

SANDOKAN

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



Sandokan: The Tigers of Mompracem

By Emilio Salgari

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Chapter 1

Sandokan and Yanez

On the night of December 20th, 1849, a violent hurricane raged over Mompracem, a small island a few hundred miles off the west coast of Borneo, home to the most feared pirates in the South China Sea. Driven by a powerful wind, the clouds raced across the sky like unbridled horses, swirling violently, at times unleashing torrents of rain upon the island's dark forests. Whipped by the wind, the sea raged with fury, its troubled waves roaring relentlessly among the crash of thunder.

Several ships rocked at anchor in the bay, sheltered by a reef, however, not a soul stirred upon their decks or among the longhouses and palisades lining the shore. Darkness reigned over the forest and those tempestuous waters, but if anyone sailing from the east had chanced to look carefully, they would have spotted two bright flickering dots, two brightly lit windows shining from atop a cliff jutting over the sea.

Past a labyrinth of battered trenches, embankments, and ramparts, past terrain strewn with broken blades and the skulls of slain enemies, stood a large hut. A red flag, emblazoned with the head of a ferocious tiger, braved the wild wind from its perch on the roof.

The light came from within a large room in that imposing structure; the walls were hung with red silk tapestries, now worn and tattered, the floor disappeared beneath layers of Persian carpets that still blazed with gold though torn and faded with age.

An ebony table, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and trimmed with silver, stood in the center of the room, covered with bottles and glasses of the purest crystal. Enormous shelves occupied three of the corners, packed with the booty of past boarding raids. Vases of all sizes proudly displayed their contents, each one overflowing with rings, bracelets, ear-

rings, locket, medallions, sacred relics and exquisite pearls from the fisheries of Ceylon. Emeralds, rubies and diamonds sparkled like stars beneath the glow of the gilded lamp that hung from the ceiling.

An old Turkish divan occupied the fourth corner, and next to it, against the wall, stood an ebony harmonium. Stacks of carpets, clothes, paintings, lamps, empty bottles, glassware, Indian carbines, Spanish rifles, cutlasses, axes, scimitars, daggers, and pistols lay strewn about in confusion.

A man sat alone in that oddly furnished room. He was tall and well built, with strong, proud features. Shoulder length hair and a black beard framed his lightly bronzed face. He had a high forehead, dark piercing eyes, and a small mouth that revealed pearl white teeth.

He had been sitting for several minutes, eyes fixed on the lamp, hands nervously clasping the hilt of his scimitar which peered from the gold-embroidered red sash he wore about his blue silk jacket.

A wild blast of wind suddenly shook the large hut to its foundations and tore him from his thoughts. He threw back his long wavy hair, took up a turban adorned with a walnut-sized diamond, fixed it upon his head, then stood up and looked about.

“It’s midnight,” he murmured. “Midnight and he still hasn’t returned!”

He drained a glass of amber liquid and went out. He made his way through the trenches defending the hut, stopped at the edge of the large cliff, and listened to the furious roar of the sea.

Arms crossed, he stood there for several minutes, revelling in the storm’s violent gales. He gazed impatiently at the churning waters, then slowly turned about and went back into the hut. He stopped before the harmonium and ran his fingers along the keyboard, filling the air with a series of rapid, almost savage sounds then listened as one by one they faded into the wind and thunder.

A sudden noise made him turn his head toward the door. He bent forward and listened, straining his ears, and then yes! He bolted out of the hut and made his way to the cliff once again. A flash of lightning helped him make out a small ship, her sails reefed, entering the bay. Eyes trained upon her, he followed her every move until she disap-

peared among the vessels moored along the shore. He put a gold whistle to his lips and blew three sharp notes; a high-pitched whistle promptly came in reply.

“It’s him!” he whispered excitedly. “Finally!”

Five minutes later, a man wrapped in a large wet cloak appeared before him.

“Yanez!” the man with the turban exclaimed, spreading his arms in welcome.

“Sandokan!” replied the newcomer with a voice marked by a slight foreign accent. “Brr! What a night from hell, little brother!”

“Come!”

They quickly made their way to the hut, closing the door behind them. The foreigner removed the carbine slung over his shoulder and took off his cape while Sandokan filled two glasses. He offered one to his friend.

“Drink, my good Yanez.”

“To your health, Sandokan.”

“To yours.”

Quickly draining their glasses they sat down at the table. The newcomer was European, a man in his early thirties, a little older than his friend. He was of average height, with a strong build, pale skin, regular features, thin lips and sharp grey eyes, a man of quick wit and excellent humour.

“Well, Yanez,” Sandokan asked excitedly, “Have you seen the young woman with the hair of gold?”

“No, but I did get the information you wanted.”

“You didn’t go to Labuan?”

“You do realize it’s difficult for people in our line of work to set foot on any shore defended by British cruisers.”

“Tell me about the young woman. What did you learn?”

“Well, I’ve heard she’s incredibly beautiful, so beautiful that she can bewitch even the most daring pirates.”

“Ah!” Sandokan exclaimed.

“I’ve been told her hair is like gold, her eyes are bluer than the ocean, and her skin is as white as alabaster. I heard tell that Alamba saw her

strolling in the forests of Labuan one evening, and was so taken by her beauty that he stopped his ship to get a better look at her. Imagine that! One of our most ferocious pirates! He put himself and his entire crew at risk. Had he met with a British cruiser...”

“Who is she?”

“Some say the daughter of a colonel or a lord, others that she’s related to the Governor of Labuan.”

“A woman cloaked in mystery,” murmured Sandokan, rubbing his forehead.

“Yes...so?” asked Yanez.

The pirate remained silent for an instant, then, without warning, jumped to his feet and walked excitedly to the harmonium. He ran his fingers over the keys, filling the air with dizzying sounds. Yanez limited himself to a smile, reached for an old mandolin hanging on the wall, and began to pluck at a few chords.

“All right then! Let’s make some music.”

He had just begun to play an old Portuguese tune, when Sandokan rushed to the table and brought his fist down with a crash. He was no longer the man of moments ago: a frown lined his brow, his eyes flashed darkly, and his lips were drawn back, baring teeth clenched in anger. The legendary captain of the fierce pirates of Mompracem had reawakened, a man that had bloodied the shores of Malaysia for the last ten years, a veteran of terrible battles, a fearless warrior whose extraordinary daring and courage had earned him the name “Tiger of Malaysia.”

“Yanez!” he thundered, “What are the British doing in Labuan?”

“Bolstering their defences,” the European replied calmly.

“Are they plotting against me?”

“More than likely.”

“Ah! Well let them try to raise a finger against my Mompracem! Let them try and challenge the pirates in their lair! I’ll darken the waters with their blood. What do they say of me?”

“They say it’s time to put an end to the career of such an intrepid pirate.”

“They hate me then?”

“Intensely! They’d gladly sacrifice their entire fleet for the pleasure of hanging you.”

“Humph!”

“Do you doubt me? Little brother, you’ve been causing all sorts of havoc for several years. Every coast bears traces of your raids. You’ve pillaged and ransacked every village, every town. Every Dutch, Spanish and British fort has been scarred by your cannon fire. The bottom of the sea is strewn with the wreckage of ships you’ve sunk.”

“True, but whose fault is that? Haven’t the Europeans been merciless with me? Did they not conspire to steal my throne, proclaiming that I’d become too powerful? Did they not murder my mother, brothers, sisters, and all those that I loved? What evil had I done them? I’d never threatened them! Never! And yet they moved to crush me. How can I not hate them all? Be they Spanish, Dutch, British or even Portuguese, your countrymen, I will have my vengeance, a fierce, crushing vengeance, I swore it on the bodies of my family and it’s a vow I’ll never break!... And yet, although I’ve been merciless with my enemies, I hope one or two voices may claim that, at times, I was indeed generous.”

“Not one, but a hundred, maybe even a thousand voices can attest to how generous you’ve been with the weak... perhaps even too generous,” said Yanez. “How many times have you defended some poor tribe from an enemy raid? And all those women that fell captive into your hands - you delivered them to enemy ports, even though you ran the risk of being sunk by British cruisers. And what about those poor castaways you found clinging to wreckage in the midst of terrible storms - you not only rescued them, you showered them with riches. Hundreds, thousands of others will always remember your gifts, Sandokan! Now tell me, little brother, why are we having this discussion? I doubt you merely wish to reminisce...”

The Tiger of Malaysia did not reply. He began to pace about the room, arms crossed, head lowered in contemplation. Despite having known him a long time, Yanez could not begin to read his thoughts.

“Sandokan,” he said, after several minutes, “What troubles you?”

The Tiger stopped and gave him a steady look, but remained silent.

“Something’s bothering you,” said Yanez. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were upset the British hate you so.”

The pirate remained silent.

The Portuguese got up, lit a cigarette and headed for a door hidden behind a tapestry.

“Good night, little brother.”

Hearing those words, Sandokan awoke as if from a trance and quickly put up a restraining hand.

“A word, Yanez.”

“Speak then.”

“I want to go to Labuan.”

“Labuan? You!”

“Why so surprised?”

“Because you’re reckless. Too reckless! Once you were in the den of your bitterest enemies, you’d probably commit who knows what acts of madness.”

Sandokan grunted.

“Brother of mine,” continued Yanez, “do not tempt fate too much. Be careful! England has set her sights on our Mompracem; she could attack at any moment. We must keep our guard up at all times. On my way back, I spotted a cruiser bristling with cannons, loaded with arms and men, buzzing about our waters like a lion stalking its prey.”

“She’ll meet the Tiger!” exclaimed Sandokan, clenching his fists.

“Yes, she’ll make your acquaintance and perhaps in the course of battle, her crew will die by your hand, but their death cry will be heard all the way to the shores of Labuan and others will move against you. True, many British Lions will die, but even though our men are quite formidable, in the end, the Tiger will die as well!”

“What!”

Sandokan had jumped to his feet, eyes blazing, fists clenched in rage, arms ready to strike. It was just a momentary flash of anger, and when it passed he sat back down at the table, shot back another glass of amber liquid and fixed his eyes upon his friend.

“You’re right, Yanez,” he said calmly, “but, nevertheless, tomorrow I’ll set sail for Labuan. There’s an irresistible force drawing me to those shores, and a voice keeps telling me that I must see the young woman with the hair of gold, that I must...”

“Sandokan!”

“Enough talk for tonight, brother, let’s go to sleep.”

Chapter 2

Ferocity and Generosity

The next day, a few hours after the sun had risen, Sandokan left his hut, ready for his bold expedition. He was dressed for war: an embroidered red velvet jacket, blue silk pants and long red leather boots. Slung over his shoulder was an ornate Indian carbine, excellent for firing at long range; tucked in his sash was a scimitar with a solid gold hilt, behind it, a kris, a dagger with a poisoned serpentine blade.

He paused for a moment at the edge of the large cliff and scanned the sea with his sharp eyes, his gaze slowly moving along the water's smooth surface until it came to rest upon the distant east.

"She is there," he murmured.

He wondered at the strange force drawing him towards her. Since first he had heard of her, the blue-eyed woman with the hair of gold had haunted his dreams. It was an omen, but would seeing her bring pleasure or misfortune? He shook his head as if to dispel such awful thoughts then slowly began his descent down the narrow steps cut in the rock that led to the beach. Yanez was waiting for him at the bottom.

"All is ready," said the Portuguese. "The two best vessels in our fleet are at your disposal. I took the liberty of fitting them with two additional firelocks."

"And the men?"

"The captains and their crews have assembled on the beach. You have but to select the best."

"Thank you, Yanez."

"Don't thank me, Sandokan; I may have just prepared your undoing."

"Relax, brother; bullets fear me."

"Be careful... *very* careful."

“I will, and I promise that once I’ve seen the young woman, I’ll return to our island immediately.”

“That cursed woman! I’d strangle the pirate who first set eyes upon her and ran to you with the news.”

“Come, Yanez.”

They crossed an esplanade defended by large ramparts and heavy artillery, made their way past several embankments and deep trenches, and finally arrived at the bay. More than a dozen prahus rested at anchor a few metres from the shore.

Three hundred men stood at attention before a row of longhouses, awaiting orders like a legion of demons, ready to spread terror over the seas of Malaysia.

Men had come from all over the east to join the Tiger’s crew: Malays, short agile men, famous for their daring and ferocity; Batavians, who despite an advanced civilization, were renowned for their love of human flesh; a few Dyak headhunters from the neighbouring islands of Borneo, famous for their ruthlessness; some Cochin Chinese with long *bianzhi*¹; a few Siamese, several Indians, some Bugis, Javanese, Tagalis, Filipinos, and a few Negritos.

At the sight of the Tiger of Malaysia, a wave of excitement raced through the long line of pirates. All eyes lit up as kris es waved in salute. Sandokan cast a tender look upon his men and summoned forth one of his captains.

“Patan, come forward.”

A tall muscular Malay dressed in a simple red chawat², drew near, walking with the rolling gait typical of men of the sea.

“How many men in your crew?” asked Sandokan.

“Fifty, Tiger of Malaysia.”

“All good warriors?”

“All thirsty for blood.”

“Assign half of them to Giro-Batol the Javanese then have them board those two prahus.”

¹ A long plait of hair or ponytail traditionally worn by Chinese men.

² loincloth

“Where are we going?”

Sandokan gave him a look that made the imprudent pirate shiver, even though he laughed in the face of machinegun fire.

“Your duty is to obey, not to question,” replied Sandokan.

The Malay quickly turned about and went off, followed by his crew. These men were bold to the point of folly who, at but a sign from Sandokan, would not hesitate to sacrifice their very lives.

“Come, Yanez,” said Sandokan, after his men had finished boarding.

They were about to go down to the beach when they spotted a short dark-skinned man running towards them, a Negrito from one of the many tribes scattered throughout the islands of Malaysia.

“What is it, Kili-Dalù?” asked Yanez.

“I’ve just run from the southern shore,” replied the Negrito, panting heavily.

“And?”

“Good news, Señor Yanez! I spotted a large junk tacking towards the Romades.”

“Carrying cargo?” asked Sandokan.

“Yes, Tiger.”

“Good, within three hours she’ll be in my hands.”

“And then you’ll proceed to Labuan?”

“Directly, Yanez.”

They stopped in front of a whaler manned by four Malays.

“Goodbye, my brother,” said Sandokan, embracing Yanez.

“Goodbye, Sandokan. Be careful and promise me you won’t do anything rash.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll be extremely cautious.”

“May that lucky star of yours protect you.”

Sandokan jumped into the whaler. A few quick strokes brought the small vessel between the two prahus.

A loud cheer erupted from the shore.

“Long live the Tiger of Malaysia!”

“Cast off,” commanded the pirate, addressing the two crews.

Two teams of pirates raised the anchors. The ships tacked and headed out of the bay towards the azure waters of the South China Sea.

“Heading?” asked Patan.

“Set a direct course for the Romades,” the captain replied. He turned to face the crews of both ships and shouted one final order. “Men, keep your eyes open; we have a junk to plunder!”

A good wind was blowing from the southwest, the sea was calm, and the vessels quickly cut through the water. Within a short time they were sailing at more than twelve knots, faster than most sail boats, but not at all uncommon for lightweight Malay vessels equipped with narrow hulls and immense sails.

The two ships were not typical prahus, which are ordinarily small and without a bridge. Unrivaled seamen, Sandokan and Yanez had modified all their vessels, making them faster and more powerful, giving them an advantage over any ship in those waters.

They had kept the immense sails, whose length approached forty metres, as well as the masts, that although large, had a certain elasticity; and the rigging, which made of gamuti and rattan, were stronger than rope and easier to replace; however, they had given their ships greater bulk, a faster keel, and an almost indestructible bow. They had ordered a bridge built on every ship, along with holes for oars, and had eliminated one of the two rudders and the outrigger, two devices that could make boarding raids more difficult.

Though the two prahus were still a great distance from the Romades, the pirates immediately began to prepare for the upcoming battle. The cannons and large firelocks were loaded with the greatest care. Large quantities of cannonballs and grenades were piled onto the deck; rifles, axes and cutlasses were laid out and the grappling hooks were placed on the bulwarks, ready to be hurled at the enemy vessel.

When all preparations had been completed, those demons, faces lit by an ardent greed, began to scan the sea, some from the ratlines, others from the bulwarks and from astraddle the yardarm. All were anxious to spot the junk, she promised a rich haul, as did most vessels that set sail from the harbours of China.

Sandokan shared his men's restlessness. He paced from bow to stern, scanning the water without pause, his hand gripping the hilt of his scimitar with ever-increasing pressure.

By ten that morning, Mompracem had disappeared beneath the horizon, but the sea remained deserted. Not a reef in sight, not a tuft of smoke, not even a white dot on the horizon to signal the presence of a ship. Impatience began to spread among the two crews. Cursing all the while, the men milled about the rifle batteries and clambered up and down the rigging, the blades of their scimitars and poisoned kris flashing in the sun. Then, a few minutes after midday, a voice shouted from atop the mainmast.

"Ship to leeward!"

Sandokan stopped pacing. He glanced at the bridge then directed his eyes towards the vessel commanded by Giro-Batol.

"Battle stations!" he thundered.

Instantly the pirates hanging from the mast scrambled down and took their places on deck.

"Pagkon," said Sandokan, turning to the one man who had remained on the mainmast. "What do you see?"

"A sail, Tiger."

"Our junk?"

"It's a junk, I'm sure of it."

"I would have preferred a European ship," Sandokan murmured with a frown. "I have no particular hatred for the Celestials." He began to pace again.

A half hour passed, during which the two prahus increased their speed by five knots then Pagkon's voice rang out once more.

"Captain, they've sighted us!" he shouted. "They're trying to get away."

"Ah!" Sandokan exclaimed. "Giro-Batol, cut off their escape!"

The two prahus quickly parted, moving to attack the merchant ship from both sides. Their prey was one of those heavy vessels typically found plying the waters of the South China Sea. At the sight of those

two suspicious ships, the junk's crew, knowing they could not outrun them, stopped their vessel and hoisted a large flag.

Sandokan rushed to the bulwark.

"Rajah Brooke's emblem!" he exclaimed with hatred. "So they're friends with the Exterminator! Men! Attack! Attack!"

A furious cry erupted from the crews of the two attacking vessels, all familiar with the celebrated Englishman James Brooke, Rajah of Sarawak, merciless enemy of all pirates. Patan leaped to the bow cannon as the others quickly aimed their rifles and loaded their carbines.

"Shall we begin?" he asked Sandokan.

"Make every shot count."

"Yes, Captain."

A blast thundered from the junk, and a small calibre cannonball whistled through the prahu's sails. Patan aimed his cannon and fired. The effect was immediate: the junk's mainmast, split at its base, tottered violently and crashed to the deck, dragging down sails and rigging. They watched as the crew frantically ran along the vessel's bulwarks and disappeared from sight.

"Patan! Over there!" shouted Pagkon.

A small rowboat, manned by six men, had been lowered from the junk and was heading towards the Romades.

"Ah!" Sandokan exclaimed angrily. "Men that would rather flee than fight! Patan, fire on those cowards!"

The Malay sprayed the water with a cloud of machinegun fire, sinking the rowboat and instantly killing all those aboard.

"Well done, Patan!" shouted Sandokan. "And now raze that ship and whatever remains of her crew. If there's anything left of her after the battle, we'll send her off with our compliments to one of the Rajah's shipyards for repairs."

The two pirate ships resumed their infernal music, showering the junk with cannonballs, grenades and torrents of machinegun fire, destroying her foremast, and smashing in her bulwarks. Cannonballs and bullets sliced through her rigging, killing sailors desperately trying to defend her with nothing but their rifles.

“Well done!” exclaimed Sandokan, admiring the courage of those few men who had remained aboard the junk. “Fire, continue firing! You are worthy adversaries for the Tiger of Malaysia!”

Cannons thundering, the two pirate ships, engulfed in thick black clouds of smoke, continued to advance, quickly trapping the junk between them.

“Tiller leeward!” yelled Sandokan, drawing his scimitar.

The grappling hooks’ iron grip quickly bound his ship to the merchant vessel’s port side.

“Attack!” thundered the terrible pirate.

He was getting ready to leap aboard the vessel, like a tiger preparing to pounce on its prey, when he felt himself held back by a powerful arm. He turned, howling in fury, but the man that had dared to restrain him had already jumped in front of him.

“Pagkon!” Sandokan shouted, raising his scimitar.

A rifle thundered from the junk and poor Pagkon fell lifelessly to the ground.

“You shielded me... a noble sacrifice!” said Sandokan. “Thank you, my friend!”

He rushed forward like an angered bull, grabbed onto the mouth of a cannon, climbed onto the junk’s bridge and jumped among the combatants with the recklessness that was the admiration of all. The merchant ship’s entire crew sped towards him to block his advance.

“To me, my Tigers!” he shouted, as he knocked down two men with the blunt side of his scimitar.

Ten or twelve pirates, who had been hanging from the rigging, jumped over the bulwarks and landed on deck, just as the second prahu launched her grapples.

“Surrender!” commanded the Tiger, eyeing his enemy.

Faced with the prospect of fending off a second attack, the eight surviving men threw down their arms.

“Where’s the captain?” Sandokan asked.

“Right here,” replied a Chinese man, quaking slightly as he came forward.

“You’re brave, and your men are worthy of you,” said Sandokan. “Where are you headed?”

“To Sarawak.”

The pirate frowned darkly.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Sarawak. And, what is Rajah Brooke, *‘the Exterminator’*, up to these days?”

“I do not know; we haven’t been to Sarawak in months.”

“No matter, when you see him, tell him that one day I’m going to drop anchor in that bay of his and await his ships. Then we’ll see if *‘the Exterminator’* is a match for my men!”

He tore a string of diamonds from his neck and offered them to the captain of the junk.

“Take them, my brave adversary. I regret having destroyed the junk you so admirably defended; these diamonds will pay for ten new ones.”

“Who are you?” asked the captain, bewildered.

Sandokan approached him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Remember my face. I am the Tiger of Malaysia.”

Then before the captain and his crew could recover from the shock and terror that revelation had wrought upon them, Sandokan and his pirates jumped back aboard their prahus.

“Course?” asked Patan.

The Tiger raised his arm toward the east, and with a quaver in his voice shouted, “Labuan! To Labuan!”

Chapter 3

The Cruiser

Though dismayed and battered, the junk was in no danger of sinking. The two pirate ships quickly pulled away and set a course for Labuan, the island home of the golden-haired young woman Sandokan strongly desired to see. The sea was calm and a good wind blew from the northwest, it was not long before the two prahus were flying at ten or eleven knots per hour.

Once the bridge had been swabbed, the severed rigging retied, and all the rifles and firelocks reloaded, Sandokan ordered his men to give Pagkon and another pirate slain by a bullet a proper burial at sea. Then he lit a beautiful nargileh, most likely acquired in an Indian or Persian bazaar, and summoned Patan before him.

“Tell me, Malay,” said the Tiger, giving him a look that would have made Satan tremble, “do you know how Pagkon died?”

“Yes,” Patan replied, shuddering at the pirate’s scowl.

“Tell me, where are you supposed to be when I board an enemy ship?”

“Right behind you.”

“Yet, you weren’t - and poor Pagkon was killed in your stead.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“I should have you shot for this lapse in duty, but you’re a brave man and I do not like to sacrifice courageous men needlessly. The next time we board a ship, you’ll lead the men on attack and have yourself killed.”

“Thank you, Tiger.”

“Sabau,” yelled Sandokan.

A Malay with a gash across his face, came forward.

“You were the first to follow me onto the junk, were you not?” asked Sandokan.

“Yes, Tiger.”

“Once Patan is dead, you’ll assume command of his crew.”

He dismissed the pirate, walked slowly across the deck and went down into his cabin.

During the day the two prahus continued to sail through that expanse of water bounded by Mompracem and the Romades to the west, Borneo in the east and northeast, and Labuan and the Three Islands to the north, without encountering a single merchant ship.

The Tiger’s sinister fame had spread across that part of the world and few ships dared to sail those waters. Most avoided that area frequented by pirate ships, preferring to sail near the coasts so that, at the first sign of danger, they could head for land and attempt to escape with their lives.

As night fell, the crews lowered the large sails to protect their vessels from any changes in the wind, the prahus drawing nearer to better guard against sudden attacks. Towards midnight, Sandokan reappeared on deck just as they were sailing past the Three Islands, first sentinels to the harbour of Labuan.

He appeared agitated and paced from bow to stern, arms crossed, walking in fierce silence. Occasionally, he would stop and examine the dark surface of the sea, climbing onto the bulwarks to get a better view of the horizon. Then standing still, he would listen for the gurgle of a cruiser’s engine or the sound of waves crashing on the shores of Labuan. At three in the morning, as the stars were beginning to fade, Sandokan shouted, “Labuan!”

A thin dark line had appeared in the east just where the water blurred into the horizon.

“Labuan,” the pirate repeated, sighing in relief.

“Should we maintain our course?” Patan asked.

“Yes,” the Tiger replied. “Head for the river.”

The order was relayed to Giro-Batol, and the two ships sailed silently toward the island.

Labuan in those times was not the important naval base it is today. It was occupied in 1847 by Sir Rodney Mundy, commander of the *Iris*, by order of the British Government, who wished to eradicate piracy from those waters. Labuan was home to a thousand inhabitants, Malays mostly, with a small European population of about two hundred.

The British had recently built a citadel there and named it after Queen Victoria, erecting large bastions to protect it from the pirates of Mompracem, whose past raids had devastated the coast. The rest of the island was covered by thick jungle that still teemed with tigers and, as a result, only a few farms had been built on its hills and plains.

The two prahus sailed along the island's coast for several miles then silently entered a small river bounded by banks covered with lush vegetation. The ships sailed up it for six or seven hundred metres and finally dropped anchor in the shadow of several enormous trees. They would be well hidden there, invisible to any cruisers patrolling the coast.

At midday, Sandokan sent two teams of men to explore the forest and keep an eye on the mouth of the river, so as not to be surprised by a sudden attack. He summoned Patan, grabbed his carbine, and the two men went ashore. They had gone about a kilometre into the thick vegetation, when the pirate came to an abrupt halt at the base of a colossal durian tree.

"Spot something?" asked Patan.

"Listen," Sandokan replied.

The Malay strained his ears and heard the sound of a dog barking off in the distance.

"Someone's out hunting," he said.

"Let's get a better look."

They resumed their march, the pepper plants, bread trees and arecas hiding their advance. The barking grew louder and minutes later the two came upon a dark-skinned man dressed in red livery, walking a mastiff.

"Where are you going?" asked Sandokan, blocking his path.

"I'm tracking a tiger," the man replied.

"And who gave you permission to hunt in my forest?"

"I'm in Lord Guldek's service."

“Excellent! Tell me, have you ever heard speak of a young woman known as the Pearl of Labuan?”

“Who on this island does not know of the angel of Labuan? She’s beloved and admired by all.”

“Is she beautiful?” Sandokan asked.

“I’ve never seen her equal.”

The Tiger of Malaysia started.

“Tell me,” he continued after a brief silence, “Where does she live?”

“In a large villa, two kilometres from here.”

“That will suffice. Now go, and if you value your life, do not return.”

He gave him a fistful of gold and the man disappeared.

“We’ll wait here until nightfall then make our way towards the villa,” said Sandokan, sitting down at the foot of a large tree.

Patan made himself comfortable beneath the shade of an areca, keeping his carbine within arm’s reach. It was about three in the afternoon, when their rest was unexpectedly interrupted.

A cannon thundered from the sea and the blast echoed toward the coast, instantly silencing the birds of the forest. Sandokan jumped to his feet, carbine in hand, his face transformed.

“A cannon blast!” he exclaimed. “Come, Patan, I smell blood!”

Chapter 4

Lions and Tigers

Less than ten minutes later, the two pirates had arrived at the banks of the river. The wind had fallen somewhat and the crews had boarded the prahus to reef the sails.

“What’s happening?” Sandokan asked, jumping onto the bridge.

“Captain, we’re under attack,” said Giro-Batol. “There’s a cruiser blocking the mouth of the river.”

“Ah!” said the Tiger. “The British are looking for a fight. Well, my friends, we’ll ready our weapons and head out to meet them. We’ll show them what the Tigers of Mompracem can do!”

“Long live the Tiger!” yelled the two crews, their voices ringing with frightening enthusiasm. “Attack! Attack!”

Moments later, the two ships began descending the river and soon reached the open sea. Six hundred metres from the coast, a large heavily armed ship of fifteen hundred tons was slowly patrolling the waters, barring the way westward. Shouted orders mixed with the pounding of drums, summoning the crew to battle.

Sandokan coldly studied that formidable adversary. She was enormous, well armed and manned by a crew four times the size of his own. Undaunted, he turned to his men and thundered, “Man the oars!”

The pirates rushed to their stations as the gunners quickly aimed the cannons and firelocks.

“Come measure yourself against us, wretched ship,” said Sandokan, as the prahus, driven by the power of their oars, shot forward like two arrows.

A light flashed on the cruiser’s deck and seconds later a large cannonball whistled past the prahus’ masts.

“Patan!” shouted Sandokan. “Man your cannon!”

The Malay, one of the best cannoneers ever to pirate those waters, fired. The shell smashed through the gangway of the enemy bridge, simultaneously snapping the flagpole in two. Instead of returning fire, the warship tacked and presented her port gun ports, home to a half dozen cannons.

“Patan, make every shot count,” said Sandokan as a cannon roared from Giro-Batol’s prahu, “Knock down her masts and destroy her wheel, then when your aim starts to falter, get yourself killed.”

The cruiser quickly began to voice her might. A hurricane of steel whizzed through the air, sweeping the prahus from bow to stern. Cries of anger and rage thundered from the decks of the pirate vessels, only to be quickly silenced by a second volley that sent oarsmen and gunners flying.

Engulfed in a whirlwind of black and white smoke, the warship suddenly tacked and sailed to within four hundred paces of the prahus. However, instead of halting, she continued on for another kilometre then began to fire once again. That second volley knocked Sandokan to the ground, felled by a yardarm, but he was unharmed and quickly shot back to his feet.

“Wretches!” he thundered, shaking his fist at the enemy vessel. “You won’t escape us!”

He whistled loudly to summon his men.

“Build barricades in front of the cannons, then full speed ahead!”

Within minutes, extra masts, old cannon parts, barrels filled with cannonballs, and whatever loose wreckage could be found, had been stacked upon the bows of both ships. Once the preparations were complete, the twenty strongest men went below to man the oars, while the others crowded behind the barricades, carbines levelled, daggers clenched between their teeth.

“Full ahead!” commanded the Tiger.

The cruiser had stopped retreating and now advanced slowly, spewing torrents of black smoke.

“Fire at will!” yelled the Tiger.

The gunfire resumed, each side matching shot for shot, volley for volley, cannonball for cannonball.

Engulfed in thick clouds of smoke, the three crews could barely find their marks, but their artillery continued to thunder, as fire was met with fire, both sides intent on victory, determined to fight to the death.

Though facing a larger and better armed opponent, the two prahus lead by the brave Tiger refused to yield. Riddled with holes, sails shredded, holds drawing water, brimming with the bodies of the dead and wounded, the pirate ships continued to fire, ignoring the incessant hail of cannonballs raining down upon them. A wild delirium had taken hold of those men, and they wanted nothing more than to storm the bridge of that formidable ship. If they could not win, they would die fighting on their enemy's deck.

Patan, true to his word, had had himself killed while stationed at his cannon and another capable gunner had taken his place; many men had fallen, and others still, horribly wounded, struggled hopelessly among torrents of blood. Giro-Batol's prahu had not fared much better, her cannon had been disabled and her firelock would not last much longer, but it mattered not. The decks of the two pirate ships still teemed with men thirsty for blood and they valiantly kept up their attack.

Metal flew about those brave men, sweeping the decks, smashing in bulwarks, tearing through arms and chests, shattering everything they touched, but no one spoke of retreating. The pirates hurled insults at the enemy and maintained their fire, and when a gust of wind would momentarily blow away the clouds of smoke covering the three ships, from behind the barricades would emerge faces twisted and darkened with rage. In the middle of that pack of Tigers, their captain, the invincible Sandokan, clutching his scimitar in his right hand, a fiery look on his face, his long hair blowing in the wind, spurred his warriors with a voice that thundered above the roar of cannons. The terrible battle lasted twenty minutes. Then the cruiser retreated a further six hundred metres to avoid a boarding.

A cry of fury erupted from the two prahus in response to that manoeuvre. Victory was no longer within reach, the British, taking advan-

tage of their powerful engine, would never allow them to set foot on deck.

Sandokan, however, refused to give up.

Cutting through the men about him, with one quick movement he re-loaded a smoking cannon, corrected the aim, and fired. Seconds later, the cruiser's mainmast, severed at its base, fell into the sea, dragging with it the marksmen stationed atop the crosslets. The vessel stopped firing and came to a halt, the crew attempting to rescue the men before they drowned. Sandokan took advantage of the lull and had Giro-Batol and the remainder of his men gather their weapons and climb aboard his prahu.

"Head for the coast," he thundered.

Giro-Batol's ship, which up until then had been kept afloat by pure miracle, was quickly evacuated and abandoned to the waves. Taking advantage of the warship's inaction, the pirates quickly manned the oars and rowed off, taking shelter in the nearby river.

And just in time. Despite their best efforts to seal the damage, the poor ship, riddled with holes, was drawing water from all sides and slowly sinking. She groaned like a dying man beneath the weight of the invading sea, listing to starboard as she moved forward. Sandokan, who had taken the wheel, pointed her towards the nearest shore and grounded her on a sandbank.

Once the prahu was out of danger, the pirates jumped on deck like a pack of famished tigers, weapons in hand, ready to resume the struggle with ferocity and determination. Sandokan calmly put up a restraining hand then drew a watch from his sash.

"It's now six o'clock," he said. "The sun will set in two hours. We'll start our repairs immediately; the prahu must be ready to sail by midnight."

"Are we going to attack the cruiser?" the pirates asked excitedly.

"I can't promise that, but I swear we'll avenge our men. We'll shower the enemy with cannon fire and hoist our flag over the ramparts of Victoria."

"Long live the Tiger!" howled the pirates.

“Silence!” thundered Sandokan. “I need two men to go to the mouth of the river and keep an eye on the cruiser and another two to go into the jungle to watch for an ambush. Once we’ve tended to the injured, we’ll set to work.”

While the pirates quickly saw to the wounded, Sandokan went to the stern of his ship and scanned part of the bay through a rift in the trees. He was undoubtedly looking for the cruiser, but she had not dared to approach the shore, perhaps in fear of grounding on one of the numerous sandbanks hidden beneath the waters.

“They know they have us,” murmured the formidable pirate. “They’re waiting for us to come out into the open so they can destroy us, but if they think I’ll lead my men on an attack, they’re sadly mistaken. I can be as cautious as their commander.”

He sat on a cannon and called for Sabau. The pirate, one of his bravest men, having earned the rank of commander after risking his life more than twenty times, rushed to his side.

“Patan and Giro-Batol are dead,” Sandokan sighed. “They fell in battle while leading their brave crews against that wretched ship. You are now in command of their men.”

“Thank you, Tiger of Malaysia.”

“You’ll fight as bravely as they did.”

“My life is yours to command, Captain.”

“Now help me.”

They gathered their strength, pushed the cannon and the firelocks to the stern and pointed them toward the small bay, so as to be ready to spray it with machinegun fire, in the event the cruiser’s commander decided to send a launch down the river.

“That should do,” said Sandokan. “Have you sent two men to keep an eye on the mouth of the river?”

“Yes, Tiger of Malaysia. They’re hiding among the reeds.”

“Excellent.”

“You plan to sneak past the cruiser once it’s dark?”

“Yes, the moon won’t be out until much later and those clouds rolling in from the south should hide our escape.”

“Are we going back to Mompracem, Captain?”

“Directly.”

“With our dead unavenged?”

“We don’t have enough men left, Sabau. Besides, they’re too well armed and our ship is in no condition for a second battle.”

“True, Captain.”

“Patience for now. We’ll have our revenge soon enough.”

While the two captains were talking, their men continued to work feverishly. Capable seamen, many were also skilled carpenters and shipwrights. It took them only four hours to raise two new masts, reinforce the bulwarks, seal all the holes and repair the rigging, having had an abundance of cables, chains and ropes on board. By ten o’clock, not only could the prahu set sail, she could also engage in battle once again, for new barricades had been constructed out of tree trunks to protect the cannons and firelocks.

During those four hours, not one of the cruiser’s launches had dared to appear in the waters of the bay. The British commander, knowing he faced the Tigers of Mompracem, had not deemed it wise to have his men engage in battle on land. He waited patiently; certain he could force the pirates to surrender or push them back towards the coast if they tried to attack or attempted to flee. Towards eleven, Sandokan, determined to set sail, summoned the sentries from the mouth of the river.

“Any launches patrolling the bay?” he asked.

“No,” replied one of the two.

“And the cruiser?”

“She’s about a half mile from shore.”

“More than enough room to pass,” Sandokan murmured. “The darkness will hide our escape.” Then, he turned to Sabau and said, “Time to set off.”

Fifteen men immediately jumped onto the sandbar and with one rapid movement, pushed the prahu into the river.

“I want complete silence. No one is to speak until we’re clear of that ship,” Sandokan commanded. “Keep your eyes open and your weapons ready. We’re about to play a deadly game.”

He sat at the wheel, Sabau at his side, and began to steer the prahu towards the mouth of the river.

The darkness favoured their escape. The moon had not yet risen; massive storm clouds had invaded the heavens, blotting out the stars. Unfortunately, the shadows beneath the durian trees, palm trees and banana leaves, made it difficult for Sandokan to scan the riverbanks.

A deep silence, broken only by the gurgling of the river, reigned over that small stretch of water. Even the breeze had disappeared and not a leaf stirred among the dark vegetation lining the shores. Nor did the slightest sound emanate from the deck of the ship. It seemed as if the entire crew, spread out from bow to stern, held their breath for fear of disrupting the silence.

The prahu had almost reached the mouth of the river, when she started to slow and came to an abrupt stop.

“Stuck?” asked Sandokan.

Sabau looked over the bulwark and studied the waters.

“Yes,” he replied. “We’ve hit a sandbank.”

“Can we pass?”

“The tide is rising rapidly; we should resume our descent in a few minutes.”

“We’ll wait then.”

Though unaware of the cause of the delay, the crew remained silent. Sandokan, however, had heard the familiar clack of carbines being loaded and signalled his men to quietly man the cannons and the two firelocks.

Several anxious minutes passed then suddenly the keel began to creak. The prahu, elevated by the rising tide, was sliding off the sandbank. Rolling gently, she had suddenly managed to free herself from the tenacious riverbed.

“Hoist the sail,” Sandokan ordered the riggers.

“Will one sail be enough, Captain?” asked Sabau.

“Yes, for now.”

A few minutes later a lateen sail was hoisted up the foremast. It had been painted black to better blend against the night sky. The prahu be-

gan to pick up speed as it followed the bends in the river. She sped along with ease, sailing over sandbanks and reefs, crossed the small bay and headed silently for the open sea.

“The ship?” asked Sandokan, jumping to his feet.

“There, a half mile from us,” Sabau replied.

The cruiser’s dark mass loomed menacingly upon the water; tiny sparks swirled above her as cinders escaped her smokestack. Listening carefully, one could hear the muffled sounds of her boilers.

“Her fires are still burning,” murmured Sandokan. “She’s waiting for us.”

“Let’s hope her crew doesn’t spot us,” said Sabau.

“See any launches?”

“None, Captain.”

“We’ll stay close to shore and try to blend against the trees and vines for as long as we can, then make a run for it.”

The sea was calm with barely a breath of wind to ruffle the waters. Sandokan ordered a sail hoisted up the mainmast then pointed the ship southward, following the outline of the shore. Hidden against the dark jungle, there was little chance the pirate ship would be detected.

Wheel in hand, Sandokan kept his eyes riveted on his adversary, knowing she could awaken at any moment and unleash a barrage of iron and lead. Despite his efforts to outsmart his enemy, at the bottom of his soul that proud man terribly regretted fleeing without attempting to avenge his losses.

Though part of him desired to be on Mompracem, part of him also longed for another battle. The formidable Tiger of Malaysia, the invincible leader of the pirates of Mompracem, felt almost ashamed to leave in this way, quietly, stealthily, like a thief in the night. The very idea made his blood boil. Oh, how he would have greeted a cannon blast with joy, even if it heralded a new and more disastrous defeat.

The prahu had already gone five or six hundred metres from the bay and was preparing to flee, when a strange light began to seep into her wake. It appeared suddenly, as if a myriad of tiny flames were rising from the murky depths of the sea.

“We’re about to be discovered,” said Sabau.

“Just as well,” Sandokan replied with a fierce smile. “This retreat was beneath us.”

“You’re right, Captain,” replied the Malay. “Better to die fighting than to flee like jackals.”

The sea grew brighter, the glimmering dots multiplying about the prahu, her wake now sparkling with light. The ship would not pass undetected by those standing watch aboard the cruiser. Cannons could begin firing at any moment.

Even the pirates lying on deck had noticed that phosphorescence; however, no one had moved or uttered a word. Like their captain, they regretted fleeing without an attempt at revenge. A volley of grapeshot would have been greeted with a cry of joy. Two or three minutes had passed, when Sandokan, who had been keeping his eyes on the cruiser, saw her position lights brighten.

“Have they spotted us?” he wondered.

“I think so, Captain,” replied Sabau. “Look!”

“Yes, there are more sparks coming out of the smokestack. They’re stoking the engines.”

Sandokan jumped to his feet and drew his scimitar. A cry had emanated from the warship: “Battle stations!”

The pirates rose like one man as the gunners pointed the cannons and the two firelocks, determined to fight to the last.

A brief silence reigned aboard the cruiser then they heard the same voice thunder out again:

“Battle stations! Battle stations! The pirates are escaping!”

A few seconds later, a drum roll sounded from the cruiser’s bridge, calling the men to action.

Gathered along the bulwarks and crowded behind the barricades, the pirates held their breath, anxious for battle, clutching their weapons, fingering the triggers of their carbines.

The drum continued to sound. They could hear the chain creak as the anchor was hoisted aboard. The cruiser was preparing to attack.

“Stand ready, Sabau!” commanded the Tiger of Malaysia. “Eight men to the firelocks.”

Seconds after he had given that command, a cannon thundered from the cruiser’s bow, just above the forecandle, lighting up the foremast and the bowsprit. Whistling through the air, the cannonball severed the tip of the mainmast and landed in the sea with a large splash. Cries of rage echoed throughout the pirate ship. There was no escaping a fight now, much to the delight of those bold adventurers.

Dark red smoke spewed out of the warship’s smokestack. The buzz of the crew preparing for battle, the shouted commands of the officers and of men running to their stations, the dull grumbling of the boilers and the sounds of the wheels churning the waters carried across the surface of the sea. The two lanterns had changed position. The vessel was advancing rapidly towards the small pirate ship, determined to thwart her escape.

“Prepare to die a glorious death!” yelled Sandokan, who harboured no illusions as to the outcome of the impending battle.

The crew responded with a loud cry, “Long live the Tiger of Malaysia!”

Sandokan gave the wheel a vigorous turn as his men quickly trimmed the sails. He was leading the prahu towards the ship, planning to storm the enemy deck. Both sides began to fire. Cannonballs and volleys of grapeshot whizzed through the air.

“Prepare to board!” Sandokan thundered. “The odds are against us, but we’re the Tigers of Mompracem.”

Her sharp ram pointed forward, the cruiser advanced rapidly, shattering the silence with furious rounds of cannon fire. Flashes of light tore through the darkness. The prahu, a toy in comparison with the giant before her, would have split in two and sunk in a direct collision. Nevertheless, she attacked daringly, firing without pause.

However, as Sandokan had said, the odds were against them, excessively so. Their small wooden prahu could do little against that mighty, well-armed, iron ship. Despite the desperate bravery of the Tigers of Mompracem, it was not difficult to predict the outcome of the battle.

Nevertheless, the pirates refused to yield and continued to fire shots in rapid succession, exterminating the gunners on the deck and cutting down the sailors on the rigging. They showered the quarterdeck, fore-castle and mast tops with bullets. Two minutes later, however, their prahu, hit repeatedly by enemy fire, could barely remain afloat. The masts had fallen, the bulwarks had caved in and the barricades could no longer shelter them from that barrage of shells. Water gushed in from all sides, flooding the hold. Still, no one spoke of surrendering. They were all prepared to die, so long as it was on the deck of the enemy ship.

The volleys continued to intensify. Sabau's weapon had been blown apart, and half the crew lay dead on the deck, massacred by grapeshot. The final bell was about to toll for the Tigers of Mompracem. Defeat was imminent. They could no longer hold their ground against that giant and her incessant rain of bullets. Their sole option was to attempt a boarding, pure madness, for victory would not smile upon them once astride their enemy's decks.

Only twelve men remained, but they were twelve Tigers, led by a captain whose bravery was legendary.

"Stand ready, my brave ones!" he shouted.

Seething with rage, eyes blazing, weapons drawn and ready, the twelve pirates regrouped, shielding themselves with the bodies of their slain shipmates.

The vessel was running at full steam towards the prahu, planning to ram her, but when the cruiser was just metres away, Sandokan gave the wheel a violent turn, avoided the crash and pointed the prahu towards the cruiser's port wheel.

The collision was violent.

The pirate ship listed to starboard and filled with water, spilling her dead into the sea.

"Launch the grapples!" Sandokan bellowed.

Two grappling hooks tore through the air and twisted about the cruiser's ratlines. Thirsting for vengeance and almost mad with rage, the thirteen pirates rushed to attack. Clinging to the portals along the battery and to any cables or rope they could find, they scrambled up the cylin-

der box onto the parapet, then leaped onto the cruiser's deck, before the British, surprised at such audacity, could move to block them.

With the Tiger of Malaysia leading the way, his men rushed against the gunners, slaughtering them where they stood, routing the marksmen that had run to block their path; then with scimitars flailing, they advanced towards the stern.

The men of the battery had gathered there at their officers' command. Sixty or seventy determined foes stood before them, bayonets drawn, but the pirates, indifferent to their number, rushed forward, howling for blood.

Retreating and advancing, swinging desperately, lopping off arms and smashing in heads, for a few precious minutes the pirates held their ground. But their bold attack could not endure. Dwarfed by that large crew, those brave men were quickly surrounded; many soon fell, unable to fend off the ring of bayonets tightening about them.

With one final effort Sandokan and four others, covered in wounds, their scimitars and krises bathed in blood, opened a path and attempted to retreat to the bow, planning to use the ship's cannons to stop that avalanche of men.

Halfway along the deck Sandokan fell, struck in the chest by a bullet, but he immediately sprang to his feet howling, "Kill! Kill!"

The British advanced, firing incessantly, bayonets levelled, determined to end the battle once and for all. The four pirates rushed to shield their captain, but a volley of rifle fire quickly put an end to that last act of resistance. The Tiger of Malaysia, however, proved to be more fortunate.

Though torrents of blood spewed from his wound, with one last effort the formidable pirate reached the port bulwark, knocked over a topman and dove into the sea, disappearing beneath the ink black waves.