



# Chapter 1

“Tom!”

No answer.

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“I wonder what’s goin’ on with that boy. TOM!” The elderly woman pulled down her eyeglasses and looked over them around the room; then she pulled them up and looked out under them. She rarely, if ever, looked *through* them for as small a thing as a boy. The eyeglasses were her fancy pair, the pride of her heart, built for style, not service. She could have seen as well through lids for a stove’s burners. “I swear, if I get hold of you, I’ll . . .” She didn’t finish because she was bending down and jabbing under the bed with a broom, and she needed breath to put strength into the jabs. She roused no one but her cat. “I never did see the equal of that boy!”

She went to the open door and looked out

over the weeds and tomato vines that formed the garden. No Tom. She raised her chin to an angle calculated for long-distance calling and shouted, "Y-o-u-u, *Tom!*"

There was a slight noise behind her. She turned just in time to seize a small boy by his jacket, stopping his flight. "There! I should've thought of that closet. What've you been doin' in there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! Look at your hands. And your mouth. What *is* that stuff?"

"I don't know, Aunt Polly."

"Well, *I* know. It's jam. I've said forty times that if you didn't leave that jam alone, I'd skin you. Hand me that switch."

The switch hovered in the air. "Oh! Look behind you, Aunt!"

Aunt Polly whirled around.

Tom instantly fled, scrambled up the board fence, and disappeared over it.

His surprised aunt stood still for a moment. Then she laughed. "Hang the boy," she thought. "Ain't he played enough tricks like that on me for me to be wary of him by now? Old fools is the biggest fools. But, my goodness, he never uses the same trick twice. He seems to know just how long he can torment me before he gets my dander up. And he knows that if he can get me off guard for a minute or make me laugh, my dander will go back down and I won't be able to hit him even once. I

ain't doin' my duty by that boy. That's the Lord's truth. But he's my own dead sister's boy, and I ain't got the heart to lash him. He'll play hooky this afternoon, and I'll be obliged to make him work tomorrow, to punish him. It's mighty hard to make him work Saturdays, when all the boys is having a holiday, but he hates work more than he hates anything else, and I've *got* to do some of my duty by him, or I'll ruin the child."

Tom did play hooky, and he had a great time. He got back home barely in time to help Jim, the small black boy owned by Aunt Polly, saw and split the next day's firewood before supper. That is, Tom was there in time to tell Jim his adventures while Jim did three-fourths of the work. Tom's younger half-brother, Sid—a quiet boy with no adventurous, troublesome ways—already was done with his part of the work (picking up chips).

While Tom was eating his supper, and stealing sugar to the extent that opportunity allowed, Aunt Polly asked him questions. She wanted to trap him into revealing that he'd played hooky. She flattered herself that her attempts to deceive were marvels of cunning. "Tom, wasn't it hot in school?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Didn't you want to go swimming?"

Tom felt an uncomfortable suspicion. He searched Aunt Polly's face, but it revealed nothing. So he answered, "No'm. Well, not very much."

Aunt Polly reached out and felt Tom's shirt.

“You ain’t hot now, though.” She was pleased with herself: without anyone knowing her intention, she had discovered that the shirt was dry.

Tom realized what was happening and forestalled Aunt Polly’s likely next move. “Some of us pumped water on our heads. Mine’s still damp. See?”

Aunt Polly was annoyed to think that she had overlooked that evidence. Then she had a new inspiration. “Tom, you didn’t have to undo your shirt collar, where I sewed it, to pump on your head, did you? Unbutton your jacket.”

Tom opened his jacket. His shirt collar was securely sewn.

“Well, go along. I was sure you’d played hooky and been swimming.” She was half sorry that her shrewdness had miscarried and half glad that Tom had, for once, been obedient.

Sid said, “I thought you sewed his collar with white thread. Now the thread is black.”

“Why, I did sew it with white! Tom!”

Tom didn’t wait for the rest. As he went out the door, he said, “Sid, I’ll wallop you for that.” He thought, “She’d never have noticed if it hadn’t been for Sid. Sometimes she sews my collar with white, sometimes with black. I wish she’d stick to one or the other.” Sid was the town’s model boy, so Tom hated him.

Within two minutes Tom forgot his troubles—not because his troubles were one bit less

heavy and bitter to him than an adult's are to an adult, but because a powerful new interest drove them from his mind. This interest was a new way of whistling that he had just learned and was longing to practice. It consisted of a bird-like warble produced by touching the tongue to the roof of the mouth. Reader, if you ever were a boy, you probably remember how to do it. Through diligence, Tom soon got the knack of it. He strode down the street whistling.

The summer evenings were long, so it wasn't dark yet. Tom stopped whistling when he encountered a stranger, a boy slightly larger than himself. A newcomer of any age or either sex was an impressive curiosity in the shabby little town of St. Petersburg. And this boy was well dressed, on a *weekday*. His cap was dainty. His buttoned blue jacket was new and stylish. So were his pants. He had shoes on, although it was only Friday. He even wore a necktie, a bright bit of ribbon. He had a city manner that ate into Tom. The more Tom stared at the boy, the shabbier he felt and the higher he turned up his nose at the boy's finery.

Neither boy spoke. If one moved, the other did too—but only sideways, in a circle. The two boys stayed face to face and eye to eye.

Finally Tom said, "I can lick you."

"I'd like to see you try."

"Well, I can do it."

"No, you can't."

An uncomfortable pause. "What's your name?" Tom asked.

"It isn't any of your business."

"Well, I'll *make* it my business."

"Well, why don't you?"

"If you say much, I will."

"Much, much, *much*."

"Oh, you think you're smart and fancy."

Another pause. More eyeing and sidling around each other. Now they were shoulder to shoulder.

Tom said, "Go away."

"Go away yourself."

"I won't."

"I won't either."

They stood, each with a foot placed at an angle as a brace, and shoved at each other. Neither could get an advantage. After struggling until they were hot and flushed, they eased up but remained watchful.

Tom said, "My big brother can thrash you with his little finger, and I'll make him do it, too."

"I've got a brother that's bigger than yours. He can throw yours over that fence."

Both brothers were imaginary.

With his big toe, Tom drew a line in the dust. "I dare you to step over that. If you do, I'll lick you 'til you can't stand up."

The boy promptly stepped over the line. "Let's see you do it."

“For two cents I *will*.”

The boy took two pennies from his pocket and mockingly held them out.

Tom struck them to the ground.

Instantly the boys gripped each other and were tumbling in the dirt. They tugged and tore at each other's hair and clothes, punched and scratched each other's nose, and covered themselves with dust and glory. Tom soon sat astride the new boy, pounding him with his fists. “Holler 'nough,” Tom said.

The boy struggled to free himself. He was crying, mainly from rage.

“Holler 'nough.” The pounding continued.

At last the stranger got out a smothered “Nough.”

Tom let him up. “That'll learn you. Better look out who you're fooling with next time.”

Brushing the dust from his clothes and sniffling, the new boy left, occasionally looking back and threatening what he would do to Tom the next time he encountered him.

Tom jeered, turned his back, and started off, feeling good.

The new boy threw a stone, which hit Tom between the shoulders. Then he ran away.

Tom chased the boy home and took up a position at his front gate, daring the enemy to come out. The enemy only made faces through the window. At last the enemy's mother appeared; called

Tom a vicious, vulgar child; and ordered him away. Tom left, but not without saying that he'd get back at the boy.

Tom got home pretty late that night. He cautiously climbed in through the window. But Aunt Polly was waiting in ambush. When she saw the condition of his clothes, her resolution to turn Tom's Saturday into hard labor became firm.