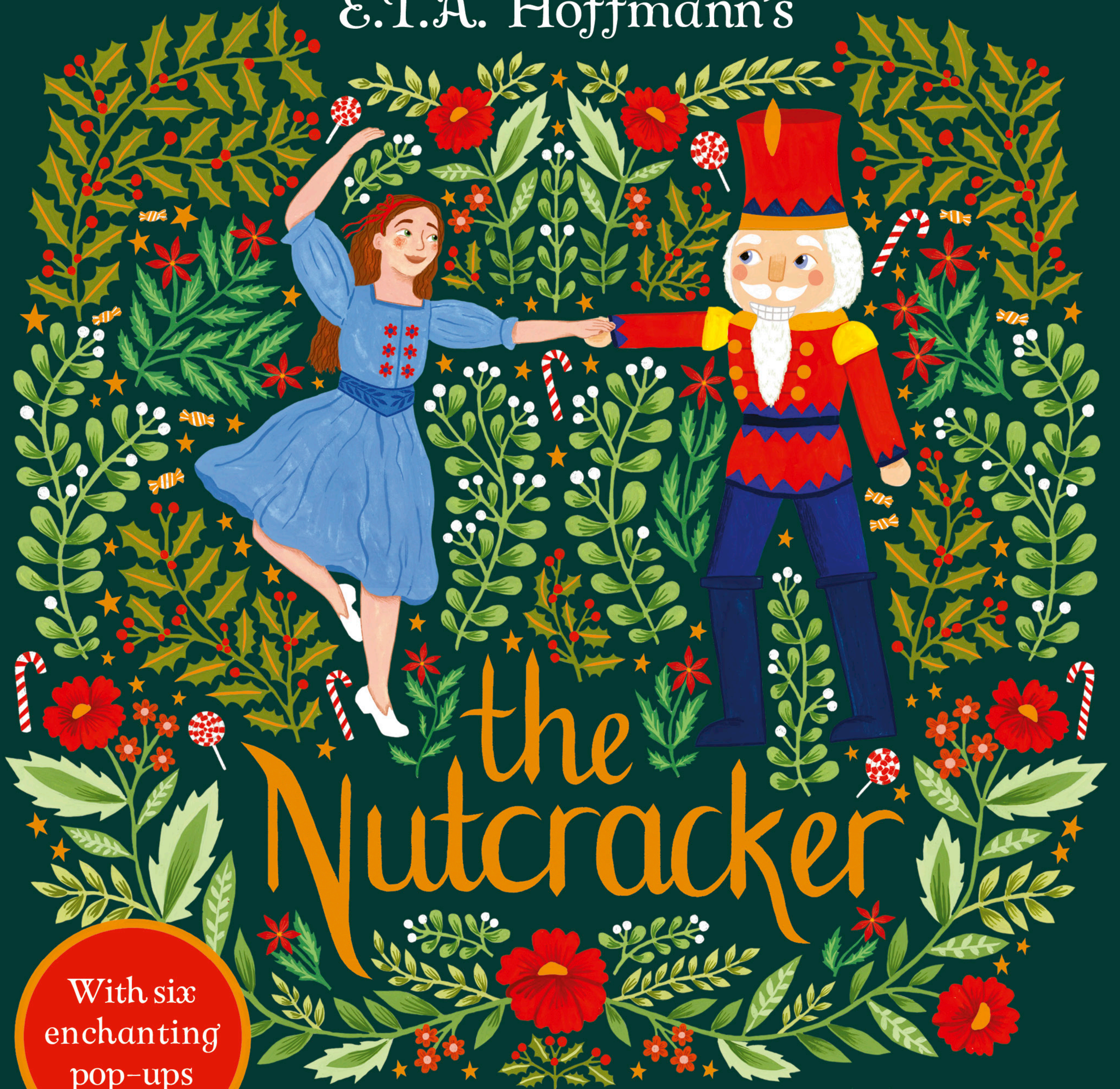


E.T.A. Hoffmann's



the
Nutcracker

With six
enchanted
pop-ups

Illustrated by Zanna Goldhawk



It was a crisp, winter day, but all was snug in the house. The sweet smells of food wafted through the rooms, soft music played and laughter tinkled. Clara and her brother Fritz could not wait to see what gifts they would find under the family Christmas tree.

The drawing room doors opened and the children's eyes grew wide with amazement. A tremendous tree stretched from floor to ceiling. It was trimmed in silver apples and iced almonds, white clusters of bright sweets hung like baubles and blossoms from every branch. The twinkling lights of the tree reflected in the ribbons and wrappings of the gifts spread out across the floor.

Just then, the children's grandfather—a man called Drosselmeier—swept into the room with presents for the children. For Fritz there was a miniature castle with clockwork figures that twirled inside tiny windows.

"And for you, my dear Clara, I have a special gift," said Grandfather Drosselmeier. "It is a nutcracker. See how the soldier's strong jaw can crack any nut."

Clara held the little man carefully. He was dressed in a handsome red jacket lined down the front with white loops and brass buttons. His painted eyes sparkled a brilliant green, while a kind, good-natured smile hid beneath a snowy cotton beard. "I love him," she whispered.

Without warning, Fritz yanked the Nutcracker from his sister and jammed a gigantic nut in its mouth. With a sickening crunch, several pearly white teeth broke off.

Almost in tears, Clara gathered the fallen teeth. Then she found a white ribbon and wrapped it in a bandage around the Nutcracker's wounded chin.

"Don't fret," she whispered. "I will tend to you."



"Look there," pointed the Nutcracker Prince,
"The Land Of Sweets!"

Lining the shore, were rows upon rows of cottages.
Their roofs were ribbed with watermelon licorice and topped with
pear drops. Their walls were shingled in peanut butter wafers, while
lollies popped out of every flower box.

"How marvellous," cried Clara. "I've never seen anything like it."

"This is my home," replied the Nutcracker. "You have shown me
nothing but love and kindness, and I can think of no greater reward
than to share it with you."

Clara's cheeks blushed as red as the watermelon licorice,
and she tried not to seem too excited.

But when the boat of shells landed, she couldn't help
herself. She leapt out and ran from cottage to cottage,
sampling a peanut butter shingle here and a flower lolly there.

"Hold on," said the Nutcracker with a smile,
"or you'll eat everyone out of house and home!"

Side by side, the pair strolled between chocolate toffee
trees and bonbon bushes, and then onto a promenade whose
pebbles were made entirely of yellow jelly beans. In the town
centre, three curious, dazzling fountains mixed in the air: one of
orangeade, one of lemonade, and a delicious cherry soda water.

Towering over it all were giant candied fruits of blue topaz
and rich ruby, each one dusted with a sugary glaze or dabbed
with dollops of frosted cream.

They rounded a small hilltop, and Clara gasped with surprise and wonder.

A magnificent palace stood before her. Its high walls glimmered and glistened rosy pink, stretching up to a dozen tall towers and turrets, the tops of which were dotted with the pinpricks of tiny stars. On either side of the grand gates, baskets of violets, tulips and jasmine hung, their delicate fragrance drawing Clara ever closer.


Inside the palace, they were greeted by twelve Christmas angels who flittered with incandescent wings. The angels led them to the beautiful Sugar Plum Fairy, who sat them upon a glistening diamond throne.



It was the Nutcracker Prince's very own seat of honour.

"Welcome home, my Prince," said the Sugar Plum Fairy with a graceful bow. "Your kingdom has long awaited your return."

The Nutcracker's loyal subjects were gathered before him. At the sight of their long lost prince, they broke into a dance. A shepherdess from Denmark played a flute as candy canes from Russia, chocolate drops from Spain, and teacups from China all pounced and paraded for their Prince's amusement. When each performance drew to a close, the immense arched ceilings of the palace echoed with applause and laughter.



Finally, the Sugar Plum Fairy invited Clara and the Nutcracker Prince to join her, and all the fragrant flowers of the kingdom, in a spectacular waltz. The room whirled about Clara and the Prince, as they followed the flowers around the edges of the grand ballroom and up the stairs to the highest tower.

As the music drew to a close, Clara found herself on a sunset-washed terrace overlooking the palace grounds. A spectacular crimson sleigh stood before her, pulled by a pair of prancing icicle reindeer.

Clara and the Nutcracker Prince carefully climbed into the velvet seats of the sleigh. Waving goodbye to all the subjects, they rose gradually into the spokes of the dimming sun, until they disappeared behind a soft mountain of puffy pink clouds.

One by one, Clara watched as the clouds shrank. "Oh Nutcracker," she sighed, "I know what is happening. Can't we stay, just awhile longer?"

But it was useless. The clouds collapsed, little by little, into a small pillow. And Clara woke in her very own bed. She found her toy Nutcracker resting beside her with the bandage still wrapped around his jaw.

"My brave Nutcracker," Clara whispered. "In my heart, I know for certain we will return one day to the Land Of Sweets one day. And there we will live, like two in a dream, happy, free, and together—forever."