

**Andrew Barton 'Banjo'
Paterson**



*Rio Grande's
Last Race and
Other Verses*

Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[Text](#)

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Rio Grande's Last Race

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.

By the Grey Gulf-water

Far to the Northward there lies a land,

A wonderful land that the winds blow over,
And none may fathom nor understand
The charm it holds for the restless rover;
A great grey chaos—a land half made,
Where endless space is and no life stirreth;
And the soul of a man will recoil afraid
From the sphinx-like visage that Nature weareth.
But old Dame Nature, though scornful, craves
Her dole of death and her share of slaughter;
Many indeed are the nameless graves
Where her victims sleep by the Grey Gulf-water.

Slowly and slowly those grey streams glide,
Drifting along with a languid motion,
Lapping the reed-beds on either side,
Wending their way to the Northern Ocean.
Grey are the plains where the emus pass
Silent and slow, with their staid demeanour;
Over the dead men's graves the grass
Maybe is waving a trifle greener.
Down in the world where men toil and spin
Dame Nature smiles as man's hand has taught her;
Only the dead men her smiles can win
In the great lone land by the Grey Gulf-water.

For the strength of man is an insect's strength
In the face of that mighty plain and river,
And the life of a man is a moment's length
To the life of the stream that will run for ever.
And so it cometh they take no part
In small-world worries; each hardy rover
Rideth abroad and is light of heart,
With the plains around and the blue sky over.
And up in the heavens the brown lark sings
The songs that the strange wild land has taught her;
Full of thanksgiving her sweet song rings—
And I wish I were back by the Grey Gulf-water.

With the Cattle

The drought is down on field and flock,
The river-bed is dry;
And we must shift the starving stock
Before the cattle die.
We muster up with weary hearts

At breaking of the day,
And turn our heads to foreign parts,
To take the stock away.
And it's hunt 'em up and dog 'em,
And it's get the whip and flog 'em,
For it's weary work is droving when they're dying every day;
By stock-routes bare and eaten,
On dusty roads and beaten,
With half a chance to save their lives we take the stock away.

We cannot use the whip for shame
On beasts that crawl along;
We have to drop the weak and lame,
And try to save the strong;
The wrath of God is on the track,
The drought fiend holds his sway,
With blows and cries and stockwhip crack
We take the stock away.
As they fall we leave them lying,
With the crows to watch them dying,
Grim sextons of the Overland that fasten on their prey;
By the fiery dust-storm drifting,
And the mocking mirage shifting,
In heat and drought and hopeless pain we take the stock away.

In dull despair the days go by
With never hope of change,
But every stage we draw more nigh
Towards the mountain range;
And some may live to climb the pass,
And reach the great plateau,
And revel in the mountain grass,
By streamlets fed with snow.
As the mountain wind is blowing
It starts the cattle lowing,
And calling to each other down the dusty long array;
And there speaks a grizzled drover:
'Well, thank God, the worst is over,
The creatures smell the mountain grass that's twenty miles
away.'

They press towards the mountain grass,
They look with eager eyes
Along the rugged stony pass,
That slopes towards the skies;