**“Ruthless” by William DeMille**

Outside, the woods lay basking in clear October sunlight; trees a riot of color, air full of Autumn’s tang and the sharp, exciting smell of moist, leaf-covered earth.

Inside, a man smiled grimly as he turned from the bathroom cabinet, entered the expensively primitive living room of his mountain camp, and crossed to a closet set in the pine wall. It was his special closet, with a spring lock and in it he kept guns, ammunition, fishing-rods, tackle and liquor. Not even his wife was allowed to have a key, for Judson Webb loved his personal possessions and felt a sense of deep outrage if they were touched by any hand but his own. The closet door stood open; he had been packing his things away for the Winter, and in a few minutes would be driving back to civilization.

As he looked at the shelf on which the liquor stood his smile was not attractive. All the bottles were unopened except one quart of Bourbon which was placed invitingly in front, a whiskey glass by its side. This bottle was less than half full. As he took it from the shelf his wife spoke from the adjoining bedroom:

“I’m all packed, Judson,” she said. “Hasn’t Alec come to turn the water off and get the keys?”

Alec lived about a mile down the road and acted as a caretaker for the city folks when they were away.

“He’s down at the lake taking the boats out of water. Said he’d be back in half an hour.”

Marcia came into the room carrying her suitcase. But she paused in surprise as she saw the bottle in her husband’s hand.

“Judson!” she exclaimed, “you’re not taking a drink at ten o’clock in the morning?”

“You wrong me, my dear,” he chuckled, “I’m not taking anything out of this bottle: I am merely putting a little kick into it.”

His closed hand opened and he put upon the table two tiny white pellets as he started to uncork the whiskey. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him. She had learned to dread that tone of his voice; it was the tone he used when he was planning to “put something over” in a business deal.

“Whoever broke into my closet last Winter and stole my liquor will probably try it again once we are out of here,” he went on, “only this time he’ll wish he hadn’t.”

She caught her breath at the cruel vindictiveness of his manner as one by one he dropped the tablets into the bottle and held it up to watch them dissolve.

“What are they?” she asked, “something to make him sick?”

“And how!” He seemed fascinated as he saw the genial Bourbon change into a lethal dose: “At least no one has found an antidote: once it’s down it’s curtains.” He corked his bottled vengeance and set it back on the shelf alongside the little whiskey glass.

“Everything nice and handy,” he remarked approvingly. “Now, Mr. Thief, when you break in, drink hearty; I won’t begrudge you this one.”

The woman’s face was pale. “Don’t do it, Judson,” she gasped. “It’s horrible — it’s murder.”

“The law doesn’t call it murder if I shoot a thief who is entering my house by force,” he said harshly. “Also, the use of rat poison is quite legal. The only way any rat can get into this closet is to break in. What happens then is his affair, not mine.”

“Don’t do it, Judson,” she begged. “The law doesn’t punish burglary by death; so what right have you—”

“When it comes to protecting my property I make my own laws.” His deep voice suggested a big dog growling at threatened loss of a bone.

“But all they did was to steal a little liquor,” she pleaded. “Probably some boys off on a lark. They didn’t do any real damage.”

“That’s not the point,” he said. “If a man holds me up and robs me of five dollars it makes me just as sore as if he took a hundred. A thief’s a thief.”

She made one last effort. “We won’t be here till next spring. I can’t bear to think of that deathtrap waiting there all the time. Suppose something happens to us — and no one knows — ”

He chuckled once more at her words. “We’ll take a chance on that,” he said. “I’ve made my pile by taking chances. If I should die, you can do as you please. The stuff will be yours.”

It was useless to argue, she knew. He had always been ruthless in business and whenever anything crossed him. Things had to be done his way. She turned toward the outer door with a sigh of defeat. “I’ll walk down the road and say good bye at the farmhouse,” she said quietly. “You can pick me up there.” She had made up her mind to tell Alec’s wife. Someone had to know.

“Okay, my dear,” he smiled genially, “and don’t worry about your poor, abused little burglar. No one is going to get hurt who hasn’t got it coming to him.”

As she went down the path he started to close the closet door; then paused as he remembered his hunting boots drying outside on the porch. They belonged in the closet, so leaving the door open he went to fetch them from the heavy, rustic table on which they stood, along with his bag and top coat.

Alec was coming up from the lake and waved to him from a distance. A chipmunk, hearing Judson’s heavy tread, abandoned the acorn he was about to add to his store within the cabin wall and disappeared, like an electric bulb burning out. Judson, reaching for his boots, stepped fairly upon the acorn, his foot slid from under him and his head struck the massive table as he fell.

Several minutes later he began to regain his senses. Alec’s strong arm was supporting his as he lay on the porch and a kindly voice was saying: “’Twarn’t much of a fall, Mr. Webb. You aren’t cut none; jest knocked out for a minute. Here, take this; it’ll pull you together.”

A small whiskey glass was pressed to his lips. Dazed and half-conscious, he drank.

“Ruthless” by William deMille, from the anthology 50 Short Stories: An Omnibus of Short Stories, edited by Mary Anne Howard (1945), is in the public domain.