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The novel opens with Aunt Polly scouring 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 theatrically, “Look behind you!” and when Aunt Polly turns, Tom escapes over the fence. After Tom is gone, Aunt Polly reflects sadly on Tom’s misbehavior and how she lets him get away with too much.

Tom comes home at suppertime and is surprised to find he has been skipped school that afternoon and won’t be whipped. He goes to school without breakfast and eats Tom’s breakfast in the classroom. Tom’s half-brother, Ben Bobbin, who is a wiser and more experienced duffer, advises Tom to eat his breakfast and eventually choose the Lukeism of the way home.

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 asks to get him to do some of the whitewashing in return for a “white alloy,” a kind of marble. Jim almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chased him off, leaving Tom alone with his tasks.