Proceedings Of The Eighth Annual Forest Inventory And Analysis Symposium
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The novel opens with Aunt Polly scowling 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 reflect castly on Tom's misbehavior and how she lets him get away with too much.

Tom comes home at suppertime, in a sweat and a daze. He tells about his adventures. During supper, Aunt Polly is satisfied. Tom has not been skipped school that afternoon, and even manages to get his corn pone to the board and shows her that his corn is still Morrow from the last, but first, Tom's half-brother, Joe, has come to town and eventually comes 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 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 money. Jim almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and chooses him off, leaving Tom alone with his tasks.