The novel opens with Aunt Polly scrounging 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 suppertime with some gold he has about his pockets. During supper, Aunt Polly asks Tom whether he was punished at school that afternoon and what rewards he brought home. Tom lies, but Aunt Polly is satisfied.

Tom goes out of the house into the street, where he meets Huckleberry Finn, a run-away slave. He has been deserted and abandoned and eventually choses the adventure 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 tries to get him to do some of the whitewashing in return for a "white alley," a kind of snuff. Jim almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chases him off, leaving Tom alone with his task.
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Tom comes home at suppertime and is greeted by his tale of the adventures he has had, including skipping school that afternoon and winning a wrestling match. Aunt Polly is satisfied, but not Tom’s half-brother, Huckleberry Finn, who wears the shirt himself to disguise his own adventures. Tom goes out of the house to seek out Huckleberry and is met by the new arrival, a man who plays the organ and eventually faces the newest of all the way home.

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