

Rio Grande's Last Race

Banjo Paterson

Now this was what Macpherson told

While waiting in the stand;

A reckless rider, over-bold,

The only man with hands to hold

The rushing Rio Grande.

He said, 'This day I bid good-bye

To bit and bridle rein,

To ditches deep and fences high,

For I have dreamed a dream, and I

Shall never ride again.

'I dreamt last night I rode this race

That I to-day must ride,

And cant'ring down to take my place

I saw full many an old friend's face

Come stealing to my side.

'Dead men on horses long since dead,

They clustered on the track;
The champions of the days long fled,
They moved around with noiseless tread —
Bay, chestnut, brown, and black.

‘And one man on a big grey steed
Rode up and waved his hand;
Said he, “We help a friend in need,
And we have come to give a lead
To you and Rio Grande.

“For you must give the field the slip,
So never draw the rein,
But keep him moving with the whip,
And if he falter — set your lip
And rouse him up again.

“But when you reach the big stone wall,
Put down your bridle hand
And let him sail — he cannot fall —
But don’t you interfere at all;

You trust old Rio Grande.”

‘We started, and in front we showed,
The big horse running free:
Right fearlessly and game he strode,
And by my side those dead men rode
Whom no one else could see.

‘As silently as flies a bird,
They rode on either hand;
At every fence I plainly heard
The phantom leader give the word,
“Make room for Rio Grande!”

‘I spurred him on to get the lead,
I chanced full many a fall;
But swifter still each phantom steed
Kept with me, and at racing speed
We reached the big stone wall.

‘And there the phantoms on each side

Drew in and blocked his leap;
“Make room! make room!” I loudly cried,
But right in front they seemed to ride —
I cursed them in my sleep.

‘He never flinched, he faced it game,
He struck it with his chest,
And every stone burst out in flame,
And Rio Grande and I became
As phantoms with the rest.

‘And then I woke, and for a space
All nerveless did I seem;
For I have ridden many a race,
But never one at such a pace
As in that fearful dream.

‘And I am sure as man can be
That out upon the track,
Those phantoms that men cannot see
Are waiting now to ride with me,

And I shall not come back.

‘For I must ride the dead men’s race,
And follow their command;
‘Twere worse than death, the foul disgrace
If I should fear to take my place
To-day on Rio Grande.’

He mounted, and a jest he threw,
With never sign of gloom;
But all who heard the story knew
That Jack Macpherson, brave and true,
Was going to his doom.

They started, and the big black steed
Came flashing past the stand;
All single-handed in the lead
He strode along at racing speed,
The mighty Rio Grande.

But on his ribs the whalebone stung,

A madness it did seem!
And soon it rose on every tongue
That Jack Macpherson rode among
The creatures of his dream.

He looked to left and looked to right,
As though men rode beside;
And Rio Grande, with foam-flecks white,
Raced at his jumps in headlong flight
And cleared them in his stride.

But when they reached the big stone wall,
Down went the bridle-hand,
And loud we heard Macpherson call,
'Make room, or half the field will fall!
Make room for Rio Grande!'

'He's down! he's down!' And horse and man
Lay quiet side by side!
No need the pallid face to scan,

We knew with Rio Grande he ran

The race the dead men ride.

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.