

The Pain Epicures

By Edward Page Mitchell

I

Nicholas Vance, a student in Harvard University, had the misfortune to suffer almost incessantly with acute neuralgia during the second term of his senior year. The malady not only caused him great anguish of face, but it also deprived him of the benefit of Professor Surdity's able lecture on speculative logic, a study of which Vance was passionately fond.

If Vance had gone in the first place to a sensible physician, as Miss Margaret Stull urged him to do, he would undoubtedly have been advised that it was mental friction that had set his face on fire. To extinguish the conflagration he would have been told to abandon speculative logic for a time and go a fishing.

But although the young man loved Miss Margaret Stull, or at least loved her as much as it is possible to love one who feels no interest in hypotheses, he had little respect for her opinion in a matter such as the neuralgia. Instead of consulting with a duly qualified member of the faculty of medicine, he rushed across the bridge one morning, in a paroxysm of pain, to seek counsel of Tithami Concannon, the very worst person, under the circumstances, to whom he possibly could have applied.

Tithami was himself a speculative logician. He lived up four pairs of stairs, and his one window overlooked a dreary expanse of back yards and clotheslines. By a subtle process of reasoning he knew that the window commanded a superb view of the sunset, granted only that the sun rose in the west and set in the east. As Tithami was aware, moreover, that east and west are relative terms, arbitrarily employed, and that inherently and absolutely there is no more reason why the sun should travel from east to west than from west to east, he derived a great deal of enjoyment from the sunsets he did notice. Such are the resources of speculative logic.

Tithami owed his education to his name. Thomas Concannon, who thirty years ago taught the Harvard freshmen how to pronounce the digamma, died a month before Tithami was born. Poor little Mrs. Concannon, sincerely desiring to compliment the memory of her deceased husband, named the infant after a Greek verb which the tutor had held in especial esteem, and of whose capabilities she had often heard him speak with enthusiasm. Her family tried in vain to persuade the simple-minded mother to give up the idea, or at least to compromise on Timothy, approximate in form to the heathen verb, but thoroughly respectable in its associations. She would not yield—not one final iota—and Tithami the baby was baptized. This queer christening proved both the making and the marring of the child. A rich, eccentric great uncle, mightily tickled by the unconscious humor of the appellation, offered to give young Tithami the best schooling that money could buy, and he kept his word, all the way from a kindergarten to Heidelberg. At the latter institution Tithami learned so much logic from the renowned Speisecartius, and went so deep into metaphysics with the profound Zundholzer, that he thoroughly unfitted himself for all practical work in life. He came home and speedily argued his benevolent uncle to death, but not before the old gentleman had stricken the logician from his will and diverted his entire property to the endowment of an asylum for deaf mutes.

“My dear Nicholas,” said Tithami, when Vance had sung all twelve books of his epic of pain, ‘you are the luckiest individual in the city of Boston. I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. Take your hand away from your cheek and sit down in that easy chair and rejoice.’”

“Thank you,” groaned Vance, who knew the chair. “I prefer to stand up.”

“Well,” said Tithami cheerfully, “stand up if it pleases you so long as you stand still. The floor creaks and my landlady, who is absurdly fussy over a trifle of rent, has a way of rushing in when the slightest noise reminds her of the fact of my existence. You’ve read how, in the Alps, a breeze sometimes brings down an avalanche?”

“Hang your landlady!” shouted Nicholas. “I came to you as a friend, for sympathy, not to be jeered at.”

“If you must walk up and down like a maniac, Nicholas,” continued Tithami, “pardon me for suggesting that you keep off that third plank from the fireplace. It’s particularly loose. I repeat, Nicholas, that you are a lucky dog. I would give my dinners for a week for such a neuralgia.”

“Can you do anything for me or not?” demanded Nicholas, fiercely. “I don’t like to exercise intimidation, but, by Jupiter, if you don’t stop chaffing, I’ll raise a yell that will start the avalanche.”

A perceptible tremor passed over Tithami’s frame. It was evident that the threat was not ineffectual. He arose hastily and assured himself that the door was securely bolted. Then he returned to Vance and addressed him with considerable impressiveness of manner.

“Nicholas,” said he, “I was perfectly serious when I congratulated you upon your neuralgia. You, like myself, are a speculative logician. Although not in an entirely candid and reasonable frame of mind just now, you will not, I am sure, refuse a syllogism. Let me ask you two plain Socratic questions and present one syllogism, and then I’ll give you something that will subdue your pain—under protest, mind you, for I shall feel that I am wronging you, Nicholas.”

“Confound your sense of justice!” exclaimed Nicholas. “I accept the proposition.”

“Well, answer me this. Do you like a hot Indian curry?”

“Nothing better,” said Nicholas.

“But suppose someone had offered you a curry when you were fifteen years younger—during the bread and milk era of your gastronomic evolution. Would you have partaken of it with signal pleasure?”

“No,” said Vance. “I should have as soon thought of sucking the red-hot end of a poker.”

“Good. Now we will proceed to our syllogism. Here it is. Sensations that are primarily disagreeable may become more or less agreeable by a proper education of the senses. Physical pain is primarily disagreeable. Therefore, *even physical pain, by judicious cultivation, may be made a source of exquisite pleasure!*”

“That doesn’t help my neuralgia,” said Nicholas. “What does it all mean, anyway?”

“I never heard you speak unkindly of a syllogism before,” said Tithami, sorrowfully. Then he took a small jar from a closet in the corner and shook out of it a little pile of fine white powder, of which he gave Nicholas as much as would cover an old-fashioned copper cent. This he did with evident reluctance.

“Come here tonight,” he added, “at half past nine, and I will try to show you what it all means, my young friend.”

II

The apprehension of a new and profoundly significant truth is a slow process. As Nicholas walked home over the bridge he pondered the syllogism which Tithami had advanced. When he reached the front gate of the house where Miss Margaret Stull lived, and saw that young lady in her flower garden watering polyanthuses, it occurred to him for the first time that he had forgotten his neuralgia.

He sat down on the doorstep and lighted a cigar. The kind inquiries and gentle solicitude of his sweetheart made him rather ashamed of himself. It was not dignified that a young philosopher with a heroic malady should be sitting among polyanthuses, forgetful of his misery, and actually experiencing that dull glow of bodily self-satisfaction which a well-fed Newfoundland dog may be supposed to enjoy when he lies in the sunshine. Nicholas felt it his duty to subject the facts of the case to logical analysis.

The first result obtained was the remarkable fact that the pain was still present in all its intensity.

Upon closely examining his sensations, Vance could discover no change in either the frequency or the acuteness of the nervous pangs. At tolerably regular periods the stream of fire ran throbbing through his face and temples. In the intervals of recurrence there was the same dull aching which had made life intolerable for days before. Nicholas, therefore, felt safe in the induction that the powder administered by Tithami had not cured the pain.

The astonishing thing was that ever since he had taken the powder the pain had been a matter of indifference. Nicholas was compelled to admit, as a candid logician, that he would not raise a finger to rid himself of the neuralgia now. So strange was the transformation wrought in his sensory system that he even felt a sort of satisfaction in the throbbing and the aching, and would have been sorry, rather than glad, to have them cease. Indeed, the more he thought about it the nearer he approached to the conclusion that neuralgia, under the existing conditions, was a luxury and something to be cherished.

When this idea was communicated to Miss Margaret Stall, she at once became alarmed for his sanity, and ran to fetch her aunt Penelope. That respectable and experienced maiden heard the proposition stated without showing surprise or other emotion. Her comment was comprised in a single word.

“Morphia,” said Miss Penelope.

“Call it lotus or ambrosia,” exclaimed Nicholas, “call it morphia, or what you will. If there is a potency in the blessed drug that can transform agony into joy, torment into delight, make the forenoon’s paroxysms of torture the pulsations of ecstasy in the afternoon, why may it not be, as Tithami said, that—but I’ll go to Boston and ask him this very hour.”

Nicholas paused, for both Miss Penelope and Margaret were regarding him with amazement. Margaret looked bewildered, but on her aunt’s face there was a very peculiar expression, which he afterward recalled most vividly.

“Mr. Vance,” said Miss Penelope calmly, “the morphia is acting on your head. Suppose you lie down on the sofa in the back parlor, where it’s cool and quiet, until suppertime. After a good cup of tea you’ll be in better condition to go to Boston, and I shall be very glad of your escort. I’m to spend the evening with some friends at the West End.”

III

At twenty-five minutes past nine Vance climbed the stairs that led to Tithami's abode. He found the speculative logician arrayed in full evening dress and just drawing on a pair of tight boots. This surprised Nicholas. He had never known his friend to be guilty of that folly before.

"Neuralgia's not so bad a thing, eh, Nicholas?" said Tithami, gaily. "Something like a hot curry when your taste's educated up to it. Great pity, though, to blunt the edge of your enjoyment with morphine. It's like sprinkling sawdust over a fine raw oyster. However, we'll soon have you educated beyond such crude practices. I want you to go out with me."

"But I'm not dressed," said Nicholas.

Tithami went to the looking glass and complacently surveyed his own rather rusty attire. "That makes no difference," said he; "it won't be noticed. Now, if you'll have the goodness to go downstairs first. If the coast is clear, whistle 'Annie Laurie,' and I'll come right along. But if you observe at the foot of the stairs a she-dragon, a female Borgia, a gorgon, a raging Tisiphone in a black bombazine dress, whistle the 'Dead March' from *Saul*, and I'll climb down the gutter pipe and join you at the corner."

The coast happened to be clear, and the notes of 'Annie Laurie' brought Tithami to the street door close upon Nicholas' heels. He led Vance through street after street, and turned corner after corner, discoursing the while upon light topics with the rattling air of a man about town. Nicholas had never seen Tithami display such animal spirits before. He seemed to have shaken off the mustiness of scholastic logic, and walked and talked like a nineteenth-century blade on his way to a congenial debauch.

"You were saying this morning," said Nicholas—timidly opening a subject on which he very much desired instruction—"you were saying that physical pain, being only a relative term, inasmuch as the same sensations in a modified degree often yield us what we call physical pleasure, might be cultivated so as to be a source of exquisite enjoyment. Now it seems to me that this theory—"

"Oh, bother theory," said Tithami, smartly and apparently with purpose rapping his knuckles against a lamp post they were just then passing. "What's the use talking of theory when you'll shortly see the idea in actual practice?"

"But please tell me what you mean," persisted Nicholas, "by pain's being only relative."

"Why," said Tithami, "who can draw the line, for example, that marks the boundary between the comfortable feeling you have after a good dinner, and the uncomfortable feeling you have after eating too much? In one case the sensation is translated by your brain into pleasure. In the other, the same sensation, only a trifle more pronounced, is called pain. Are you as blind as a newborn rabbit that you can't see, after sitting so long under Professor Surdity, that the distinction between pain and pleasure is nothing but a fallacy of words? Didn't your morphine experience today prove that? Throw away the morphine and educate your intelligence up to the proper standard and you get the same result."

Here Tithami, as if wearied of parleying, stopped short and began to dance a vigorous jig upon the pavement.

"Why do you dance if your boots are tight?" Nicholas ventured to inquire.

"Simply because they *are* tight, and my feet very tender," replied Tithami.

Nicholas walked on in silence. Tithami's conduct became more and more astonishing every minute. But Nicholas' surprise culminated when his friend halted in front of a brick mansion which had once been aristocratic. Tithami ascended the steps and rang the doorbell with the air

of one who has reached his destination. No wonder Nicholas was surprised. It was to that same door that he had escorted Margaret's aunt Penelope, not half an hour earlier that very evening.

IV

Nicholas had once attended a meeting of the First Radical Club in a private house not far from the one which he now entered. The scene in the parlor recalled the session of the Advanced Thinkers. About a dozen men and women, more or less progressive in appearance, were sitting in chairs or on sofas listening to a paper read in a mumbling voice by a tall gentleman who stood in a corner and held his manuscript close to his spectacles. The essay did not seem to excite much enthusiasm. There were more empty chairs than auditors.

When Nicholas and Tithami were ushered in, nearly all the company arose and greeted the latter silently but with every evidence of profound respect. Indeed, the salutations were almost oriental in their obsequiousness.

"You are quite a rooster here, Tithami," whispered Vance, irreverently.

"Hush!" Tithami whispered in return. "It was I who first brought this idea from Heidelberg to Boston. It is simply their gratitude for a great boon. But listen to the essay."

The speaker was just then saying: "Let it be postulated that the principle which we hold is the true arcanum, the actual earthly paradise, and let it be also postulated that we shall progress from the material to the intellectual in the development of this principle, and who can escape the conclusion from these premises? As we advance in the self-discipline that already enables us to derive the highest physical pleasure from sensations that have been deemed a curse since Cain's first colic, we shall find still loftier joys in the region of mental pain. I firmly believe that the time is not distant when to the initiated the death of a wife or husband will be a keener joy than the first kiss at the altar, the bankruptcy of a fortune a truer source of elation than the receipt of a legacy, the disappointment of ambition more welcome than the fruition of hope. This is but the logical—"

Nicholas could no longer contain himself. He knew the voice, the style of reasoning, the spectacles. He had listened too often and too intently to the lectures of Professor Surdity of Harvard College to mistake him for another, or another for him. He uttered a low whistle. Tithami checked him on the very edge of another.

"Above all things," he whispered, "show no astonishment at anything you may see or hear. And take special care to recognize nobody you meet, even if it is your own grandmother. The etiquette of the place requires that much of you."

Tithami now arose and beckoned Nicholas to follow him out of the room. "This is slow," said he. "The professor is inclined to be prosy. A few of the old fogies of our number like to sit and listen to him. They are probably trying to carry his principle to the extent of deriving excitement from a painful bore. We mustn't waste time here. Let's go to the symposium."

A passageway, screened by heavy curtains, led to an extension apartment that originally had been built for a painting gallery. It had no windows. The skylight overhead had been removed and the room was as completely sequestered as the inner chamber of one of the pyramids of Gizeh. On a table in the middle of the apartment a repast was laid. The table was surrounded by broad couches, like the *lecti* of the Romans, on which several persons were reclining. A few were eating, but the majority seemed wrapped in the sufficiency of inactive bliss. In the corners of the room Nicholas observed several bulky machines of wood. The place seemed half banquet hall, half gymnasium.

As had been the case in the outer parlors, all the company arose and saluted Tithami with marked deference. This was done almost mechanically, and as if a matter of course. Of Nicholas' presence the Pain Epicures apparently took no more notice than the inmates of a Chinese opium den would have done. There was a dreamy languor upon the company that made the locality seem not unlike an opium den.

Tithami went directly to a sideboard and poured from a decanter a brimming draft.

"It is aqua fortis," he explained, "diluted, of course, but strong enough to take the skin from the lips, and set the mouth and throat a burning. You will fry a glass? No? It would be no stronger to your taste than raw brandy is to a child's. The child grows up and learns to like brandy. You will grow to esteem this tippie. Ah, Doctor! A glass with you. How are you enjoying yourself nowadays?"

In the gentleman who approached at this moment, and whom Tithami thus addressed, Nicholas recognized one of the most eminent of Boston physicians, celebrated as a skillful practitioner all through the eastern States. The doctor shook his head at Tithami's polite question.

"Poorly, very poorly," he replied. "The moxa yields me no more pleasure now than a mere cup blister or leeching. I'd give half my income to be able to enjoy a simple neuralgia as I used to."

Tithami gave Nicholas a significant look.

"And yet," continued the doctor, musingly, "the blind, ignorant fools who employ me professionally insist on taking chloroform for a trifling amputation. I suppose they won't have a tooth drawn without anesthesia. What a pity that a luxury like pain cannot be monopolized by those who can appreciate it!"

"With your resources and pathological knowledge," suggested Tithami, "you ought to keep abreast of your pain progress and avoid ennui."

"I try everything," rejoined the medical gentleman, with a sigh. "Did it ever occur to you, Tithami," he continued, with more animation, "that if one could find some stimulant that would arouse the entire nervous system to acuter sensibility than any agent now known, he might make himself conscious of the circulation of the blood. How delightful it would be to actually feel the hot tide rushing along the arteries, oozing through the capillaries, coursing the veins, and surging into the aorta! Why, it would lend a new piquancy to existence."

"He is one of the most advanced of us," said Tithami to Nicholas after the doctor had passed on. "But he goes too fast. I believe in moderation in pain, as in all other enjoyments. By being temperate in my indulgences I keep the edge keen. By using the moxa three or four times a day the doctor killed the goose that laid the golden eggs. He's not enough of a philosopher to be an epicure."

"Have all your friends here advanced as far as the doctor?" asked Nicholas.

"Oh dear no! You understand that as one progresses the dose must be increased. While a beginner may be contented with a toothache, or may satiate himself by eating green watermelons for the colic, like that young man yonder, or by sticking pins in the calf of his leg, as those three gentlemen on the left-hand couch are doing at this moment, there are others, of more cultivated appetites, who must have the higher grades of pain. Yet it's the same thing in all stages. Some are content to be rational in their dissipations; others plunge into extremes. I have in mind a banker, not present tonight, who became so infatuated with the use of an old-fashioned thumbscrew which he picked up in some curiosity shop, that he takes it in his pocket to the office and uses it surreptitiously during business hours. I have no patience with such a man. He must either degenerate into a secret voluptuary or else set a bad example to his clerks."

"I should think so!" said Nicholas.

“Now here’s a very different character,” continued Tithami, as a burly German approached. “He’s satisfied with the simplest pleasures. Good evening, mein Herr. You are all smiles tonight.”

“*Ach Gott!*” said the Teuton, “but I have one lovely head woe. I have been—how say you it?—ge-butting *mein kopf* unt de wall.”

“And over there,” Tithami went on, after congratulating the German on his method, “is one of the rarest examples of besotted folly that I could possibly show you. That man with his hand tied up in a cloth and a serene smile on his face was ass enough one day to cut off the tip of his little finger for the sake of the temporary gratification he had from the smart. He is a lawyer in good practice and ought to know better. Well, the wound healed, and his enjoyment was over. So he cut off a fresh slice, a little further down. Thus it went on, little by little, till now he has nothing but the stumps of seven fingers and a thumb to show for his sport. He’s begun on the eighth finger already, and I’ll wager that he lays his next case before the jury with a solitary thumb.”

A strident creaking now attracted Nicholas’ attention to one of the wooden machines in the corner. Proceeding thither, followed by Tithami, he beheld an extraordinary spectacle. The machine rudely resembled an overshot water wheel. It was operated by a crank at which a brawny African of decorous demeanor was laboring. Upon the rim of the wheel, lashed hand and foot, was stretched a fleshy citizen of middle age and highly respectable appearance. He was in his shirt sleeves, and the perspiration stood in great beads upon his brow, but his face bore an expression of ineffable felicity. At every exertion of the darky at the crank the strain upon the fat epicure’s muscles and joints increased. The tension seemed to be terrific, yet Nicholas heard him whisper, in a voice almost inaudible, but ecstatic beyond description, “Give her one more turn, George Washington, one—more—little—yank—”

“I was just now speaking,” said Tithami, “of the higher grades of pain. Here you have an example. The fat gentleman is a well-known capitalist and also a man of leisure, like myself. He lives on Beacon Street. He is something of an enthusiast in the pursuit of pain novelties. He bought that machine at Madrid and presented it to the association. It is an undoubted original of the instrument of torture known as the rack, and is said to have been used by the Inquisition. At all events it is still in good working order. With a capable man at the crank it affords an amount of refined pleasure which I hope you will some day be able to appreciate.”

Nicholas shuddered and turned away from the rack. By this time there were thirty-five or forty epicures in the room. The company had been increased by the party from the parlors, Professor Surdity’s essay being at last concluded. There was more bustle and activity among the epicures than earlier in the evening. The intoxication of pain was working its effect and the revel was growing reckless and noisy.

“Let us see what they are doing,” said Nicholas.

“Make yourself perfectly at home,” replied Tithami, politely. “I told you your presence would not be noticed. Co wherever you please, and if you feel like testing any of our appliances, don’t hesitate to do so. But if you’ll kindly excuse me for a few minutes, I think I’ll take the next turn on the rack.”

The revel went on with increasing zest. The hum of delirious voices mingled with the creaking of two or three of the instruments of torture. On one side Nicholas saw a sedate party consisting of two philosophers and half a dozen theological students. They were sitting on a bench cushioned with the sharp points of tacks, and were discussing the immortality of the soul in a most animated manner. Several epicures had taken a hint from the German, and were butting their craniums against the wall. A young man, evidently inexperienced in the luxuries of pain,

seemed to derive exquisite pleasure from the simplest form of torture. He had inserted one finger in the joint of a lemon squeeze; and was grimacing with callow delight as he pressed together the handles of the utensil with his other hand. Two doctors of divinity had stripped themselves to the waist, and were obligingly flagellating each other in turn with willow switches. It was creditable to their sense of equity that the reciprocal service was performed with exact fairness, both in regard to time and in regard to the energy with which the blows were administered. Nicholas observed that, as a rule, the intoxication of pain made men selfish. Wrapped in the felicity of his own sensations, each epicure had little concern for the enjoyment of those around him.

That, however, was not the case with a group of men and women who had gathered at the remotest end of the apartment. There was a buzz of conversation there, and a manifest display of interest, as over some great novelty. The crowd was applauding the inventor of a new appliance. Nicholas pushed his way into the group, and then suddenly started back dumbfounded.

A woman of middle age sat on an ottoman, her foot in a basket that was tightly covered over with cloth. A shoe and a stocking lay on the floor. The woman's hair was disordered and her face flushed with unhealthy excitement. With the abandon of a mad bacchante, she began to sing a lively but incoherent song. Her rather shrill voice floated into the uncertain quavers of hysterical rapture. Nicholas turned to a bystander. "What has she in the basket?" he demanded.

"Six nests of hornets," was the answer. "Isn't it beautiful? It's the discovery of the age, and to think that a lady should be the first!"

V

Nicholas was almost stupefied with horror and disgust. He knew the basket, for he had brought it from Cambridge. He knew the lady, for she was Margaret's aunt Penelope. Margaret's aunt the central figure in such an orgy! He pushed his way to the front and stood before the frantic woman. She looked up, and a cloudy expression of dim remembrance and uncertain shame came over her face. "Put on your shoe!" he sternly said. Mechanically she obeyed. Nicholas kicked aside the basket, and there was a fierce struggle among the epicures for the possession of the treasure. The young man heeded not their rivalry. He took Miss Penelope by the arm and led her out of the unholy place, out of the house. The fresh night air brought her partially to her senses. She hung her head and accompanied him in silence.

The last car for Cambridge was just starting from the square. During the long ride not a word was said by Nicholas, and not a word by his companion. At the door of the house the silence was first broken. Nicholas looked up from the ground. The moon lighted the window of the room where Margaret was innocently sleeping.

"For Margaret's sake and for your own sake, Miss Penelope," said Nicholas, in a low but firm voice, "swear to me never to visit that place again."

Miss Penelope's frame shook with agitation. She sobbed violently. She looked first at Nicholas and then at Margaret's window. At last she spoke.

"I swear it!" said Miss Penelope.