

Fiction Excerpt 1: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

(retold with excerpts from the novel by Mark Twain)

Saturday morning was come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart; and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips. There was cheer in every face and a spring in every step. The locust trees were in bloom and the fragrance of the blossoms filled the air. Cardiff Hill, beyond the village and above it, was green with vegetation, and it lay just far enough away to seem a Delectable Land, dreamy, reposeful and inviting.

Tom Sawyer appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. He had been caught sneaking in late last evening, and now Aunt Polly was determined to punish him by turning his Saturday into captivity at hard labor, whitewashing a fence. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of the unwhitewashed fence, and sat down discouraged.

Soon the free boys would come tripping along on all sorts of delicious expeditions, and they would make a world of fun of him for having to work—the very thought of it burnt him like fire. At this dark and hopeless moment, an inspiration burst upon him!

He took up his brush and went calmly to work. Ben Rogers hove in sight presently—the very boy, of all boys, whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben walked with a hop-skip-and-jump—proof enough that his heart was light and his anticipations high. He was eating an apple, and giving a long, melodious whoop, at intervals, followed by a deep-toned ding-dong-dong, ding-dong-dong; he was impersonating a steamboat. As he drew near, he slackened speed, took the middle of the street, leaned far over to starboard and rounded to ponderously and with laborious pomp and circumstance—for he was personating the “Big Missouri,” and considered himself to be drawing nine feet of water. He was boat and captain and engine-bells combined, so he had to imagine himself standing on his own hurricane deck giving the orders and executing them.

Tom went on whitewashing—paid no attention to the steamboat. Ben stared a moment and then said:

“Hello, old chap, you got to work, hey?”

Tom wheeled and suddenly said: “Why, it’s you, Ben! I warn’t noticing.”

“Say—I’m going in a-swimming, I am. Don’t you wish you could? But of course you’d druther work—wouldn’t you?”

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said: “What do you call work?”

“Why, ain’t that work?”

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly: “Well, maybe it is and maybe it ain’t. All I know is, it suits Tom Sawyer.”

“Oh come, now, you don’t mean to let on that you like it?”

“Well, I don’t see why I oughtn’t to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

“Say, Tom, let me whitewash a while.”

Tom considered, was about to consent; but he altered his mind. “No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence. I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.”

“Oh come, now—lemme just try. Only just a little. I’ll be careful. Now lemme try. Say—I’ll give you the core of my apple.”

“Well, here—No, Ben, now don’t. I’m afeard—”

“I’ll give you all of it!”

Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart. And while Ben worked and sweated in the sun, the retired artist sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, and munched his apple.

Boys happened along every little while; they came to jeer, but remained to whitewash. By the time Ben was tired out, Tom had traded the next chance to Billy Fisher for a kite. Johnny Miller bought in for a dead rat and a string to swing it with—and so on, hour after hour. By the middle of the afternoon, Tom was rolling in wealth. He had besides the things before mentioned, twelve marbles, part of a jew's harp, a piece of blue bottle glass to look through, a key that wouldn't unlock anything, a fragment of chalk, a tin soldier, a couple of tadpoles, six firecrackers, a kitten with only one eye, a brass doorknob, a dog collar—but no dog—the handle of a knife, four pieces of orange peel, and a dilapidated old window sash.

He had had a nice, good, idle time all the while—plenty of company—and the fence had three coats of whitewash on it! If he hadn't run out of whitewash, he would have bankrupted every boy in the village.

Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy want a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that “Work” consists of whatever a body is obliged to do and that “Play” consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a treadmill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement. There are wealthy gentlemen in England who drive four-horse passenger-coaches twenty or thirty miles on a daily line, in the summer, because the privilege costs them considerable money; but if they were offered wages for the service, that would turn it into work and then they would resign.

The boy mused a while over the substantial change which had taken place in his worldly circumstances, and then wended toward headquarters to report. Tom presented himself before Aunt Polly, who was sitting by an open window in a pleasant rearward apartment which was bedroom, breakfast-room, dining room, and library combined. The balmy summer air, the restful quiet, the odor of the flowers, and the drowsing murmur of the bees had had their effect, and she was nodding over her knitting—for she had no company but the cat, and it was asleep in her lap. Her spectacles were propped up on her gray head for safety. She had thought that of course Tom had deserted long ago, and she wondered to see him place himself in her power again. He said:

“Mayn't I go and play now, Aunt?”

“What, a'ready? How much have you done?”

"It's all done, Aunt."

"Tom, don't lie to me—I can't bear it."

"I ain't lyin', Aunt; it is all done."

Aunt Polly placed small trust in such evidence. She went out to see for herself; and she would have been content to find twenty percent of Tom's statement true. When she found the entire fence whitewashed, and not only whitewashed but elaborately coated and recoated, and even a streak added to the ground, her astonishment was almost unspeakable. She said:

"Well, I never! There's no getting around it, you can work when you've a mind to, Tom." And then she diluted the compliment by adding, "But it's powerful seldom you've a mind to, I'm bound to say. Well, go 'long and play; but mind you get back some time in a week, or I'll tan you."

She was so overcome by the splendor of his achievement that she took him into the closet and selected a choice apple and delivered it to him, along with an improving lecture upon the added value and flavor a treat took to itself when it came without sin through virtuous effort. And while she closed with a happy Scriptural flourish, he "hooked" a doughnut.

On Monday morning, Tom came upon the juvenile pariah of the village, Huckleberry Finn. . . . Huckleberry was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle, and lawless, and vulgar and bad—and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society, and wished they dared to be like him. Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So, of course, he played with him every time he got a chance. Huckleberry was always dressed in the cast-off clothes of full-grown men, and they were in perennial bloom and fluttering with rags. His hat was a vast ruin with a wide crescent lopped out of its brim; his coat, when he wore one, hung nearly to his heels and had the rearward buttons far down the back; only one suspender supported his trousers; the seat of the trousers bagged low and contained nothing; the fringed legs dragged in the dirt when not rolled up.

Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and in empty hogsheads in wet; he did not have to go to school or to church, or call any being master or obey anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose, and stay as long as it suited him; nobody

forbade him to fight; he could stay up as late as he pleased; he was always the first boy that went barefoot in the spring and the last to wear shoes in the fall; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes; he could swear wonderfully. In a word, everything that goes to make life precious, that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in town.

"Hello, Huckleberry!"

"Hello, yourself, and see how you like it!"

"What's that you got?"

"Dead cat."

"Lemme see him, Huck. My, he's pretty stiff. Where'd you get him?"

"Bought him off 'n a boy."

"What did you give?"

"I give a blue ticket and a bladder that I got at the slaughter house."

"Where'd you get the blue ticket?"

"Bought it off 'n Ben Rogers two weeks ago for a hoop-stick."

"Say—what is dead cats good for, Huck?"

"Good for? Cure warts with."

"How do you cure 'em with dead cats?"

"Why, you take your cat and go to the graveyard, long about midnight, where somebody that was wicked has been buried; and when it's midnight a devil will come, or maybe two or three; and when they're taking that feller away, you heave your cat after 'em and say, 'Devil follow corpse, cat follow devil, warts follow cat. I'm done with ye!'"

Tom and Huckleberry agreed to meet that night to try the wart cure, then off Tom went to school. As soon as he entered the little schoolhouse, the master called out sharply: "Thomas Sawyer! Come up here. Now, sir, why are you late again, as usual?"

Tom was about to take refuge in a lie, when he saw two long braids hanging down a back that he recognized by the electric sympathy of love as belonging to a lovely

little blue-eyed creature, an angel in Tom's eyes, Becky Thatcher; and next to her was the only vacant place on the girls' side. He instantly said:

"I STOPPED TO TALK WITH HUCKLEBERRY FINN!"

"You—you did what?"

"Stopped to talk with Huckleberry Finn!"

"Thomas Sawyer, this is the most astounding confession I have ever listened to. Go and sit with the girls! And let this be a warning to you."

The titter that rippled around the room appeared to abash the boy, but in reality that result was caused rather more by his worshipful awe of his idol and the pleasure that lay in his high good fortune. He sat down upon the end of the pine bench and Becky Thatcher hitched herself away from him with a toss of her head. Tom placed a peach before her. She thrust it away. Tom gently put it back. She thrust it away again, but with less animosity. Tom patiently returned it to its place. Then she let it remain.

Tom took out his slate and scrawled something on it, hiding the words from the girl. She begged to see. Tom said, "Oh, it ain't anything."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it ain't. You don't want to see."

"Yes, I do, indeed I do. Please let me." And she put her small hand on his and a little scuffle ensued, Tom pretending to resist in earnest but letting his hand slip by degrees till these words were revealed: I love you.

"Oh, you bad thing!" And she hit his hand a smart rap, but reddened and looked pleased, nevertheless.

Just at this juncture, the boy felt a slow, fateful grip closing on his ear, and a steady lifting impulse. In that wise, he was borne across the schoolhouse and deposited in his own seat, under a peppering of giggles from the whole school. Then the master stood over him during a few awful moments, and finally moved away to his throne without saying a word. But although Tom's ear tingled, his heart was jubilant.