

CHAPTER ONE: TOM AND THE FENCE

‘Tom! Tom!’ There was no answer. ‘Where is that boy? Tom!’ Aunt Polly looked under the bed but she only found a cat. ‘Tom!’ she cried. Then she heard a noise behind her. A small girl ran fast and she stopped with her hand.

‘What are you doing, Tom?’ she asked. ‘Nothing.’ ‘Nothing.’ ‘Look at your hand and your mouth. I told you not to eat the jam.’ ‘Oh! Aunt Polly, look behind you!’ The old lady looked and Tom ran away. Aunt Polly was surprised and then she laughed. ‘I never learn. Tom always plays tricks on me and I never learn. I love Tom. He’s my sister’s child – she’s dead. But it’s not easy to look after him. Tomorrow is Saturday and there’s no school. But Tom must work tomorrow. He hates work but he must do it.’

Tom lived in the small village of St. Petersburg with his Aunt Polly, his brother Sid and his sister Mary. The summer evenings were long, and in the evenings Tom liked walking around the village. One evening he saw a big boy in front of him. The boy was a stranger. Tom was surprised because he did not see new people often. This boy had very nice, expensive clothes.

‘He’s got shoes, a new shirt and a tie. And it’s not Sunday.’ Tom thought. ‘My clothes are old and ugly.’ Tom looked at him and the big boy looked at Tom. Tom did not like him. Finally he said, ‘I can beat you!’ ‘Why don’t you try?’ said the boy. ‘Well, I can,’ said Tom. ‘No, you can’t.’ ‘Yes, I can.’ There was silence. ‘You’re afraid,’ said the boy. ‘I’m not afraid,’ said Tom. ‘Yes, you are.’ ‘No, I’m not.’ There was more silence. Then Tom pushed the boy and boy pushed Tom. Soon they were on the ground. Tom pulled the boy’s hair and hit him hard. They both fought a lot. The big boy was angry and started crying. ‘Stop,’ he said, ‘Stop!’ ‘Now, that will teach you something,’ said Tom.

Tom arrived home late and he was dirty. When Aunt Polly saw his dirty clothes, she thought, ‘What can I do with this boy? Well, tomorrow is Saturday, and he must work.’

Saturday morning was beautiful and sunny. It was summer and the world was happy. Tom sat in front of the fence and looked at it. It was thirty yards long and nine feet high. He was unhappy. ‘It’s Saturday and I must paint this long fence. All my friends will laugh at me,’ he thought.

He put his long brush in the white paint and started painting. He stopped and looked at his work. Then he continued painting. After a few minutes he had a great idea. He continued painting the fence. He saw his friend Ben Rogers in the street. Ben had an apple in his hand. He came to look at the fence. ‘You’re working for your aunt,’ said Ben. Tom said nothing. He continued painting.

'I'm going swimming but you can't come with me. You're working,' said Ben. 'Do you call this work?' asked Tom. 'Of course it's work. You're painting a fence,' said Ben. 'Maybe it's work but may be it isn't. I like it!' said Tom, 'I can swim every day, but I can't paint a fence every day.'



Ben watched Tom. He painted slowly and carefully. He often stopped to and moved back from the fence. He looked at his work and smiled. Ben was suddenly interested in the fence and said, 'Let me paint a little, Tom.' Tom thought for a moment. 'I'm sorry, Ben. Aunt Polly wants me to do it because I'm very good at painting. My brother Sid wanted to do it, but he's not good at painting.' 'Oh please, Tom! Please can I paint? I'm good at painting too. Here, you can have some of my apple.' 'No, Ben I can't' – 'Then take all of my apple!'

Tom was happy but he did not smile. He gave Ben the brush and sat down to eat the apple. Tom's other friends came by. At first they laughed at him. But soon they all wanted to paint the fence. Billy Fisher gave Tom a kite and Johnny Miller bought him a dead rat. His other friends gave him an old knife, a cat with one eye, an old blue bottle, and an old key and other interesting things. His friends painted the fence and Tom now had a lot of interesting things. He went back home. 'Aunt Polly, can I go to play now?'

When Aunt Polly saw the beautiful white fence she was happy. She gave Tom a big apple and said, 'Yes, go and play! But don't come home late!'