

# Light Fingers

It's the opening years of the new century, and Iggy and Nigel's world is bursting with opportunities their light fingers can't resist — until they're ensnared by another one being torn apart by war.

Iggy heaves a rock through the window. The sausages and hams hanging in the display glisten in the weak light from the streetlamp.

The glass hasn't even hit the floor when they hear the sharp trilling of a police whistle.

“STOP! POLICE!”

“Grab what you can and run for it!” Iggy says.

Constable Miller skids to a stop, the youngsters already out of reach. He unlocks the policebox and calls it in, then waits for one of the shop owners.

It's McLeod, the younger, who motors up.

“Good evening, Constable. Did ye catch the bastards?”

“No, not this time, but I stopped 'em before they cleaned out your shop. It was Fitzsimmons and his pal Remington.”

McLeod nods. “Those hooligans, again.”

“Aye. Maybe this time we have to track the smell of smoked ham to ferret them out,” Miller laughs.

McLeod doesn't appreciate the joke.

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They eat the ham in silence, listening to the rats scratching on the other side of the coal chute.

“Living in an abandoned basement ain't the high life you promised,” Nigel says.

“Aye, Nige. It ain't. The plan dint work out as expected, so we need another... You've noticed all the money walking around town since that Dingman fella struck oil. Those dollars are being spent on shysters peddling get-rich oil schemes.”

“You thinking' we should relieve them of their cash?”

“Uh-huh, but we gotta do it smart. Too many dips out there. I figure we gotta get into the oil business.”

Nigel's eyes go wide.

Iggy says, “I know what one of them share certificates looks like. I reckon we sneak into my Uncle Miles' printing shop, print some, and start selling them.”

“You think that'll work?”

“Sure. Greed — People just want to get rich.”

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The two boys lean against the Bank of Montreal building a week later, eyeing the crowd, searching out a mark. Iggy has a leather wallet under his arm holding freshly minted share certificates.

“Nige. Tall man with the Trilby. Grey suit. By the alley.”

They walk around the block and come up behind their mark. Iggy pulls out a share certificate.

“Hey mister,” he says.

The man turns around.

“What you want, boy?”

“I want you to be on the ground floor of a fabulous oil discovery—”

The man laughs and grabs the paper out of Iggy’s hand, crumples it, and drops it on the ground.

“Go home to mama, boys, and gimme that before you get into real trouble,” he says, pointing to Iggy’s wallet.

“Bugger off, old man,” Iggy says.

The man takes a step forward and reaches for the wallet, but Iggy’s knife buries into his side instead.

“God dammit, kid,” he says, and falls to his knees.

They hightail it to their derelict basement.

“Jesus, Iggy! Think the man’s dead? Who was he anyways?”

“Dunno. Best if we leave town now, though.”

They hop a late freight rolling out of Calgary.

Iggy turns to Nigel and says, “Full steam ahead, good buddy!”

Nigel is not convinced.

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The pals jump off the train as it rolls into Medicine Hat and in a few days are able to accumulate a few dollars and coins. The city’s not as ripe as Calgary, but the money and a bit of pilfering keep their pot full. They’re sleeping rough in a small encampment along the river.

Nigel is tossing rocks and Iggy is leafing through the Medicine Hat News.

“Nige. They got an article here about us and they’re sayin’ the man that ran into my knife is a Pinkerton man, and he’s not dead.”

“Jesus. He give a description of us?”

“Indeed, and that flatfoot, Miller, put our names in the paper.”

“What else does it say?” Nigel asks.

“Well, Miller calls us hooligans, and the Pinkerton man says we’re just greenhorn confidence men. Not much to live up to, eh?”

“Guess so,” Nigel says, a slight tremble in his voice. “Do we gotta move on?”

“I think we should.”

The two young men gather their bags and hop onto another eastbound freight train.

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The train passes through small prairie towns, rarely stopping. They swap stories with some of the others sharing the ride. They're told Winnipeg is a city full of opportunities for a couple of *greenhorn confidence men* and *hooligans*, so they hop off there.

They do well but their stay is short-lived after one of the local dips peaches on them. They vacate their lodgings with only the clothes on their backs and get on another eastbound freight train. Three *travelin' men* lighten them of the burden of their hard earned cash before the train makes it to Ontario.

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In four days they reach Montreal. Stone broke and looking rough, they stumble their way to the Salvation Army and leave with clean clothes and full stomachs. After working the crowded Windsor Station the duo walk away with their pockets full of cash. They stop for beer and meat pie at an ale house close by, then take a room at a workingman's hotel.

After a few weeks Iggy and Nigel are on easy street. They stick to classier marks, and avoid associating with the local dips and shysters. One lazy Wednesday morning Iggy reads the Montreal Star's headline out loud to Nigel. “Empire Aflame; Germany Invades Switzerland and Holland; Victories for France.”

“What's that mean?” Nigel asks.

“It means, my good friend, that Canada is at war.”

“That's not good.”

“Au contraire, Nige. It's very good. The city's going to be flooded with soldiers coming here on their way to the war. They won't be too particular about money they may no longer have. Nor will the Army care about kit that ain't where it's supposed to be. Opportunities galore for us.”

“You think it'll be like that?”

“I do, lad. I do.”

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And it was, but the competition is fierce. They are working the traffic at Windsor station when Iggy hears a police whistle.

He grips Nigel's arm and tugs him in the direction of the nearest exit. They hurriedly unload their haul for the day into the pockets of unsuspecting soldiers.

“YOU TWO. STOP! POLICE!” a constable shouts, followed by a pulse of whistles.

Two policemen grip their arms, accuse them of picking pockets, and start to lead them outside.

The boys protest and turn out their pockets showing only a few crumpled bills and coins.

The constables are unconvinced.

“What are you two doing here anyways?”

“We were asking around which regiment was the best one to sign on to. We dint get a single answer. Seems that every soldier thinks their regiment is the best,” Iggy says.

Nigel looks at him, mouth agape.

The constable’s face lights up and he says, “Well lads, this is your lucky day because I passed some soldiers asking for recruits a few short blocks from here. I’m certain you’ll find it’s the best regiment for you.”

With that he leads them out of the station and down the street.

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With the copper standing behind them, a smile creasing his face, Nigel and Iggy sign up to the Canadian Grenadier Guards. A Sergeant dutifully takes down their particulars.

“Aye, lads. Good for you. You’re doing the right thing,” the constable says.

Iggy and Nigel aren’t sure. A corporal *marches* the lads to the Armoury.

“What about our bags?” Nigel whispers to Iggy.

“Tonight,” he whispers back.

At the Armoury they’re issued their full kit, then another corporal pushes them into the drill hall where they see hundreds of cots lined up in ranks and files, and other recruits milling about.

“Find an empty cot and make yourselves at home, lads,” the corporal says.

“What we gonna do now?” Nigel whines.

“Wait for lights out, then make a break for it and hop a train going east?”

In the middle of the night Iggy jostles Nigel awake. They tiptoe to the doors where they’re met by a burly, angry sergeant.

“Doors are locked, boys. Back to your bunks now afore I give ya reason to regret coming this far.”

They go.

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The next day they board a train to Camp Valcartier where they’re given an abbreviated lesson in military discipline and firearms training. Exhaustion washes away any thoughts they

have about making a run for it. Soon they're back in Montreal and boarding a ship sailing for England.

"We're going to England, Nige. What'd ya think about that?"

"I'd rather be going back home, and not by boat!"

"When we get to England we'll figure a way out. We'll go and get lost in London," Iggy whispers in Nigel's ear.

Nigel gives him a weak smile, then leans over the railing and throws up.

"Full steam ahead, good buddy!" Iggy shouts, patting Nigel's back.

The Canadians arrive at Salisbury Plain which is mired in mud. They drill continuously, fire their weapons, and are reminded they'll soon be joining the fight against the Hun in France. Nigel is in despair and reminds Iggy that "This ain't London!"

Escape is futile. The few that try are dragged back to camp in disgrace. Iggy and Nigel make new friends, a camaraderie built from a mutual hatred of the training, the rain, the mud, and the increasing cold.

On a bleak morning in February whistles scream throughout the camp. Their platoon sergeants yell for them to fall in with their full kit and, just like that, they're off to fight in France. Nigel's dreams of seeing London disappear into the choppy English Channel as they're ferried to the continent.

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They arrive at Armentières where the trenches fill with water and are in constant need of shoring. German snipers shoot at anyone careless enough to poke their head above the sandbags. Infrequent raids keep the Boche on their toes, but the men mourn the loss of comrades after each one.

The battalion then relieves the French at the Ypres Salient. The action is muted until the Canadians see green clouds wafting across the barbed wire and mud between the trenches. The poison gas drifts into the line held by the Frenchies and is followed by artillery and machine gun fire all along the line.

Iggy and Nigel's Company is ordered over the top when the barrage ends, only to be repulsed by machine gun fire. Bodies of fallen comrades litter no-mans-land. Nigel and Iggy plunge into a crump hole between the trenches instead of risking a run back to their lines.

"Not your bloody, gay Paree, eh?" Nigel coughs, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. More soaks the front of his great coat.

Iggy takes Nigel's hand.

"No it ain't buddy, but we'll get there yet."

Nigel looks at him. He coughs, more blood dripping from his lips.

"Nah, you go without me." His eyes close and he stops breathing.

Tears streak through the mud on Iggy's face. He grasps Nigel's hand tightly and holds it to his chest, then takes his rifle and rises to a crouch.

"Full steam ahead, good buddy!" he screams at the German trenches, then charges over the rim of the crater.

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Lieutenant Briggs comes to attention in front of Lieutenant-Colonel Kensington's desk and salutes sharply.

"Yes, Briggs?"

"Sir. There's something about the VC for Private Fitzsimmons."

"Go on."

"Sir. It appears Private Fitzsimmons is wanted in Alberta for attempted murder, theft, and attempting to obtain money by false pretences."

"Oh my... Tell me, what do you think?"

"Sir. Fitzsimmons led the charge under blistering fire. An inspiration to the rest of his platoon who followed him. Together they overran the Hun's trenches, took out two machine guns, killed many, and forced the rest to retreat. Before Fitzsimmons was bayoneted, Sergeant Nichols says he saw him kill at least seven Germans. Overall, in my humble opinion, Sir, I would say that he meets the criteria for receiving the Victoria Cross — he performed an act of extraordinary bravery in the face of the enemy. Sir."

"Well said, Briggs. Do you have the paperwork?"

"Yes Sir."