

# Whitewashing the Fence

by  
**Mark Twain**  
retold by  
**Sue Baugh**

## Connect to Your Life

Have you ever had to do a job you hated? What was it? Did you try to get out of doing it?

## Key to the Story

"Whitewashing the Fence" is an example of a **novel excerpt**. It is from a book called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The book tells about a young boy who lived in Missouri in the 1800s. In this excerpt, the author tells about a humorous event. The word *humorous* means "funny." As you read the story, decide which parts are funny to you.

## Vocabulary Preview

### Words to Know

suits      fussy



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection



**FOCUS**

Read to find out what Tom has to do.

Saturday morning dawned fresh and clear. All the trees were in bloom. The smell of their blossoms filled the air. The bright summer day put a song in every heart. Or almost every heart.

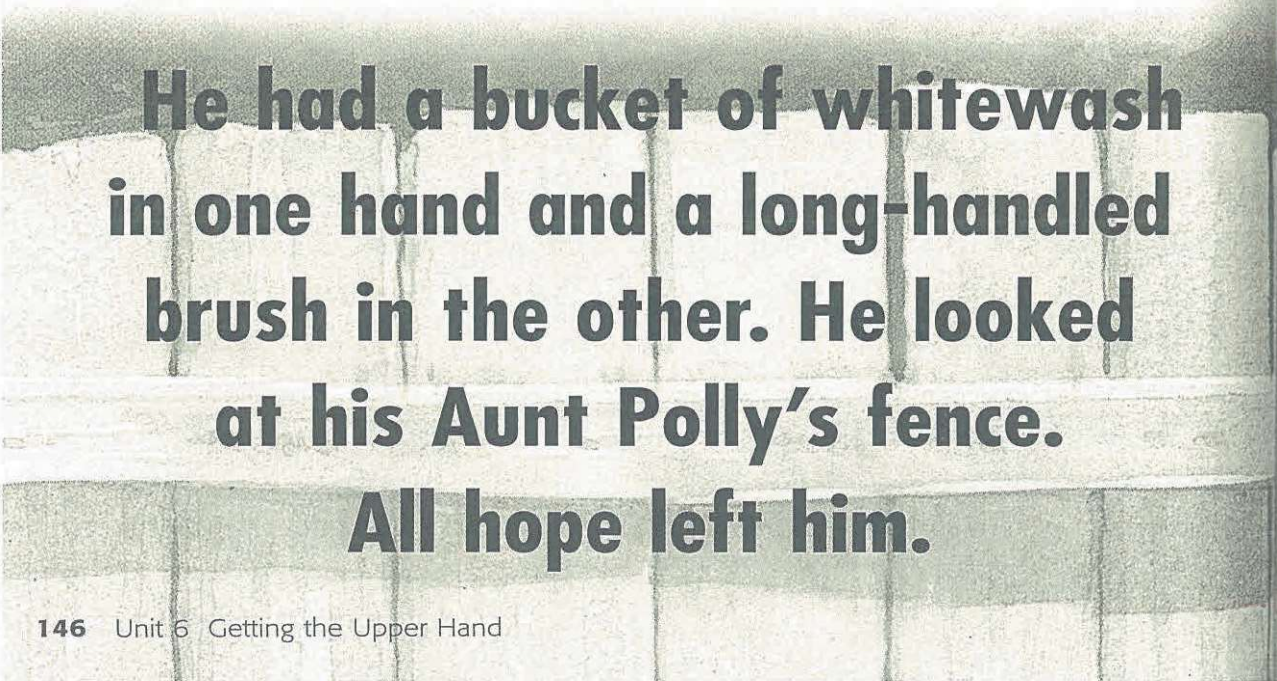
Tom walked out of his house with a slow, heavy step. He had a bucket of whitewash in one hand and a long-handled brush in the other. He looked at his Aunt Polly's fence. All hope left him. The wood fence  
10 was thirty feet long and nine feet high.

**whitewash**  
mixture of lime, water, and white chalk. It is cheaper than paint.

With a sigh, he set the bucket down. He dipped the brush in the whitewash. He made a white stripe along the top of the fence. He dipped the brush again and painted another stripe. Then he stepped back. The white stripes looked so small, and the fence looked so big. Feeling gloomy, Tom sat down on a wooden box.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What problem does Tom have?



**He had a bucket of whitewash  
in one hand and a long-handled  
brush in the other. He looked  
at his Aunt Polly's fence.  
All hope left him.**

**FOCUS**

Read to find out one way Tom tries to solve his problem.

At that moment Jim came out of the house and passed by. Jim was a young man who worked for Aunt Polly. He was singing and carrying a tin pail in his hand. His job was to bring water home from the town pump. Tom usually hated going for water, but not today.

“Say, Jim! I’ll get the water if you’ll whitewash some of this fence.”

Jim shook his head.

“Can’t. Miss Polly told me to go get water. I can’t be fooling around with anybody. She said if you ask me to help, I just mind my own business.”

**REREAD**

How does Aunt Polly know what Tom will do?

“Oh, come on. Give me the pail. I won’t be gone a minute. *She* won’t know.”

“I don’t dare. Miss Polly will be after me for sure.”

“She wouldn’t hurt anybody. I tell you what. I’ll give you a white marble.”

Jim began to weaken.

“Say! That’s a mighty fine marble. But Miss Polly—”

“If you help me, I’ll show you my sore toe.”

That was too much for Jim. He put down his pail. He took Tom’s white marble and bent down to look at the boy’s toe. Tom carefully took off the bandage.

At that minute Aunt Polly came out of nowhere. Jim took one look at her stern face and went flying down the street. Tom quickly picked up the brush. He started whitewashing like a windmill. Aunt Polly went back into the house, smiling to herself.

Tom’s energy didn’t last long. He thought about all the fun he’d planned for the day. The more he



50 thought about it, the sadder he got. The other boys would come by soon. They would make fun of him for having to work. The idea burned him like fire.

**REREAD**

How does Tom feel about the other boys seeing him work?

He took everything out of his pockets and looked at what he had. Bits of toys, marbles, and trash. Not enough to pay anyone to work for him.

Then, in his darkest hour, a great idea burst upon him. An amazing, truly wonderful idea!

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What have you learned about Tom's personality?

**FOCUS**

What do you think Tom's new idea might be? Read to find out.

Happy now, he picked up the brush and calmly went to work. Soon Ben Rogers came up the street. He was eating an apple and pretending to be a steamboat. 60 When he saw Tom, Ben pulled up to watch.

Tom went on whitewashing.

Ben said: "You're in a real fix, ain't you?"

No answer. Tom looked at his last stripe with the eye of an artist. He added a touch of whitewash. Ben came up beside him. Tom's mouth watered for that apple, but he kept on painting.

Ben tried again. "Too bad you got to work."

Tom turned around in surprise.

"Why it's you, Ben! I didn't see you."

70 "Say, I'm going swimming. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd rather *work*, wouldn't you? Course you would."



Tom looked at Ben a bit, then asked, “What do you call work?”

Ben pointed to the fence. “Why, ain’t *that* work?”

Tom started whitewashing again and said in a calm voice, “Well, maybe it is and maybe it ain’t.

All I know is, it **suits** Tom Sawyer.”

80 “Oh, come on. You don’t mean you *like* it?”

<b>suits</b>
(sōōts)
v. pleases

Tom’s brush kept moving. “Like it? Well, I don’t see why I shouldn’t like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?”

That put the job in a new light. Ben stopped eating his apple. Tom moved the brush lightly back and forth. He stepped back to check his work. He added a touch here and there. Ben watched every move. He was getting more and more interested.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

How does Tom get Ben interested in whitewashing the fence?





**FOCUS****Will Tom's idea work?**

Finally he said: "Say, Tom, let *me* whitewash a little."  
90 Tom thought about it. He was about to say *yes*,  
then changed his mind.

"No—no—it wouldn't do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly's awful **fussy** about this fence. It's right on the street, you know. If it were the back fence, she wouldn't mind. Yes, she's awful fussy about this fence. It has to be done just right. There's only one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, who can do it the way it ought to be done."

**fussy**

(fūs' ē)

*adj.* hard to please

100 Ben's eyes lit up.

"No—is that so? Oh, come on—let me just try. Only just a little. I'd let *you* if you were me, Tom."

"Ben, I would like to, honest. But Aunt Polly—well, Jim wanted to do it. She wouldn't let him. Sid wanted to do it. She wouldn't let Sid. Can you see my problem? If you were to paint this fence and anything happened to it—"

"Oh, shucks, I'll be just as careful. Let me try. Say—I'll give you the core of my apple."

110 Tom seemed to weaken. "Well . . . No, Ben, now don't. I'm afraid—"

"I'll give you *all* of it!"

Tom slowly gave up the brush. His face looked unsure, but his heart was

happy. While Ben worked in the hot sun,

Tom sat on a barrel in the shade. He bit into the apple and made plans. He wanted other friends to help paint the fence.

He didn't have long to wait. Boys came by every so  
120 often. They came to tease, but they stayed to whitewash.

**REREAD**

Is Tom really unsure, or is he just pretending?

By mid afternoon, Tom was a rich boy. He owned a kite, twelve marbles, a piece of blue glass, a key, six firecrackers, a kitten with only one eye, and many other treasures. He'd had a lot of fun, and the fence had three coats of whitewash on it!

**REREAD**

How do you feel about the trick Tom has played on his friends?

130 Most of all, Tom had learned a great law of human nature. The best way to make someone really *want* something is to make the thing hard to get. He stood up. The day had turned out just fine after all. Tom went into the house to tell Aunt Polly the job was done.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

1. What words would you use to describe Tom? Use examples from the story to support the words you choose.
2. What does Tom learn about people? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
3. What did you enjoy most about this story? Why?