

Chapter 1 of: **An Inexorable Mountie**

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 7

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This is a work of historical fiction, set in the 1970s. Although most of the historical references are accurate, a few are not, and names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 1. PRELUDE: A ROBBERY

August 2, 1920
Canada's Rocky Mountains,
Somewhere on the British Columbia side

"Are you ready Jon?"

Jonathon (Jon) Hope was a young man of average height and slender build. He was unremarkable, in fact, except possibly for his youth and his bright, clear eyes. He didn't look like a con-man, cheater, or thief but he was, unquestionably, all three.

"Yes, I think it's time," he replied. "Are you ready to ride?" he asked his two companions, Slim and Jess Peters, who were busily tying their axes to the saddles on their horses. When they were finished, all three men mounted up.

"Ready boss. Let's go," replied Jess. Jess and Slim were brothers. Jess was the talkative one, while Slim, for his part, simply nodded.

It was a small gang. If, that is, a group of three men could be called a gang. Whereas a discerning observer might have found fault with the men's rough appearances, it would have been difficult indeed to find fault with their horses. These latter were uniformly fine specimens of their species. Young, healthy, and strong looking, these were horses that had been well cared for. They could be counted on to maintain sure footing, speed, and endurance – all qualities that would shortly be needed.

The three men rode into the nearby forest and disappeared into the first game trail they encountered.

Train number 63¹ of the Canadian Pacific Railroad had just exited from one of the many tunnels and snow sheds that protected its journey through the Rocky Mountains, and was now in an open clearing. It would have made a fine sight, comprising as it did one of the grand steam locomotives of the pre-diesel era, its tender (to provide its fuel and water), two passenger cars, a baggage car, an express car, and the ubiquitous red caboose (or crew car). Now that it was clear of the latest tunnel, the train slowly gained speed as it purposefully rolled along its track, in parallel with a rocky stream that was flush with meltwater from the glaciers and snowfields that lie high above. As the train began to gain altitude, the engineer looked ahead to the next patch of forest, swore loudly, and opened the steam valve to throttle back the engine.

¹ This part of the story was inspired by a real-life train robbery on August 2, 1920, in which CPR train No. 63 was stopped in the Rocky Mountains and robbed by three men. See Robert Collins, "Canada's Last Great Train Robbery," *Macleans Magazine*, 15 February 1958, <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1958/2/15/canadas-last-great-train-robbery>.

Up ahead, at the entrance to the forest, a large tree had fallen and was lying diagonally across the tracks. As the train began to slow, the engineer began applying the steam brake. The fireman, who had by now seen the fallen tree, pulled the whistle cord with sharp tugs so that the locomotive's throaty steam whistle would produce a succession of short blasts. This was their standard method of alerting the conductor, and the two trainmen at the back of the train, that something – usually people or livestock - was on the track. In this case it also served as a warning to two armed guards in the express car that there might be more to this obstruction than met the eye.

There was only the one tree lying on the rails, and the pointed shape of the end combined with the similarly pointed shape of the stump suggested that it had been felled by beavers. The trainmen had seen things like this before and were prepared. Within a matter of minutes, one end of a heavy chain had been attached to the bottom of the tree, with the other end being attached to a standing tree of the forest fringe that was several yards away from the tracks. One end of another heavy chain was then attached to the top of the fallen tree, with the other end attached to the 'cow-catcher' at the front of the locomotive, which had been inched forward for this purpose. Then, with the train in reverse, the second chain straightened out and pulled the tree more or less parallel to the tracks. As the train continued to reverse, the first chain straightened out, which pulled the bottom of the tree away from the tracks. When this was done, the tree lay diagonally away from, and sufficiently clear of the tracks. After that, it was simply a matter of untying the chains, stowing them away, and re-boarding the train.

As the engineer shifted the locomotive back to forward gear and opened the throttle, the train slowly resumed its entrance into the forest and the crew began to relax.

That was a mistake.

Whether the train's crew was tired, inattentive, or both will never be known.

Perhaps it was simply the nearness of the forest that now bordered the train's right of way – providing a false sense of security.

Perhaps the shadows cast by the tall trees prevented anyone from seeing what came next.

Crouched low, Jess darted out of the forest and climbed up the steps at the rear of the locomotive. By the time the train's engineer and fireman turned and realized they had company, Jess was pointing two double-action U.S. Army Colt .45 revolvers² at them. To the crew they simply looked big, dark, and menacing.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, please," said Jess, "and stop the train – NOW!"

Although spoken politely, there was no mistaking his seriousness.

At this point, only the locomotive and the first few cars were actually in the forest. The rest of the cars were still in the clearing.

² Colt 'Model 1902' double-action revolvers were produced in 1902 for the U.S. Army. They were actually Model 1878 revolvers fitted with 6-inch barrels and chambered to fire .45 calibre rounds. The 'double-action' feature meant that the trigger was used to both cock and discharge the revolver.

When the engineer had complied and the train came to a full stop, Jess told them to “keep the steam up and stand quietly where you are for a minute.” Taking out his pocket watch, Jess waited for exactly four minutes, then said “OK, start the train moving again.”

This time, he waited until the train had proceeded up the track for about two miles. Given the steep slope, the train was still moving quite slowly despite having travelled the two miles, at which point Jess simply said: “Good day,” jumped off the locomotive and disappeared into the forest.

It took a moment for the engineer and fireman to recover from this latest surprise, after which they promptly stopped the train again and went to find the conductor. All three men realized that the train was being robbed, and now they even knew how it was being done. Following a quick discussion, it was agreed that they would reverse the train and retrace the two miles they had just travelled.

There was no reason to hurry.

While Jess had been busy in the locomotive, his partners had not been idle.

As soon as the train had been stopped, Jon and Slim had boarded it and hunched down over the link-and-pin coupling between the express car and the baggage car. The pin didn't want to come free but Slim had brought a crowbar with him, which he applied effectively. Despite the stuck coupling pin, this had only taken a little over three minutes. By four minutes, they had jumped off the train and were running to their next positions.

When the train restarted its ascent into the forest, the express car and the caboose were left standing alone at the edge of the clearing. By this time, Slim had taken up his position in front of the express car's big sliding door, while Jon had boarded the caboose to check for railway personnel. Finding two crew members in the caboose, Jon kept them in place at gunpoint. Like Jess, Jon had produced two large Colt double-action .45s. As the next few minutes ticked by, the two frightened crew members must have wondered what the stranger was waiting for. They soon found out, however, as a large, double explosion rang out.

At the express car, there was no attempt to order the guards that must certainly be present to open the big sliding door. Instead, Slim had simply dropped the crowbar he had been carrying and, taking several sticks of dynamite from a bag slung over his shoulder, affixed them along the lower edge of the door. He then lit the fuses and ran to take cover around the end of the car. He had just covered his ears with both hands when there was a double, thundering roar from the exploding dynamite.

The big, sliding door, being held in place only by its rollers along the top and double latches secured from the inside, was completely destroyed by the blasts. Splinters from the door were still falling from the sky as Slim ran back to the gaping doorway with, again, two large revolvers drawn. Pointing and waving with his guns, he ordered the two shell-shocked guards to drop their rifles – which, in fact they had already done – and jump out of the car. Slim herded them to the caboose, and ordered them to join the two trainmen that were already being watched by Jon.

With Jon watching the four men in the caboose Slim returned to the express car, spent

only a few minutes there, then jumped and once again took position to one side and put both hands over his ears.

Things were happening so quickly that the four captives in the caboose had only just realized what was coming next, when three explosions rang out in rapid succession.

When the dust settled, Slim re-boarded the express car carrying his crowbar. Moments later, canvas bags began to sail through the air, out the door, and down onto the ground beside the track. There were 13 bags in all, and a careful observer would have noticed that the bags were moderately heavy – about 10 pounds each - of which some made clinking sounds when they struck the ground, while others did not. The former were nine bags containing \$5 and \$10 gold coins from the Canadian Mint in Ottawa, while the latter were four mail sacks containing Dominion of Canada paper currency.

Once again, the process only took a few minutes after which Slim jumped down from the express car, placed two fingers into his mouth and gave a sharp whistle. This was a signal for the gang's three horses to come out of the forest and join them, which they did. Slim's whistle was also the signal for Jon to go and help load the horses, which he did after first leaving the men in the caboose with stern instructions to "stay put."

With Slim and Jon working together it took several more minutes to distribute the bags among the three horses and to tie Jess' horse behind that of Jon. After that, they picked up the guards' rifles, mounted up and rode off into the forest. As soon as they were out of sight, they made a sharp turn onto a game trail, rode just far enough to be out of sight of the tracks, then dismounted and prepared to wait.

It wasn't long before the rest of the train made its way slowly down the track, and the crew reconnected the cars. As the gang's leader, Jon, had predicted, the train then simply resumed its original journey up through the forest. Not being equipped to chase or deal with three heavily armed robbers, the crew had decided to continue to the next town where they could report the robbery and let the authorities deal with it.

When the train had passed them for the last time, Jon and Slim rode back down the game trail and then brazenly followed the path of the train – right up the tracks. Two miles ahead, they encountered a man sitting on one of the rails.

"Any trouble?" said Jess.

"None. You?" replied Jon.

"Nope," said Jess. Slim just gave a quiet smile.

Untying his horse, Jess mounted up and the three men rode off. Once again, they simply followed the tracks, but this time going the other way – heading west.

The gang hadn't bothered to wear masks because they were unknown in Canada and were planning to promptly leave the country. They were, in fact, headed for Vancouver where they would board a steamship heading south to the United States.

The whole episode took place so quickly and smoothly that it had either been meticulously planned and practiced, or they had done this before, or both. In only 45 minutes' time, the

three men had stolen \$44,000 comprising just over a thousand ounces of gold coins, worth \$24,000, and paper currency comprising twelve thousand 25¢, \$1, \$2, and \$5 bills worth \$20,000.

Not everything went completely smoothly, however. Shortly after the three men entered the train tunnel, several shots rang out in the darkness.

One mile further along the track, a single man, on a single horse, rode out of the tunnel.

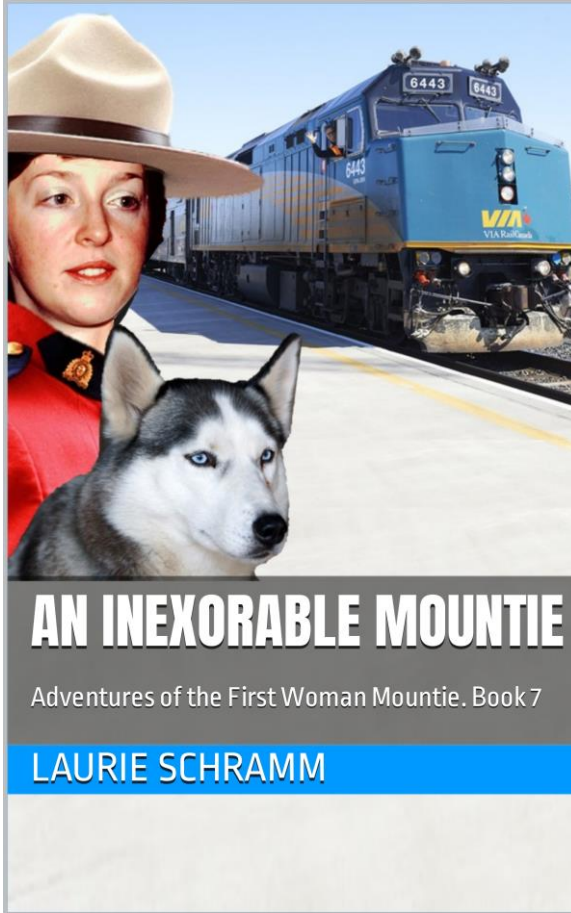
Knowing that an alert would be put out to watch for people trying to sell gold coins – which had become rare since the beginning of the 1914 world war - Jon planned to hide that part of the loot until it was safe to come back for it. Which might be never, he reflected, as he now had \$20,000 in currency, which seemed like more than enough – especially since he no longer had to share it.

As for his former partners, Jon was reminded of a saying of his fellow American Benjamin Franklin³:

“Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.”



³ The source for this quote is: Richard Saunders, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, 1735, published by Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia. The almanac was actually written by Benjamin Franklin and was published for many years under the pseudonyms 'Poor Richard' and/or 'Richard Saunders.'



RCMP Constable Alexandra Houston's adventures continue in: ***An Inexorable Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 7***, by Laurie Schramm, 2021.

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