

THE FUNERAL

The funeral procession tiredly made its way up towards the summit of the Colisa. A few paid mourners cried without much conviction. The rest of the faces in the group looked more tired than sad. Only one young woman seemed to feel the loss of the dead man, mysteriously murdered. The July sun behaved gallantly, softening the force of its rays to settle gently on the girl. The blonde locks of Gorane Otamendi shone haughtily above her dour mourning clothes. She was the only person adamant to carry out the last will of her cousin to be buried in San Sebastián y San Roque Hermitage, atop his beloved hill. This was the will of a man who knew for certain the moment of his death.

The smell of oak trees, beeches and strawberry trees was gradually replaced by that of heather. They were leaving Balmaseda below, increasingly distant. All that was left to cover was the final slope, long and steep. The mules carrying the coffin stopped to catch their breath. Gorane looked at the annoyed, flushed faces of her companions. No-one had dared go right up to the top with horses for fear of the animals getting hurt. Most were

panting, mumbling and cursing to themselves, casting sideward glances at the determined face of the young woman. A solitary voice dared to come out and express what everyone was thinking:

-Would it not have been more reasonable to bury him in San Severino church, like we do with all our dead? This walk is going to finish us off – protested a round man with a large moustache and a pink face, as he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand to dry the drops of sweat.

-Since when has a Biscayan not respected the wishes of a dead man? If he wanted to rest up there, that is where he will rest – she answered cuttingly, settling at once any other hints of reproach.

The girl, flustered by the effort, addressed the muleteer and with a determined gesture of the head ordered him to continue the procession. She was determined that her cousin Pedro Urtiaga's strange testament would be respected in its entirety, especially with regard to his burial.

The deceased had written: *Despite the fact that I am dying having had confession and that I sincerely regret my innumerable sins, it may be that God will take his time in having mercy on me and may calmly consider whether to send me to heaven or hell. My soul may be errant for the time the Lord decides; but it is my wish that the body that has been a home to that soul for forty-nine years be laid to rest in San Sebastián y San Roque Hermitage. Thus, I have already arranged my eternal place of rest. After my death, I do*

not wish any slaughterer to dare touch even an inch of my skin, and I demand to be buried as I die, with my clothes and my sword, without shrouds or embalming. This is why, and in order to avoid more smells than those already afflicting San Severino church, it will be to everyone's benefit if I am laid to rest atop the Colisa, where I will be nearer the heavens and where it may be that Our Lord will remember me sooner.

It was customary in the Basque region for testators to establish not only the fate of their property after their death, but also the details of their funeral. Gorane Otamendi had been chosen by the deceased to carry out his last will and swore before all the saints that his wishes would be fulfilled, one by one. Among them, the most important – to help discover the causes behind his murder.

The lands of Las Encartaciones were enigmatic. Hills, valleys, leafy forests, *elizates* and scattered hamlets formed a remote place which still conserved ancient customs, having become lost in the passing of time.

Every imaginable tone of green seemed to have been called on to paint this lush region. In the southern tip, looking over the fields of Castille, the Colisa stood proud. It was no wonder that it would endure in memories as one of Biscay's five *montes bocineros* or horn hills. For centuries and until quite recently, bonfires were lit on their summit at the first morning light, and a typical horn was sounded every time the *Juntas del Señorío* or Lordship Meetings were called; whether the local ones in Avellaneda, or the general ones Guernica.

Crowning the mountain, and occupying its cusp almost entirely, an old hermitage guarded over the valley, watching life go by. Its stones were almost four hundred years hold. It had always been dedicated to Saint Sebastian; however, the plagues suffered by the people of Balsameda in the mid sixteenth century meant, in addition to hundreds of deaths, that Saint Roch joined the dedication of the small temple, where locals would take shelter in times of epidemics.

A woman of about forty, dressed in black, awaited the arrival of the procession sitting on the bench under the portico. Her dignified appearance and her clean clothes indicated her professionalism as a lay sister. Her face showed no signs of complaint at having to have climbed all the way to the top to do her duties. She was in charge of the cleaning and any other details necessary for the mass and the funeral. On top of a large table below the church portico, she had already laid out the offerings: a few bread loaves and an already skinned and gutted ram. There were plenty of wax candles too, both inside and outside the hermitage.

When the procession was a few metres away, the lay sister stood up. She waited for the lads to bring down the coffin from the carriage, and placed a candlestick on it, with a lit candle. She crossed herself, whispered a brief prayer and ordered the members of the funerary procession to follow her inside. The bells tolled gloomily, adding solemnity to the moment.

After the mass, the burial took place. The niche ordered by Urtiaga was located in a

crypt under the choir stairs. Two strong porters went down the steps, lowering the coffin carefully. The space was not very large and they had to kneel down to lay it on the ground. Then they came back up to the surface, and covered the gap with a marble slab. Gorane Otamendi observed these movements with resignation. Fulfilling the instructions given, a stonemason came closer with a mallet and a chisel. With utmost mastery, he carved the epitaph. Lastly, he carved the two words that perfectly captured Pedro Urtiaga's approach to life.

Gorane closed her eyes and sighed a sigh full of anguish but also satisfaction. The funeral was ending and had been carried out in accordance with her cousin's wishes. Now they only had to hope that Don Fernando de Zúñiga arrived as soon as possible.

Basque term referring to an early form of local government in the Basque country particularly common in Biscay but also present in the other provinces. It means, literally, "church door".