

Name: _____ Class: _____

Ruthless

By William DeMille
1945

William DeMille (1878-1955) was an American writer, most well-known for screenwriting and film directing. In this short story, a man sets a deadly trap for a suspected thief.

[1] Outside, the woods lay basking¹ in clear October sunlight; trees a riot² of color, air full of Autumn's tang³ 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 primitive⁴ 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, tackle⁵ 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.



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As he looked at the shelf on which the liquor stood his smile was not attractive. All the bottles were unopened except one quart⁶ 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?"

[5] 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?"

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1. **Bask (verb):** to lie exposed to warmth and light, typically from the sun
 2. an impressively large or varied display of something
 3. a typical and strong taste, flavor, or smell
 4. **Primitive (adjective):** having a quality or style that offers an extremely basic level of comfort
 5. The equipment needed in order to fish.
 6. a unit of liquid equal to a quarter of a gallon, roughly the equivalent of just a little less than one liter in the U.S.

"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."

- [10] His closed hand opened and he put upon the table two tiny white pellets⁷ as he started to uncork⁸ 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 vindictiveness⁹ 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 genial¹⁰ Bourbon change into a lethal dose: "At least no one has found an antidote:¹¹ once it's down it's curtains." He corked his bottled vengeance and set it back on the shelf alongside the little whiskey glass.

- [15] "Everything nice and handy," he remarked approvingly. "Now, Mr. Thief, when you break in, drink hearty;¹² I won't begrudge¹³ 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.

- [20] "But all they did was to steal a little liquor," she pleaded. "Probably some boys off on a lark.¹⁴ 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 deathtrap¹⁵ waiting there all the time. Suppose something happens to us — and no one knows —"

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7. a small, rounded, compressed mass of a substance
 8. to pull the cork out of a bottle or other container
 9. **Vindictive (adjective):** having or showing a strong or unreasoning desire for revenge
 10. **Genial (adjective):** friendly and cheerful
 11. a medicine taken or give to counteract a particular poison
 12. to drink cheerfully
 13. **Begrudge (verb):** to give reluctantly or resentfully, or to envy the possession or enjoyment of
 14. something mischievous done for fun

He chuckled once more at her words. "We'll take a chance on that," he said. "I've made my pile¹⁶ 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.

[25] "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, rustic¹⁷ 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't¹⁸ 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.

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15. a place, structure, vehicle or item that is potentially dangerous
 16. a lot of money
 17. having a simplistic and rough surface quality
 18. it wasn't

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement expresses the main theme of the story?
 - A. It's important to take the opinions of your loved ones into consideration.
 - B. There will be consequences if you take justice into your own hands.
 - C. No crime is bad enough to warrant another person's death.
 - D. If you commit a crime, you will likely be punished in a similar fashion.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "for Judson Webb loved his personal possessions and felt a sense of deep outrage if they were touched by any hand but his own." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The law doesn't call it murder if I shoot a thief who is entering my house by force" (Paragraph 17)
 - C. "We won't be here till next spring. I can't bear to think of that deathtrap waiting there all the time." (Paragraph 22)
 - D. "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." (Paragraph 25)

3. How does the conversation between Judson and his wife develop the plot of the passage?
 - A. It prompts her to go warn Alec's wife about the poison, which means she is not there to warn Alec about the poisoned whiskey when Judson falls.
 - B. It causes her to tell Alec and his wife that her husband has poisoned the whiskey, encouraging Alec to retaliate against Judson.
 - C. It causes Judson to be distracted by his wife's obvious distress and not pay attention when he falls or accepts the whiskey from Alec.
 - D. It prompts Judson to consider throwing out the poisoned whiskey, which he is unable to do before falling and unknowingly drinking it.

4. How does the resolution contribute to the theme of the passage?
 - A. It proves that it's dangerous to take justice into your own hands.
 - B. It shows how paranoia can be deadly for some people.
 - C. It emphasizes how dangerous it can be to keep secrets from others.
 - D. It stresses the importance of always being aware of your surroundings.

5. How does the author's use of dialogue develop characterization and indirect characterization?
