

# Uncle Rimus and Brer Ratas

*A tall story from old New Zealand, with apologies to  
Joe Chandler Harris*

Note: The italics are mine, also the words placed in square brackets. All else is quoted from the references indicated, although in some instances I have changed the tense to suit the story.—A. P. Druce.

IN the Pukeiti rhododendron reserve in New Plymouth, there was a very old conifer called *rimus* [sic!] <sup>1</sup> A *bird* perched on a branch, wiped its bill on the bark, and thereby deposited a seed of a *rata vine*, which is also a *Metrosideros*. <sup>1</sup> (All the species of *Ratas* [sic!] are *vines*. <sup>2</sup> There are several species of this well-known *tree*. <sup>2</sup> Its seeds are *windborne* and frequently *alight in*, <sup>2</sup> [and] *gain a footing on*, the boughs of *rimu*. <sup>3</sup>) The seed germinated and began to grow. <sup>1</sup> Its mode of growth was so curious as to be one of the marvels of the vegetable world, for it started as an *innocent epiphyte*. <sup>4</sup>

After a while its *sinister intentions* became apparent. <sup>5</sup> First it got *blown up*, then it proceeded to *climb down*—much to the *embarrassment* of its living refuge. <sup>5</sup> *Cautiously clinging* to the trunk of the tree, <sup>6</sup> it sent out aerial roots *in search of new ground*. <sup>7</sup> [These] roots *stretched boldly down* in search of that *full supply* which can only be obtained from the earth. <sup>8</sup> [At last] it *dropped its roots* to the ground. <sup>1</sup> The roots [then] sent out numerous *encircling arms*. <sup>9</sup> After many years these completely encased the supporting trunk, then began its *slow strangulation*. <sup>10</sup> By enveloping, like *legs of wrestlers*, the bole of the *victim* <sup>11</sup> in a *close embrace* <sup>12</sup>—an *iron embrace*, <sup>6</sup> a *deadly embrace*, <sup>13</sup> a *fatal embrace* <sup>9</sup>—[i.e.] by *exercising a strangle grasp*, <sup>14</sup> they *choked* their host, *killing it by sheer pressure*. <sup>11</sup> In the *grip* of the *rata*, <sup>10</sup> *locked in embrace*, <sup>15</sup> the supporting tree was *literally strangled*, <sup>6</sup> *crushed and killed*, <sup>3</sup> *smothered*, <sup>16</sup> *stifled*, <sup>15</sup> *squeezed*, <sup>7</sup> and [finally] *imprisoned*. <sup>17</sup> The *robber* took its place in the forest, <sup>7</sup> [a] *trespasser* <sup>6</sup> *enjoying the fresh air and sunshine with a clear conscience*. <sup>5</sup> (The host may have become *suffocated from the loss of air*. <sup>7</sup> Nor must it be forgotten that the host was vertically compressed by the upward thrust of its own growth against the *throttling increase* of the epiphyte at its point of origin. <sup>17</sup>)

The National Park Board championed the *noble rimu* in its *struggle against the parasitic rata* and passed a resolution: "That rangers be instructed where practicable to cut through the *ratas* if they think the *rimu* can be saved." <sup>19</sup> There was no decline in the *activity* of northern *rata*—rather the reverse. <sup>20</sup> The *predatory gangster habit* was much in evidence. <sup>11</sup> The *podocarps*—particularly *rimu*—had an *openly declared enemy* in northern *rata*. <sup>3</sup> Where *rimu* had all but disappeared as on the Matamateonga Range, it was *seizing on other trees*, e.g. *tawa* and *hinau*. <sup>20</sup>



Photo: E. G. Gibbs

*Metrosideros robusta*, Bushy Park, Wanganui.

The rata [eventually] became *infested* with epiphytes.<sup>21</sup> The weight its branches had to *endure spelt its destruction*.<sup>15</sup> After a long life it died *destroyed* by the mosses, ferns, perching lilies, and epiphytes that *fastened themselves upon it*.<sup>7</sup> *On the contrary* our rata, thanks to its *sturdy nature* was able to *withstand the load*.<sup>9</sup>

### *Incidental Information*

Rata vines of other species are very common climbers on the loftier trees and *quite undeservedly get the credit of being killers*, but they start *honestly and harmlessly in the earth* and only use the grown trees as a ladder to climb up to the *sunshine and the sky*. Having accomplished this they *swing their lianes cleanly and clearly from the helpful tree* and so do it no harm whatever.<sup>11</sup>

The brilliant-blossomed rata is a *notorious strangler*.<sup>13</sup> [This] *forest bandit*<sup>5</sup> frequently behaves in [a] most ungrateful manner.<sup>15</sup> It might be described as the *cuckoo of the ratas* on account of the *exceedingly overbearing way in which it conducts itself*.<sup>5</sup> Luckless the *child of Tane-mahuta* on which it chooses to lodge for it is *doomed to succumb to the grip of the iron-hearted one*.<sup>6</sup> It may be regarded as by far the *most immoral member* of its family, and, indeed, one of the *most unprincipled trees* in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> [Miss ABC] is *glad to say* that the northern rata is the only one which behaves in this *unkind way*.<sup>5</sup> All the other members of the family are *highly respectable and law-abiding*.<sup>5</sup>

The trees all grow in what may be termed *happy association*, and so situated attain a magnificence, especially in the case of the rimu, that does not seem to indicate that the rata is a *hastener of old age* let alone a *strangler of the young*.<sup>19</sup> By the time the host has *attained its lifespan* and *succumbed to old age* the *erstwhile epiphyte* has become a *stout forest tree*.<sup>22</sup> [Mr. XYZ] has never been able to detect any evidence of *strangulation*.<sup>18</sup>

This tall sturdy forest tree, forming a huge rounded head, has *no trunk or only a crooked stump*.<sup>7</sup> [It has] an *enormous, fantastic and irregular trunk*.<sup>15</sup> The giant rata's seed can grow from ground level but in this *effort its trunk and branches are short and sprawling*,<sup>11</sup> [it becomes] a *trunkless bushy tree*<sup>3</sup> — a *mere shrub*.<sup>4</sup> [There are] *large terrestrial specimens* in many localities.<sup>8</sup> The terrestrial ratas have in many cases *unbranched trunks of upwards of 50 ft* with comparatively small ascending crowns.<sup>23</sup>

### *Postscript*

The plant [*Metrosideros robusta*] was once a *tiny vine*,<sup>24</sup> *climbing a big pine tree*.<sup>24</sup> [It] germinated *high up in the crotch of a tree*, sending down aerial roots which eventually *carried its stem* to the ground.<sup>24</sup> There it developed *subterranean support*.<sup>24</sup> In time as it grew bigger and bigger, it *engulfed the pine tree* and

eventually killed it.<sup>24</sup> And 14 schoolboys recently crowded into the hollow interior . . . .<sup>24</sup> [It] grew *enormously*,<sup>24</sup> going on to become *itself a giant*.<sup>24</sup> Its pretty flowers were *only incidental*.<sup>24</sup>

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