Not With Devils

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In the midst of a few muffled screams and shouts, Joe was carried on the crest of the explosion, catapulted free of the ensuing flames, and quickly enveloped in that salty, inviting, blue-green essential—water. There was no time for collecting one’s thoughts. The boat was in flames and there was no other sign of life on board or in the water. To swim was the only alternative and there was only one place to swim toward—the island.

Still half-asleep and something less than an expert swimmer, Joe thrashed the water more than he swam in it. For him it was like quicksand, constantly trying to tug him under, and under he did go. His mouth open, his eyes bulging, his lungs nearly bursting, he scrambled back above the surface and madly leaped or crawled in the general direction of the island.

He did get closer to it, but it still was a long, long distance to go, when he went under once again. This time he kept his mouth closed, but that only spared him the acrid, salty taste. His eyes still bulged. His lungs again felt like they were bursting. Again, he somehow regained the surface. Again, he slogged on but the water was more like syrup or glue than the inviting thing it seemed from the boat’s deck. Joe was tired, exhausted. The island still seemed no closer, and he felt himself losing control of his body; felt murky fingers tugging, tugging at him. His legs felt like felled tree-trunks. His arms ached and he was barely able to lift them from the deceiving water.

Once again Joe went under, and as he went under he quit, opened his mouth and drank deeply of his enemy. Suddenly an abrupt and razorsharp pain jerked his body erect and upward, crashing through into the air and once more alive. But the downward momentum was quickly displaced by a downward pull which hauled him back and slammed him against the coral floor just five feet below the surface. The bottom! There was a bottom, and by half-treading, gingerly stepping, gritting against the pain he could make headway toward shore. The water turned red about him in sympathy with his tortured feet, but the coral soon gave way to sand and his ginger walk turned into a maddening, leaping, running, sloughing through the remaining yards to shore.

The shore! When he gained it, he collapsed and embraced it as a child would his mother. Tears poured from his eyes dampening the already damp ground. Once, he glanced up and inward at the inviting greens, but decided that he would go no further. He had regained solid ground. The danger was past. His enemy was behind him. He had fought the good fight—and won. All that was left was the sobbing. And sobbing, he fell asleep as men often do when immediate danger seems to have passed.

But, water is a paradox, and as it recedes from shore so, too, does it return. And so it did now. Joe’s sleep was the deadened sleep of one humanly exhausted, but when the water had returned sufficiently, it was the sleep of eternity.

**NOT WITH DEVILS**

T. F. Melville

Not with devils

wearing brimstone-horns,

with smouldering pitchforks.

No, it is not

bottomless perdition, to dwell

in adamantine chains and penal fire,

But

the cold, ineffectual womb

of the city

where all you can hear are

the frightened sounds of

the screaming traffic-people.