

The Defense of Sentinel

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1952
in »Western Novels Magazine«



When the morning came, Finn McGraw awakened into a silent world. His eyes opened to the wide and wondering sky where a solitary cloud wandered reluctantly across the endless blue.

At first he did not notice the silence. He had awakened, his mouth tasted like a rain-soaked cathide, he wanted a drink, and he needed a shave. This was not an unusual situation.

He heaved himself to a sitting position, yawned widely, scratching his ribs—and became aware of the silence.

No sound... no movement. No rattling of well buckets, no cackling of hens, no slamming of doors. Sentinel was a town of silence.

Slowly, his mind filling with wonder, Finn McGraw climbed to his feet. With fifty wasted years behind him, he had believed the world held no more surprises. But Sentinel was empty.

Sentinel, where for six months Finn McGraw had held the unenvied position of official town drunk. He had been the tramp, the vagabond, the useless, the dirty, dusty, unshaven, whiskey-sodden drunk. He slept in alleys. He slept in barns—wherever he happened to be when he passed out.

Finn McGraw was a man without a home. Without a job. Without a dime. And now he was a man without a town.

What can be more pitiful than a townless town drunk?

Carefully, McGraw got to his feet. The world tipped edgewise and he balanced delicately and managed to maintain his equilibrium. Negotiating the placing of his feet with extreme caution, he succeeded in crossing the wash and stumbling up the bank on the town side. Again, more apprehensively, he listened.

Silence.

No smoke rising from chimneys, no barking dogs, no horses. The street lay empty before him, like a street in a town of ghosts.

Finn McGraw paused and stared at the phenomenon. Had he, like Rip van Winkle, slept for twenty years?

Yet he hesitated, for well he knew the extreme lengths that Western men would go for a good practical joke. The thought came as a relief. That was it, of course, this was a joke. They had all gotten together to play a joke on him.

His footsteps echoed hollowly on the boardwalk. Tentatively, he tried the door of the saloon. It gave inward, and he pushed by the inner, batwing doors and looked around. The odor of stale whiskey mingled with cigar smoke lingered, lonesomely, in the air. Poker chips and cards were scattered on the table, but there was nobody... Nobody at all!

The back bar was lined with bottles. His face brightened. Whiskey! Good whiskey, and his for the taking! At least, if they had deserted him they had left the whiskey behind.

Caution intervened. He walked to the back office and pushed open the door. It creaked on a rusty hinge and gave inward, to emptiness.

„Hey?“ His voice found only an echo for company. „Where is everybody?“

No answer. He walked to the door and looked out upon the street. Suddenly the desire for human companionship blossomed into a vast yearning.

He rushed outside. He shouted. His voice rang empty in the street against the false-fronted buildings. Wildly, he rushed from door to door. The blacksmith shop, the livery stable, the saddle shop, the bootmaker, the general store, the jail—all were empty, deserted.

He was alone.

Alone! What had *happened*? Where *was* everybody? Saloons full of whiskey, stores filled with food, blankets, clothing. All these things had been left unguarded.

Half-frightened, Finn McGraw made his way to the restaurant. Everything there was as it had been left. A meal half-eaten on the table, dishes unwashed. But the stove was cold.

Aware suddenly of a need for strength that whiskey could not provide, Finn McGraw kindled a fire in the stove. From a huge ham he cut several thick slices.

He went out back and rummaged through the nests and found a few scattered eggs. He carried these inside and prepared a meal.

With a good breakfast under his belt, he refilled his coffee cup and rummaged around until he found a box of cigars. He struck a match and lighted a good Havana, pocketing several more. Then he leaned back and began to consider the situation.

Despite the excellent meal and the cigar, he was uneasy. The heavy silence worried him, and he got up and went cautiously to the door. Suppose there was something here, something malign and evil? Suppose—Angrily, he pushed the door open. He was going to stop supposing. For the first time in his life he had a town full of everything, and he was going to make the most of it.

Sauntering carelessly down the empty street to the Elite General Store, he entered and coolly began examining the clothing. He found a hand-me-down gray suit and changed his clothes. He selected new boots and donned them as well as a white cambric shirt, a black string tie, and a new black hat. He pocketed a fine linen handkerchief. Next he lighted another cigar, spat into the brass spittoon, and looked upon life with favor.

On his right as he turned to leave the store was a long rack of rifles, shotguns, and pistols. Thoughtfully, he studied them. In his day—that was thirty years or so ago—he had been a sharpshooter in the Army.

He got down a Winchester '73, an excellent weapon, and loaded it with seventeen bullets. He appropriated a fine pair of Colts, loaded them, and belted them on, filling the loops with cartridges. Taking down a shotgun, he loaded both barrels with buckshot, then he sauntered down to the saloon, rummaged under the bar until he came up with Dennis Magoon's excellent Irish whiskey, and poured three fingers into a glass.

Admiring the brown, beautiful color, the somber amber, as he liked to call it, he studied the sunlight through the glass, then tasted it.

Ah! Now that was something like it! There was a taste of bog in that! He tossed off his drink, then refilled his glass.

The town was his—the whole town—full of whiskey, food, clothing—almost everything a man could want.

But *why?* Where *was* everybody?

Thoughtfully, he walked outside. The silence held sway. A lonely dust devil danced on the prairie outside of town, and the sun was warm.

At the edge of town he looked out over the prairie toward the mountains. Nothing met his eye save a vast, unbelievable stretch of grassy plain. His eyes dropped to the dust and with a kind of shock he remembered that he could read sign. Here were the tracks of a half-dozen rigs, buckboards, wagons, and carts. From the horse tracks all were headed the same direction—east.

He scowled and, turning thoughtfully, he walked back to the livery barn.

Not a horse remained. Bits of harness were dropped on the ground—a spare saddle. Everything showed evidence of a sudden and hasty departure.

An hour later, having made the rounds, Finn McGraw returned to the saloon. He poured another glass of the Irish, lighted another Havana, but now he had a problem.

The people of the town had not vanished into thin air, they had made a sudden, frightened, panic-stricken rush to get away from the place.

That implied there was, in the town itself, some evil.

Finn McGraw tasted the whiskey and looked over his shoulder uncomfortably. He tiptoed to the door, looked one way, then suddenly the other way.

Nothing unusual met his gaze.

He tasted his whiskey again and then, crawling from the dusty and cobwebbed convolutions of his brain, long befuddled by alcohol, came realization.

Indians!

He remembered some talk the night before while he was trying to bum a drink. The Ladder Five ranch had been raided and the hands had been murdered. Victorio was on the warpath, burning, killing, maiming. *Apaches!*

The Fort was east of here! Some message must have come, some word, and the inhabitants had fled like sheep and left him behind.

Like a breath of icy air he realized that he was alone in the town, there was no means of escape, no place to hide. And the Apaches were coming!

Thrusting the bottle of Irish into his pocket, Finn McGraw made a break for the door. Outside, he rushed down to the Elite General Store. This building was of stone, low and squat, and built for defense, as it had been a trading post and stage station before the town grew up around it. Hastily, he took stock.

Moving flour barrels, he rolled them to the door to block it. Atop the barrels he placed sacks, bales, and boxes. He barred the heavy back door, then blocked the windows. In the center of the floor he built a circular parapet of more sacks and barrels for a last defense. He got down an armful of shotguns and proceeded to load ten of them. These he scattered around at various loopholes, with a stack of shells by each.

Then he loaded several rifles. Three Spencer .56's, a Sharps .50, and seven Winchester '73's.

He loaded a dozen of the Colts and opened boxes of ammunition. Then he lighted another Havana and settled down to wait.

The morning was well nigh gone. There was food enough in the store, and the position was a commanding one. The store was thrust out from the line of buildings in such a way that it commanded the approaches of the street in both directions, yet it was long enough so that he could command the rear of the buildings as well, by running to the back.

The more he studied his position the more he wondered why Sentinel inhabitants had left the town undefended. Only blind, unreasoning panic could have caused such a flight.

At noon he prepared himself a meal from what he found in the store, and waited. It was shortly after high sun when the Indians came.

The Apaches might have been scouting the place for hours; Finn had not seen them. Now they came cautiously down the street, creeping hesitantly along.

From a window that commanded the street, old Finn McGraw waited. On the windowsill he had four shotguns, each with two barrels loaded with buckshot. And he waited...

The Apaches, suspecting a trap, approached cautiously. They peered into empty buildings, flattened their faces against windows, then came on. The looting would follow later. Now the Indians were suspicious, anxious to know if the town was deserted. They crept forward.

Six of them bunched to talk some forty yards away. Beyond them a half dozen more Apaches were scattered in the next twenty yards. Sighting two of his shotguns, Finn McGraw rested a hand on each. The guns were carefully held in place by sacks weighting them down, and he was ready. He squeezed all four triggers at once!

The concussion was terrific! With a frightful roar, the four barrels blasted death into the little groups of Indians, and instantly, McGraw sprang to the next two guns, swung one of them slightly, and fired again.

Then he grabbed up a heavy Spencer and began firing as fast as he could aim, getting off four shots before the street was empty. Empty, but for the dead.

Five Apaches lay stretched in the street. Another, dragging himself with his hands, was attempting to escape.

McGraw lunged to his feet and raced to the back of the building. He caught a glimpse of an Indian and snapped a quick shot. The Apache dropped, stumbled to his feet, then fell again and lay still.

That was the beginning. All through the long, hot afternoon the battle waged. Finn McGraw drank whiskey and swore. He loaded and reloaded his battery of guns. The air in the store was stifling. The heat increased, the store smells thickened, and over it all hung the acrid smell of gunpowder.

Apaches came to recover their dead and died beside them. Two naked warriors tried to cross the rooftops to his building, and he dropped them both. One lay on the blistering roof, the other rolled off and fell heavily.

Sweat trickled into McGraw's eyes, and his face became swollen from the kick of the guns. From the front of the store he could watch three ways, and a glance down the length of the store allowed him to see a very limited range outside. Occasionally he took a shot from the back window, hoping to keep them guessing.

Night came at last, bringing a blessed coolness, and old Finn McGraw relaxed and put aside his guns.

Who can say that he knows the soul of the Indian? Who can say what dark superstitions churn inside his skull? For no Apache will fight at night, since he believes the souls of men killed in darkness must forever wander, homeless and alone. Was it fear that prevented an attack now? Or was it some fear of this strange, many-weaponed man—if man he was—who occupied the dark stone building?

And who can say with what strange expressions they stared at each other as they heard from their fires outside the town the weird thunder of the old piano in the saloon, and the old man's whiskey-bass rolling out the words of *The Wearing of the Green; Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill; Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming*, and *Shenandoah*.

Day came and found Finn McGraw in the store, ready for battle. The old lust for battle that is the birthright of the Irish had risen within him. Never, from the moment he realized that he was alone in a town about to be raided by Apaches,

had he given himself a chance for survival. Yet it was the way of the Irish to fight, and the way even of old, whiskey-soaked Finn.

An hour after dawn, a bullet struck him in the side. He spun half-around, fell against the flour barrels and slid to the floor. Blood flowed from the slash, and he caught up a handful of flour and slapped it against the wound. Promptly he fired a shot from the door, an aimless shot, to let them know he was still there. Then he bandaged his wound.

It was a flesh wound, and would have bled badly but for the flour. Sweat trickled into his eyes, grime and powder smoke streaked his face. But he moved and moved again, and his shotguns and rifles stopped every attempt to approach the building. Even looting was at a minimum, for he controlled most of the entrances, and the Apaches soon found they must dispose of their enemy before they could profit from the town.

Sometime in the afternoon, a bullet knocked him out, cutting a furrow in his scalp, and it was nearing dusk when his eyes opened. His head throbbed with enormous pain, his mouth was dry. He rolled to a sitting position and took a long pull at the Irish, feeling for a shotgun. An Apache was even then fumbling at the door.

He steadied the gun against the corner of a box. His eyes blinked. He squeezed off both barrels and, hit in the belly, the Apache staggered back.

At high noon on the fourth day, Major Magruder with a troop of cavalry, rode into the streets of Sentinel. Behind him were sixty men of the town, all armed with rifles.

At the edge of town, Major Magruder lifted a hand. Jake Carter and Dennis Magoon moved up beside him. „I thought you said the town was deserted?“

His extended finger indicated a dead Apache.

Their horses walked slowly forward. Another Apache sprawled there dead... and then they found another.

Before the store four Apaches lay in a tight cluster, another savage was stretched at the side of the walk. Windows of the store were shattered and broken, a great hole had been blasted in the door. At the Major's order, the troops scattered to search the town. Magruder swung down before the store.

„I'd take an oath nobody was left behind,“ Carter said.

Magruder shoved open the store. The floor inside was littered with blackened cartridge cases and strewn with empty bottles. „No one man could fire that many shells or drink that much whiskey,“ Magruder said positively.

He stooped, looking at the floor and some flour on the floor. „Blood,“ he said.

In the saloon they found another empty bottle and an empty box of cigars.

Magoon stared dismally at the empty bottle. He had been keeping count, and all but three of the bottles of his best Irish glory were gone. „Whoever it was,“ he said sorrowfully, „drank up some of the best whiskey ever brewed.“

Carter looked at the piano. Suddenly he grabbed Magoon's arm. „McGraw!“ he yelled. „'Twas Finn McGraw!“

They looked at each other. It couldn't be! And yet—who had seen him? Where was he now?

„Who,“ Magruder asked, „is McGraw?“

They explained, and the search continued. Bullets had clipped the corners of buildings, bullets had smashed water barrels along the street. Windows were broken, and there were nineteen dead Indians—but no sign of McGraw.

Then a soldier yelled from outside of town, and they went that way and gathered around. Under the edge of a mesquite bush, a shotgun beside him, his new suit torn and blood-stained, they found Finn McGraw.

Beside him lay two empty bottles of the Irish. Another, partly gone, lay near his hand. A rifle was propped in the forks of the bush, and a pistol had fallen from his holster. There was blood on his side and blood on his head and face.

„Dead!“ Carter said. „But what a battle!“

Magruder bent over the old man, then he looked up, a faint twinkle breaking the gravity of his face. „Dead, all right,“ he said. „Dead *drunk!*“

