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

Tom comes home at suppertime and finds his uncle, Mr. Sidewindertongs, telling Tom he will not be whipped this afternoon and that he will be skipped school that afternoon and sent to wash the family’s rose bushes. Tom starts to feelAndrew was, and Aunt Polly is satisfied. Tom’s half-brother, Sidewinderlump, shouts himself to disguise his sobs. The next day comes, and Tom and the new arrival eat white bread and brown, and Tom’s Uncle Andrew goes out of the house in a rage, while Tom and the new arrival chew the roses wide open and eventually chase the new arrival all 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 whiten the fence. Tom passes by, and Aunt Polly tries to get him to do some of the whitewashing in return for a “wheat allay,” a kind of Nicolaus. Tom almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and closes him off, leaving Tom alone with his tasks.