

Click!

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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It was late afternoon by the time Dandridge got back to the lodge. The mountain air was as crisp as the fallen leaves that crunched under his heavy boots. He turned for a last look at the western sky, then hurried up the steps and into the massive building. In his room he paused only long enough to drop his gear onto a chair and hang his bright orange cap on a peg. Then he strode to the lobby and through it to the taproom.

He bellied up to the bar, a big, thick-bodied man. „Afternoon, Eddie,“ he said to the barman. „The usual poison.“

Dandridge's usual poison was sour mash whiskey. The barman poured a generous double into a tumbler and stood, bottle in hand, while Dandridge knocked the drink back in a single swallow. „First of the day,“ he announced, „and God willing it won't be the last.“

Both the Lord and the barman were willing. This time Eddie added ice and a splash of soda. Dandridge accepted the drink, took a small sip of it, nodded his approval, and turned to regard the only other man present at the bar, a smaller, less obtrusive man who regarded Dandridge in turn.

„Afternoon,“ Dandridge said.

„Good afternoon,“ said the other man. He was smoking a filtered cigarette and drinking a vodka martini. He looked Dandridge over thoroughly, from the rugged face weathered by sun and wind down over the heavy red and black checked jacket and wool pants to the knee-high leather boots. „If I were to guess,“ the man said, „I'd say you've been out hunting.“

Dandridge smiled. „Well, you'd be right,“ he said. „In a manner of speaking.“

„*In a manner of speaking,*“ the smaller man echoed. „I like the phrase. I'd guess further that you had a good day.“

„A damn good day. Hard not to on a day like this. When it's this kind of a day, the air just the right temperature and so fresh you know it was just made this morning, and the sun comes through the trees and casts a dappled pattern on the ground, and you've got a spring in your step that makes you positive you're younger than the calendar tells you, well hell, sir, you could never set eyes on bird or beast and you'd still have to call it a good day.“

„You speak like a poet.“

„Afraid I'm nothing of the sort. I'm in insurance, fire and casualty and the like, and let me tell you there's nothing the least bit poetic about it. But when I get out here the woods and the mountains do their best to make a poet out of me.“

The smaller man smiled, raised his glass, took a small sip. „I would guess,“ he said, „that today wasn't a day in which you failed to—how did you put it? To set eyes on bird or beast.“

„No, you'd be right. I had good hunting.“

„Then let me congratulate you,“ the man said. He raised his glass to Dandridge, who raised his in return.

„Dandridge,“ said Dandridge. „Homer Dandridge.“

„Roger Krull,“ said the other man.

„A pleasure, Mr. Krull.“

„My pleasure, Mr. Dandridge.“

They drank, and both of their glasses stood empty. Dandridge motioned to the barman, his hand indicating both glasses. „On me,“ he said. „Mr. Krull, would I be wrong in guessing you're a hunter yourself?“

„In a manner of speaking.“

„Oh?“

Krull glanced down into his newly freshened drink. „I've hunted for years,“ he said. „And I still hunt. I haven't given it up, not by any means. But—“

„It's not the same, is it?“

Krull looked up. „That's absolutely right,“ he said. „How did you know?“

„Go on,“ Dandridge urged. „Tell me how it's different.“

Krull thought a moment. „I don't know exactly,“ he said. „Of course the novelty's gone, but hell, the novelty wore off years ago. The thing about any first-time thrill is it's only really present the first time, and eventually it's all gone. But there's something else. The stalking is still exciting, the pursuit, all of that, and there's still that instant of triumph when the prey is in your sights, and then the gun bucks, and then—“

„Yes?“

„Then you stand there, deafened for a moment by the roar of the gun, and you watch your prey gather and fall, and then—“ He shrugged heavily. „Then it's a letdown. It even feels like—“

„Yes? Go on, Mr. Krull. Go on, sir.“

„Well, I hope you won't take offense,“ Krull said. „It feels like a waste, a waste of life. Here I've taken life away from another creature, but I don't own that life. It's just... gone.“

Dandridge was silent for a moment. He sipped his drink, made circles on the bar with the glass. He said, „You didn't feel this way in the past, I take it.“

„No, not at all. The kill was always thrilling and there were no negative feelings accompanying it. But in the past year, maybe even the past two years, it's all been changing. What used to be a thrill is hollow now.“ The smaller man reached for his own glass. „I'm sorry I mentioned this,“ he said. „Sorry as hell. Here you had a good day and I have to bring you down with all this nonsense.“

„Not at all, Mr. Krull. Not at all, sir. Eddie, fill these up again, will you? That's a good fellow.“ Dandridge planted a large hand on the top of the bar. „Don't regret what you've said, Mr. Krull. Be glad of it. I'm glad you spoke up and I'm glad I was here to hear you.“

„You are?“

„Absolutely.“ Dandridge ran a hand through his wiry gray hair. „Mr. Krull—or if I may call you Roger?“

„By all means, Homer.“

„Roger, I daresay I've been hunting more years than you have. Believe me, the feelings you've just expressed so eloquently are not foreign to me. I went through precisely what you're going through now. I came very close to giving it up, all of it.“

„And then the feelings passed?“

„No,“ Dandridge said. „No, Roger. They did not.“

„Then—“

Dandridge smiled hugely. „I'll tell you what I did,“ he said. „I didn't give it up. I thought of doing that because I grew to hate killing, but the idea of missing the woods and the mountains galled me. Oh, you can go walking in the woods without hunting, but that's not the same thing. The pleasure of the stalk, the pursuit, the matching of human wit and intelligence against the instincts and cunning of game—that's what makes hunting what it is for me, Roger.“

„Yes,“ Krull murmured. „Certainly.“

„So what I did,“ Dandridge said, „was change my style. No more *bang-bang*.“

„I beg your pardon?“

„No more *bang-bang*,“ Dandridge said, gesturing. „Now it's *click-click* instead.“ And when Krull frowned uncomprehendingly, the big man put his hands in front of his face and mimed the operation of a camera. „Click!“ he said.

Light dawned. „Oh,“ said Krull.

„Exactly.“

„Not with a bang but a click.“

„Nicely put.“

„Photography.“

„Let's not say photography,“ Dandridge demurred. „Let us say hunting with a camera.“

„Hunting with a camera.“

Dandridge nodded. „So you see now why I said I was a hunter in a manner of speaking. Many people would not call me a hunter. They would say I was a photographer of animals in the wild, while I consider myself a hunter who simply employs a camera instead of a gun.“

Krull took his time digesting this. „I understand the distinction,“ he said.

„I felt that you would.“

„The act of taking the picture is equivalent to making the kill. It's how you take the trophy, but you don't go out because you want a picture of an elk any more than a man hunts because he wants to put meat on the table.“

„You do understand, Mr. Krull.“ The glasses, it was noticed, were once more empty. „Eddie!“

„My turn this time, Eddie,“ said Roger Krull. He waited until the drinks were poured and tasted. Then he said, „Do you get the same thrill, Homer?“

„Roger, I get twice the thrill. Another old hunter name of Hemingway said a moral act is one that makes you feel good afterward. Well, if that's the case, then hunting with a gun became immoral for me a couple of years back. Hunting with a camera has all the thrills and excitement of gun hunting without the letdown that comes when you realize you've caused pain and death to an innocent creature. If I want meat on the table I'll buy it, Roger. I don't have to kill a deer to prove to myself I'm a man.“

„I'll certainly go along with that, Homer.“

„Here, let me show you something.“ Dandridge produced his wallet, drew out a sheaf of color snapshots. „I don't normally do this,“ he confided. „I could wind up being every bit as much of a bore as those pests who show you pictures of their grandchildren. But I get the feeling you're interested.“

„You're damned right I'm interested, Homer.“

„Well, now,“ Dandridge said. „All right, we'll lead off with something big. This here is a Kodiak bear. I went up to Alaska to get him, hired a guide, tracked the son of a bitch halfway across the state until I got close enough for this one. That's not taken with a telephoto lens, incidentally. I actually got in close and took that one.“

„You hire guides and backpack and everything.“

„Oh, the whole works, Roger. I'm telling you, it's the same sport right up to the moment of truth. Then I take a picture instead of a life. I take more risks now than I did when I carried a gun through the woods. I never would have stood that close to the bear in order to shoot him. Hell, you can drop them from a quarter of a mile if you want, but I got right in close to take his picture. If he'd have charged—“

They reached for their drinks.

„I'll just show you a few more of these,“ Dandridge said. „You'll notice some of them aren't game animals, strictly speaking. Of course when you hunt with a camera you're not limited to what the law says is game, and the seasons don't apply. An endangered species doesn't shrink because I take its photograph. I can shoot does, I can photograph in or out of season, anything I want. The fact of the matter is that I prefer to go after trophy animals in season because that makes more of a game out of it, but sometimes it's as much of a challenge to try for a particular songbird that's hard to get up close to. That's a scarlet tanager there, it's a bird that lives in deep woods and spooks easy. Of course I had to use a telephoto lens to get anything worth looking at but it's still considered something of an accomplishment. I got a thrill out of that shot, Roger. Now no one would shoot a little bird like that, nobody would want to, but when you hunt with a camera it's another story entirely, and I don't mind telling you I got a thrill out of that shot.“

„I can believe it.“

„Now here's a couple of mountain goats, that was quite a trip I had after them, and this antelope, oh, there's a heck of a story goes with this one—“

It was a good hour later when Homer Dandridge returned the photographs to his wallet. „Here I went and talked your ear off,“ he said apologetically, but Roger Krull insisted quite sincerely that he had been fascinated throughout.

„I wonder,“ he said. „I just wonder.“

„If it would work for you or not?“

Krull nodded. „Of course I had a camera years ago,“ he said, „but I never had much interest in it. I couldn't tell you how long it's been since I took a photograph of anything.“

„Never had the slightest interest in it myself,“ Dandridge said. „Until I substituted click for bang, that is.“

„No more *bang-bang*. *Click-click* instead. I don't know, Homer. I suppose you've got all sorts of elaborate equipment, fancy cameras, all the rest. It'd take me a year and a day to learn how to load one of those things.“

„They're easier than you think,“ Dandridge said. „As a matter of fact, I've got some reasonably fancy gear. Hell, you wouldn't believe the money I used to spend on guns. Or I guess you would if you're a hunter yourself. Well, it's not surprising that I spend money the same way on cameras. I've got a new Japanese model that I'm just getting the hang of, and I've got my eyes on a lens for it that's going to cost me more than a whole camera ought to cost, and the next step's developing my own pictures and I don't suppose that's very far off. Just around the corner, I suspect. In another few months I'll likely have my own darkroom in the basement and be up to my elbows in chemicals.“

„That's what I thought. I don't know if I'd want to get into all that.“

„But that's the whole thing, Roger. You don't have to. Look, I don't know what your first hunting experience was like, but I remember mine. I was fourteen years old and I was out in a field down near the railroad tracks with an old rimfire twenty-two rifle, and I shot a squirrel out of an oak tree. Just a poor raggedy squirrel that I plinked with a broken-down rifle, and that's as big a hunting thrill as I guess I ever had. Now I'd guess your first experience wasn't a hell of a lot different.“

„Not a whole hell of a lot, no.“

„Well, when I put down the gun and took up the camera, the camera I took up was a little Instamatic that cost under twenty dollars. And I'll tell you a thing. The picture I took with that little camera was at least as much of a thrill as I get with my Japanese job.“

„You can get decent pictures that way?“

„You can get perfect pictures that way,“ Dandridge said. „If I had any sense I'd still use the Instamatic, but as you go along you want to try getting fancy. And anyway, it hardly matters how good the pictures are. You don't want to sell 'em to *Field and Stream*, do you?“

„Of course not.“

„Hell, no. You want to find out if you can go on having the sheer joy and excitement of hunting without having the guilt and sorrow of killing. That's it in a nutshell, right?“

„That's it.“

„So pick up a cheap camera and find out.“²

„By God,“ said Roger Krull, „that's just what I'll do. There's a drugstore in town that'll have cameras. I'll go there first thing in the morning.“

„Do it, Roger.“

„Homer, I intend to. Oh, I'm a little dubious about it. I've got to admit as much. But what have I got to lose?“

„That calls for a drink,“ said Homer Dandridge.

Dandridge was out in the woods early the next morning. His head was clear and his hand steady, as was always the case on hunting trips. In the city he drank moderately, and his rare overindulgences were followed by mind-shattering hangovers. On hunting trips he drank heavily every evening and never had the whisper of a hangover. The fresh air, he thought, probably had something to do with it, and so too did the way the excitement of the chase sent the blood singing in his veins.

He had another good day, shooting several rolls of film, and by the time he returned to the lodge he was ready for that first double shot of sour mash whiskey, and ready too for the good company of Roger Krull. Dandridge was not by nature a proselytizer, and in casual conversations with other hunters he rarely let on that he employed a camera instead of a gun. But Krull had been an obvious candidate for conversation, and now Dandridge was excited at the thought that he had been instrumental in leading another man from bang-bang, as it were, to click-click.

Again he stowed his cap and gear and hurried to the taproom. But this time Krull was not there waiting for him, and Dandridge was disappointed. He drowned his disappointment with a drink, his usual straight double, and then he settled down and sipped a second drink on the rocks with a splash of soda. He had almost finished the drink when Roger Krull made his appearance.

„Well, Roger!“ he said. „How did it go?“

„Spent the whole day at it.“

„And?“

Roger Krull shrugged. „Hate to say it,“ he said. He took a roll of film from his jacket pocket, weighed it in his hand. „Didn't work for me,“ he said.

„Oh,“ Dandridge said.

„I envy you, Homer. I had my doubts last night and I had them this morning, but I went out and got myself a camera and gave it a try. I honestly thought it might be exciting after all. The pursuit and everything, and no death at the end of it.“

„And it didn't work.“

„No, it didn't. I'll tell you something. I'd like myself better if it had. But for one reason or another it isn't hunting for me without the *bang-bang* part. Just squeezing the shutter on a camera isn't the same as squeezing a trigger. Some primitive streak, I suppose. I stopped enjoying killing a while ago but it's just not hunting without it.“

„Hell,“ Dandridge said. „I don't know what to say.“

And that was true for both of them. They suddenly found themselves with nothing at all to say and the silence was awkward. „Well, I'm damned glad I tried it all the same,“ Krull said. „I really enjoyed talking with you last night. You're a hell of a guy, Homer.“

„You're all right yourself, Roger.“

„Take care of yourself, you hear?“

„You too,“ Dandridge said. „Say, don't you want this?“ He indicated the roll of film, which Krull had left on top of the bar.

„What for?“

„Might get it developed, see how your pictures turned out.“

„I don't really care how they turned out, Homer.“

„Well—“

„Keep it,“ Krull said.

Dandridge picked up the film, looked at it for a moment, then dropped it in his pocket. He wondered if Roger Krull had even bothered to purchase a camera at all. Men sometimes came to momentous decisions under the heady influence of alcohol and changed their minds the following morning. Krull might have decided that hunting with a camera made as much sense as taking portrait photographs with a shotgun, and then might have gone through the charade with the film to keep up appearances. Not that Krull had seemed like the sort to go through that kind of nonsense, but people did strange things sometimes.

Psychology was another hobby of Homer Dandridge's.

Well, it was easy enough to find out, he decided. All he had to do was include Krull's film with his own when he sent it off to be developed. It would be interesting to see if there were any pictures on it, and if so it would be even more interesting to see what animals Krull had snapped and how well he had done.

When the pictures came back Homer Dandridge was very confused indeed.

Oh, there were pictures, all right. An even dozen of them, and they had all come out successfully. They did not have the contrast and brightness of the pictures Dandridge took with his expensive Japanese camera, but they were certainly clear enough, and they revealed that Roger Krull had a good intuitive sense of composition.

But they had not been taken in the woods. They had been taken in a city, and their subjects were not animals or birds at all.

They were people. Ten men and two women, captured in various candid poses as they went about their business in a city.

It took Dandridge a moment. Then his jaw fell and a chill raced through him.
God!

He examined the pictures again, thinking that there ought to be something he should do, deciding that there was not. The name Roger Krull was almost certainly an alias. And even if it was not, what could he say? What could he do?

He wasn't even certain in what city the twelve pictures had been taken. And he didn't recognize any of the men or women in them.

Not then. A week later, when they started turning up in the newspaper, then he recognized them.

