

## Chapter 6: Tarzan and Jane Swim in a Pond

The next day the weather was splendid. The morning sun made the edges of all the leaves sparkle. I was getting used to the heat, and I was actually developing a tan!

I decided that the next part of speech I would teach Tarzan about was the *verb*. I was worried that it might prove a bit difficult because of the different tenses—you know, like past, present, and future: *I ate, I eat, I will eat*—and because of the different forms a verb takes depending on who’s performing the action: *I am, you are, he is*. Stuff like that.

But then I realized that Tarzan and I couldn’t discuss verbs immediately because we’d already used up the entire first article underlining nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. We’d have to write our second article first.

I was looking forward to working on this second article with Tarzan because I couldn’t wait to hear what had happened to his parents, John and Alice, who were stranded in the jungle.

We met, as usual, at the table in his cabin. I said, “Tarzan, before we learn anything else about grammar, we have to write our second article. Are you ready?”

“Yes, but where should we work? It’s too nice out to stay indoors.”

“You’re right. Where should we go? We’ve already gone to the river and to the top of a tree. I don’t want to go back to the river because I’m afraid of crocodiles.”

“Well, there are a lot of nice places we could go. There’s a pretty pond not too far from here. We can sit by its edge and eat breakfast while we talk.”

“That sounds perfect.”

I gathered my notebook and pencils—I’d decided that from now on I’d keep the articles in a notebook instead of on loose pieces of paper—and walked with Tarzan through the cabin door and into the jungle. Suddenly he seized me in one arm and took to the trees. We swung from vine to vine for about three or four minutes, landing finally at the edge of a lovely pond.

“Wait here a second,” Tarzan said.

I knew he’d gone to pick some fruit for our breakfast. While he was away I thought a little about verbs and a little about his parents being all alone and afraid in an unexplored jungle.

In a moment he was back with an armful of fruit. They were not fruits I was familiar with; they looked strange and exotic.

“What are those?” I asked.

“I don’t know what they’re called because I’ve never seen pictures of them in any of my father’s books. But they’re delicious. Here, try one.”

“I was hungry. I took a somewhat square-shaped green one from him and bit into it. At first the flavor was strange, but after a few seconds it changed into something very pleasant. I took another bite. I liked it!”

Tarzan was eating a round red one. “Let me try that one,” I said.

He handed it to me and I took a bite. This one was different from anything I’d ever tasted, but it was delicious. “Okay,” I said, very happily, “why don’t you tell me what happened to your parents in the jungle, and I’ll just listen and munch on these fruits.” Few things in life are better than hearing a good story and eating tasty food at the same time!

“Okay. But as soon as we finish the article, we’ll take a swim in the pond. The water’s nice and warm.”

I walked to the edge of the pond and tested the temperature with my foot. He was right; it was warm, but not too warm. It was very inviting.

“Are there any crocodiles in this pond?” I asked. You can’t be too careful.

“No.”

“Is there anything bad in there?”

“Well, maybe a few snapping turtles.”

“Really? How big are they.”

“Oh, they’re pretty big. And they snap pretty hard.”

It occurred to me that he might be teasing me.

“Are there really snapping turtles in here? Tell me the truth.”

“No. I was joking. It’s perfectly safe to swim here. There are only a few small fish—like guppies.

“Okay,” I said, leaning back against a rock. “Tell me all about your parents being stranded in the jungle.”

While Tarzan spoke I listened and ate one piece of unusual fruit after another. When he finished, he ate while I wrote in my notebook. After a while we had finished our second article. I kept it kind of short on purpose because the readers of *American Monthly* don’t have very long attention spans. That’s what kind of magazine it is, if you want to know the truth. Anyway, the article looked like this:

#### Article 2: “Shelter”

My father’s first thought was to arrange a sleeping shelter for the night—something that might serve to protect them from prowling beasts. He opened the box containing his rifles. He handed one to my mother and kept one for himself, so that they might both be armed against possible attack while at work. Then together they searched for a suitable spot for their first night’s sleeping place.

A hundred yards from the shore was a little level spot, fairly free of vegetation. Here they decided to construct a little platform in the trees out of reach of the larger beasts. My father selected four trees that happened to form a rectangle about eight feet square. Cutting long branches from other trees, he soon built a framework around them about ten feet above the ground, securely fastening the ends of the branches to the trees by means of a rope that was among their supplies. Across this framework he placed other smaller branches quite close together. Finally, he paved this platform with the huge, thick leaves of the jungle.

Seven feet higher he constructed a similar, though lighter platform to serve as a roof, and from the sides of this he hung a sailing cloth for walls. When completed, he had a rather snug little nest, to which he carried their blankets and some of the lighter supplies.

All during the day excited birds and chattering monkeys watched these new arrivals and their wonderful nest-building operations with interest and fascination.

It was now late in the afternoon, and the rest of the daylight hours were devoted to the building of a crude ladder by means of which my mother could climb to their new home. Just before dusk my father finished the ladder and the two mounted to the comparative safety of their cozy little tree house.

“Well,” I said, “your parents were certainly industrious—and clever! I can’t wait to get to Article 3 to find out what happens to them. So! Are you ready to talk about another part of speech, the verb?”

Tarzan stared at the calm, sky-reflecting water of the pond awhile and then said, “Are verbs easy, like nouns and adjectives, or are they hard, like pronouns?”

“Well, understanding what a verb is is pretty easy. But using verbs properly can be pretty tricky.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, verbs have to agree with—” But I was getting ahead of myself. “Wait a minute. Before we talk about what’s tricky about verbs, let’s just talk about what verbs are.”

“Okay.”

How could I explain this? Now I was staring at the water. In it I saw the reflection of a bird soaring overhead. I looked up to watch the actual bird. Tarzan’s eyes followed mine.

“Birds fly,” I said.

“I know. They fly.”

“In that sentence, the word *fly* is a verb. You see, a verb is an action word—like *fly*, *eat*, *run*, and so on. It’s a word that tells what someone is doing.”

“But that’s so easy!”

“I know. But using verbs can be tricky because verbs exist in various forms. As I started to say before, a verb has to agree with its subject—the person or thing doing the action—in *number* and *person* and *mood*.”

“Huh?”

“And verbs have to be in the correct *tense*.”

“Huh?”

“And verbs can be either *transitive* or *intransitive*.”

“Huh?”

“And verbs can be expressed in either the *active* or *passive* voice.”

“Huh?”

“And sometimes verbs function as other parts of—”

“Wait a minute! I don’t understand any of this! Slow down. Go back and start over.”

I knew he was confused. But I wanted to get everything out on the table at once so he’d see what we were up against.

“Do you see what I mean when I say that verbs can be tricky?”

“Yes,” he agreed. Then he said, “Okay, let’s start over with the first thing you said, about agreement in *number*, *person*, and *mood*. What do you mean by *number*? Wait! Don’t answer that yet. Let’s talk in the water. Can you tread water?”

“Do you want to go in?” I asked.

“Yes. It’ll be more fun than sitting here on the bank, roasting in the sun.”

I was getting hot. “Are you sure there are no snapping turtles in there? Nothing bad?”

“Maybe a few leeches.”

“You mean those things that attach to your leg and suck your blood!”

“Yes, those. But they probably won’t bother you.”

“Why not?”

“Because we won’t stand on the bottom. We’ll swim out to the deep part and tread water—or float on our backs.”

“Okay. But if I get tired, we have to come back out. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I was wearing a white sundress with a white bathing suit underneath. As I pulled the dress over my head, Tarzan discreetly kept his eyes fixed on the sky. Then the two of us ran into the water and started to swim toward the center of the pond. On the way, I swam underwater with my eyes open awhile to make sure there were no snapping turtles or leeches anywhere nearby. At least I didn’t have to worry about crocodiles here. In a minute

we were facing each other, treading water at the center of the pond. The water felt heavenly.

“How long can you tread water?” he asked.

“Did you ever hear of Deep Creek Lake?” I asked, my arms and legs gently fluttering to keep my head above water. “It’s the largest lake in Maryland. When I was a kid, my family used to swim there, and I was able to tread water for a long time.” My voice sounded slightly out of breath—as people’s sometimes do when they’re swimming or treading water. But I wasn’t tired.

“I can tread water for a long time too,” he said in a normal voice—not at all out of breath. “Now tell me more about verbs.”

There was so much to tell that I knew I couldn’t tell him everything without returning to shore. Well, I would tell him one thing, at least.

“Do you remember,” I began, “when I said that a verb must agree with its subject in *number*?”

“Yes. What did you mean by that?”

“Well, I was talking about whether the subject of the sentence is singular or plural.”

“Do you mean you were talking about the *number* of people that make up the subject?”

“Yes. If the subject is just one person, as in ‘Tarzan swims,’ the subject is singular. But if the subject is more than one person, as in ‘Tarzan and Jane swim,’ the subject is plural.”

“I see. And the *number*—singular or plural—determines which form of the verb you use—*swim* or *swims*.”

“Right!” I exclaimed, my arms and legs still fluttering to keep my body erect. “For singular you’d say, for example, ‘Tarzan *swims*,’ but for plural you’d say ‘We *swim*.’ So you see, depending on which—” All of a sudden my throat made a loud gasping sound as I involuntarily inhaled. It sounded like *grraaahh*.

“Are you okay? Are you getting tired?” he asked.

“Me? No . . . I mean yes. Let’s sit on the shore awhile.”

We swam back to shore, shook off the water that dripped from us, and sat down. Then I lay on my back, stared into the blue sky, and breathed deeply. After a few moments I sat back up.

“Okay!” I said. “Are you ready to continue?”

“Sure.”

“Okay,” I said, gazing at the water, “a verb also has to agree with its subject in *person*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, do you remember when we first talked about writing these articles? I said that the articles would be more interesting if they were told from your point of view?”

“I remember,” he said. “You said that instead of writing ‘Tarzan was born in the jungle,’ we would write ‘I was born in the jungle.’”

“Right. If you say *I*, you’re using *first person*.”

“How many persons—I mean people—I mean persons—are there?”

“Well, there are three. There’s *first person*, *second person*, and *third person*.”

“Well, if I’m the first person, who’s the second person and who’s the third person?”

“Let’s say that you’re writing a story. If you’re talking about yourself, by using pronouns like *I* and *me*, then *you’re* the first person.”

“Do you mean that whoever is referred to as *I* is the first person?”

“Yes. Now, the person you’re talking to—the reader—is considered the second person.”

“But if I’m writing a story, there’s nobody else really there. I’m alone.”

"I know, but you can pretend that the reader is there. You refer to the reader as *you*. For example, your story may begin "I was born in the jungle, even though you may find that hard to believe."

"I think I get it. In that sentence, *I*—meaning Tarzan—is the first person, and *you*—meaning the reader—is the second person, right?"

"Right!"

"Then who's the third person. There isn't anyone else."

"But there is. Anyone you're talking *about*, other than yourself and the reader, is considered the third person. For example, if you say 'My father built a tree house,' *your father* is the third person."

"And if I say 'Jane visited Africa,' *Jane* is the third person."

"You've got it! Okay, that's pretty easy. But what you need to know is that these three *persons*—*first person*, *second person*, and *third person*—can be either singular or plural."

"How?"

"Well, sometimes when you talk about yourself, you talk about yourself as part of a group. For example, if you say 'We went swimming,' you're still talking about yourself, but as part of a group—so you're still using first person."

"Do you mean that *I* and *we* are both first person?"

"Yes. The difference is that *I* is considered *first person singular* and *we* is considered *first person plural*."

"Oh."

Tarzan paused a moment while he absorbed this concept.

"What about second person?" he asked. "Does that come in singular and plural also?"

"It does. When you write or speak, you can be talking to just one person or to a whole group of people. But you use the same word—*you*—in both cases."

"You do?"

"Yes. The word *you* is used for second person singular *and* for second person plural."

"I think I see. So, like you said before, if I start a story by saying 'I was born in the jungle, even though *you* may find that hard to believe,' the word *you* could refer to just one reader or to a whole group of readers."

"Right. Good!" It crossed my mind that in the Southern United States, some people tend to say "you all" instead of "you" for second person plural, but I decided not to mention that because it wasn't really standard English—it was just a regional quirk. He didn't need to know that, did he? Besides, we weren't in the Southern U.S. We were in Africa.

"Okay," I went on, "now let's talk about third person."

"You mean about *third person singular* and *third person plural*?"

"Yes. You see, if you're talking about just one other person, you refer to him or her as *he* or *she*. That's *third person singular*."

"So," he said, "there are two forms of third person singular because of gender—*he* and *she*."

"Right. But if you're talking about more than one person, you refer to them as *they*. That's third person plural."

"I see. And you use *they* for third person plural whether the people are male or female."

"Right. There's no difference."

"What if you're talking about a *thing*—like a tree or a knife—instead of a person. Does that count as *third person*, even though it's not really a person?"

"That's a good question. The answer is yes. If you're talking about a knife, for example, and you say 'it fell off the table,' the word *it* is considered third person."

“Third person singular, right?”

“Right.”

“But something confuses me.”

“What?”

“You keep mentioning *pronouns*—I, we, you, he, she, it—to demonstrate number and person. But do nouns have number and person too?”

“Well—”

“I mean, if I say ‘Jane swims in the pond,’ is *Jane* considered third person singular?”

“Absolutely. And if you say ‘Jane and her sister swim in the pond,’ then the subject of the sentence, *Jane and her sister*, is considered third person plural—because you’re talking about more than one person.”

“You have a sister?”

“No. I was just using that as an example. I’m an only child.”

“Oh.”

Tarzan was quiet for a while. Then he said, “What did you mean about a verb *agreeing* with its subject? Wait! Before you answer that, let’s go back into the water. It’s hot. Aren’t you hot?”

I was. “Okay, but I can’t tread water as long as you.”

“Then we’ll stand in the water up to our necks. That way we’ll stay cool, but you won’t have to exert yourself.”

“But if we stand, the leeches might attach themselves to my legs. I’ve read that you can’t feel them do that, and then they’re very hard to get off. You have to burn them off or something.”

“Then let’s swim back out to the middle, and we’ll float on our backs. That takes less effort than treading water.”

“Okay,” I said, somewhat doubtfully.

We swam to the center of the pond and started floating on our backs. He said something to me, but it was hard to understand. My nose and mouth were above water, but my ears were below.

“What?” I shouted.

He repeated it, but it still sounded like a faraway mumble.

“What?” I said again. I righted myself and began treading water. Before he could repeat what he’d said, I said, “Look, this isn’t going to work. My ears are below water when I float. I can’t hear anything you say.”

“Wait here,” he said.

He swam to shore and disappeared into the jungle. In a moment he reappeared pulling a huge log. He shoved it into the water and guided it to where I waited.

“Grab onto this,” he said.

I put my hands on top of the log. It was like a life raft. I stayed afloat without effort. I kicked my legs a little anyway.

Tarzan faced me from the other side of the log, his hands next to mine. He kicked his legs a little, too, and said, “What I said was, What did you mean when you said that a subject and verb have to *agree* in number and person?”

“Oh, that. Well, for example, you would say I *swim* and you *swim*, but he *swims*. That shows that the form of the verb changes depending on the *person*. For first person and second person you use *swim*, but for third person you use *swims*. Do you see? Also, you would say he *swims*, but they *swim*. That shows that the form of the verb changes depending on *number*. For singular you say *swims*, as in *he swims*, but for plural you say *swim*, as in *they swim*.”

“Well, how am I supposed to know which form of the verb to use? Is there a rule? Or am I supposed to remember, for every verb in the world, which form to use for each person and each number. That’s impossible!”

“Isn’t this log great?” I said. “It feels so good in the water. I could stay here all day.”

“I know. But what about those verbs? It’s too much to remember.”

“Well, there are rules, but there are also exceptions. It’s another one of those things that you just learn by ear from being exposed to the English language a lot. English-speaking children learn it automatically as they grow up. Some people, when they’re in school, *conjugate verbs*.”

“Conjugate?”

“Yes. They take a particular verb and then they recite or write down the different forms of the verb, as determined by the number and person of the subject, in a fixed order. For example, for the verb *be* they would say or write: *I am, you are, he is, we are, you are, they are*.”

“I see. So the typical order, when you conjugate a verb, is *first person singular, second person singular, third person singular*, then *first person plural, second person plural, third person plural*. *I, you, he, we, you, they*. Is that right?”

“Right. But for *he* you could also say *she* or *it*, because those are also third person singular. Why don’t you try conjugating the verb *swim*.”

“Okay. *I swim, you swim, he—or she or it—swims, we swim, you swim, they swim*.”

“Good!”

“But that’s an easy one because I love to swim and I talk about it a lot. But how do I learn how to make all the other verbs agree with their subjects in number and person?”

“Well, most verbs are not really difficult. Did you see how with the verb *swim* you used the same form of the verb for all instances except for third person singular? And there you simply added an *s*. *Swim* became *swims*. *He swims*. A lot of verbs work like that. You see, the simplest, most basic form of a verb is called the *infinitive*. The infinitive of the verb *swim*, for example is simply *swim* or *to swim*. Then there are other, more complicated forms or versions of *swim*, such as *swims, swam, swimming*, and so on. But those aren’t infinitives because they’re not the simplest form of the verb.”

I kept kicking and enjoying the water. I saw a cute little guppy swim by.

“Anyway,” I continued, “for a lot of verbs, when you conjugate them, you just use the infinitive, except for the third person singular. And for that you just add an *s*; for example: *I eat, you eat, he eats, we eat, you eat, they eat*. But sometimes you have to add *es* instead of *s*, as when a verb ends in *sh* or *ch* or something like that; for example: *I wash, you wash, he washes, we wash, you wash, they wash*.”

Now I saw about ten guppies swim by.

“Do all verbs follow that rule?” Tarzan asked.

“No, but most do. Verbs that follow that rule are called *regular* verbs. The ones that don’t follow it, such as the verb *to be*, are called *irregular* verbs. Those are the tricky ones.”

“What are some of the irregular verbs, besides *to be*?”

“Well, there’s the verb *to have*: *I have, you have, he has, we have, you have, they have*. You see, for *he* I used *has—he has*. I didn’t say *he haves*. It doesn’t follow the rule; it’s an irregular verb.”

“How am I supposed to know if a verb is regular or irregular?”

Now I saw about a hundred guppies swimming all around me. Their backs reflected the sunlight.

“You’ll learn it naturally as you hear English spoken—by me or by the people in America when we put you on display in New York.” I was starting to think that putting Tarzan on display in New York might not be such a good idea, after all.

“Or you can find a book that shows the conjugation of every verb and study it. But I imagine that would be very tedious and boring. Don’t worry; you’ll get the hang of it.”

Suddenly I was surrounded by about a thousand guppies, and they were making me nervous.

“Tarzan, let’s swim to shore. I don’t like all these guppies.”

“Are you sure they’re guppies?”

Oh my! Could they be something else? Like baby piranhas maybe? I swam to shore faster than I had ever swum in my life. I sat on the shore panting as Tarzan emerged from the water. He wore a smile and carried a turtle in his hand.

“Is that a snapping turtle?” I shrieked.

“No, it’s a regular turtle. Isn’t it cute?”

It was kind of cute. Tarzan let me pet it. Then we walked to the water’s edge together and let the little guy swim away.

I suddenly realized that I was hungry. “It must be time for lunch,” I said. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. That’s enough grammar for now. When we pick up next time, we’ll talk about how a subject and verb agree in *mood*. But right now I’m not in the *mood* to talk about it.” I was pleased with myself for having made a joke—even though Tarzan didn’t laugh. “Can you find us some more of those strange-looking fruits?”