

THE BRIDGE TROLL MURDERS

SHELDON RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF THE YARD DOG AND THE INSANE TRAIN

A HOOK RUNYON MYSTERY

Published by The RoadRunner Press
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
www.TheRoadRunnerPress.com

Copyright © 2017 by Sheldon Russell
Cover photo © 2017 Color Bird/Shutterstock.com
Cover copyright © 2017 The RoadRunner Press

Map by Nancy Russell
Cover Design by Jeanne Devlin

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. While the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

First print edition published November 2017
eBook edition published March 2018

ISBN: 978-1-937054-27-4 (HC)
ISBN: 978-1-937054-64-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017950781

Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Names: Russell, Sheldon. | Russell, Sheldon. Hook Runyon mystery ; bk. 5.
Title: The bridge troll murders / Sheldon Russell.

Chapter 1

HOOK RUNYON TOOK OFF HIS artificial arm and laid it on the table. His caboose had been sided off the high iron next to a wheat field on the edge of Oklahoma's Waynoka yards, where he was to wait for Frenchy to tow him northeast to Topeka, Kansas. It was a new assignment, Hook having been named assistant division supervisor of security after the prior assistant supervisor had been found dead on the toilet and no one else could be located to fill the slot on such short notice.

Hook had spent his entire career on the rails, first as a hobo and then as a railroad bull. Even so, he had detected a certain reluctance in Eddie Preston, the division supervisor, about the job offer. Still, Hook had agreed to take it, figuring it was high time to see what getting paid for sitting on his ass might feel like.

He poured himself a Beam and then doubled it in celebration of his new position. Having made himself comfortable, he picked up his copy of H. G. Wells's 1897 novella, *The Invisible Man*. Reading from a rare book violated all the rules because nobody was fussier about the condition of a find than book collectors; yet, buying a reading copy struck him as extravagant, if not downright dangerous, considering the state of his caboose and the summary weight of his personal library. He could see the headlines now: "One-Armed Railroad Security Agent Found Dead Under Book Avalanche."

Early in his collecting, he had kept back just a few special editions, but somewhere along the line, less had become more, and simple interest had turned into a fascination, then a passion, and then an obsession that at times threatened his very livelihood. At one point, he had even considered giving up Beam in order to have more money to buy more books. Luckily, he had recovered his senses just in time.

Hook opened the sci-fi novel to where he had left off and moved his legs aside just enough to allow his dog, Mixer, whose reputation as a brawler was well established among other railway mongrels, under the table where Mixer settled at his feet. Hook used the term *his dog* loosely because Mixer did not belong to him, although they had shared the same caboose for many years. Mixer had simply showed up one day and refused to leave. By mutual agreement, their decision to cohabituate had always been implicit but binding: Each was to occupy the same quarters, but neither was to be responsible for the other's behavior, a matter of every man for himself, as it were.

Hook polished off his Beam and poured another. Landing an office job called for life changes of the highest order. Maybe he would buy himself a pen set to place on his new desk along with a calendar for keeping track of when he was to meet with Eddie Preston concerning security policy.

He returned to his book, pausing now and again to consider the advantages of invisibility. Catching pickpockets would be a cinch, and he could sit naked in his new office and not be seen. He could eat in the Harvey House kitchen whenever he pleased. He could scratch where it itched and wear his favorite T-shirt, the one with the holes in it. He could give Eddie Preston the finger to his face instead of to his back.

He poured himself a short one and gazed out the caboose window. The upsides of invisibility were attractive, but everything had downsides too. He would no longer get credit for stuff he did because no one would see him do it. He would have to forgo wearing his prosthesis because it would look like it was floating around by itself and that would scare the bejeezus out of people. If he died on the toilet like that other assistant supervisor, no one would ever know it. He might sit in there forever, people coming and going day and night.

Hook rubbed his face. A hard week chasing seal busters had cut into his sleep time. Taking off his boots, he reached for a cigarette and stretched out on the bunk to read. Under the table, Mixer snored, a habit of his after a hard day hunting stray cats. Being allergic to cat fur, Mixer always ended his hunts with swollen eyes and his nose whistling like a Steam Jenny, but it never slowed him down one iota.

Hook rolled onto his side, and weariness swept over him like warm water. Thank goodness Mixer wasn't invisible. There wouldn't be a cat left

standing within a hundred miles. All and all, Hook figured visibility had the most advantages, except maybe for that dining thing at the Harvey House.

Hook awoke to Mixer's barking. He sat up and his book slid off the bed onto the floor. Staring into the murkiness, Hook's eyes filled with water. His lungs tightened like a clenched fist in his chest, and he gasped for air. Mixer appeared from out of the gloom, whining and barking. Only then did Hook remember the lighted cigarette and realize that his mattress was afire.

"Hot damn!" he shouted, rolling off the bunk and onto the floor.

Somewhere beyond the curtain of smoke, Mixer upped the volume, his claws scratching at what Hook could only presume was the door to the caboose. Hook dropped to his stomach and crawled toward the barking, the smoke thickening over him like a storm cloud. When he could go no farther, he reached up and unlatched the door, shoving it open with his foot. Mixer dashed out over the top of him. Hook looked back at the black smoke boiling out the door.

"My books!" he yelled. Taking a deep breath, he went back in, dragged the smoldering mattress out the door, and threw it off the caboose porch. Back inside he went again, this time to open the windows to dissipate the acrid smoke and to rescue Wells from the floor.

Collapsing in the chair, Hook sniffed his shirtsleeve. It stank of smoke. He sighed. Maybe, with luck, he had gotten the fire out in time. Nothing absorbed smoke more certainly than book pages. If such was the case, his whole collection was ruined.

The smoke having cleared, he rose to close the window only to have his attention diverted by a wave of flames racing across the adjacent wheat field. The fire lit the sky, an inferno crackling and roaring as it consumed everything in its path. Hook watched, mouth agape, as smoke drifted across the countryside in a black curtain.

In that moment, he thought to repent for all the misdeeds of his life. Maybe those preachers from his childhood had been right, and the tormentors of hell had arrived to take their due. Unfortunately, his sins were numerous and varied in nature and he was not quite certain where to begin, and given that the fire had already doubled in magnitude, he thought to

postpone redemption for now. Maybe another day when things were less pressing.

In the distance, he spotted a tractor crawling across the horizon, most likely manned by a farmer attempting to impede the fire from reaching his house by plowing a furrow through the wheat. The tractor had nearly completed the first pass and had turned for another run back.

Hook hurtled out the door and off the porch to help, realizing even as he did so that there wasn't a damn thing he could do for the man.

The farmer, seeing that he could not make it back through the field, leaped from his tractor and ran full tilt for the plowed furrow. The flames, fanned by a southwest wind, soon engulfed the tractor, and black smoke from the burning tires lifted a hundred feet into the air like a massive thundercloud. Embers rained down and ignited new hot spots, which quickly spread in the dry wheat stubble. When the tractor's fuel tank finally exploded, the ball of flames hurtling heavenward turned the blue sky orange.

The scream of a whistle announced the arrival of a section work train. Section hands leaped from the work cars with shovels in hand and ran into the raging fire. How they had found out so fast, Hook could not say, but the railroad was like that, a long-distance telephone line running three thousand miles across the country. Anything happened anywhere along the line, and every railroad employee, right down to the crew callboy, picked up to pass it along.

Within the hour, only a few wisps of smoke remained. The men, black with ash, made their way back to the work train. The farmer's tractor, a burned hulk, loomed in the distance like the skeleton of an ancient dinosaur. Hook watched as Curly Hoopslaw, the section foreman, made his way over to the caboose. Helix Hoopslaw was the man's real name, but not one in a hundred knew it.

"Hook," he said.

"Curly," Hook said. "Hot day, ain't it?"

Curly took out his bandanna and wiped the ash from his face. "They got the Super Chief laying by, Hook. From the top of the grade, it looked like Pearl Harbor down here."

"Santa Fe's touchy about that damn Super Chief, Curly. Guess they didn't mind sending you boys in, though."

"Not so's you could tell," he said. "How did it happen?"

“What?”

“The fire, Hook. What the hell you think?”

Hook looked up and down the track. “I could have been burned up this very minute, Curly. I’m guessing it was divine intervention saved me.”

“I’m thinking divine retribution is more likely what set it off, Hook, given you ain’t seen the inside of a church since Stewart fell off the boiler stack and kilt himself.”

“Well, a hotbox is more apt the cause, I admit. Those dang carmen wouldn’t change out a bushing for their mother’s dying wish.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time a hotbox burned up the countryside,” Curly said. “Back in thirty-nine out in Skull Valley, one set off an empty boxcar. Wasn’t exactly empty, I’d guess you’d say, given that three section hands were in it sleeping on the job.”

“The hell,” Hook said.

“Burnt ’em to a crisp, but then, what’s three section hands more or less? It’s a lesson learned, though,” Curly said.

“Never sleep in a boxcar while it’s on fire,” Hook said. “You’d think even a section hand could think that one through.”

“Well, I better get that work train off the high iron. Those Super Chief celebrities will be calling the big boys by now.” The engineer of the work train hit three short blasts of his whistle and bumped her back. Curly gave him a wave.

“Funny thing is,” Curly said, pointing to the bar ditch, “there’s a burnt mattress right down there by the fence. Looks like it could have been what set this here fire off.”

Hook took hold of the grab iron and swung up on the caboose porch. He leaned over the railing. “’Boes,” he said. “You know how those bastards are always stealing stuff to sleep on.”

“It’s a bunk mattress out of a louse box. Might want to keep that caboose of yours buttoned up, Hook. You might be next.”

And with that, Curly turned and headed down the track.

Chapter 2

HOOK RETURNED TO HIS caboose only to find that Mixer refused to come back inside for what Hook could only assume was a fear of being burned alive. He tried to coax the dog with food, but to no avail. Truth be told, Hook found it difficult not to take the dog's accusatory look personally. Eventually, Mixer gave up any show of coming inside and slinked off into the darkness, with nary a look back over his shoulder.

Hook spent the night on the floor, his jacket for a cover, and awoke to a train roaring by on the high iron. As he nursed his morning coffee, he took stock of the smoke marks on the wall. A few seconds longer, and the whole thing would have burned to the ground, books and all.

From the door, he called again for Mixer but got no response. "Damn dog," he said, reaching for his cigarettes.

He studied the package for a moment and then threw it on the table. "That's it," he said. "I quit."

The sun had risen well into the sky by the time he made his way down the right-of-way toward the Waynoka rail yards. The smell of smoke still hung in the air. Ash swirled above the field in eddies, and charred stubs of fence posts stood in testament to the intensity of the fire.

Hook patted his empty pocket for a cigarette. He figured Eddie already knew about the fire, given the nature of railroad gossip, but a call to him was required. Reporting to Eddie Preston carried all the pleasure of an ice-water enema. Without smokes, Hook figured he could not be held responsible for what he might do or say. Cutting through the supply building, he made his way over to the yard office, where he found the yardmaster gone. Pulling up a chair at his desk, he dialed Eddie Preston.

"Security," Eddie said.

“Eddie, this is Hook.”

“What the hell is going on over there, Runyon?”

“Busy stamping out crime, Eddie. Listen, about my new office.”

“Try stamping out fires for awhile, Runyon. My phone hasn’t stopped ringing all morning. Some farmer is threatening to sue the railroad for burning up his field.”

“That wasn’t my fault.”

“And his tractor too. He says he barely got out alive. Says all his hair’s been singed off, including his eyebrows.”

“How much could eyebrows be worth, Eddie?”

“On top of that, the Super Chief arrived in Chicago three hours late because of having to lay by for that fire. Three hours. And you know who was on that train? I’ll tell you who: Bette Davis was on that train.”

“Maybe I’ll just sue the railroad myself, Eddie. I damn near burned up, and my dog won’t come in. I think he’s had a nervous breakdown.”

You’re lucky if you don’t go to jail over this one, Runyon.”

“I can’t be responsible for every hotbox on the line.”

“Curly says he found a mattress.”

“A mattress?”

“That’s right, a caboose bunk mattress.”

“ ’Boes steal those damn things right and left, Eddie.”

“Half burnt and lying twenty feet from your caboose? I find that peculiar, don’t you?”

“My caboose was surrounded by flames. I damn near died in that fire.”

“And what if it had been Bette Davis who burned up? What then?” Eddie asked.

Hook watched the yardmaster coming across the tracks. “That would qualify as peculiar. Now, about my office.”

“What office? Railroad bulls can’t go around setting fires and then get an office. It don’t work that way.”

“I have to go, Eddie. The yardmaster needs his phone.”

“I want you to get out to the Quinlan bridge. Today, you hear?”

“What for?”

“The Amarillo runs are reporting buzzards circling the bridge.”

“Those runs kill more cows than a Chicago slaughterhouse, Eddie.”

“And I’ve put an order in for Frenchy to tow your caboose to Quinlan for the time being. Someone’s busting car seals and stealing freight out

there. You can side off next to the track foreman's shack."

"But that's in the middle of nowhere, Eddie."

"Exactly. I don't want kids playing on those cars. We could get sued, you know."

"Right."

"And another thing, the Topeka office is sending around a forensic psychologist. She wants to talk to you, God help her."

"A what?"

"A forensic psychologist."

"What the hell is that?"

"A person knows all about criminals. They're doing a research study or some damn thing. Maybe you can learn something."

"Jesus, Eddie, I know too much about criminals already. Besides, I'll be pretty busy picking up dead cows. I'd just as soon not be dealing with some fornicating psychologist."

"*Forensic*, Runyon. Anyway, I don't remember asking your opinion. This came down from the big boys. Maybe there's more to law enforcement than herding 'boes with a short stick. In any case, she's to get whatever access she wants."

"She?"

"That's right."

"Has she ever been in law enforcement?"

"She reads books."

"So do I."

"She reads real books, Runyon, and that's the end of it."

Frenchy eased the old steamer back and coupled her into the caboose. He waited as Hook released the caboose brake. From his vantage on top, Hook could see Mixer chasing something in the distance. He couldn't quite make out whether it was a rabbit or a cat, although Mixer's pattern suggested the former.

Happy to know his dog was back to one of his old ways, Hook climbed the engine ladder and cleared a space to sit in the steamer cab as Frenchy pulled out onto the high iron. The fireman nodded at Hook over his shoulder. Frenchy brought the old steamer up to power and gauged her

stroke. Satisfied, he turned to Hook. "Heard you've been trying to burn up the country, Hook. Never knew Eddie Preston to be so pissed about anything." "It was an act of God, Frenchy. I can't be held responsible."

"I'm thinking God wasn't within a hundred mile of that fire, Hook." "Why does everyone assume I started that fire?"

"If it looks like a duck. . . .," Frenchy said, lighting up his cigar.

"Frenchy, is it necessary to smoke that stinking thing in here? It isn't good for my health."

Frenchy took the cigar out of his mouth and looked at it. "Some kind of hypocrite, ain't he?" he said to the fireman. "Every son of a bitch between here and California has been offended by those cigarettes of his."

"Smoking shows a lack of character, Frenchy. A man should exercise a little discipline in his life."

Frenchy flipped the ash off his cigar. "Self-discipline is something you know a lot about, I guess?"

"You don't see me smoking, do you?"

"I don't see you drinking hooch, either, Hook. Don't mean a damn thing, does it?" Frenchy stuck his head out the cab window and blew his whistle.

"Quinlan," he said, bringing the train down to a crawl.

Hook climbed out on the ladder and waited for Frenchy to back the caboose onto the siding next to the foreman's shack. After uncoupling it, with his hand held up against the blaze of the sun, Hook hollered up to the engineer.

"How far to the Quinlan bridge from here?"

Frenchy leaned out the window. "It's a walk," he said. "Why, you figuring to burn it down, Hook?"

"Not right off," Hook said. "Eddie says buzzards been flying around out there."

"Probably a cow or a section hand," Frenchy said. "Neither one's got the good sense to get off the track. You want a lift? I'm headed westbound for a short haul."

"No offense, Frenchy, but that cigar gives me a headache."

"Suit yourself," Frenchy said.

After watching Frenchy pull out and setting the caboose brake, Hook checked for level. Looked like he would have to sleep westbound or all the blood would be rushing to his head. He could not remember the last time he had been sided on level ground.

Hook climbed up into the cupola for a look around. From atop the caboose, he could see the line of freight cars and the remnants of Frenchy's engine smoke drifting away in the distance. The sun wobbled and melted into the horizon.

Climbing down, he checked his watch. Maybe he would just settle in tonight, check out the cars on his way to the bridge in the morning. He lit the lantern, poured himself a Beam, and slid a box of books out from beneath the table.

He had no electricity, no running water, and no mattress. A man of executive caliber deserved more. He picked up the pack of cigarettes, smelled them, and then laid them back down. He would give it another day. Anyway, how bad could things be? There were no 'boes, no pickpockets, and no Eddie Preston.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>