CHAPTER I

'TOM!'

No answer.

'Tom!'

No answer.

'What's gone with that boy, I wonder? You Tom!'

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked *through* them for so small a thing as a boy, for they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for 'style,' not service; she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids as well. She looked perplexed a moment and said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear, 'Well, I lay if I get hold of you, I'll — '

She did not finish, for by this time she was bending down and punching under the bed with the broom, and so she needed breath to punctuate the punches with. She resurrected nothing but the cat.

'I never did see the beat of that boy!'

She went to the open door and stood in it, and looked out among the tomato vines and 'jimpson' weeds that constituted the garden. No Tom. So she lifted up her voice at an angle calculated for distance, and shouted:

'Y-o-u-u *Tom*!'

There was a slight noise behind her, and she turned just in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight. 'There! I might a thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing! Look at your hands, and look at your mouth. What *is* that truck?'

'*I* don't know, aunt.'

'Well, *I* know. It's jam, that's what it is. Forty times I've said if you didn't let that jam alone I'd skin you. Hand me that switch.'

The switch hovered in the air. The peril was desperate.

'My! Look behind you, aunt!'

The old lady whirled round, and snatched her skirts out of danger, and the lad fled on the instant, scrambled up the high board-fence, and disappeared over it. His Aunt Polly stood surprised a moment, and then broke into a gentle laugh.

'Hang the boy, can't I never learn anything? Ain't he played me tricks enough like that for me to be looking out for him by this time? But old fools is the biggest fools there is. Can't learn any old dog new tricks, as the saying is. But, my goodness, he never plays them alike two days, and how is a body to know what's coming? He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again, and I can't hit him a lick. I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth, goodness knows. Spare the rod and spile the child, as the good book says. I'm a-laying up sin and suffering for us both, *I* know. He's full of the old scratch, but laws-a-me! he's my own dead sister's boy, poor thing, and I ain't got the heart to lash him, somehow. Every time I let him off my conscience does hurt me so; and every time I hit him my old heart most breaks. Well-a-well, man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble, as the Scripture says, and I reckon it's so. He'll play hookey this evening, and I'll just be obliged to make him work tomorrow, to punish him. It's mighty hard to make him work Saturdays, when all the boys is having a holiday, but he hates work more than he hates anything else, and I've got to do some of my duty by him, or I'll be the ruination of the child.'

Tom did play hookey, and he had a very good time. He got back home barely in season to help Jim, the small

coloured boy, saw next day's wood, and split the kindlings before supper — at least he was there in time to tell his adventures to Jim while Jim did three-fourths of the work. Tom's younger brother (or rather, half-brother) Sid was already through with his part of the work (picking up chips), for he was a quiet boy, and had no adventurous, troublesome ways. While Tom was eating his supper and stealing sugar as opportunity offered, Aunt Polly asked him questions that were full of guile, and very deep — for she wanted to trap him into damaging revealments. Like many other simple-hearted souls, it was her pet vanity to believe she was endowed with a talent for dark and mysterious diplomacy, and she loved to contemplate her most transparent devices as marvels of low cunning. Said she: 'Tom, it was middling warm in school, warn't it?'

'Yes 'm.'

'Powerful warm, warn't it?'

'Yes 'm.'

'Didn't you want to go in a-swimming, Tom?'

A bit of a scare shot through Tom — a touch of uncomfortable suspicion. He searched Aunt Polly's face, but it told him nothing. So he said:

'No 'm — well, not very much.'

The old lady reached out her hand and felt Tom's shirt, and said:

'But you ain't too warm now, though.'

And it flattered her to reflect that she had discovered that the shirt was dry without anybody knowing that that was what she had in her mind. But in spite of her, Tom knew where the wind lay now. So he forestalled what might be the next move.

'Some of us pumped on our heads — mine's damp yet. See?'

Aunt Polly was vexed to think she had overlooked that bit of circumstantial evidence, and missed a trick. Then she had a new inspiration: