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our proceedings from Billy in time to start on the expedition which ended so disastrously for him," laughed Diaz. "I shouldn't worry, Lance."

It was obvious that nothing was to be gained by worrying, and the subject of Billy's absence was dismissed, only to be referred to afterwards in its bearings on the comfort of the captain and the officers. Their spritely attendant was missed twenty times a day, now that the slower-footed steward had the entire saloon service on his hands.

The old tramp steamer was no crack "liner," devouring four hundred miles of ocean a day. Against head winds, which prevailed throughout this voyage, a steady ten knots an hour was her best speed. She had been a month out of port when the look-out man sighted the great mountain range which forms a barrier between the coastline of Guyaca and the interior of that troubled land. It was dirty weather, with gusts of sultry wind from off shore churning up a choppy sea.

HAVING satisfied himself that the cry of "Land Ahead!" was correct, Lance went into the chart-room, where Diaz shortly joined him. "Your native country is in sight, Tony," he said. "I was just going to locate the bay where we are to rendezvous with your noble patriots. Ah, here it is, a point north of that lofty peak in the centre of the range. Shall we run in in broad daylight, or wait till after dark?"

"Time is the essence of the contract; my poor people need these guns badly," responded Diaz. "It is a lonely spot, chosen for that reason. The only danger would be if news of our coming had been cabled from England to the Government. Yes, my friend, I think the advantage of early delivery would counterbalance the risk."

"Right-o!" Lance assented. "We'll take that risk. Come up on the bridge and watch the skipper of this peaceful trader make his first essay in gun-running. Old Jacob Polgleaze's hair would stand on end if he could see us, eh?"

It certainly would have, had not that grim Falmothian ship-owner been laid under the sod in Penrhyn churchyard nearly a month ago. For after "The Lodestar" had plodded on for three more weary hours, and when the land was looming up distinct in every detail, there swept into view from the little sequestered bight for which they were steering a low, dark hull, topped by a smother of black smoke. Diaz, at Lance's side on the bridge, gasped a Spanish malediction. Lance flung an order to the quartermaster at the wheel, which caused the steamer's course to be altered.

"The Guyacan Navy, eh, my son?" he said.

Antonio Diaz was proud of his English colloquialisms. "That's about the size of it," he made answer. "We are betrayed."

"Well, we've got to jump to a pretty quick decision. Do you know that boat? She can overhaul us easily, I should say."

Lance had raised his binoculars and was speaking as he got his focus.

"It is not difficult to know her, considering that the Navy of Guyaca consists of a brace of gunboats only," replied Diaz. "They are both Tyne-built and fast, though. That is the Cortez—the fastest of the two—and she is after us without doubt. She'll catch us easily enough."

"They will shoot you or hang you, if they find you on board with a consignment of guns for the enemies of the Government?"

"That would be my fate to a certainty."

"Then neither the guns nor you must be found," said Lance with decision. "The guns must go overboard, and you must play possum. It's a dead frost, but we are no match for a war-vessel. She'd sink this old hooker from a mile away, without giving us a show."

(To be continued.)

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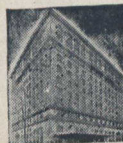
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