

Robert W. Buchanan (1841-1901)

9 *Phil Blood's Leap*

A Tale of the Gold-Seekers.

'There's some think Injins pison . . .' [It was Parson Pete who spoke,  
As we sat there, in the camp-fire glare, like shadows among the smoke.  
'Twas the dead of night, and in the light our faces burn'd bright red,  
And the wind all round made a screeching sound, and the pines roared overhead.

Ay, Parson Pete was talking; we called him Parson Pete, 5  
For you must learn he'd a talking turn, and handled things so neat;  
He'd a preaching style, and a winning smile, and, when all talk was spent,  
Six-shooter had he, and a sharp bowie, to p'int his argyment.

Some one had spoke of the Injin folk, and we had a guess, you bet,  
They might be creeping, while we were sleeping, to catch us in the net; 10  
And half were asleep and snoring deep, while the others vigil kept,  
But devil a one let go his gun, whether he woke or slept.]

'There's some think Injins pison, and others count 'em scum,  
And night and day they are melting away, clean into Kingdom Come;  
But don't you go and make mistakes, like many dern'd fools I've known, 15  
For dirt is dirt, and snakes is snakes, but an Injin's flesh and bone!

We were seeking gold in the Texan hold, and we'd had a blaze of luck,  
More rich and rare the stuff ran there at every foot we struck;  
Like men gone wild we t'iled and t'iled, and never seemed to tire,  
The hot sun beamed, and our faces streamed with the sweat of a mad desire. 20

I was Captain then of the mining men, and I had a precious life,  
For a wilder set I never met at derringer and knife;  
Nigh every day there was some new fray, a bullet in some one's brain,  
And the vicioussest brute to stab and to shoot, was an Imp of Hell from Maine.

Phil Blood. Well, he was six foot three, with a squint to make you skeer'd, 25  
His face all scabb'd, and twisted and stabb'd, with carroty hair and beard;

Sour as the drink in Bitter Chink, sharp as a grizzly's squeal,  
Limp in one leg, for a leaden egg had nick'd him in the heel.

No beauty was he, but a sight to see, all stript to the waist and bare,  
With his grim-set jaws, and his panther paws, and his hawk's eye all aglare; 30  
With pick and spade in sun and shade he labour'd like darnation,  
But when his spell was over, — well! he was fond of his recreation!

And being a crusty kind of cuss, the only sport he had,  
When work was over, seemed to *us* a bit too rough and bad;  
For to put some lead in a comrade's head was the greatest fun in life, 35  
And the sharpest joke he was known to poke was the p'int of his precious knife.

But game to the bone was Phil, I'll own, and he always fought most fair,  
With as good a will to be killed as kill, true grit as any there:  
Of honour too, like me or you, he'd a scent, though not so keen,  
Would rather be riddled thro' and thro', than do what he thought mean. 40

But his eddication to his ruination had not been over nice,  
And his stupid skull was choking full of vulgar prejudice;  
With anything white he'd drink, or he'd fight in fair and open fray;  
But to murder and kill was his wicked will, if an Injin came his way!

'A sarpent's hide has pison inside, and an Injin's heart's the same, 45  
If he seems your friend for to gain his end, look out for the sarpent's game;  
Of the snakes that crawl, the worst of all is the snake in a skin of red,  
A spotted Snake, and no mistake!' that's what he always said.

Well, we'd jest struck our bit of luck, and were wild as raving men,  
When who should stray to our camp one day, but Black Panther, the Cheyenne; 50  
Drest like a Christian, all a-grin, the old one joins our band,  
And tho' the rest look'd black as sin, he shakes *me* by the hand.

Now, the poor old cuss had been good to us, and I knew that he was true, —  
I'd have trusted him with life and limb as soon as I'd trust *you*;  
For tho' his wit was gone a bit, and he drank like any fish, 55  
His heart was kind, he was well-inclined, as even a white could wish.

Food had got low, for we didn't know the run of the hunting-ground,  
And our hunters were sick, when, jest in the nick, the friend in need was found;  
For he knew the place like his mother's face (or better, a heap, you'd say,  
Since she was a squaw of the roaming race, and himself a cast-away). 60

Well, I took the Panther into camp, and the critter was well content,  
And off with him, on the hunting tramp, next day our hunters went,  
And I reckon that day and the next we didn't want for food,  
And only one in the camp looked vext — that Imp of Hell, Phil Blood.

Nothing would please his contrary ideas! an Injin made him rile! 65  
He didn't speak, but I saw on his cheek a kind of an ugly smile;  
And I knew his skin was hatching sin, and I kept the Panther apart,  
For the Injin he was too blind to see the dirt in a white man's heart!

Well, one fine day, we a-resting lay at noon-time by the creek,  
The red sun blazed, and we felt half-dazed, too beat to stir or speak; 70  
'Neath the alder trees we stretched at ease, and we couldn't see the sky,  
For the lian-flowers in bright blue showers hung through the branches high.

It was like the gleam of a fairy-dream, and I felt like earth's first Man,  
In an Eden bower with the yellow flower of a cactus for a fan;  
Oranges, peaches, grapes, and figs, cluster'd, ripen'd, and fell, 75  
And the cedar scent was pleasant, blent with the soothing 'cacia smell.

The squirrels red ran overhead, and I saw the lizards creep,  
And the woodpecker bright with the chest so white tapt like a sound in sleep;  
I dreamed and dozed with eyes half-closed, and felt like a three-year child,  
And, a plantain blade on his brow for a shade, even Phil Blood look'd mild. 80

Well, back, jest then, came our hunting men, with the Panther at their head,  
Full of his fun was every one, and the Panther's eyes were red,  
And he skipt about with grin and shout, for he'd had a drop that day,  
And he twisted and twirled, and squeal'd and skirl'd, in the foolish Injin way.

To the waist all bare Phil Blood lay there, with only his knife in his belt, 85  
And I saw his bloodshot eyeballs stare, and I knew how fierce he felt, —  
When the Injin dances with grinning glances around him as he lies,

With his painted skin and his monkey grin, — and leers into his eyes!

Then before I knew what I should do Phil Blood was on his feet,  
And the Injin could trace the hate in his face, and his heart began to beat; 90  
And, 'Git out o' the way,' he heard them say, 'for he means to hev your life!'  
But before he could fly at the warning cry, he saw the flash of the knife.

'Run, Panther run!' cried each mother's son, and the Panther took the track;  
With a wicked glare, like a wounded bear, Phil Blood sprang at his back.  
Up the side so steep of the cañon deep the poor old critter sped, 95  
And the devil's limb ran after him, till they faded overhead.

Now, the spot of ground where our luck was found was a queerish place, you'll mark,  
Jest under the jags of the mountain crags and the precipices dark;  
Far up on high, close to the sky, the two crags leant together,  
Leaving a gap, like an open trap, with a gleam of golden weather. 100

A pathway led from the beck's dark bed up to the crags on high,  
And along that path the Injin fled, fast as a man could fly.  
Some shots were fired, for I desired to keep the white beast back;  
But I missed my man, and away he ran on the flying Injin's track.

Now all below is thick, you know, with 'cacia, alder, and pine, 105  
And the bright shrubs deck the side of the beck, and the lian flowers so fine.  
For the forest creeps all under the steeps, and feathers the feet of the crags  
With boughs so thick that your path you pick, like a steamer among the snags.

But right above you, the crags, Lord love you! are bare as this here hand,  
And your eyes you wink at the bright blue chink, as looking up you stand. 110  
If a man should pop in that trap at the top, he'd never rest arm or leg,  
Till neck and crop to the bottom he'd drop — and smash on the stones like an egg!

'Come back, you cuss! come back to us! and let the critter be!'  
I screamed out loud, while the men in a crowd stood grinning at them and me . . .  
But up they went, and my shots were spent, and at last they disappeared, — 115  
One minute more, and we gave a roar, for the Injin had leapt, and *cleared!*

A leap for a deer, not a man, to clear, — and the bloodiest grave below!

But the critter was smart and mad with fear, and he went like a bolt from a bow!  
Close after him came the devil's limb, with his eyes as dark as death,  
But when he came to the gulch's brim, I reckon he paused for breath! 120

For breath at the brink! but — a white man shrink, when a red had passed so neat?  
I knew Phil Blood too well to think he'd turn his back dead beat!  
He takes one run, leaps up in the sun, and bounds from the slippery ledge,  
And he clears the hole, but — God help his soul! just touches the tother edge!

One scrambling fall, one shriek, one call, from the men that stand and stare, — 125  
Black in the blue where the sky looks thro', he staggers, dwarf'd up there;  
The edge he touches, then sinks, and clutches the rock — our eyes grow dim —  
I turn away — what's that they say? — he's a-hanging on to the brim!

. . . On the very brink of the fatal chink a ragged shrub there grew,  
And to that he clung, and in silence swung betwixt us and the blue, 130  
And as soon as a man could run I ran the way I'd seen them flee,  
And I came mad-eyed to the chasm's side, and — what do you think I see?

All up? Not quite. Still hanging? Right! But he'd torn away the shrub;  
With lolling tongue he clutch'd and swung — to what? ay, that's the rub!  
I saw him glare and dangle in air, — for the empty hole he trode, — 135  
Help'd by a *pair of hands* up there! — The Injin's? Yes, by God!

Now, boys, look here! for many a year I've roam'd in this here land —  
And many a sight both day and night I've seen that I think grand;  
Over the whole wide world I've been, and I know both things and men,  
But the biggest sight I've ever seen was the sight I saw jest then. 140

I held my breath — so nigh to death Phil Blood swung hand and limb,  
And it seem'd to us all that down he'd fall, with the Panther after him,  
But the Injin at length put out his strength — and another minute past, —  
—Then safe and sound to the solid ground he drew Phil Blood, at last!!

Saved? True for you! By an Injin too! — and the man he meant to kill! 145  
There all alone, on the brink of stone, I see them standing still;  
Phil Blood gone white, with the struggle and fright, like a great mad bull at bay,  
And the Injin meanwhile, with a half-skeer'd smile, ready to spring away.

What did Phil do? Well, I watched the two, and I saw Phil Blood turn back,  
Bend over the brink and take a blink right down the chasm black, 150  
Then stooping low for a moment or so, he sheath'd his bowie bright,  
Spat slowly down, and watch'd with a frown, as the spittle sank from sight!

Hands in his pockets, eyes downcast, silent, thoughtful, and grim,  
While the Panther, grinning as he passed, still kept his eyes on him,  
Phil Blood strolled slow to his mates below, down by the mountain track, 155  
With his lips set tight and his face all white, and the Panther at his back.

I reckon they stared when the two appeared! but never a word Phil spoke,  
Some of them laughed and others jeered, —but he let them have their joke;  
He seemed amazed, like a man gone dazed, the sun in his eyes too bright,  
And for many a week, in spite of their cheek, he never offered to fight. 160

And after that day he changed his play, and kept a civiller tongue,  
And whenever an Injin came that way, his contrairy head he hung;  
But whenever he heard the lying word, '*It's a LIE!*' Phil Blood would groan;  
'*A Snake is a Snake, make no mistake! but an Injin's flesh and bone!*'

1882

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