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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 mischief and how she lets him get away with too much.

Tom comes home at supper time. He tells how he has been skipped school that afternoon and went instead to the river bank and showed boy that his collar is still here from last week. Then Aunt Polly is satisfied. Tom has sworn the deuce himself to disguise his collar. 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 "whip alley," a kind of noose. Jim almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chases him off, leaving Tom alone with his tasks.
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Tom comes home at suppertime. His face is dirty, and he tells tales about his adventures. During supper, Aunt Polly is startled to hear the news that the bank has been broken into and that a great deal of money is missing. Tom during the week has been skipping school that afternoon and went swimming and visited the town. Aunt Polly is satisfied.

Tom goes out of the house to whiten the fences. While wandering the streets of St. Petersburg, Tom is stopped by a streetwalker. Tom and the beautiful girl develop a friendship, and eventually she asks Tom to come with her to a dance. Tom finds that he is not able to go to the dance, and the beautiful girl throws herself on his shoulders.

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