

# THE HARNESS

BY JOHN STEINBECK

## I

PETER RANDALL was one of the most highly respected farmers of Monterey County. Once, before he was to make a little speech at a Masonic convention, the brother who introduced him referred to him as an example for young Masons of California to emulate. He was nearing fifty; his manner was grave and restrained, and he wore a carefully tended beard. From every gathering he reaped the authority that belongs to the bearded man.

Peter's eyes were grave, too — blue and grave almost to the point of sorrowfulness. People knew there was force in him, but force held caged. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, his eyes grew sullen and mean, like the eyes of a bad dog; but that look soon passed, and the restraint and probity came back into his face. He was tall and broad. He held his shoulders back as though they were braced, and he sucked in his stomach like a soldier. Inasmuch as farmers are usually slouchy men, Peter gained an added respect because of his posture.

Concerning Peter's wife, Emma, people generally agreed that it was hard to see how such a little skin-and-bones woman could go on living, particularly when she was sick most of the time. She weighed eighty-seven pounds. At forty-five, her face was as wrinkled and brown as that of an old, old woman, but her dark eyes were feverish with a determination to live. She was a proud woman, who complained very little. Her father had been a thirty-third-degree

Mason and Worshipful Master of the Grand Lodge of California. Before he died he had taken a great deal of interest in Peter's Masonic career.

Once a year Peter went away for a week, leaving his wife alone on the farm. To neighbors who called to keep her company she invariably explained, 'He's away on a business trip.'

Each time Peter returned from a business trip, Emma was ailing for a month or two, and this was hard on Peter, for Emma did her own work and refused to hire a girl. When she was ill Peter had to do the housework.

The Randall ranch lay across the Salinas River, next to the foothills. It was an ideal balance of bottom and upland — forty-five acres of rich level soil brought from the cream of the county by the river in old times and spread out as flat as a board; and eighty acres of gentle upland for hay and orchard. The white farmhouse was as neat and restrained as its owners. The immediate yard was fenced, and in the garden, under Emma's direction, Peter raised button dahlias and immortelles, carnations and pinks.

From the front porch one could look down over the flat to the river with its sheath of willows and cottonwoods, and across the river to the beet fields, and past the fields to the bulbous dome of the Salinas courthouse. Often in the afternoon Emma sat in a rocking chair on the front porch, until the breeze drove her in. She knitted constantly,

looking up now and then to watch Peter working on the flat or in the orchard or on the slope below the house.

The Randall ranch was no more encumbered with mortgage than any of the others in the valley. The crops, judiciously chosen and carefully tended, paid the interest, made a reasonable living, and left a few hundred dollars every year toward paying off the principal. It was no wonder that Peter Randall was respected by his neighbors, and that his seldom-spoken words were given attention even when they were about the weather or the way things were going.

Let Peter say, 'I'm going to kill a pig Saturday,' and nearly every one of his hearers went home and killed a pig on Saturday. They did n't know why, but if Peter Randall was going to kill a pig it seemed like a good, safe, conservative thing to do.

Peter and Emma were married for twenty-one years. They collected a houseful of good furniture, a number of framed pictures, vases of all shapes, and books of a sturdy type. Emma had no children. The house was unscarred, uncarved, unchalked. On the front and back porches foot scrapers and thick coco-fibre mats kept dirt out of the house.

In the intervals between her illnesses, Emma saw to it that the house was kept up. The hinges of doors and cupboards were oiled, and no screws were gone from the catches. The furniture and woodwork were freshly varnished once a year. Repairs were usually made after Peter came home from his yearly business trips.

Whenever the word went around among the farms that Emma was sick again, the neighbors waylaid the doctor as he drove by on the river road.

'Oh, I guess she'll be all right,' he answered their questions. 'She'll have to stay in bed for a couple of weeks.'

The good neighbors took cakes to the

Randall farm, and they tiptoed into the sickroom, where the little skinny bird of a woman lay in a tremendous walnut bed. She looked at them with her bright little dark eyes.

'Would n't you like the curtains up a little, dear?' they asked.

'No, thank you. The light worries my eyes.'

'Is there anything we can do for you?'

'No, thank you. Peter does for me very well.'

'Just remember, if there's anything you think of—'

Emma was such a tight woman. There was nothing you could do for her when she was ill, except to take pies and cakes to Peter. Peter would be in the kitchen, wearing a neat, clean apron. He would be filling a hot-water bottle or making junket.

And so, one fall, when the news traveled that Emma was down, the farm wives baked for Peter and prepared to make their usual visits.

Mrs. Chappell, the next farm neighbor, stood in the river road when the doctor drove by. 'How's Emma Randall, Doctor?'

'I don't think she's so very well, Mrs. Chappell. I think she's a pretty sick woman.'

Because to Dr. Marn anyone who was n't actually a corpse was well on the road to recovery, the word went about among the farms that Emma Randall was going to die.

It was a long, terrible illness. Peter himself gave enemas and carried bedpans. The doctor's suggestion that a nurse be employed met only beady, fierce refusal in the eyes of the patient; and, ill as she was, her demands were respected. Peter fed her and bathed her, and made up the great walnut bed. The bedroom curtains remained drawn.

It was two months before the dark, sharp bird eyes veiled, and the sharp mind retired into unconsciousness. And

only then did a nurse come to the house. Peter was lean and sick himself, not far from collapse. The neighbors brought him cakes and pies, and found them uneaten in the kitchen when they called again.

Mrs. Chappell was in the house with Peter the afternoon Emma died. Peter went immediately hysterical. Mrs. Chappell telephoned the doctor, and then she called her husband to come and help her, for Peter was wailing like a crazy man, and beating his bearded cheeks with his fists. Ed Chappell was ashamed when he saw him, for it is horrible and shameful for a bearded man to conduct himself so.

Peter's beard was wet with his tears. His loud sobbing could be heard throughout the house. Sometimes he sat by the bed and covered his head with a pillow, and sometimes he paced the floor of the bedroom bellowing like a calf. When Ed Chappell self-consciously put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'Come on, Peter, come on, now,' in a helpless voice, Peter shook his hand off. The doctor drove out and signed the certificate.

When the undertaker came, they had a devil of a time with Peter. He was half mad. He fought them when they tried to take the body away. It was only after Ed Chappell and the undertaker held him down while the doctor stuck him with a hypodermic that they were able to remove Emma.

The morphine did n't put Peter to sleep. He sat hunched in the corner, breathing heavily and staring at the floor.

'Who's going to stay with him?' the doctor asked. 'Miss Jack?' — to the nurse.

'I could n't handle him, Doctor — not alone.'

'Will you stay, Chappell?'

'Sure, I'll stay.'

'Well, look. Here are some triple bromides. If he gets going again, give him one of these. And if they don't

work, here's some sodium amytal. One of these capsules will calm him down.'

Before they went away, they helped the stupefied Peter into the sitting room and laid him gently down on a sofa. Ed Chappell sat in an easy-chair and watched him. The bromides and a glass of water were on the table beside him.

## II

The little sitting room was clean and dusted. Only that morning Peter had swept the floor with pieces of damp newspaper. Ed built a little fire in the grate, and put on a couple of pieces of oak when the flames were well started. The dark had come early. A light rain spattered against the windows when the wind drove it. Ed trimmed the kerosene lamps and turned the flames low. In the grate the blaze snapped and crackled and the flames curled like hair over the oak.

For a long time Ed sat in his easy-chair watching Peter where he lay drugged on the couch. At last Ed dozed off to sleep.

It was about ten o'clock when he awakened. He started up and looked toward the sofa. Peter was sitting up, looking at him. Ed's hand went out toward the bromide bottle, but Peter shook his head.

'No need to give me anything, Ed. I guess the doctor slugged me pretty hard, did n't he? I feel all right now — only a little dopey.'

'If you'll just take one of these, you'll get some sleep.'

'I don't want sleep.' He fingered his draggled beard and then stood up. 'I'll go out and wash my face, then I'll feel better.'

Ed heard him running water in the kitchen. In a moment he came back into the living room, still drying his face on a towel.

Peter was smiling curiously. It was an expression Ed had never seen on him before, a quizzical, wondering smile.

'I guess I kind of broke loose when she died, did n't I?' Peter said.

'Well — yes, you carried on some.'

'It seemed like something snapped inside of me,' Peter explained. 'Something like a suspender strap. It made me all come apart. I'm all right now, though.'

Ed looked down at the floor and saw a little brown spider crawling, and stretched out his foot and stomped it.

Peter asked suddenly, 'Do you believe in an afterlife?'

Ed Chappell squirmed. He did n't like to talk about such things, for to talk about them was to bring them up in his mind and think about them. 'Well, yes. I suppose if you come right down to it, I do.'

'Do you believe that somebody that's — passed on — can look down and see what we're doing?'

'Oh, I don't know as I'd go that far — I don't know.'

Peter went on as though he were talking to himself. 'Even if she could see me, and I did n't do what she wanted, she ought to feel good because I did it when she was here. It ought to please her that she made a good man of me. If I was n't a good man when she was n't here, that'd prove she did it all, would n't it? I was a good man, was n't I, Ed?'

'What do you mean, "was"?''

'Well, except for one week a year I was good. I don't know what I'll do now — ' his face grew angry — 'except one thing.' He stood up and stripped off his coat and his shirt. Over his underwear there was a web harness that pulled his shoulders back. He unhooked the harness and threw it off. Then he dropped his trousers, disclosing a wide elastic belt. He shucked this off over his feet, and then he scratched his stomach luxuriously before he put on his clothes again.

He smiled at Ed, the strange, wondering smile, again. 'I don't know how she got me to do things, but she did. She did n't seem to boss me, but she always

made me do things. You know, I don't think I believe in an afterlife. When she was alive, even when she was sick, I had to do things she wanted, but just the minute she died, it was — why, like that harness coming off! I could n't stand it. It was all over. I'm going to have to get used to going without that harness.' He shook his finger in Ed's direction. 'My stomach's going to stick out,' he said positively. 'I'm going to let it stick out. Why, I'm fifty years old.'

Ed did n't like that. He wanted to get away. 'This sort of thing was n't very decent. 'If you'll just take one of these, you'll get some sleep,' he said weakly.

Peter had not put his coat on. He was sitting on the sofa in an open shirt. 'I don't want to sleep. I want to talk. I guess I'll have to put that belt and harness on for the funeral, but after that I'm going to burn them. Listen, I've got a bottle of whiskey in the barn. I'll get it.'

'Oh, no,' Ed protested quickly. 'I could n't drink now — not at a time like this.'

Peter stood up. 'Well, I could. You can sit and watch me if you want. I tell you, it's all over.' He went out the door, leaving Ed Chappell unhappy and scandalized. It was only a moment before he was back. He started talking as he came through the doorway with the whiskey. 'I only got one thing in my life — those trips. Emma was a pretty bright woman. She knew I'd've gone crazy if I did n't get away once a year. God, how she worked on my conscience when I came back!' His voice lowered confidentially. 'You know what I did on those trips?'

Ed's eyes were wide open now. Here was a man he did n't know, and he was becoming fascinated. He took the glass of whiskey when it was handed to him. 'No; what did you do?'

Peter gulped his drink and coughed, and wiped his mouth with his hand. 'I

got drunk,' he said. 'I went to fancy houses in San Francisco. I was drunk for a week, and I went to a fancy house every night.' He poured his glass full again. 'I guess Emma knew, but she never said anything. I'd've *busted* if I had n't got away.'

Ed Chappell sipped his whiskey gingerly. 'She always said you went on business.'

Peter looked at his glass and drank it, and poured it full again. His eyes had begun to shine. 'Drink your drink, Ed. I know you think it is n't right, — so soon, — but no one'll know but you and me. Kick up the fire. I'm not sad.'

Chappell went to the grate and stirred the glowing wood until lots of sparks flew up the chimney like little shining birds. Peter filled the glasses and retired to the sofa again. When Ed went back to the chair he sipped from his glass and pretended he did n't know it was filled up. His cheeks were flushing. It did n't seem so terrible, now, to be drinking. The afternoon and the death had receded into an indefinite past.

'Want some cake?' Peter asked. 'There's half a dozen cakes in the pantry.'

'No, I don't think I will thank you for some.'

'You know,' Peter confessed, 'I don't think I'll eat cake again. For ten years, every time Emma was sick, people sent cakes. It was nice of 'em, of course, only now cake means sickness to me. Drink your drink.'

Something happened in the room. Both men looked up, trying to discover what it was. The room was somehow different than it had been a moment before. Then Peter smiled sheepishly. 'It was that mantel clock stopped. I don't think I'll start it any more. I'll get a little quick alarm clock that ticks fast. That *clack — clack — clack* is too mournful.' He swallowed his whiskey. 'I guess you'll be telling around that I'm crazy, won't you?'

Ed looked up from his glass, and smiled and nodded. 'No, I will not. I can see pretty much how you feel about things. I did n't know you wore that harness and belt.'

'A man ought to stand up straight,' Peter said. 'I'm a natural sloucher.' Then he exploded: 'I'm a natural fool! For twenty years I've been pretending I was a wise, good man — except for that one week a year.' He said loudly, 'Things have been dribbled to me. My life's been dribbled out to me. Here, let me fill your glass. I've got another bottle out in the barn, way down under a pile of sacks.'

Ed held out his glass to be filled. Peter went on, 'I thought how it would be nice to have my whole river flat in sweet peas. Think how it'd be to sit on the front porch and see all those acres of blue and pink, just solid. And when the wind came up over them, think of the big smell. A big smell that would almost knock you over.'

'A lot of men have gone broke on sweet peas. Course you get a big price for the seed, but too many things can happen to your crop.'

'I don't give a damn!' Peter shouted. 'I want a lot of everything. I want forty acres of color and smell. I want fat women. I'm hungry, I tell you! I'm hungry for everything, for a lot of everything!'

Ed's face became grave under the shouting.

'If you'd just take one of these, you'd get some sleep.'

Peter looked ashamed. 'I'm all right. I did n't mean to yell like that. I'm not just thinking these things for the first time. I been thinking about them for years, the way a kid thinks of vacation. I was always afraid I'd be too old. Or that I'd go first and miss everything. But I'm only fifty — I've got plenty of vinegar left. I told Emma about the sweet peas, but she would n't let me. I don't know how she made me do things,' he said wonderingly. 'I can't remember.'

She had a way of doing it. But she's gone. I can feel she's gone just like that harness is gone. I'm going to slouch, Ed — slouch all over the place. I'm going to track dirt into the house. I'm going to get a big fat housekeeper — a big fat one from San Francisco. I'm going to have a bottle of brandy on the shelf all the time.'

Ed Chappell stood up and stretched his arms over his head. 'I guess I'll go home now, if you feel all right. I got to get some sleep. You better wind that clock, Peter. It don't do a clock any good to stand not running.'

### III

The day after the funeral Peter Randall went to work on his farm. The Chappells, who lived on the next place, saw the lamp in his kitchen long before daylight, and they saw his lantern cross the yard to the barn half an hour before they even got up.

Peter pruned his orchard in three days. He worked from first light until he could n't see the twigs against the sky any more. Then he started to shape the big piece of river flat. He ploughed and rolled and harrowed. Two strange men dressed in boots and riding breeches came out and looked at his land. They felt the dirt with their fingers and ran a post-hole digger deep down under the surface, and when they went away they took little paper bags of the dirt with them.

Ordinarily, before planting time, the farmers did a good deal of visiting back and forth. They sat on their haunches, picking up handfuls of dirt and breaking little clods between their fingers. They discussed markets and crops, recalled other years when beans had done well in a good market, and other years when field peas did n't bring enough to pay for the seed hardly. After a great number of these discussions it usually happened that all the farmers planted the same things. There were certain men

whose ideas carried weight. If Peter Randall or Clark DeWitt thought he would put in pink beans and barley, most of the crops would turn out to be pink beans and barley that year; for, since such men were respected and fairly successful, it was conceded that their plans must be based on something besides chance choice. It was generally believed but never stated that Peter Randall and Clark DeWitt had extra reasoning powers and special prophetic knowledge.

When the usual visits started, it was seen that a change had taken place in Peter Randall. He sat on his plough and talked pleasantly enough. He said he had n't decided yet what to plant, but he said it in such a guilty way that it was plain he did n't intend to tell. When he had rebuffed a few inquiries, the visits to his place stopped and the farmers went over in a body to Clark DeWitt. Clark was putting in Chevalier barley. His decision dictated the major part of the planting in the vicinity.

But although the questions stopped, the interest did not. Men driving by the forty-five-acre flat of the Randall place studied the field to try to figure out from the type of work what the crop was going to be. When Peter drove the seeder back and forth across the land no one came in, for Peter had made it plain that his crop was a secret.

Ed Chappell did n't tell on him, either. Ed was a little ashamed when he thought of that night; ashamed of Peter for breaking down, and ashamed of himself for having sat there and listened. He watched Peter narrowly to see whether his vicious intentions were really there or whether the whole conversation had been the result of loss and hysteria. He did notice that Peter's shoulders were n't back and that his stomach stuck out a little. He went to Peter's house and was relieved when he saw no dirt on the floor and when he heard the mantel clock ticking away.

Mrs. Chappell spoke often of the

afternoon. 'You 'd've thought he lost his mind the way he carried on. He just howled. Ed stayed with him part of the night, until he quieted down. Ed had to give him some whiskey to get him to sleep. But,' she said brightly, 'hard work is the thing to kill sorrow. Peter Randall is getting up at three o'clock every morning. I can see the light in his kitchen window from my bedroom.'

The pussywillows burst out in silver drops, and the little weeds sprouted up along the roadside. The Salinas River ran dark water, flowed for a month, and then subsided into green pools again. Peter Randall had shaped his land beautifully. It was smooth and black; no clod was larger than a small marble, and under the rains it looked purple with richness.

And then the little weak lines of green stretched out across the black field. In the dusk a neighbor crawled under the fence and pulled one of the tiny plants.

'Some kind of legume,' he told his friends. 'Field peas, I guess. What did he want to be so quiet about it for? I asked him right out what he was planting, and he would n't tell me.'

The word ran through the farms, 'It's sweet peas. The whole God-damn forty-five acres is in sweet peas!' Men called on Clark DeWitt then, to get his opinion.

His opinion was this: 'People think because you can get twenty to sixty cents a pound for sweet peas you can get rich on them. But it's the most ticklish crop in the world. If the bugs don't get it, it might do good. And then come a hot day and bust the pods and lose your crop on the ground. Or it might come up a little rain and spoil the whole caboodle. It's all right to put in a few acres and take a chance, but not the whole place. Peter's touched in the head since Emma died.'

This opinion was widely distributed. Every man used it as his own. Two

neighbors often said it to each other, each one repeating half of it. When too many people said it to Peter Randall he became angry. One day he cried, 'Say, whose land is this? If I want to go broke, I've got a damn good right to, have n't I?'

And that changed the whole feeling. Men remembered that Peter was a good farmer. Perhaps he had special knowledge. Why, that's who those two men in boots were — soil chemists! A good many of the farmers wished they'd put in a few acres of sweet peas.

They wished it particularly when the vines spread out, when they met each other across the rows and hid the dark earth from sight, when the buds began to form and it was seen the crop was rich. And then the blooms came — forty-five acres of color, forty-five acres of perfume. It was said that you could smell them in Salinas, four miles away. Buses brought the school children out to look at them. A group of men from a seed company spent all day looking at the vines and feeling the earth.

Peter Randall sat on his porch in a rocking chair every afternoon. He looked down on the great squares of pink and blue, and on the mad square of mixed colors. When the afternoon breeze came up, he inhaled deeply. His blue shirt was open at the throat, as though he wanted to get the perfume down next his skin.

Men called on Clark DeWitt to get his opinion now. He said, 'There's about ten things that can happen to spoil that crop. He's welcome to his sweet peas.'

But the men knew from Clark's irritation that he was a little jealous. They looked up over the fields of color to where Peter sat on his porch, and they felt a new admiration and respect for him.

Ed Chappell walked up the steps to him one afternoon. 'You got a crop there, mister.'

'Looks that way,' said Peter.

'I took a look. Pods are setting fine.'

Peter sighed. 'Blooming's nearly over,' he said. 'I'll hate to see the petals drop off.'

'Well, I'd be glad to see 'em drop. You'll make a lot of money, if nothing happens.'

Peter took out a bandanna handkerchief and wiped his nose, and jiggled it sideways to stop an itch. 'I'll be sorry when the smell stops,' he said.

Then Ed made his reference to the night of the death. One of his eyes drooped secretly. 'Found somebody to keep house for you?'

'I have n't looked,' said Peter. 'I have n't had time.' There were lines of worry about his eyes. But who would n't worry, Ed thought, when a single shower could ruin his whole year's crop.

If the year and the weather had been manufactured for sweet peas, they could n't have been better. The fog lay close to the ground in the mornings when the vines were pulled. When the great piles of vines lay safely on spread canvases, the hot sun shone down and crisped the pods for the threshers. The neighbors watched the long cotton sacks filling with round black seeds, and they went home and tried to figure out how much money Peter would make on his tremendous crop. Clark DeWitt lost a good part of his following. The men decided to find out what Peter was going to plant next year, if they had to follow him around. How did he know, for instance, that this year'd be good for sweet peas? He *must* have some kind of special knowledge.

#### IV

When a man from the upper Salinas Valley goes to San Francisco on business or for a vacation, he takes a room in the Ramona Hotel. This is a nice arrangement, for in the lobby he can usually find someone from home. They can sit

in the soft chairs of the lobby and talk about the Salinas Valley.

Ed Chappell went to San Francisco to meet his wife's cousin who was coming out from Ohio for a trip. The train was not due until the next morning. In the lobby of the Ramona, Ed looked for someone from the Salinas Valley, but he could see only strangers sitting in the soft chairs. He went out to a moving-picture show. When he returned, he looked again for someone from home, and still there were only strangers. For a moment he considered glancing over the register, but it was pretty late. He sat down to finish his cigar before he went to bed.

There was a commotion at the door. Ed saw the clerk motion with his hand. A bellhop ran out. Ed squirmed around in his chair to look. Outside a man was being helped out of a taxicab. The bellhop took him from the driver and guided him in the door. It was Peter Randall. His eyes were glassy, and his mouth open and wet. He had no hat on his mussed hair. Ed jumped up and strode over to him.

'Peter!'

Peter was batting helplessly at the bellhop. 'Let me alone,' he explained. 'I'm all right. You let me alone, and I'll give you two bits.'

Ed called again, 'Peter!'

The glassy eyes turned slowly to him, and then Peter fell into his arms. 'My old friend,' he cried. 'Ed Chappell, my old, good friend. What you doing here? Come up to my room and have a drink.'

Ed set him back on his feet. 'Sure I will,' he said. 'I'd like a little nightcap.'

'Nightcap hell! We'll go out and see a show, or something.'

Ed helped him into the elevator and got him to his room. Peter dropped heavily to the bed and struggled up to a sitting position. 'There's a bottle of whiskey in the bathroom. Bring me a drink, too.'



Ed brought out the bottle and the glasses. 'What you doing, Peter? Celebrating the crop? You must've made a pile of money.'

Peter put out his palm and tapped it impressively with a forefinger. 'Sure I made money — but it was n't a bit better than gambling. It was just like straight gambling.'

'But you got the money.'

Peter scowled thoughtfully. 'I might of lost my pants,' he said. 'The whole time, all the year, I been worrying. It was just like gambling.'

'Well, you got it, anyway.'

Peter changed the subject, then. 'I been sick,' he said. 'I been sick right in the taxicab. I just came from a fancy house on Van Ness Avenue.' He explained apologetically, 'I just had to come up to the city. I'd a busted if I had n't come up and got some of the vinegar out of my system.'

Ed looked at him curiously. Peter's head was hanging loosely between his shoulders. His beard was dragged and rough. 'Peter,' Ed began, 'the night

Emma — passed on, you said you was going to — change things.'

Peter's swaying head rose up slowly. He stared owlishly at Ed Chappell. 'She did n't die dead,' he said thickly. 'She won't let me do things. She's worried me all year about those peas.' His eyes were wondering. 'I don't know how she does it.' Then he frowned. His palm came out, and he tapped it again. 'But you mark, Ed Chappell, I won't wear that harness, and I damn well won't ever wear it. You remember that.' His head dropped forward again. But in a moment he looked up. 'I been drunk,' he said seriously. 'I been to fancy houses.' He edged out confidentially toward Ed. His voice dropped to a heavy whisper. 'But it's all right; I'll fix it. When I get back, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to put in electric lights. Emma always wanted electric lights.' He sagged sideways on the bed.

Ed Chappell stretched Peter out and undressed him before he went to his own room.

Copyright of Atlantic Magazine Archive is the property of Atlantic Monthly Group LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.