



Fool's Peak (A Vincente, the Yaqui Story) by Wilson Campbell

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WIGGLING a bit for more comfortable adjustment in the sand hollow which was to be his bed for the night, Alf Chase drew his blanket closer, about his shoulders, and closed his eyes to the keen, low-hanging stars.

"Night, Vincente," he said sleepily.

The Yaqui merely grunted.

A lonesome breeze rattled dry pods in the mesquite on the hillside; embers of the supper fire flared in a failing struggle to hold darkness away from the sleepers. An owl hooted sadly. All things seemed well in the quiet of the night.

A rock clattered down a steep slope, and on the heels of the scattered echoes a low moan, weary and hopeless, brought the two from the Z B Ranch to wakefulness.

"Trouble," whispered Alf. "Trouble for someone. We're miles from the nearest ranch."

Guided by the moans which now came regularly, the young rancher and the tall Yaqui hurried down the coulee in which they had made camp. After crossing several small ridges, they came finally to an inert body sprawled on the gravel at the bottom of a steep slope.

Striking a match, Vincente leaned over the figure.

"An Indian boy," he said. "Papago, I think. He is exhausted from long exertion."

The Yaqui swung the lad across his broad shoulders, and with Alf guiding the way, they returned to their camp. Vincente gave the Papago sparing sips of water while the Arizonan replenished and fanned the fire. Fear was in the young Indian's eyes when he opened them, but it quickly faded at sight of his rescuers.

"*Gracias, señores,*" he said. "Like a flame of hope in the dark night I saw your fire. Señores, I beg your help! For the life of my father there is no hope, unless by dawn you have saved him!"

The boy—Alf judged that he was a lad of about seventeen—shuddered, and his face darkened in a spasm of hatred. "There are two men who would kill him!"

The boy told his story quickly. When he had finished, the two from the Z B Ranch looked at each other. There was no doubt in the minds of either of what they would do.

"We will go with you," Alf told the Papago. "Eat and rest in these few minutes while we get ready."

A short time later the three of them were riding due west toward the Sunset Mountains, in the foothills of which they had been camping. The Papago, who said his name was Joe, was mounted on the extra horse Alf had brought as a pack animal. Though they made as good time as

possible, the lad was impatient for more speed.

"I fear they will kill my father before we get there," he said time and again. "Fools! They think he knows of gold in those mountains. There is no gold in those mountains! Is not the highest of them all called Fool's Peak?"

"That is right," the Yaqui agreed, for his knowledge of that whole country was unsurpassed, "but surely there is some reason for their attack."

For a moment the boy was silent. "Yes," he admitted at length, "something else is there, but the men think it is gold. I cannot tell you now what it is, but if my father—"

He broke off, and they rode in silence for a time, each one busy with his thoughts. Alf was recalling the many adventures he and Vincente had had together, ever since the time—months ago, now—he had saved the Yaqui from misplaced and violent revenge that the cowpunchers of the Z B were about to wreak on him. The Indian's declaration of gratitude had not been empty. Taking a job on the Z B Ranch, which belonged to Alf's father, Vincente had made himself invaluable, for through his knowledge of the country he had saved the ranch countless cattle, to say nothing of the life of young Alf Chase himself, and on more than one occasion.

Alf recalled particularly the time Vincente had dragged him out of Galleon Sink while a desert-maddened prospector raced after him over treacherous, death-hiding sands.

On that occasion Alf had gone with an old desert rat to take minted gold from an ancient Spanish galleon which had lain for countless years not far from the Gulf of Lower California. They found the galleon and the gold, but the expedition came near to tragedy when their horses ran off in a severe sandstorm, and the desert rat went crazy.

Vincente, knowing the dangers of Galleon Sink, had followed; and Alf smiled as he thought of how fine the Yaqui had looked with his great, muscle-corded torso bare to the hot sun, and his blue dungarees flapping about his legs when he came to the rescue. Now, with colder weather, Vincente had put on a shirt, but his black hair still blew free in the winds, and his tough feet knew not the feel of shoe leather.

They had ridden for several hours when Joe stopped them. "We are near the place now," he said. "We go slow and careful."

When the three of them rode over the next

divide, they could see the glow of a fire reflected on a rocky hillside a little ahead. The Papago lad was hopeful at seeing the fire, for it gave him reason to believe that his father still lived.

At the bottom of the divide they dismounted, leaving the reins over their horses' heads so the animals would not wander away. Then they crept slowly forward, careful not to rattle even the smallest pebble. It seemed an age before they attained the top of the next hill, but finally they were able to peer cautiously into the next draw.

II.

They were hardly prepared for the sight that met their eyes. Stretched out on the dry gravel, stream bottom, his arms and legs tied cruelly tight to heavy stakes, his clothes ripped off his body, was an Indian who was obviously Joe's father. Near him a fire was burning brightly, flickering luridly on the prone man, making him grotesque in its wavering light. Standing over him were two men—burly, unkempt, brutal-looking fellows—who were preoccupied with their task of extracting the leads from rifle bullets with their teeth. The powder they carefully collected in a tobacco can.

"Guess we got enough tuh make the buzzard squawk a while, Ed," one of them said. "Should I pour it out on 'im?"

"Yeah. Make somethin' fancy—you're purty good at drawin'!"

The first speaker stooped over the inert captive and carefully sprinkled the powder on his bare flesh, talking to him the while.

"Yuh better come across wit' the dope on that gold, Injun," he muttered. "If yuh don't you're goin' tuh be a purty dead redskin!"

The old Papago tensed his muscles and opened his eyes to glare malignantly at his tormentor. "I never tell you," he said in a low, pain-wracked voice. "You kill me, and you find out never, also."

The black-bearded white man swore. "We'll get that kid of yourn," he said. "He slipped away from us once, but he won't be able to, the second time—not if he gets hamstrung!" He snapped out the last word viciously.

Up on the hilltop, Joe clutched the arm of each of his companions, but Vincente warned him to keep quiet.

The other man took a hand in the miserable affair. "One chance more, Injun. We're smart

hombres. We'll give yuh a sample of how awful burnin' powder hurts when it burns *on* a guy—an' then yuh can figger out fer yourself what'll happen when we puts it on yore eyeballs!"

He waited a moment, but the Papago Indian shook his head. Then, anger flaming in his cruel face, the black-bearded man suddenly stooped; and before the watchers on the hill realized what he was up to, he touched the coal of his cigarette to the train of powder that wound around the Indian's chest and stomach.

The powder flared into sputtering brilliance, making the firelight seem pale. It sped on its horrible course, burning deep. The Papago, after a moment of silent agony, screamed. The two men grinned. And then, suddenly as it had flared, the powder burned itself out.

"One more time'll fetch him, Scruggs," Ed chuckled. "Where's them extra bullets?"

Alf Chase jumped to his feet. "I've got enough bullets for you fellows," he shouted angrily. "Put up your hands!"

The two men wheeled and faced the young rancher, their arms lifted high above their heads. The six-shooter that pointed straight at them was strong enough argument that the intruder meant business.

"Where the blazes did you come from?" Scruggs wanted to know; and then his eyes widened as the Indian lad and Vincente stood up, one on either side of the Arizonan. He spat disgustedly. "Thar's what yuh get, Ed, fur lettin' that little hellion break loose!"

Ed snarled at his companion out of the corner of his wide, ugly mouth which was too red and too moist; and they might have fought right there had Alf not warned them to keep still.

Vincente hurried down the hill and disarmed them, running his hands expertly over their clothes to make sure that they carried no concealed weapons. At the same time, barely able to hold back his tears, the Papago lad was cutting the thongs which bound his father's arms and legs with Vincente's long dagger. The Indian was gritting his teeth in his determination not to moan.

Alf, looking down on the scene, blamed their folly for not having stopped the two men before the old Papago had been made to suffer so greatly; but he was later to learn that the Indian had already gone through untold agonies. And now, even as Joe severed his father's bonds, and the tortured man

tried to lift himself, he fell back with a moan and slipped into unconsciousness.

Vincente found the horses belonging to the men farther up the draw; and making them mount with their hands tied in back of them, the Yaqui whipped the animals into a gallop. They clattered away into the darkness with their helpless riders cursing and shouting back sincerely meant threats.

III.

Toward noon of the next day Alf and Vincente jumped off their horses at the foot of Fool's Peak—a towering, conical mountain that piled up into the sky, a mangled, twisted mass of stone. They stared up the jagged slope, and wondered how it would be possible to climb that cruel surface without being scratched and torn to shreds.

Alf pulled a big nickel watch out of his pocket. "Just in time, Vincente," he said. "We got twenty minutes to get to the end of the shadow of the peak!"

They left their horses where grass grew along the short-lived course of a warm spring, and lost no time in making their way up the steep, hazardous mountainside. There was no lack of footholds on the hard, harsh lava; but they had to be careful lest the sharp stone tear their flesh.

Fortunately, however, the winter sun cast a long shadow from the southern sky, and the shade from the peak reached almost to the foot of the great mountain. By dint of breathless effort they got to the apex of the shadow just two minutes before twelve.

"Where the shadow of Fool's Peak falls at high noon," Alf said thoughtfully, looking about curiously. "See anything, Vincente?"

The Yaqui was staring intently at the point of the long shadow from the mountain above. After a moment he grunted with satisfaction. "Joe and his father spoke the truth," he said. "Here we can enter the mountain!"

As he spoke Vincente reached out an experimental foot and threw his weight on it. A huge block of lava teetered with the pressure; and a moment later the two of them were tugging at it vigorously. With very little difficulty they slid it aside and stared into a hole about four feet in diameter that went straight down for a distance of perhaps seven feet. Its black sides were astonishingly slick and shiny, and at the bottom

they could see a passage leading into the mountain.

"A quarter of an hour late, and we wouldn't ever have found the darned place," Alf said. "Well, are we going in, Vincente?"

For answer the tall Yaqui put his feet over the edge and slid into the hole. "Drop the torches to me," he directed. "Then, while I hold you on my shoulders, you shall pull the cover block back in place."

Alf dropped the bundle of torches Joe had given them that morning and grinned down at his friend. "Hot down there, Vincente?" he asked. "That's a fumarole you're in—sort of a safety valve that lava and gas used to come flowing out of. If it isn't hot now, it was once. We can be glad that Fool's Peak has only been playing scenery for the last couple of hundred years."

"You talk much," Vincente said dryly. "When you are inside, this volcano will be active once more."

Astraddle Vincente's shoulders a few seconds later, Alf tugged at the big block of lava which had concealed the fumarole. It was harder to move from this strained position, but after a few moments it settled back into place with a thud.

"I wish," Alf said as they lighted their torches, "Joe had told us what to look for. I'm kind of thinking it would help considerably."

"No," the Yaqui said, "for now we will look at all things and see a great deal more."

The turn at the bottom of the fumarole took them down a gentle slope, and as they traveled along the passage the top got higher, and presently they were able to stand upright. They went forward cautiously, however, for they knew that volcanic formations are often treacherous, and the Papagoes had warned them to be sure of every step they took.

After they had traveled about a hundred yards they came to a large cavern which dropped suddenly to a depth beyond the light glow of their torches. Picking their way carefully, they descended more than a hundred feet. It was a vast place, and the darkness of it pressed close upon their flickering lights. Save for the slow, unvarying drip, drip, drip of water, there was no sound.

They felt their way about cautiously, and came to a growth of stalagmites, black as ebony, and gleaming with the moisture of the unceasing drops of water that spattered on their pointed tops. Most of them were taller than Vincente, and the largest Alf judged to be over fifteen feet high. The young

rancher gazed upward, but the companion stalactites were lost in the gloomy darkness of the cavern.

"Golly," Alf said, "this place is big enough to put a city in! Wish we had it on the Z B Ranch."

Exploring thoroughly, they came upon all manner of twisted shapes of lava, and always there were the gleaming stalagmites, pointing up eternally, like so many stony exclamation points. It was a magic, eerie place, with its echoing drops of water; its wild, insane formations, as if here Nature had at last gone mad. They spoke in whispers, and their voices sounded loud and harsh. But they found nothing that could be of any possible value.

"Whatever we have come to find," Vincente said thoughtfully, "must be farther in the mountain, or far down in the earth. There are four passages leading out of this place—and two of them go straight down. I think we better try the others first!"

They went to the largest opening their search had disclosed, and after following it for fully a hundred yards as it wandered up and down in the heart of Fool's Peak, they came to an abrupt halt against a wall of lava, just as they thought they were getting somewhere.

The next passage meandered even more, but it finally gave into a second cavern, even vaster than the first, and, as they had traveled steadily downward, many feet below it. Here again they found stalagmites, but this time they were of purest white, and their myriad crystals gleamed in the light of the torches.

Alf, looking up again, was astonished to see a patch of blue. He moved away from Vincente until he stood under it, and saw that it came through a long fumarole, or chimney, such as they had used in entering the mountain. And as he looked, a head peered down at him, black and unrecognizable against the sky.

Evidently the man above could see the young Arizonan, for the head was quickly withdrawn. Alf still stood there, staring upward, holding his blazing torch in his hand. As he looked, the head and shoulders reappeared, a spurt of flame jumped out from them, and a bullet spattered at Alf's feet. He jumped aside quickly, and heard the rolling echoes of the shot. He drew his own gun and fired into the bottom of the fumarole, but there was no evidence that the random shot was successful.

"What's the matter?" Vincente called across the cavern; and in that moment Alf knew why the head

had seemed familiar.

"Scruggs!" Alf shouted back. "They've trailed us here!"

"Umph," Vincente grunted. "Well, they haven't found a way in—yet. Of course, there may be other ways of getting inside the mountain, but if it's gold they're going to all this trouble after, they're going to be two mad hombres, Don Alfredo. There is no gold in all this mountain."

"That won't keep them from making trouble, Vincente. I've got an idea that they don't like us any too well."

"Let them come," the Yaqui replied. "They cannot surprise us, for this place has too many echoes. We shall go on and look for the mysterious wealth the Papagoes told us about."

IV.

The second chamber was even more startlingly beautiful than the first, but it proved to be as bare of anything of value. They wasted little time in it, now that the presence of the men outside gave them a reason for hurry. They followed the first horizontal outlet they came to, but it soon gave into a small but amazingly lovely room. The place was dome-shaped, and wholly covered with a crust of glowing crystals, white as snow save when light fell directly on them, and then flashing fire like myriads of diamonds. The whole place blazed magnificently and dazzlingly, and Alf was reluctant to leave it.

"If we don't find a durned thing," he said in a whisper, "that was worth the trip!"

Back in the large cavern, they immediately turned into the next passage, and trailed along its winding course. They walked until Alf began to think that they had come to a tunnel without end, and still they went on. Above them they could see the smudge of smoke on the stone, and they felt at last they were on the right path. The way was mostly uphill, at times becoming so steep that they had to stop for a breath of air.

Quite suddenly, when Alf had given up hope of ever reaching to the end of the old lava vent, they came upon the most spectacular cavern of all. Its dimensions were staggering, and the place seemed comparatively bright. High above, Alf counted the bottom ends of five fumaroles, and through these the light streamed in long, clear shafts.

On the far side of the gigantic space there was a

huge outlet, now blocked by fallen lava and stone. Vincente said he thought it was debris from the crater for they had traveled far enough underground to be near the center of the extinct volcano; and he knew that the crater had fallen in.

But the cavern itself was not the thing that interested the two from the Z B most. In the center of the great natural underground hall was a pile of bones—such bones as neither of them had ever seen before. They hurried over to examine them.

"Looks like a dinosaur's happy hunting ground," Alf commented as he poked with his foot at a huge curved piece of bone that obviously had once been a rib.

Vincente's face was beaming. "We have found the great wealth of which the Papagoes told us," he announced.

Alf stared at him. "Bones! How come?"

"Ivory," said Vincente. "Look at those tusks! A fortune of it is here!"

The Yaqui was right. Mingled with the bones of the scattered skeletons of the prehistoric monsters, were long, darkened tusks. In every case they had fallen out of the skulls to which they had once belonged. Alf picked one of them up. For all the world, with its covering of dust, it looked like some of the smaller stalagmites they had examined.

"A fortune," he repeated. "I'll say. There's enough ivory here to make billiard balls for—"

Vincente held up his hand for silence. "I hear a noise," he said. "Your friends, Scruggs and Ed, have found a way inside."

Alf regarded the pile of bones speculatively. "I've got an idea, Vincente," he told his friend, and his gray eyes sparkled as he outlined the scheme.

Vincente listened, and when Alf had finished, the Yaqui's dark face crinkled into a broad smile. "Then we must get to work," he said, "*muy pronto!*"

Half an hour later not one ivory tusk remained with the pile of bones. From time to time the two could hear noises from Scruggs and his companion as they wandered about in the outer caverns, but every sound was amplified so that it was difficult to follow their progress.

Alf Chase and Vincente concealed themselves behind a cluster of stalagmites and stalactites which had grown to such proportions that they had joined to become monster columns reaching from the floor of the cavern to the vaults above. They made a perfect defense, for nothing less than small

artillery could have shattered them, and between the separate columns were openings through which it would be possible to fire at an enemy. They had the farther advantage of being in the darkest part of the vast submountain room.

While they waited—for they had concluded that the best way of dealing with the two overambitious men was to let them do the seeking—the young rancher and the Indian advanced theories as to how the great skeletons might have gotten into the heart of the extinct volcano.

“In Africa,” Alf said, “the elephants are supposed to go to a far-distant place, in the jungle when they feel that they are going to die. It is said that all elephants have died there—when death came naturally—for hundreds of years. Maybe the dinosaurs—or whatever they were—came here for the same reason.”

“Maybe,” Vincente said, “but I doubt it. In this country there may have been a great drought—we know that once there were tall forests here. But inside this mountain there was water, even as there is now, while it is wholly dry outside. The beasts came for water, entering through that wide passage which is now fallen in. Finding water, they drank; and perhaps it was poisoned by salts of arsenic or some such thing, dissolved out of the lava.”

Alf nodded. There were any possible number of explanations, and one man’s was as good as another’s. “I wish those two hombres would happen along,” he complained. “I’m getting hungry!”

As if willing to be obliging for once in their lives, the two men who had tortured the Papago the night before appeared on the opposite side of the cavern.

“Halt!”

Alf’s voice sent the echoes flying. In that high, vaulted place it sounded like rolling thunder. The men stopped abruptly.

“Who says so?” Scruggs shouted back. His voice was big, but it had a ring of uncertainty. In that echoing place he could not tell where the Indian and the Arizonan were concealed.

“Now,” Alf shouted back, “you fellows have looked around, and I guess you are convinced that there is nothing here. What you expected to find when you were torturing that poor Papago is more than I can see. Anyhow, there’s no sense in fighting over nothing, is there?”

The two men whispered, and after a time

Scruggs shouted back: “Guess you’re right, young fella—but we wanta be sure first. Yuh come on out, an’ we’ll all take a look-see, an’ no hard feelin’.”

Alf started to show himself, but the Yaqui restrained him. “Those men are no good,” he said in a low voice. “You wait.”

V.

Taking a match from his shirt pocket, Vincente lighted it. Its flame seemed bright in that gloom—and to the men on the far side of the cave, it flickered behind the stalagmites, making them seem like the shadows of men. While the match still burned, Scruggs whipped out his gun and fired. The bullet pinged away from one of the limestone columns, and Vincente snuffed out the flame.

Alf, in anger at this lack of faith, drew out his own gun and fired. A cry of pain told of some success. He saw Scruggs holding his shoulder as he leaped into the protection of the passageway.

“Keep on firing,” Vincente directed. “I’m going over there and get them!”

As Alf fired two more shots, the Yaqui left his hiding place and darted across the irregular floor of the subterranean vault. In that half gloom it was hard to follow his progress, but a shot from Alf’s gun now and then kept the two men from seeing him at all.

Alf ceased firing when he saw that Vincente was standing at one side of the passage mouth. After a little bit, Scruggs ventured out, his gun in hand.

Like a striking snake, Vincente’s arm flashed out to hit the man a painful blow on the wrist. His gun flew into the air and fell clatteringly out of sight. Ed, his companion, rushed out at the moment of attack, but the Yaqui’s ready dagger discouraged him from violence, and he handed over his gun without daring to use it.

A moment later Alf had joined the Yaqui, covering the two men with his sixgun. They were sullen and silent.

“These men can help us carry out the things we gathered,” Vincente said to the young rancher. Turning to the prisoners, he directed: “Take off your shirts—we need ‘em.”

Muttering, they obeyed. “Yuh did find somethin’,” Scruggs growled. “We’ll get yuh fer this!”

“Only some souvenirs,” Vincente said,

accepting the reluctantly proffered shirts.

While Alf held the captives, Vincente went to the spot where he had stood the ivory tusks upright, and made a show of breaking them off. One by one he piled them on the shirts, and then he used his own and Alf's. The men looked on contemptuously.

"Shucks," Ed said, "that's what yuh came in here fer, eh?"

Alf nodded. "And you are going to help carry 'em out," he said. "They're pretty heavy."

At last they were ready, and each took a bundle, Scruggs getting the lightest on account of his wounded shoulder. The men groaned and complained at having to carry a load of rock like a couple of burros, but the Arizonan reminded them that they had brought all their troubles on themselves.

It was late afternoon when they were out of the volcano's many twisting passages. Scruggs, in a burst of talkativeness, explained how they had found the loose block covering the fumarole. Then he told how they had seen the Papago coming from the mountains many times, and had concluded that he had a hidden gold mine somewhere about the foot of Fool's Peak.

Now that there wasn't any gold, he said, he didn't bear the Yaqui and young Chase any malice. He felt that his wound was about what he deserved for being such a darned fool.

It was late afternoon when they slung the

improvised packs which Vincente had made of the shirts over the waiting horses. Alf handed Ed a real stalagmite to examine in the daylight.

"Rock," Ed snorted. "Just plain, purty rock. But it ain't worth nothin'. I'm darned if I see what yuh want with so much of it!" He looked with puzzled eyes at the long, smooth shapes of the tusks showing through the shirts.

"Don't you worry too much about it," Alf advised. "They make fine door weights, or gateposts if they're big enough. I tell you what. We are coming back for bigger ones. I'll give you both a job helping me get them back to the ranch."

"Not on yer life," Scruggs said. "I've had enough carryin' fer a year. Ed an' me is leavin' this neck of the woods anyhow."

Vincente nodded approvingly. "Just as well," he said. "You are lucky. We do not forget things around the Palo Verde Valley. If you come back—be careful!"

The men rode away in silence. After they had disappeared, Alf and Vincente turned their own mounts, heavily laden with a treasure in ivory, southward toward the Z B Ranch.

The adventures of Vincente, the Yaqui Indian, and his friend Alf Chase, are always exciting and unusual. Whenever they take the trail it is a sure thing that something out of the ordinary is going to happen. Meet Vincente again in WILD WEST WEEKLY and read about the strange country of the great Southwest.