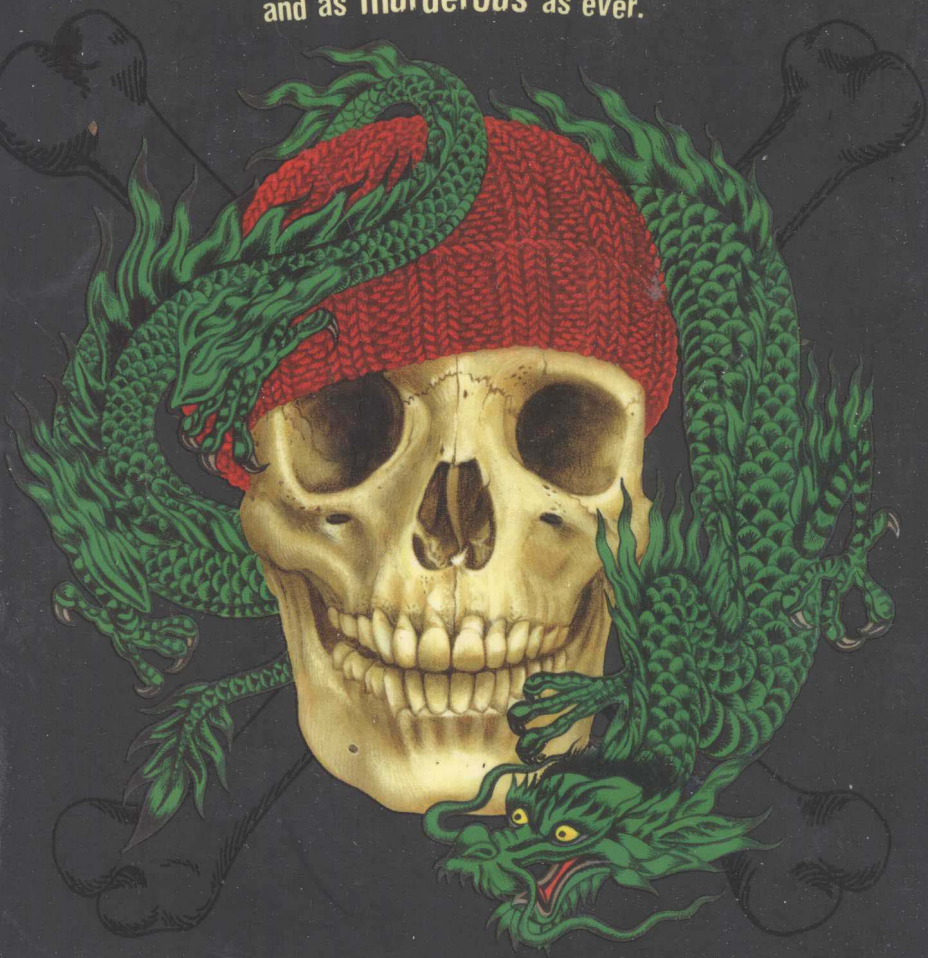


Beware! Pirates are alive and well
and as **murderous** as ever.



PIRATES

GEOFFREY MALONE

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江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



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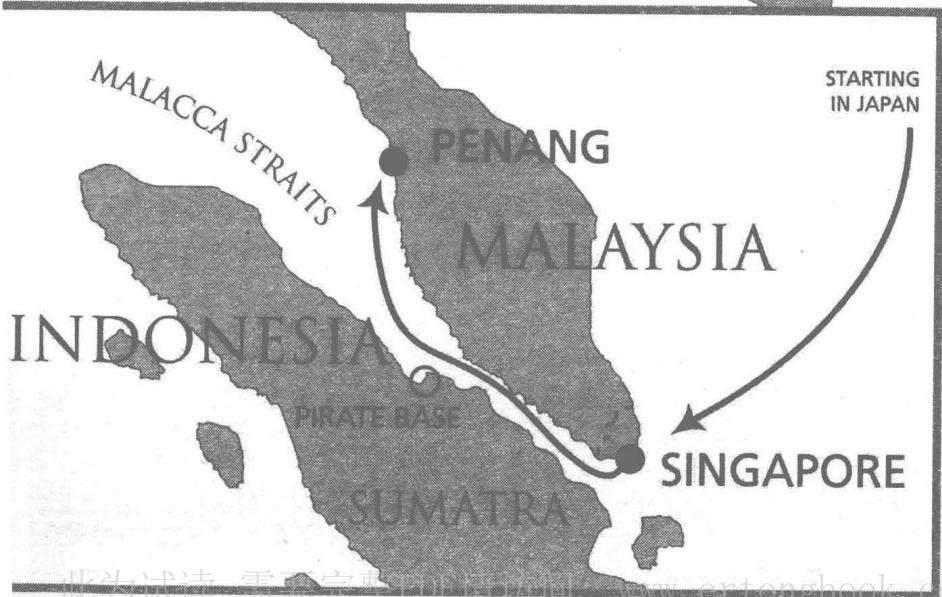
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*Beverley Birch, whose editorial wisdom and
enthusiasm have helped me through many books.
In gratitude and friendship.*





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AUSTRALIA

FOLLOW TOM'S JOURNEY
AS YOU READ THE STORY...

Chapter 1

The pirate boat rolled easily in the swell pushing up from the South China Sea. It was past midnight. Overhead, the moon played hide and seek amongst the thunderclouds that towered ten thousand metres into the Malaysian night. To the south, towards Singapore, lightning flickered erratically, like a failing neon sign.

The wind was fitful. It blew in hot, uneven gusts over the mountains of Sumatra then down across the Malacca Straits. Small, steep-sided waves raced towards the mangrove swamps on the far side and broke with a ragged crash, amongst the millions of twisted roots.

The moon appeared and poured through a gap in the clouds, turning the sea into a sheet of silver foil. Lin Pao was the first to see the yacht. He caught the sudden flicker of movement as her sails shivered then filled again, as the squall raced past. The next moment, the

boat disappeared into the glare. Lin Pao smiled in triumph. No one else had spotted it.

He had heard the rumour from a friendly fisherman that a large, ocean-going yacht was on her way down through the Straits. And now he had found her. Despite his own boat's broken radar, he had known where to find his prey. His hunting instincts were as good as ever.

His low cry brought the rest of the crew to their feet. There were eight of them. All barefoot. Shoes were liable to slip even on modern steel decks. They wore ragged shorts and vests and each man had a blue cotton band knotted around his forehead. It was the colour Lin Pao had chosen to distinguish his crew from Duang's people, back at base.

He swung the wheel over and brought the bows round until they pointed to where the yacht had been. Carefully, he pushed open the throttle. The hull began to vibrate and the sound of the engine grew to a powerful rumble. But not yet loud enough to be heard on board the other boat.

The crew shaded their eyes against the moonlight. They stared ahead, past the heavy machine gun mounted in the bows, straining for any sign of the yacht. Silently, they nudged one another to show their

pleasure. They were proud to be in Lin Pao's crew. They were the best. Lin Pao was the best skipper in the Family. Their boat was the best. Hadn't Lin Pao himself escaped in it when he had deserted from the Chinese People's Navy? They had named her *Ular Ular*, after the yellow-banded sea snakes that infested these waters. She was the fastest craft in the Straits.

One of the pirates cried out and held up an arm. He gestured urgently to one side. Lin Pao spun the wheel still further. As he did so, the moon went in and they stood balancing on tiptoe, waiting for their night vision to return. The crewmen clicked their teeth in frustration and peered into the night. Thunder boomed over the mountains in a slow, majestic roll. Then at last, someone yelled. Moments later, Lin Pao saw the yacht again.

She was about three miles ahead; a beautiful winged creature under full sail with a streak of white water at her bow. Lin Pao gave a grunt of pleasure. He would not lose her this time. *Ular Ular's* engine note deepened and the water under her stern began to boil. The pirates felt the rush of wind on their faces and grinned at one another.

As they closed the gap, the crew studied the yacht with professional interest. She was keeping well over to

the Malaysian side of the Straits, right at the edge of the shipping lane. Not far away, in the middle of the channel, a fully laden supertanker ploughed its way south, leaving a ten-metre-deep furrow in its wake. Lin Pao kept half an eye on the tanker's navigation lights, watching for any change of course. A hole in the sea that size spelt certain disaster for any yacht that fell into it. And that included the *Ular Ular*. Both boats would be swamped in minutes, reduced to waterlogged hulks, waiting to be run down by the next ship that came along. And out here, the supertankers followed each other, like a herd of elephants.

The yacht was now much closer and clearly visible. The moonlight glinted on stainless steel winches and carbon fibre masts, as she soared gracefully over the swell. She was an ocean-going boat, a good twenty metres in length. She had a main cabin forward and a smaller one behind a roomy open cockpit. She looked beautiful and expensive. Lin Pao's crew murmured in anticipation.

'She's making six knots,' Lin Pao told them. He looked over to the Sumatran side, gauging the strength of the wind. Sheet lightning glowed pink and green deep inside the clouds massed above the mountains. There was a storm coming. He could smell it on the

wind. All the more reason to close quickly.

‘She’ll stay steady on this tack,’ he called. ‘We’ll be up with her in five minutes. You know what to do!’

The crew licked their lips and fingered the knives at their belts.

Lin Pao turned and looked back over his shoulder. For some moments, he stared intently, checking to make sure they were not being followed. Some months ago, the Malaysian authorities had announced a crackdown on pirates. In the weeks that followed, they had flooded the Straits with warships. Whenever Lin Pao thought he had spotted one on the radar, he had taken evasive action and hidden behind one of the hundreds of small islands that dotted the Straits.

Satisfied there was nothing behind him now, he concentrated on the job in hand. It was time to attack. He eased the throttle and the bows slowly sank.

‘We’ll come in starboard side!’ he called in a low voice. ‘So get ready. All of you! And No Noise!’

Some pirate captains liked to circle their victims, firing warning shots from rifles or machine guns until they surrendered. Duang, his great rival, was one of these. The thought of Duang made Lin Pao instinctively spit over the side. ‘Cowboy,’ he muttered, as he brought the *Ular Ular* to within a hundred

metres of the yacht's stern. For Lin Pao, the essential element of any attack was surprise. No matter how big the other vessel was. And that meant getting as many men as possible on board the victim before anyone there realized what was happening.

Fifty metres behind the yacht, Lin Pao cut the engines. The *Ular Ular's* momentum would bring them level within the next minute. Now, the only sound to be heard was the slap of sea on the hull and the creak of rigging from the yacht in front. Seconds later, he could see the glow of instruments from the yacht's cockpit. He took a deep breath and checked his crew. They stood waiting, their bodies tensed for action. The man at either end of the boat began to swing his steel grappling-hook.

There was music playing from somewhere inside the yacht. The thump of the bass grew louder. It drowned out all noise as the *Ular Ular* closed the gap like a cat gathering to pounce. As her bow drew level with the yacht's stern, Lin Pao raised a clenched fist.

There was a sudden flash of light. Lin Pao jerked his head away, momentarily blinded. Now voices and the sound of laughter filled the cockpit. Instinctively, he brought the wheel hard over and yanked open the throttle for a fierce burst of power.

‘Throw!’ he screamed.

The grappling-hooks snaked across. It was a simple throw and the men were experts. The hooks caught in the yacht’s deck gear and held fast. The pirates whipped the ropes around cleats in the deck and physically heaved the boats together.

There was a long, screeching crash. *Ular Ular’s* deck tilted hard over and the night was suddenly full of thrashing sails. There was a rush of bodies and the next moment screams and confused shouting. Lin Pao stepped over the yacht’s guardrail and threw himself to one side as the boom swung towards him. It smashed against the *Ular Ular’s* bridge and split wide open. Bending low, he hurried towards the cockpit.

He took the steps down into the main cabin at a jump. Inside, his men were already hard at work. He landed easily and immediately sensed the thickness of the carpet under his feet. A quick glance around took in the mahogany chart table and the array of radio and navigational equipment above it. The yacht was brand new.

He saw three Europeans huddled together at the far end of the salon. An older man was crouched on one knee, moaning loudly. He held his head in both hands. Blood was welling up between his fingers and

running down his arm. The cotton T-shirt he was wearing was already badly stained. Lin Pao thought he was about sixty.

A woman had her arms around his shoulders, holding him to her, comforting him. Lin Pao saw the sparkle from the square diamond ring she was wearing. It was hard to miss. She looked up at him, her eyes wide in terror, and saw Lin Pao looking her. She screamed and buried her face in the man's neck. Lin Pao knew she was the sort of woman who would have a lot more rings.

The other man was much younger. Tall, ashen-faced and wearing glasses. Their son, perhaps? Lin Pao hoped so. It would simplify matters. There were tumblers on the cabin table and a half-full bottle of good brandy.

'Get the woman out of it!' Lin Pao ordered.

Chou, the bosun, reached down and yanked the woman to her feet. She screamed and began to flail at him with her fists. The bosun slapped her once across the face then pushed her away. The woman's screaming stopped and she began to sob instead. The younger man stood in front of her, trying to shield her. Everyone looked at Lin Pao.

For twenty seconds he said nothing, until the tension grew unbearable. Then he spoke in halting

English. 'I want your money, your watches, jewellery, drugs, ship's papers, passports. You have three minutes to find everything. Or this man dies.' He jabbed a finger at the younger man. 'You die!'

Then, to Chou the bosun, 'Get the safe open! The old man will have the key.'

Lin Pao turned and left them and went through into the rear salon. Two of his men were checking the boat's supplies, picking out the most attractive items.

'I want to be out of here in five minutes,' he told them.

He went up into the cockpit and looked around. The sea was splashing up between the two boats leaving wet patches on the yacht's wooden deck. He called to the lookout on board the *Ular Ular*.

'Nothing happening,' the man told him.

'Well, keep a damn good lookout just the same!' growled Lin Pao.

Back in the main cabin, the older white man was standing by an empty safe. His hands and arms were shaking uncontrollably. On the chart table, there was a pile of valuables. Lin Pao turned them over then began stuffing the bundles of bank-notes and traveller's cheques into the pockets of his old navy jacket. He picked up a small velvet pouch and weighed it in the

palm of his hand. He pulled open the draw strings and looked inside. He couldn't help smiling. He was right. The woman was a walking jewellery store.

Not a bad haul, he thought. Twenty thousand American dollars for a start. And all that jewellery on top. But there was more. The Europeans were each carrying two passports. One British and the other Australian. Lin Pao knew that genuine passports were worth their weight in gold to the shadowy Dragon Family bosses, over on the Malaysian mainland. The Family had many interests. Piracy was only one of them. He had never met any of the big bosses from the mainland. There was no reason why he should have. He was only a humble pirate captain. But this haul would do him no harm back at his own base. The Dragon Lady for one, would surely be pleased. And it was about time she started treating him with proper respect. He was by far her best captain. Much better than that idiot Duang.

Lin Pao reached over the table, took the brandy bottle and poured out two generous tots. He gave one to Chou. Then, mockingly, he raised his glass towards the Europeans. He downed his drink in one gulp and turned to go. The woman's ring glinted as she clutched her husband's shoulder.

Lin Pao stared at her in disbelief, his face darkening in rage.

‘The ring! She’s still wearing her ring!’ He kicked the nearest pirate. ‘Get it off her, you fool!’

Chou shouldered the man aside and grabbed the woman’s hand. He began to twist the ring off. But the woman was terrified and her finger had swollen.

‘Try soap or cooking oil!’ Lin Pao ordered. ‘And if that doesn’t work, use your knife!’

He pushed his way towards the radio transmitter bolted to a bulkhead. He drew out a pistol, put the muzzle against the control panel and fired. In the confines of the cabin, the noise was shocking.

By the time the crew of the yacht realized the pirates had gone, *Ular Ular* was a mile away and moving fast. For a long time afterwards, the woman sat unmoving, staring in disbelief at the blood-soaked bandage on her left hand.

Back on his own bridge, Lin Pao listened to the sound of spray splattering against the glass windscreen. The wind was getting up and the sea was growing lumpy. Chou stood beside him drinking tea from a stained mug.

Lin Pao looked at him. ‘What happened to the woman’s finger?’

Chou laughed. ‘I put it back in the brandy bottle!’