# The Pain Peddlers

# Robert Silverberg

Pain is Gain.

—Greek proverb

The phone bleeped. Northrop nudged the cut‑in switch and heard Maurillo say, “We got a gangrene, chief. They’re amputating tonight.”

Northrop’s pulse quickened at the thought of action. “What’s the tab?” he asked.

“Five thousand, all rights.”

“Anesthetic?”

“Natch,” Maurillo said. “I tried it the other way.”

“What did you offer?”

“Ten. It was no go.”

Northrop sighed. “I’ll have to handle it myself, I guess. Where’s the patient?”

“Clinton General. In the wards.”

Northrop raised a heavy eyebrow and glowered into the screen. “In the *wards?”* he bellowed. “And you couldn’t get them to agree?”

Maurillo seemed to shrink. “It was the relatives, chief. They were stubborn. The old man, he didn’t seem to give a damn, but the relatives—”

“Okay. You stay there. I’m coming over to close the deal,” Northrop snapped. He cut the phone out and pulled a couple of blank waiver forms out of his desk, just in case the relatives backed down. Gangrene was gangrene, but ten grand was ten grand. And business was business. The networks were yelling. He had to supply the goods or get out.

He thumbed the autosecretary. “I want my car ready in thirty seconds. South Street exit.”

“Yes, Mr. Northrop.”

“If anyone calls for me in the next half hour, record it. I’m going to Clinton General Hospital, but I don’t want to be called there.”

“Yes, Mr. Northrop.”

“If Rayfield calls from the network office, tell him I’m getting him a dandy. Tell him—oh, hell, tell him I’ll call him back in an hour. That’s all.”

“Yes, Mr. Northrop.”

Northrop scowled at the machine and left his office. The gravshaft took him down forty stories in almost literally no time flat. His car was waiting, as ordered, a long, sleek ’08 Frontenac with bubble top. Bulletproof, of course. Network producers were vulnerable to crack‑pot attacks.

He sat back, nestling into the plush upholstery. The car asked him where he was going, and he answered.

“Let’s have a pep pill,” he said.

A pill rolled out of the dispenser in front of him. He gulped it down. *Maurillo, you make me sick,* he thought. *Why can’t you close a deal without me? Just once?*He made a mental note. Maurillo had to go. The organization couldn’t tolerate inefficiency.

The hospital was an old one. It was housed in one of the vulgar green‑glass architectural monstrosities so popular sixty years before, a tasteless slab‑sided thing without character or grace. The main door irised and Northrop stepped through, and the familiar hospital smell hit his nostrils. Most people found it unpleasant, but not Northrop. It was the smell of dollars, for him.

The hospital was so old that it still had nurses and orderlies. Oh, plenty of mechanicals skittered up and down the corridors, but here and there a middle‑aged nurse, smugly clinging to her tenure, pushed a tray of mush along, or a doddering orderly propelled a broom. In his early days on video, Northrop had done a documentary on these people, these living fossils in the hospital corridors. He had won an award for the film, with its crosscuts from baggy‑faced nurses to gleaming mechanicals, its vivid presentation of the inhumanity of the new hospitals. It was a long time since Northrop had done a documentary of that sort. A different kind of show was the order of the day now, ever since the intensifiers had come in.

A mechanical took him to Ward Seven. Maurillo was waiting there, a short, bouncy little man who wasn’t bouncing much now, because he knew he had fumbled. Maurillo grinned up at Northrop, a hollow grin, and said, “You sure made it fast, chief!”

“How long would it take for the competition to cut in?” Northrop countered. “Where’s the patient?”

“Down by the end. You see where the curtain is? I had the curtain put up. To get in good with the heirs. The relatives, I mean.”

“Fill me in,” Northrop said. “Who’s in charge?”

“The oldest son. Harry. Watch out for him. Greedy.”

“Who isn’t?” Northrop sighed. They were at the curtain, now. Maurillo parted it. All through the long ward, patients were stirring. Potential subjects for taping, all of them, Northrop thought. The world was so full of different kinds of sickness—and one sickness fed on another.

He stepped through the curtain. There was a man in the bed, drawn and gaunt, his hollow face greenish, stubbly. A mechanical stood next to the bed, with an intravenous tube running across and under the covers. The patient looked at least ninety. Knocking off ten years for the effects of illness still made him pretty old, Northrop thought.

He confronted the relatives.

There were eight of them. Five women, ranging from middle age down to teens. Three men, the oldest about fifty, the other two in their forties. Sons and daughters and nieces and granddaughters, Northrop figured.

He said gravely, “I know what a terrible tragedy this must be for all of you. A man in the prime of his life—‑head of a happy family...” Northrop stared at the patient. “But I know he’ll pull through. I can see the strength in him.”

The oldest relative said, “I’m Harry Gardner. I’m his son. You’re from the network?”

“I’m the producer,” Northrop said. “I don’t ordinarily come in person, but my assistant told me what a great human situation there was here, what a brave person your father is...”

The man in the bed slept on. He looked bad.

Harry Gardner said, “We made an arrangement. Five thousand bucks. We wouldn’t do it, except for the hospital bills. They can really wreck you.”

“I understand perfectly,” Northrop said in his most unctuous tones. “That’s why we’re prepared to raise our offer. We’re well aware of the disastrous effects of hospitalization on a small family, even today, in these times of protection. And so we can offer—”

“No! There’s got to be anesthetic!” It was one of the daughters, a round, drab woman with colorless thin lips. “We ain’t going to let you make him suffer!”

Northrop smiled. “It would only be a moment of pain for him. Believe me. We’d begin the anesthesia immediately after the amputation. Just let us capture that single instant of—”

“It ain’t right! He’s old, he’s got to be given the best treatment! The pain could kill him!”

“On the contrary,” Northrop said blandly. “Scientific research has shown that pain is often beneficial in amputation cases. It creates a nerve block, you see, that causes a kind of anesthesia of its own, without the harmful side effects of chemotherapy. And once the danger vectors are controlled, the normal anesthetic procedures can be invoked, and—” He took a deep breath, and went rolling glibly on to the crusher, “with the extra fee we’ll provide, you can give your dear one the absolute finest in medical care. There’ll be no reason to stint.”

Wary glances were exchanged. Harry Gardner said, “How much are you offering?”

“May I see the leg?” Northrop countered.

The coverlet was peeled back. Northrop stared.

It was a nasty case. Northrop was no doctor, but he had been in this line of work for five years, and that was long enough to give him an amateur acquaintance with disease. He knew the old man was in bad shape. It looked as though there had been a severe burn, high up along the calf, which had probably been treated only with first aid. Then, in happy proletarian ignorance, the family had let the old man rot until he was gangrenous. Now the leg was blackened, glossy, and swollen from midcalf to the ends of the toes. Everything looked soft and decayed. Northrop had the feeling that he could reach out and break the puffy toes off, one at a time.

The patient wasn’t going to survive. Amputation or not, he was probably rotten to the core by this time, and if the shock of amputation didn’t do him in, general debilitation would. It was a good prospect for the show. It was the kind of stomach‑turning vicarious suffering that millions of viewers gobbled up avidly.

Northrop looked up and said, “Fifteen thousand if you’ll allow a network‑approved surgeon to amputate under our conditions. And we’ll pay the surgeon’s fee besides.”

“Well...”

“And we’ll also underwrite the entire cost of postoperative care for your father,” Northrop added smoothly. “Even if he stays in the hospital for six months, we’ll pay every nickel, over and above the telecast fee.”

He had them. He could see the greed shining in their eyes. They were faced with bankruptcy, and he had come to rescue them, and did it matter all that much if the old man didn’t have anesthetic when they sawed his leg off? He was hardly conscious even now. He wouldn’t really feel a thing, not really.

Northrop produced the documents, the waivers, the contracts covering residuals and Latin‑American reruns, the payment vouchers, all the paraphernalia. He sent Maurillo scuttling off for a secretary, and a few moments later a glistening mechanical was taking it all down.

“If you’ll put your name here, Mr. Gardner...”

Northrop handed the pen to the eldest son. Signed, sealed, delivered.

“We’ll operate tonight,” Northrop said. “I’ll send our surgeon over immediately. One of our best men. We’ll give your father the care he deserves.”

He pocketed the documents. It was done. Maybe it was barbaric to operate on an old man that way, Northrop thought, but he didn’t bear the responsibility, after all. He was just giving the public what it wanted, and the public wanted spouting blood and tortured nerves. And what did it matter to the old man, really? Any experienced medic could tell you he was as good as dead. The operation wouldn’t save him. Anesthesia wouldn’t save him. If the gangrene didn’t get him, postoperative shock would do him in. At worst, he would suffer only a few minutes under the knife, but at least his family would be free from the fear of financial ruin.

On the way out, Maurillo said, “Don’t you think it’s a little risky, chief? Offering to pay the hospitalization expenses, I mean?”

“You’ve got to gamble a little sometimes to get what you want,” Northrop said.

“Yeah, but that could run to fifty, sixty thousand! What‘ll that do to the budget?”

Northrop shrugged. “We’ll survive. Which is more than the old man will. He can’t make it through the night. We haven’t risked a penny, Maurillo. Not a stinking cent.”

Returning to the office, Northrop turned the papers on the Gardner amputation over to his assistants, set the wheels in motion for the show, and prepared to call it a day. There was only one bit of dirty work left to do. He had to fire Maurillo.

It wasn’t called firing, of course. Maurillo had tenure, just like the hospital orderlies and everyone else below executive rank. It was more a demotion than anything else. Northrop had been increasingly dissatisfied with the little man’s work for months, now, and today had been the clincher. Maurillo had no imagination. He didn’t know how to close a deal. Why hadn’t he thought of underwriting the hospitalization? *If I can’t delegate responsibility to him,* Northrop told himself, *I can’t use him at all.* There were plenty of other assistant producers in the outfit who’d be glad to step in.

Northrop spoke to a couple of them. He made his choice. A young fellow named Barton, who had been working on documentaries all year. Barton had done the plane‑crash deal in London in the spring. He had a fine touch for the gruesome. He had been on hand at the World’s Fair fire last year in Juneau. Yes, Barton was the man.

The next part was the sticky one. Northrop phoned Maurillo, even though Maurillo was only two rooms away—these things were never done in person—and said, “I’ve got some good news for you, Ted. We’re shifting you to a new program.”

“Shifting...?”

“That’s right. We had a talk in here this afternoon, and we decided you were being wasted on the blood and guts show. You need more scope for your talents. So we’re moving you over to Kiddie Time. We think you’ll really blossom there. You and Sam Kline and Ed Bragan ought to make a terrific team.”

Northrop saw Maurillo’s pudgy face crumble. The arithmetic was getting home; over here, Maurillo was Number Two, and on the new show, a much less important one, he’d be Number Three. It was a thumping boot downstairs, and Maurillo knew it.

The *mores* of the situation called for Maurillo to pretend he was receiving a rare honor. He didn’t play the game. He squinted and said, “Just because I didn’t sign up that old man’s amputation?”

“What makes you think...?”

“Three years I’ve been with you! Three years, and you kick me out just like that!”

“I told you, Ted, we thought this would be a big opportunity for you. It’s a step up the ladder. It’s—”

Maurillo’s fleshy face puffed up with rage. “It’s getting junked,” he said bitterly. “Well, never mind, huh? It so happens I’ve got another offer. I’m quitting before you can can me. You can take your tenure and—”

Northrop blanked the screen.

*The idiot,* he thought. *The fat little idiot. Well, to hell with him!*He cleared his desk, and cleared his mind of Ted Maurillo and his problems. Life was real, life was earnest. Maurillo just couldn’t take the pace, that was all.

Northrop prepared to go home. It had been a long day.

At eight that evening came word that old Gardner was about to undergo the amputation. At ten, Northrop was phoned by the network’s own head surgeon, Dr. Steele, with the news that the operation had failed.

“We lost him,” Steele said in a flat, unconcerned voice. “We did our best, but he was a mess. Fibrillation set in, and his heart just ran away. Not a damned thing we could do.”

“Did the leg come off?”

“Oh, sure. All this was *after* the operation.”

“Did it get taped?”

“They’re processing it now. I‘m on my way out.”

“Okay,” Northrop said. “Thanks for calling.”

“Sorry about the patient.”

“Don‘t worry yourself,” Northrop said. “It happens to the best of us.”

The next morning, Northrop had a look at the rushes. The screening was in the twenty‑third floor studio, and a select audience was on hand—Northrop, his new assistant producer Barton, a handful of network executives, a couple of men from the cutting room. Slick, bosomy girls handed out intensifier helmets—no mechanicals doing the work here!

Northrop slipped the helmet on over his head. He felt the familiar surge of excitement as the electrodes descended, as contact was made. He closed his eyes. There was a thrum of power somewhere in the room as the EEG‑amplifier went into action. The screen brightened.

There was the old man. There was the gangrenous leg. There was Dr. Steele, crisp and rugged and dimple‑chinned, the network’s star surgeon, $250,000‑a‑year’s worth of talent. There was the scalpel, gleaming in Steele’s hand.

Northrop began to sweat. The amplified brain waves were coming through the intensifier, and he felt the throbbing in the old man’s leg, felt the dull haze of pain behind the old man’s forehead, felt the weakness of being eighty years old and half dead.

Steele was checking out the electronic scalpel, now, while the nurses fussed around, preparing the man for the amputation. In the finished tape, there would be music, narration, all the trimmings, but now there was just a soundless series of images, and, of course, the tapped brainwaves of the sick man.

The leg was bare.

The scalpel descended.

Northrop winced as vicarious agony shot through him. He could feel the blazing pain, the brief searing hellishness as the scalpel slashed through diseased flesh and rotting bone. His whole body trembled, and he bit down hard on his lips and clenched his fists and then it was over.

There was a cessation of pain. A catharsis. The leg no longer sent its pulsating messages to the weary brain. Now there was shock, the anesthesia of hyped‑up pain, and with the shock came calmness. Steele went about the mop‑up operation. He tidied the stump, bound it.

The rushes flickered out in anticlimax. Later, the production crew would tie up the program with interviews of the family, perhaps a shot of the funeral, a few observations on the problem of gangrene in the aged. Those things were the extras. What counted, what the viewers wanted, was the sheer nastiness of vicarious pain, and that they got in full measure. It was a gladiatorial contest without the gladiators, masochism concealed as medicine. It worked. It pulled in the viewers by the millions.

Northrop patted sweat from his forehead.

“Looks like we got ourselves quite a little show here, boys,” he said in satisfaction.

The mood of satisfaction was still on him as he left the building that day. All day he had worked hard, getting the show into its final shape, cutting and polishing. He enjoyed the element of craftsmanship. It helped him to forget some of the sordidness of the program.

Night had fallen when he left. He stepped out of the main entrance and a figure strode forward, a bulky figure, medium height, tired face. A hand reached out, thrusting him roughly back into the lobby of the building.

At first Northrop didn’t recognize the face of the man. It was a blank face, a nothing face, a middle‑aged empty face. Then he placed it.

Harry Gardner. The son of the dead man.

“Murderer!” Gardner shrilled. “You killed him! He would have lived if you’d used anesthetics! You phony, you murdered him so people would have thrills on television!”

Northrop glanced up the lobby. Someone was coming around the bend. Northrop felt calm. He could stare this nobody down until he fled in fear.

“Listen,” Northrop said, “we did the best medical science can do for your father. We gave him the ultimate in scientific care. We—”

“You murdered him!”

“No,” Northrop said, and then he said no more, because he saw the sudden flicker of a slice‑gun in the blank‑faced man’s fat hand. He backed away, but it didn’t help, because Gardner punched the trigger and an incandescent bolt flared out and sliced across Northrop’s belly just as efficiently as the surgeon’s scalpel had cut through the gangrenous leg.

Gardner raced away, feet clattering on the marble floor. Northrop dropped, clutching himself. His suit was seared, and there was a slash through his abdomen, a burn an eighth of an inch wide and perhaps four inches deep, cutting through intestines, through organs, through flesh. The pain hadn’t begun yet. His nerves weren’t getting the message through to his stunned brain. But then they were, and Northrop coiled and twisted in agony that was anything but vicarious now.

Footsteps approached.

“Jeez,” a voice said.

Northrop forced an eye open. Maurillo. Of all people, Maurillo.

“A doctor,” Northrop wheezed. “Fast! Christ, the pain! Help me, Ted!”

Maurillo looked down, and smiled. Without a word, he stepped to the telephone booth six feet away, dropped in a token, punched out a call.

“Get a van over here, fast. I’ve got a subject, chief.”

Northrop writhed in torment. Maurillo crouched next to him. “A doctor,” Northrop murmured. “A needle, at least. Gimme a needle! The pain—”

“You want me to kill the pain?” Maurillo laughed. “Nothing doing, chief. You just hang on. You stay alive till we get that hat on your head and tape the whole thing.”

“But you don’t work for me—you’re off the program—”

“Sure,” Maurillo said. “I’m with Transcontinental now. They’re starting a blood‑and‑guts show too. Only they don’t need waivers.”

Northrop gaped. Transcontinental? That bootleg outfit that peddled tapes in Afghanistan and Mexico and Ghana and God knew where else? Not even a network show, he thought. No fee. Dying in agony for the benefit of a bunch of lousy tapeleggers. That was the worst part, Northrop thought. Only Maurillo would pull a deal like that.

“A needle! For God‘s sake, Maurillo, a needle!”

“Nothing doing, chief. The van’ll be here any minute. They’ll sew you up, and we’ll tape it nice.”

Northrop closed his eyes. He felt the coiling intestines blazing within him. He willed himself to die, to cheat Maurillo and his bunch of ghouls. But it was no use. He remained alive and suffering.

He lived for an hour. That was plenty of time to tape his dying agonies. The last thought he had was that it was a damned shame he couldn’t star on his own show.