

King OF THE Tightrope



WHEN THE
GREAT BLONDIN
RULED NIAGARA

Written by

DONNA JANELL BOWMAN

Illustrated by

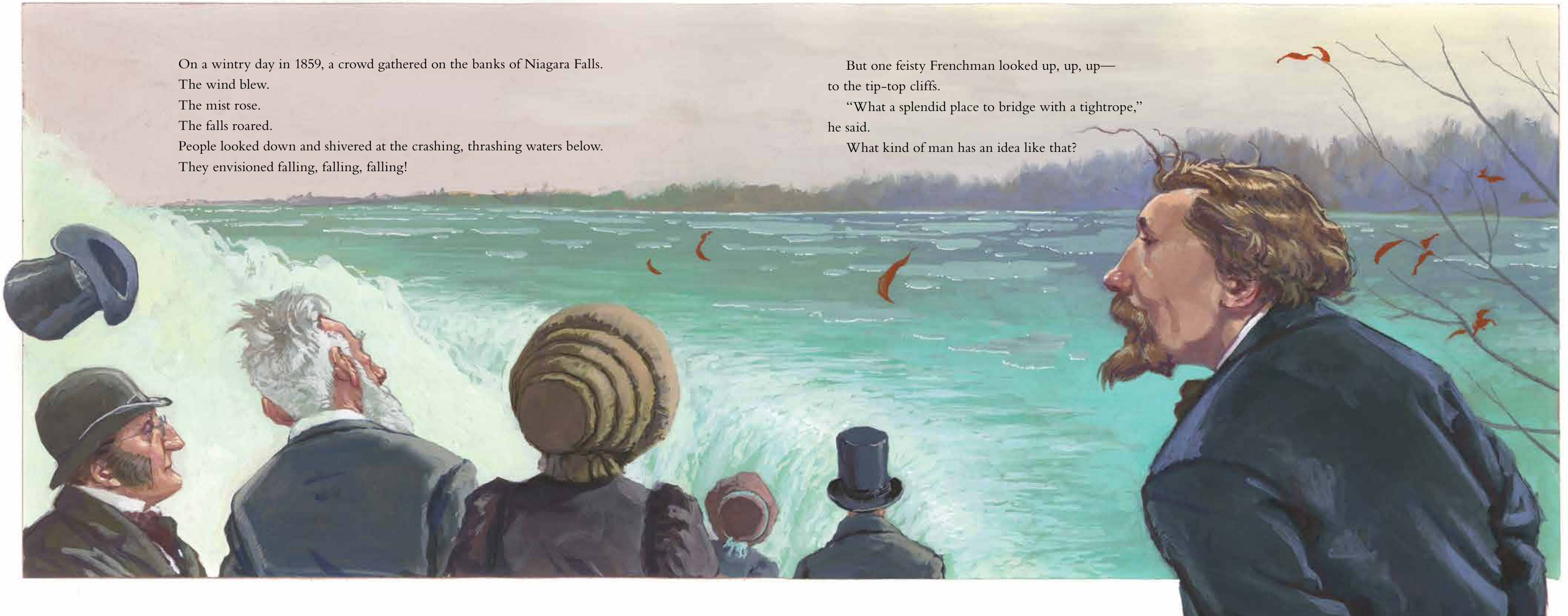
ADAM GUSTAVSON

On a wintry day in 1859, a crowd gathered on the banks of Niagara Falls.
The wind blew.
The mist rose.
The falls roared.
People looked down and shivered at the crashing, thrashing waters below.
They envisioned falling, falling, falling!

But one feisty Frenchman looked up, up, up—
to the tip-top cliffs.

“What a splendid place to bridge with a tightrope,”
he said.

What kind of man has an idea like that?





That feisty Frenchman was born Jean-François Gravelet in 1824 in a little town called Hesdin. His family members—all the way back to *grand-père* Pierre—were acrobats, gymnasts, and funambulists. (That's what tightrope walkers are called.)

They twirled, flipped, leaped, and skipped in circuses, theaters, and carnival shows.

When Jean-François turned four, it was his turn to perform. But first he had to learn to balance.

He toddled and wobbled along the edge of a thick board.

He fell. Again and again.

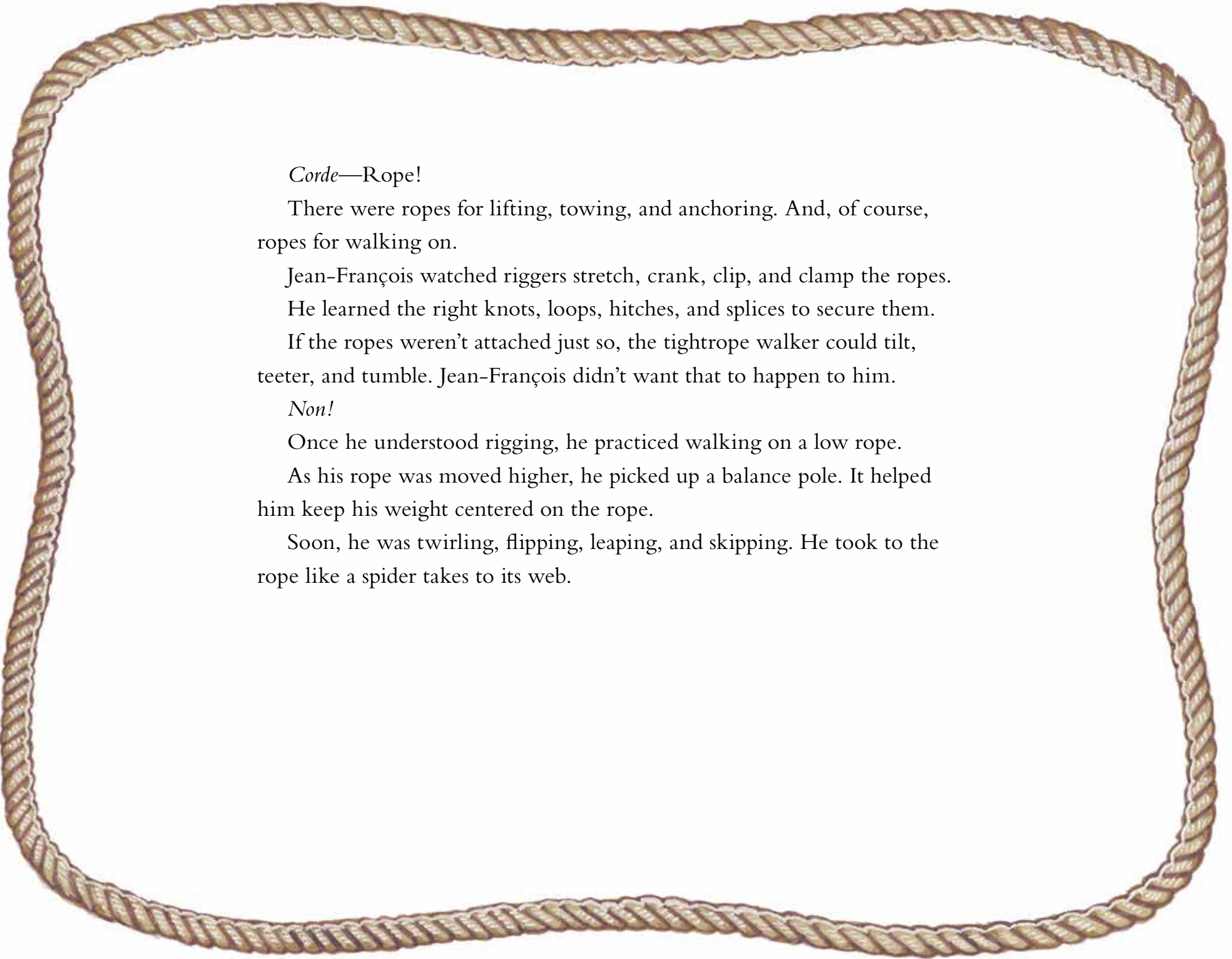
He soon learned to keep his shoulders straight and his knees *fléchis*.

He learned to keep his eyes ahead and his arms *ouverts*.

And he learned to keep his weight centered on the board for *équilibre*!

Then the thick board was replaced with thinner and thinner ones.

Finally, Jean-François was ready to learn about...



Corde—Rope!

There were ropes for lifting, towing, and anchoring. And, of course, ropes for walking on.

Jean-François watched riggers stretch, crank, clip, and clamp the ropes.

He learned the right knots, loops, hitches, and splices to secure them.

If the ropes weren't attached just so, the tightrope walker could tilt, teeter, and tumble. Jean-François didn't want that to happen to him.

Non!

Once he understood rigging, he practiced walking on a low rope.

As his rope was moved higher, he picked up a balance pole. It helped him keep his weight centered on the rope.

Soon, he was twirling, flipping, leaping, and skipping. He took to the rope like a spider takes to its web.

