

CHAPTER I

THE PIRATES OF MOMPRACEM

On the night of the 20th of December 1849 a very violent hurricane was raging above Mompracem, a wild island of sinister fame and hideout to extraordinary pirates, situated in the Malaysian Sea, a few hundred miles from the eastern coasts of Borneo.

Black threatening clouds were galloping in the sky like wild horses, pushed by the overpowering wind. Every now and then they would let furious downpours fall on the dreary island jungles. The huge sea waves, lifted by the wind, crashed and shattered furiously on the coasts, as their loud throbs were mixed with the endless bursts of lightning.

No lights could be seen on the island, neither from the huts lined up on the bay, nor from their defensive walls, nor from the many ships anchored beyond the cliffs, nor from the woods, nor from the rough sea.

However, if those traveling from the east had looked up towards the Island, they would have noticed, at the top of a very high cliff overlooking the sea, two brightly lit windows.

Who was awake at this time and with this storm on the island of the blood-thirsty pirates?

Amongst a maze of collapsed trenches, fallen embankments, uprooted fences and gutted gabions full of shattered firearms and human bones, stood a huge and solid hut with a big red flag portraying the head of a tiger.

One of the rooms was lit, the walls were covered with heavy red fabrics, prestigious velvets and brocades, some creased, torn and stained and the floor disappeared under a Persian carpet, dazzling with gold but also ripped and soiled.

In the middle of the room there was an ebony table, inlaid with mother of pearl and adorned with silver friezes, laden with bottles and glasses made with the rarest of crystals. Big old battered shelves stood in the corners of that room, weighed down by gold bracelets, earrings, rings, medallions, precious holy relics, pearls from

the fisheries of Ceylon, emeralds, rubies and diamonds sparkling under the reflection of a ceiling lamp.

Chaos overwhelmed the place: a scratched ebony harmonium, a torn Turkish divan, rolled-up carpets, lavish clothes, paintings probably by well-known artists, empty bottles, Indian rifles decorated with arabesques, Spanish trombones, sabres, scimitars, axes, daggers and pistols.

In that messy and oddly furnished room, stood out a powerful and strangely handsome man. He sat majestically in a flimsy armchair, his features strong and manly.

His long black hair fell to his shoulders and a thick beard framed his slightly tanned face. His forehead was high, shadowed by two beautiful boldly arched eyebrows, his small mouth displayed teeth as sharp as those of a wild beast and as shiny as pearls. His intense black eyes would make anyone yield with just one look.

He'd been sitting for a few minutes, his gaze fixed on the lamp, his hands nervously holding his scimitar hanging from a wide red silk sash, wrapped around a blue velvet jacket embroidered in gold.

A sudden violent downpour shook the hut to its foundations, and pulled him sharply from his daze. He threw back his long loose hair, fixed his turban on his head, and got up gazing around with a menacing and gloomy look.

- It's midnight - he murmured. - Midnight and he still hasn't returned!

He slowly drank a glass full of an amber coloured liquid, then he opened the door and walked with determination between the trenches that defended the hut, until he reached the edge of the cliff. Below, the sea was roaring furiously.

He lingered there for a few minutes, with his arms across his chest, as still as the cliff on which he was standing, breathing in with satisfaction the storm's tremendous blows and searching the wild sea with his gaze; then he slowly walked back into his hut and paused in front of the harmonium.

- What a contrast! - he exclaimed. - Outside is the hurricane and inside is me! Which one is more dangerous?

He let his fingers slide along the keyboard, playing a brisk tune, which sounded odd and wild. Then he slowed down until the music faded amidst the thundering of the storm.

Suddenly he anxiously turned towards the door, which had been left ajar. He listened for a moment, leaning forward with his ears tense then he walked out rapidly, pushing himself to the edge of the cliff.

When lightning struck he saw a small ship, with its sails half lowered, entering the bay and blending with the anchored vessels. He brought a gold whistle to his lips and blew three sharp notes; a moment later a piercing whistle answered back.

- It's him! - he murmured excitedly. Finally!

Five minutes later a man, wrapped in a large cloak dripping with water, appeared in front of the hut.

- Yanez! - exclaimed the longhaired man with the turban, throwing his arms around his neck.

- Sandokan! - answered the new arrival, in a strong foreign accent. - What a hellish night, my brother.

- Come!

They rapidly crossed the trenches then entered the lit room, closing the door.

The foreigner got rid of his cloak and rifle from his shoulder, while Sandokan filled two glasses and, handing one to him, said in a friendly tone:

- Drink, my good Yanez.

- To your health, Sandokan.

- To yours.

They drained their glasses and sat at the table.

The new arrival was a man in his early thirties, a little older than his companion. He was of medium height, very robust, very pale skinned, with classic features, grey, cunning eyes, thin and sneering lips, a sign of a strong will. At first sight he looked obviously European, particularly from the south.

- Well, Yanez, - asked Sandokan, with a thread of excitement in his tone, - have you seen the girl with the golden hair?