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The Glorious Whitewasher

“Tom!”

No answer.

“Tom! Where is that boy? You, TOM!”

The old lady looked over the top of her glasses. “If I lay hold of you, I’ll...”

She did not finish her threat but looked under the bed. There was no boy there. She went to the front door and shouted again, “Y-o-uu *Tom!*”

A noise came from behind her. Turning quickly, she grabbed a small boy by the shirt.

“There you are, you rascal! What have you been doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Why, look at your sticky hands. And look at your mouth! How many times have

I told you to leave that jam alone? Hand me that switch.”

The switch was raised in the air.

“My! Look behind you, Aunt!”

The old lady whirled around.

The boy ran out the door. In an instant, he had scrambled over the fence and disappeared.

His Aunt Polly stared at the empty room. Then she broke into a gentle laugh. “Will I never learn?” she said to herself. “Hasn’t Tom Sawyer played tricks enough on me? But they say old fools is the biggest fools! And that boy never plays the same trick twice. I’m afraid I’ve spoiled him. But he’s my own dead sister’s boy, poor thing. I just ain’t got the heart to lash him!”

Aunt Polly sighed. “Chances are he’ll skip school this afternoon,” she thought. “Then I’ll have to make him work on Saturday. He hates work more than he hates anything else, but I’ve got to do my duty.”

Aunt Polly was right. Tom *did* play hooky, and he had a very good day.

He got home in time to sit down at the supper table with his younger brother, Sid. Sid was a

quiet boy. He never went out on adventures and never made any trouble.

While Tom was eating supper—and stealing sugar when he could—Aunt Polly asked questions. It was clear she wanted to trap him into admitting he'd played hooky.

“My, it was warm today, wasn't it, Tom? Didn't you want to go a-swimming?”

“No ma'am. Not very much.”

The old lady reached out and felt Tom's shirt. She found it was dry.

Tom knew what was coming next. “Some of us pumped water on our heads,” he said. “See, my hair is still damp.”

Aunt Polly thought a moment. “When I sewed that rip in your shirt this morning, Tom, I also stitched your collar shut. Open your jacket!”

Tom opened his jacket.

“Well, I'll be! I was *sure* you'd been a-swimming. But look at your collar still sewed tight.” Aunt Polly felt proud. For once she thought Tom had done the right thing.

But then Sid spoke up. “Well now, I thought you sewed his collar with white thread. But look, that thread is black.”

“Why, I *did* sew it with white! TOM!”

But Tom was out the door. “Sid,” he shouted back, “I’ll lick you for that!”

It was true that Tom was not the model boy of the village. He knew the model boy very well—and hated him.

Saturday morning came bright and fresh and full of life. The trees were in bloom and there was a song in every heart.

Tom appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a brush. He looked at the fence mournfully. All gladness was gone. The time had come to take his punishment for skipping school.

There were more than 30 yards of fence to whitewash! Sighing, Tom dipped his brush in the bucket. Then he sighed again and sat down on a wooden box. Pretty soon his friends would come along. They would make fun of him for having to work. Just the thought of it burnt him like fire.

He reached in his pocket and got out all his worldly goods. There were bits of toys, marbles, and trash—not half enough to buy his freedom. Then an idea came to him—a