

SANDOKAN

The Two Tigers

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



Sandokan: The Two Tigers

By Emilio Salgari

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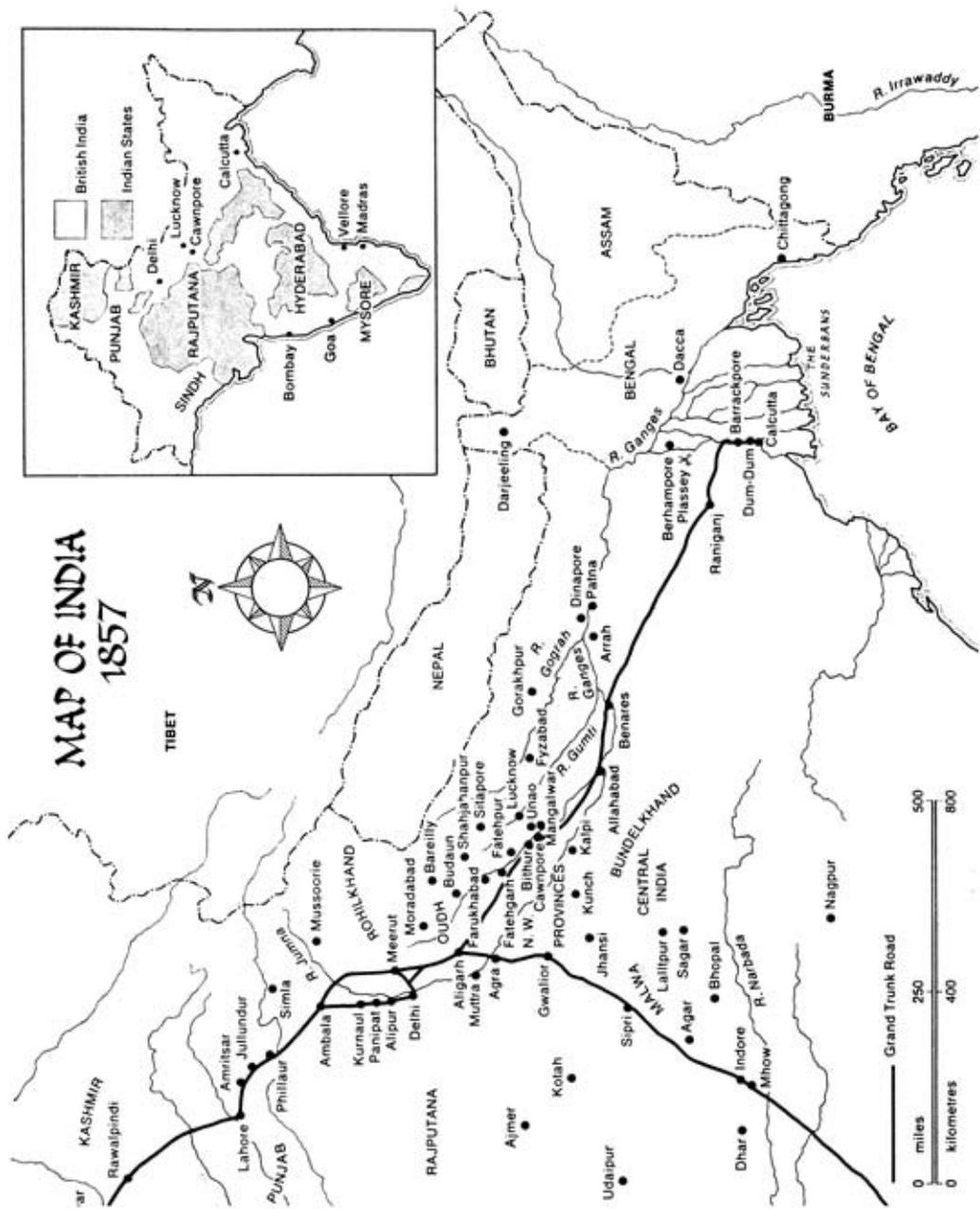
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Contents

Chapter 1: The <i>Marianna</i>	1
Chapter 2: Dharma	9
Chapter 3: Tremal-Naik.....	16
Chapter 4: The Manti	24
Chapter 5: The Dharmaraja Festival.....	33
Chapter 6: The Devadasi	41
Chapter 7: Surama's Tale.....	48
Chapter 8: Sati.....	55
Chapter 9: The Manti's Confession	61
Chapter 10: A Terrible Battle.....	69
Chapter 11: In the Jungle	78
Chapter 12: The Rhinoceros Attacks	87
Chapter 13: The Man-Eater.....	94
Chapter 14: The First Tiger	103
Chapter 15: In the Sundarbans.....	110
Chapter 16: The Thugs.....	119
Chapter 17: Mysterious Signals.....	130
Chapter 18: The Cyclone	136
Chapter 19: The Devadasi Disappears	143
Chapter 20: The Tower of Barrackpore	151
Chapter 21: Betrayal.....	159
Chapter 22: Sirdar	167
Chapter 23: Rajmangal	176
Chapter 24: The Thugs' Pagoda.....	182
Chapter 25: In the Thugs' Lair	190
Chapter 26: The Pirates Attack.....	198
Chapter 27: A Slaughter.....	206
Chapter 28: On Suyodhana's Trail	213
Chapter 29: The Indian Rebellion	220
Chapter 30: Spies	233
Chapter 31: The Escape	243
Chapter 32: Towards Delhi.....	254
Chapter 33: The Delhi Massacre.....	263
Conclusion	270

MAP OF INDIA 1857

TIBET



Chapter 1

The Marianna

On the morning of April 20th, 1857, the lighthouse keeper at Diamond Harbour signalled the presence of a small unknown vessel that had come up the Hugli during the night without escort from a pilot.

Judging by the extraordinary size of her sails, she appeared at first glance to be a Malay ship, however, a second look revealed she was no common prahu.

She had no outrigger to help her counter the wind and waves, and though she must have journeyed far, not a single atap had been erected over her deck to shelter her crew. High sterned and made of steel, she could carry three times as much as any wooden vessel.

Whatever her origin, she was a beautiful ship and with the wind astern could have outrun any steamship in the Anglo-Indian fleet. She was a true racer and, save for her sails, recalled the blockade runners of the American Civil War.

But the lighthouse keeper, had he been watching, would perhaps have been most astonished by her crew, for it was far too large for a vessel of that size.

It seemed as if every bellicose tribe in Malaysia had one or more representatives aboard that ship: dark sullen Malays, Bugis, Makassans, Batavians, Negritos from Mindanao, Dyak headhunters from the Bornean jungles, even a few Papuan warriors, their woolly hair adorned with white cockatoo feathers.

Though of different origin, each man was clad in a white knee-length sarong and a kabay, a large jacket well suited for life at sea.

Only two men, the commanders of the vessel, wore clothes of unmatched affluence.

One sat on a large red silk cushion, close to the tiller, his eyes on the water as the ship sailed past Diamond Harbour.

He was tall, handsome and well built, with bronze skin and thick black wavy hair that fell freely about his strong shoulders. He had a high forehead, thin lips, piercing eyes and a magnificent beard that was as dark as a crow's wing.

An observer could have mistaken him for a Malay prince dressed as he was in a large blue silk cloak embroidered with gold, white trousers and yellow leather long boots. His white silk turban was adorned with a small feather, fixed in place by a diamond the size of a walnut.

His companion, leaning against the bulwark, nervously folding and unfolding a letter, was a tall European with fine aristocratic features and cool blue eyes. Though he was only two years older than his friend, his black moustache had already begun to show signs of grey.

He was elegantly dressed, clad in a brown velvet jacket with gold buttons, a thick red silk sash, brocatelle trousers and brown leather boots with gold buckles. A large hat of Manila hemp adorned with small red silk tassels shielded him from the sun.

The ship was about to sail past the lighthouse and the signal tower, when the European, who until then had appeared unconcerned with his surroundings, suddenly turned towards his companion.

"Sandokan," he asked, "That's the pilots' station. Are we going to hire one?"

"I don't want any strangers aboard my ship, Yanez," replied his friend, rising from the cushion as he cast a glance at the building. "We'll find our own way to Calcutta."

"You're right," said Yanez, after a moment's reflection, "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves and arouse Suyodhana's suspicions."

"You've been here before, how long until we reach Calcutta?"

"We'll be there before sundown," replied Yanez. "The tide's rising and the wind is still with us."

"I'm impatient to see Tremal-Naik again. Our poor friend! First his wife, now his daughter!"

“We’ll get her back from Suyodhana; the Tiger of India is no match for the Tiger of Malaysia.”

“Yes,” said Sandokan, his eyes flashing fiercely as a frown formed upon his brow. “We’ll rescue her, no matter the cost. We’ll set India ablaze if need be. Do you think Tremal-Naik received our message?”

“There’s no need to worry, Sandokan, telegrams always reach their destination.”

“Then he’ll be waiting for us?”

“I think it’d be best to let him know we’re making our way up the Hugli and that we’ll be in Calcutta by nightfall. He’ll send Kammamuri to meet us and spare us the trouble of finding his house.”

“Is there a telegraph office somewhere along the river?”

“There’s one in Diamond Harbour.”

“At the pilots’ station we’ve just passed?”

“Yes, Sandokan.”

“Very well then, drop anchor and send a launch to relay a message. Adding an extra half-hour to our journey won’t make much of a difference. Who knows, the Thugs may be spying on Tremal-Naik’s house.”

“I admire your caution, Sandokan.”

“Write him a message, my friend.”

Yanez tore a sheet of paper from a notebook, drew a small pencil from his pocket and wrote:

From aboard the *Marianna*
Mr. Tremal-Naik
Durumtolah St, Calcutta

We’re sailing up the Hugli. Will arrive tonight. Send
Kammamuri to meet us. Have him look for our flag.

Yanez de Gomera

“This should do,” he said, showing Sandokan the slip of paper.

“Excellent,” his friend replied, “better your signature than mine. If someone were to recognize my name, they could report it to the authorities. I doubt the British would welcome an old enemy even if there is no war between us.”

The ship had come to a stop a half mile from Diamond Harbour. A launch, manned by five men, was quickly put into the water. Yanez summoned her helmsman and handed him the message and a pound sterling.

“Not a word about who we are,” he said in Portuguese. “And if anyone asks after your captain, tell them I’m in command.”

The helmsman, a tall, well-built, handsome Dyak, nodded then quickly climbed down into the launch and signalled the oarsmen to set off for the pilots’ station. He returned a half-hour later and announced that the telegram had been sent.

“Did they ask any questions?” asked Yanez.

“Yes, Captain, but I didn’t say a word.”

“Excellent.”

The launch was quickly hoisted aboard, and the *Marianna* resumed her course, keeping to the centre of the river.

Sandokan sat down once again and fell into thought while Yanez leaned against the aft bulwark, lit a cigarette and began to study the passing shores.

Vast bamboo jungles towered over the river’s majestic banks, covering the swamp-filled Sundarbans, the favourite refuge of tigers, panthers, snakes and crocodiles. Clouds of birds circled above them but not a soul appeared among those enormous reeds.

Giant herons, large black storks, brown ibises, and arghilah sat perched upon the mangrove branches like rows of soldiers as they carefully groomed their feathers. Flocks of Brahmin ducks, cormorants and coots frolicked about cheerfully, plunging into the water whenever a school of rohi¹ drew near.

¹A type of red carp.

“A beautiful place for a hunt, but a terrible place to live,” murmured Yanez as he took in his surroundings. “They’re no match for the majestic jungles of Borneo. If this is what Suyodhana’s Thugs call home, I do not envy them. Reeds, thorns, swamps, swamps, thorns, reeds. Nothing’s changed along the banks of India’s sacred river since my last visit. The British don’t appear to be in any hurry to improve the lot of their poorest subjects.”

The *Marianna* continued to advance rapidly and soon small groups of mud huts began to appear along the riverbanks, their thatched roofs shaded by large neem and coconut trees. Each village was enclosed by a tall wooden palisade, probably to protect the inhabitants from crocodile attacks.

Yanez was studying one of those picturesque little places, when Sandokan walked to his side and asked:

“Is this where the Thugs live?”

“Yes, little brother,” replied Yanez.

“I wonder if that village is one of their lairs. See that wooden tower over there? What do you think it is? An observation post?”

“It’s a refuge tower,” replied Yanez. “A shelter for castaways.”

“A shelter?”

“Yes, built by the Anglo-Indian government. This river is a lot more dangerous than meets the eye, little brother. Enormous sandbanks abound throughout these waters and the current reshapes them constantly; there are more shipwrecks here than there are at sea. Those towers have saved many a poor wretch. Most castaways wouldn’t stand a chance against the ferocious animals that inhabit these shores. But up there, with a little caution and patience, they can survive until the next steamboat comes to replenish supplies.”

“These shores are that dangerous?” asked Sandokan.

“They abound with wild beasts of every kind; I wouldn’t be surprised if there were a few tigers spying on us from behind those mangroves as we speak. They’re more daring than the ones in our jungles; it’s not uncommon for them to dive into the water, attack a small vessel, and drag off some unfortunate member of the crew.”

“And the authorities just leave them be?”

“British officers organize hunting expeditions from time to time, but they haven’t made much of a dent in the population. There are just too many of them.”

“I have an idea, Yanez,” said Sandokan.

“What kind of idea?”

“I’ll tell you tonight, when we’re with Tremal-Naik.”

The prahu was just sailing past the tower they had been discussing; it stood on the shore of a small swampy island that was separated from the jungle by a narrow canal.

Though built of planks and bamboo, it was a solid construction almost six metres high. A rope ladder led to an enclosure at the top. Signs written in French, German, English and Sanskrit advised castaways to ration the provisions in the tower, warning that the supply boat only called once a month.

It appeared empty. Several pairs of marabou dozed on the rooftop; their heads resting between their shoulders, their enormous beaks hidden among their feathers, probably digesting the remains of a corpse that had washed ashore.

The jungle continued to stretch out on either side of them, a sea of pale yellow reeds and dreary plains dotted at times by pools of muddy water and the odd lotus flower.

It was not until later that afternoon that they caught sight of the river’s inhabitants. From time to time a few Molanghis would appear along those cholera-infested banks to gather salt from the swampy soil and the tiny salt ponds they had dug close to shore. Most were naked, little more than skin and bones, no taller than children, their limbs trembling with fever as they went about their work.

Every mile the prahu advanced brought changes to the life upon the water. Birds grew rarer and soon only kingfishers could be seen perched upon the reeds, filling the air with their monotonous cries. Boats had begun to appear, a sure indication they were drawing nearer to the opulent capital of Bengal. Cargo dinghies, murpunkys, sloops and grabs

plied the river, loaded with goods, as steamships advanced cautiously, coasting along the shore.

Towards six, Sandokan and Yanez, now at the bow, spotted Fort William's imposing ramparts and the tall spires of ancient pagodas peering through the evening mist.

Bungalows and attractive villas, the architecture a mix of British and Indian styles, began to appear in great number along the right bank, their small graceful gardens shaded by groves of coconut and banana trees.

Sandokan ordered his flag - a red banner emblazoned with the head of a tiger - hoisted up the mainmast, had the four large swivel guns on the bow and the stern stowed out of sight then sent most of the crew below deck.

"Shouldn't Kammamuri have been here by now?" he asked Yanez.

The Portuguese was standing by his side, calmly smoking a cigarette, watching the ships crisscross the river, when suddenly he stretched an arm towards the right bank and exclaimed:

"That's him now. See that small launch flying our flag on its stern?"

Sandokan's eyes had followed Yanez' arm and came to rest upon a small but elegant fylt-sciarra. She was a sleek little vessel with an elephant bust carved into her bow. She was manned by six oarsmen and one helmsman; a red flag emblazoned with the head of a tiger flew from her stern.

She advanced rapidly, deftly making her way through the grabs and sloops that crowded the river, heading towards the prahu, which had immediately come to a halt.

"Can you see him?" Yanez asked excitedly.

"I may be getting older," smiled Sandokan, "but my eyes are still sharp. Our friend is at the tiller. Have the ladder lowered. We'll finally learn how Suyodhana kidnapped Tremal-Naik's daughter."

Within minutes the fylt-sciarra had covered the distance between them and drawn up beside the ladder that hung over the prahu's port side. While the oarsmen pulled in their oars and tethered the launch, the

helmsman scrambled up the ladder with the agility of a monkey and jumped onto the deck.

“Captain Sandokan! Señor Yanez! How happy I am to see you again!” he exclaimed excitedly.

The man that had uttered those words was a tall handsome Indian around thirty or thirty-two years of age with dark bronze skin and fine energetic features. He was dressed in white and wore no jewellery save for a pair of earrings.

Sandokan pushed away the hand the Indian had proffered and drew the newcomer towards him saying:

“Embrace me, my brave Maratha.”

“Sir! I...” exclaimed the Indian, a slight tremble in his voice, his face pale with emotion.

Yanez, calmer than his companion, welcomed him with a warm handshake and said, “It’s good to see you again, my friend.”

“How’s Tremal-Naik?” Sandokan asked anxiously.

“Ah! Sir!” said the Maratha, stifling a sob. “I fear my master may be going mad! The wretches have taken their revenge!”

“We want to hear everything that’s happened,” said Yanez. “But first, where can we drop anchor?”

“Not here, Señor Yanez,” said the Maratha. “The Thugs are watching our every move, the wretches must not learn of your arrival. Best to sail past Fort William and drop anchor in front of the Strand. My crew will guide us in.”

“When can we see Tremal-Naik?” asked Sandokan.

“Tonight, after midnight, once the city’s asleep. We have to be careful.”

“Can I entrust your men with our ship?”

“They’re all able seamen.”

“Have them come aboard, give them command of the prahu, then come below. I want to know all that’s happened.”

The Maratha summoned his men with a whistle, issued his orders then followed Sandokan and Yanez into the main cabin.

Chapter 2

Darma

The *Marianna* was a magnificent ship, unrivalled in comfort and design; Sandokan had spared no expense to make her worthy of the name she bore.

The cabin the men had entered occupied most of the stern. The walls were papered in red silk embroidered with flowers of gold thread. An eclectic collection of weaponry adorned the walls: Malay kris with serpentine blades, wide-bladed Dyak parangs and kampilan; pistols and rifles inlaid with mother-of-pearl, well-crafted Indian carbines, and steel-barrelled blunderbusses, once the weapons of choice of Bugis and Moro pirates.

White silk divans lined the room, an ebony table inlaid with mother-of-pearl stood in the center, a large Venetian lamp hung from the ceiling, casting its soft light upon the three old friends.

Yanez took a bottle from a shelf, filled three glasses with a topaz-coloured liquid then turned to the Maratha who had taken a seat beside Sandokan and said:

“You can speak freely now, no one can hear us. The Thugs would have to have gills to get anywhere near our ship.”

“I wouldn’t put it past those devils,” sighed the Maratha.

“They won’t be around for much longer, my good Kammamuri,” said Sandokan. “The Tiger of Malaysia set sail from Mompracem determined to destroy the Tiger of India. Now tell us about the kidnapping. Spare no detail.”

“It’s been twenty-four days, sir, since little Darma was taken by Suyodhana’s men, and for twenty-four days my master has been over-

whelmed with grief. If your telegram hadn't arrived to announce you'd set sail, he would have gone mad by now."

"Did he think we wouldn't have come to help?" asked Yanez.

"There was always the chance you were employed in some ambitious enterprise."

"Times have changed. We've practically hung up our swords. The glory days of Labuan and Sarawak have long passed."

"Tell us everything, Kammamuri," said Sandokan. "How was Darma taken?"

"With a diabolical trick crafted by Suyodhana's infernal genius. As you know, when Miss Ada died during childbirth, my poor master was devastated. But with a daughter to take care of, he could not wallow in grief. Darma meant everything to him; he gave her every ounce of his love and affection. He watched over her constantly, afraid the Thugs would harm her to exact their revenge.

"Rumours soon reached our ears. The Thugs, it was said, after having disbanded years ago to escape the vengeance of Captain MacPherson's sepoy, had returned to the vast caverns beneath the island of Rajmangal and Suyodhana had turned his thoughts to procuring a new Guardian of the Temple of the East.

"Those rumours made my master's heart race. He feared those wretches, who had imprisoned his wife for so many years, were making plans to abduct his daughter.

"Unfortunately, his fears were soon confirmed. Well aware of the Thugs' cunning, we had taken great precautions so that they could not break into the young girl's room. We'd put metal bars on the windows, reinforced the door with armour plating, and carefully examined the walls to ensure they did not hide any secret passages. Every night I slept in the hall outside her room, along with Darma our tiger, and Punthy, our dog, two brave beasts that, as you know, had battled the Thugs alongside us when we lived in the jungle.

"For six months we kept an anxious vigil, but there was never a sign of the Thugs. Then one morning Tremal-Naik received a telegram from

Chandernagore. It was signed by a friend, a former rajah now living in exile in the small French colony.

“What did the telegram say?” asked Sandokan and Yanez in unison, not missing a single word of the Maratha’s story.

“Just six words: ‘Come. Must speak to you. Mucdar.’”

“My master was great friends with the former prince; the rajah had helped him immensely upon our return to India. Fearing the prince was in trouble with the British authorities, he set off immediately, leaving Darma in my care.

“The day passed uneventfully, there was no suspicious activity to indicate that Suyodhana’s men were planning to abduct the daughter of the former Guardian of the Temple of the East.

“Shortly after nightfall, I received a telegram from my master in Chandernagore. The words still burn in my memory:

“Darma in great danger; our enemies about to strike. Leave at once.’”

“Frightened, I immediately got Darma and her nurse and set off for the station. I’d received the dispatch at 6:34 and there was a train for Chandernagore and Hooghly at 7:28.

“I found an empty compartment; however, just as the train was about to leave the station, two Brahmins came in and sat down across from me. They were both stern, imposing men with long white beards, men beyond suspicion.

“We set off without incident, but an hour later, as we passed Sirampur station, events took a turn for the worse.

“It seemed innocent at first. One of the two Brahmins’ suitcases had fallen. It opened and a small crystal globe filled with flowers fell out and shattered on the floor. The petals scattered about the compartment, but the Brahmins did not bother to pick them up. They just pulled out their handkerchiefs and covered their mouths and noses.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Sandokan, taking great interest in that strange tale. “Continue, Kammamuri.”

“What happened next,” continued the Maratha, his voice starting to tremble, “I do not know. I began to feel sleepy, my eyes grew heavy and I struggled to keep them open. Then all went black. I awoke in the dark,

silence reigned throughout the compartment. The train had stopped, but I could hear a whistle sounding off in the distance.

“I jumped to my feet and called for Darma’s nurse, but no one replied. I leaped towards the door, it was locked.

“Mad with fear, I smashed through the window with my fist, opened the door and rushed out. The train had come to stop on a dead track, not a soul was in sight.

“I spotted some lanterns off in the distance and what appeared to be a station. I started to run, yelling: Darma! Ketty! Help! They’ve taken her! The Thugs! The Thugs!

“A few policemen and some of the train station workers came to my aid. At first they thought I was mad, so great was my fear, it took me an hour to convince them otherwise and relate what had happened.

“I learned that I was at Hooghly station, about twenty miles north of Chandernagore. No one had noticed me when the train stopped at the platform, so I had been left in the compartment until I awoke.

“The policemen at the station made prompt inquiries, but to no avail. In the morning I left for Chandernagore to inform Tremal-Naik of the disappearance of Darma and her nurse. He had already left, and I learned that his friend had not sent the telegram. The one I received was also a fake.”

“A clever deception,” said Yanez. “I didn’t think the Thugs were so cunning.”

“Continue, Kammamuri,” said Sandokan.

The Maratha dried two tears and resumed his tale, his voice broken by sobs.

“I’ll never be able to fully describe my master’s pain when he learned what had happened. It’s a miracle he did not go mad.

“The police and the French authorities in Chandernagore began a thorough investigation. They soon discovered that two dispatches had been sent by an Indian. But the clerks at the telegraph office in Chandernagore remembered little, only that the man could barely speak French. We also learned that the two Brahmins had been seen getting off at the station, helping what appeared to be a very ill woman. One

was carrying a small child. The next day the nurse was found dead in a grove of banana trees, a black silk scarf wrapped tightly about her neck. The Thugs had strangled her!”

“Wretches!” exclaimed Yanez, clenching his fists.

“That doesn’t prove it was Suyodhana’s Thugs that kidnapped little Darma,” observed Sandokan. “It could have been common bandits—”

“No, sir,” said the Maratha, interrupting him. “Suyodhana’s Thugs committed the crime, a week later my master found an arrow in his room that must’ve been fired from the street, a Nagi had been carved into the arrowhead, the emblem of Kali’s cult.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Sandokan, as a frown formed upon his brow.

“And,” continued Kammamuri, “one morning we found a piece of paper tacked to our door that bore the same emblem, and above it a drawing of two crossed daggers beneath an S.”

“Suyodhana’s insignia?” asked Yanez.

“Yes,” replied the Maratha.

“And the British police didn’t find anything?”

“They continued their investigation for a few more weeks then dropped the case. It appears they do not wish to stir up trouble with the Thugs.”

“Did they send an expedition into the Sundarbans?” asked Sandokan.

“No, they claimed they needed more men to ensure success.”

“Doesn’t the Governor of Bengal have soldiers at his disposal?” asked Sandokan.

“The Anglo-Indian government is too busy to worry about the Thugs. There’s a rebellion spreading that could sweep the British out of India.”

“A rebellion?” asked Yanez.

“And it’s been growing quickly, sir. Sepoy regiments have mutinied in several places, Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow, Cawnpore. They’ve shot their officers and flocked to the banners of Tantia Topi and the Rani of Jhansi.”

“Well,” said Sandokan, getting up and pacing about the table excitedly, “since neither the police, nor the Bengali government can be bothered to eliminate the Thugs, it appears the task now falls to us.”

“Yes,” agreed Yanez. “We have fifty men, fifty warriors, handpicked from the bravest pirates on Mompracem. We’ve got a few million rupees, a good supply of weapons, and a ship that can hold its own against any British gunboat. I’d say we’re well equipped to destroy Suyodhana and his Thugs once and for all.”

“The Tiger of India against the Tiger of Malaysia! Now there’s a challenge I’ll relish!”

He drained his glass, remained silent for a moment, then fixed his eyes upon the Maratha and asked:

“Are you certain the Thugs have returned to the caverns of Rajmangal?”

“Yes,” replied Kammamuri.

“Then little Darma must’ve been taken there.”

“Most definitely, sir.”

“You know the island well?”

“Yes, sir. And every inch of those caverns. I spent six months there as their prisoner.”

“I remember. You said those caverns were connected by a network of tunnels.”

“That’s correct. The tunnels run beneath the entire island.”

“Beneath...Then we could flood those caverns and drown them all!”

“What about Darma?”

“We’ll rescue her before we destroy their lair, my good Kammamuri. How does one get into those caverns?”

“There’s a secret entrance in a banyan tree.”

“Very well, we’ll pay a little visit to the Sundarbans,” said Sandokan. “My dear Suyodhana, prepare to receive Tremal-Naik and the Tiger of Malaysia.”

They heard a chain creak followed by a splash. Someone shouted a few orders and the ship came to an abrupt halt.

“They’ve dropped anchor,” said Yanez. “Let’s get a look at where we are.”

Kammamuri and the Portuguese quickly drained their glasses and the three went back above deck.

Night had fallen several hours earlier, cloaking the temples of the Black Town and the domes, bell towers, and grandiose palaces of the White Town in darkness. Numerous streetlamps shone along the Strand, jetties, and squares.

That section of the river was more than a kilometre wide; an infinite number of steamships and sailing vessels from all parts of the world rocked gently at anchor, the dim glow of their lanterns lighting the waters beneath them.

The *Marianna* had dropped anchor on the far side of Fort William, its imposing mass towering above them.

Once he had checked the anchors, Sandokan had the sails lowered and ordered a launch put in the water.

“It’s almost midnight,” he said, addressing Kammamuri. “Can we go see Tremal-Naik?”

“Yes, but it would be better if you wore less conspicuous clothing. My master and I are certain Suyodhana’s men are watching our every move.”

“We’ll dress like Indians,” replied Sandokan.

“Better to dress like sudras,” said Kammamuri.

“Sudras?”

“Servants, sir.”

“An excellent idea. There’s no shortage of clothing aboard; you’ll help us put together the perfect disguise. The Tiger of India is proving to be a clever adversary; we’ll have to outsmart him. Come, Yanez. The campaign begins!”

Chapter 3

Tremal-Naik

Half an hour later, the *Marianna*'s whaleboat was making her way down the river, carrying Sandokan, Yanez, Kammamuri and six Malay pirates.

Dressed in dhotis² and brown dugbahs³, the prahu's commanders could easily have been mistaken for Indian servants. As a precaution, they had each hidden their krises and a pair of long-barrelled pistols in the folds of their sashes.

The lights along the squares and jetties had been extinguished and the city was in darkness, save for the white, green and red glow of ships' lanterns upon the black waters of the river.

The whaleboat raced past the dinghies, grabs, sloops and steamboats crowded along the banks, then headed towards Fort William's southern ramparts and docked before a dark deserted esplanade.

"It won't be long now," said Kammamuri. "Durumtolah Street isn't far from here."

"Do you live in a bungalow?" asked Yanez.

"No, in an old Indian palace that belonged to the late Captain MacPherson. My master inherited it when Miss Ada passed away."

"Lead the way," said Sandokan. He stepped ashore, turned towards the Malays and said, "Wait for us here."

"Yes, Captain," replied the helmsman.

Kammamuri had set off, advancing quickly across the vast esplanade.

² A large rectangular piece of cloth worn about the waist

³ A cape made from coarse cloth

Sandokan and Yanez followed, each resting a hand on the butt of a pistol, ready to draw it out at the first sign of trouble.

The esplanade was deserted or at least appeared to be, the darkness making it difficult to discern a form among the shadows.

A few minutes later they arrived at Durumtolah Street and came to a stop before an old Indian palace, a square building with three terraces, topped by a small dome.

Kammamuri pulled out a key and inserted it into the lock. Just as he was about to open the door, Sandokan, whose eyes were sharper than his companions', spied a figure emerging from behind one of the support columns of a neighbouring verandah. Within seconds it had run off and disappeared into the night.

For a moment he considered giving chase, but then thought the better of it, suspecting that it could have been a trap.

"Did you see that man?" he asked Kammamuri and Yanez.

"Where?" the Portuguese and the Maratha asked in unison.

"He was hiding behind one of those columns. You were right, Kammamuri, the Thugs are keeping an eye on the house. We've just had proof. It matters little, it's too dark for the spy to have seen our faces, and even if he had, he doesn't know who we are."

Kammamuri opened the door, and once the three had stepped into the courtyard, carefully locked it behind him. He made his way up a dimly lit marble stairway and led the prahu's commanders into a small but elegant drawing room.

A blue crystal lamp hung from the ceiling, casting its soft light upon a floor inlaid with red, black and yellow stones. A table and a set of bamboo chairs stood in the centre.

They had been there less than a few seconds, when another door opened, and a man rushed out to welcome them.

"My friends, my brave friends!" he exclaimed, embracing Sandokan and Yanez in turn. "How I thank you for having come. You'll rescue my Darma, won't you?"

The newcomer was a handsome Bengali, about thirty-five or thirty-six years old, well built, with fine energetic features, light brown skin and

fiery black eyes. He was dressed in the manner of modern, well-to-do Indians, who have abandoned the dhoti and dugbah for the latest Anglo-Indian fashions: a white cotton jacket, a thick embroidered sash, white trousers and a small embroidered turban.

“Put your fears to rest, Tremal-Naik,” the Tiger said warmly. “The Thugs don’t stand a chance against us.”

“My Darma!” sobbed the Indian, his voice heavy with agony as he wiped away his tears.

“We’ll find her, my friend,” said Sandokan. “You remember what we did to James Brooke. The White Rajah was no less powerful, the Sultans of Borneo trembled at the thought of him, yet we toppled him from his throne. Suyodhana’s days are numbered; it won’t be long before Darma is playing happily by your side.”

“Yes,” said Tremal-Naik, “The two of you are my only hope. No one else can destroy those bloodthirsty dogs. I’ve lost my wife; I’ll go mad if I lose my daughter. My poor Ada! After having fought for so long to make her my bride, to see our daughter in the hands of those monsters...”

“You must try to be strong, my friend,” said Yanez, deeply moved by the man’s pain. “Now is not the time for tears, we’ve got to act, devise a plan, there’s no time to waste. Kammamuri said the Thugs have returned to their old lair on Rajmangal. You’re absolutely certain of this?”

“Positive,” replied the Bengali.

“And Suyodhana’s there as well?”

“He must be.”

“Then wouldn’t little Darma have been taken there?” asked Sandokan.

“It’s probable, but I’m not completely certain. She was kidnapped to succeed her mother as Guardian of the Sacred Temple; it seems the logical place they would have taken her.”

“Is she in danger?”

“None whatsoever, the Guardian of the Temple of the East is precious to Kali; she’ll be revered as a goddess.”

“Then no one would dare harm her?”

“Not even Suyodhana,” replied Tremal-Naik.

“How old is Darma?”

“Almost four.”

“And she’ll be revered as a goddess!?” exclaimed Yanez. “She’s just a child!”

“She’s the daughter of the Guardian of the Temple of the East. Ada served Kali for seven years,” said Tremal-Naik, stifling a sob. “Her blood is sacred on Rajmangal.”

“Little brother,” said Yanez, turning toward Sandokan, “you said you had an idea?”

“Yes, and I’ve since added to it,” replied the Tiger of Malaysia. “However, before we act, we must be absolutely certain the Thugs have taken Darma to their island.”

“How can we find out?”

“We’ll capture a Thug and force him to confess. There must be a few of them hanging about Calcutta.”

“Quite a few, actually,” said Tremal-Naik.

“Well, then, it shouldn’t be hard to capture one.”

“And then?” asked Yanez.

“If they have returned to their old lair, we’ll set off on a hunting expedition in the Sundarbans. You said those swamps were infested with tigers so we’ll go kill ourselves a few, a little target practice before the main event. While we’re making our way towards Rajmangal we’ll gather information and plan our attack. Do you still hunt from time to time, Tremal-Naik?”

“It’s in my blood,” replied the Bengali. “But why a hunting expedition?”

“To fool Suyodhana. Why would he suspect hunters? Not a uniform among us. The jungles are full of wildlife, nothing could be more natural. The Thugs won’t be alarmed by our presence. What do you think, Yanez?”

“It appears there are no limits to the Tiger of Malaysia’s imagination.”

“We’re dealing with a clever opponent; we’ll have to outmanoeuvre him. How familiar are you with those swamps, Tremal-Naik?”

“Kammamuri and I know the area well. We’ve explored every canal and island.”

“And the rivers are navigable?”

“Yes, the water is deep and there’s a good roadstead at Rajmatla, about twenty miles from Rajmangal. The *Marianna* could shelter there if need be.”

“Excellent,” said Sandokan. “Aside from Kammamuri, do you have any other servants you can fully trust?”

“They’re all loyal to me.”

Sandokan reached into his jacket and drew out a large wad of bank-notes.

“Have one of them hire two elephants and guides. Tell him there’s no need to haggle.”

“But... I...,” said the Indian.

“The Tiger of Malaysia has diamonds enough to blanket all the rajahs and maharajahs of India,” Sandokan replied with a smile. Then he sighed and added sadly: “Neither Yanez nor I have any children. What am I going to do with all the riches I’ve accumulated in these last fifteen years? Fate’s been cruel, taking my Marianna...”

The formidable pirate shot to his feet. An intense, indescribable pain had shaken the proud features of the man that had once spread terror throughout the Malay Archipelago. He paced round the room three times, lips parted, a frown upon his brow, hands clutching his heart, eyes dark with pain.

“Sandokan, little brother,” said Yanez, gently placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

The pirate halted, a sob dying on his lips.

“I’ll never forget the Pearl of Labuan!” he sobbed, wiping away, almost in anger, two tears forming beneath his thick lashes. “Never! Never! I loved her more than life itself! Fate has been too cruel!”

“Sandokan!” repeated Yanez.

Tremal-Naik had stepped to the Tiger of Malaysia’s side. His face bathed in tears, the hunter embraced his friend.

“Our wives are dead,” said the Bengali, his anguish as deep as Sandokan’s.

Yanez looked on in saddened silence, unable to speak, while off in a corner, Kammamuri was quietly drying his eyes.

Suddenly the two men parted; the Tiger’s grief had vanished, replaced by a calm determination.

“Once we’re certain Suyodhana has taken Darma to his old lair,” he said, “we’ll set off for the Sundarbans. Can you hire the elephants tomorrow?”

“It should be possible,” said Tremal-Naik.

“Perfect. We’ll stay in Calcutta until we capture a Thug. You should come back to the ship with us. You’ll be safer aboard our prahu than in your palace.”

“The Thugs are watching this place. We shouldn’t travel together. I’ll sneak out late tomorrow night.”

“Fine. We’ll see you then. Time to go, Yanez; it’s already two o’clock.”

“Why don’t you spend the night here?” asked Tremal-Naik.

“Too risky,” replied Sandokan. “The Thugs would surely see us leave in the morning and follow us back to the *Marianna*. Night will help conceal our tracks; if we’re spotted, we’ll row off into the darkness until it’s safe to head back to our ship. Goodnight, Tremal-Naik, we’ll send word tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow night then.”

“Yes, make sure you’re not followed. Take whatever precautions are necessary.”

“They won’t even know I’ve left the house. Do you want Kammamuri to accompany you?”

“There’s no need, we’re armed and the jetty is nearby.”

They embraced once again then Sandokan and Yanez followed Kammamuri down into the courtyard.

“Keep your guard up,” said the Maratha as he unlocked the door.

“There’s no need to worry,” replied Sandokan. “We won’t let ourselves be taken by surprise.”

Once outside, the two pirates drew their pistols.

“Keep your eyes open, Yanez,” said Sandokan.

“They’re open, little brother, but I confess I can barely see my hands. The night is as dark as pitch. Perfect for an ambush.”

They stopped in the middle of the street and listened for a couple of minutes, then reassured by the silence, they set off towards the Maidan in front of Fort William.

They kept to the centre of the street, away from the houses that lined both sides, Yanez training his eyes to the right, Sandokan to the left. Every fifteen or twenty paces, they would stop, look over their shoulder and listen. Twice they heard footsteps that immediately fell silent. Someone was following them, perhaps the very man Sandokan had spotted running off as Kammamuri opened the door to the courtyard.

They reached the end of the street without incident and stepped onto the esplanade where it was not as dark.

“The river is just over there,” said Sandokan.

“I can hear it,” replied Yanez.

They quickened their pace and had almost reached the middle of the esplanade when something sharp sent them sprawling to the ground.

“Ah! The wretches!” shouted Sandokan. “Steel wire!”

Several men that had been lying among the thick grass immediately sprang to their feet and rushed towards the pirates. A sharp hiss sliced through the air.

“Don’t get up, Sandokan! Nooses!” yelled Yanez.

Two pistol shots thundered in swift succession.

Sandokan had fired immediately, just as a lead ball struck him between the shoulders. One of his attackers fell, crying out as he hit the ground. His companions scattered and quickly disappeared into the night.

A sentry yelled out from atop the fort’s ramparts: “Who goes there?”

Then all fell silent.

Fearing a second attack, Sandokan and Yanez did not move.

“They’re gone,” said the Portuguese, after a few minutes had passed. “So much for the fearless Thugs. They ran off like rabbits at the sound of gunfire.”

“The trap was well set,” replied Sandokan. “If I hadn’t fired my pistols, they would’ve strangled us. Catching us off guard with a steel cable, well done.”

“Let’s see if that scoundrel is really dead.”

“He isn’t moving.”

“It may be a trick.”

They stood up and looked around, keeping an arm raised to protect themselves from an enemy noose, then cautiously walked towards the man lying among the grass and knelt down to examine him. His face was bathed in blood.

“He got a bullet in the head,” said Sandokan.

“Do you think he’s a Thug?”

“If he is, there’ll be a tattoo on his chest. We’ll carry him to the launch, the light is better there.”

“Shh!”

A whistle had sounded off in the distance; within seconds, another came in reply from Durumtolah Street.

“A signal,” said Sandokan, “Quickly back to the launch! Leave him.”

They jumped to their feet, leaped over the steel wire and ran towards the river as a third whistle sounded in the darkness. The launch was anchored in the same place, half the crew stood on the jetty, rifles drawn and levelled.

“Captain,” said the helmsman, at the sight of Sandokan, “was that you who fired?”

“Yes, Rangary.”

“We thought as much. We were about to come to assist you.”

“There was no need,” replied Sandokan. “Has anyone been nosing about our launch?”

“No, sir.”

“Back to the ship then, my Tigers. It’s already late.”

He ordered the stern lantern lit and the whaleboat quickly rowed off.

Seconds later, a small gonga manned by two men pulled out from behind a sloop near the jetty and silently set off after them.