

Michael Hugentobler

**Louis**

or *The Ride on the Ocean Turtle*

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Translated by Rachel Hildebrandt

6.

The financier was a bald, portly man who called himself Monsieur Bischofberger. He was so tall that Louis could only look him in the eye by leaning his head back as far as possible. Bischofberger always wore a tailcoat and a top hat, and he devoted great attention to his tie. The book *L'art de mettre sa cravate* by Saint Hilaire had to be within reach at all times. Bischofberger refused to wear a modern necktie, a preference which conveyed to his appearance a somewhat old-fashioned look. His neckwear had to be short and wide. He had mastered twenty-seven of Saint Hilaire's thirty-two knots. He was still working on three of them, while the remaining two were too splashy for him, so he never used them. He was of the opinion that a hint of tradition was synonymous with confidence, and he further emphasized this confidence through an exceedingly straight back and a nose pointed toward the sky.

At their first meeting, he told Louis that he should take off his ridiculous hat.

"What is your actual name?"

"Louis de Montesanto," Louis replied.

Louis loathed Monsieur Bischofberger's smile. It was never an expression of joy, rather a weapon.

"Sepp? Heinz? Franz?"

"Hans," Louis said. "Roth."

They agreed to register the passport in the name Louis de Montesanto. After all, it was nothing more than a piece of paper that had been eliminated long ago in Europe. However, in their day-to-day lives, Monsieur Bischofberger absolutely refused to tolerate his servant's aristocratic fancies. He was Hans Roth, period. In any case, Bischofberger had a policy of never using anyone's last names, and he pronounced the first names in a manner reminiscent of someone calling a donkey.

He ordered a steamer trunk to be constructed and had the initials H.R. branded into the wood.

Louis would occasionally stir sugar into Monsieur Bischofberger's soup and salt into his tea. He punctured the crust of the *crème brûlée* with his thumb, blaming the cook for the *faux pas* and promising to personally attend to the matter himself. He knotted Monsieur Bischofberger's shoelaces together in the hope that he would tumble down a staircase, but that never happened.

Bischofberger had entered the world as the son of a financier in Biel, and he had spent the past twenty years traveling back and forth between Europe and the United States as an investment manager. During this time, he had developed an ingenious packing system. His favorite saying was: "The true traveler can find his toothbrush within thirty seconds, blindfolded." He was convinced that misfortune could strike at any moment, and under "misfortune," he included the possibility that his lamp oil might run out, leaving him blind. If he ended up washed up in the dark on the beaches of Bermuda, he would want to change into his champagne-colored gaiters right away, but in order to do that, he needed to know where the gaiters were packed. The day might break at any moment, which is why he wanted to look his best.

Thus, each of his staff received, for orientation purposes, hand-drawn plans showing the location of each article in the luggage cases. The undergarments were duly noted, and on top of them were stacked the short stockings, which were next to the long stockings, between which were nestled the flannel stockings. At first grasp, Bischofberger must be able to locate his double-soled boots, or the cork-soled boots, or the galoshes.

He threatened to throw a tantrum if, in the midst of an unexpected snowstorm in the middle of the night, his groping fingers did not immediately pull out his beloved Ulster.

Anyone wishing to be in Monsieur Bischofsberger's employment had to memorize these plans right away. A certain saying circulated among the servants: "Everything is running according to plan." What this meant was that someone had made a packing mistake and was now rubbing their cheek, where the imprints from Bischofberger's fat fingers still glowed.

Monsieur Bischofberger only used suitcases from Allen's Portmanteaus, which were deemed the best products on the market, and yet hardly a week passed in which Bischofberger did not send a telegram to West Strand Street containing recommendations on how the cases and bags could be improved. He had a very low opinion of the African mahogany travel kit, since regardless of how much care he took in placing the little cut quartz bottles, the silver stoppers, the scissors, the opium boxes, the bloodletting instruments, the scale, the measuring cup, and the marble mortar in their appropriate places, the case clanked around so terribly when being moved that he was actually ashamed of it. In his opinion, the kit sounded like it belonged to a traveling scissors grinder.

He was convinced that a padded inner lining would put an end to the clanking. After receiving no responses from West Strand Street to his telegrams, he decided one day to make his own lining, which functioned very nicely and of which he was extremely proud. He praised his invention whenever possible, even when nobody wanted to hear about it. Someday, he would present his revolution to the world, the revolution of the inner lining, but the world was not ready for it yet. Bischofberger was happy to have at least made his own life somewhat easier.

Between eight and nine o'clock each morning, Bischofberger would lean back in his wine-red, silk-covered wing chair, his legs crossed one over the other, and let the chain from his pocket watch glide through his fingers. Kneeling on the floor, Louis would practice packing the dust coat, cape, and wrap coat, in addition to all of the shirts, pants, and stockings.

"Hans!" Monsieur Bischofberger shouted when he checked the case.

"It's much better like this," Louis remarked.

Louis never gave a moment's thought to subjecting himself to plans, especially ones from a man who had never worn through a single pair of pants. He was not afraid of being beaten, and wealth alone was no reason for him to respect anyone as an authority figure. The plans had only one sensible function where Louis was concerned. On his way to the bathroom one time, he was unable to find a package of Gayetty's aloe-soaked toilet papers in Bischofberger's supply stash, so he took the packing instructions along instead. As he sat on the toilet seat, he tore them into long strips.

Whenever Louis was in the same room as Monsieur Bischofberger, he would begin to sing a slave protest song from the Civil War years which he had picked up on Regent Street. In anticipation of a trip to New Orleans, Bischofberger announced that he never wanted to hear this song again. After all, some of his clients were plantation owners. Louis' response was to sing all the louder:

Am I not a man and brother?  
Ought I not, then, to be free?  
Sell me not to one another,  
Take not thus my liberty.

A week before their departure, it occurred to Monsieur Bischofberger that this young man did nothing except cause annoyance. Later, in an interview with the Chicago Daily News, he explained that in Louis' presence he

always felt like Louis was the master and he was the servant. And there had been something else that had bothered him even more.

“He mimicked all of my gestures.”

Bischofberger felt like he was watching a smaller, younger version of himself in a mirror.

The journalist asked why he had recommended Louis to another employer. That, Bischofberger admitted, he could no longer explain, looking back. It must have had something to do with his sense of responsibility toward a fellow countryman or, at most, toward Louis' eccentric behavior, which he thought might be less problematic for an English employer.

Monsieur Bischofberger sent Louis, along with a letter, to Sir William Stevenson.

7.

The appetizer of clams and salted almonds had only just been finished, and Louis was now carrying a platter of toasted bread with caviar into the salon. The SS Scotia was bobbing in the Indian Ocean, and Louis was taking long strides in an effort to keep his balance. They would be reaching Ceylon in two or three days. They had stayed in London for a long time. The Derby had been run in early June, followed by the more exclusive Ascot a few weeks later. The Henley Regatta had taken place in July. The cricket games had been up next, first between Oxford and Cambridge, then Eton against Harrow.

It seemed to Louis as if, during this time, he had served an entire sea of clams to gentlemen with frizzy mustaches.

One of these men was Sir William Stevenson, a man with emotionless features, who went to great lengths to be at all the social occasions and who very diligently went out riding before breakfast every morning along Rotten Row in Hyde Park. He spent long hours at the Reform Club, where he attempted to make contacts or to play a hand of whist. However, most of the time, he ended up in the library, listlessly paging through one of its seventy-five thousand volumes. Sir William was an insipid person, and nobody wanted to have anything to do with him. His career was comprised of several governor posts, including a malaria-plagued island of several hundred residents in the Caribbean and a frozen boulder at the end of the world somewhere near Patagonia.

When grouse season started in early August and the upper crust once again fled London to return to the countryside and enjoy the hunt, Sir William and Lady Stevenson, along with their two children and a dozen servants, boarded a ship to Australia. Sir William was being sent to the colony as a governor, naturally to an extremely unpopulated corner where there was nothing much except sand and rock.

The caviar was followed by turtle soup.

Sir William's blandness and the bleakness of his posts were so well known in London society that he had a hard time finding staff to work for him. This explained why the service staff on the SS Scotia was composed of young women with illegitimate children and good-for-nothing men.

Sir William had noticed Louis' unusual last name, but he was used to hiring individuals who had no other choice except to follow him into hell. Besides that, he was reliant on those who came to him voluntarily, and thus, he asked no unnecessary questions. Louis traveled with the American passport Monsieur Bischofberger had taken out for him. For the next thirty years, Hans Roth would remain Louis de Montesanto.

English salmon in hollandaise sauce with a cucumber garnish was the next dish on the table. A stout porter beer for the gentleman.

Louis had assumed the role of supervisor among the staff. He believed that his co-workers were lazy and slow, and that somebody needed to keep them on task. Lady Stevenson changed her clothes several times a

day, and her petticoats and skirts had to be washed and ironed. The Stevensons dined on ten-course meals, so someone had to polish the plates and glasses and forks and knives afterward. Louis was the man who made certain these tasks were done.

While still in London, he had been promoted to butler, which meant that he was allowed to assume the honorable duty of ironing Sir William's morning newspaper to prevent his master's fingers from getting inky while reading. He had declined the salary increase, since money did not interest him. "The true wealth is freedom," he had said with such a penetrating, steely gaze that Sir William had fallen back a little step. The Stevensons respectfully called him by his last name. The servants working under Louis called him Mister de Montesanto. It was important to him that the S in his last name be emphasized and not the A, and he made them practice until they said it correctly.

The next course was sweetbreads a la Toulouse and pasties a la Financiere, stuffed with oysters and truffles. "Rapide, rapide," he hissed every time he entered the kitchen.

In the evenings, he reminded the servants that he was a French nobleman of Italian heritage and that he was only here to learn humility.

After that, everyone had to set their hands, fingers spread, out on the table so that he could inspect their fingernails and use a nail clippers as necessary. He made the decisions about who had their hair cut when, which shirts needed to be changed out, and how long their mealtimes could last. Anyone who dawdled in the bathroom received only bread for supper, a punishment the entire staff received with some frequency. He deducted the weekly baths at inflated prices from their salaries. And if anyone ever complained about it, he would flare his nostrils and say: "Money is the illusion of success."

They despised him.

Shortly before reaching Ceylon, he heard his cabin door open softly, followed by the snapping sound of the lock. He rattled the knob, but the door refused to open.

Stretched on his bed in the darkness, he thought about the butter churn and wondered if anyone could ever escape from it. He recalled Emma Campbell and her warm hands fumbling for him under the bedspread. He stroked the trunk on the Ganesha statue, and wondered why he never sought the company of his peers and why connections of all kinds were so horrifying to him. Voices were calling after him, as they had under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. They were saying that he should pack his trunk. He was a gypsy, not a costumed monkey.

The following morning, breakfast was served without him. It was not until noon that Louis heard the lock click. His gaze that of a drowsy baby, Sir William stood in the doorframe and assured him that he would look into this shameful act.

He spent the rest of the trip to Colombo at a corner table in the salon, where he studied the light that fell through the portholes and broke across the oak benches. Or he was up on the deck, where he gazed up at the clouds scudding across the sun. At one point, he thought he caught sight of dolphins in the water, but he was never sure. It might have been flying fish. He enjoyed the tropical heat. He felt a little dazed, but it was a pleasant feeling.

When the ship dropped anchor at Colombo, he stood in his cabin, holding a mirror up to his face. He ran his pointer finger across his forehead and tried to smooth out the indentations which were gouged into it. He could not remember noticing them before now. It seemed as if they had sliced themselves into his flesh overnight.

The first thing he saw on land was a cow chewing its cud next to a brown mound crawling with flies. The scent of cardamom and cinnamon wafted toward him from somewhere. The harbor was one huge, deafening mob. A rickshaw limped past. Somebody had set a large pot full of bubbling oil out on the sidewalk. A young

boy with a bare torso tried to sell him a Shiva statue made of perfumed sandalwood, but Louis shook his head. A gnome-like person with a lumpy face and no legs, and whose hips were lashed to a board, heaved himself on his fists through the dust, howling: “Karma! Karma! Karma!”

Louis kned him a little to the side and strolled southward along the sea. He sat down on the terrace of the Galle Face Hotel and ordered a cup of tea. An aristocratic Bengali man sat next to him. The man was wearing large glasses and a full beard.

“Travel makes a man circumspect,” the Bengali man said.

Louis nodded at the waves breaking at his feet, and the only thing that came to his mind was rhubarb cake and roasted golden plover in mayonnaise. He narrowed his eyes to slits and stared at the horizon.

The tea arrived, along with a small plate of fresh mango. Louis dunked a strainer full of leaves into the hot water, before wiping his damp hands on his pant legs under the table.

The Bengali man offered to accompany Louis to the Sri Maha Bodhi, the sacred fig tree underneath which Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment, the tree of all trees. The Bengali man explained that this particular tree was not the original one, since that one had been destroyed in Bodhgaya by King Shashanka. However, a brave monk had saved a branch of that tree and brought it here to cultivate a new one. The man talked and talked, and it seemed impossible for him to utter a single sentence without mentioning the Sri Maha Bodhi.

Louis turned his head to the right, toward the harbor. Without responding to the invitation, he stood up, walked along the thundering waves, and returned to the ship much too early.

Over the following ten days to Fremantle, he complained to the staff about the quality of the Yorkshire pudding, and claimed that the capon had been burnt in the oven and that the cranberry sauce was too sour, that the lamb with mint was a failure, that the plum pudding tasted of garlic, and that the vanilla ice cream would cause diarrhea.

When he disembarked in Australia, nobody helped him with his steamer trunk.

He dragged the trunk down the pier, past men with stubby chins whose thick arms were draped around the slender shoulders of young women. They were pearl fishers who never would have even dreamed of using their money to purchase a house or a coach. They preferred to drink whiskey and dance through the night. Louis lowered his eyes and affixed them to Lady Stevenson’s hemline, which threatened to vanish at the end of the pier.

8.

The only foreigners who came to Perth were explorers with cracking lips and rigid stares. They rode down Saint George’s Terrace, tied their horses’ halters to cast-iron hitching posts, and entered the governor’s house underneath its Gothic Revival columns. To the music of violins and oboes, they walked across black-and-white patterned floors of fake marble, past glass-fronted cabinets holding stacks of gold-rimmed porcelain plates. To the left of the staircase, a longcase clock with Roman numerals leaned against the wall. A staircase of Jarrah wood rose upward, and over it hung a golden chandelier with twenty candles. The wall in the background contained a leaded glass window that portrayed a rearing unicorn and a lion holding aloft a scepter.

Visitors turned to the left and took their seats in a bay window in the salon, where the sun illuminated their wizened necks. Louis hurried to the kitchen to uncork a bottle of champagne.

Nobody ever came a second time. Except for Bob Fraser, a man who filled out his clothes like a stuffed feed

sack. On top of his head, a tuft of sparse hairs trembled, reminiscent of a little pile of dust. His mouth was hidden behind a seaweed-like mesh. Several years ago, Sir William's predecessor had sent Fraser off to his definite demise in search of a new land route through the desert between Perth and Adelaide. To the great astonishment of all Australians, Fraser did not die. As a result, he received permission from the governor to come and go from his residence as he pleased for the rest of his days, without having to either announce himself or take his leave.

Louis always filled Fraser's champagne glass himself, and the massive man would wink conspiratorially at him as he did so.

The governor's house was a new construction and the largest building in the city. East of the entrance and above one of the olive trees, you could make out a rectangular depression in the grass where the foundations of the old governor's residence sat. The house had been built of wood, and the ants had consumed it. From the foundation, steps led down to the riverbank, where a vegetable garden was located. This was where the head gardener, in his stained jute apron, spent his days, trying to cultivate potatoes. But the ground was too swampy, and even when the head gardener tried to grow asparagus, tomatoes and carrots, everything rotted. Every winter, the Swan River flooded the garden when it crested its banks.

On the northern side, a sandstone wall separated the house from the road and from a flower bed dotted with kangaroo paws, which always unfurled their purple buds in November. Goodenia, as thick as moss, grew around a pond full of lily pads. All of the frogs were an annoyance, especially the bullfrog, which sounded like a tearful foghorn.

On the eastern edge of the garden, in a hut set between two horse barns, lived an epileptic Aborigine who had been released from the Fremantle lunatic asylum due to his advanced age. Everybody just called him Buddy. Buddy was officially employed as assistant gardener, but he did nothing all day long except sit on his heels and watch the flowers. He would occasionally chase away a frog, but only for a few meters, at which point he would trot off again.

One afternoon, Bob Fraser stood in the salon, gazing out the window and watching Buddy stick blossoms from a teaberry bush into his mouth. Louis was just in the process of filling Fraser's glass.

"Look at his skin," Fraser said, his back to Louis. "So leathery, only a vulture could get through it."

"Oh," Louis replied.

Fraser turned around and picked up his glass from the table: "All this country has are vultures."

Fraser liked to tell the story about Salty Plains, where he had once traveled with a tracker. The tracker had been a sixteen-year-old boy, and one evening, they had been grilling a piece of prime rib on a spit when a horde of aborigines rushed at them out of the dark. The cannibals knocked the boy out with a stone, placed him in a pit dug into the sand, covered him with dry branches, and then roasted him alive.

"How do you know that?" Louis asked. "Were you standing right there?"

Fraser ignored the question.

"After that, it was a bit harder to make good progress," he replied, straightening his neck and readjusting his tie.

Bob Fraser used each of his stories as an opportunity to quickly run through the greatest of his adventures: the expedition from Perth to Adelaide. He would always prop his hands on his hips as he did so:

In the first month, all of the dogs starved to death because they could not find any fresh meat to eat. In the second month, there was hardly any food for the horses, and the weaker ones died. In the third month, the men had to ride straight through for five days and nights because their supplies threatened to run out early. Early in the fourth month, the man bringing up the rear fell off his horse. They heard his cries, but none of them had the strength to even turn their heads back. All they saw was glistening lightning against a steely

sky.

“Is that really true?” Louis asked.

“Anything can be true as long as it suits your needs,” Bob Fraser remarked, as he continued to watch Buddy through the window.

“Sometimes I wonder if they’re actually human,” he slowly swayed his head.

Visitors provided the only variety in the governor’s house. However, they were a rarity, and Louis spent most of his time either in the library, where he would read for days, or at the window of his room, watching the street down below. He felt caged. The boredom drained him, and Sir William’s good-naturedness stoked his anger. Whenever he gazed into that innocent face, he wanted to poke his eyes out. He would not spend his life serving others. It was a form of slavery, even if it was comfortable and kept him fed.

One evening, Louis stood at his window and watched as a cockroach crept over the windowsill. Its body was the color of caramelized sugar. He let it crawl into his hand and then squeezed it between his thumb and pointer finger. He pulled off its small back legs. It wriggled wildly. The head came off when he pulled on the antennae. He held its body over a candle flame until the stench of the burning insect filled the room.

Louis spent more time in the garden. He claimed the hedges would spread everywhere since the head gardener was too occupied with his potatoes, so he, Louis, would have to set things straight. However, he did nothing except sit next to Buddy.

Buddy had a pipe, the end of which he clasped between his toes. He held the other end up to his mouth and blew into it in order to speak with his ancestors.

Louis once asked Buddy why he did not leave. He was, after all, a nomad. He had to know that walls and fences sent people to their graves faster than pistols did. Buddy stood up and walked into his hut at the end of the garden.

Buddy did not speak with anyone, not even Louis.

It was July 1874, a cold and damp time, when Bob Fraser pointed out of the window and said to Louis: “Those Negroes have never gotten past the lowest level of evolution, just like the monkeys.”

He twirled the stem of his champagne glass between his fingers and looked up at the dripping trees. Bubbles climbed the inside of the glass, as raindrops trickled down the window pane.

That night, Louis dreamed about taking a train from Solothurn toward the French border. He once again saw the bushes close to the railroad tracks, as they bobbed up and down outside the window. He once again felt Emma Campbell’s hand on his knee. When he turned around, a figure in women’s clothing was sitting beside him, but it was Bob Fraser’s face that looked out at him from underneath the little hat. A gauzy dark pink bow was tied under his chin, and from beneath the poplin, a puffy tulle collar peeked out. He extended a finger full of jingling oversized gold rings and pointed across the hills toward the Alps: “Nothing more than another country full of monkeys.”

Louis felt himself flush with fury, as a metallic taste spread in his mouth.

It was now raining incessantly. One morning, Sir William took a walk around the pond with an umbrella in one hand and William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* in the other. At the line “Dost thou know who made thee?”, he pondered what seemed to him a sophisticated choice of words, before contemplating the refreshing psychology behind a preceding metaphor. Suddenly he glanced up. And he would go on to tell this story for many years to come: About how Louis was just sitting there, as naked as a person could be, chewing on lily pad roots, his face smeared with ashes.

That was the day Sir William realized that he needed a new butler.