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The secret opens with Aunt Polly crossing the fence in search of her nephew, Tom Sawyer. She finds him in the city that his hands are covered with jam, and prepares to give him a whipping. Tom runs out fearfully, "Look behind" when Aunt Polly turns, Tom escapes over the fence. After Tom is gone, Aunt Polly reflects carefully on Tom's secret she lets him get away with too much.

Tom crosses fence at supper time. During supper, Aunt Polly tells Tom that he must be obedient and work around the house as well as school. Tom's collar is still wet from jam. Aunt Polly says that she will whip him if he does not do his work. Tom's half brother, Sid, tells Tom to do his work and Aunt Polly will be satisfied. Tom then goes to bed.

Tom goes out of the fence to play in the streets of St. Petersburg. Tom and the new arrival, Joe, play in the streets and chase the cats all the way home.

When he returns home in the evening, Tom finds Aunt Polly waiting for him. She notices his dirty clothes and makes him work the next day, a Saturday, as punishment.

On Saturday morning, Aunt Polly sends Tom out to whitewash the fence. Tom goes by, and Tom tries to get him to do the whitewashing in return for a "white alley," a kind of excuse. Tom almost agrees, but Aunt Polly appears and she leaves Tom alone with his labor.

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