



CHARLES HAMILTON IN THE WILD, WILD, WEST!

BY ERIC FAYNE.



FOREWORD: Our article "The Roamings of the Rio Kid" appeared in *Collector's Digest Annual* all over 30 years ago. In a letter from Charles Hamilton, dated December, 20th 1952, the author wrote as follows to Eric Fayne:

"I cannot let another hour go by without writing to tell you how greatly I have enjoyed your article on the "Roamings of the Rio Kid." It is the very best article I have ever read in my life.

Thank you, my dear boy, for giving so much pleasure to an old man."

So the article delighted Charles Hamilton. We thought you might like to renew your acquaintance with the article. Or, more likely than not, it may come completely fresh to you. (here it is.)

The Rio Kid joined the "POPULAR" in the first month of the year 1928. The stories of the Boy Outlaw of the Rio Grande were the only ones which were new in the whole history of this paper whose pages were always devoted to the re-prints of past successes.

Not only was the Kid a new character - he was unique. Western yarns or western films probably do not enjoy a great popularity in this country. The main thing to be said in their favour is that they are clean, - sex never rears its ugly head in the Wild West, apparently.

But I think that many hardened anti-Westerners must have been converted by the Kid. Not that there have ever been, - either before or since, - any Western yarns of the same tingling quality as those of the Boy Outlaw, or any Western character of the same subtle charm as the Rio Kid.

For these stories rang true. They were geographically exact to the last detail; the characters lived; there was never a false moment with the dialogue; the lazy Spanish atmosphere of Texas was blended right into the heart of the stories. Every single story in the entire series had an original plot which was skilfully developed under the hot Western sunshine. A reader felt that they were written by some cowboy who had wandered away from the ranges, - some puncher who had dropped his lariat and taken up the pen.

RALPH REDWAY

It is rather remarkable that there were so many readers who did not realise that Martin Clifford was Frank Richards, and that Frank Richards was Owen Conquest, and that all were Charles Hamilton who had written the early St. Jim's tales in PLUCK.

But the Rio Kid was a character apart. The stories were gems without parallel.

The Cedar Creek tales, delightful though they were, had an English flavour. Even some of the plots had their counterparts at St. Jim's and Greyfriars. When Jimmy Silver, or Tom Merry, or the Bounder went to the Wild West the English flavour was always there. The scene was like that set on an English theatre stage; the dialogue seemed to be an Englishman's idea of how cowboys would talk.

But the Rio Kid was real. The dialogue was real. The rolling prairies and the wide rivers were real.

When I learned that Ralph Redway was none other than our old friend, Charles Hamilton, I had the surprise of my life, and my admiration for this amazing writer reached its zenith. Much less been written of the genius of Charles Hamilton. His greatest genius is to be found in the Rio Kid stories, which not even a keen student of his work could trace to the pen of an Englishman who has never visited America.

THE BEGINNING THAT WASN'T

The Rio Kid first appeared in the POPULAR dated January 21st 1928, and numbered 469. The Kid was then an outlaw. He had been kicked out of the Double Bar Ranch at Frio by Rancher Dawney for some crime which he denied. What he was supposed to have done we were never really told. But he was innocent. We were assured of that. Something seemed to be missing here. It was as if a few stories had been omitted at the commencement of a series.

We were never told his actual age. He was called the "Boy" outlaw, but the term "boy" can cover a multitude of sins and an assortment of ages. From a close study of the stories, it can be assumed that he was something just under twenty.

His name? We never really knew. As the series went on, he called himself Kid Carfax, but as the Kid himself often said, people call themselves by many names in the Wild West.

His grey mustang, - as brave as the Kid himself, - was Sidekicker. The Kid was something of a dandy in his dress. He always wore a band of silver nuggets round his hat, and the neck scarf was of pure silk. But he carried two walnut-butted guns in low holsters at his side, and we knew of the little Derringer pistol which he always had in his pocket.

Dark and desperate were the tales told of the Rio Kid, through all the Cattle country along the Rio Grande and the Pecos. Boy in years, hard-bitten man in all else, cool and daring and desperate, quicker on the draw than any puncher on the ranges, or any gunman of the river camps, the Kid's life had been a tale of danger and hazard ever since the day when he had pulled out from the Double Bar and become an outcast.

That was how Ralph Redway introduced us to his new character who was to grace the pages of the POPULAR for several years to come.

SOUTH TEXAS

The series opened in South Texas, and we met Jake Watson, the Sheriff of Frio, the town near the Double Bar Ranch. He appeared from time to time in the series, on occasions when the Kid's travels took him towards his old home.

THE TRAIL OF THE KID

The Kid's wanderings took him from Texas to Mexico; thence to Arizona; on to Nevada; into Wyoming; through the foothills of the Rockies; to New Mexico.

He came trailing back to Texas, visited Mexico again, and finally reached Hollywood. Some of the stories, four-chapter affairs, blended together into one series; others were single stories, and many of them were delightful. Of the single stories, in which the plot was complete in one issue, one of the best was "The Bully of Salt Lick", in which the Kid took on Jeff Blake, gunman and bully, and saved the life of a plucky youngster who was no match for the brute.

LLANO ESTACADO

Some of the early yarns were set on the Llano Estacado. A strange name for a strange land, explained Ralph Redway, geographically accurate as always. In the old days, when the Spaniards held all the wild South West, a trail had run across the high table-land, from Texas to Santa Fe in New Mexico, but sand and dust blotted out the track, and whitened bones in the desert told where travellers had lost their way. And then great wooden stakes had been set up at regular intervals to mark the trail. Long since had the stakes rotted away, - vanished, like the Spanish conquerors who had set them up. But the name remained. The Staked Plain, or Llano Estacado, in the musical tongue of the old conquerors.

GOLD

In May 1928 came the most brilliant stories in a brilliant series. The Kid became possessor of a gold-mine in Arizona. He tried to work the Gambusino mine at Los Pinos, but found himself in conflict with the big mining company, the Arizona Consolidated, who tried every underhand device to make him give up his mine. Finally, the Kid blew up his own mine, with the aid of Rainy Face, the Apache Indian.

But, with the aid of Rainy Face, the Kid captured Eli Robinson, the president of the Consolidated, and, under the threat of being left to the tender mercies of the Apaches, Robinson paid one hundred thousand dollars for the wreck of the mine. This series ran to eight stories, and it was the very best of all the tales of the Kid, which is saying a mouthful, as the Kid himself would have said. In passing, this series was re-published in the Boys' Friend Library under the title "The Rio Kid's Gold Mine".

NEVADA

The Kid, with his wealth in his pocket, went north of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, heading for Nevada. Here, he fell in love, and even thought of settling down with a wife. Fortunately for readers, Miss Janet's fiance turned up, and the Kid turned out on the trail once again.

THE SPARSHOTTS

By mid-July 1928, the Kid was in Montana with the intention of hitting the sheep country. The Kid, like every true cowman, hated sheep, and all they stood for - the barbed-wire fences and the eaten-up range. In his own country of Texas he had seen many a wide Llano, once a sea of tossing horns, turned into an ocean of wolly backs. But here, in Wyoming, it was not his country, and if they raised sheep it was no business of his. But the Kid soon found himself mixed up in a dispute between cowmen and sheepmen, with the Starbuck bunch. A thrilling series which ran through August.

TRAILING BACK

Meeting thrilling adventures all the way, the Kid came trailing back, through the Rockies and New Mexico, into Texas.

The shining waters of the Rio Frio and the green rolling plains of Texas called to the Rio Kid -- and although there were countless enemies waiting him there, the Kid trailed back to his own country. There, in Frio, the Kid found that there was a Thousand Dollars reward for his capture, dead or alive.

Now came a brilliant set of stories, in which Chief Many Ponies featured. There had been a time when the old Apache's name had accorded with his estate. A chief, the son of a chief, he had owned many ponies, many buffalo robes, and many braves had followed him on the war trail. The old hunting-grounds of Chief Many Ponies were ranch lands now. Where his braves had ridden in war-point and feathers, the cowboy punchers rode the range; long-horned cows grazed where countless buffaloes had roamed. Chief Many Ponies, now a vagrant outcast fell foul of Sheriff Watson of Frio, and, in revenge, bound the Sheriff, like Mazeppa, to the back of a horse which he turned adrift in the desert. The Kid went after the Sheriff, and after many breathless adventures, rescued his enemy. A magnificent Western series.

THE RIO KID'S CHRISTMAS

There was rain in the Huecas - winter rain - and bitter wind. On that stormy eve of Christmas the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was a hard case. The Kid came on a "nester's" shack, - a nester being a settler, apparently, - and the Kid rode forty miles to Cow Crossing, by the wildest and hardest trail in the West of Texas, to fetch Doc Pigeon to the Nester's sick wife. He left the Doc at the shack on Christmas morning, with 500 dollars as a gift for the sick women.

That night, in a far canyon of the lonely Huecas, as the dusk of Christmas faded into night, the stars came out of a velvety sky, and glimmered down on the Rio Kid, rolled in his blankets, sleeping peacefully as a child.

THE KID AT SEA

The Kid had now been in the POPULAR for exactly a year, and he began his second year as a puncher on the Sampson ranch in the San Pedro country, a hundred miles from Frio and Sheriff Watson. From here, the Kid was shanghaid, became a sailor, was seasick, and had a hard time from the rope's end, before he eventually turned the tables on the villainous Captain Shack.

TRAILING ON

Through the spring and early summer of 1929, masterpiece followed masterpiece, as the Kid, back in Mexico, starred in adventure after adventure. By mid-summer he was back in Texas, and we found him, once again befriended by Chief Many Ponies, actually joining the Apache band, to escape from Mule Kick Hall of the Texas Rangers. What a superb film this great story would have made, with its cowboys and Injuns and Texas Rangers.

THE LAZY "O"

In the autumn, the Kid bought the Lazy "O" ranch, and in nine powerful stories we were told how he tried to lead the peaceful and law-abiding life of a rancher. And when the Kid at last had to take the trail again, owing to the persistence of the Texas Rangers, the boss gave the ranch to his "bunch". Far away from the Lazy O, a rider in goatskin chaps, with a band of silver nuggets round his Stetson and two long-barrelled walnut-butted guns in his holsters, rode a trail in the chaparral. The Rio Kid, rancher no longer, once more the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

CHRISTMAS AGAIN

It was bitter winter weather -- in many a drift on the ranges cattle froze, and up in the rugged Huecas the snow was stacked in every gully, and gulch, and arroyo. It was going to be a hard Christmas in the uplands of the cow country, - and it was here that the Rio Kid saved the life of an old enemy, Mike Jadwin. This story, "The Trail in the Snow", was re-printed in a Holiday Annual.

A fortnight later came "The Rio Kid's Christmas Gift", a story in which the Kid played Santa Claus. A novel and fascinating story which also appeared in a Holiday Annual.

BLACK GEORGE

At the beginning of January, 1930, exactly two years after the Kid had first appeared in the POPULAR, came the "Black George" series, of a negro bandit. He was found afterwards to be a white man in disguise, and six yarns passed before the bandit was brought to justice. This fine tale appeared in the Boys' Friend Library.

YUBA DICK

In Mid-February, "The Rio Kid's New Pal" was Yuba Dick, an inveterate gambler. It was an expensive friendship for the Kid, but entertaining for the reader.

MARCH 1930

"The Man from Montana" told of Colonel Sanderson and the sacrifice of the Kid, who took on his own shoulders the blame for the crime of the old man's wayward son.

APRIL 1930

By this time, the POPULAR was in deep waters, but the Kid was going strong in a fine series of a white boy who had been brought up among the Apache Indians. The Kid was now carrying the POPULAR on his own shoulders, for the western story was now the only item worth reading left in the paper. But, with "The Rio Kid's Quest", which appeared at the end of April, the Kid left the POPULAR, and one felt that the end was in sight for that fine paper.

THE KID'S RETURN

But, at the end of July 1930, the Kid came back in a series which lasted 13 weeks, in which he became Sheriff of Plug Hat, and had many adventures before he was driven back to the outlaw trail.

Far away from Plug Hat, by a lonely trail, the Rio Kid rode the grey mustang. Sheriff no longer. It had been a good game while it lasted, but it was over. But the Kid still had his guns and his mustang, and a high heart, and the world was before him. With these words, Ralph Redway said good-bye to the Popular.

So, for three years, from early 1928 till the autumn of 1930, the Rio Kid rode the ranges in the POPULAR. During that time there was not one weak story in the entire series, and the majority of them were brilliant. The success of the Kid was due to his carefree outlook on life, plus his deep humanity. Not to mention the musical quality of the words used to tell the stories, - the lilting phrases which had the same appeal as the lyrics of a song.

THE KID IN "MODERN BOY"

But that was not quite the end. Exactly seven years later, when the Modern Boy was losing the race in the popularity stakes, the Editor announced that "The Rio Kid Rides Again" was to appear in that famous paper. So the Boy Outlaw made his appearance once again, and his brand new adventures were told week by week by Ralph Redway from September 1937 until February 1938 in "Modern Boy".

Although I have never considered that this latest series was of the same very high quality which had marked the Kid stories in the POPULAR, - and reading them again in preparation for this article, I still feel the same about them, - they were, nevertheless, excellent yarns, and nothing better ever appeared in "Modern Boy", at least.

GOOD-BYE TO THE KID

In September 18th 1937, in No. 502 of that paper, the Kid made his bow in Modern Boy. The first series, a long one of 13 stories, told of how he became foreman of the Lazy S ranch at Lariat, and much excitement prevailed before he was fleeing again from Mule Kick Hall of the Rangers.

A second series, "The Rio Kid in Hollywood" started in No. 515, and ran for 9 stories. The Kid was out of his element here. Judged by the standard of the rest of the series, it was disappointing. So, on February 12th, 1938, the Kid departed, - for good this time, though not for our good. Modern Boy, already in deep waters, announced a complete change of policy which may be commented upon when that paper is analysed some time.

WE MISS THE KID

With the passing of the Rio Kid, a gap was left which has never been filled. Of their type, nothing better than these stories appeared in any paper. Because he played the lead in every story, and his character was so consistently maintained by the unfailing skill of a great writer, the Kid endeared himself to the reader.

He became a personal friend. When we lost the Kid, I felt that I should never again meet a character who could charm the passing hours as he could.

And I never have!

THE RIO KID IN THE "BOYS' FRIEND LIBRARY"

Large numbers of the Rio Kid stories from the Popular were reprinted in the splendid little volumes of the B.F.L. And many of the great series appeared twice in the B.F.L., indicating the obvious great popularity of the character.

Boys' Friend Library, 2nd Series:- 266, The Rio Kid; 275, The Rio Kid's Gold Mine; 283, The Rio Kid's Revenge; 306, The Rio Kid at Bay; 317, The Rio Kid's Enemy; 335, The Six-Gun Outlaw; 356, The Rio Kid's Return; 370, The Rio Kid, Sheriff; 403, The Kid from Texas; 471, The Outlaw Kid; 487, The Rio Kid in Mexico; 566, The Rio Kid; 569, The Rio Kid's Gold Mine; 578, The Outlaw Ranger; 585, The Rio Kid at Bay; 590, The Rio Kid's Enemy; 593, The Six-Gun Outlaw; 601, The Rio Kid's Revenge; 606, The Rio Kid, Sheriff; 609, The Kid from Texas; 693, The Outlaw Kid.

It will be seen that from No. 566 the stories were reprints of the earlier ones.

And to complete our re-living of Charles Hamilton's main stories of the Wild, Wild West, here is "GOLD IN THEM 'HAR HILLS" which featured, many years later, in our "Let's Be Controversial" series:-

GOLD IN THEM THAR HILLS!

Talent will out. The gifted will rise to the top. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that luck does play its part in making a star in any walk of life.

One wonders whether Charles Hamilton would ever have become famous, had he not, by some stroke of fortune which may have come from his own or somebody else's initiative, struck on the formula of the Peter Pan schoolboys with his series of St. Jim's in the paper named Pluck.

We know that he started as a writer of tales of adventure. Whether those early tales of adventure were good I cannot say, for, though I possess some of them, I have never been moved to read them. So far as I know, and it is only a guess, his first in the direction of the Wild West came in the early blue Gem, When Tom Merry, and a rather oddly-assorted little band of friends, went to North America. They were strikingly good yarns of their type, but they only formed a trailer of what was to come.

Hamilton wrote three main series of Westerns:-

1. The Cedar Creek stories which ran for four years, from 1917 till 1921, with the genuine Martin Clifford writing all but one of them.
2. The series of the Rookwood Fistical Four in the West of Canada, which ran for the best part of a year - so long that readers wondered whether Rookwood had been abandoned for ever.
3. The stories of the Rio Kid.

Without any question, the Rio Kid tales were the best Western adventures which Hamilton wrote. These were set in the States, and the movements of the Kid were against a geographically accurate kaleidoscope. In addition, the atmosphere of the tales was utterly convincing, and the musical prose of the stories of the first three years was a delight. The prose became harsher towards the end of the Kid's life in the Popular, but the quality was high throughout.

Without any question, too, the Cedar Creek tales were the most popular. Plenty of readers, no doubt, fondly imagined that they were reading of the school life of their favourite author, and that helped. But, in their own right, the tales were delightful, and it seems likely that they held their popularity right till the end. If so, the question might feasibly be asked, why did they stop when they did? Probably the answer is that Hamilton had decided, or had been persuaded, to give more attention once again to St. Jim's and, later on, to Greyfriars.

Whether the background of Cedar Creek was authentic is problematical. Certainly, with the advent of Hillcrest, the private school, the tales became more like St. Jim's transferred to a theatrical western backdrop. Most important, the tales were all well-written and delighted the readers. They were convincing for the simple reason that readers were easy to convince.

The "Windy River" stories concerning the Rookwood chums were so good that some readers may have been sorry when they came to a rather abrupt end, and the Fistical Four returned to Rookwood.

In addition to these three main series of Westerns, Hamilton strayed on a few other occasions into the West for brief periods which it is reasonable to believe he enjoyed.

The Dirk Power series of 1920 was saved from mediocrity by a couple of exceedingly well-written tales set in the Canadian North-West. In 1927, the Gem offered an 8-story series in which Tom Merry and Co. went to Canada as the guests of Wildrake. It was a series which had its moments, even though it never seems to have quite rung the bell. Perhaps it is little known owing to the fact that it appeared among a glut of sub tales which had caused the old faithfuls among readers to be less than faithful.

Few people ever speak very highly of the Magnet's Texas series of 1938. Characterisation seemed harsh, and the schoolboys unbelievable in their western setting. The Rio Kid was an anachronism in this series with the Greyfriars boys, and his introduction makes one doubt whether the author really ever understood the true nature of his own creation.

The Kid was also an anachronism when he returned in 1937, to Modern Boy in stories concerning talking pictures and Hollywood. Outlaws of the Kid's type could not possibly have existed long beyond the turn of the century. The spread of the telegraph, better communications and roads, and greatly advanced law enforcement techniques ended the careers of those old outlaws like the Kid.

The Rio Kid stories were by far the best of the Hamilton westerns, but today they are almost certainly less popular than the others. Hamilton followers are mainly school story

fans, who still enjoy the Cedar Creek school yarns, or those of the English schoolboys transferred temporarily to the wild west. But to enjoy the Kid, you have to be a lover of westerns. And there are not so many of those in our own tightly-knit little clan.

Among the general reading public, however, westerns have always been enormously popular, as any librarian can tell us. It has long amazed me why some enterprising publisher has not put out the Rio Kid stories in book form. I am certain they would win a following all their own.

In post-war years, Hamilton wrote quite a number of short Kid tales for various Annuals and for some obscure types of comic papers which appeared mushroom-like. All were indifferent. The author also had a shot at a full-length western "The Lone Texan," which was hackneyed stuff, cheaply printed.

Actually, his great western era ended when the Rio Kid left the Popular in 1930. It had been a more than worth while era. The wonder is how Hamilton ever found the time to soak himself in western lore and atmosphere, without which he could never have produced the Kid.

That there was some hidden story behind the Rio Kid, I have always believed. But that Hamilton deeply loved the Kid, I have never doubted. His letters to me on the subject were ample proof of that.

The RIO KID'S REVENGE

by RALPH REDWAY

