

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of Pleasant Journey, by Richard Thieme

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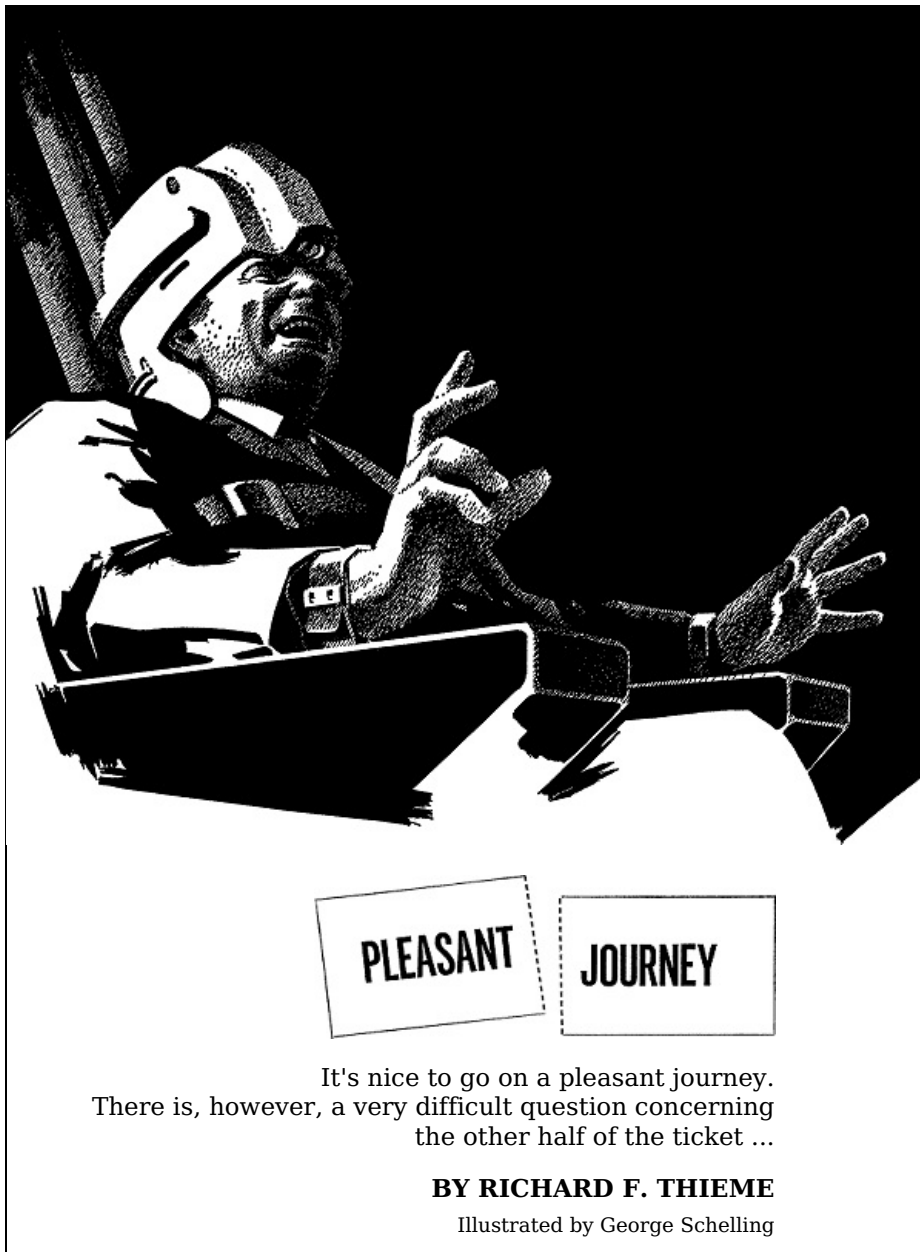
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PLEASANT JOURNEY \*\*\*



"What do you call it?" the buyer asked Jenkins.

"I named it 'Journey Home' but you can think up a better name for it if you want. I'll guarantee that it sells, though. There's nothing like it on any midway."

"I'd like to try it out first, of course," Allenby said. "Star-Time uses only the very best, you know."

"Yes, I know," Jenkins said. He had heard the line before, from almost every carnival buyer to whom he had sold. He did not do much business with the carnivals; there weren't enough to keep him busy with large or worthwhile rides and features. The amusement parks of the big cities were usually the best markets.

Allenby warily eyed the entrance, a room fashioned from a side-show booth. A rough red curtain concealed the inside. Over the doorway, in crude dark blue paint, was lettered, "Journey Home." Behind the doorway was a large barnlike structure, newly painted white, where Jenkins did his planning, his building, and his finishing. When he sold a new ride it was either transported from inside the building through the large, pull-away doors in back or taken apart piece by piece and shipped to the park or carry that bought it.

"Six thousand's a lot of money," the buyer said.

"Just try it," Jenkins told him.

The buyer shrugged. "O.K.," he said. "Let's go in." They walked through the red curtain. Inside the booth-entrance was a soft-cushioned easy-chair, also red, secured firmly in place. It was a piece of salvage from a two-engine commercial airplane. A helmet looking like a Flash Gordon accessory-hair drier combination was set over it. Jenkins flipped a switch and the room became bright with light. "I thought you said this wasn't a thrill ride," Allenby said, looking at the helmetlike structure ominously hanging over the chair.

"It isn't," Jenkins said, smiling. "Sit down." He strapped the buyer into place in the chair.

"Hey, wait a minute," Allenby protested. "Why the straps?"

"Leave everything to me and don't worry," Jenkins said, fitting the headgear into place over the buyer's head. The back of it fitted easily over the entire rear of the skull, down to his neck. The front came just below the eyes. After turning the light off, Jenkins pulled the curtain closed. It was completely black inside.

"Have a nice trip," Jenkins said, pulling a switch on the wall and pushing a button on the back of the chair at the same time.

Currents shifted and repatterned themselves inside the helmet and were fed into Allenby at the base of his skull, at the medulla. The currents of alternating ions mixed with the currents of his varied and random brain waves, and the impulses of one became the impulses of the other. Allenby jerked once with the initial shock and was then still, his mind and body fused with the pulsating currents of the chair.

Suddenly, Roger Allenby was almost blinded by bright, naked light. Allenby's first impression was one of disappointment at the failure of the device. Jenkins was reliable, usually, and hadn't come up with a fluke yet.

Allenby got out of the chair and called for Jenkins, holding on to the arm of the chair to keep his bearings. "Hey! Where are you? Jenkins!" He tried to look around him but the bright, intense light revealed nothing. He swore to himself, extending his arms in front of him for something to grasp. As he groped for a solid, the light became more subdued and shifted from white into a light, pleasant blue.

Shapes and forms rearranged themselves in front of him and gradually became distinguishable. He was in a city, or on top of a city. A panoramic view was before him and he saw the creations of human beings, obviously, but a culture far removed from his. A slight path of white began at his feet and expanded as it fell slightly, ramplike, over and into the city. The buildings were whiter than the gate of false dreams that Penelope sung of and the streets and avenues were blue, not gray. The people wore white and milled about in the streets below him. They shouted as one; their voices were not cries but songs and they sang his name.

He started walking on the white strip. It was flexible and supported his weight easily. Then he was running, finding his breath coming in sharp gasps and he was among the crowds. They smiled at him as he passed by and held out their hands to him. Their faces shone with a brilliance of awareness and he knew that they loved him. Troubled, frightened, he kept running, blindly, and, abruptly, there were no people, no buildings.

He was walking now, at the left side of a modern super-highway, against the traffic. Autos sped by him, too quickly for him to determine the year of model. Across the divider the traffic was heavier, autos speeding crazily ahead in the direction he was walking; none stopped. He halted for a moment and looked around him. There was nothing on the sides of the road: no people, no fields, no farms, no cities, no blackness. There was nothing. But far ahead there was green etched around the horizon as the road dipped and the cars sped over it. He walked more quickly, catching his breath, and came closer and closer to the green.

Allenby stopped momentarily and turned around, looking at the highway that was behind him. It was gone. Only bleak, black and gray hills of rock and rubble were there, no cars, no life. He shuddered and continued on toward the end of the highway. The green blended in with the blue

of the sky now. Closer he came, until just over the next rise in the road the green was bright. Not knowing or caring why, he was filled with expectation and he ran again and was in the meadow.

All around him were the greens of the grasses and leaves and the yellows and blues of the field flowers. It was warm, a spring day, with none of the discomfort of summer heat. Jubilant, Roger spun around in circles, inhaling the fragrance of the field, listening to the hum of insect life stirring back to awareness after a season of inactivity. Then he was running and tumbling, barefoot, his shirt open, feeling the soft grass give way underfoot and the soil was good and rich beneath him.

He saw a stream ahead, with clear water melodiously flowing by him. He went to it and drank, the cold, good water quenching all his thirst, clearing all the stickiness of his throat and mind. He dashed the water on his face and was happy and felt the coolness of it as the breeze picked up and swept his hair over his forehead. With a shake of his head he tossed it back in place and ran again, feeling the air rush into his lungs with coolness and vibrance unknown since adolescence. No nicotine spasms choked him and the air was refreshing.

Then up the hill he sped, pushing hard, as the marigolds and dandelions parted before him. At the top he stopped and looked and smiled ecstatically as he saw the green rolling land and the stream, curving around from behind the house, his house, the oaks forming a secret lair behind it, and he felt the youth of the world in his lungs and under his feet. He heard the voice calling from that house, his house, calling him to Saturday lunch.

"I'm coming!" he cried happily and was tumbling down the hill, rolling over and over, the hill and ground and sky blending blues and greens and nothing had perspective. The world was spinning and everything was black again. He shook his head to clear the dizziness.

"Well?" Jenkins said. "How was it?"

Allenby looked up at him as Jenkins swung the helmet back and unhooked the seatbelt. He squinted as Jenkins flipped the light switch and the brightness hit him.

His surroundings became distinguishable again very slowly and he knew he was back in the room. "Where was I?" he asked.

Jenkins shrugged. "I don't know. It was all yours. You went wherever you wanted to go, wherever home is." Jenkins smiled down at him. "Did you visit more than one place?" he asked. The buyer nodded. "I thought so. It seems that a person tries a few before finally deciding where to go."

The buyer stood up and stretched. "Could I please see the barn?" he asked, meaning the huge workshop where Jenkins did the construction work.

"Sure," Jenkins said and opened the door opposite the red curtain into the workshop. It was empty.

"You mean it was all up here? I didn't move at all?" He tapped his cranium with his index finger.

"That's right," Jenkins said anxiously. "Do you want it or not?"

Allenby stood looking into the empty room. "Yes ... yes, of course," he said. "How long did the whole thing last?"

"About ten seconds," Jenkins said, looking at his watch. "It seems much longer to the traveler. I'm not sure, but I think the imagined time varies with each person. It's always around ten seconds of actual time, though, so you can make a lot of money on it, even if you only have one machine."

"Money?" Allenby said. "Money, yes, of course." He took a checkbook from his inside pocket and hurriedly wrote a check for six thousand dollars. "When can we have it delivered?" he asked.

"You want it shipped the usual way?"

"No," Allenby said, staring at the red-cushioned chair. "Send it air freight. Then bill us for the expense."

"Whatever you say," Jenkins said, smiling, taking the check. "You'll have it by the first of the week, probably. I'll put a complete parts and assembly manual inside the crate."

"Good, good. But maybe I should test it again, you know. Star-Time can't really afford to make a mistake as expensive as this."

"No," Jenkins said quickly. Then, "I'll guarantee it, of course. If it doesn't work out, I'll give you a full refund. But don't try it again, today. Don't let anyone have it more than once in one day. Stamp them on the hand or something when they take the trip."

"Why?"

Jenkins looked troubled. "I'm not sure, but people might not want to come back. Too many times in a row and they might be able to stay there ... in their minds of course."

"Of course, of course. Well, it's been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Jenkins. I hope to

see you again soon." They walked back to Allenby's not-very-late model car and shook hands. Allenby drove away.

On the way back to the hotel, and as he lay for a long time in the bathtub, letting the warmth drift away from the water, the thought ran over and over in his mind. They might be able to stay there, Allenby said to himself. They might be able to stay there. He smiled warmly at a crack in the plaster as he thought of the first of the week and the fragrant meadow.

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