The Pirate Wind
Tales of the Sea-Robbers of Malaya

by

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and 5 maps

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CHAPTER I

THE PIRATE WIND

The pirate fleets of Malaya—Attack on Dutch and Spanish shipping—The taking of the Maria Frederika—Pirates seize the American vessels Friendship and Eclipse off the coast of Sumatra—United States frigate Columbine exacts retribution—The terrible fate of Captain Ross of the Regina—Malay pirates and buccaneers contrasted—Sir Charles Hedges' definition of piracy—How piracy in the Eastern Seas began—European responsibility—The Sultans of Sulu and Brunei implicated—No efforts made by Great Britain to repress the power of the pirate chiefs.

A CENTURY ago, and for more than half a century before that, piracy was rife in the Malayan seas. From Manila to Sumatra, from Malacca to Celebes, no trading ships were safe from the sea-rovers, no coastal villages immune from their attacks.

In those days the Archipelago was split up into countless petty kingdoms, and each rajah was the commander-in-chief of a pirate fleet. These squadrons could shelter in a thousand lonely bays; a thousand rivers gave them hiding-places whence the swift war-boats could dash out to seize a peaceful merchantman: and, once sighted and marked down, scant chance had any vessel against those ruthless warriors who, arrayed in scarlet and coats of mail, came sweeping across the sea brandishing their two-handed swords, and yelling their war-cries as they leapt on deck in quest of slaves and plunder.

Native craft and Chinese junks fell an easy prey to these Vikings of the Eastern seas, but European ships,
and those of America, suffered too. In the Philippines, schooner after schooner was taken; brig after brig. Every year something like 500 Spanish subjects were sold into slavery, and between the years of 1778 and 1793, the Spanish Government spent a million and a half pesos in attempts to stamp out the pirate settlements, but in vain. The Dutch were forced to organise a system of cruising gunboats, but with little better success, for the pirates grew so bold that they did not hesitate to attack these vessels, and on one occasion a pirate squadron engaged a Dutch gunboat in the Straits of Sunda, and, having carried her, murdered every soul on board.

In 1806 a merchant ship, belonging to two Dutchmen named Phefferkorn and Wensing, was attacked in the Straits of Banca by a fleet of forty pirate prahus. Seeing no chance either of resistance or escape they allowed a number of the pirates to board the vessel and then blew her up.

In the following year the Dutch war cruiser de Vrede (Lieut. C. Beckman) was attacked in the roads of Indramayo by seven pirate boats, each of which carried 100 warriors. For a while the crew fought the ship, then broke, and, taking one of the boats, made for the shore. Lieutenant Beckman and his second-in-command, named Stokbroo, remained at their posts until the pirates boarded, then flung themselves into the sea. Beckman was drowned, but Stokbroo was captured in the water. The pirates stripped him, shaved his head, and later gave him as a present to the Rajah of Lampong, who in turn sold him to the Prince of Linga Island for thirty Spanish dollars. Here he remained in slavery until the Chinese owner of a brig trading from Java, taking compassion on him, bought him for $50 and landed him at the Dutch settlement of Samarang, refusing any recompense for his generous act.

On another occasion, thirty years later, when the Dutch schooner, Maria Frederika, commanded by Captain Andrew Gregory, was lying becalmed off the coast
of Lombok, two pirate vessels approached on the pre­
tence of obtaining a few supplies. The captain was
in his cabin sick, and one of the crew whom he had
recently punished encouraged the pirates to come aboard.
Immediately forty of them leapt on to the schooner’s
deck, drove the crew below, seized the captain and the
mate, and took the vessel to Tunku, their stronghold
on the north-east coast of Borneo. There they buried
the white men up to their waists in sand. Then an
elderly chief, Rajah Muda, who was famous for his long
beard, walked up to Captain Gregory sword in hand,
and with one blow cleft his body from the shoulder
to the side, while his companions fell upon the mate
and cut him to pieces.

In February, 1831, while an American vessel, the
Friendship, was lying off Kuala Batu, on the west coast
of Sumatra, taking in a cargo of pepper, a native boat
came off from the village ostensibly to deliver part of
the cargo. While it was being got aboard, the Malays,
at a given signal, suddenly set upon the officers and
crew, killed every soul on board and then ransacked the
ship, carrying off goods and money to the value of
$8,000. The captain, who had been ashore with four
of his men, returned to find his ship a shambles. He
sought the aid of other American vessels that were trad­
ing along the coast. These assembled at Kuala Batu and
demanded the punishment of the robbers and the resti­
tution of the property, but they could obtain no satis­
faction, the chiefs denying all knowledge of the affair.
A year later retribution visited Kuala Batu in the shape
of the U.S. frigate Potomac, which assaulted the settle­
ment, burnt the houses and killed some 300 of the
inhabitants. Little sympathy can be felt for them, for
there is no doubt that they were pirates one and all.

Seven years later this act of vengeance on the part
of the American Navy had been forgotten, for in August,
1838, on the same coast, the U.S. ship Eclipse (Captain
Wilkins) suffered a similar fate. While trading at a
village called Trabongan, twelve miles from the port of Muka, she was visited by a party of twenty-four Malays, who asked permission to come aboard. The captain was down with fever in his cabin, but the second mate, having no suspicion that the Malays were anything but peaceful traders, allowed them on deck, but asked them to give up their arms in accordance with the practice that was observed on that coast. This they did without demur. When the captain finally appeared on deck, however, the headman of the party complained of the second mate’s lack of confidence in him and his companions, and asked that their weapons might be given back as a mark of good faith. Now Captain Wilkins had done business with this man before and, trusting in his protestations of friendship, unwisely gave way and restored to each man his kris.

The second mate then began to weigh some pepper the party had brought on board, and a few minutes later heard Captain Wilkins, who was sitting near the binnacle, cry out, “I am stabbed”; at the same moment he himself was wounded in the loins, but saved himself by leaping overboard. Several of the crew followed him. Others ran up the rigging. An apprentice was cut down by the captain’s side. The pirates then began to plunder the ship. Going below, they found the cook in irons, and he offered to show them the whereabouts of the opium and specie the ship was carrying if they would spare his life. The pirates broke his irons and with his assistance found four chests of opium and eighteen casks containing in all 18,000 Spanish dollars. With this booty they left the ship and took to their prahu, the cook accompanying them.

While the pirates had been busy looting below, the men who had jumped overboard had climbed up the rigging, and when the Malays had left the ship the second mate and four sailors took one of the boats and made for the French barque L’Aglæ, which was lying at a neighbouring port. The carpenter and two other sailors went ashore to join the chief mate and others of the crew
who were in the village buying pepper. The chief mate then took command of the ship, but his efforts to recover the booty that had been seized were unsuccessful and he was forced to leave the coast with empty hands.

News of the outrage reached Commodore Read, of the U.S. frigate Columbine, at Ceylon. He sailed immediately with his squadron for Sumatra and learnt that the leader of the pirates was at Kuala Batu, living under the protection of the local rajah. Arriving at Kuala Batu, the Commodore demanded the surrender of the man, together with the property in his possession. He was met with evasion, and retaliated by bombarding the town. Then he sailed for Muka, where he had learned that five of the pirates were living. Being equally unsuccessful in obtaining redress from the Rajah of Muka, he landed a party of thirty officers and 300 men from his squadron and within the hour Muka was blazing heaven-high and its inhabitants in flight. Thus for the second time in seven years the pirates of Sumatra were taught that American shipping could not be molested with impunity.

In those years, however, the shipping of every nation trading in the Eastern seas suffered at the pirates' hands, and that of Great Britain not least. One instance will suffice here, the peculiarly horrible case of the barque Regina, owned and commanded by Captain James Ross. A rumour appears to have got abroad that she was carrying a large quantity of silver dollars, with the result that a pirate fleet lay in wait for her. As soon as she was sighted the pirates gave chase, overhauled her, and carried her by weight of numbers. The captain was taken prisoner and the pirates began to plunder the ship, but without finding the money they believed to be on board. Their chief then promised Captain Ross his life if he would reveal the hiding-place of his treasure. In vain did the unhappy man protest that the ship held nothing but what the pirates had already found: and this was the truth, for he had invested his money in
a cargo of rattans, rubber and other jungle produce. The pirates refused to believe him, however, and to make him speak they lashed his son to one of the ship's anchors and, when he still protested that he had no treasure, flung the anchor into the sea, drowning the boy before his father's eyes. This having no effect, they began to torture Captain Ross himself, cutting off his fingers joint by joint, and then inflicted other mutilations upon him. He was finally left a bleeding but breathing mass upon his quarter-deck, and the pirates, after killing the other officers and taking the native crew for slaves, set fire to the barque and sailed away.

These are some isolated examples of the lengths to which the pirates of the Malayan seas would go. Compared with them the buccaneers of the Spanish Main were gentle and amiable creatures. Moreover, the Malay pirate led a far less hazardous existence than the buccaneer. At any moment the buccaneer might be hunted by ships of war, while the Malays could rove their seas unchecked. It is true that spasmodic reprisals were taken against them, but such punishment had no lasting effect; the great cruising fleets of the Illanuns and Balanini seldom suffered, and hundreds of ships were taken with impunity. Unlike the buccaneers, these pirates knew no anxieties as to supplies or markets, for they had but to land on the coast, or penetrate a short distance up a river, to find a village they could rob and men and women whom they could carry off as slaves, while for their captives and plunder they found a ready market in the towns of the petty Malay kingdoms, whose rulers neither dared nor cared to thwart them; then at the end of the cruise they could repair to their strongholds, secure from attack, and there they would divide the spoils of the season, pass their days in cock-fighting and their nights in opium-smoking—and plan fresh raids.

So that while the buccaneer was an outlaw, with
the hand of every nation against him, the Malay pirate chief was a prince who might range where he listed, taking what he would. Rulers would placate him and even come to do his bidding, and the seas over which he roved became a sort of Tom Tiddler's ground which traders crossed at their peril and, so far from picking up other men's gold and silver, frequently lost their own.

Although the sea-robbers of Malaya had different methods from those of the Spanish Main, they were none the less pirates, both in the popular and in the strictly legal sense of the term. Sir Charles Hedges, Judge of the High Court of Admiralty, thus defined piracy at Common Law in his charge to the Grand Jury on October 13, 1696:

"Now piracy is only a sea term for robbery, piracy being a robbery committed within the jurisdiction of the Admiralty. If any man be assaulted within that jurisdiction, and his ship or goods violently taken away without legal authority, this is robbery and piracy." Later in the same charge the jurisdiction was declared to extend . . . "to the most remote parts of the world; so that if any person whatsoever, native or foreigner, Christian of Infidel, Turk or Pagan, with whose country we have no war . . . shall be robbed or spoiled in the Narrow Seas, the Mediterranean, Atlantic, Southern or any other seas . . . either on this or the other side of the line, it is piracy within the limits of your enquiry and the cognizance of this court." 1

While it is clear, therefore, that these Malays were pirates, and as such a menace to European trade, it is but fair to say that it was largely European intercourse with the East that made them so. It is true that the old Malay romances contain references to piratical cruises, yet there seems no doubt that piracy was not

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1 At the Trial of Joseph Dawson and others for Felony and Piracy. *State Trials*, p. 454.