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The novel opens with Aunt Polly searching the house in search of her nephew, Tom Sawyer. She finds him in the closet, discovers that his hands are covered with jam, and prepares to give him a whipping. Tom cries out tearfully, “Look behind you!” and when Aunt Polly turns, Tom escapes over the fence. After Tom is gone, Aunt Polly reflects sadly on Tom’s mischievousness and how she lets him get away with too much.

Tom comes home at supper time. His face is dirty, and his clothes are torn and dirty. His shoes are not tied, and his collar is still open. Aunt Polly is satisfied. Over dinner, Tom tells his aunt about his adventure. During supper, Aunt Polly tells Tom that he will be sent to bed early if he does not eat his dinner faster. Tom sits at the table for hours, whistling. While wandering the streets of St. Petersburg, Tom is met by his new neighbor, Becky Thatcher. Tom and the new arrival soon become fast friends. When Becky's father learns of Tom's prank, he threatens to throw Tom out of the house.

When he returns home in the evening, Tom finds Aunt Polly waiting for him. She notices his dirtied clothes and resolves to make him work the next day, a Saturday, as punishment.

On Saturday morning, Aunt Polly sends Tom out to whitewash the fence. Jim passes by, and Tom tries to get him to do some of the whitewashing in return for a “white alley,” a kind of marble. Jim almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chases him off, leaving Tom alone with his task.
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