

Prize Story.

LITTLE TOM.

[This story was awarded first prize in the HESPERIAN competition.]

HE SAT on the green lawn, pulling off the heads of yellow marigolds. His soft, yellow hair shone in the slanting sunlight like an uncertain aureole. Under one tiny gilt shoe lay his little white cap, squeezed into the grass. Scattering the marigold leaves all over himself, until the sunbeams seemed tangled in all the folds of his tumbled apron, he looked like a bright blossom.

He held up a great, fluffy, yellow head, and looked at it, and laughed. Then, suddenly, he pushed it into his mouth—as well as so big a flower could go into so small a mouth. The feathery pollen brushed his tiny nose with powdery dust, and made him sneeze. He looked at the flower in astonishment. He put it into his mouth again. But he did not calculate the angle of torsion exactly, and this time his dimpled fist came first, striking his lips against two sharp little teeth.

This was different. It was not so nice. He puckered up the little, smarting lips, and shut his blue eyes tight. But he did not cry. He thought better of it. He rolled himself over on the grass, and pulled up the soft blades with both hands. Then he sat up, very still. A bird had just begun to sing in the one lone maple on the lawn. Where did that pretty thing come from? He looked all around—on the grass—on the bits of marigold leaves. He did not look up to the maple tree, because, to be sure, he did not know there was a maple tree there. He looked at a bit of glass, sparkling in the sun. Ah! that was it. He laughed softly, and crept over the green turf to the shining thing. He picked it up, and all the brightness of the sinking sun flashed out between his tiny, dirty fingers. He laughed again, and tried his two white teeth on the sharp edge. This time there was a cry indeed.

The glittering glass fell into the little white apron, and a tiny red stream trickled after it.

He did not scream. He did not even kick his gilt shoes off upon the marigold leaves. He sat still, only crying softly with an unimperative, plaintive little moan. The sun sank lower and lower. It shone in his small dusty face, powdered with yellow marigold dust and streaked with little white lines where the tears had run down and made his lace collar hang limp and uneven.

“Why Tommy, pet! Bless his dear little heart—Look at the blood—Mercy!—He’s cut himself. Mother’s blessed boy—Tommy!” Tommy was asleep. His mother gathered him up and shook the glass and the yellow, withered leaves into the grass. She picked up the crushed cap, and carried the sleeping baby into the house.

It was a poor, small house. A bed with red valances stood in the parlor. A sick woman lay there, tossing with fever.

“Don’t go, Mrs. Liner,” she moaned, “don’t leave me.” Mrs. Liner had laid little Tom on the foot of the bed, while she tied on her bonnet and took her shawl.

“I must go home and get supper ready, Mrs. Conley, or Mr. Liner will not like it.” She smoothed out the pillow, pulled the sheets straight, and placed a pitcher and glass on a chair close to the bedside. Then she took up little Tom, and walked out across the grassy lawn, down the narrow walk, past many blocks of small cottages and poor houses. In that little green house an old man lay dead. Mrs. Liner hurried by. She had kept warm flannels at his feet. But he was old. Here was the flat where the twins were recovering from the measles. Mrs. Liner saw their heads at the window. She went on to a new store building and walked slowly up a long flight of stairs. In the hall, she stopped. A clock was striking— one, — two, — three, — four, — five, six.

She placed Tom on a bed and walked into the kitchen. A fire burned furiously in the range, and a tall man with shaggy hair bent