

How Tom Sawyer Painted A Fence

From “The Bedtime Story Book” by Mark Binder

Story by Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Bedtime stories aren't just for little kids. Mark Twain's story of how Tom Sawyer Painted his fence is a classic.

I've tried to change it as little as possible, mostly just editing it down. When your child finally gets old enough to read the original, he or she will already be familiar with the characters.

READER TIP: Have fun with Tom and Bill's language and accent.



SATURDAY morning was come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life.

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. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high to paint.

Sighing, he dipped his brush and passed it along the top plank. He did it again and compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged...

At this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration.

He took up his brush and went tranquilly to work.

Ben Rogers hove in sight presently — the very boy whose ridicule he had been dreading. Ben's gait was a hop-skip-and-jump. He was eating an apple, and giving a long, melodious whoop, followed by a deep-toned ding-dong-dong, ding-dong-dong, for he was impersonating a steamboat.

“Stop her, sir! Ting-a-ling-ling!” He drew up slowly toward the sidewalk.

Tom went on whitewashing — paying no attention to the steamboat.

Ben stared a moment and then said: “Hi-yi ! You're up a stump, ain't you!”

No answer. Tom surveyed his last touch with the eye of an artist, then he gave his brush another gentle sweep.

Ben ranged up alongside him. Tom's mouth watered for the apple, but he stuck to his work.

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

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

“Say,” said Ben, “I'm going a-swimming. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd druther work — wouldn't you? Course you would!”

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 that you like it?”

The brush continued to move.

“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 — criticised the effect again — Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

“Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little.”

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 — right here on the street, you know. If it was the back fence I wouldn't mind and she wouldn't. Yes, she'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.”

“No — is that so? Oh come, now — lemme just try. Only just a little — I'd let you, if you was me, Tom.”

“Ben, I'd like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly — well, Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn't let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn't let Sid. Now don't you see how I'm fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it — “

“Oh, shucks, I'll be just as 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 the Ben worked and sweated in the sun, Tom sat on a barrel in the shade close by, dangled his legs, munched his apple, and planned the slaughter of more innocents.

There was no lack of material; boys happened along every little while; they came to jeer, but remained to whitewash. By the time Ben was fagged out, Tom had traded the next chance to Billy Fisher for a kite, in good repair; and when he played out, Johnny Miller bought in for a dead rat and a string to swing it with — and so on, and so on, hour after hour. And when the middle of the afternoon came, from being a poor poverty-stricken boy in the morning, Tom was literally rolling in wealth. He had besides the things before mentioned, twelve marbles, part of a jews-harp, a piece of blue bottle-glass to look through, a spool cannon, a key that wouldn't unlock anything, a fragment of chalk, a glass stopper of a decanter, a tin soldier, a couple of tadpoles, six fire-crackers, a kitten with only one eye, a brass door-knob, 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 had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it — namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.

The END

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