**On Board the Esperanza**

**translated by Séamus Ó Coileáin**

**from Esperanza**

**by Liam Mac Uistín**

Part II, Section 5

The first storm hit them that night. The ship began to dance wildly on the choppy sea. The wind howled like damned souls being tortured.

The wild sea couldn’t be seen from the ship’s steerage but those down there in the darkness imagined that the end of the world was near. The violent waves threw a few families from their beds. They crashed into passengers from the other side of the steerage. They were then thrown against the wooden partitions. They were battered and bruised and life itself was almost squeezed out of the younger children.

The passengers wailed in terror with each sudden roll of the ship. Sea water started running down from the deck above. Mattresses were soaked and the water rose to above their ankles. Pots and jugs, earthenware and jars were sliding about the steerage; bottles and dishes were smashed to pieces.

The vessel was shaking from top to bottom and those in the steerage were certain that it was about to break apart and that they would all be swallowed up by the depths of the ocean.

Captain Burton ordered his crew to close hatch down to the steerage. Those below became more terrified when they discovered that they were trapped in their gloomy dungeon. They had no hot food and their drinking water was contaminated by seawater. Now no one could go up to the two toilets above. They were like animals locked in a cage.

After a while, when the storm abated slightly, they began to assess the damage. Many of them were bruised and injured. Pots and pans and food were strewn everywhere, as well as clothes, shoes, and blankets. There was a woman with a broken elbow in one corner. In another corner was a baby with bruised ribs.

Some people tried to give help to those who were injured. Most of the others began to collect items and put them back where they belonged. They hurried, one after another, to the hatch to go up to the toilet. Despite their calls, the hatch didn’t open. It remained closed for two days until the storm had gone and the sea was calm again.

Those in the steerage were in dire straits without the use of the toilets. The young people and the children had their own solution. When nature called they did their business wherever it best suited them. After a while, the others had to do their business where they determined most suitable. For modesty’s sake, some of the girls snuck down to the lower cargo deck. The ship was carrying animal hides on this occasion. They gave off an awful, sour smell.

‘Will you come with me?’ whispered Áine de Paor to Máire. ‘I'm afraid of being alone in the darkness below. The place is full of rats.’

Máire took her hand and they slipped away down. They searched the centre of the cargo that had not been used already. They made as much noise as possible to scare away the rats.

‘We should have listened to the hawker who was selling chamber pots on the pier,’ said Máire. ‘We would not be in this predicament had we taken his advice.’

‘It would be hard to keep them clean.’

‘It wouldn’t, then. You’d only have to tie a bleached cord to the handle and dunk it in the sea.’

‘This filth is disgusting! I can’t stand it.’ Áine squeezed her nose with her fingers.

‘It's worse than a slaughterhouse.'

‘The place above will be as bad before long. Old and young people’s waste is piling up by the day. The crew should clean out all the waste.’

‘If they don’t open that hatch soon we'll all be smothered.’

‘They won’t open it until it suits themselves. They don’t care what happens to those in steerage.’

(Pages 28-30)