

Toddy Boy

SAMAN GAZED UP into the tops of the palm trees, trying to spot his brother. "Solomon!" he called out. But no answer came. "Solomon! Which tree are you in?"

Saman's eyes followed the shaky rope bridges that were strung high above the ground between the treetops. Why wasn't his brother there? He raced out of the palm grove and across the rice paddy toward home.

Inside the one-room house Saman's mother and father sat solemnly drinking tea. His brother lay on a cot in the corner. Except for the breeze swishing through the palm-frond roof, the house was silent.

"Solomon!" Saman said. "Why aren't you collecting toddy today?"

"Don't you notice, little brother?" Solomon replied. "My ankle is swollen."

Saman's father popped another betel nut into his mouth and said, "Your brother, one of the most skilled toddy tappers in all of Sri Lanka, got careless this morning."

"Habatta? Really?" Saman said in disbelief. "You fell from a palm tree, Solomon?"

Solomon lowered his gaze, ashamed. "From one of the bridges," he said.

The bridges. Saman had always been fascinated by those rope bridges that the toddy boys must tightrope across to get from treetop to treetop. A single toddy boy might have



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Drawings by Dennis Hockerman

BETEL NUTS ARE
THE BRIGHT RED
SEEDS OF AN EAST
INDIAN PALM TREE.
SAY IT: BEET • EL



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CURRY IS A
SPICY - HOT
DISH (USUALLY
MEAT) MADE WITH
CURRY WHICH IS
A MIXTURE OF
SPICES.



one hundred trees in his grove. The bridges, however dangerous they were, saved the boys a lot of climbing.

"We are fortunate that you escaped with only a twisted ankle, Solomon," said Saman's mother as she began making curry for dinner.

"I was crossing a bridge," Solomon explained to his brother, "and I took my eyes off the rope to watch some monkeys. I missed my step and fell. Father is right; I was careless."

Saman sat on the hard dirt floor and leaned against the mud wall. Now he knew why his father wasn't at his toddy shop in the village.

Solomon was his father's toddy tapper. It was his job to collect toddy sap from the tall palm trees. His father boiled the sap to make the sweet, syrupy treacle, a favorite treat of the Singhalese children. He made drinks and candy from the toddy, too. But without toddy sap, he had nothing to sell in his shop.

TREACLE IS
MOLASSES.
SAY IT: TREE - KEL!
THE SINGHALESE
ARE THE PEOPLE
OF SRI LANKA.



"It will be weeks before that ankle is well enough for you to climb up the trees again," Saman's father said to his brother. "I doubt that any of the other toddy boys have extra time to tap our grove for us."

Saman listened intently. Couldn't he help his family? Surely he could climb a palm tree. But was he brave enough to cross those bridges? He shivered at the thought.

He took a deep breath and said, "Father, I am old enough to be the toddy tapper. I will collect the toddy for your shop."

Saman's father said nothing.

"Ou! Yes!" Solomon cried from the cot. "Saman could do it. And I could call up from the ground to tell him what he should do."

Saman's father nodded slowly. Then he grinned. His teeth, stained dark red from years of chewing betel nuts, shone like cherries.

So it was settled. Early the next morning the brothers walked to the toddy grove. Solomon, limping with the aid of a bamboo crutch, led his brother to a palm tree that grew at a slant.

"This tree is the easiest to climb, Saman," he explained. "From this tree you can reach the tops of all the others by the rope bridges."

Saman tied the sarong he was wearing into a knot in front, as he had seen the other toddy boys do. Solomon handed him a coil of rope, which Saman slung over his shoulder. Then, feeling both pride and fear, he shinnied up the scaly palm trunk.

When he reached the top, Saman squeezed the trunk with his knees, freeing both of his hands. A stiff breeze blew. Fanlike palm fronds waved close above his head.

Under the palm fronds Saman found a clay pot hanging from a piece of bamboo that had been stuck into a large flower pod. Out of the spigot dripped clear toddy sap. The pot was nearly full.

TAP MEANS TO
COLLECT THE SAP,
OR JUICE FROM
A TREE.



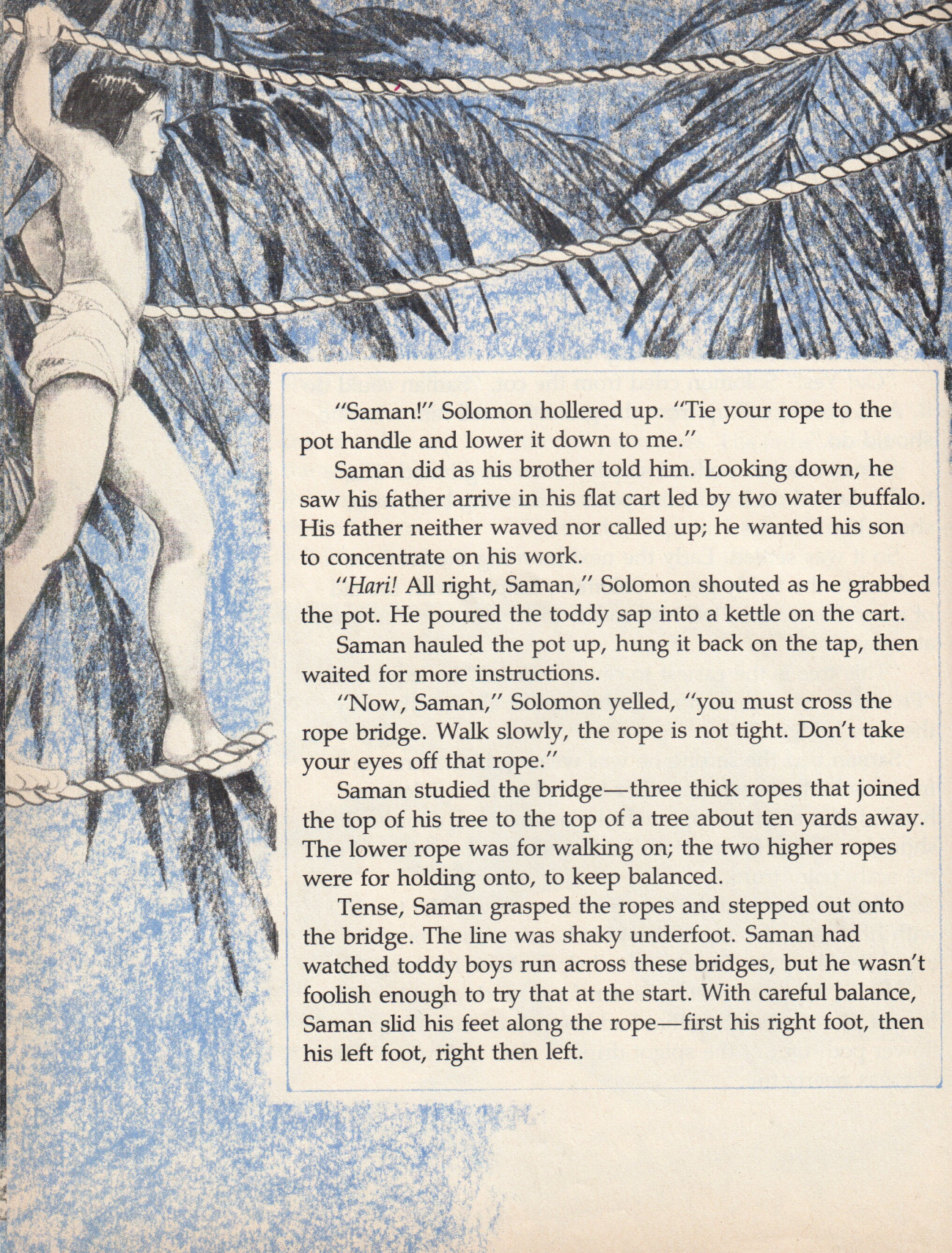
A SARONG IS A
PIECE OF CLOTH
WRAPPED AROUND
LIKE A SKIRT. IT'S
WORN BY BOYS
AND GIRLS ALIKE.



FRONDS ARE PALM-
TREE LEAVES.

A POD IS A SEED-
CASE, AND A SPIGOT
IS LIKE A FAUCET.





"Saman!" Solomon hollered up. "Tie your rope to the pot handle and lower it down to me."

Saman did as his brother told him. Looking down, he saw his father arrive in his flat cart led by two water buffalo. His father neither waved nor called up; he wanted his son to concentrate on his work.

"*Hari!* All right, Saman," Solomon shouted as he grabbed the pot. He poured the toddy sap into a kettle on the cart.

Saman hauled the pot up, hung it back on the tap, then waited for more instructions.

"Now, Saman," Solomon yelled, "you must cross the rope bridge. Walk slowly, the rope is not tight. Don't take your eyes off that rope."

Saman studied the bridge—three thick ropes that joined the top of his tree to the top of a tree about ten yards away. The lower rope was for walking on; the two higher ropes were for holding onto, to keep balanced.

Tense, Saman grasped the ropes and stepped out onto the bridge. The line was shaky underfoot. Saman had watched toddy boys run across these bridges, but he wasn't foolish enough to try that at the start. With careful balance, Saman slid his feet along the rope—first his right foot, then his left foot, right then left.

Halfway across, a gust of wind shook the trees. The bridge swayed, and Saman froze. As he stared at his feet, he could see the upraised, worried faces of his father and brother far below. Saman forgot to breathe.

When the wind calmed, Saman continued. Inch by inch he made his way to the next palm until he could finally touch it. He reached out and grabbed its trunk, then wrapped his legs around it. At last secure, Saman breathed a long sigh of relief and began to look about him. The view was spectacular. Behind him, he could see sprawling green mountains, all the way to sacred Adam's Peak. Ahead lay the glistening white shoreline of his beloved island.

"Hey, toddy boy," Saman heard his father call up. "This is no time for sightseeing."

Glancing down, Saman saw his brother's bright white smile and his father's shining red one. It was true, he thought. Now, he was a real toddy boy.

