

# Andreas Vesalius the Anatomist

By Petrus Borel

## I. CHALYBARIUM

At that peaceful hour of night when a city comes to resemble a graveyard, a single crooked little sidestreet—one of Madrid's minor arteries—still throbbed with a violently feverish pulse. This restless street in the otherwise slumbering city was the *Callejuela casa del Campo*. At one end of it was found a prosperous residence inhabited by a foreigner: a Fleming. The stained-glass windows were lit up from within, casting their light obliquely across the dark facade of the house opposite, so that in the gloom it seemed to be sprinkled with fires and burning nets, and with tracery of gold.

The gates of this mansion were wide open, disclosing a spacious porch with its groined arch and pendant keystone, at the foot of a great stone stairway with balustrades elaborately carved like the ivory of a fan and all strewn with sweet-smelling flowers.

The walls were, to put it fancifully, in their carnival dress, all bedecked and tricked out with tapestries, velvets, and glittering candelabra.

A few halberdiers patrolled to and fro at the entrance.

Occasionally, when the yells of the crowd gathering outside subsided, the sweet and lively harmonies of music could be heard at the foot of the stairs, calling forth echoes in the resounding archway.

The whole palace was alive with celebrations, but outside a common rabble was howling and milling at the gates; these were the groundlings from the lowest gutter. Sometimes they sent up a frightful cheering, and sometimes snorts of mockery, which were taken up by one group after another in the darkness, and died away like the satanic laughter of thunderclouds.

'The doctor has chosen a fine wedding day—a Saturday, feast of the Sabbath. A sorcerer couldn't do better,' said a toothless old crone squatting in a gateway.

'Too true, my dear; and, by God, if all his dead victims came back here, they could make a ring around Madrid.'

'What a sight that would be,' replied the crone, 'if all the poor Castilians who've been picked to pieces by this torturer—God preserve them—turned up to get back their skins!'

'I've been told,' said a little bearded man squeezing up on tiptoes from out of the crowd, 'that he often dines on outlets that never came from the butcher's.'

'It's true, it's true!'

'No, no, it's a lie!' cried a tall young man stuck up against a trellis window, 'all lies! Go and ask Rivadeneyra the butcher.'

'Silence! You, pipe down!' cried still louder a man wrapped in a brown cape with his hat pulled down over his eyes. 'Don't you all recognize him? It's Enrique Zapata, the torturer's apprentice, sticking up for his master. I'll bet if you searched his doublet you'd find a hand or a leg.'

'Just think of it! That old cannibal getting his hands on a young bride!' said the crone. 'If I were King Philip, I'd stop the monster from—'

'Oh yes?' said the stranger in the brown cape, 'even when Philip the Second protects this

Flemish dog? Just yesterday, Torrijos, the baker from La Cebada, went missing; and no doubt he's ended up in the wedding cake. It's an outrage! We must put a stop to it!

'What's the king doing, protecting him?' the people complained. 'He should burn him alive.'

Then some monks joined in, from the monastery of Our Lady of Atocha, recently founded by Father Garcia de Loaysa, Inquisitor-General and archbishop of Seville, and Father Juan Hurtado de Mendoza, confessor to Emperor Charles V. They added mildly: 'Christians! This man is a heretic! a sorcerer! a Fleming! He deserves to die!' And the chorus was joined by all the monks of the royal monastery of San Geronimo.

'Death to him!' shouted the mob, pushing back the halberdiers and cursing in their faces.

'Death to him!' responded the gentleman in the cape.

'Death to him!' yelled the monks, brandishing their crucifixes and stirring up the rabble. 'Put him to death! Start up the fire!'

Suddenly the gathering storm broke. Murderous threats filled the air as the crowd hurled itself against the gates, led by a monk brandishing a torch. But the halberdiers, supported by Enrique Zapata and several more students, firmly stood their ground and forced this unruly and bellowing rabble into retreat. The response was a renewed uproar: they clattered away with bells, knives, and pans, raising a thunder that was agonizing, deafening, a whole symphony of murder.

## II. SALTATIO, TURBA, MORS

Within the mansion, the hearty merrymaking and bantering went on, and nobody bothered themselves at all about the din outside, it being the custom to greet the marriage of an old man and a young bride with some such revelry.

In the gallery where the guests were leaving their robes, a brown cape was hung up at the entrance. The bride was dancing with a dashing cavalier who had as yet put in only a fleeting appearance at the party. They seemed to be more occupied in whispering together than in dancing. The bridegroom was at the other end of the room, flirting with the little daughter of one of his relatives.

The great ballroom opened on to a balcony overlooking a courtyard. It was crowded with guests: ladies, knights, aged relatives, and duennas; and all of them, under the pretext of breathing in some fresh night air, were out there to unleash their spiteful mockery. There was a hubbub of conversation, a chorus of many voices, high-pitched, deep, hoarse, and trembling; a gallery of sweet faces and sour faces, creased by broad laughter or lit up by malicious smirks, and revealing sets of teeth like ivory keyboards or like crenellated turrets, or like serrated arches.

‘And who’s the good-looking cavalier our bride is simpering over?’

‘How wicked you are, *senorita!*’

‘Ha, ha! Just look at Don Vesalius over there, giving himself airs in his scarlet stockings and black doublet. Devil take me if his legs inside his boots don’t look just like pens in an inkwell! Look at him cavorting with that plump and rosy Amalia de Cárdenas. Doesn’t he look to you like Old Father Time?’

‘Or like Death dancing with Life.’

‘Holbein’s dance.’

‘Tell me, Olivares, what can he give her?’

‘A lesson in anatomy.’

‘A topic for conversation.’

‘Thanks for the bride!’

‘Now the saraband is finished, watch him kiss cousin Amalia’s hand.’

‘This is no bourgeois wedding, it’s a brilliant occasion.’

‘But where’s the bride?’

‘And where’s our dashing cavalier?’

‘Don Vesalius is fussing about looking for her. Sniff her out, you old fox!’

‘Go on, then, Olivares, ask him—he’s supposed to be a sorcerer— what Maria is doing just now.’

‘Careful, my friend; we mustn’t get our fingers burned.’

The dancing began once more. Vesalius asked Amalia for another dance, but she just pouted prettily and then laughed behind his back. The bride was no longer in the ballroom, nor was the brown cape to be found in the gallery. But in one gloomy corridor there was the sound of footsteps, and of these words:

‘Quickly, Maria, cover yourself with this cape. We must leave!’

‘Alderán, I can’t.’

‘Can I leave you to be the prey of Vesalius? No—you belong to me! While I’m away you betray me; I hear about it; I come in haste, this very morning, mingling in with the celebrations; I

take you aside all alone, and now that I ask you to leave with me, you refuse! Oh no, Maria, you're deluding yourself. Come, we still have time. Break off this shameful alliance, and we shall be happy: I will be yours entirely, yours alone and forever! Come, Maria!

'Alderán, my family has imposed this yoke on me, and I must submit. But you will still be my lover all the same, as I will always be yours! What does this man matter? What is he but another valet, a screen to hide our secret love? Leave me, leave me, and adieu!'

'Very well. So you refuse, Maria. Go and defile yourself with this man, then. You carry out your wishes, as I shall carry out my own. Begone!' Flung from his embrace, she hurried from the gallery back to the ballroom.

Alderán paused for a few moments, as if overwhelmed. He cursed, stamped his foot, then suddenly vanished into the night.

Meanwhile the crowd at the gates had swollen like floodwater in a storm. The tumult grew fiercer, and the frenzy more alarming. Renewing the boldness of its first attempt, the rabble edged closer and closer to the halberdiers, laughing in their faces. Again they snarled their curses and their threats of death; they threw stones at the windows, and they smeared the walls with ox blood and dung. Suddenly the crowd opened up to make way for a dishevelled woman who howled like a dog at the moon. It was La Torrija, the baker's wife, crying out for her husband and demanding vengeance.

The word went round on all sides: 'It's La Torrija, the baker's wife.' The mob observed a compassionate silence as La Torrija sobbed and howled. Then the man in the brown cape got up on the steps and shouted: 'Friends, justice must be done! Those who fail to follow me now are cowards. Vengeance! Death to Vesalius! Death to the sorcerer!'

The response was a volley of stones flung at the windows and at the halberdiers, who retreated as far as the stairway. The crowd spilled into the porch, threw itself against the fixed pikes and smashed them. It had clambered up the stairs and was breaking open the door of the ballroom when the sound of galloping was heard in the distance. 'Run for your lives—it's the Guard!' Seized with panic, the mob tumbled down the stairs, disappeared down corridors, or leaped out of the windows. A few brave souls stood their ground and waited alone.

'In the name of the King, disperse!'

'The King is there to put murderers, heretics, and sorcerers to death. Death to the Fleming!'

'In the King's name, disperse!'

Then the guardsmen rode into the porch. They were met by sticks of furniture raining down on them, whereupon they shot their muskets, bringing down the boldest of the rioters. With a cry of pain, the man in the brown cape clutched his side. The survivors took flight along with the wounded, leaving behind five corpses lying on the ground.

A gloomy silence quickly descended on the mansion and the street. The watchmen carried off the bodies of the fallen, while the guests slipped away nervously through a back door. The gates were bolted shut, the lamps were snuffed out, in deathly contrast to the evening's vitality. Only in one wing of Vesalius's mansion did two windows blaze on in the darkness.

### III. QUOD LEGI NON POTEST

Through the broken panels of the ballroom door, Maria had seen the man in the brown cape shot down by musket-fire, and had swooned at the sound of his piercing cry. She had been carried to her room and placed on a couch where she had been laid out unconscious for a long time. Kneeling down beside her, the tearful and trembling Vesalius was kissing her hands and her brow.

‘How do you feel, Maria, my love?’

‘Better—but is the trouble all over?’

‘Yes, that ugly rabble has been seen to. What can these people have against me? I live in peaceful seclusion, unassumingly passing my time with dull anatomical research for the good of humanity, the advancement of science, and the greater glory of God. These people are demanding my head, believing me to be a sorcerer. Everyone in this city who goes missing is supposed to have been abducted by me, Vesalius, for my experiments. The common people will always be gross and stupid—the ungrateful brutes! And such is the fate in store for those of us who devote our lives to them, who show the way forward, or who have something new to say. They crucified Jesus of Nazareth and laughed in Christopher Columbus’s face. The people will always be gross and stupid—ungrateful brutes!’

‘You must cast aside these dismal thoughts, Vesalius; although, to be honest, this latest bloodletting is not going to win you their love.’

‘Oh, what does the people’s love matter, after all, so long as I have yours? Oh you do love me, don’t you? You love me a little?’

‘How can you still ask me such questions?’

‘I know I’m old, Maria, and age is beset by doubts. I know I don’t hate a gallant manner, that I’m broken down by my long nights of work, and that I’ve become nearly as gaunt as one of the skeletons in my workshop; but my heart is young and eager. Don’t you see, there’s nothing stale in the passion I feel for you: the skin may be old, but the soul I bring you is new. I have met many women in my time, but I swear to you not one has sparked such a fire in me! What a fate—having to reach this decrepitude before knowing the violent force of love! Maria, you will get used to seeing the crude frame that imprisons my youthful soul: under the bark of the ancient oak tree, the sap is boiling!’

Maria threw an arm round his neck and lightly kissed his bald pate and white beard. Vesalius wept with joy.

Time for bed! A time of ecstasy, throbbing with shame and rapture, when souls unite, and desire is aroused and then drowned! Bedtime, with all its delights and its deceptions! Time of painful paradox, which is sometimes the hour of our death...

The bride gracefully threw off her wedding gown and her jewels, like a rose emerging from its leaves. She was a Castilian beauty such as one sees in one’s dreams! Awkwardly, Vesalius too doffed his festive garments and revealed his hideous figure—like a mummy unpeeling its wrappings!

The lamp was abruptly blown out, and the curtain-rings rattled on their rods. A deep calm prevailed, which was now and then loudly broken; but nobody heard Maria cry out...

Then, far into the night, there were caresses and kisses that went unanswered, then grumbling and reproach, as the learned professor of anatomy repeated in a shaking voice:

‘Oh, don’t you go thinking this is weakness, Maria! It’s the violence of my love that leaves me

shattered. Your beauty paralyses me with shame, as I seem to be touching something holy, so great is my love for you, Maria! No, you mustn't imagine that this is impotence. In the morning I'll show you, in twenty authors—in Mundinus, in Galienus, in my master Gonthierus Andernaci, the chief physician to Francis I of France—and you'll see that, on the contrary, it's potency and excessive love; I love you that much, Maria!

We can only assume that this excessive love was unrelenting, for only a few days had gone by before Maria moved into an isolated suite of rooms in another wing of the mansion, accompanied by the professor's devoted old housekeeper, now transformed into his wife's duenna. The old owl no longer saw his turtle-dove except at meal-times, when they treated each other with the chilly politeness that prevails between strangers.

Once again, Vesalius was wedded to his research. Immersed in his studies, he shuttled back and forth from the laboratory to the lecture-hall, from the lecture-hall to the laboratory.

Here is a lesson you should draw from this, all you young women ripe for marriage: if you have a strongly passionate nature, make sure, if you can help it, never to marry a university professor, nor a member of the literary academy, and especially not one of the demigods of the forty-strong Académie Française with its everlasting dictionary.

#### IV. NIDUS ADULTERATUS

After about four years, the lady Maria, who had not made her customary appearance at the table for several days, sent for her husband. Vesalius was at her side in an instant, and found her sprawled on her bed in a state of collapse, her features deadly pale with rings around her eyes, her voice a lifeless whisper. Drawing up a chair, Vesalius sat down and leaned over to hear her. Maria, feeling a warm breath on her face, opened her eyes, recognized Vesalius, and said with an agonized sigh:

‘Andreas, you are my lord and master. I feel weaker with every passing moment. Soon I shall be kneeling at the feet of God, the strictest of judges. And I am impure! I have sinned so much against you; but this sinner begs forgiveness. Do not be angry with me. You are a wise man, my husband and my master: let me bare my soul to you!’

‘Senora, you are not as ill as you seem to believe. It is your mind that is afflicted.’

‘No one knows an illness better than the patient herself. Something inside me says that my time is almost come. You are my husband and my good lord; listen, and forgive me, for in some things I am not to blame. We both made our vows at the altar, and we have both been unfaithful: I, because I was young and too full of life; and you, because your hair turned white from studying and your body broke down with work. Oh, misery!—to be reduced to cursing my youth! Oh, Vesalius, if only you knew what it is to be a young woman, if you knew what we go through, Vesalius, you would forgive me! Be calm, now, and listen: I tell you I am an adulteress, that I have betrayed you shamefully. The crimes I have committed, Andreas! I have brought my lovers under your roof, made them drunk with your wine, stuffed them with your food; and while you were asleep or buried in your studies I joined them in laughing at you. Our filthy vices took advantage of your good nature. You were the butt of all our mockery. How vile it was! This very bed, now to be my deathbed, still shudders with our lascivious abandon. God is summoning me, and I am dying! If you spurn me now...’

Her voice was drowned in sobbing. Then, after a moment of silence, she spoke more clearly:

‘I have already been punished, bitterly and grievously. An adulteress always makes herself repulsive, dragging her filth around with her. Since we were married, I have had three lovers, but I had each one only once. When I gave way to their cravings after prolonged entreaty, when I offered up my body to them, sharing this bed... Yes, a guilty wife is truly disgusting! In the morning, when I awoke, I was alone! And I never saw them again! Can anyone be punished more cruelly than that? Crime and punishment are bound up with one another, and each crime calls forth its own torment. Have pity on me, Andreas, and let me confess everything, that I may gain remission of my sins. Let me tell you, I loved the last one with a reckless, insane passion. Losing him is killing me; forsaken by him, I can live no longer! Now I have confessed all. In the name of Our Lady of Atocha, in the name of San Isidro Labrador, in the name of San Andreas, your patron saint, in the name of my father, forgive this weak woman who has so grievously trespassed against you. Let me be purified by your blessing. Oh, give me your pardon! I am dying...’

She seized his hand, covering it with kisses and with tears. Vesalius snatched it away, pushed back his chair, and said resolutely:

‘Get up, Maria, and follow me.’

‘I am sinking fast; I cannot.’

‘I told you to follow me.’

Struggling to get up, Maria wrapped herself in a gown and staggered along behind Vesalius, who went down the great stairway, crossed the courtyard, and opened a little lattice door which led into a small building lit by high stone-framed windows. The door closed behind them, and the bolts on the inside creaked into their fastenings.

## V. OPIFICINA

We are within Vesalius's workshop or laboratory: a large square room with a vaulted ceiling, paved and walled with stone. The furnishings consisted of a few dirty, greasy tables, some workbenches, a couple of wash-tubs, one cupboard, and a few storage chests. A number of cauldrons were laid out around the fireplace, the wide mantel of which descended straight from the vaulted ceiling. Hanging from the chimney-hook was a pan boiling up over the heat of the fire. The benches were so overladen with chopped-up corpses that you risked treading on scraps of flesh or amputated limbs. The professor himself would crush muscles and cartilage under his sandals. A skeleton was hung up on the door, which would creak open and shut like a chandler's shop sign agitated by a wintry gale. The ceiling and the walls were covered with ribs, backbones, skeletons, and carcasses; some of them were human, but most came from monkeys and pigs—the animals whose form most closely resembles human bonestructure. These had been of assistance in Vesalius's researches; and it should be said that he was the first to make anatomy a true science, the first who dared to dissect corpses (even those of orthodox Christians) and work on them publicly. Not until about 1315, well before this time, had the world been treated to the new spectacle of dissected cadavers—three of them, exhibited by Mundinus, a professor at Bologna. This daring outrage had never been repeated, the Church having formally prohibited the practice as sacrilegious. Frightened off by this latest papal edict from Boniface VII, Mundinus himself could hardly draw any benefit at all from his discoveries. Among the ancients, contact with a corpse, or even the bare sight of one was held to be so indelible a pollution that the most vigorous of solemn ablutions and other rites of expiation could scarcely expunge it. In the Middle Ages, to dissect a creature 'made in God's image' was considered a blasphemy worthy of the gallows.

## VI. ENODATIO

‘So now what do you want of me here in your laboratory, Vesalius?’ said Maria tearfully. ‘What do you want of me? I can’t stay in here: the foul stench of these bodies is choking me. Open the door and let me out—I can’t bear this!’

‘I don’t care about that. It’s your turn to listen to me. You had three lovers, am I right?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘And you made them drunk on my wine?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Well, the wine was contaminated. Your duenna mixed into it some opium—a narcotic—and you went into a long and deep sleep, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, my lord, and when I awoke I was alone.’

‘Alone, indeed?’

‘Yes, and I never saw them again.’

‘Never! Very good. Now come with me . . . !’

Taking her arm, he dragged her to the other end of the room, where he opened a chest, in which there hung a complete skeleton, its bones all properly connected and as white as ivory.

‘Do you recognize this man?’

‘What, these bones?’

‘Do you recognize this doublet and brown cape?’

‘Yes, my lord, it belongs to the cavalier Alderán!’

‘Look more closely, senora. Now do you recognize the dashing cavalier who wore this cape, and who danced with you so gallantly at our wedding?’

‘Alderán!’ Maria uttered a shriek fit to wake the dead.

‘As you can see, madame, this has at least been of great benefit to science’, he said, turning to her coldly, ‘and so, you see, science is greatly indebted to you.’

Then, with a sneer, he led her along to a kind of reliquary or glass showcase that displayed a miraculously preserved human skeleton: the arteries were filled with a red liquid, and the veins with a liquid of blue, so that this bony frame seemed to be wrapped in silken webs. It was not hard to recognize, since some tufts of beard and hair were still attached to it.

‘This one, madame, do you recall him? Just look at his fine beard and blond hair.’

‘Fernando!! You killed him?’

‘Until now, without having dissected any living bodies, we have had only a vague and incomplete notion of the circulation of the blood or of the action of the muscles; but thanks to you, senora, Vesalius has stripped away these veils and won eternal glory.’

Then, grabbing her by her hair, he dragged her over to a huge chest and heaved up its heavy lid, forcing her head down to look inside.

‘And now look at this! This was your last one, wasn’t he?’

The chest contained a number of jars in which pieces of flesh were immersed in alcohol.

‘Pedro, Pedro! And so you killed him too!’

‘Yes, him too!’

Then with a frightful deathly gasp, Maria slumped to the floor.

The next day, a funeral procession set off from the mansion. The gravediggers who lowered the coffin into the crypt of Santa Maria la Mayor remarked to each other that it was heavy but hollow-sounding, and that the sound it made when it dropped was not that of a body.

That night, through the lattice of the laboratory door, you could have caught sight of Andreas Vesalius at his work-bench, dissecting the body of a beautiful woman, whose blond hair trailed down to the floor.

## VII. AFFABULATIO

At the fabulously wealthy court of Madrid, overflowing with the treasures of Columbus and dominating the whole of Europe, Andreas Vesalius basked in his glory, his riches, and his position of high esteem. Balancing himself between Philip II and the Inquisition, he encouraged the study of anatomy as far as he possibly could, until he was plunged into a series of dreadful calamities by an official denunciation.

While he was conducting a public autopsy upon the body of a nobleman, the heart appeared to give a beat under the very blade of his scalpel. Nursing a bitter grudge against the scientist, the Inquisition accused him of murder and demanded the death penalty. Only with great difficulty could Philip manage to commute the sentence to a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Vesalius made his way to Palestine in the company of Malatesta, the leader of the Venetian army. After braving all the hazards of this perilous journey, he was shipwrecked on the return voyage by a storm off the coast of Zante, where he died of hunger on the 15 October 1564. The Venetian Republic, mourning the recent premature death of his disciple Gabrielle Fallopius, had just appointed him to the University of Padua.

If Boerhave and Albinus are to be credited, Andreas Vesalius perished a victim of the constant ridicule with which he mocked the ignorance, the fripperies, and the immorality of the Spanish monks and of the Inquisition—which was only too glad of the opportunity to rid itself of this troublesome scholar.

Andreas Vesalius's great work on anatomy, *De humani corporis fabrica*, was published in Basel in 1562, embellished by illustrations attributed to his friend Titian.