

About the Author

William Douglas (1898-1980) was born in Maine, Minnesota, USA. After graduating with a Bachelors of Arts in English and Economics, he decided to pursue a legal career. He became an adviser and friend to President Franklin D Roosevelt. Douglas was also a leading advocate of individual rights. He retired in 1975 after thirty-six years service as a Justice in the courts.

Summary of the Chapter

The Narrator Developed an Aversion to Water at a Young Age

The narrator recalls a horrific incident that happened to him when he was ten or eleven years old. He had decided to learn swimming, and the YMCA pool gave him the opportunity, as it was safe. It was only two or three feet deep at the shallow end and, while it was nine feet deep at the other end, the drop was gradual. In comparison, the Yakima river was treacherous. The narrator's mother continually warned him against it. She kept reminding him about the details of each drowning incident in the river. The narrator developed an aversion to water at the age of three or four when his father took him to the beach in California. The waves knocked him down and swept over him. He was buried in water and was breathless. He was terrorised by the strong force of the waves, but his father had only laughed.

The Misadventure

The introduction to the pool revived the narrator's unpleasant memories and stirred his childhood fears. Still, he tried to learn swimming by imitating the other boys. He was just beginning to feel at ease in the water when a mishap occurred. He went to the pool one day and found that no one else was there. He was timid about going in alone. So, he sat on the side of the pool to wait for others. Just then a big bully came. He was quite muscular. He picked up Douglas and threw him into the deep end of the pool. Douglas landed in a sitting position, swallowed water, and went at once to the bottom.

Douglas Tried to Save His life

The narrator was frightened, but not frightened out of his mind. He made a plan to save himself. When his feet would hit the bottom, he would make a big jump, come to the surface, lie flat on it and paddle to the edge of the pool. However, the nine feet down seemed more like ninety to poor Douglas.

He was totally out of breath when his feet touched the bottom. Still, with all his strength, he made a spring upwards. He came up slower than he had thought. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but water. He started to panic. Douglas was suffocating and tried to yell but no sound came out.

A Sheer, Stark Terror

Then he came up to the surface and started beating the surface of the water. He tried to breathe, but swallowed water and choked. Douglas tried to bring his legs up, but they hung like dead weights. A great force was taking him to the bottom of the pool.

He had lost all his breath. His lungs ached and his head throbbed. But he remembered his strategy. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but water with a yellow glow. A sheer, stark terror seized him—terror that knew no understanding, terror that knew no control, a terror that only the one who had experienced it could understand. He was shrieking under water.

Only his heart and the pounding in his head said that he was still alive. Douglas told himself that he had to remember to jump when he reached the bottom. He again jumped with all his might, but his jump went in vain. He was still under water. The stark terror took him more tightly in its clutches.

The Fight for Survival is Lost

Douglas describes how fear paralysed him. His arms and legs stopped moving. He trembled with fright. He tried to call for his mother, but nothing happened. Suddenly, Douglas found himself coming out of the water. He sucked for air and got water. Then he started going down for the third time. Then all his efforts ceased and his body went limp. A blackness took over his brain which wiped out fear and terror. Everything went quiet and peaceful. Douglas felt as if he was wrapped in his mother's arms. Then he fell unconscious. The next thing he remembers was lying on his stomach beside the pool, vomiting.

The Terror Destroyed Douglas' Social Life, He Tried to Overcome it

Douglas couldn't eat that night. He was weak and trembling. He shook and cried on his bed. He never went back to the pool. He feared water and avoided it whenever he could. Whenever he went near water, the terror that had seized him in the pool would return to haunt him. The fear paralysed him.

This handicap stayed with him as years rolled by. It ruined his fishing trips and deprived him of the joy of canoeing, boating and swimming. He tried his best to overcome this fear, but it didn't let go of him. Finally, Douglas decided to get a swimming instructor. He went to a pool and practised five days a week, an hour each day. The instructor put a belt with a rope around Douglas.

This rope went through a pulley. The instructor held on to the other end of the rope. Each time the instructor relaxed his hold on the rope and Douglas went under, some of the old terror returned and froze his legs. It took him three months to get over this fear. Then the instructor taught him to breathe while swimming. Next he taught him to move his legs. Thus, piece by piece, bit by bit, he built a swimmer out of Douglas.

Douglas' Will to Live Grew in Intensity

After the training was finished, Douglas wondered if he would be terror-stricken when he would be alone in the pool. He tried, and tiny vestiges of the old terror did return, but now he was not afraid. Douglas was still not satisfied. So, he went to Lake Wentworth in New Hampshire and swam two miles across the lake. When Douglas was in the middle of the lake, he put his face under and saw nothing but bottomless water.

The old sensation came back to haunt him. But this time Douglas was strong. He swam on. Yet he had some residual doubts. At his first opportunity, he went to the Warm Lake. He swam to the other shore and back. He was thrilled with joy, as he had conquered his fear of water. The experience had a deep meaning for him.

He explains that death was peaceful but it was the fear of death that crippled a person. Here he quotes President Roosevelt, saying, 'All we have to fear is fear itself.' Because he had experienced death and the terror that it could produce, his will to live somehow grew in intensity.

WORD MEANINGS

The given page numbers correspond to the pages in the NCERT textbook.

- Page 23**
- treacherous — dangerous, unreliable
 - water wing (s) — an apparatus in the shape of inflated waterproof bags that can be fixed to the arms to help someone learn swimming

- Page 25**
- subdued my pride — overcame feeling ashamed
 - surf — a mass of foam formed by waves breaking on a seashore

- overpowering — overwhelming
- stirred — aroused
- paddled — moved through the water
- aping — imitating, copying
- misadventure — mishap
- bruiser — bully
- specimen — example
- rippling — swelling, bulging
- ducked — pushed under water
- spring — jump
- bob to the surface like a cork — move up quickly to the water surface like a piece of cork

- Page 26**
- panicky — afraid, alarmed
 - flailed at the surface — swung arms or legs violently on the surface
 - expending — spending or using up

- irresistible — overwhelming
- strike out — hit sharply
- pounding — rhythmical beating or throbbing

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- oblivion — unconsciousness
- curtain of life fell — as if life ended
- fooling — joking
- locker room — changing room of the pool
- icy — which can freeze
- fishing for landlocked salmon — fishing for edible fish trapped by being cut off from the sea

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- bass — a common term for many different species of fish
- trout — a freshwater fish
- back and forth across the pool — one way and the other across the pool
- slack — lessen or reduce
- integrated — composite
- crawl stroke — a stroke in which the swimmer lies flat on the water with face submerged, and takes overhand arm strokes, while moving his legs up and down
- vestiges — traces or remains of something that is disappearing or no longer exists