

"Ruthless" (William de Mille)

Outside, the woods lay in clear October sunlight: the autumn air was full of the sharp, exciting smell of moist, leaf-covered earth. Inside, a man smiled grimly as he turned from the bathroom cabinet, entered the 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 and liquor. Not even his wife was allowed to have a key, for Judson Webb loved his personal possessions and became furious 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 he 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 self. The bottle was less than half full. As he took it from the shelf, his wife spoke from the next bedroom. "Everything is 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 the water. He said he'd be back in half an hour."

Mabel 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, are you?"

"You're wrong, my dear," he chuckled, "I'm not taking anything out of this bottle; I'm only putting something into it." His closed hand opened, and he put two tiny white tablets on the table 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 business.

"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 this cruel vindictiveness 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 Bourbon changing into a deadly drink. "At least no one has found an antidote: once it's down, it's the end."

He corked the bottle and set it back on the shelf alongside the little whiskey glass. "Everything nice and handy," he remarked, "now, Mr. Thief, when you break in, have a good drink; 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 not forbidden. The only way any rat can get into this closet is to break in. What happens then has nothing to do with me."

"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 was like that of a big dog growling at the possible 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 death-trap 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 towards the door with a sigh.

"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, "and don't worry about your poor 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, and then paused as he remembered his hunting boots 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, left the acorn it was about to add to its store within the cabin wall and disappeared.

When reaching for his boots, Judson stepped upon that 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 head as he lay on the porch, and a kindly voice was saying, "It wasn't much of a fall, Mr. Webb. You aren't cut none; just knocked out for a minute. Here, take this. It'll pull you together."

A small whiskey glass was pressed to Judson's lips. Dazed and half-conscious he drank.