

SANDOKAN

The King of the Sea

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



Sandokan: The King of the Sea

By Emilio Salgari

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For information address:

info@rohpress.com

Visit our website at

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Contents

Part I: A Mysterious Enemy

Chapter 1: The Attack on the <i>Marianna</i>	1
Chapter 2: The Sherip.....	9
Chapter 3: On the Kabatuan.....	21
Chapter 4: Trapped among the Flames.....	31
Chapter 5: The Pilot's Confession.....	40
Chapter 6: The Elephants Attack.....	47
Chapter 7: Pangutaran's Kampong.....	55
Chapter 8: The <i>Marianna</i>	62
Chapter 9: The Sherip Performs a Miracle.....	68
Chapter 10: The Attack on the Kampong.....	77
Chapter 11: Kammamuri's Return.....	85
Chapter 12: The Dyaks' Binge.....	94
Chapter 13: The Retreat through the Forests.....	104
Chapter 14: The American Ship.....	114
Chapter 15: Fire a Broadside!.....	123
Chapter 16: The Declaration of War.....	133

Part II Suyodhana's Son

Chapter 1: A Nocturnal Expedition.....	145
Chapter 2: A Surprise Attack.....	152
Chapter 3: A Terrible Battle.....	162
Chapter 4: Sir Moreland.....	170
Chapter 5: In Pursuit of the <i>King of the Sea</i>	177
Chapter 6: Sir Moreland's Secrets.....	187
Chapter 7: The Sunda Sea.....	194
Chapter 8: The Island of Mangalum.....	202
Chapter 9: The Colonists Strike Back.....	214
Chapter 10: The <i>King of the Sea</i> Returns.....	224
Chapter 11: The First Attacks.....	233
Chapter 12: The Bay of Sarawak.....	243
Chapter 13: The <i>Marianna</i>	253
Chapter 14: The Lord of War.....	264
Chapter 15: The Tide Begins to Turn.....	271
Chapter 16: Suyodhana's Son.....	278
Epilogue.....	290

Part I

A Mysterious Enemy

Chapter 1

The Attack on the *Marianna*

“How long before we set forth? By Jupiter! I can’t believe we’re stuck here like imbeciles!”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do, Señor Yanez.”

“A sandbank! How could we have grounded on a sandbank? By Jupiter! Was the pilot drunk? So much for Malay seamanship! And to think that up until this morning I’d thought them the best in the Seven Seas! Sambigliong, have them hoist another sail. The wind is still favourable; we may be able to wrench free.”

“Unlikely, Señor Yanez, the tide is dropping too quickly.”

“The devil take that idiotic pilot!”

The man that had uttered those words had abruptly turned toward the stern, his face dark with anger. Though in his late forties, he was still strong and vigorous. His moustache, now grey, had been carefully curled; his face, bronzed and handsome, was framed by long hair that fell from beneath a large hat of Manila hemp adorned with small red silk tassels.

His clothes were simple yet elegant, a white jacket with gold buttons, white trousers and brown leather long boots. A pair of long-barrelled Indian pistols inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl were tucked in a thick red velvet sash about his waist.

“Pilot!” he shouted.

At that command, a Malay with dark soot-coloured skin and almond-shaped eyes yellowed from long years at sea, gave the wheel to a crewmate and nervously made his way towards Yanez.

“Padada,” the European said dryly, his right hand resting on the butt of one of his pistols. “How do you explain our present situation? I seem

to recall you telling me that you knew every inch of the Bornean coast; that's the only reason I took you on."

"But, sir," the Malay stammered embarrassedly.

"Do you have an explanation?" asked Yanez who appeared, perhaps for the first time in his life, to have lost his usual calm demeanour.

"This sandbank wasn't here before, sir."

"So it just formed this morning, did it? Do you take me for a fool? You intentionally ran the *Marianna* aground."

"Why would I do that, sir?"

"How should I know? Perhaps you're in league with those scoundrels that have stirred up the Dyaks."

"I only associate with other Malays, sir."

"How long before we can set off?"

"We'll be on our way come high tide, sir."

"Well that's something to hope for; tell me, are there many Dyaks along the river?"

"A few small tribes, sir, I doubt they'll be any trouble."

"Are they well armed?"

"Parangs and sumpitans mostly, perhaps a few rifles."

"Who could have stirred them up?" murmured Yanez. "There's more to this than a simple uprising... The Tiger of Malaysia insists the British are behind it, but why this sudden hostility? There's a mystery here; let's hope we can get Tremal-Naik and Darma back to Mompracem before the scoundrels attack their plantation. Now, let's see what we can do to get off this sandbank before high tide."

He turned his back to the Malay, walked toward the bow, and leaned over the bulwark.

The ship that had run aground, perhaps due to the carelessness of her pilot, was a magnificent two-masted vessel of recent construction with two enormous triangular sails similar to those used by large Malay prahus. She weighed no less than two hundred tons and carried enough arms to strike fear into even the mightiest cruiser.

Two heavy-calibre chasers stood on the quarterdeck, protected by a mobile barricade comprised of thick steel plates; four large swivel guns

peered from the forecastle, which though of short range, could do considerable damage to any ship caught within their sights.

She was manned by a crew of forty men, Malays and Dyaks, who, though past their prime, were all strong and muscular, their proud faces and many scars indicating they had seen their share of battle.

The ship had come to an unexpected halt before a vast bay several dozen metres from the mouth of a large river. Numerous islands dotted the waters, each one covered in thick vegetation and defended by a maze of sandbanks and coral reefs.

The *Marianna* had grounded upon a sandbank, hidden just below the waterline, which was slowly growing larger as the tide receded.

“Wretched pilot!” exclaimed Yanez, after having studied their predicament at length. “She’s in too deep to kedge her out. We’ll be stuck here until midnight. What do think, Sambigliong?”

A rugged-looking Malay with whitish hair and a muscular build had just drawn up by the European’s side.

“It’s as you say, Señor Yanez, there’s nothing we can do; we’re stuck here ‘til high tide.”

“Do you trust that pilot?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” replied the Malay. “I’ve never seen him before today. However...”

“Continue,” said Yanez.

“Well, looking back, it all seems rather suspicious. We found him alone, miles from Gaya, in a rowboat that could barely withstand the waves. When he learned where we were headed, he immediately offered to guide us through these waters.”

“Was I rash to give him the wheel?” Yanez wondered aloud. Then, shaking his head as if to dispel an unwelcome thought added, “Why would that man, one of your countrymen, have tried to strand the Tiger of Malaysia’s mightiest prahu? Haven’t we always protected the natives from British oppression? Have our battles against James Brooke been forgotten? Had it not been for us, the Dyaks of Sarawak would never have regained their freedom.”

“Why would the Sea Dyaks suddenly take up arms against our friends,

Señor Yanez?" asked Sambigliong. "These shores were almost deserted before Tremal-Naik built his farms here. Most of the Dyaks in these parts were pirates before he showed them a better way to earn a living. Who knows how many of their lives he's saved by giving them the option of hanging up their parangs."

"It's a mystery, my dear Sambigliong, that neither I nor Sandokan can fathom. Something must have happened to spark this sudden anger towards Tremal-Naik, but for the moment we're at a loss to explain it."

"Do you think Tremal-Naik and his daughter are in danger?"

"The messenger he sent to Mompracem said the Dyaks were up in arms as if taken by sudden madness, three of his farms had been burned and pillaged and it was rumoured they were planning an attack on his life."

"And yet there isn't a better man on the island," said Sambigliong. "It makes no sense. Why would those scoundrels turn on him?"

"We'll find out when we reach Pangutaran's kampong. The *Marianna's* sudden appearance on the river should calm the Dyaks' tempers a bit, but if they refuse to lay down their arms, we'll gladly give them battle."

"Let's hope we learn the reason behind their uprising."

"Look over there!" exclaimed Yanez, casting his eyes toward the mouth of the river. "There seems to be someone heading towards us."

A small rowboat fitted with a single sail had emerged from behind the small islands clustered about the mouth of the river and had pointed her bow toward the *Marianna*. One man sat at the tiller, but from that distance the Portuguese could not tell if he was a Malay or a Dyak.

"Now who could that be?" asked Yanez, keeping his eyes trained on the approaching vessel. "Look at him, Sambigliong. He's trying to decide where to go. First he heads toward that small island then he tacks and sails off towards the reef."

"Someone may be spying on him, Señor Yanez," replied Sambigliong. "He may be trying to hide his course."

"I agree," replied the European. "Load one of the swivel guns and have someone bring me a pair of binoculars. I'd wager he's trying to reach us; if anyone attempts to stop him, we'll open fire."

Minutes later he had trained the instrument on the rowboat. She had finally set off from the small island and was now less than two miles from them, heading determinedly towards the *Marianna*.

At one point the Portuguese cried out:

“Tangusa!”

“Tangusa? Are you sure? It’s been six years since that old pirate set off with Tremal-Naik.”

“It’s him, Sambigliong; I can make out his face quite clearly.”

“Then, we’ll finally get some answers about this uprising,” said the Dyak.

“Yes and... Oh!”

“What is it, sir?”

“A launch manned by a dozen Dyaks; looks like they’re giving chase. See, there, just off the furthest island?”

Sambigliong sharpened his gaze and spotted a long narrow boat by the mouth of the river quickly heading toward the open sea, driven forward by eight well-built oarsmen.

“Yes, Señor Yanez, they’re giving chase,” he said.

“Is the swivel gun ready?”

“Yes, sir. We loaded all four of them, take your pick.”

“Excellent, stand ready for my command.”

Aided by the wind, the small rowboat was flying toward the *Marianna* with great speed; however, she was no match for the launch. Realizing he was being followed, Tangusa quickly secured the tiller in place, took up the oars and started rowing furiously.

A small cloud of smoke suddenly rose from the launch’s bow, then the sound of a discharge reached the ears of the *Marianna*’s crew.

“They’re firing on Tangusa, Señor Yanez,” said Sambigliong.

“Well, my friend, time to announce our presence,” the European replied.

He tossed away his cigarette, walked calmly through the throng of men that had been drawn to the forecabin by the sound of the blast, took position behind one of the swivel guns and aimed it at the launch.

The chase was intensifying and though Tangusa was rowing desperately, his tiny vessel was slowly losing ground.

The pursuers fired another rifle blast, but the bullet went wide, Dyaks generally being more skilled with sumpitans than firearms.

Yanez calmly continued to take aim.

"They're within range," he murmured after a minute.

He fired. The long barrel thundered darkly, the shot echoing beneath the trees lining the shores of the bay.

A jet of water shot into the air off the launch's starboard side followed immediately by cries of rage.

"A direct hit, Señor Yanez!" shouted Sambigliong.

"It should sink in a minute," the Portuguese replied.

The tiny boat was rapidly filling with water, the one-and-a-half pound shell fired from the swivel gun having blasted a large hole in its side.

The Dyaks immediately turned about and began rowing desperately towards the small islands at the mouth of the river, hoping to reach one while the launch remained afloat. But when they were about three hundred paces from the nearest shore, the launch suddenly disappeared beneath the waves.

Skilled swimmers, they had little need to worry, for Sea Dyaks, like Malays and Polynesians, spend most of their lives on the water.

"Yes, save yourselves," murmured Yanez. "Try to follow us again and we'll tan your hides with a couple of rounds of grapeshot."

The small rowboat, freed of her pursuers, thanks to that well-aimed shot, had resumed her course towards the *Marianna*. The breeze had picked up slightly with the setting sun and soon the tiny vessel was only a few cable lengths from the prahu.

Her sole occupant was a man in his early thirties with sallow skin and almost European features. Though short in stature he was of muscular build; portions of his arms, chest, and legs were bound with cloth, which appeared to be stained with blood.

"He looks like he's in pain," said Yanez. "He may have been wounded! Throw down the ladder and have Kikatany stand by."

While his men rushed to carry out his orders, the small rowboat

tacked once more and arrived beneath the *Marianna's* starboard side.

"Quickly, climb aboard!" shouted Yanez.

Tangusa tethered his boat to the ship, took down the sail, then with a bit of effort, scrambled up the ladder to the deck.

A cry of surprise and horror escaped the Portuguese.

The poor man's body was riddled with cuts and gashes as if he had been sprayed with several volleys of tiny grapeshot. Small threads of blood streamed from each of those countless wounds.

"By Jupiter!" Yanez exclaimed in horror. "Who did this to you, Tangusa?"

"White ants, Señor Yanez," the Malay replied hoarsely, grimacing in pain.

"White ants!" the Portuguese exclaimed. "You were tortured? The Dyaks?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! Wretches! Get yourself to the infirmary and have Kikatany tend to your wounds, we'll resume our conversation later. Just tell me if Tremal-Naik and Darma are in danger."

"The master has gathered a small band of Malays and is trying to hold off the Dyaks."

"Fine, that's all I need to know. Now have Kickatany take a look at you; send for me once you're better, my good Tangusa. I have a few things to tend to."

While the Malay, assisted by two sailors, was led below, Yanez turned his attention back to the bay. Three large canoes had emerged from the mouth of the river, teeming with warriors. A double canoe fitted with a platform followed close behind them, a small brass cannon peering menacingly from her deck.

"What the devil!" murmured the Portuguese. "Do those Dyaks intend to measure themselves against us? Ah, my friends, you'll need more than a lela and a handful of muskets to defeat the Tigers of Mompracem. Our guns will make short work of you."

"Provided there aren't any other launches hiding behind those islands, Señor Yanez," said Sambigliong.

“Those pirates and headhunters may be as daring as they come, but we’re much too well armed to be afraid of them. Besides, in the unlikely event they should manage to board us, a few well-placed caltrops should stop them in their tracks. We do have enough to cover the deck?”

“Yes, sir, two crates full, Captain Yanez.”

“Excellent. Have them brought up and order our men to put on their boots. How are we stocked for thorns?”

“We have several dozen bundles stored below.”

“Have them spread about the bulwarks. If the Dyaks try to attack, they’ll howl like beasts. Pilot!”

Padada, who had climbed up to the crow’s nest to get a better look at the four launches, quickly came down and nervously made his way towards the Portuguese.

“How many ships do those Dyaks have?”

“I’ve only seen a few on the river,” the Malay replied.

“Then we have no reason to fear an attack?”

“I can’t imagine they’d try, sir.”

“I see. Padada, I’m beginning to have my doubts about you; I’d almost wager you ran my ship aground intentionally.”

The Malay grimaced as if to hide a smile.

“I’ve never given you any reason to doubt my loyalty, sir,” he replied, a tone of resentment in his voice.

“We’ll see soon enough,” replied Yanez. “Now while Sambigliong prepares our defences, I’ll pay poor Tangusa a visit.”

Chapter 2

The Sherip

The *Marianna* had been designed to rival even the most elegant yachts and her interior was nothing short of opulent. Her main cabin, which served as a mess hall and receiving area, had been decorated and furnished with no expense spared. The shelves, chairs and dining table were of the finest mahogany, trimmed with gold and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The floor disappeared beneath thick Persian carpets, Indian tapestries hung from the walls and the windows were adorned with pink silk curtains embroidered with silver. A large Venetian lamp hung from the ceiling, and a magnificent collection of weapons from every corner of the world filled the spaces between the drapery.

Tangusa lay on a green velvet couch, bandaged from head to toe and wrapped in a large white woollen blanket. His wounds had been fully tended to and his spirits quickly restored by a double shot of brandy.

“How do you feel, my friend?” asked Yanez.

“Kickatany’s ointments are miraculous,” the patient replied. “I started feeling better from the moment he began applying them to my wounds.”

“Then you can tell me what happened. Is Tremal-Naik still at Pangutaran’s kampong?”

“Yes, Señor Yanez. When I left, they were strengthening their defences so they could keep the Dyaks at bay until your arrival. When did our messenger reach Mompracem?”

“Three days ago, we readied our best ship and set sail immediately.”

“What does the Tiger of Malaysia make of this sudden Dyak uprising?”

Up until three weeks ago, those headhunters treated Tremal-Naik like their guardian angel...

"We've talked about it at length and come up with various theories, but I doubt we've discerned their real motives. Why would the Dyaks rise up and destroy Tremal-Naik's farms? After all the work he's put into them. Six years of toil and more than a hundred thousand rupees spent in vain! Do you have any ideas?"

"I can tell you what I know. A month ago, maybe earlier, a man disembarked on these shores. He was neither Malay nor Bornean. He wore a green turban, like all those that have made the great pilgrimage to Mecca and it was rumoured he was a sherip, a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. As you may be aware, sir, the Dyaks in these islands do not believe in forest spirits, nor do they believe in the antus, the good and evil spirits worshipped by their brethren in the south, they're all Muslims, as devout as any you'd find in Central India. I don't know what he said to those savages, but he somehow convinced them to attack Tremal-Naik and destroy his plantations."

"What tale is this?" Yanez exclaimed in surprise.

"Unfortunately, a true one, Señor Yanez. Tremal-Naik and Miss Darma are in grave danger; we must get to them immediately if they're to escape with their lives."

"So this sherip isn't just trying to run him off his land..."

"He wants the Bengali's head, Señor Yanez."

The Portuguese turned pale.

"Who is he? Why would he lead an attack against Tremal-Naik? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, I caught a glimpse of him shortly before I escaped from the Dyaks."

"Is he young, old..."

"Old, sir; and as tall and thin as a fakir. But there's more to the mystery," added Tangusa. "I've learned that two weeks ago a steamship flying British colours dropped anchor near here and the sherip had a long conversation with her commander."

"How long did the ship remain in these waters?"

“She sailed off the following morning, but I suspect she may have unloaded arms during the night. Quite a few Dyaks now possess muskets and pistols whereas just a few weeks ago you would have been hard pressed to find one armed with anything other than a sumpitan or a kampilan.”

“Could the British be behind all this?” wondered Yanez, visibly worried.

“It’s possible, sir.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. There’s a rumour going round Labuan that they’re planning an attack on Mompracem. The British government suddenly feels we pose a threat to its colonies; it’d like nothing better than to take our island and force us to resettle on some distant shore.”

“One would think the British would be grateful; the Tigers of Mompracem did them a great service when they rid India of the Thugs!”

“Would a lion show its gratitude to a monkey for having rid it of its fleas?”

“No, sir, those beasts have no feelings.”

“And neither does the British government.”

“Are you going to let them chase you off Mompracem?”

A smile appeared on Yanez’ lips. He lit a cigarette, took a few puffs, then said calmly:

“It wouldn’t be the first time the Tigers of Mompracem took to battle against the British Lion. We made them tremble in the past, once we even forced the colonists of Labuan to take to the sea, they knew better than to try and fend off one of our attacks. Rest assured, they won’t take us by surprise.”

“Has Sandokan sent prahus to Tiga to gather reinforcements?”

“Yes, and they won’t be any less courageous than the Tigers of old,” replied Yanez. “If England tries to take that patch of land we’ve called home for the last thirty years, they’ll face our swords and cannons. We’ll set fire to all of Malaysia if need be. The old Lion may be insatiable, but we’ll give no quarter. The Tiger will never lower his flag in defeat.”

Suddenly Sambigliong, the *Marianna*’s quartermaster, cried out:

“Captain on deck!”

“Excellent timing, my Malay friend,” replied Yanez. “I’ve just finished my chat with Tangusa. What is it?”

“They’re advancing.”

“The Dyaks?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“That should make things interesting.”

The Portuguese left the room, climbed the ladder and stepped on deck. The sun was setting behind a golden cloud, staining the sea red, a light breeze rippled across the waters.

The tide was at its lowest ebb, and the *Marianna*, still stranded upon the sandbank, had listed slightly to port, her deck now sloping gently towards the water.

The enemy had multiplied. Four double canoes and a dozen large launches had emerged from behind the small islands at the mouth of the river and were advancing slowly towards the middle of the bay. A small prahu led the attack, a meriam peering from her bow, a brass cannon slightly larger than a lela.

“Ah!” Yanez said calmly. “So they wish to measure themselves against us? Well so be it; we’ll give them their fill of powder. I’d say we have more than enough to dispatch this lot, wouldn’t you, Sambiglion?”

“We’ve got an ample supply, Captain,” the Malay replied.

“They don’t appear to be in any hurry, my friend!”

“They’re waiting for nightfall.”

“Ah yes, of course. Well then, let’s get a look at who we’re dealing with while we still have some light.”

He picked up a pair of binoculars and pointed them at the small prahu at the head of the flotilla.

She was manned by fifteen or twenty men dressed in Dyak battle attire. Each wore a rattan war-cap adorned with long black and white feathers, a sleeveless war-coat made of goat skin, breeches buttoned at the ankles and a short sarong about the waist. Some were armed with muskets; the majority carried kampilans, sharp heavy sabres, or pisaurants, short single-edged daggers with long carved wooden hilts. All bore large square shields of buffalo hide.

“A handsome group of foes,” said Yanez, unperturbed.

“Are there many of them, sir?”

“I’d say about a hundred and fifty, my friend.”

He turned and scanned the *Marianna’s* deck.

His forty men had gone to their battle stations. The gunners had taken their place behind the two chasers and four swivel guns, the marksmen peered from behind the bundles of thorns now lining the bulwarks and the riggers and lookouts had scrambled up to the crow’s nest armed with carbines and grenades.

“Should make for quite a visit!” he murmured, pleased with the way Sambigliong had arranged the ship’s defences.

The sun was sinking beneath the waters, its last rays bathing the islands’ coasts and reefs in a golden-red light. It vanished in an instant, painting the clouds crimson as it set the horizon ablaze, then the light began to fade and darkness descended upon the bay.

“That ought to give them the advantage... or so they think,” said Yanez, still marvelling at the beautiful sunset.

He cast his eyes upon the enemy fleet. The small prahu, the war boats and the smaller vessels had quickened their pace.

“Everyone ready?” asked Yanez.

“Yes,” replied Sambigliong.

“Then, Tigers of Mompracem, you may begin.”

The small prahu was within range, the other ships advanced behind her in single file to better protect themselves from the *Marianna’s* artillery.

Sambigliong bent over one of the chasers on the quarterdeck, took careful aim and fired. The prahu’s foremast came crashing down; its immense sail blanketing her crew.

That marvellous shot was greeted by furious cries from the launches then a blast of smoke suddenly shot out from the bow of the damaged ship.

The prahu’s meriam had thundered in response, but the ball, badly aimed, had done little more than pierce the jib sail Yanez had ordered hoisted.

“Not much of a first shot,” said Yanez, calmly enjoying his cigarette as he leaned against the bow bulwark.

A series of discharges followed that second shot as the four double canoes fired in unison.

Fortunately their small cannons were still out of range, and those blasts did little more than fill the air with smoke and noise.

“Destroy the prahu first, Sambigliong,” said Yanez. “Try to take out her meriam; it’s the only piece they have that can do us any damage. Six men to the chasers! Fire at will!”

He stopped suddenly and quickly cast his eyes towards the stern.

“Sambigliong!” he exclaimed, turning pale.

“Don’t worry, Señor Yanez, within two minutes that prahu will be resting beneath the waves.”

“Where’s the pilot, I don’t see him anywhere.”

“The pilot!” exclaimed the Malay, rushing from the cannon. “Where is that rascal?”

Shaken, Yanez quickly raced across the deck.

“Find the pilot!” he shouted.

“Captain,” shouted a Malay stationed by one of the swivel guns, “I spotted him earlier going below.”

Sambigliong, who perhaps had the same suspicions as the Portuguese, quickly drew his pistol and rushed down the ladder. Yanez followed close behind as the chasers flashed and thundered at the approaching ships.

“Ah! Dog!” the quartermaster shouted.

Sambigliong had grabbed Padada as the pilot was emerging from a cabin with a bit of burning rope clutched in one hand.

“What are you up to, you wretch?” howled Yanez, rushing at the Malay who was struggling to fend off the quartermaster.

At the sight of the captain’s pistol, the pilot, realizing that he had perhaps just moments to live, turned pale.

“Sir,” he said, trying to keep his voice even, “I came below to search for fuses for the swivel guns.”

“Fuses!” shouted Yanez. “You scoundrel, you were trying to set fire to the ship!”

“What!?!”

“Sambigliong, tie him up!” the Portuguese commanded. “We’ll deal with him once we’ve beaten off the Dyaks.”

“No need for rope, Señor Yanez,” the quartermaster replied.

With one swift movement his hands slipped about the pilot’s neck, fingers pressing just below the jaw.

Padada’s eyes widened, his lips parted, and he gasped for air, then his head fell back and he slumped in Sambigliong’s arms.

“You’ve killed him!” exclaimed Yanez.

“No, sir,” Sambigliong replied. “I just knocked him out. An old Javanese trick; a bit of pressure to his carotid artery and he’s out in an instant. He’ll come around in about twelve or fifteen hours.”

“Really?”

“You have my word.”

“Toss him into a hammock and let’s get back on deck. Sounds like the battle is heating up.”

Sambigliong picked up the unconscious pilot and placed him on a carpet, then both men quickly climbed back up on deck, and arrived just as the two cannons resumed their fire.

The battle had intensified.

The double canoes had fanned out to divide the *Marianna’s* fire, while the smaller boats crowded with warriors had remained out of the fray, impatiently waiting for the order to attack.

Shots thundered in rapid succession and a barrage of cannonballs, though all of small calibre, rained down upon the *Marianna*, blunting yards, piercing sails, mangling the rigging and splintering the bulwarks. Some men had been wounded and a few had been killed, but the gunners, undaunted, calmly returned fire.

Now that the enemy had come within range, the swivel guns had also begun to voice their might, hurling volleys of grapeshot at the small fleet. A shower of nails sliced through the Dyaks’ skin, drawing howls of rage.

Despite those formidable volleys, the ships continued to advance. Dyaks, as courageous as any Malay, do not fear death. The oarsmen rowed with all their might, while those armed with rifles fired incessantly, though ineffectively, not having had much practice with their new weapons.

The launches had arrived to within five hundred paces, when the enemy prahu suddenly listed to one side. She had lost both her masts, her outrigger had been destroyed and her bulwarks had been smashed to rubble.

“Destroy that meriam, Sambigliong!” shouted Yanez, spying a double canoe rapidly advancing towards the prahu, obviously intending to seize the cannon before the small vessel sank from sight.

“Yes, Captain,” replied the Malay, from aside the port fore chaser.

“The rest of you fire on the crew,” added the Portuguese, from atop the quarterdeck where he had been closely following the small fleet’s every movement, his cigarette pressed between his lips.

A broadside from the fore chaser and the swivel guns knocked the meriam off its carriage, then a hurricane of grapeshot swept the deck from bow to stern, wounding most of the crew.

“Nicely done!” the Portuguese exclaimed coolly. “They won’t be bothering us anymore.”

The prahu was quickly filling with water. Those that had survived that tremendous broadside had jumped into the sea and were swimming toward the launches as the pontoons’ *elas* covered their retreat.

The small ship capsized minutes later, spilling her dead and wounded into the water. Fierce cries thundered from the launches as the Dyaks watched her disappear beneath the waves.

“You squawk like geese,” shouted Yanez. “You’ll need to do better to defeat the Tigers of Mompracem, my darlings. Gunners, fire on those launches! Things are heating up.”

Though having lost the prahu and her artillery, the enemy vessels had resumed their attack and were quickly advancing toward the *Marianna*.

The Tigers of Mompracem did not hold back. Cannons, muskets and

swivel guns thundered without pause, felling numerous foes with every blast.

Those old warriors, who had once made the British of Labuan tremble, who had battled and defeated James Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak, and who had challenged and destroyed the might of the dreaded Indian Thugs, defended themselves with admirable fury, not a man among them taking refuge behind the barricades.

Ignoring the danger, they had climbed upon the bulwarks, and aided by the riggers in the crow's nest, unleashed a deadly rain upon the launches, sparing none of their assailants.

But the Dyaks did not retreat. More launches continued to emerge from the river, swelling their numbers. Three hundred well-armed savages were soon moving towards them, determined to board the *Marianna* and slaughter her defenders. There would be no quarter from those bloodthirsty warriors anxious to add to their collection of human skulls.

"The matter threatens to become serious," murmured Yanez, at the sight of those new launches. "Keep firing, my Tigers! Don't let up for an instant! That dog of a sherip has turned them all into rabid fanatics."

He drew up beside the starboard chaser and relieved Sambigliong, just as the quartermaster was taking aim.

"Let me take the shot," he said. "If we don't smash their double canoes and sink their lelas, they'll be here within three minutes."

"The thorns will hold them back, Captain."

"I wouldn't count on it, my friend. They'll put their kampilans to work."

"And our riggers will shower them with grenades."

"I'd rather they not reach us."

He fired a shot and, as always, struck his mark, destroying one of the advancing vessels. Her double bows, breached just beneath the waterline, quickly disappeared beneath the waves.

A second vessel fared no better, but by the time Yanez fired his third shot the launches were almost upon them.

"Draw your parangs and haul the swivel guns to the stern!" he

shouted, abandoning the now useless weapon. "Clear the bow!"

His commands were executed immediately. The marksmen flocked to the quarterdeck while the riggers and lookouts remained in the crow's nest, ready to unleash an attack from above.

Sambigliong and several men drew their axes and smashed open two crates, covering the deck with caltrops, small steel balls with four projecting spikes.

The Dyaks, infuriated by the large number of casualties they had suffered, had surrounded the *Marianna* and were howling menacingly as they attempted to scramble up her sides, grabbing onto the launches, shrouds, backstays and the bowsprit to aid their advance.

Yanez had drawn his scimitar and jumped in among his crew.

"More men to the swivel guns!" he shouted.

Rifles and carbines burning in their hands, the marksmen fired without pause, each volley felling more and more attackers.

Still the Dyaks advanced, scaling the ship's sides, clambering towards their prey. But as the first men reached the bulwarks the air filled with cries of pain. Sharp thorns tore at their flesh and they fell back, dragging down those beneath them.

But, though the attack on the port and starboard bulwarks had been thwarted, the Dyaks that had climbed up onto the bowsprit had found a clear path before them and easily breached the ship's defences.

Spotting the thorns, they hacked at the bundles with a few swipes of their kampilans and tossed them into the sea, then a dozen men stormed onto the forecastle, howling in victory.

"Fire!" shouted Yanez, having let them advance.

The four swivel guns thundered in unison and a shower of nails swept the forecastle.

The attackers fell as one man, torrents of blood streaming from their wounds as they writhed upon the deck, moaning in agony.

Even so, the battle was far from over. Dyaks were swarming the ship from all sides, hacking away the thorns with their kampilans then storming the deck without pause, undaunted by the incessant barrages of nails unleashed by the Tigers of Mompracem.

But once aboard, they could barely move, the caltrops strewn about the deck barring their path, the barbed spikes a crippling menace to their bare feet.

Riggers and lookouts began to hurl grenades from the crow's nest as they attempted to drive the attackers back with a thunderous shower of metal.

Caught between two fires, unable to advance, the Dyaks had come to a halt. A volley of grapeshot tore through their lines, felling several men. Gripped by sudden fear, those that survived dove over the sides and quickly swam back towards the launches.

"It appears they've had enough," said Yanez, unshaken by the battle. "Perhaps now they'll think twice before they try to measure themselves against the Tigers of Mompracem."

The Dyaks had been defeated. pontoons and launches were fleeing towards the small islands at the mouth of the river, without replying to the Marianna's volleys. The Portuguese quickly ordered his men to hold their fire, believing it dishonourable to fire upon an enemy that had broken and run.

Ten minutes later, all that remained of the tiny fleet had disappeared up the river.

"They're gone," said Yanez. "Let's hope they leave us be."

"They'll be waiting for us upriver, sir," Sambigliong said.

"And they'll resume the fight," added Tangusa, who despite his exhaustion, had rushed on deck at the sound of the first cannon blast to help defend the ship.

"Think so?" asked the Portuguese.

"I'm certain of it, sir."

"We'll be ready, and we'll teach them another lesson that'll put an end to their attacks once and for all. How deep is the river? Can we sail to the banks of the kampong?"

"Yes, sir. Provided the wind holds, we shouldn't have any difficulties."

"How many men did we lose, Kickatany?" asked Yanez.

"Four dead and eight wounded sir," replied the ship's doctor.

"May the devil take the sherip and his band of wretches!" exclaimed

Yanez. "Four good men gone," he added with a sigh. Then turning toward Sambigliong, who appeared to be awaiting an order, added, "It's almost high tide. Let's try to get off this wretched sandbank."

Chapter 3

On the Kabatuan

The water had been rising steadily for the last five hours, slowly covering the sandbank upon which the *Marianna* had been stranded.

The time to break free was at hand and it appeared all would go well for the crew had discovered that her bow had shifted slightly. The ship was not yet afloat, but it would not take much effort to dislodge her.

Once the caltrops had been gathered and put back in their crates and the decks had been cleared of the dead, the preparations began to kedge the ship off the sandbank.

Two small anchors were tossed sixty paces off the stern, the hawsers were wound on to the windlass, then the sails were turned to take advantage of the breeze.

“Man the windlass!” shouted Yanez, once all was ready. “We’ll be out of here in no time.”

The ship began to creak and groan as the keel slowly rose with the swelling tide.

Twelve men rushed to the windlass. Twelve more grabbed the hawsers to add their strength, and, at the Portuguese’s command, all began to pull.

The anchors held and as they winched in the cables the *Marianna* began to slide along the sandbank, slowly turning to starboard as her sails filled with wind.

“And we’re free!” Yanez exclaimed gleefully. “What a nice surprise for the pilot, when he awakens. Raise the anchors, brace the sails and head towards the river.”

“We’re going in before dawn?” Sambiglion asked.

“Tangusa assured me that there aren’t any sandbanks and that it’s wide and deep enough to accommodate our ship,” replied Yanez. “I’d rather start now and surprise the Dyaks; they certainly won’t be expecting to see us so soon.”

A couple of men raised the two anchors, while the riggers quickly oriented the jibs and sails. Tangusa, who had not left the deck, had taken the wheel, being the only one familiar with the mouth of the Kabatuan.

“Take us in, my good friend,” said Yanez. “Once we’ve reached the river, I’ll take the wheel and you can go below to rest.”

“There’s no need, sir,” the former pirate replied. “Kickatany’s balms and medicines have worked wonders; I don’t feel a thing.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Yanez, as the *Marianna* cautiously turned away from the sandbank and began her advance towards the river. “You still haven’t told me how you were captured by the Dyaks.”

“Those wretches didn’t give us much time to talk,” replied Tangusa, forcing a smile.

“I take it they captured you outside the kampong.”

“Yes, Señor Yanez. Tremal-Naik asked me to set up camp along the bay. I was to watch for your ship and guide you up the river.”

“So he knew we’d rush to his aid.”

“He had no doubt, sir.”

“Where were you captured?”

“On one of the small islands by the mouth of the river.”

“When?”

“Two days ago. Some men that had worked at the kampong recognized me; they attacked my rowboat and took me prisoner. They must have concluded that Tremal-Naik had sent me to the coast to wait for help. They interrogated me for hours, threatening to kill me if I refused to answer their questions. But I held firm and eventually those wretches grew tired of my silence. They tied me up, cut a few gashes in my arms and legs then threw me into a hole next to an ant hill.”

“The dogs!”

“You know how voracious white ants are, Señor Yanez. Drawn by the

smell of blood, it wasn't long before battalions of them had swarmed to the hole and begun to eat me alive."

"A torture worthy of savages."

"It lasted a quarter of an hour, the pain was unbearable. Fortunately they'd also started to gnaw away at my bindings; they'd been smeared with coconut oil so they'd tighten as they dried."

"So once they gnawed through your ropes, you escaped..." said Yanez.

"As you can imagine," Tangusa replied. "The Dyaks had gone; I rushed into the nearby forest, reached the river, found a boat and quickly sailed off. It was just moments later that I spotted your ship off in the distance."

"Well, I'd say you've been avenged!"

"And for that I am grateful, Señor Yanez. Those savages deserved everything they got. Look!"

He had spotted several bonfires dotting the shores of the small islands guarding the mouth of the river.

"The Dyaks are keeping an eye on us, Señor Yanez," he said.

"I see them," the Portuguese replied. "Can we sneak past them without being seen?"

"We may be able to if we head up the far canal," replied Tangusa, after carefully studying the mouth of the river. "There don't seem to be any bonfires burning there."

"Is the water deep enough?"

"Yes, but there are a few sandbanks in places."

"Ah! Devil it!"

"No need to worry, Señor Yanez. I'm well acquainted with the area; we won't have any problems reaching the Kabatuan."

"In the meantime we'll prepare for a second attack," the Portuguese replied, making his way towards the forecastle.

Driven by a light westerly breeze, the *Marianna* advanced quickly, scarcely touching the water as she made her way towards the mouth of the river. The rising tide would greatly facilitate her journey up the Kabatuan.

The entire crew, except for two or three men assigned to care for the

wounded, had gone to their battle stations, expecting the Dyaks to spring from the thick groves covering the islands and launch another attack at any moment.

Tangusa, still at the wheel, knew every inch of the bay, and kept the *Marianna* far from the enemy bonfires lining the reefs. With a clever manoeuvre he steered the ship into a narrow canal that stretched between the coast and a small island. Cannons and swivel guns trained on both shores, the crew waited expectantly for the sentries to sound the alarm, but not a single cry broke the silence.

"We're on the river, sir," he said to Yanez, who had drawn up beside him.

"And still no sign of the Dyaks. Don't you find that odd?"

"They're probably biding their time, waiting for the right moment."

"Yes," said the Portuguese, nodding slowly. "They probably let us pass so they could ambush us on the river."

"It's likely, Señor Yanez."

"How long before we reach our destination?"

"Several hours, we won't get there before midday."

"How far is the kampong from the river?"

"Two miles."

"Through jungle, probably."

"Thick jungle, sir."

"Too bad Tremal-Naik didn't build his farm a little closer to the river. We'll have to divide our forces. Fortunately, every man aboard is a seasoned warrior, our Tigers fight just as well on land as they do on the decks of their prahus."

"Full ahead then, sir? We've got a good wind and the tide will be favourable for another hour or so."

"Yes, maintain our present course, careful not to run the *Marianna* aground."

"No fear of that sir, I know the river well."

The ship sailed past a small sandbar and began to make her way upstream, a light breeze filling her enormous sails.

That stretch of water, still uncharted, the Dyaks there being hostile to

all foreign explorers, was about a hundred metres wide and gently meandered between tall banks lined with mango, durian and rubber trees. The jungle about them was dark and quiet, not a sound or movement to indicate their enemies were lurking nearby.

At times a soft splash would reach their ears as a gavia, awakened from its slumber, would slide into those deep waters, frightened off by the approaching ship.

Yanez did not find that silence reassuring; he doubled the lookouts, and relentlessly scanned for danger beneath the dark wall of trees.

"They must have spotted us," he murmured. "It doesn't take a genius to realize they're planning something, but whatever they're up to, we'll be ready for them."

Half an hour passed uneventfully; the Portuguese was beginning to think he had been mistaken, when he spied a streak of light shooting up over the canopy at the far end of the river.

"A flare!" exclaimed Sambigliong.

Yanez's brow grew dark.

"Where did these savages get flares?" he asked.

"Captain," Sambigliong said, "this proves the British are involved. These savages have never had them before."

"That sherip could have supplied them."

"Look! Over there!"

Yanez quickly turned toward the bow and spotted a second flare tracking across the sky off towards the mouth of the river.

"Tangusa," he said. "Looks like Tremal-Naik's enemies are preparing quite the welcome for us."

"It would appear so, sir," the Malay replied.

A few minutes later they heard several cries echo from the bow.

"Fireflies!"

"Torches?"

"Look, up there."

"The river is on fire!"

"Señor Yanez! Señor Yanez!"

The Portuguese was on the forecastle in an instant; several men had already gathered there.

Upriver the water was filled with light. A long line of bright dots stretched out before them, swirling in rows and clusters as they advanced with the current.

Stunned, Yanez fell silent.

"Some kind of natural phenomenon, Captain?" Sambigliong asked. "They can't be fireflies."

"I don't think so either," replied Yanez, a deep frown lining his brow.

Tangusa drew up beside him, having quickly handed the tiller to one of the helmsmen.

"Do you know what that is?" asked Yanez.

"Torchtlight, sir," the Malay replied.

"Torchtlight? Impossible! There must be a thousand of them out there; the Dyaks have nowhere near enough ships to carry them all."

"Yet there's nothing else they could be," replied Tangusa.

"But how? What could be keeping them afloat?"

"Tree trunks, maybe. It's hard to tell from this distance. Whatever it is, they're getting closer; the *Marianna* could go up in flames."

"By Jupiter!" Yanez thundered loudly. "What kind of infernal trap is this?"

"Captain, we should prepare the pumps as a precaution."

"Have the men grab every pole they can find, we've got to keep those flames at bay. Quickly, my Tigers, there's no time to lose."

Dragged forward by the current, the blazing dots grew larger, blanketing the waters before them.

They advanced in clusters, swirling with the eddies, arching and spiraling as they pooled into a long serpentine line of flame. Had his ship not been in danger, Yanez would have stopped to admire that dazzling play of light.

A large number sailed forward along the banks, but the majority danced about the centre of the river where the current was strongest.

How they stayed afloat no one could say; the shadows cast by the wall of vegetation lining the riverside made it too dark to see.

Grabbing whatever beam, yard, spar or pole they could find, the crew had rushed to the *Marianna's* sides to fend off that new danger. Several men had even been lowered over the sides in nets or in launches to better battle against the flames.

“Keep to the centre of the river!” Yanez shouted to Tangusa who had gone back to take the wheel. “If the ship catches fire, we’ll head for shore.”

The flames attacked in waves, swarming towards the *Marianna*, the ship advancing slowly, the wind having dropped to a breeze.

“Bring me one of them,” said Yanez, addressing the Malays hanging above the water in one of the nets.

The crew had quickly gone to work, poles and beams raining down upon the fiery menace growing ever larger before them.

A Malay quickly scooped one out of the water and brought it to Yanez. That floating torch was nothing more than half a coconut shell filled with cotton soaked in sticky resin.

“The rascals!” the Portuguese exclaimed. “Coconuts! I never would have imagined! It’s brilliant! These Dyaks are growing more cunning by the minute! Tigers, keep those flames at bay! If this cotton sticks to the pitch, we’ll go up like kindling.”

He tossed away the coconut and rushed toward the bow, where the danger was greatest, the flames swarming towards the stern in large numbers, threatening to ignite the *Marianna's* sides.

Their ship in peril, the Tigers worked without pause, fending off the waves of flames, drowning the tiny vessels before the fires drew too close. But from time to time a patch of burning cotton would stick to her boards and ignite the pitch, sending up thick clouds of acrid smoke.

Had the *Marianna* been manned by a smaller crew her sides would have quickly been ablaze, but fortunately, she had ample Tigers to defend her. Whenever a plank caught fire, the flames were immediately put out with a blast of water from the pumps.

That strange battle lasted half an hour then the sea of flames began to thin and soon the last of the shells sailed past, drifting off towards the mouth of the river.

“What other surprises do they have in store for us?” asked Yanez, drawing up by Tangusa’s side. “They’re certain to try again. Any thoughts, my friend?”

“We won’t reach the kampong without a second battle, Señor Yanez,” the Malay replied. “The Dyaks will see to that.”

“I’d prefer that, but I haven’t spotted so much as a launch yet.”

“We still have a fair distance to go. Let’s hope the wind picks up soon, otherwise we may not arrive until tomorrow evening.”

“Not the best situation. My Tigers, keep your eyes open and your weapons drawn. You can be certain those headhunters are watching our every move.”

He lit a cigarette and sat on the stern bulwark, eyes fixed on the riverbanks.

The wind continued to drop and it was not long before the *Marianna* slowed to a crawl.

All was quiet. The jungle had thickened on either side of them; enormous branches stretched over the river, adding to the darkness, yet no one doubted that hidden eyes were following their every move.

Having come so close to success, it was unlikely the Dyaks would abandon the fight without another attempt to avenge their defeat.

They had gone another five or six miles when the Portuguese spotted several bright flashes racing among the trees. People were darting through the forest, carrying torches to light their path. Several hisses suddenly reached their ears.

“Signals,” said Tangusa.

“Yes,” the Portuguese replied uneasily. “What now?”

“They’re up to something, sir, you can be sure of it. They’ll pull out every trick they have to keep us from reaching the pier.”

“I’m starting to have enough of this,” said Yanez. “I’d rather face a direct attack.”

“They’ve tested our strength, sir; they know they haven’t a chance against our artillery.”

“Yet my instincts tell me those rascals are up to something.”

“I agree. Best keep the pumps ready.”

“Expecting another fleet of coconuts?”

Instead of replying, Tangusa got up and gave the wheel a quick turn.

“This is the narrowest part of the river, Señor Yanez,” he said. “We’ve got to be cautious if we wish to avoid running aground on some sand-bank.”

The river had been wide until then, and the *Marianna* had advanced quite easily, but now, as it narrowed, thick branches twined above them, shutting out the stars.

It had suddenly grown so dark that Yanez could no longer make out the shores.

“Nice place for a boarding raid,” he murmured.

“They may just shoot at us, sir,” Tangusa said.

“Sambigliong, point the swivel guns at the riverbanks!” shouted Yanez.

The gunners had just executed that order, when the *Marianna*, which had picked up speed thanks to a strengthening wind, struck something hard that made her tack to port.

“What happened?” shouted Yanez. “Have we run aground?”

“No, Captain,” replied Sambigliong who had rushed towards the bow. “She’s still afloat!”

With a turn of the wheel the *Marianna* resumed her course, but seconds later, she struck another obstacle that immediately forced her back.

“Now what?” shouted Yanez, drawing up beside Sambigliong. “Rocks?”

“I don’t see any, Captain.”

“Then why can’t we pass? Have someone check it out.”

A Malay threw one end of a rope over the side, secured the other end to the rail then lowered himself into the water just as the ship was forced back for a third time.

Leaning over the fore bulwark, Yanez and Sambigliong anxiously watched the Malay swim about, looking for the obstacle that blocked their advance.

“A reef?” asked Yanez.

“No, Captain,” the Malay replied, continuing to swim about, diving

beneath the water from time to time, untroubled by the dangers lurking in the river.

“Well then?”

“Ah! Found it! They’ve stretched a chain across the river; we’ll have to cut through it to advance.”

A harsh voice suddenly thundered from behind the trees lining the left bank and cried out in English:

“Surrender, Tigers of Mompracem, or we’ll destroy you all!”