

SANDOKAN

THE TIGERS OF MOMPRACEM

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



Sandokan: The Tigers of Mompracem

By Emilio Salgari

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Translated from the Italian by Nico Lorenzutti

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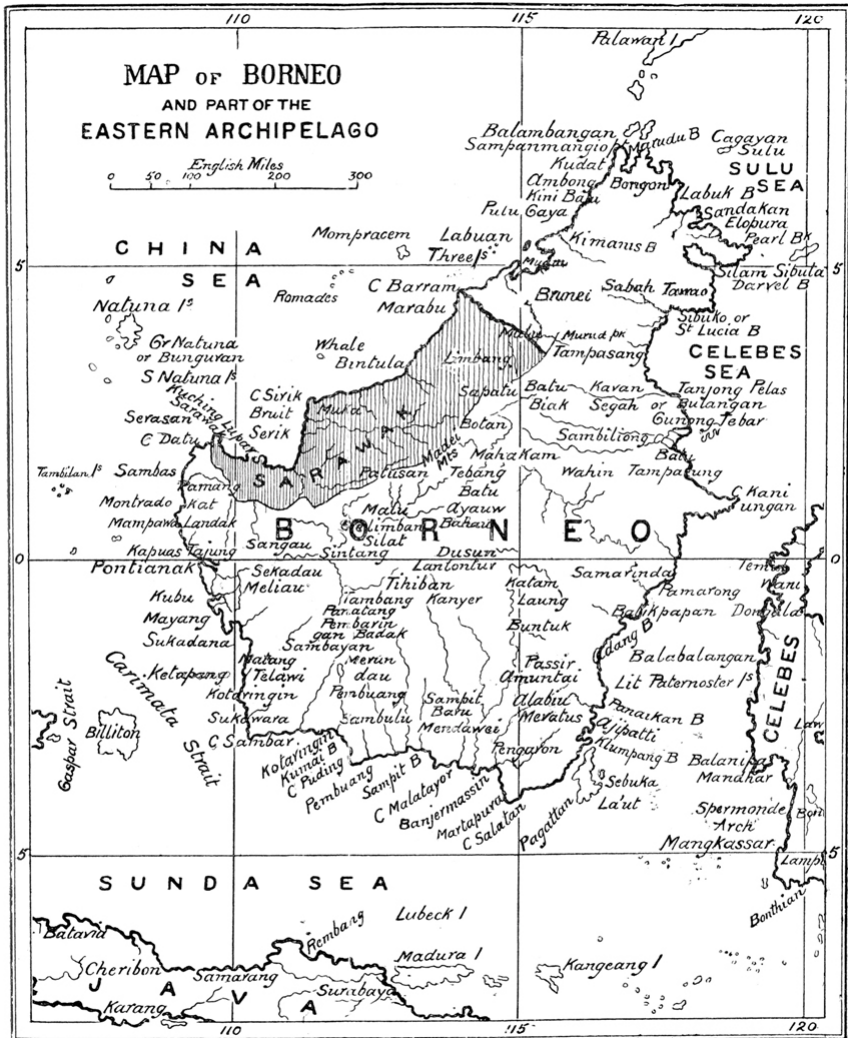
Front cover: *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, Alberto Della Vale, 1906

Back cover: A pair of Malay crises

Map: *The Expedition to Borneo for the Suppression of Piracy: With Extracts from the Journal of James Brooke Esq., of Sarawak*, Admiral of the Fleet Henry Keppel, GCB, OM, 1846

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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 and home to the most feared pirates in the South China Sea. Whipped by the wind, the raging seas roared relentlessly among the crashes of thunder, while above, clouds swirled wildly across the sky unleashing torrents of rain upon the island's dark forests.

A cluster of ships rocked and tugged at anchor in the bay, sheltered somewhat by a reef. Not a soul stirred upon their decks nor among the longhouses and palisades lining the shore. Darkness blanketed the forest and tempestuous waters. If anyone sailing from the east had chanced to look carefully, however, they would have spotted two flickering dots, a pair of brightly lit windows illuminated atop a cliff that jutted over the sea.

There, beyond a labyrinth of battered trenches, embankments, and ramparts, past terrain strewn with broken blades and posts adorned with 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 a pole on the roof.

A large room within that great dwelling was alight; its walls hung with red silk tapestries, long worn and tattered, the floor disappearing beneath layers of Persian carpets blazing with gold despite tear and age.

An ebony table, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and trimmed with silver, stood in the center of the room, crowded with bottles and glasses of the purest crystal. Enormous shelves occupied three corners, packed with the booty of past boarding raids. Vases of myriad size and shape proudly displayed their contents, each brimming over with rings, bracelets, earrings, lockets, medallions, sacred relics and exquisite pearls from the fisheries of Ceylon. Emeralds, rubies and diamonds sparkled under the glow of the gilded lamp hanging from the ceiling.

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An old Turkish divan occupied the fourth corner, and next to it, against the wall, stood an ebony harmonium. Carpets, clothes, paintings, lamps, empty bottles, glassware, Indian carbines, Spanish rifles, cutlasses, axes, scimitars, daggers, and pistols filled much of the space, set where chance had placed them.

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.

He had been sitting for several minutes, eyes fixed on the lamp, hands nervously clasping the hilt of his scimitar which protruded 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 whiskey and went out. He walked past the trenches defending the hut, stopped at the edge of the large cliff, and listened to the sea raging below.

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 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 leaned forward and listened, straining his ears, and then yes! He bolted out of the hut and ran 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 disappeared 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, the hint of an accent discernible in his voice. “Brr! What a night from hell, little brother!”

“Come!”

They walked quickly to the hut and closed the door behind them. The newcomer unslung the carbine from his shoulder and took off his cape.

Sandokan filled two glasses with whiskey and offered one to his friend.

“Drink, my good Yanez.”

“To your health, Sandokan.”

“To yours.”

They quickly drained their glasses and sat down at the table. The newcomer was European, a man in his early thirties, a little older than his friend. He was tall and well built with pale skin and fine aristocratic features. He had thin lips, a black moustache, sharp blue eyes, and was renowned for having a strong will and quick wit.

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

“No, but I haven’t come back empty handed. I’ve learned all you wanted to know and more.”

“You didn’t go to Labuan?”

“I did, but, as you know, it’s never wise for people like us to linger on an island defended by British cruisers.”

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

“They say she’s incredibly beautiful, so beautiful that she can bewitch even the most daring pirates.”

“Ah!” Sandokan exclaimed.

“Her hair is like gold, her eyes are bluer than the ocean, and her skin is as white as alabaster. Alamba himself told me that he 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 fiercest men! 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.”

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

“Yes...so?” asked Yanez.

The pirate remained silent for a moment, then, without warning, sprang to his feet, walked excitedly to the harmonium and ran his fingers over the keys. Yanez smiled, 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!”

Yanez had just begun to play an old Portuguese tune, when Sandokan rushed back to the table and brought his fist down with a crash. He was no longer the welcoming friend of moments ago: a frown lined his brow, his eyes flashed darkly, and his teeth were clenched in anger. Standing there now was the legendary captain of the pirates of Mompracem, a man who had bloodied the shores of Malaysia for the last ten years, 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 come and challenge the pirates in their lair! I’ll darken the waters with their blood. What do they say of me?”

“That it’s time to end the career of their most intrepid foe.”

“They hate me then?”

“They’d sacrifice their entire fleet just to see you hang.”

“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 bears the scars of 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, on the pretext that I’d become too powerful? Did they not murder my mother, brothers, sisters, and all those whom I loved? What evil had I done them? I’d never threat-

ened 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 upon the souls of my beloved ones 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 who fell captive into your hands - you delivered them to enemy ports, even though you ran the risk of being sunk by British cruisers. And then there were those poor castaways you found clinging to the remnants of their ship in the midst of a terrible storm - 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 talking of this? 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 for years, Yanez could not begin to read his thoughts.

"Sandokan," he said, after several minutes, "What troubles you?"

The Tiger stopped, fixed his eyes upon him, 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 stood up, lit a cigarette and began to walk towards a door hidden behind a tapestry.

"Good night, little brother."

At 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?"

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“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.

“Little brother,” 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 here, 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 sprung 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, drained another glass of whiskey and fixed his eyes upon his friend.

“You’re right, Yanez,” he said calmly, “but, nevertheless, tomorrow I’m setting sail for Labuan. A voice keeps telling me that I must see the young woman with the hair of gold. I cannot ignore it any longer; I must... 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 expedition. He was dressed for war: a jacket of embroidered red velvet - his favourite colour - blue silk trousers, and red leather long boots. Slung over his shoulder was an ornate Indian carbine, excellent for firing at long range; a scimitar with a solid gold hilt was tucked in his sash, 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 to descend 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 ships in our fleet are at your disposal. I took the liberty of fitting them with two additional swivel guns."

"And the men?"

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

"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 man 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 krises were drawn and 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 *chanua*² stepped towards him, 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.”

“Where are we going?”

Sandokan gave him a look that made the pirate shiver, even though he was the type of man who laughed in the face of enemy fire.

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

² loincloth

Ferocity and Generosity

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

“Yes, Captain!”

The Malay quickly turned and walked towards the ships, followed by his crew. These men were bold to the point of folly who, and at Sandokan’s command would not hesitate to sacrifice their very lives.

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

They had barely taken a step towards 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, Captain.”

“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 tiny vessel between the two prahus.

A loud cheer erupted from the shore.

“Long live the Tiger of Malaysia!”

“Take us out!” commanded the pirate, addressing the two crews.

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

“Your orders, Captain?” asked Patan.

“Set a course for the Romades,” Sandokan 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 prahus quickly cut through the water. Soon they were sailing at more than twelve knots, faster than most sail boats, but not at all uncommon for light Malay vessels equipped with narrow hulls and immense sails.

The two ships were not typical prahus, which are ordinarily small and without a bridge. Unrivalled 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, made of gamuti and rattan, was 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 oar holes and a bridge added to every ship and had one of the two rudders and the outrigger removed to make boarding enemy vessels easier.

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 swivel guns 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, their faces alight with anticipation, 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 for 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 resting on the hilt of his scimitar.

By ten that morning, Mompracem had disappeared from sight. The sea, however, remained deserted; not a reef, nor a billow of smoke or a speck in the distance 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 crises flashing in the sun. Then, a few minutes after midday, a voice shouted from atop the mainmast, "Ship to leeward!"

Sandokan stopped. He glanced at the bridge then turned 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 lone 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 bear no 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 ships, all familiar with the celebrated Englishman James Brooke, Rajah of Sarawak, merciless enemy of all pirates in those waters. 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 junk's mainmast, severed at its base, crashed to the deck, dragging down sails and rigging. Sandokan and his men watched as the crew ran frantically 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 who would rather flee than fight! Patan, fire on those cowards!"

The Malay sprayed the water with a cloud of bullets, 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 bullets, 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! Fire! 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 drew back and was about to spring board the vessel, like a tiger pouncing on its prey, when he felt himself held back by a powerful arm. He turned, howling in fury, but the man who had dared to restrain him had already leaped forward to block his step.

"Pagkon!" shouted Sandokan, raising his scimitar.

A rifle thundered from the junk and poor Pagkon fell to the deck, shot through the heart.

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

He charged 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?” asked Sandokan.

“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?”

“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. I regret having destroyed the junk you defended so bravely. 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.

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

The Tigers of Mompracem

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 dismasted 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 racing at ten or eleven knots per hour.

Once the bridge had been swabbed, the severed rigging retied, and all the rifles and swivel guns 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.

“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, for allowing me to die in battle.”

“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 Mom-

pracem, whose past raids had devastated the coast. The rest of the island was covered by thick jungle ridden 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 brook whose banks were 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 brook, 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.

"Did you 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, stepping before him.

"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."

The Tigers of Mompracem

“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 sprang to his feet, carbine in hand, his face transformed.

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