

The Coquihalla Wreck and Other Poems

Francis Cecil Whitehouse

1932

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Title: The Coquihalla Wreck and Other Poems

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: Francis Cecil Whitehouse (1879-1959)

Date first posted: July 20, 2021

Date last updated: July 20, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210740

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Transcriber's note: a Contents has been added for reader convenience]

**The RYERSON
POETRY
CHAP-BOOKS**

The Coquihalla Wreck And Other Poems

**By
FRANCIS CECIL WHITEHOUSE**

This is Chap-Book Number Fifty-eight

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For the longer, more ambitious poems of this author, the reader is referred to *REBELS and OTHER LOVE POEMS*, issued under the name of *RAMÓN FRANCISCO*. "Kinistin's Death Song" and "The Salamander's Song" are borrowed from the unpublished manuscript "Peggy, Ben & Co."

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***The* RYERSON
POETRY**

CHAP-BOOKS

The Coquihalla Wreck and Other Poems

THE COQUIHALLA WRECK (1926)

(A RAILWAY EPIC)

But remember, please, the Law by which we live.

We are not built to comprehend a lie.

We can neither love nor pity nor forgive.

If you make a slip in handling us you die!

Kipling.

When the Creator tired—

That long third day—

Of mud and rock and laval scum,

He threw the residue

In one great heap

And let it go!

And Man, for better name.

Calls it the Coquihalla Pass.

So let it stay:
God's rubbish-heap!

But Man was not content;
He must traverse
What God had left a dump;
And cut a line with errless transit
For his traffic's steel:
Fearing but little
Of God's residue!—
And caring less,
If such a line could serve his needs
And swell his revenues.

Years passed: no sacrifice was called.
The traveller said:
"My! ain't it wild!"
And sipped his tea
In callous comfort:
Whilst the crew stood by their brakes,
And hoped that luck
Would still stand by them
Down the treach'rous grades—
And see them safely home.

It came at last—only a freight:
Some trainmen working
For their daily bread,
And scarcely "news"—
Not in a front-page sense.
A heavy train it was, of forty cars
And "pusher" on behind:

The boxes filled
With lead and zinc from Tadanac,
Bound for the Orient.

'Twas eight o'clock: a fine September morn.
And mountain tamaracks
Were tinting brown—
Fair nature's warning
Of approaching Fall.
The train was in the wilderness
Near Jessica;
The western slope,
But fifteen miles from Hope,
'Twixt Portia and Lear.

Bob Marks, the engineer,
Had sensed it first—
The gathering speed; and wondered why
She was not holding right.
"Maybe, there's some cut-out," was his
First thought: opened his sand valve
And—gave her the works.
But, as the rock-cuts flew the faster by,
Knew they were done!—
Blew one wild blast for brakes.

Ray Letts, the youthful fireman,
Stepped to where
The gauge made all too plain.
"Bob, where's yer air?" he shouted.
"God! she's got it all,"
The engineer replied.

"She's gone! and that's the truth.
You're wasted here . . .
With nothin' to be done . . .
Time ... if you hurry!
Lad ... you'd best unload."

And, thus excused from death,
The younger man put match to pipe
And took a drag of comfort
For his soul's repose;
Then had his final say:
"If I'd a club, I'd sure go back
And help 'em set 'em up.
In any case, I ain't the quittin' kind."
And lolling there—content to wait—
He also served.

Back on the "pusher" engine, too,
They'd doubted his control—
And, at the blast for brakes,
The fireman got his orders quick:
"To get out front and pull the pin."
Down Barwick climbed
Upon the swaying pilot;
There, with clutching fingers
Pulled the pin—
Thus saved the last nine cars.

High in the cupola, Jack Quinn, the "con,"
Took one glance at his gauge—
And opened wide the valve.
Then, grabbed a club,

And hand-braked the caboose.
Up to the platform
Of the next box climbed
With practised feet;
Set that, and carried on: yet knew
He'd put in his last trip.

The brakeman, Stringer, some ten cars ahead,
Was setting up like mad.
He'd done his thinking quick,
Old "Mickey" had—
Not waiting for the blast.
The good deck made for speed,
At that—three cars in forty flat!
First with his hands
He'd spin the wheel with cunning skill,
Then give the club a twirl.

From right behind the tender,
Johnson, too, had followed his mate's lead.
But he was never much
Up on the running board—
When she was rambling fast.
He'd set his share—
Eight brakes before he went!
And might have made one more,
But, as she lurched, he missed...
They both had seen him go.

The end must quickly come:
For now the train
Was rolling in her throes—

Like drunken thing,
Lost to all sense of shame.
Where each he clung, Stringer and Quinn
Had waved their last good-byes.
The signal meant:
"It's nigh on sixty now—
We're gone at the next curve."

And, at the curve they went:
A wooden trestle—
Clear one hundred feet
To piled destruction
On the rocks below.
Then fiend fire joined in,
And made Hell's furnace
Of the runaway:
Man and his works—
Gold and base metals—
One infernal mass!

That's all the tale: forgotten now,
Except where trainmen yarn
Of bygone wrecks
They—lucky!—missed,
Or, might well have been in.
So, ere my memory fades
And vision dims,
I set it down
In halting verse—
To linger yet awhile:
This epic of brave men.

RUDYARD KIPLING

Down the long years from youth to age,—
 As master craftsman joyous sings,
 He wrought with rich imaginings
 In artistry of his device:
With pictured thought he filled the page,
 Nor ever used his colours twice.

He read, what though the light were dim
 Of star-lit night or funeral pyre,
 The heart of man and his desire,
 And plied his knowledge down the years:
So, laughing, made men laugh with him,
 Or sighing, moved a world to tears.

Impatient lest a tragic dawn
 Should find th' allotted task undone—
 Some gems of precious worth unstrung—
He, ever eager, gave us these
Fine treasures of fancy born—
 Rich pillage of the Seven Seas!

Well may he, pausing, rest content
 Who, caring nothing for renown,
 Dreamed mighty dreams and set them down
 In variation to amaze,—

For later Ages' wonderment
And unborn critics' humble praise!

THE ARCHERS OF MONS

The works of Man are puny in the light
Of God's inheritance
Of power, and will, and all sufficing faith:
For Man is Man!
And limited, in fact, to his imaginings
To hold, to move, what he may
Grasp or stir—a beetle with his pellet!—
Grossly magnified.

And, when the roaring flood will not
Be checked,
Or hurtling rocks of avalanche
And snow defy the breastworks of his hands,
Then sickness comes to aching limbs
And mind;
And grasping for the cause of his defeat
He faces death resigned,—
For this is weariness.

The body crumbles only when the will
Is overcome
To sorrowful surrender, and will raise
The proud portcullis to the lustful foe:

"See! here is blood!" he cries,
 "We cannot stay their hosts
With our poor crippled means!"—
 And so!—it was at Mons.

Oh! piteous thing! when grim-lipped men must taste
 The vinegar of shame and impotence;
And brave heads bow in knowledge
 Of defeat,
E'en though their cause be right,—
 And this they know full well!
Then in their hearts are spoke
 The shameful words:
"There is no God!" they cry, and bite their lips,
 "There is, indeed, no God!"

And, breathing blasphemy in broken faith, they looked
 Towards the foe
Now rolling down like tide in flood
 And undeniable;
And shook their fists in childish rage—
 These men!
Then were they each to know for once
 And ne'er forget—these men!
 The Glory of the Lord.

For 'tween the foe and their poor lines
 Had come
Another Host, with bows and arrowed quivers
 At their sides;
And all were capped with light, and close above
 A brilliant sheen

Added illumination to the Sun
That friend and foe
Might see.

Below was mist, 'pon which the Archers floated,
And concealed
Their nether parts from curious eyes
Of men:
Nor were they seen to draw a bow,
Or use a feathered shaft;
Just motionless they stayed 'twixt the opposing hosts—
This Host in fleecy white.

And, to the souls of men prepared for death,
Came peace and comfortude;
For worldly soldiers seemed to understand
That still there was the God
Who'd dried a sea to let His people through;
And calmed a sea to give men faith in Him—
In truth, that He was *still* the God of Gods,
And *still* the Lord of Hosts.

And 'gainst the Passive Band the conquering Huns
Spurred their unwilling steeds,
With cruel rowel and impious hurriedness,
But to no purpose! Nor, is it to ask
Who *these* might be,—a Heavenly Guard,
Or old Crusaders sent once more to Earth
For His good purposes!
They—were the Will of God!

JE T'ADORE

If I am dumb, 'tis not because I'm blind
To what is beautiful
In life and love
And thy dear eyes,
But that their violet depths
Are far away
As purple witcheries on distant hills,
To promise, yet deny.
For me 'twere poetry to kiss thy lips,—
Forbidden both in act
And utterance!
So, am I dumb
Throughout the noisy day,
But, when the silent stars their watches keep
My soul shall sing to thine.

I know a Dreamland garden where the sun
For ever shines
Through trailing vines
And leafy canopy;
Where passion flowers and sweet azaleas blend
In an exotic fragrance
With the rose: and spirit song-birds call
In low note melodies.
Here, mossy paths invite the feet of loves
In other worlds denied,

And these may wander
Till their lips unite
To give soft kisses as of butterflies:
O! wilt thou come and share dream hours with me
When my soul sings to thine?

DREAMLAND'S GARDEN

And some there are who miss the Golden Gate
To Dreamland's garden
And its fragrant bowers:
The Stonecrop, tied to rocks
Her weary years,
And frigid Iceplants
All unpassionate.
Yet others fail—conscious of their desire
To venture in and know
What joys they may:
But hang their heads like Canterbury-bells
And all too timid vassals
Of the shade.
Still others climb the ramparts to despair—
As Wall-flowers fade and die.

But we be man and woman, and may walk
These paths of love
In perfect faith
Unstintingly:

For now 'tis daring night,
And we may charm
Our wills to glad surrender, and may speak
Sweet whispered words
To compensate the day:
Nor let the timid flowers fashion our thoughts
To vain regrets;
Nor hang our heads in fearful doubt
That each dear kiss is warm.
For this is Dreamland's garden,
And its Goddess rules:
Where love is all, and each doth willing give,
Her garden is adorned.

MAY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

In apple-blossom time I sing
Because the hills are drawn
In pastel shades; and carols ring
Of earth and hope re-born.

I sing because the eager bees
Once more delight my sight;
And hawk-moths haunt the lilac trees
Beneath the dome of night.

I sing that silv'ry troutlets leap;
That waters broad and fair

Waft from the tangled forest's keep
A balsam scented air.

I sing the swallows 'neath the eaves,
Of blue-birds on the bough—
That rustling Winter-crumpled leaves
May be forgotten now.

For hope is of the mountains,
Of beck'ning vales between,
Of sparkling freshet fountains
And gorges budding green:

Of winsome Nature, wooed and won,
Decked out in glad array
To dance beneath new Summer's sun
A joyous wedding day.

This! year by year, the call of Spring,
This! the recurring rhyme:
Wherefore, I say, my soul doth sing
In apple-blossom time.

À TOI

So small a thing I ask—the hum of bees,
The wayward melody of brook and trees,
The azure blue.

To me the fragrant violet never dies;
Shadows are dreams through which my spirit flies
To you.

I ask so little of the world without,
The song of birds to compass me about,
The distant view,
The snow in patches on the mountain side,
The mystic stillnesses of even-tide—
And you.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FOLLOWING POEM

Kinistin, truly an Indian Chief of the old order, died in the Spring of 1890 "when the buds were on the poplar trees, just before they break into leaf"—in accordance with his own prophecy. By "old order" is meant that he was a pagan, worshipping the Great Spirit, Kitche Manitou; practising polygamy, and having no dealings with white men. No Government "treaty money" was accepted by his band until after his death, nor did they, prior to his death, live on a "reserve."

Kinistin was a man of magnificent physique—a good six feet in moccasins; broad chested and scarred with several

arrow and bullet wounds received in fights with the Blackfeet of the Plains. He wore only a loin cloth and leather leggings reaching to the thigh, with a coloured blanket or buffalo robe as a wrap in the winter.

As for being improvident (the white man's conception of an Indian) Kinistin's wisdom in caring for his people was remarkable: winter and summer camping and hunting grounds, food reserves, policy in dealing with other tribes, etc., all being planned with infinite care.

KINISTIN'S DEATH SONG

"Born to a Chieftain's head-dress;
Trained to the Council seat;
Brave through the blood of fathers
Who never had known defeat:
Mine was no lowly portion—
Hark! do ye hear that sound?
The hoofs of a thousand thousand
That thunder, and shake the ground!

Mighty the herds of the plain-land,
Countless as leaves in the Fall;
Noisy the lakes with the wild-fowl,
And the honk of the gray goose call.
Strong were the Braves in their war-paint,
Dauntless, and free from care:

Pure as the snows of the Winter
The hearts of our maidens fair.

Rich was my Wigwam in trophies
Of Buffalo, Elk and Bear
Killed for the joy of the hunting
Or a love-lock of raven hair:
Pelts of the Marten and Beaver,
A thousand, and yet again—
Wealth! that is less than nothing!
Life! that is all in vain!

Wisely I guided the Nation;
Counselled in peace and war:
Checking the evil of passion,
And holding the ancient law.
Free in the Land of my Fathers:
Proud that the Great-bow bent
To me, the Chief of a People
That prospered, and was content.

Then came the white man in envy,
Coveting, sordid and sly;
Cruising the wealth of our forests,
Measuring fields with his eye:
Fogging our brains with his liquors,
Tricking with paper and pen—
"Here, make the mark that will sign it!
Seal it,—and say Amen."

Thus, and thus did he cheat us—
We, who were born to fight!

Taking what—God is my witness—
Is ours in our native right!
Oh! that in savage wisdom
The Chiefs had heeded my cry:
Get ye arrayed for the battle,
Drive them away!—or die!"

His are the fish of the rivers,
His are the beasts of the plain;
His to direct, and to order
When, and by whom, be slain:
His are the virgin forests,
His is the prairie hay.
And we, his Red-skin brothers—
May bitterly rue the day.

O! my soul I am weary—
Why should I suffer so?
Live, but to see my Nation
Broken, and brought so low?
*Now, Mother Earth, I am ready—
A serf, in my own Domain—
Take me! O Mother, take me!
Back to thy arms again..."*

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

Within the tangled jungle of the grass
A fly, but newly hatched,
Halts ere it takes
Its virgin flight
To stretch its legs
And dry its glassy wings—
Cramped from the chrysalid's close catacomb:
For strength, and will to act,
Have not yet come,
And it must wait
Until the Sun's warm rays
Have knit the thews
Beneath the gleaming back,—
Wait the appointed hour
Of wingèd flight to love and liberty.

And, peering through the rooted stems and moss,
With baneful, greedy eyes,
A spider slowly creeps
Upon her prey,
Dragging behind
In tender ecstasy
Her unborn babes within their silken purse:
For on her skill as huntress
Must depend
These other sacred lives:
So, cautiously she creeps
With guarded noiseless step,
Then leaps!
And takes, with paralyzing bite,
The luckless offering.

THE AWFULNESS

Hark! how he howls,
the hungry wolf,
into the tragic night:
for company, a whitened owl
floating o'er wastes of snow—
death's silent messenger.

Beside a barbed-wire fence,
a frozen cow
and last year's calf
stand belly-deep
and lifeless, in a drift;
their heads bowed low,
round backed, and piteous.

And, on a cord-wood pile
of aspen-poplar, newly axed,
a wretched cat faces the north,
where ghostly lights
crackle and dance
in frenzied mockery:
so, pitying, I reach forth to stroke,
and push it sideways o'er—
a fur-clad block of ice,
its tail still round its toes.

Whereat my soul knows fear,
so that I flee
in horror of the night
on which God's back is turned;
and run until the pea-green sun
again mocks, comfortless,
a frost-flecked air and frozen earth—
where death and terror reign.

THE SALAMANDER'S SONG

"Oh! for the days of long ago
When on those ancient shores
Majestic'ly we lived our lives
Within the ruthless laws—
And might was right through tropic night
To all the Dinosaurs.

Oh! for the dim and distant past
When toothless reptiles flew;
And serpents-of-the-sea patrolled
The bayou's waters blue,
Or sought the caverns of the deep
And slept, and fought, and slew.

Oh! for the tangled forest glades
And limpid dank lagoon,
Where giant creatures munched the reeds

Beneath the silver moon—
Nor showed a fear of death so near...
Which always came too soon.

Oh! for the battles fought and won
Beneath the murky sky,
When crested monsters turned at bay
To face that awful cry
That told the King was in the ring—
And they must fight or die.

Oh! for the days of long ago
Unhonoured and unsung,
When warring Gorgosaurus then
His curdling challenge flung...
And laws were claws and champing jaws,
And all the World was young!"

THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

In direst need the mightiest thoughts arise,
As smoldering sparks beget the beacon flare,
To lead men onward, show where safety lies
Midst haunting doubt and blackness of despair:
Till the fine morrow dawns and radiant skies
Bid all be Valiant, all to do and dare.
Shield us, O Lord, who gave us unity,
From youthful pride and bind our faith in Thee.

For we were weak, indeed, in that young day
 When jealousy and pride the discord fanned;
When none had risen up to show the way
 And each must do his little task to hand;
So strove we blindly, proudly, with dismay,
 Bewildered by the vastness of the land.
Then came there those with faith to make us one.
To Thee our praise, O Lord: the task was done.

Thus, out of chaos, was a nation born
 To work alone its own proud destiny;
To labour bravely, and its brow adorn
 With man's inventions fashioned craftily;
And through the mountains rugged paths were torn
 And mighty highways linked the sea to sea.
Nor were the captains of the task afraid:
In Thee their faith,—with Thee beside to aid.

Of nature's bounty great estates arose
 Of virgin forest and wealth-giving mine,
The fruitful lands abutting to the snows
 Of rocky peaks pricked in serrated line,
And fish and fowl and scented orchard close
 And myriad herds, withal, of sheep and kine.
Without Thy blessing Lord, these would not be.
Give us Thy peace, and teach humility.

For, to this structure, at some future day,
 A hungry world must look if it would live;
Ours then to serve, and serving to repay
 The bounty of Thy hand superlative:
Bid us be strong and guide us in the way,

For, did we fail Thee then, could'st Thou forgive?
Without Thee Lord, we know not what to do:
O give us faith,—the faith our fathers knew.

June, 1927.

LIFE'S VOYAGE

A ship is launched, and sails out on the main
Proud in her strength to battle with the seas;
The World is hers for pleasure or for gain;
The choice of ways—where youthful fancy please.
And now her worth is tried by angry gales
That strive to bring her joyous course to grief;
But stout of heart, the gallant Ship prevails,
Nor falls a victim to the sunken reef.
Again, and yet again, down life's long day
She risks the dangers that must all be passed,
Until, with bruised hulk, but pennant gay,
She makes the passage to her port at last.
Happy the Ship, or man, and doubly blessed,
That braves all storms, and comes safe home to rest.

[The end of *The Coquihalla Wreck and Other Poems* by
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