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 Pollyreflects sadly on Tom’s naughtiness and how she lets him get away with too much.

Tom comes home at supper time and shows Aunt Polly a handful of coins that found about his adventures. During supper, Aunt Polly tells Tom that he must never be skipped school that he has to prepare for the test and that his father is still away from home. Tom’s half-brother, Joe, is a troublemaker, and Aunt Polly is satisfied. Tom and Joe argue, and eventually, Tom is sent out of the house.

When Tom returns home in the evening, Aunt Polly is waiting for him. She notices his dirty 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. Joe passes by, and Tom lies to get him to do some of the whitewashing in return for a “white alley,” a kind of cache. Joe almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chases him off, leaving Tom alone with his task.