



## Aunt Polly Decides Her Duty

“Tom!”

No answer.

“TOM!”

No answer.

The old lady looked around the room.

“When I find you, I—”

She did not finish. With her head down, she was looking under the bed. Only the cat came out.

She went to the open door and looked toward the garden. No Tom was there. She shouted:

“You, Tom!”

There was a little noise behind her. She turned and caught a small boy, stopping him before he could escape.

“What were you doing in that corner?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing! What is that on your hands and face?”

“I do not know, **Aunt** Polly.”

“I know. You have been eating sweets. I have told you a hundred

times not to eat those sweets.”

Her hand was raised in the air—it started down—it was very near—  
“Oh! Look behind you, Aunt!”

The old lady turned. The boy ran. In a moment he was up on the high board fence. Then he was on the far side of it.

His Aunt Polly was surprised. Then she laughed a little.

“That boy! I never know what he will do next. And he knows that I do not want to hit him. But I should. And if he does not go to school this afternoon, I must make him work tomorrow. He does not like work. Especially on Saturday, when there is no school, he does not like work. All the other boys will be playing. But I must try to make him a good boy. He is my dead sister’s son, and it is my duty. I must do my duty.”

Tom did not go to school and he had a very happy afternoon. He came home late. He hurried to do his share of the evening work. His brother Sid had already finished his share. Sid was a quiet boy, who had no adventures and also no troubles.

While Tom sat eating, his Aunt Polly asked questions. She hoped to learn about his afternoon.

“Tom, was it warm in school?”

“Yes, Aunt Polly.”

“Did you wish to go swimming, Tom?”

Tom began to feel afraid. What did she know about his afternoon?  
“No, Aunt Polly. Not very much.”

She touched his shirt. It was dry. But Tom knew what she would touch next. He said quickly, “Some of us put water on our heads because we were hot. My hair is not dry yet.”

He watched her face. Yes, she believed him. He was safe.

And Aunt Polly was glad to believe that he had been good.

The summer evenings were long. Tom walked along the street, **whistling** like a bird. Then he stopped whistling. He had met a stranger, a boy a little larger than he was.

The boy’s clothes were new and good, and he was wearing shoes. Tom would wear shoes and good clothes like these only to church on Sunday. Tom looked and looked. The boy’s clothes seemed to become

better and better, and his own clothes seemed to grow poorer.

Neither boy spoke. If one moved, then the other moved. But they moved only to the side, in a circle. They remained face to face and eye to eye. Then Tom said:

“I can beat you!”

“Try.”

“I can.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t.”

“I can.”

“You can’t.”

“Can!”

“Can’t!”

A moment of quiet. Then Tom said:

“I could beat you with one hand.”

“Do it. You say you can do it.”

“That hat!”

“Hit it off my head if you can.”

“I will.”

“You are afraid.”

“I am not afraid.”

“You are.”

“I am not.”

“You are.”

More moving in a circle. Now they were shoulder to shoulder, each trying to make the other fall back. And then suddenly they were both rolling in the dust. Each pulled at the other’s hair, and each hit the other’s nose.

And now through the dust Tom appeared, sitting on the new boy, beating him with hard, closed hands.

“Have you had enough?” said he.

The boy tried to get free. He was **weeping** with anger.

“Have you had enough?”

Then the new boy said, "Enough!" Tom let him stand up and walk away.

But as soon as Tom turned, the new boy threw a stone, hitting Tom's back. Therefore, Tom followed him home, and waited.

The boy did not come out again. His mother came and said that Tom was a bad child. She told him to go home.

It was late when Tom got there. Very quietly and carefully, he entered through a window.

But his aunt was waiting for him. She had learned from Sid about Tom's afternoon. Now she saw his clothes and she knew that he had been fighting. She knew what she must do. Tom would work all day on Saturday.